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## Competition and Conflict: Implications for Maneuver Brigades

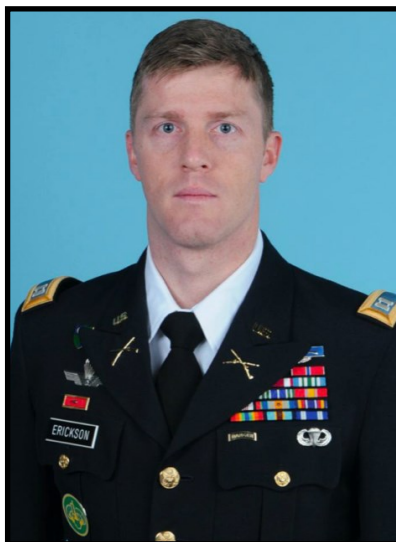


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*Editor's Note:* The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Modern War Institute, Department of the Army, DoD, or any other department or agency of the US government.

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### Executive Summary

This report contributes to ongoing efforts that examine the role of the US Army's maneuver brigade combat teams in today's operating environment. It seeks to reconcile current training, reform, and modernization efforts with the likeliest competencies for contemporary interstate conflict. The findings of this report suggest that the United States has overemphasized preparing for large-scale operations at the cost of being better prepared for other, likelier conflict scenarios.

Most current research addresses these issues at the policy or strategic level. This report, however, identifies asymmetries between the United States, China, and Russia that should drive innovation at lower echelons within the US Army's maneuver organizations. In part 1 a literature review examines the concepts of competition and conflict, revisiting a number of trends that many contemporary strategic planners deemphasize. These include the frequency of low-intensity conflict, hybrid tactics, proliferation of lethal weapon systems to non-state actors (NSAs), and the use of underground and urban terrain to negate the technological capabilities of state actors. These trends suggest a lens through which to analyze future engagements with Chinese and Russian forces.

Part 2 begins by examining the core interests, policy objectives, and trends within select security and defense services of China and Russia. Although each actor possesses different interests and objectives and utilizes different tactics, they do share several things in common, including perceptions of the United States and investments within their respective defense establishments. Each is attempting to maximize long-term asymmetric advantages against the United States through denial strategies, the proliferation of lethal weapon systems and technology, the use of proxies, and tactics that minimize US targeting capabilities. This report examines each state's mission command and use of hybrid and proxy warfare, technology, and practices relating to underground warfare and urban terrain. Then it imagines potential conflict scenarios on the Korean Peninsula and in the vicinity of Kaliningrad, to highlight asymmetries of particular concern to conventional maneuver formations.

The report concludes in part 3 with a discussion of capability gaps that maneuver organizations face and several recommendations for further consideration. The findings

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suggest that Russian and Chinese methods will likely require the United States to use combat brigades in shaping operations as well as in maneuver operations. To do so effectively, conventional forces (CF) should revisit special operations forces–conventional forces (SOF-CF) integration concepts that create a more optimal, symbiotic relationship, and they should also gain authorities that can be effective against any actor during the short but intense escalation associated with a kinetic event. Brigades must be able to accomplish and survive their initial deployment into a given theater. Maneuver organizations need to gain appropriate access to fires and effects systems that will complement the authorities required to maneuver during kinetic operations. Moving to a distributed mission command architecture will also likely best enable continuous operations when communication between echelons is disrupted. Additionally, a hybrid framework that incorporates urban and underground terrain may be the most realistic basis for training scenarios. Finally, where time and resources are short, further education will necessarily fill emergent knowledge gaps.

### Introduction

In *Prodigal Soldiers*, James Kitfield tells the story of the military officers who experienced irregular conflict in Vietnam under extraordinary constraints.<sup>1</sup> Based on their experiences and observations of other conflicts, they believed that the character of warfare was changing and that the US military *had* to change with it. Those officers later led the push for new legislation, doctrine, adjustments in task organization, recruiting, and the establishment of combat training centers (CTCs). Their efforts to reform their respective services proved sufficient in the resounding victory in the First Gulf War.

That story should seem familiar to those at the forefront of military innovation in the contemporary environment. Leaders across the Department of Defense (DoD) again recognize the changing international system and question the role of force within it. The US Army describes the operating environment as one that is “trending toward a multi-polar international system with a wicked mixture of state-sponsored proxy, non-state actor (NSA) fomented, and cyber oriented low-level conflicts” and “competitive interactions . . . that fall between traditional war and peace.”<sup>2</sup> American rivals have “adopted various forms of warfare that reduce [their] military exposure while . . . combining both lethal and nonlethal tools.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, proliferating conflict challenges states as NSAs operate from physical and cyber sanctuaries.<sup>4</sup>

The US military is currently rebalancing its forces to ensure that it can still win in this environment. It is correcting the atrophy in large-scale maneuver that has occurred over the last two decades of low-intensity conflict.<sup>5</sup> The Army fits into those efforts by effecting change through its new Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) concept. The reforms are often focused on

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<sup>1</sup> James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> David Ellis, Charles Black, and Mary Ann Nobles, “Thinking Dangerously: Imagining US SOCCOM in the Post-CT World,” *PRISM* 6, no. 3 (2016): 115.

<sup>3</sup> Lionel Beehner and Liam Collins, *Dangerous Myths: How the Crisis in Ukraine Explains Future Great Power Conflict*, (West Point, NY: Modern War Institute, 2020), 54.

<sup>4</sup> Richard H. Shultz, *Transforming US Intelligence for Irregular War: Task Force 714 in Iraq* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 1–3.

<sup>5</sup> J. Paul Pope, *Interagency Performance in Counterterrorism Operations: Implications for the “Gray Zone,”* Policy Research Project Report (Austin: LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin, 2018), 9. Available at <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/68062>.



better preparing the upper echelons of CF for large-scale conflict between state actors. As a side effect, new gaps continually appear at the tactical level. Those gaps—caused by innovation or environmental trends—offset many advantages US forces possess in large-scale operations. Some adjustments must be made to better align US efforts with the realities of those asymmetries and trends.

### Defining the Problem

Three central issues complicate military reform. First, although violent extremist organizations and NSAs persistently threaten US interests, policy makers are predominantly concerned with the threat from other states.<sup>6</sup> Yet there is still debate about what state-on-state conflict might look like, and its practical implications for maneuver units remain unsettled.

Second, tactics on the ground suggest that the character of war is changing. The more effective US military capabilities become, the likelier our enemies—especially those possessing nuclear weapons—will avoid direct conflict with US troops.<sup>7</sup> Methods include cyberattacks; the use of proxy forces; Cold War–era covert tradecraft; targeted killings; and other irregular war enabled by technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), hypersonic systems, and robotics. These systems challenge long-held notions of deterrence and war.<sup>8</sup>

Third, the pace of change is high, because threatening states have an incentive to maintain an asymmetric advantage in the face of a preponderance of American conventional power. However, in the United States there is no post-9/11 environment to serve as a stimulus for change.<sup>9</sup> The longer the United States waits to identify the correct responses to modern competition, the more its competitors get ahead.

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<sup>6</sup> Pope, *Interagency Performance in Counterterrorism Operations*, 13–14.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Cleveland, James Linder, and Ronald Dempsey, “Special Operations Doctrine: Is It Needed?,” *PRISM* 6, no. 3 (2016): 10.

<sup>8</sup> US Army Training and Doctrine Command, *The US Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*, TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1 (Fort Eustice, VA: US Army, 2018). Available at [https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo114669/TP525-3-1\\_30Nov2018.pdf](https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo114669/TP525-3-1_30Nov2018.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Pope, *Interagency Performance in Counterterrorism Operations*, 1.



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Several research questions emerge. First, what does current competition (or conflict) look like, and what is the likeliest next fight?<sup>10</sup> What are its triggers and causes?<sup>11</sup> What are the implications for maneuver organizations as they balance preparation for likeliest and most-dangerous conflict scenarios?

Most of the current research seeks to highlight current trends that shape policy at a strategic level. This report will instead focus on the implications of great power competition at the tactical level, with a focus on conventional maneuver brigades. It takes a qualitative approach to answer the research questions and to test commonly held perspectives on contemporary near-peer competition. Part 1 will be a literature review that examines how others have answered similar questions and that highlights the trends in warfare that challenge some of their assumptions. Part 2 will examine the cases of China and Russia to illuminate the first research question. Part 3 will consist of a discussion of the implications of these case studies for maneuver brigades, concluding with recommendations.

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<sup>10</sup> Shultz, *Transforming US Intelligence for Irregular War*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 43.

