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**Power and Influence:  
Using Interest-Based Targeting**

Prashant R. Patel

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## Executive Summary

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The National Defense Strategy recognizes that the Department of Defense (DoD) faces long-term strategic challenges from China and Russia. Both nations seek to become regional hegemony in the near-term, while China seeks to displace the United States globally. The US and DoD's national security goal is to prevent regional hegemony from forming.

Great power competition is a security challenge between powers that can significantly harm one another. The severe negative consequences in a great power conflict incentivize each side to actively limit direct kinetic engagements. At the same time, each side will use all available tools to achieve their goals.

China, Russia, and others actively use interest-based operations to disrupt DoD's approach to national defense by undermining our allies/partners and reducing our technological superiority. Interest-based operations create conflict between the interests of constituents and national security objectives. This incentivizes the targeted decision makers to trade away national security. We have already seen China and Russia use interest-based operations to gain strategic footholds, target our allies/partners to limit DoD actions, and extract technology from firms and individuals.

In short: China and Russia are operating to win without having to fight. Therefore, DoD should expect our adversaries to use sub-threshold operations (e.g., gray zone, short of war) aggressively to disrupt DoD's ecosystem in an attempt to become regional hegemony.

DoD's ecosystem includes a rich set of firms, institutions, countries, and individuals that enable DoD to maintain its global access, intelligence, and technological superiority. This ecosystem includes such entities from the traditional defense contractors all the way to the non-US logistics firms that support our troops abroad. It includes our major allies to our lesser known partners. This ecosystem is important, as it enables DoD's success while at the same time blocking out our adversaries.

DoD should recognize interest-based operations as a key tool in sub-threshold competition and create a "short-of-war" strategy designed to protect its global access, intelligence, and technology superiority while disrupting an adversary's ability to establish regional control.

## **Interest-Based Targeting Is Central to Today's Competition**

National security leaders recognize that today's competition is qualitatively different from that of the past. Although tools such as propaganda and sanctions date back to antiquity, countries are no longer "black boxes." Adversaries have weaponized economics and political science. They can readily identify and target the various social, ethnic, business, etc. interests of a country's constituents. Adversaries use interest-based targeting to change the calculus of decision makers.

Interest-based targeting involves operations that create conflict between the interests of the targeted nation's constituents/groups and its national security. Interest-based operations create a dilemma in which the targeted nation's decision makers must make tradeoffs between their support for national defense and their support for key constituents.

The ability to see into the "black box" of countries is driven by the integration of trade, and the convergence of data, communications, computing power, and social media means that the interests of a nation's key constituent groups (e.g., corporate, social/ethnic groups) can be identified and targeted. Creating broad economic harm or being "generally" liked are not the goals of these operations. Instead, the objective is to use the salient interests of their targeted nation's existing constituencies against the target's national defense. These interest-based operations use the targeted nation's ecosystem against itself. Successful interest-based operations have several common features:

1. **Surgical Targeting:** The targeted nation's constituent groups (e.g., business, local, social, ethnic) are selected due to their relevance to the targeted nation's decision maker and potential impact.
2. **Calculated Effects:** The operation's effects are dialed to benefit or harm (without destroying) the interests of the targeted constituent in a manner that limits the decision maker's ability to ameliorate the issue.
3. **Limiting Blowback:** The effects are generated in a manner that limits collateral damage to the targeting nation (adversary).

As the United States saw in South Korea, Germany, Ukraine, and other countries, these interest-based operations can be effective; they create conflict between a target's national defense and the interests of its key constituents. This conflict, in turn, creates situations in which the targeted nation's decision makers are incentivized to compromise on national defense. Interest-based operations have constrained DoD's options, disrupted US alliances, and enabled our adversaries to achieve their national security objectives. Through such operations, our adversaries have created a pathway to achieve regional dominance without resorting to war.

## **Developing a Short of War Strategy**

DoD's alliances and technological superiority are central to its ability to operate globally and prevent adversaries from becoming regional hegemons. Adversaries are actively waging a sub-threshold campaign to undermine DoD's strategy and enable themselves to carve out spheres of influence. DoD should develop a short of war strategy designed to limit an adversary's ability to become regional hegemons while also limiting DoD's vulnerabilities.

We propose a three-step process to develop a short of war strategy: baselining programs and activities, taking stock of the defense ecosystem, and creating advantages and leveraging opportunities.

