

# **Harnessing David and Goliath**

**Orthodoxy, Asymmetry, and Competition**



**United States Special Operations Command**

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*Centuries ago in the Valley of Elah, Goliath swept his eye across the field between his Philistine army and towards Saul, standing in front of the Israelite Army. As he had done for each of the past forty days, Goliath called for an Israeli challenger. The call went unheeded, until a youth stepped forward. Saul, the king and leader of the Israeli army and cowed in fear by the giant, looked in shock at the youth who had accepted the call to single combat. Saul, second in power only to Goliath, offered his armor to the nearly naked young man, which he declined. The youth, David, untested by war and a mere shepherd, had surveyed the enormous armor-clad warrior at the head of the Philistines with his enormous spear and instantly saw weakness. Loading a smooth stone into his sling, a sling that had felled lions and bears, David judged the distance and aimed for the giant's forehead. David heaved and struck true. Within seconds, Goliath lay dead at his countrymen's feet. Undeterred by the ostensibly impossible challenge, the youth ended the reign of fear imposed by the seemingly invincible giant. David saw what others had not, that victory would not come by matching strength with strength. Victory was won by using his strength against the giant's vulnerability...*

## INTRODUCTION

The U.S. remains in a position to have a disproportionate impact on the shape of the future, but the window of opportunity is closing. While the military must continue to prepare for distant and unlikely wars, the U.S. is losing ground in the present. Outside of war, actors are achieving desired outcomes and increasing their positional and policy advantages – often at the expense of U.S. interests. These actors have stolen intellectual property, annexed the sovereign territory of neighboring nations, interfered in political processes, and even caused the deaths of innocent non-combatants.<sup>1</sup> Their militaries elude existing nuclear and conventional deterrence practices, often enabling other elements of a national effort to extend influence. Left unchecked, this behavior contributes to a future which will be more accommodating and hospitable to authoritarianism and disorder.

To meet this challenge, the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) outlined the need for the U.S. military to compete short of armed conflict. However, it left both how to compete and for what purpose ill-defined, while doubling down on the deterrent effect of its conventional forces – the very aspect of the U.S. approach that rivals have learned to avoid. Competition now permeates nearly every contemporary U.S. strategic document. In the year since the publication of the NDS, no strategic document from the Department of Defense has defined competition – and more specifically, competition short of armed conflict – or described how to compete with any clarity.

This critical shortcoming puts the viability of the strategy at risk and threatens unity of effort. Stakeholders across the defense enterprise have already begun to interpret the idea through their own localized lens. Every service and theater finds a way to distill their own flavor of competition in what may simply reflect existential concerns about retaining relevance – and the resources that come along with it. While each service certainly has a role in competition, putting platforms and posture at the center of competition absent context defined by strategic objectives and national interests is a recipe for failure. These divergent perspectives fail to account for the

fact that the adversaries described in the NDS have achieved significant gains at the expense of U.S. interests and in spite of U.S. conventional and nuclear superiority.

Over the past three decades, the U.S. has marshalled unprecedented military power and enjoyed greater freedom of action than any actor in history, and yet David-like rivals have increasingly found vulnerabilities that mitigate this Goliath-like strength. To be successful in conditions short of war, the U.S. must learn to engage as both Goliath and David, both overwhelming and precise in the coordinated application of power. While the Joint Force must maintain strategic deterrence and continue to prepare for high-end conventional conflict, it must simultaneously leverage orthodox and unorthodox applications of power through a compound approach to achieve outcomes in competition short of war.

## COMPETITION IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

*While armies continue to fear Goliath, David has shown the world how to defeat the giant. As others learn of David's approach, Goliath has failed to draw on this experience and grows more vulnerable those who emulate David...*

The U.S. remains near the height of its power with a dominant role in the world economy and best in class military, but short-term developments and long-term trends are quickly eroding the foundation of that position of advantage. The U.S. defines its vital interests as protecting the American people, the homeland, and the American way of life; promoting American prosperity; preserving peace through strength; and advancing American influence.”<sup>2</sup> Tempered optimism in previous administrations brought attempts to reset relations with Russia and to welcome rising China as a responsible stakeholder. However, the U.S. now views both as strategic challenges to those interests and asserts, “It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model.”<sup>3</sup>

Sovereign states serve as the baseline around which societies function at present, however, a diverse cast of capable influencers has begun to emerge. Multinational corporations, such as Google, Amazon, Facebook, Alibaba, Huawei, and ZTE, control vast swaths of the telecommunications landscape, including massive amounts of data derived from populations. Online communities are taking on state-like qualities in the form of cyber nations, with physical embassies popping up globally to provide a venue for in-person interaction.<sup>4</sup> Individuals – from political leaders to lone wolves – bear greater power to influence events globally. In this time of rapid change, the next dominant social or political construct remains unknown.

Accelerating systemic changes are also shaping the strategic environment. Demographic developments suggest that traditional powers will soon confront significant internal pressures from aging populations and migration, while many less developed states face youth bulges that offer both economic opportunities and security challenges.<sup>5</sup> The proliferation of technology paradoxically enables both populations and states, providing opportunities for individuals to exercise power while also affording states means to monitor, influence, and control populations. Environmental degradation has reached critical levels, driving food scarcity, ocean acidification, biodiversity loss, and coastal crises.<sup>6</sup> Economic trends are driving inequality among population segments within states. These trends suggest that “even well-functioning states are losing

ground as power is dispersed downward and outward,” as power and influence once exclusive to Westphalian states spread to a wider range of organizations and individuals.<sup>7</sup>

Each generation faces challenges wrought by change, and these challenges cannot be met with simple fear and doubt. As Dr. Henry Kissinger observed in 2015, “The United States has not faced a more diverse and complex array of crises since the end of the Second World War.”<sup>8</sup> Within the U.S. itself, a growing domestic culture of cynicism is compounding these global strategic challenges. Nevertheless, the U.S. stands poised to guide the world through its networked security, economic leadership, and diplomatic connectivity. Its community of allies and partners is unrivaled. Its people remain a creative and dominant economic force. Its values offer more for people than more transactional alternatives. Despite its vulnerabilities, the U.S. can further develop its position as the friend of choice and dominant player in the “great game” with strategic vision, adaptability, and statecraft.