### Part 1: Literature Review

#### The Debate over Preparation for the Next Fight

The US government is clear about what it perceives as its main threats. The 2017 *National Security Strategy* states that the main challenge is revisionist powers. Those revisionist powers are great powers—China and, to a lesser degree, Russia—or rogue states, such as Iran and North Korea, and NSAs.<sup>12</sup> This strategic document prioritizes China and Russia as the main competitors and grounds its efforts in “military readiness . . . alliances . . . [and reformed] business practices.”<sup>13</sup>

Although the chief actors are clear, the military and policy community are not wholly aligned about the nature of conflict nor about how to prepare for it. First, the debate often begins with a discussion of whether or not the United States is in a state of competition or conflict. If there is a danger in this debate, it is that a misunderstanding of the term competition creates less of a sense of urgency than does the term conflict. Some suggest that the two concepts lie on a spectrum, with cooperation on one end, competition in the middle, and conflict on the opposing end.<sup>14</sup> Dr. Liam Collins notes the heightened and irreconcilable nature of relationships in the term *conflict*.<sup>15</sup> Others, such as Dr. Christopher Harmon, describe competition as the broader of the two terms, with conflict falling underneath competition, and occasionally kinetic.<sup>16</sup> This report assumes the Army’s definition of competition (below armed conflict): “When two or more actors . . . have incompatible interests but neither seeks to escalate to open conflict . . . challenges may include a range of violent instruments . . . with uncertain attribution to the state sponsor.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: White House, December 2017), 25.

<sup>13</sup> Shultz, *Transforming US Intelligence for Irregular War*, 210–12.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas G. Mahnken, "Thinking about Competitive Strategies," in *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice*, ed. Thomas G. Mahnken (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher C. Harmon, interview with author, June 4, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Michael D. Lundy, *US Army Concept: Multi-Domain Combined Arms Operations at Echelons above Brigade, 2025–2045: Versatile, Agile, and Lethal* (Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Technical Information Center, 2018), 86. Available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/AD1060758>.

Then the debate is framed in terms of the likelihood or magnitude of risks posed by high- or low-intensity conflict. High-intensity conflict occurs between “two organized military forces ... of greater technological capability,”<sup>18</sup> while low-intensity conflict includes “insurgency, guerrilla wars, civil wars, separatism, communal violence, insurrection, and terrorism.”<sup>19</sup> In practice, though, it can be difficult to distinguish between high-intensity and low-intensity conflict, as both may involve multiple actors or be large operations. In addition, high-intensity combat often devolves into large-scale, long-term, low-intensity conflict.<sup>20</sup>

CF play a role in competition, whether through the use of force or passive deterrence. But what type of conflict should CF prepare for? This debate plays out as leaders adjust doctrine, training, personnel, and force posture to remain successful and relevant in the new operating environment. Lt. Col. (ret.) Pat Proctor groups decision makers into two opposing views: those who emphasize preparing for low-intensity conflict and those who emphasize high-intensity conflict. Those who emphasize low-intensity conflict note the proliferation of weapon systems and conflict involving NSAs. They believe even state actors will use asymmetric, low-tech means to avoid US strengths. Those who emphasize high-intensity conflict emphasize that state actors will use area denial, cyber warfare, and new technologies to negate US strengths. While advocates of preparing for low-intensity competition stress urban warfare and population-centric conflict, those who are concerned about high-intensity conflict suggest bypassing cities to enable decisive maneuver elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> US interventions in Central America and initial victories in Iraq and Afghanistan initially seemed to solidify the idea that special operations forces (SOF), airpower, and conventional maneuver could be highly successful for any future challenge. In each case, however, long-term success was elusive. Ultimately, conflict intensity is less relevant than its proliferation. Proctor argues that those who emphasize high-intensity conflict ought to also acknowledge that in future conflict any given action will lead to geographical expansion of a war into other theaters, where it often

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<sup>18</sup> Pat Proctor, *Lessons Unlearned: The US Army's Role in Creating the Forever Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2020), 14.

<sup>19</sup> Richard A. Hunt and Richard H. Shultz, eds., *Lessons from an Unconventional War: Reassessing US Strategies for Future Conflicts* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982), 191.

<sup>20</sup> Proctor, *Lessons Unlearned*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Proctor, *Lessons Unlearned*, 13–17.

manifests with less intensity.<sup>22</sup> Thus, while some believe that the Army must prepare exclusively for large-scale combat operations, there is reason to be concerned that the lessons from low-intensity conflicts continue to be lost because of failures to adequately “integrate them into training, education, and organizations.”<sup>23</sup>

The Army avoided siding with either the high- or low-intensity argument. The Army’s MDO framework, instead, emphasizes the changing nature of war and seeks ways to rapidly integrate all domains of warfare.<sup>24</sup> It does not refer to intensity. Instead, this framework requires decision makers to rethink conventional wisdom and analyze how maneuver brigades can achieve objectives when the area of operations is full of state actors and NSAs, nonhomogenous populations, and a plethora of systems and effects. Does it need to be fully trained to use assets once reserved for high-level decision makers or just to access them? What is the right force posture? What does a multi-domain formation look like when the priorities for manning and equipment continue to melt upward to higher echelons?

### *Current Trends in the Operating Environment*

Although MDO seek to integrate with both state and nonstate threats to a degree, in practice the greater emphasis, by far, is on interstate conflict and, by extension, high-intensity conflict. For example, a major US Army Training and Doctrine Command publication about only describes their logic down to the division level.<sup>25</sup> This is despite increasing evidence that the contemporary operating environment will feature a mixture of threats, with states increasingly relying on tactics more traditionally associated with low-intensity conflict and NSAs. For example, Gen. Tony Thomas described the contemporary environment as one in which nearly all threats “utilize forms of hybrid conflict short of war that frustrate and limit traditional forms of deterrence.”<sup>26</sup> It is necessary to understand the following trends, in

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<sup>22</sup> Proctor, *Lessons Unlearned*, 10–11.

<sup>23</sup> Proctor, *Lessons Unlearned*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Though I share the goal of Multi-Domain Operations in addressing contemporary problems for the use of force, Multi-Domain Operations have still been applied in a way that primarily applies to high-intensity interstate conflict. See Lundy, *US Army Concept*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> US Army Training and Doctrine Command, *The Army in Multi-Domain Operations*, v.

<sup>26</sup> Tony Thomas, “Prologue,” *PRISM* 6, no. 3 (2016): 3.

particular, to understand the challenges facing contemporary maneuver brigades, which part 2 will describe in more detail.

*The majority of actors are using asymmetric methods in a manner that avoids interstate conflict.* Asymmetric methods are defined as those that take advantage of one's strengths and an adversary's weaknesses. They include the application of technology, tactics, weapon systems, or other capabilities in combination with another hard or soft power advantage. They may occur in any conflict, but today they are predominantly evident in the gray zone<sup>27</sup>—the area between cooperation and declared war—in the form of adversarial tactics such as “the use of misattribution, denial, proxies, and strategic exploitation of existing cleavages” and an “exploitation of ambiguities in legal frameworks.”<sup>28</sup>

Although many perceive conflicts between state actors as increasing, recent trends suggest that low-intensity conflict is likelier. In a study on future conflict, the RAND corporation demonstrated the rise in intrastate, low-intensity conflicts. Figure 1.1 shows the reduction in high-intensity and interstate conflict. Figure 1.2 shows the proliferation of intrastate conflict.<sup>29</sup>

*Hybrid warfare is on the rise.* There is no single, widely-accepted definition, but most agree that hybrid warfare consists of “a combination of regular and irregular war in a highly flexible and efficient way” using modern information capabilities.<sup>30</sup> Andrew Radin describes hybrid warfare as “nonviolent subversion, covert violent action, and conventional warfare

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<sup>27</sup> Pope, *Interagency Performance in Counterterrorism Operations*, 10–11. Gray zone operations are alternatively defined as cohesive, integrated campaigns using gradual, unconventional tools that avoid escalation to outright conventional conflict.

<sup>28</sup> Pope, *Interagency Performance in Counterterrorism Operations*, 75.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas S. Szayna, *Conflict Trends and Conflict Drivers: An Empirical Assessment of Historical Conflict Patterns and Future Conflict Projections* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017): 16. Szayna defines high-intensity conflict as battle deaths of one hundred thousand per year during interstate wars or intrastate civil or ethnic war. Low-intensity conflict is defined as twenty-five to one thousand deaths per year during militarized disputes or armed conflict between states, or alternatively terrorism, guerilla warfare, insurgency, or conflict between communities. Finally, medium-intensity conflict has between one thousand and one hundred thousand deaths per year during declared war, civil war, or wars of independence. As has been discussed, the term can be misleading, given that violence and casualties can occur regardless of the type of conflict. Low intensity can be large scale, for example, but given the likely increase in casualties, it may meet the author's definition of medium intensity. The point here is that conflicts other than large-scale, high-intensity combat operations are increasing.

<sup>30</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 26.

supported by subversion.”<sup>31</sup> It assumes the ability to escalate the conflict—through a strong conventional or nuclear force—in order to enable deterrence or coercion.<sup>32</sup> Lionel Beehner and Liam Collins describe hybrid war as an increasingly “systematized and normalized” method supplanting traditional means of war.<sup>33</sup> Hybrid tactics economize an actor’s use of force, are continuous and mostly covert, and tend to be population centric.<sup>34</sup> Examples are Russia’s recent operations in eastern Ukraine, Crimea, and the Baltic states.<sup>35</sup> Finally, as great powers grow stronger, lesser powers—even NSAs—turn to hybrid tactics to gain asymmetric advantages.