First, we recommend DoD baseline its activities and investments related to sub-threshold competition. This activity provides DoD leaders with a mapping between resources and this new mission. DoD could use data from budgets (e.g., Major Force Programs), selected acquisition reports, and other sources to show how resources support the four major mission areas. The baselining should be done to highlight where investments, forces, and activities are and how they support the mission. Once completed, it can be used as a basis for ensuring that DoD is appropriately supporting this new mission.

Second, we recommend taking stock of the defense ecosystem. This involves mapping DoD priorities (e.g., technological superiority or global access) to the allies/partners, firms, institutions, etc. that support these goals. DoD can use these data-driven methods to examine ways to close vulnerabilities or expand the defense ecosystem, thereby increasing resiliency and limiting adversaries' abilities to expand their control. For instance, DoD can use data from the Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution (PPBE) process, DoD plans, and intelligence priorities to identify links between allies, partners, firms, technologies, and current and future force structures. This approach will help DoD identify the vulnerability of nodes in DoD's defense ecosystem. For example, China used economic actions to limit DoD's future actions in South Korea when DoD deployed a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery. A data-driven approach could help DoD identify which locations are vulnerable to interest-based actions, how they affect DoD's ability to operate, and identify alternatives. Using this approach, DoD can find ways to diversify its defense ecosystem, thereby ensuring it has multiple pathways to maintain global access and technological superiority. We recognize that this may require the development of new analytical techniques and suggest starting a small-scale experiment to explore its feasibility. This process will help DoD understand how its equities can be affected by sub-threshold actions and provide opportunities to limit vulnerabilities and increase its resiliency.

Finally, DoD should create advantages and leverage opportunities. DoD should begin by examining its capabilities, authorities, and policies related to sub-threshold operations

to identify operational and technological gaps as well as policy limitations. In addition, DoD should look for vulnerabilities in our adversaries' sub-threshold defense-related organizations, operations, and goals. For example, in Venezuela we have seen autocratic leaders make trades against the national interests in order to stay in power. Could this mechanism be used elsewhere to create trades between internal security and regional power? Similarly, in China, we have seen conflicts between the interests of national and local leaders exacerbating the effects of the African swine flu. Can DoD use internal frictions to reduce adversaries' military development or operational effectiveness? At the other end, we have witnessed situations in which China and Russia had to forgive loans when they had limited leverage. Can DoD reduce adversaries' leverage in adverse situations instead of trying to box them out completely? This could be accomplished through alternative investments or information operations highlighting the negative consequences of Chinese and Russian operations and investments. These examples and questions are meant to highlight that there are opportunities to contest our adversaries' defense pipeline. There are opportunities to create national trades, disrupt military research and operations, and blunt adversary leverage.

DoD should conduct short of war games, exercises, experiments, and other activities to help explore how it can limit adversaries' regional control. It should identify what tools DoD has, concepts of employment, and when DoD should lead vs. support actions by other agencies (e.g., Central Intelligence Agency, Treasury, Department of State, USAID). Together these activities support the development of an executable short of war strategy.

Long-term strategic competition demands that DoD be prepared to confront and confound a determined and adaptable adversary. These three steps represent the building blocks of a data-driven approach to creating a short of war strategy. Furthermore, these steps can form the basis of a repeatable process that can be used to continuously adjust and adapt to the ever-changing global environment. **Rather than waiting for its adversaries to act, DoD should undertake a data-driven approach to align resources with sub-threshold missions, examine its ecosystem to identify opportunities and close sub-threshold vulnerabilities, and create an offensive campaign to challenge adversaries' hegemonic goals.**



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# 1. Long-Term US Security Is Challenged by Interest-Based Operations

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## A. Long-term Strategic Competition

The Department of Defense (DoD) faces adversaries with the tools and goals of establishing regional control.<sup>1</sup> As the National Defense Strategy states, “the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition*.” In addition, the strategy recognizes that US adversaries “are competing across all dimensions of power.” In particular, China “seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.”<sup>2</sup> Further, “Russia seeks veto authority over nations on its periphery in terms of their governmental, economic, and diplomatic decisions, to shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and change European and Middle East security and economic structures to its favor.” The US national security challenge is to prevent regional hegemony from forming.

Great powers are those that can significantly harm one another but not necessarily win.<sup>3</sup> The destructive capabilities of great powers create large risks for leaders, thereby incentivizing them to avoid direct and open conflict.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the dominant actions will continue to be sub-threshold (e.g., gray zone, short of war). In addition, great powers are engaged in a security competition in which the primary focus is securing (limiting) regional control. Thus, China and Russia are focused on establishing regional control, while the goal of the United States is to prevent a regional hegemon from forming.<sup>5</sup>

The competition is about the ability to apply and focus power on preventing China and Russia from establishing regional hegemony. When adversaries misallocate forces or have to deal with inefficiencies in their defense ecosystem, it works against their goals.