### The State of Strategy

In the words of former Secretary of Defense James Mattis, “America is emerging from a period of strategic atrophy.”<sup>9</sup> In the absence of a forward-looking vision for the world and the U.S. role within it, the Joint Force has become embroiled in avoidable conflicts with no clear end state, suffering from the demands of tactical urgency at the expense of strategic form. National resolve has wavered as the costs of these conflicts has accumulated, particularly in the wake of the global financial crisis. In Mattis’ assessment, the complex and “dangerous” strategic environment described above is “the result of 20 years of the United States operating unguided by strategy.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, U.S. strategies in recent decades have focused on either perceived threats or opportunities, often losing sight of national interests central to determining what is in fact a threat or opportunity.<sup>11</sup>

In this context, the NDS and 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) have instructed the military to compete short of armed conflict while maintaining readiness for high-end warfare. The NSS states, “An America that successfully competes is the best way to prevent conflict.”<sup>12</sup> It emphasizes the military’s role in competition within a broader national effort, establishing that “U.S. military strength remains a vital component of the competition for influence.”<sup>13</sup> However, the NSS recognizes that “our diplomatic, intelligence, military, and economic agencies have not kept pace with the changes in the character of competition.”<sup>14</sup> This inability to keep pace with changes further reflects the costs of strategic atrophy.

Building on the NSS, the central idea of the NDS is expanding the competitive space. The NDS explains that, “A more lethal force, strong alliances and partnerships, American technological innovation, and a culture of performance will generate decisive and sustained U.S. military advantages.”<sup>15</sup> The role of the military with respect to its interagency partners is also a critical area of emphasis:

“A long-term strategic competition requires the seamless integration of multiple elements of national power: diplomacy, information, economics, finance, intelligence, law enforcement, and military. Our government partners are often the lead in key competition areas... **The military, for its part, must continue to fulfill its role of**

**deterrence, but must also consider ways to apply the military instrument differently to better enable diplomatic, information, and economic elements of power.”<sup>16</sup>**

A critical gap in national strategy at present remains an enduring vision that can withstand changes in administration, distracting fluctuations in the security environment, and guide the development of strategies and campaigning. George Kennan’s Long Telegram in 1946 remains a landmark example of how a single document can integrate cultural understanding and strategic vision into an overarching lodestar for an existential challenge spanning generations. Nested within that guidance, subordinate strategies over the course of the Cold War reflected that vision in space and time to address the contemporary environment at different stages. In the face of persistent disorder and accelerating change, no such enduring vision has emerged for how the U.S. might shape the world to better accommodate its interests and the values it shares with its allies and partners. In the absence of such a vision, the U.S. risks distraction in wars of choice and abdication of its position as the leading global power.

For the part of the U.S. military, however, the Joint Force – in full cooperation with its partners – must adapt its organizations, concepts, and doctrine to the evolving character of competition. To do so, the Joint Force must develop a deeper understanding of the character of competition.

### Theoretical Context

Leaders have many lenses through which to evaluate the strategic environment, build deeper understanding of competition, and develop effective approaches to contemporary challenges and opportunities. Thucydides offers one such model, which is widely accepted as a conceptual framework for understanding what drives actors to fight: fear, honor, and interests. Although contemporary strategic thinking orients predominantly around interests, the remaining two legs of the Thucydidean triad – fear and honor – influence behavior as well and can often account for deviations from interest-based rationality. Fear of encirclement or instability on the periphery – for example, in Eastern Europe for Russia or in the South China Sea for China – also shapes behavior. Similarly, China’s sociological concept of “face” and Russia’s emphasis on geopolitical respect both reflect how honor permeates contemporary strategic culture. Assuming that conflict is but competition in its most intense and violent form, this same triad may also provide insight into why actors compete and help to characterize actors’ behavior and motivations in competition.

Dr. Terry Deibel offers another framework to consider when developing and evaluating strategy. Deibel assesses, “Strategy must begin... with purpose; and purpose in foreign affairs strategy rests on the concept of the national interest.”<sup>19</sup> From this foundation of interests, strategists can identify threats and opportunities: “Threats are *to* (and opportunities *for*) interests. Indeed... threats are only threats if they jeopardize

<b>National Interests in Theory and Practice</b>	
<b>Deibel’s Theory of National Interests (2007)<sup>17</sup></b>	<b>National Security Strategy (2017)<sup>18</sup></b>
1. Physical Security	1. Protect the American People, the Homeland, and the American Way of Life
2. Economic Prosperity	2. Promote American Prosperity
3. Value Preservation at Home	3. Preserve Peace through Strength
4. Value Projection Overseas	4. Advance American Influence

*Figure 1 - Theory and practice are generally aligned in fundamental understanding of national interests.*

an interest, and opportunities only opportunities if they can help the state advance an interest.” In this way, threats and opportunities are inherently relational to the interests that they affect. One actor leverages power to exploit identified threats and opportunities through its influence, described as “the effect of that power on its intended target.”<sup>20</sup> These key building blocks of strategy – interests, threats, opportunities, power, and influence – all play roles in constructing a more comprehensive understanding of competition.

A third lens through which to consider competition emerges from the indirect approach as articulated by B.H. Liddell Hart. Hart’s indirect approach suggests that an actor should “orient upon, target, and upset an adversary’s equilibrium or balance.”<sup>21</sup> In this sense, strategists should focus on challenging or disrupting an adversary’s system, strategy, and underlying logic rather than directly confront what the adversary presents. While Hart helped to articulate and contextualize these concepts, they are not uniquely his; strategists reaching back to Sun Tzu have advocated for an indirect approach.<sup>22</sup> While Hart focuses on the development and application of strategy in war, his thoughts provide insight into competition as well – one actor can certainly target another’s “equilibrium” without engaging in armed conflict. External interference in domestic media and electoral processes, deliberate use of economic tools to generate specific effects on an adversary, and military operations short of armed conflict that defy adversary expectations are but a few examples of how the indirect approach might manifest in competition. In other words, the principles incumbent to an indirect approach can help to inform a deeper understanding of competition.

