Strategic Influence: Applying the Principles of Unconventional Warfare in Peace

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Editor's note: *The thoughts, concepts, and products included in this paper are the author's own, developed in over 30 years as a Special Forces qualified officer both in uniform and during the past 10 years as a civilian strategist at USSOCOM.*

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"The most important aspect of our containment strategy is that it serves to contain ourselves," former President Dwight Eisenhower reportedly observed after he had left office. Perhaps the greatest problem facing the United States in the post-Cold War era is not our waning ability to deter the problematic peacetime activities of others; rather, it is that we have lost sight of the need to deter ourselves. Therefore, any serious look at updating US deterrence going forward must include a serious look at our own missteps. The world is changing rapidly, and we can neither wish nor force it into staying in some form we deem best for us. To truly lead a rules-based system, the US must first understand the world better for what it actually is and then shape changes in directions favorable to us. To lead, we must also pursue our interests in ways others deem appropriate and see as being in their own interests to follow.

A Simple Concept

Instead of increasing our efforts, what if we refocused our purpose? The world is changing rapidly, and change favors the revisionists. They see opportunity where status quo powers see threat. In increasing our efforts against threats, we risk exhausting the very aspects of our nation that have made us the partner of choice as leader of the rules-based system. It is time to reframe the contest in our favor.

Current approaches are rooted in control, yet control is becoming an expensive liability. What if we switch to approaches where the competition is *with* others, rather than *against* them? A contest where winning is in the fostering of positive influence rather than the exercise of coercive control? What if we focused on the people, places, and nations linked most closely to *our* interests and those who work with us, rather than chasing those we deem as threats in the pursuit of *theirs*?

At a time when so many argue for a return to the past, offered here is a path to the future. We need not *contain* our competitors; we must *outcompete* them. Offered here is a concept of *Strategic Influence* as a framework for that competition, as well as variations on *unconventional warfare (UW)* as a family of new mechanisms to better deter threats and create opportunities in that competition space beneath the thresholds of traditional deterrence. We stand at a crossroads. Do we risk becoming the country others increasingly see in us, or do we reembrace the visions and the principles inherent in how we see

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ourselves? The choice is ours to make but we must make it now. To delay is to risk bad choices being forced upon us by others.

Increasingly, population-based power holds the key to both stability and deterrence in peace. Those who understand and most effectively shape the drivers of political instability among populations will have the advantage. The US has a natural advantage in shaping positive influence, though one we risk losing in becoming too reactive to the perceived threats around us. Ultimately, governments premised in control *of* populations are becoming increasingly brittle and closer to sudden failure, whereas governments premised in control *by* populations are becoming increasingly chaotic but are ultimately far more resilient. The keys to success lie in understanding the fundamental drivers of instability. Armed with such insights, one can leverage those drivers to foster domestic resilience and assist partners and allies in doing the same. Equally, this understanding empowers one to posture in ways designed to create and communicate credible capabilities for triggering instability elsewhere, thereby affecting the interests of those who would do us harm. The former promises restored resilience, the latter new deterrence. We need a good bit of both.

The negative perceptions of governance which grow naturally within distinct segments of any society are best managed by ensuring that the entire population perceives itself as being empowered to legally address their grievances. Populations must perceive these means as both effective and culturally appropriate. Nurturing these positive perceptions is the primary purpose of our own Bill of Rights and subsequent civil rights laws. But when such mechanisms are non-existent, or if they are perceived as being denied to certain demographics, or if they simply become distrusted over time, an exploitable energy for instability and insurgency can grow to dangerous levels. These conditions create a rich playground for the exploiters of instability. Insurgency and unconventional warfare exploit, but do not create these conditions.

In fundamental terms, UW is the exploitation of the insurgent energy existing in the populations of others to advance one's own interests. Offered here is the notion that the credible threat of UW can be employed to create a deterrent effect. This is a new form of "unconventional deterrence"[2] designed to supplement current approaches as part of an integrated scheme. Similarly, one can help immunize an at-risk population of a partner or ally (or one's own domestic population) to the UW efforts of others by working to identify and mitigate this energy to manageable levels. This is a form of "unconventional resilience." While derived from a form of warfare central to the identity of US Special Forces, both concepts are increasingly important to competing successfully across the elements of national power in peace.

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[2] For more on "Unconventional Deterrence," please refer to Jones (2019a).