DoD should expect its adversaries’ sub-threshold operations to focus on undermining DoD’s core strengths (i.e., global access and technological superiority) and expanding adversaries’ reach.<sup>6</sup> Adversaries have targeted US allies/partners, commercial and defense firms, and talented individuals in order to undermine DoD’s strengths. Although conventional deterrence helps keep the competition sub-threshold, it does not solely enable success in long-term strategic competition. The world has changed sufficiently since the Cold War such that our old playbook, while important, is not sufficient for today’s long-term strategic competition.<sup>7</sup>

## **B. Interest-Based Targeting Creates Influence**

National security leaders widely recognize that today's competition is markedly different from the past.<sup>8</sup> The difference in today's competition is that countries can no longer be treated as black boxes.<sup>9</sup>

Today, China, Russia, and others can now see and precisely target key constituents. They are conducting *interest-based targeting in order to influence the decision makers of their targeted nations*. Interest-based targeting consists of using operations to create conflict between the self-interests of the targeted nation's constituents/groups (e.g., firms, social groups) and its national security. This new type of conflict poses challenges that incentivize targeted decision makers to trade away their national defense in order to ameliorate their constituents' interests.

This new type of conflict means that influence operations are not just broad-based and centered around changing popular opinion. Instead, interest-based operations use the internal ecosystem and incentives to change the calculus of targeted decision makers. While the United States perfected precision kinetic strikes, its adversaries perfected surgical, interest-based operations.

The ability to conduct scalable and real-time, interest-based targeting is driven by several changes. First, the rise in global markets and trade means that businesses are now readily targetable through their financial interests. Second, interconnected communications combined with massive data, algorithms, and computing power means that individuals can be readily deconstructed according to their interests and then reassembled into like groups.<sup>10</sup> This deconstruction means that domestic interests can now be targeted and placed in conflict with national defense objectives through structured operations.

China and Russia use interest-based operations to achieve their internal and external objectives. For example, China routinely manipulates its policies to incentivize non-Chinese businesses to transfer technology and then closes the market around them.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Russia and China defend themselves against interest-based operations by establishing active, internal security operations designed to limit their own issue-based groups from forming and coopting and controlling existing businesses and institutions.<sup>12</sup> They are also targeting US allies/partners in order to limit US operations. Adversaries have strategies and tools to expand their reach and undermine DoD's core strengths: allied/partner networks and technology.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Interest-Based Targeting Used to Compromise National Security

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Adversaries are using interest-based operations to compromise the United States' national security. These operations succeed against national security interests because they target the interests of relevant and organized constituents. Olsen noted that the intensity with which individuals are willing to organize around an issue is more relevant than the general welfare or broad consensus.<sup>14</sup> Given a benefit/harm to a salient interest, we can expect organizations and individuals to act to defend it.<sup>15</sup> Interest-based operations exploit these principles against national security.

**The goal of interest-based operations is to drive the actions of targeted decision makers by creating a zero-sum game between a constituent interest and national security.** Interest-based targeting works by “attacking” the interests of the targeted group to compel them to act against national defense. The targeted constituents will work to influence their leaders to ameliorate the consequences on them. The key is to create conflict between a defense issue and non-defense issue where the targeted nation's decision makers place a higher value on the non-defense issue.

Interest-based operations are about producing real-world effects by changing the ecosystem around decision makers. Successful interest-based operations have several common features:

1. **Surgical Targeting:** The targeted groups are selected due to their value to their targeted nation's decision makers.
2. **Measured Effects:** The operation's effects on the targeted group's interest are dialed to benefit or harm (but not destroy) the target while being significant enough that the targeted decision maker cannot ameliorate the harm.
3. **Limiting Blowback:** The operation's effects are generated in a manner that limits collateral damage to the targeteer.

These represent the basic necessary conditions for success. However, they do not capture the full set of conditions that operational practitioners must consider. For example, the timing of operations is critical as they must be launched before decision makers commit to a specific course of action.

## **A. Future DoD Options Are Limited by Chinese Interest-Based Operations in South Korea**

The United States took steps to enhance its and South Korea's national security posture by deploying a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system to Seongju, South Korea in response to the growing North Korean threat. China then claimed it was a national security threat and targeted South Korean firms. They targeted tourism, car sales, and a South Korean grocery store chain operating in China. These firms then put pressure on the South Korean government to resolve the dispute. The end result was that South Korea agreed to "three nos". South Korea agreed to limit US ballistic missile defense, not integrate into regional ballistic missile defense, and not form a US/Japan/South Korea alliance.