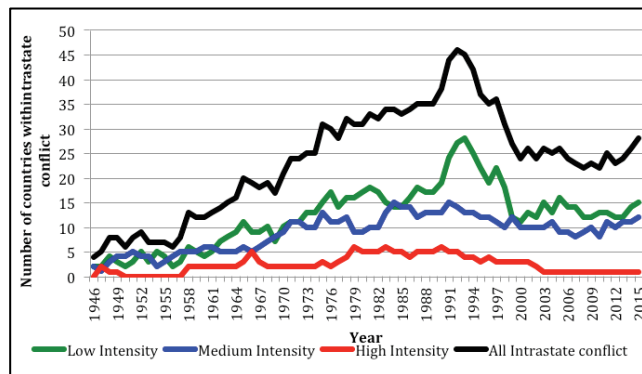
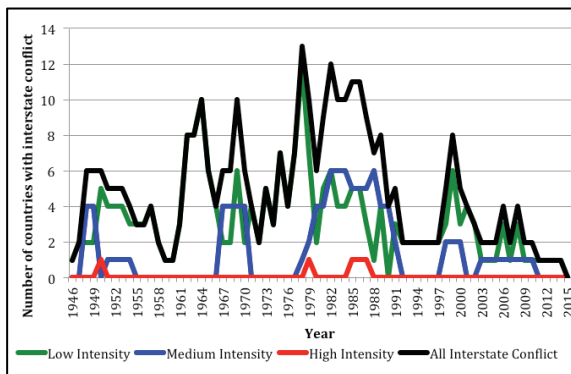


Figure 1.1 Interstate Conflicts by Intensity<sup>36</sup>      Figure 1.2. Intrastate Conflicts by Intensity<sup>37</sup>

*Most states are undergoing significant modernization efforts that support new doctrines heavily reliant on technology.* The extent of the modernization effort depends on their current strengths and weaknesses, their ability to affect change given their available resources, and how they view future conflict. Most advanced militaries spent years preparing for high-intensity conflict, but now are trying to overhaul leadership, personnel, doctrine, training, and equipment, for the new operating environment. For example, Russian and Chinese modernization investments suggest a desire to avoid lengthy, and costly, large-scale combat.

<sup>31</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 24; see also Andrew Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Shultz Jr., “Great Power Competition: A Special Operations Perspective,” (lecture, Joint Special Operations University online video conference, May 12, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Szayna, *Conflict Trends and Conflict Drivers*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> Szayna, *Conflict Trends and Conflict Drivers*, 16.

The result is that technology is growing more lethal and plays an increasing role in conflict. Every great power is developing precision-guided munitions (PGMs), as well as antispace, cyber, and electronic-warfare capabilities. Furthermore, that technology is proliferating well beyond their borders.<sup>38</sup> Social media has also given old tactics a new medium. Actors use information warfare to collect information about an enemy as well as to spread disinformation.<sup>39</sup> These developments have massive implications for, among other things, mission command, mobility, and survivability.

*Proxies and NSAs are increasingly at the heart of conflict. We should be careful to not dismiss the threats posed by NSAs, even as we balance the threats posed by state actors.* Richard Shultz writes, “Since the end of the Cold War, the predominant form of armed conflict has been generated by armed groups utilizing irregular warfare methods to pursue their objectives against state actors.”<sup>40</sup> RAND’s study again demonstrates (in figure 2) an increase in NSA involvement in conflict. An NSA may be transnational or not, depending on the specific conflict or circumstances.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, an increasing number of actors are attempting to achieve their political objectives through the use of partners or proxies. A partner force is officially an element of a state’s national security apparatus.<sup>42</sup> Proxy warfare involves “the provision of financial support, weaponry, training, and other material by states to nonstate groups, in exchange for the latter fighting on behalf of the state’s interests.”<sup>43</sup> Proxies typically consist of paramilitary outfits, militias, or volunteers who often are veterans of other wars.<sup>44</sup> Use of a proxy gives the sponsoring state actor a “first mover advantage,” because it can move faster than the international community can react due to legal or political issues.<sup>45</sup> The state gives the proxy a lifeline of support while the proxy can assume some a greater share of the risk and

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<sup>38</sup> Peter Roberts, ed., *The Future Conflict Operating Environment Out to 2030*, occasional report (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2019), 59.

<sup>39</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 31.

<sup>40</sup> Shultz, *Transforming US Intelligence for Irregular War*, 12–13.

<sup>41</sup> Szayna, *Conflict Trends and Conflict Drivers*, 16.

<sup>42</sup> Austin Long, “The Limits of Special Operations Forces,” *PRISM* 6, no. 3 (2016): 42.

<sup>43</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 32. Today, states and NSAs increasingly play both of these roles.

<sup>44</sup> Shultz, *Transforming US Intelligence for Irregular War*, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 37.



compensate the state's lack of resources.<sup>46</sup> Figure 3 shows that the number of known intrastate and proxy conflicts (internationalized intrastate), highlighted in blue and red respectively, has increased since 2012.

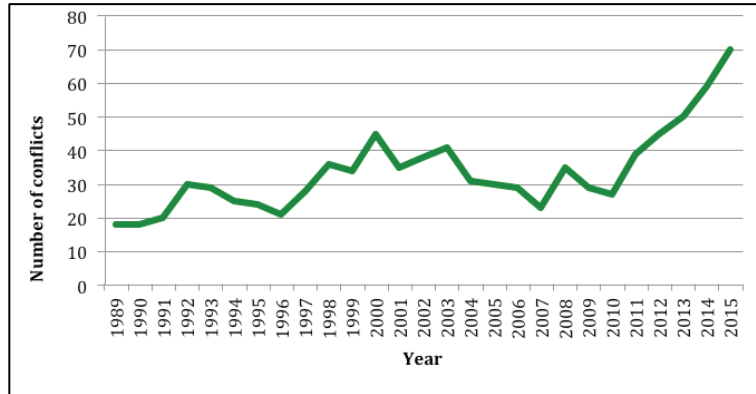


Figure 2. Conflicts in Which a Belligerent is an NSA, 1989–2015<sup>47</sup>

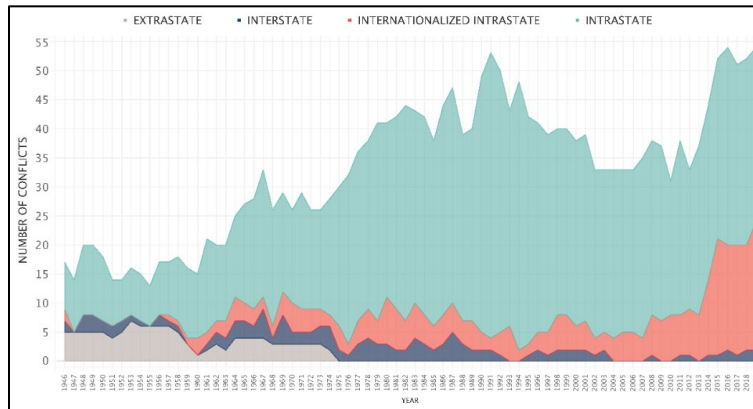


Figure 3. Armed Conflicts by Type, 1946–2019<sup>48</sup>

*Conflict is moving underground.* In her book *Underground Warfare*, Daphne Richmond-Barak argues that underground warfare has reemerged as a threat favored by NSAs that uniquely raises both operational and legal challenges for state actors. Tunnel warfare occurs largely between NSAs in Asia and the Middle East. In Syria, for example, “tunnels have been used by both state *and* nonstate actors, and by both combatants (to launch surprise attacks *and* protect military personnel and ammunition) *and* civilians (as shelter).”<sup>49</sup> The actors

<sup>46</sup> Roberts, *Future Conflict Operating Environment Out to 2030*, 12–14.

<sup>47</sup> Szayna, *Conflict Trends and Conflict Drivers*, 16.

<sup>48</sup> Therése Pettersson and Magnus Öberg, “Organized Violence, 1989–2019,” *Journal of Peace Research* 57, no. 4 (2020): 600. <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/charts/>.

<sup>49</sup> Daphné Richmond-Barak, *Underground Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 33, emphasis in the original.

involved maximize the use of man-made and existing underground structures, rudimentary and sophisticated, and for various durations, in order to provide an advantage against well-resourced foes.

However, Richmond-Barak demonstrates that states like Russia, North Korea, and China are also increasingly going underground, through the construction of deeply buried facilities that hide strategic infrastructure.<sup>50</sup> They also use the underground to hide tanks, artillery, air defense artillery (ADA), explosives, and ammunition and even to train recruits. As weapon systems grow more lethal, and NSAs or proxies seek increasingly asymmetric methods to gain military advantage, we should expect more actors to move underground.<sup>51</sup>

Although the preponderance of underground warfare is conducted by NSAs, given that many NSAs may serve as proxies for state actors and that many weapon systems are supplied by state actors, the underground remains relevant for CF. State forces will be increasingly confronted with situations in which they must seize underground terrain, destroy it, or neutralize it.

*Conflict increasingly occurs in urban environments.* Megacities are expected to contain half of the earth's population under the age of thirty by 2035. As those growing populations stress governments, infrastructure, and resources and even react to external forces like technology or climate change, strong governments, private contractors, proxies, local militias, or criminal organizations will likely step in to fill gaps or seize power. States struggling to resource basic services, even security, in massive urban centers may turn to contracting such NSAs.<sup>52</sup> If conflict occurs between groups of people, then it follows that conflict may inevitably move ever more into urban terrain. The US Army, for its part, already recognizes the complex nature of urban conflict.<sup>53</sup> It also follows that the aforementioned asymmetric methods and tactics will be seen in urban terrain.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Richmond-Barak, *Underground Warfare*.