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Under an overarching construct of *strategic influence*, we must recognize that the influence we can foster serves our interests better than the control we can exert [3]. We must also bring new balance to how we approach Clausewitz's social trinity of "Government–Military–People." The rise of popular power demands an elevation in priority of population-focused activities. We remain far too focused on the first two, either assuming the people will follow or that a beefed-up military can force compliance. Within the rubric of strategic influence, there are opportunities to foster positive influence where stability is desired and to threaten instability where deterrence is required. This is the modern adaptation of "hearts and minds"—*being near to the hearts of those who would work with us within a rules-based system and inside the minds of those who would work against us.*

The World As It Actually Is

The current strategic environment is characterized by rapidly shifting power and slowly adjusting governance (Nye, 2011; Jones, 2016). When these dynamics are present in interstate relations, such as between the US and China, the policies for managing critical relationships naturally lag. Friction and risk of miscalculation grow as the rising power seeks to expand its sovereign privilege. This also occurs within states. Governments everywhere are struggling to stay in step with their rapidly evolving populations. The fundamental competition is between those status quo actors who see their interests served best by keeping things largely as they are and those revisionist actors who see their interests served best by change. This is as true with nations we see as friends as it is with those we label as threats. Change is natural; it cannot be contained or deterred. Shaping this change is our greatest challenge as leader of the rules-based system.

Figuratively speaking, there has been a "great power playbook" passed down since time immemorial. The formula is not elegant, but it is simple: Form alliances where possible. Otherwise, go out into the world to where one perceives their interests to manifest and then employ power to exercise control over the space, the government, and the people who live there. This typically involves either creating or adopting a collaborative local government willing to prioritize the interests of the great power over those of their own people and then protecting that government against all challengers, foreign or domestic. Though the validity of the controlling aspects of this approach began to fade with the advent of electronic communications in the late 1800s, it has remained a central theme in US foreign policy since our rise to great power at the end of World War II. The power shifts of the industrial age broke the British Empire and exposed the flaws of this historic model. The current shifts in power have rendered the playbook obsolete on our watch. It is time to craft and adopt a new playbook. But this requires turning loose of what we know—and reaching for what we do not yet fully understand or accept. The rise of China complicates decisions of this magnitude, as many will mistake bold wisdom for cowardly appeasement. In a competition for influence, shaping such perceptions is critical.

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[3] A more comprehensive explanation of "Strategic Influence" can be found in Jones, 2020.

As the preeminent status quo power, the US prefers a stability borne of stasis over the opportunities offered by change. As the preeminent revisionist power, China plays a difficult game of seeking the opportunity of change abroad, while sustaining the stability of stasis at home. The result is growing friction for the US both at home and abroad, largely due to both the growing gap between our increasingly outdated policies designed for the Cold War and the (tarnished) but increasingly sound principles upon which our nation was founded. In comparison, China appears to many as an unsinkable ship sailing toward an inevitable future. But, like the Titanic, she, too is inherently brittle. China is characterized by an excessively rigid system ill-suited to withstand the shocks that will surely come.

Here is the fundamental challenge: One cannot effectively deal with *instability* unless they first understand *stability*. The challenge comes from the fact that our understanding of stability is still framed in the context of the aforementioned, obsolete, great power playbook. We think of stability in terms of stasis and control. Phrases like "enduring allies" and "control the population" are but two classic examples of the mindset this fosters. Alliances must be flexible and tailored to specific situations, and never in the history of governance did a population wake up hoping to be more controlled today than they had been the day prior—certainly not by some foreign power. This brings us back to this dynamic of shifting power. Relative power is not just shifting between the US and our adversaries; it is shifting between the US and our allies and partners as well. Any solution to deter one group more effectively from what we wish them *not* to do must equally address the reciprocal challenge of how we become a better leader for those who work with us. We agonize over the former and assume the latter. The goal must be garnering support, not just compliance. Both missions are equally problematic and vital to sustaining our role.

Building Blocks of Political Instability

Like our foreign policies, our doctrinal definitions are also deeply rooted in a world that no longer exists. Far too often, we seek success in the context of how we have mislabeled a problem, while applying definitions that are some combination of wishfully convenient, inaccurate, or obsolete. *We are defining our way to failure when we should be understanding our way to success.* We are so certain in our knowledge that we close our minds to possibilities. Knowledge is indeed both the pathway and the obstacle to understanding. Many of our most experienced leaders are so confident in their knowledge, derived from a lifetime of professional success in the world fading behind us, that they are the least open to understanding the emerging world before us. There are multiple examples of this, but here we will limit our focus to just three insurgency-based concepts: *revolution, resistance,* and *UW.*

In 2016, United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) published a very handy pocket guide on UW. Unfortunately, it is also a very handy resource for the types of inaccurate and obsolete definitions mentioned above. The net result is a Special Forces community who understands UW well

enough in fundamental terms, seeing tremendous utility in the concept, but a military and policy community outside of Special Forces who think about the concept as it is clumsily defined, seeing little application in modern competition. The goal here is get everyone to a better fundamental understanding, so that more can see the utility in applying modern variations of UW in peace as a tool for facilitating stability or fostering deterrence as desired.