In the end, the United States lost strategically as China advanced their goal of "Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future."<sup>16</sup> They did so by limiting US options in South Korea, creating a deterrence effect on our allies and partners,<sup>17</sup> and demonstrating that the United States has limited options to defend or help our allies/partners short of a conflict.<sup>18</sup> How did China use interest-based operations to achieve this outcome? China worked to achieve their strategic goals and disrupt our alliance through a precision interest-based operation. The operation created conflict between South Korean (and US) national security and select South Korean business interests. This conflict pitted well-organized firms and industries against a more diffuse national security concern. The operations targeted South Korean decision makers and, through our allies/partners, created effects on DoD.

We map the adversary's actions to these three features of interest-based operations defined earlier:<sup>19</sup>

1. **Surgical Targeting:** China targeted Lotte, Hyundai, and tourism because they are organized and important industries in South Korea.
2. **Measured Effects:** The influence operation produced almost \$7 billion in concentrated negative effects. The affected firms informed leaders about the issue due to the level of harm being inflicted on them. The level of harm is comparable to 25 percent of South Korea's defense budget, meaning that it would be difficult for leaders to ignore or ameliorate the effects.<sup>20</sup>
3. **Limiting Blowback:** China limited their targets to consumer goods because they are substitutable and unlikely to generate protests inside China. In addition, China avoided creating meaningful impact to Chinese businesses by not banning all travel, just group tours, and did not target microelectronics, which represented \$21 billion in their trade with South Korea and is a critical intermediate good for China.<sup>21</sup>

Together, these steps created conflict between concentrated South Korean business interests and a national defense issue that was ultimately resolved in favor of internal interests at the expense of national defense.

## **B. Information Operations Disrupt Decisive Action**

China and Russia use information operations extensively to advance their goals and limit the options of the United States and its allies/partners. The objective of information-powered, interest-based operations is not propaganda, but rather manipulating the collective action potential around specific issues/events in order to limit counter-action.

### **1. Distraction Creates Barriers to Action**

During the initial invasion into Ukraine and following the shoot down of MH-17, Russia extensively used disjoint messaging combined with denial of the use of Russian forces. We propose that the objective was not to deceive the intelligence community but rather to create confusion among the country's citizens in order to limit European and US responses. This action would put existing interests in conflict with the need for action. Russia raised the political costs on decision makers by ensuring a common anti-Russian narrative did not form. The absence of such a narrative would have forced leaders to expend political capital to create a coalition if they wanted to act. The offensive techniques employed by Russia are similar to those used by the Chinese Communist Party for internal security purposes.

Using these three features of interest-based operations, we observe how Russia created a decision dilemma:

1. **Surgical Targeting:** The interest-based operation limited the decision makers' support for action by creating a set of non-intervention narratives within the public. This limited public support for action that democratic leaders needed.
2. **Measured Effects:** Russia issued conflicting messages that denied involvement, threatened action if pushed further, criticized the meddling of western nations, and supported Russia's actions as democratic in nature.<sup>22</sup> The diverse messaging plan was designed to appeal to different interests and concerns toward a common non-intervention goal. This strategy made it costly for decision makers to unify the disparate interests because a common counter-argument would not appeal to all the concerns.
3. **Limiting Blowback:** The messaging ensured that Russia continued to maintain freedom of action by limiting their internal collateral effects. If Russian messages flowed back into Russia, they were designed to not cause significant protests.

## **2. Collective Action Disrupts Current Operations**

Russia uses cohesive messaging to create organized action within countries in order to disrupt ongoing decisions or weaken existing actions. The Lisa case, in which Russia amplified a false story in Germany, represents an example of how Russia fomented protests aligned with specific political groups in order to undermine the German government's support for action against Russia.<sup>23</sup> In the Lisa case a teenager left her home to spend time with friends. She reported that she had been abducted by immigrants. The police quickly ascertained the truth; however, Russia reported and amplified the false narrative using traditional and diplomatic channels. The goal was to enhance the far-right in Germany in order to diminish and limit Germany's anti-Russian actions within Europe by fragmenting the German government's coalition.

We deconstruct Russia's operation to show how it was designed to create a decision dilemma for the German government.

