

Whitehall Report 2-21

# Operationalising the Constrain Concept

## Competing Below the Threshold

Sidharth Kaushal



**Royal United Services Institute**  
for Defence and Security Studies



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RUSI Whitehall Report, December 2021



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RUSI Whitehall Report, December 2021. ISSN 1750-9432.

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# Executive Summary

**T**HE SUBJECT OF competition beneath the threshold of conflict has become increasingly central to both academic discussions of strategy and policy discourse.<sup>1</sup> Central to this is the idea that adversaries are achieving strategic progress through a series of steps short of warfare, and that crafting tailored responses to this form of coercion is one of the cardinal challenges facing Western militaries. This has found expression in documents such as the UK Ministry of Defence's Integrated Operating Concept (IOpC), which stresses the need to constrain opponents below the threshold of conflict.<sup>2</sup>

While a focus on competition below the threshold of conflict is an important conceptual development, in order for it to be translated into concrete guidance for action, greater specificity is required on two counts. First, the contours of the sub-threshold space and their relationship to warfighting need to be more explicitly articulated. The criteria for what constitutes sub-threshold aggression are not objectively defined and are typically the subject of a parallel competition to define thresholds in a way that aligns with a state's own advantages. Second, the pathways by which competition below the threshold of warfare can deliver strategic effects need to be more explicitly identified. If it is indeed the case that states will need to adapt to a mindset of persistent campaigning, then a clearly defined set of campaign goals will be crucial.

This paper seeks to further the evolution of the constrain concept into lines of effort by providing both a discussion of the relationship between constraint and warfighting and a typology of the campaign objectives that can be fruitfully sought below the threshold of conflict. Its key findings are:

- The boundaries of the sub-threshold space are the product of mutual consent on the part of adversaries. Often, they result from a parallel – and crucial – contest to compel an adversary to define conflict on one's own terms. This contest is shaped, in no small part, by one's posture for the use of force above the threshold of conflict and the way it shapes the other party's risk calculus. Other contextual factors, such as the trajectory of the overall relationship between adversaries, may also play a role in defining the contours of the competitive space.
- The defining objective of sub-threshold competition is not merely undercutting an opponent's credibility, despite the outsized importance attributed to this aim. Rather, sub-threshold campaigns can serve several goals, including strategic erosion, tipping the balance in favour of a partner that is in the fight phase of operations, costly signalling and preparing for warfighting on favourable terms.

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1. For a useful discussion, see Kathleen H Hicks, *By Other Means Part I: Campaigning in the Gray Zone* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019).  
2. Ministry of Defence, 'Integrated Operating Concept', August 2021.

- Many of these objectives may be served using capabilities associated with the high-intensity phase of conflict – underscoring the importance of not conflating sub-threshold competition exclusively with specific organisations and capabilities such as special forces or cyber assets.<sup>3</sup>
- In an operating environment characterised by defence dominance and mutual interdependence among adversaries, the threshold for what constitutes an act of war is likely to be raised, with a range of kinetic actions falling within the sub-threshold space.

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3. A point noted by Cold War-era discussions of competition. See, for example, Barry M Blechman and Stephen S Kaplan, *Force Without War: U.S. Armed Forces as a Political Instrument* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1978).

# Introduction

IN 1905, BRITAIN secured a strategic coup without firing a single shot. The successive destruction of the Russian Baltic and Pacific fleets by Britain's ally, Japan, had effectively eliminated a prospective maritime challenger, and halted any chance of Russian expansion in the Far East which could have threatened the interests of an increasingly overstretched empire with multiple far-flung commitments. What is often forgotten is how Britain – ostensibly a neutral party to the conflict – shaped its outcomes through a series of proactive measures. The positioning of the Royal Navy near the bases of the Russian Baltic fleet – which increased the uncertainty of Russian decision-makers about Britain's likely response to the fleet's redeployment – slowed the pace of Russian decision-making and precluded the unification of Russia's two fleets early in the conflict. To this, one might add the denial of British coal fuelling stations, which similarly slowed the progress of the Russian Baltic fleet.<sup>1</sup> The shadowing of Russian vessels by the Royal Navy's Cape squadron – which raised Russian fears of their location being revealed to the Japanese, similarly introduced a degree of hesitancy into Russian planning and decision-making cycles. In addition, the material and organisational effect of British support to Japan, as well as British efforts to preclude emergency warship purchases by Russia, eroded the balance of power between Russia and Japan.<sup>2</sup> Collectively, Britain's actions during the war amount to a study in constraining an adversary's military and strategic options below the threshold of high-intensity conflict. While not militarily decisive, these actions were strategically decisive in that they enabled Britain's ally, Japan, to defeat a numerically superior Russian navy. Had the Russian Pacific and Baltic fleets combined in time, this may not have been the case, given their aggregate numerical advantage.<sup>3</sup>

This historical episode should serve as a reminder that states can achieve significant strategic effects without initiating decisive kinetic military operations through a combination of engaging partners and undermining an adversary's ability to use the tools at its disposal to effect. This is being recognised in contemporary strategic discourse. The concept of competition below the threshold of open warfare – now an effective mainstay of strategic thinking – is increasingly incorporated in policy documents. Among these are the US Department of Defense's National Defense Strategy, which stipulates the need for the US military to cope with persistent sub-

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1. Philip A Towle, 'British Assistance to the Japanese Navy During the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05', *Great Circle* (Vol. 2, No. 1, 1986), pp. 44–54. Certainly, Britain had a legal case for denying Russia, a belligerent, access to neutral ports. However, this was arguably more a pretext than the primary cause for the British decision.
  2. *Ibid.*
  3. Yoji Koda, 'The Russo-Japanese War – Primary Causes of Japanese Success', *Naval War College Review* (Vol. 58, No. 2, 2005), pp. 22–24.

threshold challenges, and the UK government's Integrated Operating Concept (IOpC).<sup>4</sup> The latter is particularly noteworthy for its inclusion of the concept of constraint operations alongside arguably more traditional functions such as protection, engagement and warfighting at scale.

Constraining an opponent's freedom of action through a series of measures which, notably, include certain combat operations is an understandable objective in the context of a strategic environment characterised by persistent great power competition.<sup>5</sup> That said, the framework of sub-threshold competition is not without its critics, who raise important questions regarding precisely how the threshold between war and peace is delineated and whether proponents of this concept may underestimate the increased risks of escalation which, they argue, it necessarily involves.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the relative weight that should be placed on activities which are often described as limited in scope and ambition as opposed to preparing for the less likely, but arguably more consequential, scenarios involving high-intensity warfighting has also been the subject of debate.<sup>7</sup> If sub-threshold competition is primarily restricted to peripheral liminal spaces where it is unlikely to precipitate war – for example, the territory of non-allied third parties such as Ukraine or narrowly defined disputed areas such as the Senkaku Islands – then is it of particular significance?<sup>8</sup> Or might it be argued that sub-threshold aggression reflects a pattern of poorly considered interventions in peripheral areas to little positive strategic effect? One might consider, for example, Wilhelmine Germany's behaviour in the 1905 Moroccan crisis, where Germany adopted a confrontational policy regarding France in an area of sufficiently little strategic value to deliver substantial strategic effects, which was nonetheless sufficiently aggressive to generate international opprobrium.<sup>9</sup> The logic that such contests constitute tests of resolve – which may imbue their objects with an artificial strategic significance – is also empirically unproven given that leaders tend to draw limited conclusions about each other's

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4. US Department of Defense, 'Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge', 2018, p. 5; Ministry of Defence (MoD), 'Integrated Operating Concept', August 2021.
  5. MoD, 'Integrated Operating Concept'.
  6. See, for example, Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside, 'Blurred Lines: Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War—Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking', *Naval War College Review* (Vol. 73, No. 1, 2020), pp. 1–38; Chiara Libiseller and Lukas Milevski, 'War and Peace: Reaffirming the Distinction', *Survival* (Vol. 63, No. 1, 2021), pp. 101–12.
  7. Michael J Mazarr, 'Presence vs. Warfighting: A Looming Dilemma in Defense Planning', *War on the Rocks*, 26 April 2016.
  8. For examples of this view, see David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (London: C Hurst and Co, 2020); Adam P Liff, 'China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations in the East China Sea and Japan's Response', in Andrew S Erickson and Ryan D Martinson (eds), *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations* (Annapolis, MD: China Maritime Studies Institute Press: 2019).
  9. Jeffrey W Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 64–80.

resolve or capabilities based on such engagements.<sup>10</sup> While this paper argues that sub-threshold activity is of significance, and should not be conflated with peripheral gains, an understanding of when it can deliver meaningful strategic effects is needed.

The purpose of this paper is to: provide a definition of the relationship between sub-threshold tools and a state's wider strategy; develop a typology of sub-threshold campaigns detailing the objectives that they can plausibly deliver; and discuss the role of military and non-military instruments in the sub-threshold space. The paper also details the distinctive features of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century sub-threshold operating environment. It builds on a review of historical literature on interstate competition and engages with contemporary policy documents, such as the IOPC.