<sup>51</sup> Richmond-Barak, *Underground Warfare*, 1.

<sup>52</sup> Roberts, *Future Conflict Operating Environment Out to 2030*, 44.

<sup>53</sup> US Army Training and Doctrine Command, *US Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*, 6.

<sup>54</sup> Richmond-Barak, *Underground Warfare*, 209–15.

### Part 2: An Analysis of China and Russia

This section analyzes trends, asymmetries, and adversary capabilities to understand their political and military objectives, strategy, and tactics. It relies on not only troop numbers and technology but also other factors that might provide insight on how these resources will be used, such as history, recent exercises, government investment, demographics, and expert opinion.<sup>55</sup> In particular, it explains how the trends listed in the previous section affect the most relevant functional areas for conventional maneuver units. Those functional areas are mission command, the use (or nonuse) of proxies, technology (in the context of information, electronic, and cyber domains), underground warfare, and urban terrain. Each threat assessment will begin with an analysis of the strategic culture of an actor. Strategic culture refers to a nation's "traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behavior, habits, symbols, achievements, and particular ways of adapting to the environment and solving problems with respect to the threat or use of force."<sup>56</sup> As Brig. Gen. (ret.) Russ Howard describes, there is debate over the usefulness of the term *strategic culture* as an analytic tool; some argue that it is predictive, while others propose that its framework is indecisive.<sup>57</sup> At a minimum, it offers some suggestions as to how a state might approach future conflict, and in this context, one involving its army's conventional units.

Each assessment will then highlight the core interests of the actor and how those underwrite their foreign policy objectives. Then the assessment will examine recent trends in how the given adversary achieves its strategic goals. Finally, we will imagine a scenario that demonstrates the employment of those key strategies against US troops. Of note, due to classification concerns, these scenarios draw from unclassified material, are general in nature, and highlight issues that organizational leaders in maneuver brigades should be most

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<sup>55</sup> Andrew W. Marshall, "The Origins of Net Assessment," introduction to *Net Assessment and Military Strategy: Retrospective and Prospective Essays*, ed. Thomas G. Mahnken (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2020), 1–10; James G. Roche and Thomas G. Mahnken, "What Is Net Assessment," in *Net Assessment and Military Strategy: Retrospective and Prospective Essays*, ed. Thomas G. Mahnken (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2020): 11–26.

<sup>56</sup> Ken Booth, "The Concept of Strategic Culture Affirmed," in *Strategic Power: USA/USSR*, ed. Carl G. Jacobsen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), 121.

<sup>57</sup> Russell D. Howard, *Strategic Culture*, Joint Special Operation University Report 13-8 (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: JSOU Press, 2013), 5. Available at <http://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo81102>.

concerned about. This section will conclude with a review of the common asymmetries and issues between the United States, China, and Russia.

### China

#### *Strategic Culture*

According to a recent study on strategic culture by the Joint Special Operations University, “China’s long history, innovative society, and dominance in the region reinforce its aspirations to be a great power and its desire for prominent status.”<sup>58</sup> Several additional traits describe how it pursues these goals. First, its autocratic regime—combined with a society that historically is patriarchal, hierarchical, and collective—has created a preference for the status quo.<sup>59</sup> It also enables the government to push society in certain directions. For example, as in the case of technology development, the government is able to “mobilize epic resources” quickly.<sup>60</sup> People are generally willing to sacrifice a little privacy for the greater good. This enables the development of incredible technology that may have dual purposes.<sup>61</sup>

Second, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) usually allies with any side in a conflict that is fighting the most powerful actor, in order to sustain its own quest for hegemony. This act of “leaning to one side”<sup>62</sup> could be seen in their support to North Koreans and the North Vietnamese against the United States during the conflicts of the 1950s and 1960s. However, this tendency suggests that alliances are temporary and transactional in nature.

Third, the Chinese military emphasizes the ideas of Confucius and Sun Tzu as they relate to military stratagem and indirect approaches to warfare. In more tangible terms, the CCP takes a long-term approach to strategy. For example, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which got its start from Xi Jinping, is designed to support China’s economic rise and expand the power of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) well beyond its borders.<sup>63</sup> It enables the

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<sup>58</sup> Howard, *Strategic Culture*, 24.

<sup>59</sup> Howard, *Strategic Culture*, 23–25.

<sup>60</sup> Kai-Fu Lee, *AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley, and the New World Order* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 18.

<sup>61</sup> Lee, *AI Superpowers*, 17.

<sup>62</sup> Russell D. Howard, “Great Power Competition: A Special Operations Perspective” (lecture, Joint Special Operations University online video conference, May 12–14, 2020).

<sup>63</sup> Howard, “Great Power Competition.”

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consolidation of power through a coercion model and enabling of power-projection capabilities.<sup>64</sup> The People's Liberation Army (PLA) emphasizes the utilization of deception and surprise.<sup>65</sup> The military often camouflages offense as defense or preemption. Additionally, in line with the thinking of Sun Tzu, the PLA believe it is better to convince the United States not to fight at all, rather than conduct a direct operation against US forces. This philosophy laid the foundation for the development of its A2/AD (antiaccess/area denial) systems and strategies that continue to frustrate US capabilities.

### *Core Interests and Objectives*

The core interests of the CCP are to deter and resist aggression; oppose and contain Taiwan independence; crack down on separatist movements; and safeguard political security, state sovereignty, and economic development.<sup>66</sup> First and foremost, the government of the PRC cares most about maintenance of the CCP. Although the party comprises only 6 percent of the population, it holds a monopoly on violence within its borders. The CCP at the national level controls the appointments of military, public, judiciary, and security officials. It also heavily controls many business, technology, and media industries. The CCP vigorously rejects the multiparty system, a nod to the significance of what it sees as domestic concerns in Taiwan and Hong Kong.<sup>67</sup>

Second, state sovereignty and territorial integrity is paramount. The CCP's notion of state sovereignty generally includes what it believes is its right to assert itself in territory near its borders, specifically in the East and South China Sea. China also wants to maintain territorial integrity from what it views as its main aggressors: Russia, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, India, and the United States.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Roberts, *Future Conflict Operating Environment Out to 2030*, 21–22.

<sup>65</sup> Howard, *Strategic Culture*, 23–25.

<sup>66</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win*, (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2019), 7, 10–13, [https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China\\_Military\\_Power\\_FINAL\\_5MB\\_20190103.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_5MB_20190103.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> Jacqueline Newmyer Deal, "China's Approach to Strategy and Long-Term Competition," in *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice*, ed. Thomas G. Mahnken (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 149.

<sup>68</sup> Newmyer Deal, "China's Approach to Strategy and Long-Term Competition," 150.

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Finally, China seeks to establish safeguards for its own economic development. These include using force where necessary to protect its investments and infrastructure. It also means complementing its physical infrastructure investments with technology and digital infrastructure. Figure 4 shows the proliferation of the digital infrastructure, which includes cables, server farms, and security-oriented facial-recognition technology.<sup>69</sup>

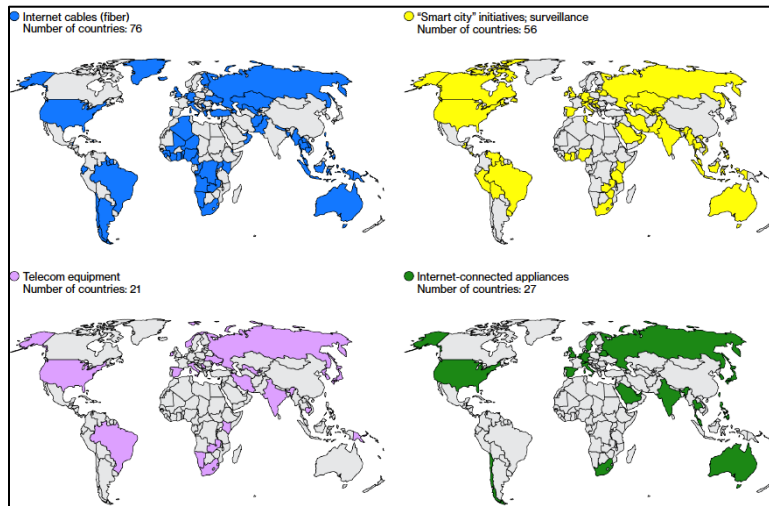


Figure 4. China's Digital Infrastructure Investments<sup>70</sup>

These core interests form the basis for their foreign policy objectives. Some serve as very specific benchmarks for the CCP's extraterritorial strategies. These policy objectives—given their link to physical territory—make plain the regions in which the PLA and Chinese proxies are likeliest to persistently invest, provoke, and even be willing use force. First, the CCP seeks unification with Taiwan. Second, the CCP seeks total sovereignty in the South China Sea. Third, they seek to reclaim disputed territory with India (the Arunachal Pradesh region), Japan (the Diaoyutai, Senkaku, and Ryukyu Islands), and Russia (in outer Mongolia and the Argun and Amura River area).<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 12–13.

<sup>70</sup> Sheridan Prasso, "China's Belt and Road Is Looking More Like the Iron Curtain," Bloomberg, January 10, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-01-10/china-s-digital-silk-road-is-looking-more-like-an-iron-curtain>.