1. **Surgical Targeting:** Russia created a messaging campaign leveraging anti-immigrant and anti-crime sentiments. The channels and messaging targeted select audiences rather than all Germans.<sup>24</sup> In particular, the messaging themes were aligned with the pro-Russian, far-right, Alternative for Germany party. The Alternative for Germany party led protests timed with Russian messages. This affected the German government because it created conflict with the existing German government coalition by pulling members on the right further right.<sup>25</sup>
2. **Measured Effects:** The potential magnitude of the effect ranged from 3.6 to 20 percent of the population, which is significant, given German support is split evenly on acting against Russia. By weakening Chancellor Merkel's coalition, Russia attempted to undermine Germany's action against Russia.<sup>26</sup>
3. **Limiting Blowback:** The messages aligned with Russia's traditional narrative and therefore presented no collateral effects on them.<sup>27</sup>

## **C. Instruments Do Not Equal Interests**

These three cases represent a small fraction of the publicly reported incidents. China and Russia have used interest-based operations to further their expansion and undermine DoD's core strengths. For example, China targeted the interests of the former Prime Minister of Sri Lanka in order to secure a deal to build a port.<sup>28</sup> Then China used the need for ongoing financing to gain control of the port in a strategic location.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Russia routinely uses information and economic actions to divide NATO. China cleverly manipulates its policies to obtain technology from firms.<sup>30</sup> Strategic locations, allies/partners, and technology are all important issues for DoD, and our adversaries are using interest-based operations to win without having to resort to conflict.



Interest-based operations are simple in principle but exploit and use a sophisticated set of techniques. We have seen China use everything from financial incentives to informal and formal manipulation of policies to influence their targets.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Russia has used messaging and content to cause targets to self-select because they also perceive a benefit from the operation.

Interest-based operations work by focusing on the target's interests rather than being defined by the instruments used. What we observe is that interest-based operations are focused on producing tangible effects.

We observe a common instrument-agnostic structure to these operations. Our analysis shows how precision targeting and measured effects are used to transmit and create strategic outcomes. It is an extendable framework that can incorporate additional research, such as what makes issues actionable, how vulnerabilities are created, and how long-term perceptions can be shifted. This means operations can be standardized and professionalized to support tactical and strategic goals.

China and Russia are using well-structured, interest-based operations to achieve their objectives and undermine DoD's strategy. DoD needs systematic and structured approaches if it wants to limit its vulnerabilities. In addition, DoD needs to understand how interest-based operations can be used strategically in order to win the *long-term, strategic competition*.



### **3. DoD Should Develop a Short of War Strategy**

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#### **A. Data Are Central to Developing a New Strategy**

Sub-threshold competition is not isolated to a single domain, technology, or instrument. Therefore, we propose focusing on ingraining it as a mission area within the DNA of DoD by creating processes that support sub-threshold competition while providing flexibility for the Services and Combatant Commands on how best to organize and operationalize these concepts.

We recommend three steps to developing a short of war strategy. First, baseline DoD's programs and activities and align them to sub-threshold competition. The goal is to provide DoD leaders with objective data on the disposition of current forces, how investments support sub-threshold missions, and how that is expected to change over time.

Second, we recommend taking stock of the defense ecosystem to identify opportunities and vulnerabilities. This involves mapping DoD's strategic priorities (e.g., technological superiority) to the allies/partners, firms, individuals, and institutions that support that objective. The goal of this exercise is to enable DoD to be able to identify which allies/partners, firms, etc. are critical to DoD's success, if there are alternatives, and how vulnerable DoD's ecosystem is to an adversary's operations.

Third, we recommend creating advantages by identifying the full range of tools, barriers, and gaps to support offensive interest-based operations. DoD can then explore concepts for how to increase the costs of adversary positions, and force adversaries to substitute away from regional control toward other areas.

This three-pronged approach is designed to ensure the sub-threshold mission is visible and resourced, limit vulnerabilities by creating a systematic approach to increasing the resiliency of DoD's defense ecosystem, and create an offensive interest-based operations capability. These three efforts work together to provide information necessary for DoD to formulate a sub-threshold competition strategy.

#### **B. Baseline Sub-threshold Competition**

DoD now has a new major mission area: sub-threshold competition. DoD needs to review its programs and activities and identify those relevant to sub-threshold competition. The major force programs can be used to support a large fraction of the review. The central issue is isolating programs (or lack thereof) that primarily support sub-threshold

competition. This will enable senior leaders to see how programs and activities support DoD's strategy.<sup>32</sup> This can then be used to show how DoD is investing in sub-threshold competition vs. other missions.