Furthermore, the paper aims to operationalise the concept of constraint operations in sub-threshold competition by translating the IOPC's broad conceptual direction into concrete lines of effort. Its objectives are to: specify which actions and capabilities fall under the aegis of constraint operations; identify the interrelationships between constraining activities and the other components of the IOPC; and articulate precisely which strategic goals constraining activities can usefully serve. As such, the analysis offers:

- A definition of the sub-threshold space and its relation to high-intensity warfighting.
- A typology of campaign goals that sub-threshold activity can serve.
- A description of the features of the contemporary strategic environment that impact the conduct of sub-threshold competition and their policy implications.

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10. This stems from the fact that deductions regarding credibility tend to be made on a case-by-case basis, rather than on the basis of past actions that may have occurred in contextually dissimilar circumstances. See Daryl G Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).



# I. The Sub-Threshold Space as a Contested Concept

**C**RITICAL TO ANY definition of the sub-threshold space is the definition of its boundaries. While there is a general consensus that actions short of those which could spark a major power war can be defined as part of sub-threshold competition, there is little definition of precisely what such actions might be. Consider, for example, the analogous cases of Iran-backed Kataib Hizbullah's recent attacks on US forces in Iraq and the 1965 Pleiku attacks on US forces which precipitated large-scale US involvement in Vietnam.<sup>11</sup> The latter were treated as an act of war, but the former were not. This is because, as McGeorge Bundy opined, 'Pleikus are like streetcars' – once a decision to engage in conflict had been made, a suitable provocation would be identified.<sup>12</sup> Equally, if this were not the case, the same provocation would be treated as sub-threshold. The political and strategic context, then, plays a key role in determining where the threshold is. The relationship between sub-threshold competition and a state's overarching strategy therefore requires greater discussion.

It has, for example, been argued that the Clausewitzian definition of war – the reciprocal use of violence for political ends – ought to remain the primary determinant of where the threshold between war and peace lies, lest a range of competitive activities be construed as forms of warfare.<sup>13</sup> This risk is certainly visible in discussions of grey-zone warfare where actions as wide-ranging as Chinese efforts to secure influence through economic aid are included under the rubric of warfare.<sup>14</sup> This entails both conceptual lacunae and escalatory risks if any potentially competitive action by a rival is presented as a form of warfare.

However, the Clausewitzian criterion of reciprocal violence being used for political purposes being the definition of where the threshold lies is somewhat at odds with the way contemporary competition is often viewed. There have been several recent cases in which states have engaged in direct kinetic action against each other's forces without being classified as 'at war'. Among

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11. Lara Seligman, 'U.S. Officials Believe Iran-Backed Group Responsible for Latest Rocket Attack in Iraq', *Politico*, 4 March 2021; John Schlight, *The War in South Vietnam: The Years of the Offensive, 1965–1968* (Washington, DC: US Air Force History and Museums Program, 1999), p. 15.

12. For more on Kataib Hizbullah, see Sune Engel Rasmussen and Isabel Coles, 'Iran-Backed Militia Has Long Targeted U.S. Forces', *Wall Street Journal*, 29 December 2019; for more on the Pleiku attacks, see David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 140.

13. See Stoker and Whiteside, 'Blurred Lines'; Frank Hoffman, 'Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges', *PRISM* (Vol. 7, No. 4, 2018), pp. 31–47.

14. For an example of this type of broad-based definition, see Elizabeth Troeder, *A Whole of Government Approach to Grey Zone Warfare* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2019), pp. 1–10.

these are clashes between Russian and Turkish forces in Syria, clashes between the US marine corps and Russian private military companies (PMCs) in Syria, and the assassination of Qassem Soleimani and the subsequent Iranian missile strikes.<sup>15</sup> Not only have the states involved in each scenario failed to frame their relations as having entered a state of war but, in the case of Russia and Turkey, they have actually seen their commercial and defence relations burgeon at the same time through projects such as the TurkStream pipeline and Rosatom's construction of the Turkish nuclear reactor at Akkuyu.<sup>16</sup> While some cases have involved the use of third parties such as PMCs, this is less true of others, such as the Soleimani killing or cross-border clashes between India and its neighbours Pakistan and China.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, it is not necessarily the case that the conduct of violence through a proxy has historically been considered an act short of war. Indeed, there is a long history of states treating others that provide support and refuge to hostile non-state actors as effectively at war with them.<sup>18</sup>

This leads to the first key point about the sub-threshold space: it is, at least to an extent, an intersubjective concept – one that exists not by any objective benchmark but rather by mutual consent on the part of the contestants. The choice to acknowledge that one is in a state of war with an adversary, which typically commits both parties to higher levels of escalation, is a strategic one in and of itself. This choice can be a function of three elements:

1. The ability of one or both parties to deter conventional escalation at higher levels of intensity. This is of particular salience to the weaker party, which stands to lose if conflict should escalate to a higher level of intensity.
2. The overarching relationship between two powers. If two states stand to lose economically from a direct, high-intensity confrontation, or if conflict in certain areas is proceeding alongside collaboration in others, they have incentives to raise the thresholds at which a conflict is deemed to have transitioned to warfighting.
3. The strategic culture of each state and the subjective basis on which organisations and individuals determine a conflict as having begun.

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15. Carlotta Gall, 'Airstrike Hits Turkish Forces Conducting Operations in Syria', *New York Times*, 27 February 2020; Rodrick H McHaty and Joe Moyer, 'The US Military Must Plan for Encounters with Private Military Actors', Brookings Institution, 30 March 2021, <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/03/30/the-us-military-must-plan-for-encounters-with-private-military-companies/>>, accessed 22 November 2021; Gordon Lubold, Nancy A Youssef and Isabel Coles, 'Iran Fires Missiles at U.S. Forces in Iraq', *Wall Street Journal*, 7 January 2020.
  16. Rahim Rahimov, 'The Russian-Turkish Economic Partnership Takes Shape, but Tensions Persist', Wilson Center, 4 March 2020, <<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/russian-turkish-economic-partnership-takes-shape-tensions-persist>>, accessed 22 November 2021.
  17. Salman Masood, Mujib Mashal and Hari Kumar, 'Pakistan, India Renew Pledge on Cease-Fire at Troubled Border', *New York Times*, 25 February 2021; Nick Reynolds and Sidharth Kaushal, 'A Military Analysis of the Sino-Indian Border Clashes', *RUSI Commentary*, 2 June 2020.
  18. Wendy Pearlman and Boaz Atzili, *Triadic Coercion: Israel's Targeting of States that Host Non-State Actors* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018).

The ability of one party – often the conventionally weaker one – to deter an opponent from higher levels of conventional escalation and an open acknowledgement of a state of war is vital. For example, Iran’s conventional threats to disrupt the economies of key Gulf states through precision strikes or to close the Strait of Hormuz have contributed to its ability to conduct proxy warfare in the Middle East without triggering a high-intensity conflict. Similarly, North Korean provocations, such as the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island and the sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* in 2010, could readily qualify as acts of war, but this framing was consciously avoided due to the threats posed by North Korea’s artillery across the demilitarised zone and its WMD arsenal.<sup>19</sup> To use another example, Indian policymakers have been deterred from treating proxy warfare by Pakistan as a *casus belli* by the threat posed by the potential use of Pakistani battlefield nuclear weapons.

Moreover, India’s search for a doctrine which might restore its ability to use conventional forces to respond to an indirect attack illustrates a key facet of the sub-threshold space. Its contours are contested by both parties on the basis of their relative strengths. The stronger actor often has incentives to lower the thresholds at which a state of war can be declared by formulating limited war doctrines that are usable – that is, which can be operationalised without risks that exceed the value of the policy objective.<sup>20</sup> The weaker actor, by contrast, is incentivised to raise the risks of conventional escalation by threatening a relatively unrestricted response. This often takes place through threats of WMD use, although, as the Iranian and North Korean cases above illustrate, conventional forces can also provide the threat. In effect, then, a challenge that the stronger actor faces in a competitive environment is developing a response suite that makes its strength politically usable in the face of limited provocations, thereby setting the threshold as low as possible.

That said, the relative conventional strength and military doctrines of the two contestants is not the only reason for activity to be deemed below the threshold of war. The overarching relationship between two actors also plays a key role. For example, the Nixon administration could mine Haiphong Harbour in 1972 during its war with North Vietnam, and effectively threaten both Chinese and Soviet ships entering Vietnamese waters without fearing war in the event of a sinking, because improving relations with both China and the Soviet Union gave them an incentive to treat the act as a form of competition instead.<sup>21</sup> To use a more recent example, progress in Russian and Turkish relations on a range of fronts – including weapons sales, investments in key pipelines and shipbuilding – provide leaders in both states with an incentive to not treat clashes between their forces and proxies as acts of war.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, for

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19. Ankit Panda, ‘South Korea Commemorates 10 Years Since Sinking of *Cheonan*’, *The Diplomat*, 27 April 2020; *BBC News*, ‘North Korean Artillery Hits South Korean Island’, 23 November 2010.

20. Walter C Ladwig III, ‘A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army’s New Limited War Doctrine’, *International Security* (Vol. 32, No. 3, 2007/08), pp. 158–90.

21. W L Greer, ‘The 1972 Mining of Haiphong Harbor: A Case Study in Naval Mining and Diplomacy’, Institute for Defense Analyses, April 1997.