<sup>71</sup> Howard, "Great Power Competition."

### *Trends Relevant to China in Contemporary Competition and Future Conflict*

The term *People's Liberation Army* is itself broad, in that it includes the army (ground forces), navy, air force, rocket forces, strategic support force, and joint logistics forces. Chinese ground forces include the army, marine organizations, People's Armed Police (PAP), and some militias.<sup>72</sup> It is the world's largest standing ground force, with over 915,000 active-duty personnel. Its missions are to respond to crises, safeguard China's territory and overseas interests, participate in security cooperation, maintain political security, and conduct rescue and disaster relief. The PLA remains the ultimate guarantor of the CCP.<sup>73</sup> Its mandated core competencies are maneuver warfare, information warfare, and coordination of fires.

The PLA ground forces are conducting modernization in support of their "Forward Edge Defense Concept."<sup>74</sup> This concept increases the sphere of influence beyond the immediate borders of the PRC, to account for its extraterritorial objectives. It is mainly focused on Taiwan and regional hegemony. The PLA continues to train for local, short, and middle- to high-intensity conflict on China's periphery. The size of that periphery expands with the increasing ranges of their ballistic missiles. Given their current naval and airpower projection capabilities, this is likely no farther than one thousand miles beyond Chinese borders.<sup>75</sup>

PLA forces increasingly prepare for future conflict under "informatized" conditions.<sup>76</sup> PLA leadership closely study the West, and particularly the United States.<sup>77</sup> They have studied the theory surrounding the revolution in military affairs (RMA) demonstrated in the First Gulf War and are keen to be on the forefront of the next RMA. They believe that modern warfare requires using "all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military or non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one's interests."<sup>78</sup> Economic warfare, information warfare, cyber warfare, proxy wars, terrorism, and maneuver warfare all work in concert. Within this context, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) estimates the core

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<sup>72</sup> Dennis J. Blasko, *Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2.

<sup>73</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 3–5.

<sup>74</sup> Harmon, interview.

<sup>75</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 16.

<sup>76</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 24.

<sup>77</sup> Mahnken, "Thinking about Competitive Strategies," 6.

<sup>78</sup> Quiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Shadow Lawn Press, 2017), 1.



strengths of the PLA to be long-range fires, information warfare, and nuclear capabilities. Furthermore, it acknowledges the PLA's ever-improving power-projection capabilities and SOF. The DIA assesses that the PLA will suffer from their rigid command structure, joint inexperience, and logistical woes in future conflict.<sup>79</sup>

Structural changes made in 2016 turned the PLA into a smaller force with five joint commands all designed to project power in a strategic direction. Like most powerful state actors, the PLA has a full complement of conscripted, conventional light, mechanized, and motorized infantry, as well as armor, artillery, and aviation units. It is rapidly integrating special operations, electronic warfare, and information-operations units into its joint structures. Additionally, the PAP increasingly conducts operations in concert with conventional PLA maneuver organizations. Furthermore, militia organizations—over 60 percent of whom have civilian jobs in engineering, chemical manufacturing, or communications—play key roles in the mobilization of active units as they prepare to move outside China's borders.<sup>80</sup>

Chinese ground forces are increasingly expeditionary. First, the PLA participate in overseas operations. While the list is lengthy, a few examples include peacekeeping operations across the Middle East and Africa, antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, and search-and-rescue operations across the Indo-Pacific. Second, they increasingly conduct operations with other nations not typically aligned with the United States. Many of the exercises are tied directly to the Taiwan contingency and amphibious operations.<sup>81</sup>

### *Mission Command*

The PLA is modernizing its command-and-control systems for operations beyond its borders. Prior to recent reform efforts, the PLA had no joint commands, no operations centers, no joint staff, and no technology to facilitate rapid decision-making. The PLA is now rapidly overhauling its command-and-control systems and structures to support “strategically

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<sup>79</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 7.

<sup>80</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 24–27.

<sup>81</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 63.

defensive but operationally offensive”<sup>82</sup> operations. This is evident in several key areas. First, of course, is the improvement of intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and communications platforms through improved technology, like AI.

Second, structural change is occurring from the top down. In 2016 the PLA created a joint staff reminiscent of a Western military and established five theaters, each with their own areas of responsibility that extend beyond Chinese borders. These commands continually rehearse joint operations as well as mobilization and logistical actions that facilitate the transition from competition to conflict.<sup>83</sup> For example, the southern theater is arrayed to support contingencies throughout Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and the Indo-Pacific.

Third, ground forces seek ways to integrate what they believe are the future components of modern warfare. Any theater command involved in a given contingency will heavily integrate PLA forces, the PAP, militia, and the other arms of its strategic support or rocket forces into the fight. Interestingly, political cadres continue to exist at each echelon and influence every decision. Although this “decision making by committee” may maximize input, it also creates implicit stovepiping between party leaders.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, it likely prevents forthrightness between military leadership and civilian leadership.<sup>85</sup>

### *Hybrid and Proxy Warfare*

Chinese use of hybrid tactics is increasing. China’s own unrestrictive way of war relies heavily on proxy methodology and the use of ground forces with increasingly looser ties to the state. Those actors often receive significant financial and technological aid and, in some cases, benefit from PLA advisors who are directly involved to protect Chinese interests. For example, in the same way China’s ancient tribute system forced foreigners seeking business to support policy objectives, the BRI creates infrastructure in developing countries through financial entrapment that fundamentally increases the mobility and power projection of PLA forces.

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<sup>82</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 23.

<sup>83</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 102.

<sup>84</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 14–16.

<sup>85</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 19.

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That infrastructure ranges from airports and seaports to digital infrastructure.<sup>86</sup> In addition, China is increasingly exporting arms to nonaligned actors, which helps the PLA break out of the perceived Western encirclement by building relationships with other actors.<sup>87</sup> For example, as figure 5 shows, Hezbollah, Iran, Pakistan, and several African states currently possess Chinese-made air defense and missile systems. These arms sales, totaling \$20 billion in just four years, typically accompany other BRI projects and have few strings attached.

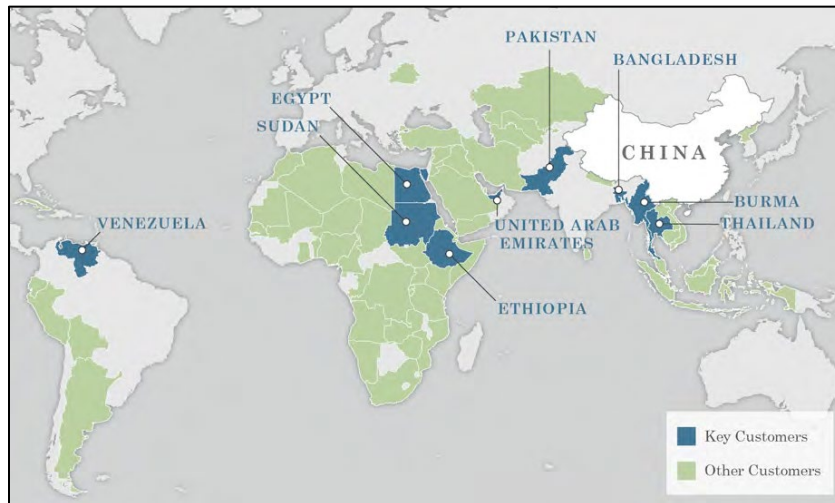


Figure 5. Recipients of Chinese Arms, 2002–17<sup>88</sup>

Finally, new CCP policy enables the use of non-PLA personnel to achieve its objectives beyond Chinese borders.<sup>89</sup> Examples include the use of partnered forces, participation in peacekeeping operations, and relying on private companies—especially to enhance its cyber capabilities and logistical networks; even the supposedly domestically oriented PAP and People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia operate in border regions and disputed territory.<sup>90</sup>

### Technology

*Informatized warfare* refers to China’s use of information, electronic, and cyber warfare. The Defense Intelligence Agency defines it as the “process of acquiring, transmitting,

<sup>86</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 103–5.

<sup>87</sup> Harmon, interview.

<sup>88</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 107.

<sup>89</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 4.

<sup>90</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 19, 46, 50, 79, 105.

processing, and using information to conduct joint military operations across [all domains].”<sup>91</sup> While it has implications for PLA strategy and tactics, the CCP has also applied resources to the development of new technologies that will particularly impact US forces where those systems proliferate.<sup>92</sup> Even within the information space, for example, populations living in close proximity to maneuver units will be influenced by PLA operations.<sup>93</sup> The proliferation of Chinese digital technology provides troves of data on civilians and military forces that will likely prove useful to PLA ground forces and proxies.