Understanding the driving power of interests and the principles of indirect approach informs a broader strategic asymmetry critical to an effective approach to competition. Interests determine an actor’s perceptions of threats and opportunities, but not all interests are the same; an actor will value certain interests, such as protection of its citizens, higher than more peripheral interests, such as productive relations with a given partner. Furthermore, actors will assign different values to interests, influencing their tolerance both for risk and for the encroachment of another actor on that given interest. Actors are able to address threats and opportunities depending on the capabilities that they possess and the legal and ethical bounds of their respective strategic cultures. Therefore, competition takes place in a context where interests drive behavior and actors seek to shape the environment more favorably to the advantages of their strategic cultures.

### Defining Competition

*Competition is the interaction among actors in pursuit of the influence, leverage, and advantage necessary to secure their respective interests.*<sup>23</sup> Competition is continuous and without the finite and clear end states that often characterize military plans and campaigns. Success in competition is measured as an ongoing evaluation of one’s freedom of action relative to competitors, a dynamic challenge that constantly evolves with geopolitical and technological developments.<sup>24</sup> Decision-makers who adapt to change with flexibility and agility can expand options to better achieve effects and exploit opportunities in the strategic environment.<sup>25</sup>

**Competition Short of Armed Conflict**

**Actors employ all tools of statecraft in order to maximize the impact of power applied toward advancing national interests without engaging in direct conflict.**

The three core concepts of competition – *influence*, *leverage*, and *advantage* – form the common ways through which an actor secures its interests and are fundamentally interrelated.

Influence is the power to cause an effect in indirect or intangible ways. An actor can

actively accumulate, spend, or lose influence; influence also passively emanates as it accumulates, much like interest gained on investment. Leverage is the application of influence gained or created to achieve an effect or exploit an opportunity. Advantage is superiority of position or condition. Inherently relative, it is established through leveraging tools of power – diplomatic, informational, military, and economic – used to manage and employ that influence. From a position of advantage, an actor is more capable of promoting and protecting its interests.

As actors pursue influence, leverage, and advantage to secure their interests, cooperation, competition, and conflict all reflect the degree of friction among their efforts. Where interests converge, actors cooperate; where interests diverge, actors compete – sometimes to the point of conflict. Actors often cooperate and compete in different areas simultaneously. Furthermore, actors assign different degrees of significance to interests; what may be a peripheral interest to one actor may in fact be a vital interest to another. The ability of actors to build influence, action leverage, and establish and maintain advantage shapes behavior and determines their freedom of action in competition.

Any contemporary effort to define competition must acknowledge other adjacent concepts that influence the current conversation, chief among them the concept of deterrence.<sup>26</sup> Beginning in the wake of World War II and retrenched throughout the Cold War, the U.S. has viewed its nuclear and large-scale conventional might as the bedrock of national security. A leading premise suggested that mutually assured destruction had held the hounds of “hot war” at bay, keeping simmering violence from reaching a boil and providing statesmen space to maneuver against their counterparts. The Gulf War served as an exclamation point on the merits of nuclear and large-scale conventional deterrence, providing all observers with an unequivocal demonstration of that power and reinforcing the validity of the U.S. approach. Since that time, however, actors – state and non-state alike – have sought to poke holes in that strategic deterrence. Al Qaida revealed a limitation of strategic deterrence that comes when an aggressor has virtually no physical territory or assets for the U.S. to impose its military might against. State actors have begun to test for limitations as well, as China’s incrementalism in the South China Sea and Russia’s operational ambiguity in Ukraine demonstrated further gaps in the U.S. approach. Precisely and paradoxically because the U.S. has successfully deterred nuclear and large-scale conventional war, actors have adapted to its conventional superiority and nuclear parity, developing approaches to pursue their objectives and secure their interests short of war. Deterrence will remain a necessary component of a U.S. approach to competition, but its limitations require consideration of a more comprehensive approach.

Legacy concepts reflect habits of mind for the U.S. national security community as a collective. Each era of defense issues – from the Cold War through the Gulf War and into the Global War

on Terror – has imprinted the prevailing concepts of its day upon the U.S. strategic psyche and influences perspectives, biases, and approaches to prescribing a role for the U.S. in the broader environment. These cognitive ruts that have developed across U.S. institutions both offer guiding rails based on personal and national experience and also, if not questioned or mitigated, threaten to steer U.S. strategy along a more comfortable path to a less appropriate approach to the contemporary environment and its challenges. These concepts independently remain insufficient to address present issues, yet they collectively bear consideration in developing a military approach to competition.

## ASYMMETRY AND COMPETITION

*Although Goliath's size and strength keep opposing armies from taking the battlefield, David-like options would likely prove more effective in competition short of armed conflict than a more powerful Goliath...*

Within current U.S. strategy, a military approach to competition must begin with the NSS and NDS. Based on a “principled realism,”<sup>27</sup> these documents orient around favorable regional balances of power, the achievement of which would likely allow the U.S. sufficient global influence to moderate and guide change.<sup>28</sup> However, seeking these outcomes through a direct approach would be a mistake; geographic distance, finite resources, and numerous actors ensure that the U.S. cannot hope to achieve these outcomes simply through the direct application of its economic and military might. To this end, the NDS asserts that the U.S. must “[seize] the initiative to challenge our competitors where we possess advantages and they lack strength.”<sup>29</sup> The Joint Force must develop an approach that most effectively makes use of limited resources to maximize advantages derived from the differences, or asymmetry, between actors. In doing so, the Joint Force will drive rivals into the horns of a dilemma, leaving nothing but difficult options.