22. These clashes have included incidents such as Turkey shooting down a Russian jet in 2015 and Russia enabling and possibly conducting strikes on Turkish forces in Syria, among others. See

example, Imperial Japan went to war with the US as a result of the Roosevelt-Stimson oil sanctions – a decidedly non-kinetic and non-military tool. This was because Japanese planners already considered the relationship between the two states as having deteriorated irrevocably, and felt that tarrying would weaken Japan’s strategic position further by rendering its fleet inoperable for want of fuel.<sup>23</sup> In other words, whether a given action is considered as a basis for high-intensity conflict is often a function of the broader relationship between the involved powers.

Finally, organisational and strategic culture, as well as the embedded views of individual decision-makers, can play a significant role in perceptions of the boundaries of the sub-threshold space. For example, the Chinese concept of active defence takes as the starting point of conflict circumstances that point to relations in which the political and strategic actions of an opponent have rendered war necessary. Defence, in this context, is comparable to pre-emption from a Western standpoint – given that the starting point of conflict is not the first clash of arms.<sup>24</sup> Beliefs that can shape the contours of the sub-threshold space can include those regarding the value of credibility, as well as the utility of the military instrument and embedded images of the opponent. An example of the first of these might be typified by a quote from Robert McNamara during the Cuban Missile Crisis, noting that ‘it is not a military problem that we’re facing ... It’s a problem of holding the alliance together. It’s a problem of properly conditioning Khrushchev to our future moves’.<sup>25</sup> Although in this case the Soviet challenge (which did not constitute an act of war) did not lead to full-scale warfare, the reasoning outlined served as the basis for taking steps which may have resulted in war. Leaders’ embedded views regarding the role of military force and the nature of war may impact decision-making. For example, one might note the difference between the Soviet Union’s view that once shooting started, war naturally escalated to total proportions and the contemporary Russian view that escalation can be carefully managed. The latter approach enables Russia to view a range of acts, including limited kinetic coercion, as forming part of ‘strategic containment’, the rough analogue to constraining operations.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, perceptions of an opponent’s thresholds can prove critical. For example, during the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, Chinese leaders were surprised by the scale of the US response to Chinese missile

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*BBC News*, ‘Turkey’s Downing of Russian Warplane – What We Know’, 1 December 2015; Metin Gurcan, ‘Deciphering Turkey’s Darkest Night in Syria’, *Al-Monitor*, 28 February 2020, <<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/02/turkey-syria-russia-deciphering-attack-on-turkish-troops.html>>, accessed 22 November 2021.

23. Trevor Filseth, ‘The Forgotten Reason Japan Attacked Pearl Harbor’, *National Interest*, 9 December 2020.
24. M Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy Since 1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 158; Andrew Scobell, *China and Strategic Culture* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2002). The degree to which this reflects a deep-rooted strategic culture, as opposed to a more recent organisational consensus, is the subject of some discussion.
25. Press, *Calculating Credibility*, p. 13.
26. See Jack L Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1977); Anya Fink and Michael Kofman, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2020).

tests off Taiwan, which included the deployment of multiple aircraft carriers and an implicit threat of war. Beijing assumed that the tests – conducted with dummy warheads – would be clearly recognised as a form of sub-threshold coercive diplomacy, an opinion not shared by their US counterparts.<sup>27</sup> A number of factors can shape perceptions. For example, some scholars have argued that patterns of cognition differ across cultural boundaries, with some cultures analysing events on a case-by-case basis, while others view them in holistic terms in relation to their wider context. Thus, in principle, a state from the latter framework might view an action as being either above or below the threshold based on, for example, preceding events or the wider geopolitical context.<sup>28</sup> Alternatively, individual leaders' formative experiences and resulting operational codes can play a critical role in determining how thresholds are conceived.<sup>29</sup> Operational codes are generally comprised of philosophical beliefs regarding the nature of things such as competition or conflict and instrumental beliefs. For example, individuals and groups which view international politics as being generally competitive and transactional may be much more willing to both engage in limited conflict and expect adversaries to retaliate in proportion and continue cooperation alongside conflict. This is arguably a view shared by Russia and Turkey, for example. Alternatively, instrumental beliefs, such as the idea that conflict must be prosecuted decisively and with all a state's means, may be less willing to accommodate the notion of limited kinetic conflict as being below the threshold.<sup>30</sup>

In effect, then, sub-threshold competition occurs in tandem with a parallel contest to define precisely where the thresholds of conflict are.<sup>31</sup> This contest is shaped to a significant degree by the way in which conventional forces are postured to deter or fight, and has a bearing on the conduct of sub-threshold activities. Where a credible conventional response at a higher level of intensity can be threatened, as in the case of the Taiwan Strait Crisis or Turkey's threats of war should Syria not end its policy of lending refuge to the Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan, the sub-threshold space shrinks considerably for an opponent.<sup>32</sup> However, other factors, including the overarching relationship between disputants and subjective perceptions, are also critical to defining the sub-threshold space.

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27. Andrew Scobell, 'Show of Force: Chinese Soldiers, Statesmen and the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis', *Political Science Quarterly* (Vol. 115, No. 2, 2000), pp. 227–46.

28. See, for example, Richard E Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently – And Why* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2005); on the Russian tradition of holistic reasoning – a characteristic shared with much of East Asia – see Dima Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), Chapter 2.

29. On the subject of operational codes and schemas, see Ole Holsti, 'The "Operational Code" Approach to the Study of Political Leaders: John Foster Dulles' Philosophical and Instrumental Beliefs', *Canadian Journal of Political Science* (Vol. 3, No. 1, 1970), pp. 123–57.

30. For an example of the US debates regarding the possibility of limited kinetic conflict, see Christopher M Gacek, *The Logic of Force: The Dilemma of Limited War in American Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994).

31. Herman Kahn once referred to this as a 'systemic competition' to define precedents. See Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (London: Routledge, 1965), p. 22.

32. On the Turkish Syrian crisis, see Alan Makovsky, 'Defusing the Turkish Syrian Crisis: Whose Triumph?', Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 February 1999, <<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/defusing-the-turkish-syrian-crisis-whose-triumph>>.

Defining the boundaries of the sub-threshold space, and compelling an opponent's acquiescence to them, is a critical parallel task alongside sub-threshold competition. The Fight part of the PECF (Protect, Engage, Constrain and Fight) framework is likely to be critical to this parallel competition. More powerful actors may see their technological and economic benefits somewhat offset if they cannot formulate means of fighting at higher levels of intensity that are politically viable. The challenge for militaries, then, may often be *obviating* deterrence – overcoming adversary efforts to deter kinetic responses – to secure deterrence against more limited challenges.

In other circumstances, however, it may be to the mutual benefit of both parties to define the sub-threshold space in a broad way. This may be particularly true of competition in peripheral theatres where the game is not worth the candle of high-intensity conflict, as well as in circumstances where high-intensity conflict would be mutually catastrophic. In such cases, the ability of other arms of the state and society – such as economic and diplomatic actors, along with arms supplies to allied states and insurgents – to engage a rival and establish a shared set of boundaries may prove important. This was the case during the Nixon-Kissinger era of détente in which engagement with the Soviet Union contributed to a shared interest in limiting the potential of peripheral proxy conflicts to cascade into full-scale global conflict. Alongside this was a rulebook of sorts for sub-threshold competition that saw the US limit radio-free Europe broadcasts and the Soviet Union reciprocate through actions such as tacitly acceding to the mining of Haiphong Harbour, providing official assurances limiting its construction of facilities in Cuba following the Cienfuegos crisis, and limiting its support to the Syrian invasion of Jordan to levels short of what it could have achieved.<sup>33</sup> The threshold for what might lead to a general war was thus raised in cases – notably the risk to Soviet vessels posed by US mines – and a mutual language of when, where and how both actors could compete below the threshold established.

Competing below the threshold, then, depends on a parallel effort to use military force – among other tools – to define the sub-threshold space in accordance with national policy. This latter effort involves a much broader spectrum of tools, including a state's capacity for conventional warfighting at scale and its nuclear capabilities. It is also noteworthy that seemingly unrelated activities, such as economic engagement and negotiations over arms control, may have a critical role in defining the boundaries of the sub-threshold space. These tools can, in addition to their intrinsic value, be used to determine the thresholds of what constitutes an act of war, as well as to negotiate what acts are acceptable in the space between war and peace.<sup>34</sup>

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[washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/defusing-turkish-syrian-crisis-whose-triumph](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/defusing-turkish-syrian-crisis-whose-triumph), accessed 22 November 2021.

33. For a useful discussion of the successes and failures of détente, see Robert S Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969-1976* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 80–100; on the Soviet Union's relative restraint in the Jordanian crisis, see Adam M Garfinkle, 'U.S. Decision Making in the Jordan Crisis: Correcting the Record', *Political Science Quarterly* (Vol. 100, No. 1, Spring 1985), pp. 117–38.
34. For more on this, see Sidharth Kaushal and Peter Roberts, 'Competitive Advantage and Rules in Persistent Competitions', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (April 2021).

## II. A Typology of Strategies for Sub-Threshold Campaigns

THE SECOND CHALLENGE confronting policymakers, alongside defining the sub-threshold space to their own advantage, is to define how sub-threshold competition serves national policy objectives. The objective of persistent campaigning, identified as critical in the IOpC, requires a typology of campaign objectives and a description of their relation to strategy.