The pocket guide offers both an overly detailed doctrinal definition and overly simplistic summary definition of UW:

Doctrinal Unconventional Warfare
"Joint Publication (JP) 3-05.1 defines UW as: Activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area" (United States Army Special Operations Command, 2016, p. 1).

Simplistic Unconventional Warfare
"Simply, UW is the support to a resistance movement" (United States Army Special Operations Command, 2016, p. 3).

The doctrinal definition paints us into a narrow corner, adding layers of unnecessary constraints. It describes activities that must take place in a denied area, it lists three organized levels of activity that must all be present, it says that UW must be in support of a resistance or insurgency (when the first is a subset of the latter), and it restricts the entire operation to just three purposes (coerce, disrupt, or overthrow). This is a definition derived from the experiences of the OSS in World War II, and while yes, this is absolutely UW, and the type of UW that meets the criteria of a "special operation,"[4] it precludes all of the many other possible applications of this powerful activity when viewed in less restrictive terms.

The authors, realizing how problematic the definition is, relent and say it is just "support to a resistance movement" (United States Army Special Operations Command, 2016, p. 3). This essentially negates the definition and makes the concept something entirely different. Now all one must do is look up what a resistance movement is to discover what that new concept is. On page 5 we are given a great menu of traditional definitions, which should clarify everything, but instead only add more confusion:

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[4] According to Joint Publication 3-05, *Joint Operations* from 2011, special operations are defined as "operations requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment and training often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and characterized by one or more of the following: time sensitive, clandestine, low visibility, conducted with and/or through indigenous forces, requiring regional expertise, and/or a high degree of risk. Also called SO. (Approved for incorporation into JP 1-02.)" (Joint Staff, 2011, p. 93).

Resistance Movement

"An organized effort by some portion of the civil population of a country to resist the legally established government or an occupying power and to disrupt civil order and stability. (JP 3-05)" (United States Army Special Operations Command, 2016, p. 5).

The biggest problem with this definition is that it does not specify this as an organized activity *outside the laws of the challenged government.* This definition applies equally to any constitutionally-sanctioned protest. Many look to the presence of violence as the characteristic distinguishing a resistance from an exercise in democracy. But in truth, violence is little more than a tactical choice and offers little insight into the nature of the problem. Legality is the critical factor and a political primary purpose for action. If the actions are illegal and the primary purpose is political, then one is dealing with an insurgency. But is it a resistance or a revolution? Does the distinction even matter? It probably matters a great deal, but not in a way one can determine from our existing definitions.

Insurgency

"The organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region. Insurgency can also refer to the group itself. (JP 3-24)" (United States Army Special Operations Command, 2016, p. 5).

The definition of insurgency does not offer much help. The organizational requirement carries over from resistance and is joined by subversion and violence. Any efforts to undermine a government are subversion, so that runs the gamut from democracy to war; and again, violence is just a tactic.

This is a big part of why the United States is so bad at counterinsurgency, and why the Special Forces community struggles to communicate the value of UW beyond their own ranks. Our entire doctrine for counterinsurgency is focused on treating the symptoms of an insurgency and on preserving the existing government as is. In Counterinsurgency (COIN), we have an in-depth doctrine for a solution without first coming to a clear and logical understanding of the problem itself. UW suffers from the same unstable foundation. UW is an approach to support an insurgency, but again, we really have not yet quite figured out what an insurgency actually is. Much like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous definition of pornography, we can't define it "but know it when we see it."

Finally, the guide lists two activities for addressing insurgency:

> Counter Insurgency: Comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to defeat an insurgency and to address any core grievances. (JP 3-24)

> Foreign Internal Defense: Participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in any of the action programs taken by another government or other designated organization to free

and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to its security. (JP 3-22) (United States Army Special Operations Command, 2016, p. 5).

