

A new model for strategic competition

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“Our traditional way that we differentiate between peace and war is insufficientwe think of being at peace or war...our adversaries don’t think that way.”

General Joseph F. Dunford, Jr. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 21 September and 5 October 2016¹



Figure 1: Competition Continuum

Like General Dunford and Kelly McCoy², when considering the spectrum of conflict, I reject the paradigm that a linear relationship exists from a state of peace to war and back again³, as proposed by recent US publications such as the Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning (figure 1 above) and Joint Publication 3-0 Joint Operations⁴ (figure 2 below). Rather than actors adopting a singularly one dimensional relationship, where they are either in conflict or not, a

¹ United States Department of Defense, 2018, “*Joint Concept for integrated campaigning*”, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_19.pdf, accessed on 26 August 2019.

² McCloy, K, 2018, “*Competition, conflict, and mental models of war: what you need to know about Multi-Domain Battle*”, January 26, 2018, <https://mwi.usma.edu/competition-conflict-mental-models-war-need-know-multi-domain-battle/>; accessed on 19 August 2019.

³ United States Department of Defense, 2018, “*Joint Concept for integrated campaigning*”, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_19.pdf, accessed on 26 August 2019.

⁴ United States Department of Defense, 2018, “*Joint Publication 3-0 – Joint Operations*”, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_0ch1.pdf?ver=2018-11-27-160457-910; accessed on 29 August 2019.

holistic approach to future strategic competition (illustrated in the “Competition Prism” at figure 3 below) requires stakeholders to concurrently manage a broader array of six relationship “vectors”: *collaboration*, *cooperation*, *contest* *confrontation* and where possible *compromise* to avert *violent conflict*. In contrast to other models, the “Competition Prism” illustrates how any actor (state or non-state) may have to *collaborate* with a counterpart over one issue, while simultaneously *confronting* the same actor, or others, on another. In sum, the two conditions are not mutually exclusive.

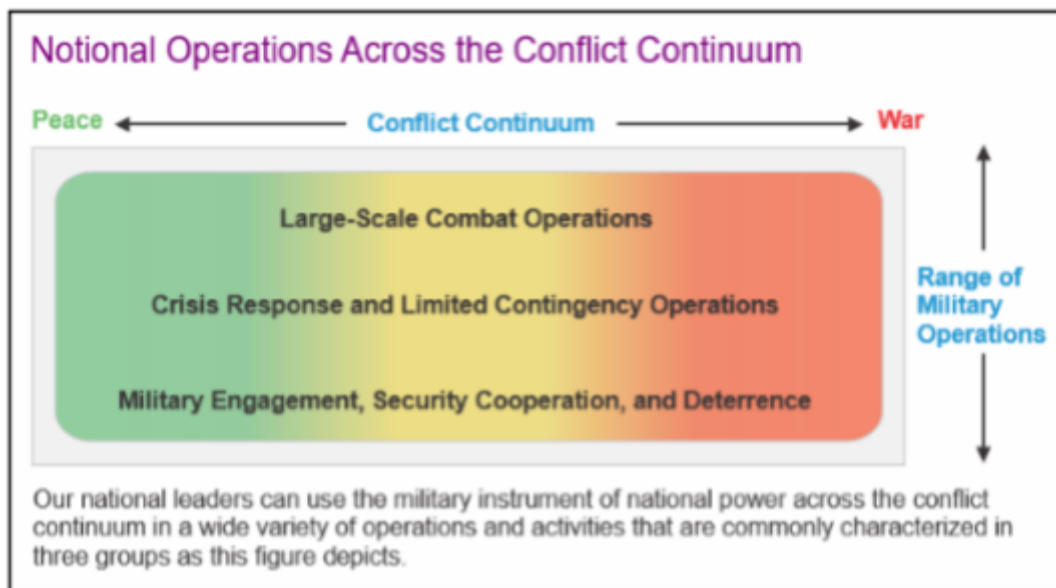


Figure 2. JP 3-0 – Joint Operations Conflict continuum

McCloy’s analysis is spot on, highlighting that even as a “Notional Joint Combat Operation Model”, the “conflict continuum” offered in JP 3-0 (figure 2 below) and the more recent Multi Domain Battle Concept⁵ is limited in its binary application that considers only two variables - the spectrum between war and peace and the type of military operations required - in a relational causal pattern⁶ to generate an outcome. But where McCloy supports Perkins’ view that war is more cyclical in nature, transitioning between states of *competition* short of conflict, and *conflict* itself (see figure 4 below)⁷, the thinking remains linear based on a consecutive causal relationship that exists between one variable and another.

⁵ McCloy, *ibid*.

⁶ Harvard, USA, 2008, “*Six Causal Patterns*”, https://www.cfa.harvard.edu/smg/Website/UCP/causal/causal_types.html#relational, accessed on 29 August 2019.

⁷ Perkins, D.G, 2017, “*Multi-Domain Battle The Advent of Twenty-First Century War*”, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/November-December-2017/Multi-Domain-Battle-The-Advent-of-Twenty-First-Century-War/>; accessed on 19 August 2019

However, strategic relationships, much like the societies and the people that produce them, are more complicated than this, unlikely to be influenced by simple linear relationships between cause and effect. People, and their behaviour in particular, are more likely to be influenced by their environment, their personal factors, and their perception of how others behave towards them - what Albert Bandura termed “Triadic Reciprocal Determinism”⁸. The key point to Bandura’s model is that these three factors interact with each other continuously, not linearly or sequentially. Strategic competition is fundamentally no different, as actors will likewise be influenced by the behaviour of others, dominated by their geopolitical environment.