Fundamentally, asymmetry is a relational concept describing two sides that are not the same; in strategy, asymmetries are the material and immaterial differences between actors and the associated advantages and disadvantages in that relational context.<sup>30</sup> Geopolitical competition generally reflects infinite competition, within which a constellation of finite engagements take place to move the needle of advantage. *Materially, actors possess unique arrays of qualities that introduce distinct advantages and disadvantages relative to other actors.* One actor may benefit from a robust economy and high levels of cultural attractiveness while remaining vulnerable through the openness of its society and political spheres. Another may enjoy unity of vision under closed governance and social systems while remaining brittle in the face of popular dissent or internal subterfuge. Cultures may present similarly double-edged qualities, as can be seen in contrasting individualist and collectivist societies. *Immaterially, as Sun Tzu long ago observed, “All warfare is based on deception.”*<sup>31</sup> This dictum is perhaps most applicable in the masking and leveraging of immaterial asymmetries, as rivals can exploit advantages and understanding to induce strategic miscalculation or paralysis. Another set of immaterial asymmetries emerges from the different ambitions – and different prioritization of those ambitions – that actors pursue. While rivals constantly seek to exploit asymmetries and shape competition to advantage over time, their approaches should ultimately reflect what they hope to accomplish in the long-term.



Looking out across the strategic environment with myriad challenges both emergent and enduring, the U.S. must assess which challenges prevent it from accomplishing its goals, under what circumstances to engage rivals, and how to cultivate and exploit asymmetries in pursuit of those goals and favorable future conditions. Dissimilar values of competing interests, distinctive features of sociopolitical systems, and different operating logics for the execution of national strategy all present asymmetries that one actor may leverage against another for advantage. In the Cold War, the U.S. cultivated an international system and influenced Soviet leadership toward difficult decision points that played to U.S. advantages while exposing Soviet weaknesses. Since the end of the Cold War, however, rivals have avoided engaging U.S. strengths and rather have sought to modify conditions and exploit opportunities the international system to create a more favorable environment to their advantages. In this asymmetric spirit, the U.S. must now strive to change the game in a manner favorable to U.S. advantages.

Leaders at the national level can apply military power asymmetrically within a broader strategy, reflecting the indirect approach advocated by Hart. Historically, cases abound where superior powers and their militaries have been overcome or undermined by diplomatic, economic, and social forces.<sup>32</sup> These cautionary lessons suggest that winning military battles but losing the war often manifests from decisive non-military effects, generated by leveraging asymmetries between systems and strategies rather than forces. In other words, the ultimate victors employed asymmetric strategies that “[transformed] an adversary’s perceived strength into a vulnerability, often by revealing one’s own perceived vulnerability as a strength.”<sup>33</sup> While asymmetric approaches are typically associated with weaker parties seeking to mitigate an adversary’s advantage, the U.S. should seek its own asymmetric strategies that undermine rival strengths. To reshape and dominate the game once more, the U.S. must have the humility to recognize that an asymmetric military approach to competition does not simply mean doubling down on an already superior conventional and nuclear force.

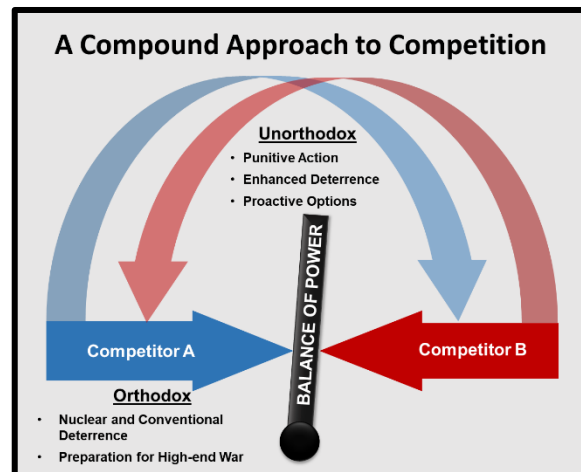
Competition requires that the U.S. understand and leverage the layered asymmetries between itself and competitors to create differences in perception and comprehension. In strategy, asymmetry presents ways of engaging potential opponents in ways for which they are neither organized nor culturally prepared to address. In order to exploit asymmetries, the U.S. must build a military approach based on operating logic that makes adaptation challenging for those that would threaten U.S. interests.

## A COMPOUND APPROACH TO COMPETITION

The Joint Force should aspire to harness the principles of asymmetry within an interest-based indirect approach,<sup>34</sup> and the concept of compound warfare may provide an appropriate starting point for such an approach. In its simplest description, compound warfare features a conventional force and unconventional forces fighting under unified direction to realize fully their complementary potential, as each type of force conducts operations that give full expression to its own capabilities.<sup>35</sup> Both conventional and unconventional forces bring distinct advantages and vulnerabilities to bear on the battlefield. If used appropriately and in complement, they are able to mitigate each other’s vulnerabilities while maximizing the impact of their employment. Although – like the Thucydidean triad and Hart’s indirect approach –

compound warfare describes conflict, this concept of a unified approach acting in complement provides a strong foundation for a military approach to competition.

To build a compound approach to competition short of armed conflict, the Joint Force should leverage orthodox and unorthodox applications of force toward a position of advantage.<sup>36</sup> Whereas compound warfare describes the integration of conventional and unconventional forces, however, this compound approach focuses less on forces themselves than on the manner in which they are employed. Orthodox military applications are well defined by doctrine and use defined frameworks, through which forces evaluate and address issues in the strategic environment. Unorthodox military applications, however, draw on doctrine where applicable and develop frameworks to fit emergent issues rather than rely on defined methodology. A compound approach to competition complements orthodox and unorthodox functions to more effectively exploit asymmetries to advance U.S. interests.



Both orthodox and unorthodox applications of force are essential elements of a comprehensive military. The Joint Force must continue to meet its traditional responsibilities, such as maintaining strategic deterrence and preparing for high-end conflict, to keep conventional and nuclear threats at bay. This includes ensuring that the Joint Force is equipped and postured, at a relatively high level of readiness, and possesses sufficient political support to generate credible deterrent effects on targeted actors.<sup>37</sup> Positioning combat credible forces in contested theaters reassures local allies and partners while also effectively acting as a tripwire for conventional military aggression. However, this approach has not deterred actors from maneuvering to avoid the strength of U.S. forces. As the Joint Force maintains orthodox approaches to maintain strategic deterrence and readiness for high-end war, it should also more deeply explore unorthodox approaches to both emergent and enduring problems.