DoD could use budgets, selected acquisition reports (which provide long-term view), force disposition data, and other data sources to build a view of the resources and activities that support sub-threshold competition. The first step would be to undertake a series of feasibility exercises to demonstrate the utility of this capability. One such exercise is to conduct a test to show how the budget or major programs can be mapped to sub-threshold competition. We expect that the major force program allocations will be widely used, with the major effort being in identifying programs that are sub-threshold-related.

This could then be repeated for force disposition, exercises, and other activities. These activities would help establish the allocation rules and demonstrate that a strategic mission-centric view is possible.

The next step would be to increase the richness of the views by adding metadata such as geographic data, relationships between programs, etc. This view would help show how strategic missions and resources are allocated to the various Combatant Commands and how changes in one program may affect another program.

Finally, DoD can then link in analytical tools to help it conduct effectiveness and what-if analyses. These could help DoD re-balance its portfolio in response to changes in the strategic environment or the development of new technologies.

### **C. Take Stock of DoD's Defense Ecosystem**

Adversaries have already acted to limit DoD's global operations. They are also undermining our technological superiority. The effects are felt by DoD but the targets are the firms, individuals, and allies/partners (i.e., nodes) that make up the defense ecosystem. Therefore, DoD needs to know how it can protect its equities by increasing the resiliency of its defense ecosystem.

We suggest using a data-driven approach to identify, prioritize, and limit vulnerabilities. DoD's bureaucratic processes that "everyone loves to hate"—Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution (PPBE)—provide a rich data source that should be mined to build linkages between DoD's strategy and ecosystem. When DoD finds vulnerabilities, it could look for alternatives—which would increase resiliency and reduce the value of any single target—or it could close the vulnerability, which would raise the costs of targeting that node.

This proposed analytical process leverages the richness of DoD's internal processes to help identify potential vulnerabilities and limit exposure. This methodology creates a transparent, data-driven process that DoD's leaders can use to prioritize, fund, and close

influence pathways. We recognize that it is a proposal and untested. Therefore, we recommend starting with a single priority (e.g., technological superiority) and using that case to develop the necessary tools, intra-DoD interactions, and decision-making processes.

### **1. A Pilot Program to Test Feasibility**

This suggestion is conceptually simple but analytically challenging. While some tools may already exist to support this effort, it is currently unproven.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, as a first step, DoD leaders should undertake a pilot program to determine the feasibility of linking the required data, developing the costing methodologies, and creating vulnerability closure plans. The goal of this feasibility test would be set up the tools and processes that could be used on a recurring basis to increase the resiliency of DoD's ecosystem.

As part of the feasibility test, we suggest starting small and focusing on a single major priority; for example, technological superiority. This strategic thrust can then be mapped to Office of Secretary of Defense (Research and Engineering) OSD(R&E) priorities, Service acquisitions, and Combatant Command future forces and operational constructs. Next, these current and future investments can be linked to technologies, firms, research institutions, adversaries affected, and allies/partners required. This list is inclusive, not exclusive. This aggregation of data provides a dataset that links a DoD-level priority all the way down to potentially vulnerable nodes (e.g., institutions, allies/partners, etc.).

### **2. Identifying Critical Nodes**

The second step is to identify critical nodes (e.g., allies/partners, firms, institutions) within DoD's ecosystem and quantify the opportunity cost of losing those nodes. DoD can use these data to identify the criticality of nodes by examining their uniqueness, which priorities they affect, and the opportunity cost of losing them. The opportunity cost estimate bounds the price DoD should be willing to pay to harden or replicate the node. This would require developing new scalable costing methodologies and may require using subject matter experts in key areas. The former is needed to ensure the process can be rapidly executed without burdening analysts. The latter will help address unobservable gaps in the data. After this stage, DoD has a list of critical nodes, their current benefit to DoD, and their opportunity cost.

### **3. Linking Nodes to Exploitable Influence Pathways**

The final step is to link these nodes to exploitable influence pathways and identify mitigation measures. DoD can do this by linking the dataset from Step 2 to each node's interests and intelligence on adversary influence pathways. This information will then help DoD prune the critical nodes list to those that are feasibly exploitable. DoD can focus on this reduced list and develop vulnerability closure plans. Closure plans should encompass

a wide range of options, from limiting an adversary's influence effects by reducing ex-post leverage,<sup>34</sup> to identifying alternatives to reduce the criticality of a particular node, to more traditional means of increasing DoD's influence and reducing adversary exploitation vectors. The key is to consider a wide range of options and price each one.