Both can apparently be conducted domestically or abroad, implying that the existing government preserves power and that COIN is the subset of foreign internal defense (FID) dealing solely with insurgency. Still no mention of revolution. Resistance, which is declared so central to this perspective on UW above, goes unmentioned in favor of the more generic term, "insurgency." (Of note, in recent days one has heard a great deal about "insurrection" associated with the failed riots of January 6th. Insurrection is simply the French word for insurgency.)

Frankly, the inconsistencies in doctrine are exhausting and confusing. It is little wonder that the US is so bad at countering the insurgencies of others and that our own instability and acts of insurgency are growing at home. Equally, it is little wonder that the Special Forces community has been unable to generate much interest in the incredibly powerful and relevant concept of UW. The reason for all of this is really very simple: We do not understand insurgency in fundamental terms, so when we talk about insurgency and those activities associated with insurgency, our confusion manifests in a mishmash of terms and meandering definitions. Unfortunately, this also results in "endless wars," misunderstanding of organizations like al Qaeda and the Islamic State, an excessive fixation on violence, and studying and treating problematic symptoms. Ultimately, this all contributes to an accelerating decline of the positive influence possessed by the United States that is so necessary to remaining the leader of the rules-based system abroad and to our own inherent stability at home.

Few senior leaders at Special Operations Command or the Pentagon—and certainly not across the river in the civilian agencies—see much utility in UW. Most civilian officials dismiss it all as some blend of nonsensical, outdated, too dangerous, or simply inappropriate. Military leaders become overly fixated on defeating some threat and making violence go away, and civilian leaders typically just want to know when security is established so they can get fully back to business as usual. What neither group wants to hear is that the threat is just a symptom, violence is just a tactic, and that it was the negative perceptions of business as usual (conducted by both the host nation and ours) causing the problem to begin with.

Our tremendous knowledge of insurgency and UW is blinding us from seeing the fundamental truths of both of those dynamics revealed by the current strategic environment. For example, we brand them as "terrorists", but Al Qaeda and ISIS have waged sophisticated, networked UW campaigns since their respective inceptions. We brand them as "rogue", but Russia and Iran are masters of modern UW. China aggressively ignores our laws and has a long history of UW as well. The hard reality is, *all our greatest competitors, unconstrained by our overly restrictive and archaic doctrine, are finding UW to be their very best tool for frustrating the policy ambitions of the United States.* That is the bad news.

But here is the good news: These state actors are all autocratic regimes attempting to maintain control over increasingly brittle societies at home. These actors also adversely affect foreign populations in ways that make them far more vulnerable than Western powers to the effects of a sophisticated UW campaign. As for the non-state violent extremist organizations (VEOs) like Al Qaeda and ISIS who rely wholly on the growing political angst of oppressed and disenfranchised Sunni populations around the planet for their very relevance and existence? These are the figurative "loan sharks" of rebellion. Populations only turn to VEOs when the public feels rejected by the "banks" of good governance. Trapped in the logic of colonialism and containment, we turn these populations away, valuing reliable relationships with troubled regimes over the principles we profess to stand for. We instinctively counter and contain threats and work to preserve partner governments. What we need to do is *compete*: disrupt and deter threats and champion change we can live with. But first we must reframe the problem. We keep trying to solve for "X" without first solving for "*why.*" Reframing the problem is essential to better solutions.

Strategic Influence

Strategic influence is a comprehensive concept premised in the belief that in the current strategic environment, our interests are secured far more by the influence we can foster than by the control we can exert. China wins if some day, other nations come to see a rules-based system defined and led by them as a better option to the one currently led by the US. In our efforts to sustain a waning status quo, we find ourselves rationalizing increasingly coercive and provocative behavior that is counterproductive to our goal. We are drifting further and further from our professed values as a nation in the process, hastening, rather than delaying, the day that shift in global leadership might occur. Instead, we must seek to understand problems more accurately for what they are, rather than for how we have defined and labeled them. Only then can we evolve to more appropriate mechanisms to advance and secure our interests.

The greatest emerging opportunity space for this competition is tied to this shift in relative power from governments to populations. Certainly, this is the space in which our adversaries are competing. State and non-state actors alike leverage existing grievance to their advantage. The idea that exploitable grievances are created with ideology is naïve blame-shifting on the part of those destabilized by these efforts. To date, our response has been symptomatic and reactive. To prevail in this contest, we must accept the risk of turning loose the certainty of what we know and be willing to explore the emergent opportunities we do not yet fully understand. This brings us back to how vitally important understanding population-based conflict and political instability is, and why we must explore bold new approaches for managing and shaping the associated energy for instability in our favor.