In an age where large-scale conventional or nuclear war is in no state's interest, competition – not conflict – will often define more contentious conditions within peaceful coexistence. To complement orthodox functions oriented primarily on deterrence and high-end conflict preparations, the Joint Force should develop unorthodox military functions that includes several key characteristics. Critically, the Joint Force should integrate its approach with civilian counterparts across the Interagency, from planning through execution to assessment. From this more dynamic position, an approach should articulate unorthodox options for both deterrence and – if deterrence fails – punitive actions. Finally, the Joint Force must also provide unorthodox options to achieve strategic gains proactively in conditions short of war – explicitly seeking to create decision dominance by exploiting asymmetries of understanding, position, and capability. In doing so, the U.S. can evolve strategy beyond a binary construct of war and peace and develop usable options that better reflect reality.

## Competitive Options Short of War

Competitive elements within a compound approach should provide decision-makers with expanded unorthodox options spanning physical, virtual, and cognitive domains. For the Joint Force, competitive options short of war form three general groups of unorthodox options. First, these options should advance more comprehensive and dynamic deterrence. While conventional and nuclear forces reinforce conventional and nuclear deterrence, a deterrence suite must discourage a broader range of destabilizing activities. Enhanced deterrence should include the full spectrum of national power instruments, innovative applications of conventional forces, and dynamic use of unconventional forces. Relationship management and technological advancement will also remain essential components of effective deterrence. Organizations must innovate, adapt, and absorb technology rapidly, avoiding attachment to legacy systems, models, and ideas.

Second, unorthodox punitive options should respond in a timely and clear manner to behavior that violates established “red lines.” Punitive options should adhere to three principles: first, leaders must separately consider the effect on the targeted actor and the effect on the domestic U.S. audience; second, leaders must set limited objectives for the punitive action; and third, leaders must target recoverable assets that will yield a short-term effect rather than causing more permanent destruction or disruption.<sup>38</sup> These options are temporally sensitive and rely heavily on managing perceptions with both target actors and other observers. Exercising punitive action in response to unacceptable behavior should both arrest deviant behavior and contribute to the credibility of future deterrence. Assumptions about other actors’ “red lines” constrain punitive action presently; engaging in broader experimentation in competition to validate or disprove those assumptions may help to develop more robust options for leaders, particularly in the case of *fait accompli* conditions or incremental aggression.

Third, unorthodox options should provide decision-makers with opportunities to achieve objectives proactively – seeking decision relative to a limited set of objectives in conditions short of war. These unorthodox options will necessarily be interest-driven, housed within a strategy to establish desired conditions. Efforts should focus primarily on generating effects through non-kinetic methods, aiming at targets in the human domain, cyberspace, the information environment, and other non-physical arenas. In the information age, these slings and stones should strive to change population’s minds and behavior rather than to convert the living to the dead, to generate deception and miscalculation rather than mass destruction, to darken a city rather than to raze it. Precision kinetic strikes may be necessary on occasion but will generally be less desirable, given heightened associated risk of escalation and attribution, irreversibility, and perception implications. The emergence, cultivation, and exploitation of opportunities should drive employment of these unorthodox options, used to advance goals within the limits of a broader interagency campaign – either in support of civilian counterparts or as independent operations.

## Characteristics of Competitive Options

In combination, these unorthodox deterrent, punitive, and proactive options short of war round out a comprehensive suite of efforts within competition – all of which demand further

exploration beyond this paper. This multi-faceted approach should provide a more proactive complement to a strategy currently oriented around reactive, posture-based deterrence. Through a more dynamic range of offensive options focused on achieving a decision around limited objectives, the Joint Force should support the active manipulation of the daily functions of rivals that leaves them disadvantaged in competition and pressed into the horns of a dilemma. Ultimately, these competitive activities should weave together in a global web to generate outcomes that protect and promote U.S. interests.

A more assertive approach to competition inherently involves a discussion of risk tolerance and assumptions with respect to the “red lines” that define actors’ perceived response thresholds. Although policymakers determine thresholds for responses, the military owes its civilian leadership a wider range of options to address asymmetric advances, such as disruptive cyberattacks or aggressive influence operations. While options in competition should develop with awareness of the available political decision space and tolerable risk for leaders, those creating the options should not self-limit to the point of stifling innovation. During the Global War on Terror, decision-makers have grown accustomed to allowing activities with low levels of political risk and modest tactical risk to continue without much heartburn. Activities against more capable competitors, without air- and maritime-dominance, and in less defined conditions, however, demand that leaders recalibrate political risk calculations for interactions in a more complex strategic environment. Ethical and legal considerations must always inform the development and employment of options, but limitations imposed by political risk and consequences should derive from the leaders considering the options rather than those developing them. A more proactive posture will undoubtedly carry increased risk, but maintaining a reactive posture may generate even greater long-term risks.

In considering a broader range of engagement options, it will be equally critical for leaders to evaluate where not to engage. In some cases, this may simply mean transitioning to support Interagency or multinational partners who may hold advantages specific to the mission or whose capabilities might better align with mission requirements. In other cases, creating space for rival actors to compete amongst themselves might in fact serve U.S. interests. In still other cases, engagement may provide more relative benefit to a rival actor, such as the opportunity to study U.S. tactics and to gain operational experience in rehearsing their own responses. Particularly in a resource-constrained environment, the Joint Force must carefully examine opportunities to empower partners, generate friction between rivals, and reduce benefiting rivals through ceding operational space.