The PLA has invested heavily in offensive and defensive cyber capability. The West is now well acquainted with Chinese cyberattacks and theft, ranging from breaches at the US Office of Personnel and NASA to various research universities and defense contractors. In 2015 the PLA established the Strategic Support Force to coordinate previously dispersed cyber capabilities. That organization has individuals located at all echelons.<sup>94</sup> Unit 61398 of the PLA, for example, has stolen hundreds of terabytes of data about military personnel and seeks to disrupt US targets, communications networks, and computer systems.<sup>95</sup> This organization also is meant to assist conventional PLA units with denial and deception efforts.<sup>96</sup>

Perhaps it is the PLA’s efforts across the electromagnetic spectrum that has the most tangible impact. At the tactical level, the PLA is focused exclusively on detection of radio emissions in frequencies used by US units at the small-unit level. Additionally, the PLA developed acoustic and optical sensors that can quickly identify and track equipment currently in use by the West. Electronic-warfare battalions—individuals with easily procured handheld devices—are embedded with PLA units to conduct jamming of US radios and to interfere with other digital systems.<sup>97</sup> Finally, the PLA developed the capability to physically target US satellites critical to GPS systems. By targeting US satellites, the PLA can drastically interfere with the thousands of devices that enable land navigation, the delivery of guided munitions,

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<sup>91</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 24.

<sup>92</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 41, 46.

<sup>93</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 8.

<sup>94</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 97.

<sup>95</sup> Pope, *Interagency Performance in Counterterrorism Operations*, 16.

<sup>96</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 46.

<sup>97</sup> James Mulvenon, “LOCUST GHOST: PRC Views of US SOF Capabilities; Great Power Competition: A Special Operations Perspective” (lecture, Joint Special Operations University online video conference, May 14, 2020).

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and the encryption of communications within a US brigade.<sup>98</sup> This technology will impact not only maneuver organizations on the front line but anything facilitating the projection of combat power. Most importantly, much of the technology can be transferred to anyone operating against Western forces.

### *Underground Warfare and Urban Terrain*

Use of the underground is ongoing and use of urban terrain is inevitable. Like most state actors, China's use of deeply buried facilities is to protect command-and-control infrastructure and strategic assets.<sup>99</sup> Conventional leaders in the US military should note several other trends. First, many of the world's megacities are in eastern Asia. As such, given the PRC's recent trend toward expeditionary operations and willingness to influence populations in so-called historic Chinese territory, any Western force should not expect the PLA to simply avoid entering a large urban area if its interests require it to do so.

Second, the many technologies discussed in the information, cyber, and electronic domains have application in urban centers. For example, much of the digital infrastructure and AI-enabled unmanned aerial vehicles are designed to operate in urban areas. Furthermore, both China and other actors supported by China will likely believe the best defense against Western targeting will be to place much of their high-value systems underground or in urban terrain.<sup>100</sup>

### ***A Crisis Scenario on the Korean Peninsula and Emerging Asymmetries***

Future conflict will likely occur on China's periphery, in a state directly combating its expansionist policies or pushing back against the BRI.<sup>101</sup> For example, the PRC imports 60 percent of its oil and raw materials. It needs stability in the developing world to sustain its economy as much as any great power.<sup>102</sup> The United States should consider areas in which US interests are in conflict with those of the PRC or the possibility of skirmishes over key

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<sup>98</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 40, 43.

<sup>99</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 50.

<sup>100</sup> Richmond-Barak, *Underground Warfare*, 12.

<sup>101</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 10.

<sup>102</sup> Ellis, Black, and Nobles, "Thinking Dangerously," 116.

infrastructure or a crisis that involves a PRC redline. For example, if Taiwan declares total independence from the PRC as the younger generation shifts away from its Chinese ties or if the North Korean regime collapses, it is likely that the PLA will conduct a so-called “strategically defensive” preemptive action that may invoke a US response.<sup>103</sup> This report will focus on the latter of the two named scenarios, not because it is more or less likely than the former, but because the Army specifically has a larger investment in manpower and resources on the Korean Peninsula.

This scenario highlights many of the asymmetries between the US and Chinese forces. First, China holds the advantage during the mobilization period because its forces and their proxies are in close geographical proximity to many likely conflicts. Imagine for a moment that the North Korean regime collapses. In order to prevent a mass exodus of North Korean refugees moving north into China and the loss of key nuclear capabilities and to hide years of material support, the PLA would move south to the Taedong River and Pyongyang. A short press release would be distributed stating that the CCP has successfully reclaimed a historic Chinese territory. Indian leadership—assuming that China has initiated a series of land grabs and increasingly worried by persistent PLA support to Chinese proxies in Burma, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—could mobilize troops all along their northeastern borders.<sup>104</sup> US troops in South Korea and Japan would be placed on high alert. Within the continental United States, combat brigades would receive the warning order to mobilize for a deployment to the Indo-Pacific as political leaders weigh their options. For their part, the PLA would place all organizations in the western and northern theater commands on high alert. The PLA would rapidly mobilize the 16th and 39th Army Groups out of the northern theater command, with a total of eight infantry brigades, two armor brigades, an aviation brigade, three artillery and air defense brigades, and two special operations brigades. Four PAP brigades would mobilize to secure key infrastructure and support other ground forces.<sup>105</sup> PLA Strategic Support Forces

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<sup>103</sup> Howard, “Great Power Competition.”

<sup>104</sup> Geoffrey Garrett, “What US-China ‘Proxy Wars’ Mean for Asia’s Balancing Act,” *Wharton Magazine*, April 2, 2018, <https://magazine.wharton.upenn.edu/digital/what-u-s-china-proxy-wars-mean-for-asias-balancing-act/>.

<sup>105</sup> Peter Wood, “Strategic Assessment of China’s Northern Command,” Jamestown Foundation, May 15, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/strategic-assessment-chinas-northern-theater-command/>.

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would increase effects in the information, cyber, and electronic-magnetic space to delay the Western response long enough to avoid direct conflict.

Second, China holds the advantage in information and cyberspace. Its capabilities across the electromagnetic spectrum may be decisive, at least initially. Before US brigades even arrive on the battlefield, US military service members may find themselves facing unexpected challenges. Their human resources and pay systems will be inhibited by cyberattack. In addition to the stress associated with a deployment, family members will struggle under the burden of targeted power outages and denial-of-service attacks against their financial and social media accounts. For those units that successfully leave home station, soldiers may find that their equipment lags well behind personnel movement. Third-party civilian contractors that support mobilization efforts with ships, trains, and aircraft will find their digital systems under attack and their navigation systems malfunctioning after US GPS satellites are targeted through various means. Key logistical infrastructure stretching across the Pacific and Southeast Asia will be unavailable for US troops, as the PRC uses coercive means to ensure that foreign governments deny access to warehouses, ports, and railheads.<sup>106</sup>

However, the United States will, over the long run, hold the advantage in leadership and mission command. Assume that conventional maneuver units are ordered out of South Korea to the north in order to prevent the spillover of civil unrest and a mass migration to the south and to seize strategic weapons infrastructure. Seeking to avoid a direct fight with US troops, the PLA would send lesser numbers of conventional PLA units, SOF, PAP, and cooperative North Korean troops to seize nuclear infrastructure south of Pyongyang. Chinese forces, initially mobilizing rapidly through the direction of the CCP and a political cadre, would face challenges as friction occurred among state and non-state proxies and a plethora of irregular organizations unaccustomed to large joint operations.<sup>107</sup>

Tangentially, US troops would hold the advantage in the close fight. In areas where they retain freedom of maneuver and the terrain is less complex, Army brigades would perform well. In situations facing poorly equipped proxies, US maneuver units would win in tactical

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<sup>106</sup> Mulvenon, "LOCUST GHOST."

<sup>107</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 192–93.



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situations while taking casualties. However, in urban or subterranean situations, both US and PLA troops would find themselves challenged by the complexity of the operating environment and limitations inherent to population-centric warfare. As a result, both sides would find themselves integrating regular and irregular methods of warfare to find success.<sup>108</sup>

At least initially, the PLA would hold the advantage in fires and effects. Their rocket forces and tube artillery, in spite of their mixture of legacy and modern equipment, would be able to inflict casualties on US forces.<sup>109</sup> AI-enabled swarms of unmanned aircraft systems (UASs) and unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs) would target US troops during movement and maneuver in contested areas. Additionally, PLA electronic-warfare battalions, embedded at the tactical level, would directly target the GPS-enabled communication and navigation systems critical to the functioning of a brigade. Airborne and air assault operations would be limited on both sides, as the PLA possess limited capabilities and the US is challenged by air defense systems.<sup>110</sup> Over time, US brigades would target critical PLA digital and communications infrastructure and integration nodes. Higher echelons would seek to target and influence the local population and critical transportation infrastructure through information and cyber operations, respectively.<sup>111</sup> Eventually, after both sides had felt the effects of casualties in a small time period, leaders would seek de-escalation to avoid a nuclear standoff. As world opinion, and possibly even Chinese public opinion, turns against the CCP, the PLA would look for a resolution that allows it to keep its newly gained terrain.

This scenario highlights that, in the case of China, any combat operations would likely be characterized by the use of partners and proxies in addition to CF, contested mobilization, long-range movement and maneuver, and continually frustrated mission command. Chinese strengths suggest that their efforts would focus on preventing the United States from arriving in theater and inhibiting US efforts to maneuver after arrival.

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<sup>108</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 116.

<sup>109</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 58–62.

<sup>110</sup> Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 194–96.

<sup>111</sup> Lee, *AI Superpowers*, 54–55.