With the goal of understanding problems more accurately and redefining them in accordance with that updated understanding, offered here are a family of perspectives at which I have arrived over the past

several years. The foci of activities are adjusted accordingly. The overly controlling and invasive goals of the old playbook are abandoned. Adopted in their place are new objectives intended to foster positive influence as we work to outcompete both state and non-state actors to be perceived as the partner of choice in the pursuit of shared interests. It all begins with fostering a fundamental perspective on democracy and posturing to exploit conditions outside that framework.

Democracy

Legal, population-wide, trusted political participation internal to a single system of governance. (I see self-determination of governance as the purest form of democracy—even if a population believes their interests are served best by an autocratic regime or very dogmatic laws. So long as they remain empowered to shape the system as their needs evolve, it is democracy. Likewise, I see revolution as the rawest form of democracy, albeit illegal. It is also the worst form, as revolution focuses on removing governance deemed as intolerable, rather than bringing governance deemed as good. Also contributing to the problems associated with revolution, is that the ideologies that are most effective for fueling a revolution are incredibly ineffective for shaping good governance once the revolution is won. Nations that do not transition to effective, culturally appropriate, self-determined governance mechanisms, typically end up going from bad to worse.)

Revolution

*An illegal, population-based political challenge internal to a single system of governance. **An exercise in illegal democracy,** typically where effective legal mechanisms are denied or mistrusted*. (Revolution may be violent or non-violent. It is illegality under the laws of the system being challenged that distinguishes revolution from democracy.)

Resistance

*An illegal, population-based political challenge to some external source of governance perceived as inappropriately affecting the system of which one is a part. **A form of irregular warfare***. (Resistance does not require a physical occupation and is often created when a foreign entity effectively *occupies by policy*).

Insurgency

Some blend of revolution and/or resistance. (Grievance, catalysts, goals, tactics, and narratives will vary greatly, but they only serve to describe the character of the conflict and do not inform the nature.)

Counterinsurgency (COIN)

A ***civilian-led, domestic operation*** *to prevent and/or resolve insurgency*. (Effective COIN must recognize and address the causal role of governance and the dual natures of revolution and resistance at the policy and strategy level. Failure to do so leads to threat-focused, symptomatic approaches that foster impunity of governance and are increasingly infeasible).

Foreign Internal Defense (FID)

Activities abroad to foster resilience and culturally appropriate self-determination of good governance, free from foreign interference and broadly accepted across the entire affected population. (Military activities in strategic influence nest under FID.)

Unconventional Warfare (UW)

Activities seeking to leverage the energy (latent or active) for insurgency in the populations of a foreign system of governance to advance one's own interests.

It all begins with some distinct population perceiving itself to be in conditions of legally irreconcilable political grievance. This is the center of gravity. This is the source of all strength and power for insurgency and UW. *This is the energy in the system*. Effective campaigning is all about understanding and shaping this energy for purpose.

Armed with these reframed and refocused fundamental definitions, one can more effectively determine the nature of instability. This empowers one to think about, communicate, and implement solutions in ways impossible with the many gaps and overlaps of the traditional understanding and lexicon. This is not a reductionist approach; it is simply seeking to understand and describe unique, but related aspects of government-population dynamics in clear, discrete, fundamental terms. It allows one to clearly determine what are problematic symptoms to manage, and what are sources of causation to resolve.

A population empowered with trusted, legal, culturally appropriate mechanisms to shape their governance is in some form of naturally stable democracy. It is only when they resort to illegal mechanisms to force change that it has become insurgency. If internal to a single system, it is a revolutionary exercise in *illegal democracy*. If, however, it is a response to some external sources of governance, it is resistance and an exercise in *irregular warfare*. In most cases there is a blend of both resistance and revolutionary causation at work, both sharing common characteristics, but each demanding diametrically different solutions to resolve. To only treat the symptoms invariably makes the problems worse, even if those symptoms are effectively suppressed and the aggrieved population temporarily deterred.

To that end, we really need to refocus counterinsurgency as a purely domestic and civilian-led activity. Our current belief that COIN is a form of irregular war we conduct in support of another nation's insurgency is deeply flawed and a counterproductive residual of colonialism. It invariably results in becoming overly focused on preserving the very form of governance creating the problem in the first place, overly fixated on defeating the insurgent, and invariably acting in ways that increase the resistance energy toward the US. In most cases COIN should be largely prophylactic and is simply governance seeking to be perceived as legitimate, fair, and appropriate by the entire population. This is the primary role of the Bill of Rights. COIN also includes avoiding, deterring, or disrupting any problematic foreign influences from state or non-state actors. Frankly, this is the domestic challenge facing the Biden administration today and should be a primary focus of the administration's governance. If existing insurgent challengers are framed as the "domestic terror" so many are advocating for, we will simplistically target the symptoms, continue provocative governance, and make our problems worse.