If, as the IOpC contends, the UK must shift to a posture for continuous campaigning in the sub-threshold space, it will need a classification of the objectives that engagement and constraining actions can serve – in other words, a list of campaign objectives. While noting that where the threshold lies is the subject of contestation, the general consensus can nonetheless be applied that it encompasses competition short of high-intensity warfighting as a heuristic to examine precisely what purposes those actions can serve.<sup>35</sup>

A significant amount of the literature examining sub-threshold competition has emphasised the importance of calibration and strategic gradualism, with a specific focus on case studies such as the actions of China in the South China Sea.<sup>36</sup> While the gradual erosion of an opponent's will or capabilities is indeed an important part of constraining operations in the sub-threshold space, it is not its defining characteristic nor the only strategic function that such actions can serve. To use the example cited at the beginning of this paper, British constraining actions during the Russo-Japanese War enabled an ally (Japan) to achieve decisive effects in a short time period by supporting the ally's efforts at warfighting above the threshold.<sup>37</sup>

There are several campaign mechanisms through which sub-threshold activity can deliver effects:

- Strategic erosion.
- Enabling a partner to achieve decisive effects in the Fight phase of operations.
- Setting the conditions for committing one's own forces to a high-intensity clash.
- Costly signalling and brinkmanship.

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35. This paper uses the Correlates of War methodology of classifying combat operations which cause more than 1,000 battle deaths between both combatants as high-level intensity. This metric, while imperfect, is useful to establish where 'high intensity' on the conflict spectrum begins. See The Correlates of War Project, 'History', <<https://correlatesofwar.org/history>>, accessed 22 November 2021.

36. See, for example, Michael J Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Washington, DC: Strategic Studies Institute, 2014); Peter Layton, *China's Enduring Grey-Zone Challenge* (Canberra: Air and Space Power Centre, Department of Defence, 2020).

37. Towle, 'British Assistance to the Japanese Navy During the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05'.

## Strategic Erosion

Strategic erosion has received perhaps the most attention of the mechanisms above. The use of both military and non-military capabilities in a drumbeat of relatively ambiguous and often – though not always – bloodless engagements can serve to erode both an opponent’s material position and its psychological resolve. The oft-cited case here is China’s use of its fishing vessels backed by the Chinese coast guard and maritime militia to disrupt the commercial fishing activity of disputants in parts of the South China Sea. This has been coupled with the artificial reclamation and subsequent militarisation of islands in the region, altering the regional balance of power in a series of moves short of outright warfare. On the Sino-Indian border, similar moves have been accompanied by lethal clashes, albeit without the use of firearms to adhere to the letter (if not the spirit) of the protocols signed between the two states.

What is notable in each case is that limited actions can have meaningful aggregate strategic effects through their ability to erode either the capabilities, position or will of an opponent. While China’s actions in the South China Sea have done little to establish a legal basis for its nine-dash line, or to preclude US and allied vessels from challenging its claims, the ability to disrupt critical commercial activity, whether fishing off the Philippines or oil exploration in Vietnamese waters, has provided it with a degree of leverage over both states through the imposition of steady economic costs. The cost of economic disruption to energy exploration efforts, for example, is estimated to have cost the Vietnamese government \$1 billion in compensation for cancelled contracts. Similarly, the prevention of access to fishing grounds has had a significant impact on the livelihoods of communities in the Philippines.<sup>38</sup> This has, at times, been accompanied by de facto sanctions on key Philippine exports to China. This has partially contributed to a tacit acceptance of the need to accommodate China by the present administration of the Philippines, although in other cases it has resulted in pushback.

The purpose of this form of sub-threshold competition is its ability to wear down the resolve or resources of an actor. For example, the cost of countering Chinese airspace incursions over Taiwan has reached almost \$900 million in one year, a significant sum relative to Taiwan’s limited defence budget.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the costs of mobilisation on India’s northern flank impacted the Indian military to a greater degree than it has the People’s Liberation Army, and will potentially have ramifications for India’s modernisation plans, particularly in the maritime space.<sup>40</sup>

Nor, it should be said, is strategic erosion necessarily an exclusively non-Western approach. One might, for example, consider the Reagan administration’s emphasis on pressuring the Soviet economy and undercutting the confidence of its political class by destabilising Soviet clients

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38. Andrew Higgins, ‘In Philippines, Banana Growers Feel the Cost of South China Sea Dispute’, *Washington Post*, 10 June 2012.

39. *Reuters*, ‘Taiwan Says Has Spent Almost \$900 Million Scrambling Against Chinese Jets This Year’, 7 October 2020.

40. Arzan Tarapore, ‘The Crisis After the Crisis: How Ladakh Will Shape India’s Competition With China’, Lowy Institute, 6 May 2021, <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/crisis-after-crisis-how-ladakh-will-shape-india-s-competition-china>>, accessed 22 November 2021.

and waging a proxy war against the Red Army in Afghanistan.<sup>41</sup> This was coordinated with fresh sanctions and restrictions on trade, efforts to drive down the price of energy exports that were vital to the Soviet economy, and conventional force generation and deployment efforts such as the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) and the deployment of intermediate-range Pershing missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) in Europe, all of which were designed to provoke the Soviets into resource outlays disproportionate to the costs of the US administration's initiatives.<sup>42</sup> This amounted to a cross-government approach with a clear organising objective – forcing an overstretched Soviet economy to expend ever-greater resources. Again, economy of force methods, including working through regional powers such as Pakistan, China and South Africa in theatres like Angola, Afghanistan and Cambodia proved critical. However, the Reagan doctrine also illustrated the potential psychological and economic impact of investing in and deploying certain expensive conventional capabilities, such as missile defences and GLCMs. The prospect of being forced into growing resource outlays by these deployments reinforced the effect of the other cost-imposing measures in the eyes of Soviet leaders, despite relatively limited work and expenditure on projects such as the SDI.

This is illustrative as it demonstrates that conventional assets, including those in development, can have an important role in information warfare, and thus strategic erosion, that is often overlooked. The posturing of assets, along with efforts to exaggerate their effects in an opponent's eyes, can therefore force an opponent into asymmetrical resource outlays. One might consider contemporary pronouncements by Russian leaders about the effects of new technologies, including hypersonics and nuclear torpedoes, in this context.<sup>43</sup> Notably, framing capability generation in this way implies somewhat different benchmarks for utility. Some assets, like the SDI, may be effectively useless in wartime, but an adequate amount of effort in research coordinated with adroit efforts at psychological warfare may still render them strategically useful. Other less visible tools, by contrast, may be more useful in an actual conflict. Governments and militaries thus need to contemplate precisely how much weight is put into different assets, given that some will be more useful in strategies of constraint and erosion and others in the context of warfighting.

Several features of strategic erosion are notable. The first is the mismatch often observed between the intrinsic value of an object of contestation and the strategic effect that threatening

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41. James M Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
  42. For more on the Strategic Defense Initiative and ground-launched cruise missiles, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of US National Security Policy During the Cold War* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 174; for more on the Reagan-era strategic embargoes, see Andrew E Busch, 'Ronald Reagan and the Defeat of the Soviet Empire', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (Vol. 27, No. 3, 1997), pp. 451–66.
  43. Xavier Vavasseur, 'Russian MoD: Tsirkon Hypersonic Missile, Poseidon Nuclear Torpedo Trials Close to Completion', *Naval News*, 31 July 2020, <<https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/07/russian-mod-tsirkon-hypersonic-missile-poseidon-nuclear-torpedo-trials-close-to-completion/>>, accessed 14 November 2021.

it delivers. For example, the Senkaku Islands are of limited strategic and economic value, but the perceived challenge to Japan's sovereignty and the viability of the US–Japan alliance that a Chinese challenge might represent makes them a viable strategic pressure point. Similarly, failures in peripheral proxy campaigns often have a psychological effect disproportionate to the material value of the peripheral ally or client – witness the collapse in confidence observed in both the US and the Soviet Union after the Vietnam and Afghan wars respectively.<sup>44</sup> Psychology may provide some of the answers to this paradox. The endowment effect, a well-documented flaw in human decision-making, suggests that people significantly overvalue what they already possess relative to what they stand to gain.<sup>45</sup> So, for example, a relatively peripheral island or far-flung client state can be framed as vital by those who already 'possess' it.<sup>46</sup> Yet, simultaneously, the objectively limited value of the possession limits the risks that will be taken to secure it. Strategic erosion in many cases appears to exploit this decision-making flaw, achieving magnified psychological effects. Understanding the locus of an opponent's endowment effect is thus critical to erosion.