Within a complementary approach, these competitive options support an “antifragile” position,<sup>39</sup> helping to insulate the Nation from disruption, attack, and aberrations in the strategic environment. As the rate of change continues to accelerate, the approach must leverage those on the frontiers of U.S. influence – particularly diplomats and the military – to understand and affect change favorably. More than just enhancing resilience, however, these forward assets can and should adapt to disturbances in the operational environment to improve the position of the U.S., seeking to cultivate and exploit emerging opportunities. More authoritarian actors competing in the strategic environment may benefit from greater unity of effort and vision; however, their

militaries are often hamstrung at an operational level due to lack of trust and delegation of authority to subordinate elements. The U.S. is well-suited to strive for an “antifragile” position that maintains a relative advantage in contrast to rivals through rapid adaptation to changing conditions. With appropriate strategic direction and operational limitations in place, forward diplomatic and military assets must embrace the principles of mission command to maintain peak agility.

Enhanced risk tolerance and expanded risk mitigation measures – including restructured command and control, improved ethics training, and more deliberate influence in the information environment – are critical to the development of this compound approach. Against a significantly less capable and resourced series of enemies in the Global War on Terror, the U.S. and its allies have enjoyed relentless technical and organizational advantage that has allowed decision-makers direct involvement and oversight throughout campaigns. This process may help to mitigate political risk but degrades operational agility, strategic adaptability, pace of execution, and consistency of effort. The U.S. should improve its ability to campaign within a broader strategy by establishing limitations, accepting political risk, designing coordinated campaigns, developing integrated command and control, and synchronizing execution across military and civilian entities. By distributing decision-making with an approved campaign to forward elements – perhaps under the command of a transregional or global Joint Interagency Task Force – leaders accept additional political risk in order to enhance the ability to respond to challenges and opportunities at the pace of change.

## THE WAY AHEAD

*What if Goliath, for all his might, had the humility to recognize the limitations of his strength?*

*What if David, for all his agility, had the strength of Goliath on his side? What if a nation possessed both the power of Goliath and the precision of David, and the prudence to use both to build a better peace?*

Looking to the future, the U.S. must commit to a choice: we can shape – or be shaped by – the future. It is a question of perspective, vision, and strategy. Unforeseen shocks to the strategic environment are just that, and investing in resilience will remain essential. However, without a forward-leaning effort to design the future, the U.S. remains at the mercy of other actors’ more aggressive approaches and the inertia of systemic change. Reclaiming the initiative requires a more diversified and complementary approach than simply leveraging the power of Goliath; the U.S. must pair its David-like capabilities with its conventional and nuclear deterrence, developing a proactive compound approach.

This compound approach is not a silver bullet. This approach does not replace deterrence or render the traditional functions of the Joint Force irrelevant but rather aims to complement and enhance the effectiveness of both. If a forward-postured Joint Force represents an orthodox approach, more unorthodox elements can advance interests in collaboration. This approach is also not about perfecting a methodology but rather inculcating institutional dynamism to adapt with changes. This approach is not a roadmap to preserve the U.S.-dominated status quo and ossify current power structures. Status quo conditions are destined to change, and that which is

ossified can easily shatter. Rather, this is an effort to shape the evolution of the global future to promote security, prosperity, individual freedom, and rule of law.

Fundamentally, a Joint Force compound approach should promote and project the best version of America. The Joint Force on its own cannot replace a strong American brand in the international community, nor can it operate in isolation from domestic political realities and foreign policy machinations of the interagency. Rather, it should strive to reinforce a strong national brand, amplifying its strengths and mitigating its shortcomings. It should exercise strategic self-restraint, acting as a responsible arbiter of power and respectful partner. Particularly among those engaged in unorthodox applications of force, the Joint Force must uphold the highest standard of ethics and values. The effectiveness of a compound approach will largely hinge on these more intangible factors.

In order to reclaim the initiative in the face of eroding strategic advantage, the U.S. should consider employing a compound approach of both Goliath and David for the Joint Force in support of interagency campaigns within broader national strategy. As Goliath, the Joint Force should continue to provide strategic deterrence and prepare for the high-end warfight. As David, the Joint Force should provide leaders with competitive options to expand deterrence, conduct punitive actions, and execute offense operations to achieve and consolidate gains short of war. By combining orthodox power with unorthodox precision, the Joint Force can enable national success.

The U.S. has enjoyed unprecedented influence over global affairs for nearly three decades, but the window of opportunity to exploit that advantage is closing quickly. Rather than seeking to control global events, the U.S. should leverage its influence to build advantage and support favorable outcomes. The U.S. should seize opportunities present in natural conditions characterized by the continuous turbulence of change and adaptation. This turbulence may never reach the threshold of war, but the Joint Force can still effectively engage in the strategic environment to shape conditions and achieve objectives in support of interagency campaigns.

Threats today may not pose as evident or immediate a challenge as the adversaries of generations past, yet the situation is no less urgent. Many a David has an eye for evading U.S. strength and exploiting Goliath-like vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, the U.S. remains well positioned to determine its own fate. To do so, however, the U.S. should seek to complement its global might with 21<sup>st</sup> century slings and stones, along with a keen eye for opportunities and vulnerabilities. By harnessing both David and Goliath, the U.S. can reclaim its hand in shaping the future.

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<sup>1</sup> On 17 July 2014, Russia-affiliated forces shot down Malaysian Airlines MH-17, a Boeing 777 carrying 298 passengers and crew from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. The casualties included citizens from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, and the United Kingdom. For more information on the MH-17 incident: <https://www.government.nl/topics/mh17-incident>

On 4 March 2018, Russian agents targeted two Russian citizens – one of whom holds a UK citizenship as well – with a military-grade nerve agent, Novichok, in Salisbury, UK. For more information on the Novichok attack: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/novichok-nerve-agent-use-in-salisbury-uk-government-response>

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<sup>2</sup> The White House. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Dec. 2017.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America*. 2018.

<sup>4</sup> As of September 2016, BitNation had 25 citizen-run embassies and consulates worldwide. For more information: Souli, Sarah. "I Became a Citizen of Bitnation, a Blockchain-Powered Virtual Nation. Now What?" *Vice*, September 12, 2016. Accessed January 9, 2019. [https://motherboard.vice.com/en\\_us/article/xyg5x7/bitnation-or-bust](https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/xyg5x7/bitnation-or-bust)

<sup>5</sup> Dhillon, Navtej. *Middle East Youth Bulge: Challenge or Opportunity?* Brookings Institution, 22 May 2008, [www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/middle-east-youth-bulge-challenge-or-opportunity/](http://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/middle-east-youth-bulge-challenge-or-opportunity/). Accessed 23 Jan. 2019.