When one seeks to help a foreign government with their insurgency (or what they may frame as domestic terror), one is not conducting counterinsurgency or counterterrorism. Misunderstanding problems and framing activities under the wrong mission is why many of these foreign operations so often devolve into "endless wars." The very act of excessively supporting a government against some segment of their population serves more to undermine their legitimacy than to reinforce it. It also validates the grievances of the population and the narratives of the insurgent. The result is typically a temporary suppression of the symptoms of insurgency at best, with enhanced impunity by the assisted government. Both effects serve to expand the revolutionary and resistance energy driving the conflict in the first place. This is what happened following "the surge" in Iraq, creating the powerful conditions fueling the rise of ISIS. Our subsequent efforts to defeat ISIS achieved suppression but also served to make those conditions worse for the effort. We misunderstood the problem, and we attacked the symptoms.

This new perspective on foreign internal defense recognizes the importance of fostering broad perceptions of self-determination and acting in ways to mitigate the resistance energy created naturally by foreign interference of any sort. Instead of entering like an arbitrator, picking winners and losers and enforcing those decisions, one must now enter like a mediator. This means giving up control and focusing on using one's power to help shape conditions allowing a nation to come to its own solutions for its future governance. We are seeing a trend in this direction over the past year or so in Afghanistan, but we need to become even more committed to this change of mindset and be willing to apply it everywhere we go. After all, a critical aspect of competition is being perceived as the partner of choice. Seventy years of Cold War and post-9/11 activities have taken us far from the principles of the path we proclaim to walk. The world notices: It is not just obsolete tactically, it is counterproductive strategically as well.

Unconventional Deterrence and Resilience

Governments everywhere find themselves challenged at home and abroad by the effects of the rapidly evolving expectations of governance among the populations they affect. This is directly attributable to the empowering nature of modern information technologies. How one understands these challenges and how they act to address them will determine if a society weathers the storm intact, if it devolves into instability and insurgency, or if its citizens are convinced by their government to surrender important civil liberties rationalized by misplaced fear.

For all of its self-professed "exceptionalism," even the United States is not immune. We find ourselves mired in "endless wars" abroad, not because the nature of conflict has changed, but because we still apply obsolete thinking and approaches derived from the lessons of colonialism and containment. For similar reasons, we see growing instability at home as well. Fortunately, we have far better mechanisms for our domestic governance than we apply abroad. But faith in those systems is waning, and if we lose faith, we become just like everybody else.

We are so certain we are doing things right that when desired outcomes elude us, the instinct is to work harder, stay longer, overly celebrate tactical victories, and write off strategic failures to the complexity of it all. There simply is not much strategic learning taking place regarding our domestic governance or our foreign manipulations of the governance of others. Instead of chasing new solutions, we need to recognize we have the problem wrong. What made sense in the world behind us is not what makes sense in the world before us. Once we get to a better understanding of the problem, better solutions will become clear. Even our adjustments in Afghanistan are not because we have grown wiser; rather, they are because we have grown weary. The world is watching, and how we are judged in the court of public opinion will be a major factor in how long we are allowed to remain leader of the rules-based system.

The attached graphic is intended to describe and help visualize how governance affects populations. How governance is perceived by any individual or group will determine if they are resilient and naturally stable, or if they are exploitable and only stable due to the deterrent effect of state power. As relative power shifts to populations, fear of state power fades, and these exploitable populations are far more easily incited to illegal action. An unhappy population who could be ignored, suppressed, or deterred in the past is now a situation that must be appreciated and addressed. If the energy for instability is allowed to build, it will ultimately explode. Understanding this energy is the key to competition.