A related but distinct characteristic is the mismatch between tactical stalemates and strategic success. A tactical stalemate – seen in China's efforts to alter the status quo in Vietnamese waters or contest Taiwanese airspace – can still amount to a strategic success if it contributes to long-term pressure. This is because as long as a form of competition exerts a greater negative impact on an adversary's resources than one's own, its continuation becomes valuable in and of itself. Freezing a contest at a durable level of instability then becomes the goal of erosion.<sup>47</sup>

Attempts to deter by denial – frustrating individual efforts to push the envelope – are often likely to prove futile in cases where an opponent can try again at limited cost and where the cost of effective denial reinforces the objective of erosion. Instead, deterrence by punishment – imposing diplomatic, economic or military costs which upend the asymmetrical resource outlay so central to strategic erosion – may well prove key. A recent example of this might be the way in which the Vietnamese government used the risk of international publicity, and thus diplomatic backlash, to compel the withdrawal of the HSY 981 oil rig and the Haiyang Dizhi 8 survey vessel from its waters in 2014 and 2019–20 respectively. The presence of the vessels conducting exploratory work for energy extraction had threatened to erode Vietnamese control over its natural resources.<sup>48</sup> Public statements by Vietnamese officials, efforts to internationalise

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44. See, for example, Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1982); Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition: The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Interventionism, 1973-1996* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 1996).

45. See Daniel Kahneman, Jack L Knetsch and Richard H Thaler, 'The Endowment Effect, Loss Aversion and Status Quo Bias', *Journal of Economic Perspectives* (Vol. 5, No. 1, 1991), pp. 193–206.

46. For examples of this, see Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks*.

47. Some refer to this as a strategy of 'bloodletting'. See John J Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

48. Michael Green et al., 'Counter-Coercion Series: China-Vietnam Oil Rig Standoff', CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 12 June 2017, <<https://amti.csis.org/counter-co-oil-rig-standoff/>>.

the issue through forums such as ASEAN, coordinated messaging with external partners and the managed encouragement of popular outrage in Vietnam raised the costs of deploying them.<sup>49</sup> The costs of mitigating such a backlash in terms of political capital undercut the logic of strategic erosion. Indonesia's approach – emphasising the seizure and public destruction of intruding vessels – represents another means of meeting erosion at cost, by attempting to deter incursions through psychological effects rather than the risk of interdiction. Israel's approach in theatres such as Syria – emphasising disproportionate retaliatory escalation against Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps assets – represents a kinetic variant of this logic.<sup>50</sup> Such an approach depends, however, on local military overmatch. States throughout history have relied on irregulars, often from liminal communities, to act as auxiliary forces precisely because a combination of situational awareness and local presence makes them better suited to dealing with persistent erosion. This includes examples such as the Russian and Ottoman use of Tatar communities, as well as more recent cases such as Vietnam's creation of a maritime militia from its own coastal communities.<sup>51</sup> Auxiliaries, from PMCs to paramilitaries, who have additional sources of income in peacetime and are not entirely dependent on the state are a cheap way of maintaining a presence at an acceptable cost. Those recruited from liminal communities, both on land and at sea, may also enjoy local knowledge of factors such as terrain. This approach may be necessary in the cyber space and while digital natives, many not affiliated with states, are sought out as auxiliaries.<sup>52</sup>

Given that erosion often depends on an asymmetrical outlay of resources, the ability to match it at cost is the vital determinant of success. Efforts to either conduct a strategy of erosion or to enable partners to constrain attempts at strategic erosion thus need to begin with efficiency as a criterion rather than solely effectiveness.

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accessed on 12 November 2021; CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 'Update: China Risks Flare-Up Over Malaysian, Vietnamese Gas Resources', 13 December 2019, <<https://amti.csis.org/china-risks-flare-up-over-malaysian-vietnamese-gas-resources/>>, accessed on 12 November 2021.

49. Lye Liang Fook and Ha Hoang Hop, 'The Vanguard Bank Incident: Developments and What Next?', *ISEAS Perspective* (No. 69, 2019).
50. Suleiman Al-Khalidi, 'Israel Intensifying Air War in Syria Against Iranian Encroachment', *Reuters*, 22 April 2021.
51. Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Enemy at the Gate: Hapsburgs, Ottomans and the Battle for Europe* (London: Pimlico, 2009), p. 50; on the Russian *Voiska Inozemnogo Stroia* (auxiliaries), see William C Fuller, Jr, *Strategy and Power in Russia 1600-1914* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1996), p. 300; on the Vietnamese maritime militia, see Nguyen The Phuong, 'Vietnam's Maritime Militia Is Not a Black Hole in the South China Sea', CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 22 May 2020, <<https://amti.csis.org/vietnams-maritime-militia-is-not-a-black-hole-in-the-south-china-sea/>>, accessed 22 November 2021.
52. Presentation by Nina Kollars, RUSI Sea Power Conference 2021, 25 February 2021, 26:53, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imSeGzWVDbE>>, accessed 22 November 2021.

## Enabling a Partner in the Fight Phase of Operations

It is important not to conflate constraining operations with indecision or gradual effects. This is particularly true if they are combined with operations in the Fight phase of activity being conducted by a partner force. There are a number of ways in which a state's armed forces can constrain an opponent to tip the balance of a conflict without entering it.

The most notable function is the posturing of forces near the theatre of conflict to divert the attention and capabilities of an opponent. As Napoleon noted, the presence of a relatively small British force on the South Downs had the effect of tying up a significantly larger French force in the task of coastal defence, thereby impacting France's ongoing continental wars.<sup>53</sup> Though this force did not engage in large-scale kinetic action, the need to guard against raids against the French coast had the effect of paralysing large numbers of French forces in garrisoning roles.<sup>54</sup> Although Britain was at war with France, states have used the uncertainty regarding possible military action to support allies without becoming belligerents. During the Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979, the Soviet Union played a similar role, posturing enough troops on its border to tie up a significant portion of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in a deterrent function and thus limit China's numerical advantage.<sup>55</sup> Notably, this function is often the task of large conventional formations which are visible to an opponent and thus capable of impacting their calculations without necessarily entering the Fight phase. Amphibious forces and airmobile units, given their theatre mobility, can be particularly useful as a means of pinning down troops, as the Napoleonic example suggests.

In a modern context, the use of non-kinetic tools, including cyber capabilities and electronic warfare, could allow an ostensibly neutral party to slow the mobilisation cycle or limit the options of a belligerent in a conflict and thus enable a partner to achieve decisive effects. For example, during the Sino-Vietnamese war, the deployment of Soviet naval vessels including *Sverdlov*-class destroyers and intelligence-gathering vessels to Vietnam, coupled with naval air reconnaissance near Hainan Island, served to both underscore the risk of Soviet involvement without actually committing the Soviet Union to action and to provide the Vietnamese side with signals intelligence.<sup>56</sup> The presence of Soviet vessels led Chinese decision-makers to refrain from using airpower in an offensive role so as to signal restraint and precluded any effort to limit supplies of arms to Vietnam – thus undercutting China's tactical options and contributing to its failure in a limited war. Traditional activities, such as deploying vessels in a harassing role, will likely also continue to play a part. The provision of critical ISR can also play a role, as

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53. Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 187.

54. *Ibid.*

55. See King C Chen, 'China's War Against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis', *Occasional Papers/ Reprint Series in Contemporary Asian Studies* (No. 5, 1983), pp. 20–25; Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 120–30.

56. Kenneth G Weiss, 'The Naval Dimension of the Sino-Soviet Rivalry', *Naval War College Review* (Vol. 38, No. 1, 1985), pp. 37–52.

illustrated by the activities of the Soviet navy during the Sino-Vietnamese War, as well as those of the Iranian special forces vessel, the *Saviz* of Yemen, which gathered signals intelligence and provided information regarding Saudi coalition naval vessels to the Houthi rebels.<sup>57</sup>

A state's armed forces and wider strategic assets can also constrain the freedom of action of one of the participants in a conflict without assuming belligerent status by attempting to introduce friction into their mobilisation and deployment cycles. Noting intra-alliance tensions during the Kosovo War, Chinese authors such as Jiang Lei of the National Defence University have written that economic inducements and coercive threats could possibly be used to prevent states which host US bases from allowing US access in a conflict over Taiwan, thereby compelling the US to conclude that intervention is unviable and constraining it from intervening short of being directly involved in the flight.<sup>58</sup> Political influence or economic interdependence can achieve a similar effect. For example, during the Yom Kippur War many Western European states, with the exception of Portugal, denied overflight rights to US aircraft resupplying Israel even as they allowed Warsaw Pact states similar rights – a result of energy interdependence with the Middle East.<sup>59</sup>

Military assets can be exported or deployed along with the troops to man them, often covertly, to offset a key component of one belligerent's military power.<sup>60</sup> Examples of this include the recent US defence exports to Taiwan and, perhaps, the trilateral UK–US–Australia (AUKUS) deal to construct nuclear-powered submarines for Australia.<sup>61</sup> A state's troops may also be directly involved in small numbers as advisors, technical experts or to man equipment where the host state's forces are lacking. For example, during the 1967–70 Egypt–Israel War of Attrition, Soviet-manned SA-2 surface-to-air missiles played a role in constraining Israeli air operations and thus enabling the Egyptians to conduct their operations more effectively.<sup>62</sup> More direct and overt

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57. H I Sutton, 'Iranian Covert Operations Ship Still Monitoring the Red Sea', 7 July 2019, <<http://www.hisutton.com/Saviz.html>>, accessed 12 November 2021.

58. Jiang Lei, *Modern Strategy for Using the Inferior to Defeat the Superior* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1997), p. 54. Notably, other writings are from the early 2000s. A more powerful China may conclude it has other means of constraining the US.

59. John Chipman, 'Allies in the Mediterranean: Legacy of Fragmentation', in John Chipman (ed.), *NATO's Southern Allies: Internal and External Challenges* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1988), pp. 62–63.