<sup>6</sup> UN Department of Economic & Social Affairs, Economic Analysis & Policy Division. *World Economic and Social Survey 2013*. United Nations, 1 July 2013, [www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wess/wess\\_current/wess2013/Chapter1.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wess/wess_current/wess2013/Chapter1.pdf). Accessed 14 Dec. 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Mazarr, Michael J., Miranda Priebe, Andrew Radin, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *Understanding the Current International Order*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1598.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1598.html).

<sup>8</sup> *Global Challenges and U.S. National Security Strategy: Hearings Before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee* (2015) (statement of Dr. Henry A. Kissinger).

<sup>9</sup> Heilbrunn, Jacob. "The Ghosts of 1918." *The National Interest*, October 16, 2018. Accessed December 17, 2018. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/ghosts-1918-33641?page=0%2C1>.

<sup>10</sup> Schake, Kori, Jim Mattis, and Jim Ellis. "A Blueprint for American Security." *San Francisco Chronicle* (San Francisco, CA), August 11, 2016. Accessed December 17, 2018. <https://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/article/A-blueprint-for-American-security-9137892.php>.

<sup>11</sup> As Dr. Terry Deibel notes, "Too much emphasis on either opportunities or threats can lead to illogical and dysfunctional strategies. However, the international environment may provide an abundance of one or the other in any category of the national interest, leading naturally to strategies that are primarily opportunity-based or threat based. The Clinton and George W. Bush administrations provide two final examples, both of focus on differing areas of the national interest, and of how opportunity- and threat-based strategies evolve." Deibel, Terry L. *Foreign Affairs Strategy*. Cambridge University Press, 2010. p. 154.

<sup>12</sup> *NSS*, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *NDS*, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* Note: Author's emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> Deibel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy*.

<sup>18</sup> *NSS*, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Deibel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy*.

<sup>20</sup> This definition of influence is based on Deibel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy*. Another characterization of influence that informed this paper is provided by Dr. David A. Lake, who writes that, in the case of China, influence manifests from the "[conversion of] material resources and economic success." For more: Lake, David A. "Domination, Authority, and the Forms of Chinese Power." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2017.

Deibel also defines power as "the capabilities of an actor in international politics." For more: Deibel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy*.

<sup>21</sup> Morrison, Scott. "Redefining the Indirect Approach, Defining Special Operations Forces (SOF) Power, and the Global Networking of SOF." *Journal of Strategic Security*, Volume 7, no. 2 (Summer 2014). Accessed January 9, 2019. <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1379&context=jss>

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<sup>22</sup> Sun Tzu. "The Art of War." Translated by Lionel Giles. The Internet Classics Archive, MIT, <https://classics.mit.edu/Tzu/artwar.html>. Accessed 1 Feb. 2019.

<sup>23</sup> This definition draws on and integrates concepts from a variety of sources. Webster's Dictionary gives us: A) the effort of two or more parties acting independently to secure the business of a third party by offering the most favorable terms; B) active demand by two or more organisms or kinds of organisms for some environmental resource in short supply; and C) a contest between rivals. Webster's notwithstanding, defining competition in geopolitical competition requires adaptation to better suit the context. In that light, we propose to define competition as: the interaction among actors in pursuit of the influence, leverage, and advantage necessary to secure their respective interests.

In Deibel's description of influence, he refers to an excerpt from K.J. Holsti's writing, which explains that: "Influence [an aspect of power] is essentially a means to an end. Some governments or leaders may seek influence for its own sake, but for most it is instrumental, just like money. States use influence primarily for achieving or defending other goals..." For more: Holsti, K.J. *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1992. p. 117.

On leverage, David Anderson writes: "Foreign policy for all nations has always involved leverage." He continues: "There are number of notions of leverage. There is, for one, the notion of leverage as strategic advantage... There is, secondly, the notion of leverage as a resource that is used to accomplish an objective. In the economic sphere, leverage typically refers to a process of investing capital in a way that is likely to generate excellent returns. And although there are different notions of leverage these notions do share what the philosopher Wittgenstein called "a family resemblance" to each other." For more: Anderson, David M. "The Age of Leverage." The Brookings Institution, 2010. Accessed January 9, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-age-of-leverage/>

From Anderson's work, Gregory Weeks derives that leverage in foreign policy "involves using resources and / or relationships in a creative way to bring about certain effects in the world." When tied to Diebel's explanation of influence, leverage represents specific manifestations of influence exercised on actors or on the international environment. For more: Weeks, Gregory. "Soft Power, Leverage, and the Obama Doctrine in Cuba." University of North Carolina at Charlotte – The Latin Americanist, 2016. Accessed January 9, 2019. <https://pages.uncc.edu/gregory-weeks/wp-content/uploads/sites/43/2017/01/Obama-Doctrine-article-2016.pdf>

Advantage simply describes the result of the effective cultivation of influence and application of leverage. The definition used in the following paragraph reflects that offered by Merriam-Webster Dictionary. For more: "Advantage." *Merriam-Webster*, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/advantage](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/advantage). Accessed 9 Jan. 2019.

<sup>24</sup> We use success versus winning because there is no winning in this context – competition between states and in this realm is enduring. The struggle for advantage requires continuous learning and adaptation within an environment with few rules and an infinite clock. Success implies achieving your goals over time and adapting to the rules of the game as they change such that you remain advantaged.

<sup>25</sup> While no consensus definition of statecraft exists among scholars and strategists, one description of statecraft posits that it is the ways that tools of national power are used toward achieving objectives. Deibel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy*.