## **D. Create and Leverage Opportunities**

DoD needs to develop a strategic approach and operational capabilities to drive adversary behaviors that limits their ability to become regional hegemony. The large bundle of cyber, information, and intelligence authorities gives DoD a unique opportunity to develop capabilities and operational concepts for integrating interest-based operations to support long-term strategic competition.

Adversaries have already demonstrated the value of interest-based operations to disrupt DoD's defense strategy. Similarly, we have seen that absent a response, adversaries have continued to press their advantage. For example, Russian leadership worried about their use of mercenaries when such actions resulted in an internal backlash. However, the United States did not press its advantage, and Russia used their internal security to quell the outcry and then expanded their use of mercenaries.<sup>35</sup>

### **1. Adversaries' National, Internal, and External Frictions Create Opportunities**

We have seen that adversaries are vulnerable to interest-based operations. Venezuela shows how, at the national level, leaders are willing to compromise national interests in favor of political survival.

Venezuela sacrificed its primary source of revenue, oil, in order to maintain political control. Venezuelan leaders were willing to undermine their key source of revenue, the state oil company, by firing 18,000 employees who were protesting the administration.<sup>36</sup> In addition, they directed *Petróleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA)* to allocate further benefits to their power base. The end result was a significant opportunity cost and degradation in the ability of PDVSA to produce oil.<sup>37</sup> Its current production is one third of its level in 2000.<sup>38</sup> This example highlights how autocratic leaders will sacrifice the basis of national success for short-term political survival.

China has shown us how internal frictions between governmental organizations can lead to national dysfunction. In China, misaligned interests between national and local leaders, as well as farmers, led to a drastic drop in pork production.<sup>39</sup> In response to an initial African swine flu outbreak, Beijing mandated rules to contain the outbreak but then allocated no resources to enforce the mandate. This approach all but ensured that local officials, who had limited resources and feared passing on "bad news," helped cover up the growing problem. In addition, because of the harsh penalties and low compensation, many farmers were incentivized to cover up the issue or transport their pigs outside contaminated

areas. These events resulted in a wide-spread contagion, a doubling of pork prices, and a loss of half the pork supply in China. What this showed is that misaligned interests between different organizations within an autocratic regime can lead to national level issues.

Finally, we note that adversaries' interest-based operations are not always effective. For example, when China has limited leverage, it has been forced to concede and forgive its loans.<sup>40</sup>

Together, these suggest there are a wide range of possible applications of interest-based operations to limit adversaries' ability to establish regional control.

## **2. Pressing Advantages across Adversaries' Defense Pipeline**

In order to achieve regional control, adversaries have to translate their general economic resources into military and regional operations. This pipeline includes critical inputs (e.g., research, industries, talent, materials, technology), the organizational structure and efficiency of their defense industry, and—finally—the allocation and use of defense products.

Historically, we have already seen that these areas have been targeted. For example:

- Inputs of defense production: Nations have targeted human capital (e.g., Iranian scientists associated with the nuclear weapons program have been targeted with kinetic operations).<sup>41</sup>
- Efficiency of defense production: Cyber actions have been used to reduce the efficiency of and disrupt defense programs.<sup>42</sup>
- Outputs of defense production: Operations have been used to misallocate existing defense capabilities, such as when the Soviet Union supplied arms to Vietnam, and when the United States supplied weapons to anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan.

These examples are not exhaustive, but show that there is historical precedence for targeting this economic to regional control pipeline to limit adversaries' capabilities. As our previous cases highlighted, there are multiple potential mechanisms that could be leveraged within autocratic regimes. This could include creating conflict between national-level objectives, exploiting frictions between different governmental organizations, or blunting their ex-post effectiveness.

As part of a sub-threshold strategy, DoD should examine the range of exploitable mechanisms using existing capabilities and interest-based targeting to limit an adversary's regional control—and decide how aggressively and which tools to use.

### **3. Implementation**

We propose that DoD should undertake a systemic approach to help it establish the role and value of offensive operations. We provided several mechanisms and possible use cases from current and historical examples. We suggest that DoD execute a structured approach to identify the correct approach and use small-scale experiments to showcase the utility and value of the approach.

We recommend a three-pronged approach:

The first is to take stock of the potential options and constraints in implementing an interest-based operation. At this point, DoD should review its available authorities, capabilities, programs, and tools (unclassified to compartmented), including financial, cyber, intelligence, and so on. DoD should also examine statutory, cultural, and policy constraints that limit its operations. The objective is to create a consolidated view of the full range of tools DoD can deploy as well as the obstacles that may limit its operations.