60. For more on the escalation ladder of partner-enabling actions, from shipments of arms to the provision of resources, see Bruce D Porter, *The USSR in Third World Conflicts: Soviet Arms and Diplomacy in Local Wars, 1945–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 241–46.

61. For more on US defence exports, see Michael E O'Hanlon, 'An Asymmetric Defense of Taiwan', Brookings Institution, 28 April 2021, <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/28/an-asymmetric-defense-of-taiwan/>>, accessed 22 November 2021; for more on AUKUS, see Sidharth Kaushal, 'What Does the AUKUS Deal Provide its Participants in Strategic Terms', *RUSI Commentary*, 21 September 2021.

62. Dima P Adamsky, "'Zero-Hour for the Bears": Inquiring into the Soviet Decision to Intervene in the Egyptian–Israeli War of Attrition, 1969–70', *Cold War History* (Vol. 6, No. 1, 2006), pp. 113–36.

forms of constraint can also occur. For example, during the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, the Soviet Union made its non-intervention conditional on the People's Liberation Army Air Force not taking part in the conflict, which partially contributed to China's defeat.<sup>63</sup> This form of 'target balancing' tends to be particularly prominent when one component of national power, such as airpower, is vital to the success of a state's operations. Different forms of assistance typically entail different levels of risk.

The critical characteristics of constraint operations which serve to enable a partner in the Fight phase of competition are a targeted focus on a specific part of an adversary's concept of operations. Given that the desire to avoid warfighting at scale limits the direct effect constraining forces can have, they must be used to judiciously target certain key objectives. For example, British constrain operations in 1905 were very specifically focused on expanding the impact of Russia's lines of communication. Similarly, Soviet constrain operations during the Sino-Vietnamese War and the Egypt–Israel War of Attrition targeted very specific components of one party's force structure, namely airpower, to enable a partner to fight on better terms.

Such operations are often implausibly deniable and can only remain in the constrain phase if the costs of acknowledgement, and thus open hostilities, are too significant for the target state. Their ultimate success, moreover, depends on the potential of the supported partner to conduct warfighting operations successfully.

## Setting the Conditions for a High-Intensity Clash

Efforts to constrain a rival can be crucial to ensuring that high-intensity clashes occur on favourable terms. This can also serve the deterrent purpose of dissuading such a clash in the first place. The approaches central to such activities often overlap substantially with strategic erosion, insofar as efforts to erode an opponent's resources, military position or capabilities can also ensure conflict on favourable terms. This is not necessarily a new approach – consider the way in which Cardinal Richelieu's support to the Holy Roman Empire's myriad external opponents and internal discontents set the conditions for France to initiate direct hostilities on favourable terms.<sup>64</sup>

In addition to erosion by proxy conflict and subversion, the peacetime posturing of forces can be critical to both constraining an opponent's freedom of action and prevailing in a high-intensity clash. It may, for example, serve the purpose of gaining the information dominance needed to prevail in a conflict. Consider, for example, the cat-and-mouse game played between submarines and anti-submarine forces in peacetime, or the importance of peacetime efforts at codebreaking to achieving both tactical and strategic intelligence before a conflict breaks out.<sup>65</sup>

More recent examples of sub-threshold actions setting the conditions for a high-intensity clash might include the PLA's militarisation of islands in the South China Sea, or its efforts to establish

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63. Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, pp. 120–25.

64. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 20–30.

65. Peter Hennessey and James Jinks, *The Silent Deep: The Royal Navy Submarine Service Since 1945* (London: Penguin, 2015), pp. 93–100.

effective control over key highways on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India by holding positions overlooking these critical links. Both sets of actions would, if successful, posture the PLA to credibly threaten higher-intensity actions from advantageous positions.<sup>66</sup>

The approach represents a potential prelude to higher-intensity conflict rather than a substitute for it. The Israeli concept of the campaign between wars represents, in part, an example of steady erosion setting the conditions for clashes at higher levels of intensity followed by de-escalation. To a certain degree, contemporary Russian discourse on warfare which stipulates that high-intensity operations are preceded by lengthy political economic and military preparation of the battlefield also evince this logic.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, as incidents such as the Kornilov affair and the Kapp Putsch – both of which saw railway workers undercut attempts to seize power by hindering troop movement by the respective plotters at critical junctures – illustrate how civilian organisations such as railway unions can also deny vital time to a military actor.<sup>68</sup> While neither incident involved the instigation of a state, both illustrated how civilian actors can constrain the flow of forces and their logistics. As competitors' logistical and economic supply chains eventually come to span multiple states through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, the ability to engage a raft of actors, from insurgents to unions, who may form alliances of convenience with states will become ever more important. For example, a major source of opposition to China in Africa has been local trade unions. One might envision such entities hindering the construction and operation of any overseas infrastructure the PLA seeks to generate, thereby constraining its ability to operate beyond the First Island Chain in any mid- to high-intensity scenario. The task of engaging non-traditional partners may involve a range of agencies from special forces operators to diplomatic and intelligence agencies.

## Costly Signalling and Brinkmanship

A final strategic function that can be met by sub-threshold activities is 'costly signalling' – backing up deterrent threats or red lines with actions that, while not sufficient to trigger conflict, are deliberately designed to seem risky to demonstrate resolve to an opponent. This usually involves a calibrated lessening of ambiguity. To use an example, the Kennedy administration's decision during the Laotian crisis to have US advisory forces in mufti don their uniforms provided such a signal to both the Pathet Lao and the Soviet Union. Given that the role of these advisors was not publicly specified, the position that the US was not a combatant could be maintained.<sup>69</sup>

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66. See, for example, Gregory B Poling, 'The Conventional Wisdom on China's Island Bases Is Dangerously Wrong', *War on the Rocks*, 10 January 2020; Nick Reynolds and Sidharth Kaushal, 'A Military Analysis of the Sino-Indian Border Clashes', *RUSI Commentary*, 2 June 2020.

67. For a discussion, see Roger McDermott, 'Gerasimov Unveils Russia's "Strategy of Limited Actions"', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (Vol. 16, No. 31, 6 March 2019).

68. On the Kornilov affair, see Edward Acton, *Russia: The Tsarist and Soviet Legacy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); on the Kapp Putsch, see Gerald D Feldman, 'Big Business and the Kapp Putsch', *Central European History* (Vol. 4, No. 2, 1971), pp. 99–130.

69. Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 295–310.

Similarly, activities ranging from exercises and freedom of navigation operations at the lower end of the coercive spectrum through to demonstrative shows of force – such as the Chinese missile tests during the 1996 Taiwan crisis or more recent Russian jamming of GPS systems during NATO exercises in Norway and mock attack runs on radar installations – can all serve a costly signalling function.<sup>70</sup> The purpose of such actions is best captured by behavioural scientist Alexander George's description of a coercive strategy of 'turning the screw' as the limited use of national capabilities, including military, to signal a willingness to escalate further if necessary.<sup>71</sup>

Another use of sub-threshold activity is what the political scientist William Riker described as 'heresthetics' – the art of coalition splitting. In simplified terms, a heresthetic seizes on a wedge issue to split a hostile coalition.<sup>72</sup> For example, Russia initiating operations in Syria under the aegis of counterterrorism could be seen partially as a dual heresthetic – one of several purposes of the intervention was to drive a wedge between NATO members and populations that view terrorism as a primary concern, as opposed to Russia, as well as giving Russia control over migratory flows that divide the threat perceptions of southern and eastern NATO members.

Initiating a crisis short of conflict can allow a state to exacerbate differing threat perceptions within an opposing coalition or between different factions within a target state without providing the unambiguous provocation of open conflict, which tends to have the effect of galvanising cohesion. For example, one might consider Nikita Khrushchev's Berlin Ultimatum which, through the threat to transfer border control in Berlin to East Germany, exacerbated both transatlantic fissures and disagreements within the Kennedy administration regarding both an optimal Berlin policy and the German question more broadly.<sup>73</sup>

The Berlin crisis also illustrated another use of sub-threshold crises – brinkmanship geared towards securing negotiations. In these circumstances, a crisis is usually initiated with expansive demands, following which the initiator settles for more limited concessions as the price for de-escalation. For example, in Berlin, the eventual restrictions placed on freedom of movement from the East were generally accepted as the (lesser) price of de-escalation. Similarly, one might view the Trump administration's economic warfare against China, which was initiated with a wide-ranging set of demands that gave way to a more limited agreement on trade, as fitting within a similar dynamic.<sup>74</sup>

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70. For more on Russian GPS jamming, see Mark Episkopos, 'GPS Jamming: Can NATO Defeat This Russian Weapon in the Arctic?', *National Interest*, 3 March 2021; Thomas Nilsen, '11 Russian Fighter Jets Made Mock Attack on Norwegian Radar', *Barents Observer*, 12 February 2019.

71. Alexander L George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 1991), pp. 7–15.

72. William H Riker, *The Art of Political Manipulation* (Yale, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

73. Alexander L George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 154.

74. Ana Swanson and Alan Rappeport, 'Trump Signs China Trade Deal, Putting Economic Conflict on Pause', *New York Times*, 15 January 2020.