At its core, the “Competition Prism” is influenced by the geopolitical environment. As the Australian Army’s latest futures statement highlights, the combination of “...the geopolitical context, changing threat, disruptive technologies and domain integration...” will in effect produce an *accelerated environment*⁹. Moreover, this accelerated environment will deliver its own complexity, hastening “...the dynamism across diplomatic, informational, economic and military interactions between sovereign states and other actors”¹⁰. Adapting to this environment requires a conceptual model more nuanced than one that simply transitions between two states of “*competition short of conflict, and conflict itself*”¹¹.

⁸ Bandura, A. (1986). *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall

⁹ Commonwealth of Australia, 2018, Australian Army - “*Accelerated Warfare*”, https://www.army.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/futures_statement_accelerated_warfare_booklet_u.pdf; accessed on 19 August 2019.

¹⁰ *Loc.cit.*

¹¹ Perkins, *ibid.*



In the main, actors prefer to *collaborate* or *cooperate* with each other or at least *confront* each other in the first instance rather than resorting directly to *violent conflict*, as it is largely in their interest to do so. Many states and actors recognise the benefit of *collaboration* and *cooperation*, particularly in the fields of science (research in the Antarctic) and space exploration (the International Space Station), where the results can and have been shared for the greater good. *Cooperation* may also involve international actors working together to deter a third party from going to war, evidenced by the *collaboration* between the US, Singapore and South Korea to encourage North Korea into nuclear reduction talks this year. In contrast the cost of *conflict* can be enormous in terms of “blood and treasure” as the Brown University “Costs of War Project” amply demonstrates. The project, currently in its eighth year, estimates the current United States federal price tag for the post-9/11 wars at over \$5.9 trillion dollars with over 480,000 killed in Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan¹². Avoiding such significant costs should be a great motivator for statesmen and soldiers alike.

However, states will only *collaborate* or *cooperate* with each other to a point, as they are likely to have to compete against each other to access a range of diminishing resources, land and labour, where they believe they have a clear positional advantage or claim. In doing so, state

¹² Brown University, USA, 2019, “Costs of War”, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs>; accessed on 19 August 2019

based entities in particular will apply all elements of their national power¹³ to *contest* another actors claim, potentially *confronting* them to resolve their dispute or differences. A good example of this is the current disputes over territory in the South China Sea¹⁴ where numerous state actors are vying for ownership over land and maritime resources, and continually *contest* or *confront* each other's forces in disputed areas. The resultant use of "little green men"¹⁵ in the Adriatic and "little blue men"¹⁶ in the South China Sea has set a trend that aspirational belligerents are mimicking to their own advantage. Recent Iranian sabotage of civil shipping by Special Forces and the naval apprehension of foreign flagged oil tankers demonstrate how military power is being applied for economic, diplomatic and information advantage. Notably, the use of "grey zone"¹⁷ tactics may increasingly become a defining feature of the continuum between *contest* and *confrontation* in the competition prism, primarily as an offset strategy to avert *violent conflict*, rather than adopting the more conciliatory approach of *compromise*.



Figure 4. Multi Domain Battle competition continuum

¹³ Diplomatic, Information, Military and Economic.

¹⁴ Council of Foreign Relations, 2019, "Territorial disputes in the South China Sea", <https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>; accessed on 19 August 2019.

¹⁵ The United States Army Special Operations Command Fort Bragg, United States, 2017, "Little Green Men", https://www.jhuapl.edu/Content/documents/ARIS_LittleGreenMen.pdf; accessed on 26 August 2019.

¹⁶ Institute for Maritime and Ocean Affairs, "Beware of China's Little Blue men in the South China Sea", <http://www.imoa.ph/beware-of-chinas-little-blue-men-in-the-south-china-sea/>; accessed on 26 August 2019 and Sing, A. 2019, "Deciphering grey-zone operations in maritime-Asia", Observer Research Foundation online, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/42978-deciphering-grey-zone-operations-in-maritime-asia/>, accessed 28 August 2019

¹⁷ Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2018, "Competing in the Grey Zone: Countering Competition in the Space between War and Peace", <https://www.csis.org/features/competing-gray-zone>; accessed on 19 August 2019.

Where *cooperation* has failed and the drive for *contest* and *confrontation* outstrips the rationality of threat de-escalation through *compromise*, the scope for strategic miscalculation becomes more likely, increasing the risk of *violent conflict*. Recent tensions in the Gulf of Hormuz between the United States and Iran in particular, may well prove this point as neither belligerent appears to be seeking solutions based on *compromise*, while the potential for strategic miscalculation increases as more forces (including Australia's) are drawn to the region like moths to a flame.

While the "Competition Prism" is depicted two dimensionally, it should be conceptualized over a number of dimensions, with multiple sides representing the multiple relationships an actor can have with multiple actors or a single actor at the same time. It is by extension, the strategic competition version of Krulak's "Three Block War"¹⁸, where multiple conditions exist simultaneously, rather than transitioning from one state to the other. For many countries in particular, this approach is a practical reality, as on one hand they may share symbiotic economies, but on the other, be at odds over fundamental issues such as climate change or territorial disputes. To gain a position of national advantage in this climate requires a new approach, one that accepts the requirement to balance complex relationships simultaneously with other states, rather than a binary model based on being "at peace" or "at war" with your strategic competitor.

¹⁸ Dr. Dorn, A and Varey, M. 2007. Canadian Forces Journal, "The Rise and Demise of the 'Three Block War'", <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vol10/no1/07-dornvarey-eng.asp>; accessed 29 August 2019. The was coined by General Charles C. Krulak, Commandant of the United States Marine Corps (1995-1999). Krulak postulated that future battlefields would be more urban and asymmetrical, where there would be few distinctions between combatants and noncombatants, and sophisticated weaponry was readily available to all sides.