### Russia

#### *Strategic Culture*

Russia is uniquely shaped by its Soviet history and the rise of a kleptocratic system in the 1990s. In particular, Vladimir Putin's role is seminal.<sup>112</sup> Dr. Roger Kanet describes Russian strategic culture as heavily influenced by the concept of class struggle that has its roots in communist ideology. There were side effects to this ideology. For example, Stalin and his successors conducted multiple purges of talented leaders, suppressed notions of individuality that might have one day created intellectual capital and economic strength, and perpetuated a belief in a sphere of influence that dominated smaller nations on the Russian periphery. Fundamentally, the dominance of this ideology through the Cold War formed an instinctive hostility toward Western actors. Emerging leaders in various centers of power received their upbringing in the Soviet system. As such, they brought with them long-standing perceptions and opinions about the West.<sup>113</sup>

This historical insecurity has a profound impact on its foreign policy. State leaders are aware of the ramifications of its economic weakness for potential domestic uprisings and turmoil. Leaders are very aware of any threat to survival of their system of government. Many fear revolt and regime change. They rely heavily on hard power to ensure they maintain their grip on power.<sup>114</sup>

Russian perceptions of Western actions after the fall of the Iron Curtain also contributed to feelings of insecurity and a natural hostility. US interventions in the Balkans, NATO expansion, and a perceived lack of sufficient aid led Vladimir Putin to conclude, once he became president, that cooperation with the West was highly unlikely and even impossible. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the rise of the European Union (EU), and Western support for

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<sup>112</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2017), 9, <https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Russia%20Military%20Power%20Report%202017.pdf>.

<sup>113</sup> Roger E. Kanet, "Russian Strategic Culture, Domestic Politics and Cold War 2.0," *European Politics and Society* 20, no. 2 (2019): 192–93.

<sup>114</sup> Igor Sutyagin and Justin Bronk, *Russia's New Ground Forces: Capabilities, Limitations and Implications for International Security* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017), 5.

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the so-called “color revolutions” reinforced this perspective. In fairness, many Western leaders were equally hostile to Russian interests based on their own experiences during the Cold War. Finally, as the EU gained economic momentum, Russia recognized that the Western orientation of post-Soviet states could take away from the long-term Russian market share for commodities.<sup>115</sup>

These three components of strategic culture led Russian leadership to rely heavily on their military and security apparatus to achieve policy objectives. The Russian military plays the greatest role of any state institution. According to Professor Christopher Miller, Russian borders were always historically insecure going back to the time of the Vikings. Both locals and state leaders relied on the military for protection from raids or invasion. In the modern era, relations with the United States have been the key challenge for Russia since the end of World War 2. The Soviet Union, followed by the Russian state, was “always bargaining from a position of relative weakness by every metric except its military.”<sup>116</sup> For that reason, the military became the tool of choice in foreign policy. However, as the US and Chinese economies surged, Russia recognizes that non kinetic tools are increasingly necessary given the limits of its own hard power. Yet given its lack of soft-power influence around the world, many of these non kinetic tools remain in the hands of the military.<sup>117</sup>

### *Core Interests and Objectives*

The core interests of Russia, according to its own 2015 National Security Strategy, are to strengthen the country’s defense, ensure domestic stability, cement Russia’s standing as a great power, and improve the economy and standard of living.<sup>118</sup>

From the Russian perspective, the main threats to national defense are the United States and NATO. Beginning with his speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference and extending through successive National Security Strategies, Putin has stated unequivocally that he believes that the West is pursuing containment policies through a military buildup and placement of precision nonnuclear capabilities on Russia’s western periphery. Official

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<sup>115</sup> Kanet, “Russian Strategic Culture, Domestic Politics and Cold War 2.0,” 192–93.

<sup>116</sup> Christopher Miller, telephone interview with the author, June 12, 2020.

<sup>117</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia’s New Ground Forces*, 10.

<sup>118</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 16.

documents also address the threat posed by Islamic violent extremist organizations and terrorism from the Central Asian states.<sup>119</sup> He strongly supports the idea that Russia should be capable of projecting power to defend its interests as they arise outside its borders.<sup>120</sup> As such, Putin's government puts great effort into supporting its defense initiatives. However, given its lesser economic might and weaker diplomatic standing, Russia has to spend a lot to get a little. Historical Russian military spending hovers around 15 percent of the state's GDP. In recent years, that number has shrunk to a more realistic, albeit still expensive relative to Western counterparts' spending, 4.5 percent.<sup>121</sup>

Second, Russia believes in the maintenance of the regime. As stated again in his 2007 speech, Putin genuinely believes that the United States is pursuing regime change in Russia.<sup>122</sup> Russia acknowledges the economic and cultural component to the survival of the regime. Official documents highlight the importance of economic growth, modern healthcare and education, preservation of historic ethnic Russian culture, and progressive use of natural resources as intimately connected to regime stability.<sup>123</sup>

Finally, Putin is intent on reviving Russia as a great power. Eugene Rumer writes that their grand strategy is to create "a multipolar world, with Russia as one of its poles."<sup>124</sup> Putin's ideal world order is based on "state sovereignty and non-interference, primacy of the UN, and a balance of power system."<sup>125</sup> In his mind, Russia deserves to be consulted on all major issues as a great power.<sup>126</sup> Professor Christopher Miller summarizes it simply: "It's an issue of status."<sup>127</sup>

Specific foreign policy objectives are less clear than with respect to the PRC. Many refer to the "near abroad" when seeking to predict physical locations one may find elements of the

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<sup>119</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 16.

<sup>120</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 15.

<sup>121</sup> Miller, interview.

<sup>122</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 16.

<sup>123</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 17.

<sup>124</sup> Eugene Rumer, "Russian Strategic Objectives: It's about the State," in *Current Russia Military Affairs: Assessing and Countering Russian Strategy, Operational Planning, and Modernization*, ed. John R. Deni (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2018), 3.

<sup>125</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 14–15.

<sup>126</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia's New Ground Forces*, 2.

<sup>127</sup> Miller, interview.

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Russian military pursuing or protecting state interests. The term refers to the region in which the Soviet Union used to be the dominant player on the western and southern periphery of present-day Russia. In most locations, Russia believes that conflict will be less likely<sup>128</sup> as the populations are either ethnic Russian or Slav.<sup>129</sup> Not surprisingly, those locations are the sensitive points for the Russian government as they seek to maintain access to resources and warm water ports or to prevent further NATO expansion and internal instability. It includes the Crimea, Ukraine, the area around Kaliningrad,<sup>130</sup> Georgia, Armenia, and Kazakhstan. Of note, in the Caucasus region and on its southern border, Russia is particularly concerned by violent extremism and historically conducts counterinsurgency operations.<sup>131</sup>

### *Trends Relevant to Russia in Contemporary Competition and Future Conflict*

Russian ground forces officially include ground troops, airborne troops, naval infantry (a marine equivalent), coastal troops, the national guard, and missile artillery. These are similar in size to the United States' service branches, though this does not include the massive state internal security apparatus (Internal Affairs or Border Security, for example). There are approximately 350,000 ground troops, 200,000 national guard, and a growing airborne contingent. The primary missions of the ground troops—which include all flavors of motorized, mechanized, and armored units—include forcible entry and holding and seizing territory. Unlike the PLA, the ground forces do not directly serve any political party.<sup>132</sup>

In 2008, following a poor performance in the Russo-Georgian War, military leaders recognized the need for modernization and reform. Civilian and military leaders reprioritized military modernization as critical to future Russian strength. In 2017 the DIA listed Russia's core capabilities as its legacy strategic nuclear and CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear) arsenals and associated hardened underground structures; its technological capabilities across the information, cyber, and electromagnetic spaces; and its A2/AD

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<sup>128</sup> Shultz, "Great Power Competition."

<sup>129</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 7; Miller, interview.

<sup>130</sup> Miller, interview.

<sup>131</sup> Miller, interview.

<sup>132</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 50.

systems.<sup>133</sup> Russia acknowledges the impact of PGMs and seeks to ensure that its forces are smaller, mobile, and survivable.<sup>134</sup>

Russian military thinkers are keenly aware of their scarcity of resources. As such, this modernized force relies on hybrid tactics to reduce costs.<sup>135</sup> Those tactics support a strategy of threshold warfare that is designed to use information warfare, diplomacy, active measures, and a combination of conventional and irregular forces to “sow doubt in the minds of key [Western] decision makers.”<sup>136</sup> What the United States coined *new generation warfare* tends to focus in areas where Western alliances and international legal ramifications are less clear for victims and respondents.<sup>137</sup> Reforms also reduce duplications in personnel functions, the modernization of weaponry, mobility of units, and updating tactics.<sup>138</sup>

It is no secret that Russian forces, under Putin’s direction, have grown more hostile to Western actors in the region. Russia withdrew from the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Force in Europe, which encouraged information sharing and unit inspections. They no longer notify the West of snap exercises or near-border operations that may be indicative of an actual cross-border incursion targeted at another state actor.<sup>139</sup> For example, as occurred in the Ukrainian conflict, Russian ground forces may temporarily restructure a unit into a group of new tactical organizations that fall below the nine thousand-man notification threshold enshrined in the Vienna Document on Confidence and Security-Building Measures.<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, Russia has taken tangible action to seize terrain in recent years. Some of these actions occur in areas loosely tied to Russia, such as Syria, Latin America, or Africa.<sup>141</sup> Most well-known is its recent operations in eastern Europe, when it seized Ukrainian terrain, using misinformation, cyber and electronic warfare, and highly integrated conventional and unconventional forces.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 1.