# III. Sub-Threshold Competition in the Contemporary Operating Environment

**H**AVING DESCRIBED THE historical functions of sub-threshold campaigns, this chapter focuses on contemporary circumstances, discussing which distinct features are likely to characterise sub-threshold competition in the future operating environment. Three trends are particularly salient:

1. Mutual incentives for major powers to broadly define the sub-threshold space.
2. The importance of network effects and bottlenecks.
3. The emergence of a defence-dominated operating environment.

## Broadly Defining the Sub-Threshold Space

The advent of a multipolar order should be characterised by both relative risk aversion at the highest levels of competition and conflict and risk acceptance below this level. This stems from the fact that in a multipolar order, conflict between any two belligerent states or coalitions is likely to be to the benefit of a third. To use an arcane example, arguably the strategic victor of the Peloponnesian War was the Persian empire which, by virtue of its non-participation and subsidisation of the economically weaker belligerent to protract the war was able to both recover its western territories in Ionia and dictate the King's Peace to the exhausted Greeks at the war's end.<sup>75</sup> Later rulers have also grasped this dynamic. Stalin, for example, signed the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact in the hope that a long attritional war between Germany and the West would force both sides to court the Soviet Union which, with its intact forces, could dictate the post-war order.<sup>76</sup> Although the speed of Germany's victory in the West undid this strategy, its logic remains generally sound for parties in a multipolar order. Add to this the effects of economic interdependence and the proliferation of nuclear capabilities beyond the initial Soviet–US duopoly, which raises the possibility that WMD assets might be mobilised the longer a war continues.<sup>77</sup> As such, all actors are incentivised to avoid protracted high-intensity clashes, meaning both need to define the sub-threshold space in the broadest possible terms and limit the scope and duration of any clash that does occur between peer competitors.

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75. G L Cawkwell, 'The King's Peace', *Classical Quarterly* (Vol. 31, No. 1, 1981), pp. 69–83.

76. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 60–62.

77. For more on economic interdependence, see David C Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos and Cristina L Garafolla, *War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016); for more on nuclear dynamics, see Paul Bracken, *The Second Nuclear Age: Strategy, Danger, and the New Power Politics* (New York, NY: Times Books, 2012).

According to this probabilistic prediction, acts such as limited kinetic clashes, once considered to be well above the threshold, may be reduced in significance by policymakers and defined as sub-threshold activities.

This logic underpins the Chinese doctrine of fighting local wars and the Russian concept of a strategy of limited actions.<sup>78</sup> It would seem, deductively, to suggest a higher willingness to risk limited kinetic action comparable to the clashes between Russian and both Turkish and US forces in Syria on the grounds that neither side will risk the costs associated with an open declaration of war. A number of authors have noted that a combination of interdependence, nuclear dynamics and multipolarity incentivises state to use all means short of war to achieve competitive aims, but what has achieved less attention is that the spectrum of activities that states are willing to frame as being short of war is likely to broaden given the mutual incentive to avoid protracted high-intensity conflict. It is worth considering, then, that doctrines predicated on the assumption that certain provocations must necessarily lead to high-intensity conflict may become unusable in the event of a crisis.<sup>79</sup> Yet, simultaneously, to fail to prepare for low-probability, high-impact scenarios may be to invite them. One solution might be what Nassim Nicholas Taleb describes as the ‘barbell’ strategy, an investment approach in which the bulk of one’s assets are invested in safe (in other words, high-probability) bets, while a smaller but sufficient proportion is invested in low-probability, high-impact scenarios to profit should they occur.<sup>80</sup> A military analogue might be an approach that aimed at minimum sufficiency at the highest levels of conflict coupled with a heavy investment in gearing forces and capabilities for more likely low- to mid-intensity scenarios.

## Network Effects and Bottlenecks

The second major feature of the current operating environment is the importance of network effects and weaponised interdependence, both as a means of competition and as an objective. As Henry Farrell and Abraham Newton have illustrated, flows in interdependent networks are characterised by returns to scale and chokepoint effects with certain hubs, nodes or access

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78. For more on Chinese concepts, see M Taylor Fravel, ‘China’s New Military Strategy: “Winning Informationized Local Wars”’, *China Brief* (Vol. 15, No. 13, 2015); for more on Russia, see Marina Miron and Rod Thornton, ‘Emerging as the “Victor”(?): Syria and Russia’s Grand and Military Strategies’, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* (Vol. 34, No. 1, 2021), pp. 1–23.

79. This is a major criticism of the US AirSea Battle concept and its successor Joint Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons. See, for example, T X Hammes, ‘Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict’, *Strategic Forum* (No. 278, June 2012). The claim has also been made with regard to the US Army’s multidomain operations framework. See, for example, Nathan Jennings, Amos Fox and Adam Taliaferro, ‘The US Army Is Wrong on Future War’, Modern War Institute at West Point, 18 December 2018, <<https://mwi.usma.edu/us-army-wrong-future-war/>>, accessed 12 November 2021.

80. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012), p. 35.

points to a network's becoming points of failure with few alternatives because setting up alternatives makes little sense from an efficiency perspective.<sup>81</sup>

This process of chokepoint effects may be represented in the form of physical chokepoints through which trade flows, but it can also take the form of chokepoints in digital networks. The SWIFT mechanism, for example, represents a chokepoint in the global financial system, one that the US weaponised to great effect against Iran. Excluding Iranian banks from the SWIFT mechanism made it exceedingly difficult for them to conclude transactions – effectively cutting them off from the global financial system and hampering the financial transactions on which Iran's trade depends.<sup>82</sup> In a globalised era characterised by network effects, control over physical and digital key flows is likely to be both a goal of and enabler to sub-threshold competition.<sup>83</sup> Consider, as a hypothetical future example, China's effort to build a network of Chinese-operated ports around the world in this context. Irrespective of their military value, should this network of ports become central to global trade because of the observed effect of returns to scale and chokepoint effects, it will become a geopolitical chokepoint.<sup>84</sup> A more directly military example of a state exploiting chokepoint effects in the future would be Russia's development of special-purpose submarines capable of menacing undersea cable infrastructure or Iran's efforts to dominate the Strait of Hormuz, although these effects could also extend into wartime.<sup>85</sup>

Control over a chokepoint – the ability to prevent the flow of goods an opponent needs – need not be viewed in purely negative terms. It can also provide leverage if a state can situate itself in a position to manage goods or people that an adversary wishes to keep at arm's length. Russia's efforts to establish a foothold in Libya and reassert its presence in Syria can be viewed partially as an aid to control the chokepoints by which politically sensitive migrant flows enter Europe.<sup>86</sup>

## Emergence of a Defence-Dominated Environment

The final trend worthy of discussion is defence dominance at the highest levels of conflict. A range of factors including but not limited to urbanisation, the proliferation of sensors, short-range fires and area-denial capabilities, and the presence of increasingly widespread precision-strike capabilities, are increasingly making the denial of manoeuvre space across domains easier

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81. Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, 'Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion', *International Security* (Vol. 44, No. 1, 2019), pp. 42–79.
  82. Zachary Basu, 'SWIFT Payments System Suspends Iranian Banks as U.S Sanctions Return', *Axios*, 5 November 2018, <<https://www.axios.com/key-payments-channel-complies-iran-sanctions-9eea0c36-325d-4dc1-9dee-f0b6430ec96e.html>>, accessed 12 November 2021.
  83. Farrell and Newman, 'Weaponized Interdependence'.
  84. See Daniel R Russel and Blake H Berger, 'Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative', Asia Society Policy Institute, September 2020; Geoffrey F Gresh, *To Rule Eurasia's Waves: The New Great Power Competition at Sea* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), pp. 5–25.
  85. H I Sutton, 'Russia's New Super Submarine, Belgorod (K-329)', 29 June 2021, <<http://www.hisutton.com/Belgorod-Class-Submarine.html>>, accessed 12 November 2021.
  86. *BBC News*, 'Migrant Crisis: Russia and Syria "Weaponising Migration"', 2 March 2016.

than offensive action. As others have noted, these trends have resulted in a reduction in the generally observed differential in force concentrations between stronger and weaker actors, with stronger actors forced to disperse by the proliferation of fires capabilities, thus meeting their weaker counterparts with comparable force-to-space ratios in conflicts such as the 2006 Israeli campaign in Lebanon.<sup>87</sup> In the maritime domain, anti-access capabilities may render even weak actors capable of a degree of sea denial, as demonstrated by both Hizbullah and the Houthi's use of anti-ship cruise missiles.<sup>88</sup> Urbanisation adds another dimension of complexity to an attacker's task given the difficulty of dislodging defenders from complex urban terrain, and even if successful, struggling to garrison it.<sup>89</sup>

This dynamic will be reinforced by the shrinking of militaries, a phenomenon not exclusive to the West, which makes circumventing or enveloping strong points unviable.<sup>90</sup> Proliferation precision-strike capabilities capable of knocking out disproportionately expensive targets both on land and at sea, and which enable weaker actors to target civilian populations with comparative ease, can also be observed. The protracted defence of Yemen by the Houthis, together with their use of strike assets against the Saudi-led coalition forces and homelands, is illustrative of this dynamic. This is not to deny the existence of cases where states have made meaningful territorial gains, such as the conflict in Donbass or Nagorno-Karabakh, but these examples represent a partial exception, particularly in light of the relatively limited territorial aims of the attacking side and the relative unpreparedness of the defender in each case.<sup>91</sup> This would suggest, as T X Hammes has argued, a sort of 'Melians' revenge' in which smaller actors can be enabled to hold ground against larger opponents.<sup>92</sup> Of course, a doctrinal or technological shift could break this deadlock, much as German Stormtrooper tactics overcame trench warfare in 1918.<sup>93</sup> However, cycles of defence dominance have proven more durable –

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87. See, for example, Stephen Biddle, *Nonstate Warfare: The Military Methods of Guerrillas, Warlords, and Militias* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), pp. 20–60.

