

# IDA | Research Summary

## Three Steps to a Counterstrategy for Subthreshold Operations



**U.S. adversaries aggressively use interest-based operations to gain regional influence without resorting to combat. These subthreshold operations weaken U.S. technological superiority and undermine U.S. alliances and partnerships. IDA offers a three-step approach for the Department of Defense (DOD) to develop a counterstrategy to deal with subthreshold operations.**

DOD maintains global access, intelligence, and technological superiority through a rich network of organizations, governments, and individuals. This network (or *ecosystem*) enables DOD's success while blocking advantages to U.S. adversaries. Players in this important ecosystem range from traditional U.S. defense contractors to foreign logistics firms, from major allies to lesser known partners, and from diplomats to heads of state.

China, Russia, and other U.S. adversaries use a sophisticated set of techniques that focus on the interests of targets in this ecosystem to gain footholds in strategic regions. Techniques may include financial incentives, policy manipulation, and digital messaging intended to extract useful technology, limit U.S. operations, and degrade U.S. alliances. Such operations create conflict between the interests of regional decision-makers and their national security objectives, limiting U.S. options for counteraction. In effect, U.S. adversaries are maneuvering to win the great power competition without ever having to engage in combat.

To thwart an adversary's ability to establish regional spheres of influence using these techniques, DOD must recognize subthreshold competition as a new mission. We propose a three-step process that will provide the information DOD needs to formulate an effective counterstrategy. This approach supports competition and conventional deterrence by ensuring DOD maintains its global access, intelligence, and technology superiority by increasing the defense ecosystem's resilience and blunting the adversaries' attempts to establish regional control through interest-based operations.

- **Baseline activities and investments related to subthreshold competition.** DOD leaders first need a baseline of activities and investments that are aligned to support the mission of subthreshold competition. IDA proposes an initial analysis of budgets, selected acquisition reports, and other sources of data to reveal a strategic view of the disposition of forces, extent of mission investments, and expected changes over time. Adding geographic data, program relationships, and other metadata will enhance the view by showing how missions and resources are allocated and how changes in one program can affect another. DOD could then use analytical tools to baseline the effectiveness and resources allocated to subthreshold competition and provide what-if analyses.
- **Take stock of the defense ecosystem.** DOD also needs to identify locations that are vulnerable to interest-based actions and evaluate how those actions might affect DOD operations. Data-driven methods that map technological superiority, global access, and other priorities to the various players in DOD's current ecosystem could reveal these vulnerabilities. DOD could then address these vulnerabilities and identify alternative strategies. If this mapping requires development of new analytical techniques, the new techniques could also be made to reveal ways to diversify DOD's ecosystem and to replicate pathways for attaining priorities.
- **Create advantages.** Finally, DOD needs to identify the full range of tools for offensive interest-based operations and to explore ways to counter them. Examining current capabilities, authorities, and policies through the lens of subthreshold operations will identify opportunities for creating advantages where there are now none.

This systematic approach to developing a strategy will ensure support and visibility of the subthreshold mission, increase resiliency of the defense ecosystem, and create a capability for offensive interest-based operations.



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