Second, DoD should build adversary-specific short of war campaigns. The focus here is to create a strategy for how DoD will limit an adversary's expansion without going to war. As part of this approach, DoD should examine what seams can be exploited and the potential utility. For example, DoD should seek to address what national level trades (e.g., internal security vs. national defense) exist and how they could be used to limit an adversary's ability to establish control. For example, China is heavily investing in unstable countries (e.g., Pakistan) in order to eliminate a perceived vulnerability on oil transported by sea and distract a regional competitor. Do these investments and perceived vulnerability present a distraction opportunity? DoD should also examine the internal conflicts within our adversaries' regimes and how those could be leveraged. For example, China and Russia have invested heavily in internal security. Their approach is to co-opt or shut down existing institutions and disrupt the ability of people to organize through enhanced monitoring and intervention. Does this present an opportunity to limit the efficiency and effectiveness of their defense enterprises? The process of building these campaigns will help DoD establish how it will organize and operate, where it will lead and need support, and identify organizational, operational, and technical gaps.

This process should start internally but eventually include other governmental agencies—including Treasury, Central Intelligence Agency, and Department of State—as well as our allies and partners. The value of expanding is that it may identify other possibilities and provide opportunities for specializations. For example, Baltic allies might be willing to help experiment and test out interest-based targeting concepts. In addition, given the resource difference between the United States and our allies, this might provide a way of focusing allies/partner investments in a manner that complements US strengths, thereby adding unique capabilities to the alliance.



Finally, DoD should prioritize and fund programs and experiments to support interest-based targeting. For example, because timing can be critical in these operations, the tools and organizational constructs should support rapid operations. DoD should also work to test operational concepts and measure effects. The goal is to ensure DoD has the relevant tools to identify targets, develop influence chains, and conduct post-action assessments.



## 4. Summary

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DoD faces a long-term strategic competition. The severe negative consequences of conflict incentivize each party to operate below the threshold of conflict. DoD should prepare for a protracted sub-threshold campaign using interest-based operations. Adversaries already use interest-based targeting to harm DoD interests and expand regional control. DoD should create a short of war strategy to protect its interests and prevent adversaries from establishing regional control.

Interest-based targeting is the use of operations to create conflict between the interests of a targeted nation's constituents/groups and its national security in order to change the calculus of its decision makers. Interest-based operations are designed to produce real-world effects by changing the ecosystem around decision makers. Successful interest-based operations have several common features:

- **Surgical targeting:** The targeted constituent groups are selected due to their value to their nation's decision maker.
- **Measured Effects:** The operation's effects on the constituent groups' interests are dialed to harm, but not destroy, the target while being significant enough so the target's decision maker cannot ameliorate the harm.
- **Limited blowback:** The operation's effects are generated in a manner that reduces collateral damage to the targeting country.

China and Russia have already used a wide array of tools to expand their reach and limit US actions. We propose a three-pronged approach to developing a short of war strategy:

1. **Baseline sub-threshold related investments, activities, and forces.** This will enable DoD leaders to ensure that sufficient coverage exists for this new mission area.
2. **DoD should take stock of the defense ecosystem by mapping its major strategic priorities (e.g., global access or technological superiority) to the firms, allies/partners, and individuals that enable them.** This will help DoD identify opportunities to enhance the resiliency of the defense ecosystem and provide opportunities to close vulnerabilities.
3. **DoD should create and leverage opportunities by examining our adversaries' economic to regional control pipeline for vulnerabilities.** This should also

support an exploration of the tools, organizational constructs, and policies that can support or limit interest-based operations. Finally, DoD should leverage wargames and experimentation to identify promising approaches and fund programs to close any technological or operational gaps.

Together, these steps will help DoD build a short of war strategy by properly supporting sub-threshold competition, increasing resilience and closing vulnerabilities of the defense ecosystem, and blunting adversaries' attempts at establishing regional control.

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## Abbreviations

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DoD	Department of Defense
OSD(R&E)	Office of the Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering
PDVSA	Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.
PPBE	Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution
THAAD	Terminal High Altitude Area Defense
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development



## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001).
- <sup>2</sup> This comes directly from the summary of the National Defense Strategy, but it also closely aligns with conclusions in John J. Mearsheimer, “The Gathering Storm: China’s Challenge to US Power in Asia,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 4 (2010): 381–396, <https://www.doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poq016>; and Jim Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018).
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