88. Sidharth Kaushal, 'Persistent Engagement and Strategic Raiding: Leveraging the UK's Carrier Strike Capability to Effect', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (April 2021), pp. 20–35.

89. John Spencer, 'The City Is Not Neutral: Why Urban Warfare Is So Hard', Modern War Institute at West Point, 4 March 2020, <<https://mwi.usma.edu/city-not-neutral-urban-warfare-hard/>>, accessed 12 November 2021.

90. Anthony King, *Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021).

91. Michael Kofman, 'A Look at the Military Lessons of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict', *Russia Matters*, 14 December 2020, <<https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/look-military-lessons-nagorno-karabakh-conflict>>, accessed 12 November 2021.

92. T X Hammes, 'The Melians' Revenge', Issue Brief, Atlantic Council, 27 June 2019, <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/the-melians-revenge-how-small-frontline-european-states-can-employ-emerging-technology-to-defend-against-russia/>>, accessed 10 November 2021.

93. Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

consider, for example, that positional warfare embodied in fortified lines such as Vauban's *Ne Plus Ultra* dominated the entirety of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>94</sup>

For great powers operating in the constrained space, these interrelated trends would appear to incentivise a heavier reliance on enabling partners, while the direct use of one's own forces and assets is focused on the cultivation and subsequent exploitation of both physical and digital chokepoint effects. The direct application of force, while by no means absent from a state's repertoire, may be expected to give way to an approach that might be described as Corbettian – focused on economy of force at the highest levels of intensity and on establishing network centrality through protracted campaigning in both competition and conflict.<sup>95</sup> Unlike Corbett's era, however, the commons central to this latter aim are unlikely to be exclusively physical.

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94. Cathal J Nolan, *The Allure of Battle: A History of How Wars Have Been Won and Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 110.

95. Michael I Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* (London: Frank Cass, 1992), pp. 200–40.



## IV. Means: The Operational Components of a Constraining Sub-Threshold Approach

**H**AVING DESCRIBED THE campaign objectives that sub-threshold competition can serve both in a historical perspective and the contemporary environment, this chapter focuses on the role of the military instrument. In principle, a range of military and non-military activities can support both sub-threshold competition and the accompanying competition to set the rules and thresholds that define the competitive space. The roles of these instruments and their relative utility is determined both by the nature of the opponent and the overarching strategy being pursued by a state. In many cases, the same instrument can support multiple approaches.

To use one example, economic instruments can be used either in an offensive capacity, a signalling role or to stabilise sub-threshold competition. Instruments such as strategic embargoes or sanctions can, depending on their scope and ambition, serve either a signalling function or contribute to strategic erosion. US sanctions targeting the Russian defence sector might serve as an example of the former while the largely economically meaningless recent Chinese sanctions against Lockheed Martin might serve as a case of signalling over the issue of Taiwan.<sup>96</sup> Equally, however, commercial engagement can serve to impose a degree of restraint on competition, raising the thresholds at which the sub-threshold space is defined by both actors and imposing constraints on where and how they compete. The aforementioned architecture of restrained competition between the US and the Soviet Union which characterised *détente* is one example of this.<sup>97</sup> A more recent example would be the way in which Russo-Turkish commercial relations have raised the threshold for what constitutes an act of war between the two countries. Moreover, how an instrument is best used is also dependent on which of the strategies described above is being pursued. A strategy of enabling an ally to win, for example, might benefit from the indirect use of economic instruments, much as when Britain denied Russia the purchase of replacement warships. A strategy of erosion, by contrast, might well

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96. John V Parchini and Ryan Bauer, 'Sanctions Targeting Russia's Defense Sector: Will They Influence its Behaviour?', RAND Blog, 20 May 2021; Joe McDonald, 'China to Sanction Boeing, Lockheed and Raytheon Over Taiwan Arms Sales', *Defense News*, 26 October 2020, <<https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2020/10/26/china-to-sanction-boeing-lockheed-and-raytheon-over-taiwan-arms-sales/>>, 22 November 2021.

97. Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*, p. 100.

be served by more broadly defined economic warfare.<sup>98</sup> As such, the role of the military tool depends on two questions that a policymaker must answer:

- How broadly should the competitive space be defined with regard to a rival?
- What is the campaign goal within the competitive space?

The first question determines how liberally kinetic force can be used. Previous chapters suggest that limited kinetic action may well fall below the threshold in the contemporary operating environment. The second question is of particular importance since it implies a focus on effects rather than instruments. In the previously mentioned case of the Reagan doctrine, conventional deployment, research and development, the information operations that exaggerated its effect, sanctions on oil, and proxy warfare were all part of the same effect chain, targeting the Soviet economy.

Similarly, in the context of sub-threshold operations to enable an ally to fight, a range of tools can be used, but quite differently. Consider the hypothetical example of the UK supporting an allied fight in East Asia from a neutral position. Efforts to identify which vessels are headed to China, without which the US strategic option of a blockade would be inoperable, could be undertaken if intelligence networks exist in key ports.<sup>99</sup> This might be accompanied by the issue of a series of statements by the government intended to raise the insurance costs on shipping to China, given that the UK is still a major player in maritime insurance. The potential for covert warfare along key transit routes such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor via insurgent groups could complement this. Furthermore, peacetime efforts to build the sea denial capabilities of regional powers could reinforce the defence-dominated environment of the First Island Chain.<sup>100</sup>

While purely hypothetical, the purpose of this vignette is to illustrate the ways in which disparate tools are part of the same effect chain, in this case tilting a roughly balanced conflict in a favoured direction. This sets the requirement for the use of each tool. Rather than overt and broad sanctions, such an approach might involve deniable efforts to target specific militarily vital supplies. Similarly, rather than the visible deployment of force, the use of assets that tie down a disproportionate number of vessels to track may be the most economical way of impacting a conflict.

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98. For a useful primer on the different roles of economic warfare, see David A Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

99. Sean Mirski, 'Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (Vol. 36, No. 3, 2013), pp. 385–421.

100. Arguably, AUKUS serves this purpose. See Kaushal, 'What Strategic Purpose Does the AUKUS Deal Serve?'; Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), pp. 79–85.

# Conclusion: Key Policy and Military Considerations

**A** GROWING EMPHASIS ON the sub-threshold space has ramifications for military activity across the tasks of force generation, organisation and employment. This paper has attempted to add greater clarity to this area of research by:

- Articulating the role of strategy in defining the contours of the sub-threshold space.
- Providing a typology of the campaigns that can be pursued in a sub-threshold context.
- Identifying the distinctive characteristics of the modern sub-threshold operating environment.

The first major argument of this paper is that the threshold is something that a state must choose to define and contest in a manner that reflects its relative strengths. The need to actively shape thresholds rather than taking them as concrete points that adversaries try to circumvent ought to be more fully reflected in policy documents.

Second, the paper suggests that the threshold for violence below the level of open war should rise in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and that the primary objectives of contestation should be the physical and digital chokepoints generated by network dynamics. This ought to orient the 'ends' part of the ends-means-ways chain in a sub-threshold competition.

Finally, the paper provides a typology of campaign plans for persistent sub-threshold activity. If, as documents such as the IOpC suggest, a persistent campaigning mentality is to be adopted, the lexicon to describe different sub-threshold campaigns will be needed. The fact that multiple tools can form part of a single campaign objective, such as strategic erosion, and that there is a degree of functional agnosticism regarding the roles of both military and non-military instruments means that a cross-military and whole-of-government architecture is needed to manage the sub-threshold space. Sub-threshold competition should not be conflated with specific tools such as cyber assets or special forces. The historical examples used in this paper illustrate that a range of assets contribute to both defining the sub-threshold space on favourable terms and prosecuting competition within it. This shows the need for an organisational architecture with the standing and permissions to define sub-threshold campaign objectives and the roles of UK national assets within them. While the question of precisely what this architecture should look like is beyond the remit of this paper, the current system of responsibilities divided between the services, STRATCOM and ministries is not fit for task. The Russian General Staff-led model, the Eisenhower-era Solarium model, with its emphasis on using the National Security Council to coordinate the formulation and implementation of policy, and the more ad hoc Chinese system of leading small groups offer examples of what an architecture to direct sub-threshold campaign

may involve. A juxtaposition of the strengths and weaknesses of these structures, then, should be the basis for further work.

The purpose of this paper has been to provide a 'how-to' document that aims to translate the conceptual architecture of the IOpC into usable objectives and plans for action. While not exhaustive, the objectives of sub-threshold activity and the typology of sub-threshold campaigns described here can allow the general direction of the IOpC to be translated into lines of effort.

# About the Author

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