The facts of every society or system of governance are unique, but there are a handful of fundamental perceptions of governance one must consider. Specific conditions that are perceived as normal and proper in one society may be perceived as highly provocative by another. This is why facts and statistics fail to tell the complete story and why any accurate assessment must be done through the unique lens

of the population in question[5]. All of this combines to form a figurative "Circle of Trust." Populations within the circle are resilient, while those outside the circle are exploitable. Appreciating how these dynamics work and how to shape them for purpose is the key to this concept.
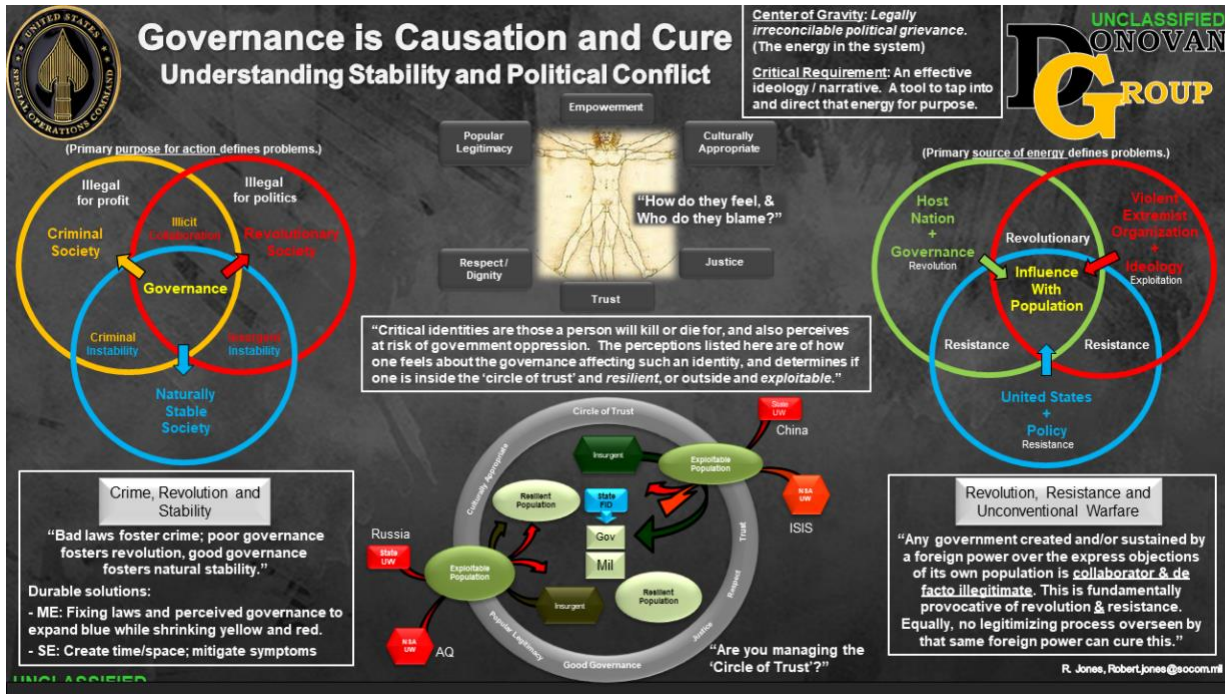
The United States struggles to see the opportunities before it. This is due to being a status quo power, being blinded by our belief in our exceptionalism, and being armed with a family of obsolete and confused terms. Instead, we see only threat. Revisionist actors, on the other hand, approach the emerging strategic environment far more pragmatically and are unencumbered by our bureaucracy and dogma. Revisionists see opportunity. It is not too late to change, but change we must, as our current approaches can only lead to exhaustion and failure.

This brings us to the Venn diagrams. On the left, we place governance in the center and consider how governance affects a society as it radiates outward. Bad laws can foster the rise of destabilizing crime for profit. Poor governance can foster the rise of destabilizing illegality for political purpose. These two vastly different dynamics each erode the stability of a society. The goal of governance must be to minimize bad laws and poor governance to optimize the percentage of the population perceiving their governance as good. Society is not "attacked by networks" so much as society creates the opportunity for highly resilient networked approaches to thrive. To attack a network is futile; one must *disempower* it.

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[5] For a more detailed exploration of the risks associated with over-reliance on statistics, refer to Jones, 2018.

In the Venn diagram on the right, we place a population in the center and consider how domestic and foreign sources of governance impacting that population are perceived. If perceived poorly, internal actors will emerge to wage insurgency, and external (VEO/state) malign actors will seek to exploit those conditions through UW. It is this blend of revolutionary and resistance energy that one must understand and shape. It is only when it grows to dangerous levels within a society that malign narratives are able to take root in widespread ways. Ultimately, populations are rarely "radicalized" by the narratives of the exploiters. They are radicalized by the foreign and domestic governance affecting their lives.