<sup>26</sup> Additional adjacent concepts include: Strategic deterrence – Primarily based on nuclear and large-scale conventional forces, the U.S. has successfully discouraged nuclear and large-scale conventional war, but actors have adapted to advance their interests while avoiding direct conflict. Phase Zero – Although U.S. military planning doctrine has shifted away from its traditional phasing construct, personnel throughout the Department of Defense have spent formative professional years using a model that conflates competition short of armed conflict with actions to prevent or prepare for war, which leaves a cognitive gap that allows competitors to achieve objectives without ever escalating to a state of conflict. Containment – The current environment has drawn imperfect comparisons to Cold War containment, which would likely prove materially and politically unsustainable against more complex, resilient, and globally integrated actors. Cooperation – The U.S. approach to competition must consider cooperation, even with rivals, if the U.S. aspires to shape a more favorable peace.

<sup>27</sup> Realism, according to political scientist Hans Morgenthau, consists of six principles. Paraphrased, those principles include: 1) Politics is governed by laws that have their roots in human nature; 2) interests must be defined in terms of power; 3) interests are universal in category but remain dynamic in context; 4) moral principles must be



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filtered through the lens of reality to be applied in time and place; 5) a difference exists between a nation's moral aspirations and universal moral purpose; and 6) realists maintain autonomy of the political sphere. For more: Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Fifth Edition, Revised, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), pp. 4-15.

<sup>28</sup> *NSS*, 2017. *NDS*, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> *NDS*, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> As an illustrative example, imagine two fighters enter the arena. One is a boxer, preferring to deliver sharp strikes with his hands and move on his feet. The other is a wrestler, more comfortable on the ground and grappling. Assuming equal athleticism, the differences in approach create opportunities and vulnerabilities. The boxer should not strive to wrestle the wrestler, nor the wrestler box, but rather should leverage advantages inherent to their respective approaches. If the wrestler is unable to bring the fight to the ground, the boxer will hold an advantage. If the boxer is unable to create separation to deliver strikes, the wrestler will similarly hold an advantage. As asymmetries are inherently relational, the advantages and vulnerabilities that a boxer possesses against a wrestler would differ greatly from those possessed against a fighter of another style – or in an entirely different competitive context, such as a courtroom debate.

More important than the material attributes of a boxer or wrestler are their immaterial asymmetries and recognition of the nature of both the competition and the opponent. One fighter must understand the strengths, weaknesses, and perceptions of the other in order to achieve success. Sun Tzu long ago observed, "All warfare is based on deception." This dictum is perhaps most applicable in the masking and leveraging of asymmetries. Fully comprehending these aspects of an opponent can unlock opportunities to steer that opponent into decision-making dilemmas through manipulation of their perceptions and expectations. Similarly, succumbing to cognitive mirroring biases that reflect one's own approach in another or otherwise failing to understand an opponent can lead to catastrophic miscalculation. Shaping the immaterial arena that establishes context for the broader competition can generate game-changing material effects.

A single bout represents a finite example within the infinite competition between these two fighters over the course of their lifetimes. In the broader view, the fighters can train in techniques that mitigate vulnerabilities, invest in equipment to enhance their performance, or identify countermeasures to maintain an upper hand against specific opponents. The boxer might incorporate kicking strikes to extend separation, whereas the wrestler might practice throws to more easily bring the boxer to the ground. Each might look into methods to quickly regain a position of advantage if lost; the boxer might look into ground escapes to return to standing, just as the wrestler might study closing techniques to reduce separation. Importantly, the goals of the fighters may differ; one may strive to establish a legacy of dominance whereas another may prioritize maximizing profit. These divergent goals help to inform when, where, and under what circumstances the fighters choose to engage. So while a fighter constantly seeks to exploit material and immaterial asymmetries to shape the competition to his advantage over time, his approach should ultimately reflect what he hopes to accomplish in the long-term.

<sup>31</sup> Sun Tzu, "The Art of War."

<sup>32</sup> In the Second Punic War (221-201 BCE), Rome advanced a Fabian Strategy to avoid pitched battle with Hannibal's impressive Carthaginian Army and instead undermine its logistics and partnerships indirectly, ultimately resulting in the subjugation of Carthage as a client state of Rome. In the Algerian War (1954-1962), an inferior Algerian military force built advantage through diplomatic and informational channels, draining a militarily advantaged France of political will and international support. Egypt's military entered the Yom Kippur War (06-25 October 1973) against a superior Israeli force to build diplomatic advantage for negotiations; although Egypt suffered military defeat, its engagement ultimately contributed to its objective of restoring the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt.

<sup>33</sup> Breen, Michael, and Joshua A. Geltzer. "Asymmetric Strategies as Strategies of the Strong." *Parameters*, Spring 2011, pp. 41-55.

<sup>34</sup> This phrase derives from both Diebel's discussion of interests and Hart's explanation of the indirect approach.

<sup>35</sup> Huber, Thomas M. *Compound Warfare: That Fatal Knot*. U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 2002. Accessed January 9, 2019. <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a481548.pdf>

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<sup>36</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army. “FM 3-90-1, Offense and Defense, Volume 1.” March 2013. Accessed January 14, 2019. [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/fm3\\_90\\_1.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/fm3_90_1.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Credibility in deterrence directly reflects the credibility of a threat, for what is deterrence if not conditional threat. A threat consists of the capability and the will or intent to cause harm, and threat credibility derives from the targeted actor’s perception of that capability and will. Credibility in deterrence is also oriented on the targeted actor’s belief that the targeting actor has both the capability and the will to deliver unacceptable harm.

<sup>38</sup> Newton, Brandon D. *Punishment, Revenge, and Retribution: A Historical Analysis of Punitive Operations*. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, School of Advanced Military Studies, 26 May 2005. *Defense Technical Information Center*, [apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a436111.pdf](https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a436111.pdf). Accessed 23 Jan. 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Note: Antifragility is a property of systems that increase in capability, resilience, or robustness as a result of stressors, shocks, volatility, noise, mistakes, faults, attacks, or failures. Antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better. The difference between antifragile and adaptive is the difference between a system that is robust under volatile conditions, and one that is robust in a previously unknown environment. For more information: Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*. Random House, 2012. p. 430.

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