With this reframed problem, winning is not about defeating some threat or preserving some government in a particular form. "Winning" is optimizing the percentage of the population perceiving governance as good. When a population perceives their domestic governance as poor (it may be highly effective in performance, yet extremely poor in perception at the same time), it creates the exploitable potential for revolution. When foreign governance is perceived as inappropriate, it creates the exploitable potential for resistance. When these conditions exist, the exploiters will emerge. They do not create the problem; they are but the problematic symptom to mitigate as governance cures itself.

Competition

Competition should not be thought of as a phase *of* war, nor as a prelude *to* war. Competition is peace. We compete for stability at home, and we compete with partners and allies as well as those we label as threats. To foster greater stability the US must first work to reduce the destabilizing provocations of our domestic governance and our foreign policies. This is in no way a call for a return to isolation. Rather, it is a call to be far more aware of how we are perceived and, when given a choice, to act in the least provocative way. Al Qaeda and the Islamic State both wage sophisticated UW campaigns that we simplistically label as "terrorism." What so many refuse to accept is that "but for" the extremely high levels of revolutionary energy toward the governments of the Middle East, and the equally high resistance energy created by outdated policies and approaches of the West to advance our interests in the region, these campaigns would quickly fizzle. One does not *defeat* an insurgent group or a VEO. *Rather, one renders them irrelevant.* Efforts to simply defeat threats and preserve governments are counterproductive relics of the old playbook.

As we work to clean our own house, we can lead by our example to encourage and assist those partners and allies important to our interests in understanding and addressing their own instability. This fostering of resilience serves two purposes. First, it enhances how we are perceived, thereby reducing the potential for resistance against us. Secondly, it helps to reduce the potential for revolution within those partners and allies. The combined effect is to disempower the UW campaigns of VEOs and of state actors like Russia, Iran, or China. It also serves to help bring insurgent organizations and the populations who support them to a point where they can begin to trust in culturally appropriate legal mechanisms

unique to their respective situations and not feel compelled to resort to revolution. *This is the essence of unconventional resilience.*

Lastly, we must learn to stem those problematic acts of competition conducted by revisionist state actors. They know exactly where the red lines for our existing deterrence are, and they design their actions intentionally to fall below those thresholds. Reinforcing or updating the mechanisms of traditional deterrence does little to lower these thresholds, regardless of how "integrated" they might be. This leaves our leaders in a quandary, as they can either do nothing and look weak, or they can over-react and look like a bully. Either way, the revisionist gains influence, and the status quo actor loses. This is the essence of Gray Zone competition.[6] The bottom line is that we need a new form of deterrence that works in peace and below these thresholds. Revisionist actors have their own internal instability issues. Revisionist actors also act in ways to create the potential for resistance in foreign populations. By posturing in ways to create and communicate a credible threat of our ability to conduct UW to destabilize places critical to the interests of revisionist actors, we can create this new line of deterrence. *This is the essence of unconventional deterrence.*

Conclusion

The modern information age has ushered in a new age of insurgency. Old thinking on insurgency is inadequate, confusing, and rooted in the controlling logic of the colonial practices of a bygone era. To appreciate new opportunities, we must first update our understanding of how political stability or instability are fostered in any society. Armed with that updated understanding, a world of opportunity presents itself—a world that revisionist actors, both state and non-state, have already fully embraced.

To remain the leader of the rules-based system, the United States must recognize we are competing for influence with everyone. This includes populations equally to governments, at home and abroad, and nations we perceive as friends equally to those we label as threats. This is neither war, nor prelude to war. This is peace. War may come, but war is the failure of competition, not the climax. For war is indeed the "final argument of Kings," but revolution is *the final vote of the people*.

This new approach demands we reframe how we advance our foreign polices abroad and, as importantly, how we think about our governance at home. We must lead once again by the power of our example, relying less upon the power of our bribes and threats. This will serve to increase our influence, even as it reduces our vulnerability to the UW efforts of others. We should employ unconventional resilience to help foster the evolving stability of those who are willing to work within the rules-based system. But what of those who seek to operate outside the system? What of those who create vulnerabilities through their own poor governance at home, and what of their inappropriate

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[6] For more on the Gray Zone, please refer to Kapusta (2015).

approaches to advancing their interests abroad? For them, we will play upon their paranoia to unconventionally deter the problematic acts of competition they plague the world with now. *Ultimately this is the modern adaptation of "hearts and minds"—being near to the hearts of those who would work with us within a rules-based system and inside the minds of those who would work against that system for their own self-interest.*

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