<sup>134</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 34.

<sup>135</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 18–20.

<sup>136</sup> Roberts, *Future Conflict Operating Environment Out to 2030*, 9.

<sup>137</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia’s New Ground Forces*, 2.

<sup>138</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia’s New Ground Forces*, 3.

<sup>139</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia’s New Ground Forces*, 12.

<sup>140</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia’s New Ground Forces*, 14–15.

<sup>141</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 19.

<sup>142</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 7.

Beehner and Collins codify the emerging pattern that appears in contemporary conflicts involving Russia. They describe this “playbook” in five phases. First, there is a Russian provocation that violates some international norm. The clear example here is the presence of Russian forces and proxies on the ground in Crimea and Ukraine.<sup>143</sup> Second, there is clear effort at political subterfuge and a total denial of involvement. This enables Russia to avoid any Article 5 response from NATO.<sup>144</sup> Third, Russia escalates its non kinetic information and cyber operations to continue to challenge opposing forces, their governments, and other state actors that may otherwise seek to intervene.<sup>145</sup> All three may occur across various mediums, to include state media or language-specific channels in the West, or at key moments (such as election seasons).<sup>146</sup> Fourth, troops seize terrain either through intimidation or kinetic escalation. The weapon of choice for this phase is irregular or proxy forces that offer Russia plausible deniability. This often occurs in regions with key infrastructure—such as in Crimea—or in which locals may support the cause (as with separatist forces in Eastern Ukraine). Those forces are heavily supported with tactical enablers such as ground artillery and air support. CF will intervene if the proxy force is at risk of failing to achieve the main political objective. Finally, Russia will famously “freeze” the conflict by seeking to broker a peace deal or threatening further escalation.<sup>147</sup>

It should be noted that many of these tactics are fairly overt. Russian ground forces actively rehearse this type of operation with their annual Zapad exercises. In these scenarios, lightly equipped border incursions are supported by information, cyber, and electronic-warfare operations, followed by massive combined arms attacks. Often, conventional operations are jointly rehearsed with members of the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), expeditionary Spetsnaz units, and cyber units.<sup>148</sup> Infantry and armor units rehearse mobilization of personnel with light equipment to rapidly integrate into these wartime

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<sup>143</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 26.

<sup>144</sup> Ellis, Black, and Nobles, “Thinking Dangerously,” 117.

<sup>145</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 26.

<sup>146</sup> Shultz, “Great Power Competition.”

<sup>147</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia’s New Ground Forces*, 11.

<sup>148</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 22.



scenarios. Although the rehearsal of joint operations is certainly nothing new, the point is that they actively rehearse their playbook.<sup>149</sup>

### *Mission Command*

Russia is reshaping mission-command systems for flexibility in expeditionary conflict. Like China, the Russians paid close attention to the US military during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Unlike China, however, Russia gained combat experience. The performance of their ground forces, by their own admission, especially in Georgia and even in Ukraine and Crimea, has been imperfect.<sup>150</sup> Through the subsequent New Look reforms, leaders focused on modernization of equipment, professionalization, and movement to an expeditionary model relevant for both small wars and great power competition.<sup>151</sup> This created joint commands that are centralized under Putin in times of crisis. Communications systems have been rebuilt to be redundant, geographically dispersed, and hardened for survivability against NATO precision strikes.<sup>152</sup>

Russia's ground forces revamped their organizational structures for an expeditionary model that could survive and contest NATO forces in a conflict. In the wake of Western sanctions, Putin's government cut 10 percent from every nonmilitary organization across the budget and sent funding to the ground forces.<sup>153</sup> CF transitioned to smaller modular units. Most units transitioned to a flexible brigade structure similar to the US brigade combat team. This organization of Russian forces, which now reported directly to army-level commanders located across theater commands, was ideal for conflicts within the near abroad. For example, figure 6 shows a standard organizational table for a New Look motorized brigade. Note the electronic warfare, air defense, CBRN, and signal companies embedded at the tactical level.<sup>154</sup>

Overall, this has allowed Russia to maintain the Soviet style of ad hoc flexibility. They have retained the highly fluid battalion tactical group structure and are increasingly turning

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<sup>149</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency *Russia Military Power*, 50–57.

<sup>150</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 10–13.

<sup>151</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 12.

<sup>152</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 26.

<sup>153</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia's New Ground Forces*, 84.

<sup>154</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 52–53.

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away from their conscripts and toward longer-service contract soldiers, with some terms exceeding six years. A 2012 Russian mandate required brigades to have at least one entirely volunteer-manned battalion tactical group as a core maneuver element).<sup>155</sup> Additionally, a modern platoon and company can be adjusted in an ad hoc manner to fit a specific mission requirement. For example, one platoon may have two tanks, three infantry fighting vehicles, one fire support vehicle, one command vehicle, one supply vehicle, and one UAS-equipped vehicle. Another platoon in the same company may have a very different composition.<sup>156</sup> Russia also completely restructured its logistical footprint to facilitate offensive operations within its areas of influence. It first eliminated outdoor storage of munitions and consolidated storage facilities by 90 percent. Specifically, the number of mobility and shipment centers shrank from 330 to 24. The excess manpower created by the reduction in overhead is being put into combat units. At these consolidated locations, excess vehicles and combat loads are stored to provide organic units with equipment required for a crisis upon arrival. The army exercises this strategic mobility and rapid equipment fielding regularly.<sup>157</sup>

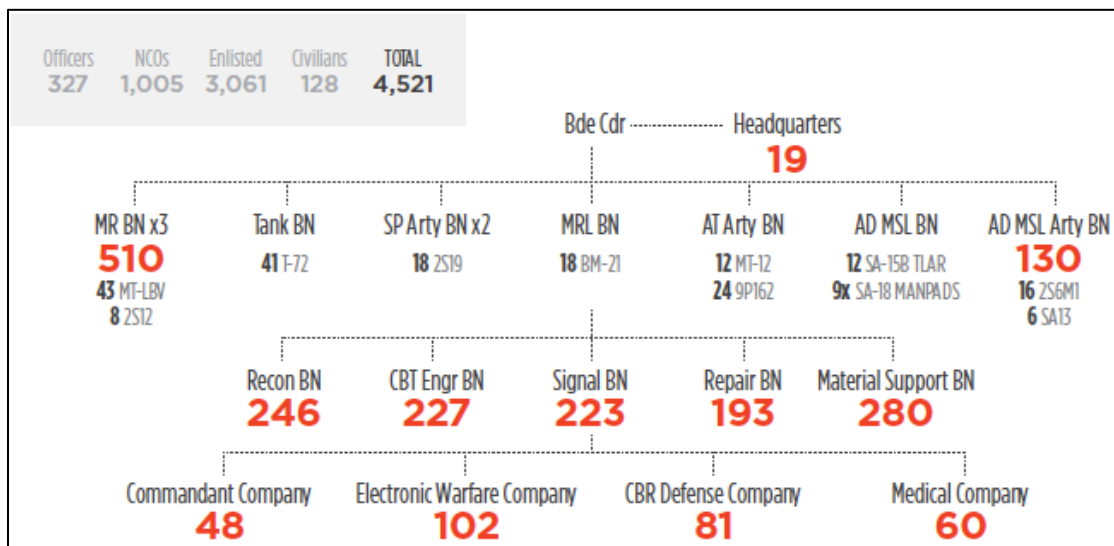


Figure 6. The Russian Motorized Brigade under the New Look<sup>158</sup>

<sup>155</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 55.

<sup>156</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia's New Ground Forces*, 44–46.

<sup>157</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia's New Ground Forces*, 16–22.

<sup>158</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 53.

### *Hybrid and Proxy Warfare*

Russian doctrine sees proxy conflict as an acceptable lever of power. This is evident through arms sales and their increasing reliance on proxies in recent combat operations, including the use of special operations alongside local proxy forces in maneuver operations.<sup>159</sup> Light units—which recently doubled to seventy-two thousand personnel—are particularly adept at hybrid tactics.<sup>160</sup> Each brigade now has a Spetsnaz company to link in with proxy forces and conduct irregular warfare.<sup>161</sup> By their own doctrine, proxy forces can be used to defeat conventional or nonconventional threats using virtually any conventional or irregular tactic, to seize and hold territory, or to conduct active measures and information warfare.<sup>162</sup>

Russia is one of the largest exporters of military aid and weapon systems. It ships weapon systems to seventy nations. The military has connections to seven hundred (and counting) private companies developing new systems and negotiating arms deals that serve Russian interests. This proliferation occurs mainly in the Middle East and North Africa, but it is spreading to Southeast Asia and Latin America. The sale of ballistic missiles, T-90 tanks, and the new S-400 and S-500 air defense system are most notable. They include legacy systems, like infantry fighting vehicles and air defense systems, being sold to NSAs.<sup>163</sup> In short, US forces should expect to see Russian weapon systems wherever a Russian interest exists.

Russian proxies and private military contractors (PMCs) are in significant numbers in combat operations in Syria, Ukraine, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Yemen, Libya, Nigeria, and Venezuela, and they are in training missions across the near abroad. These are not necessarily in small numbers. In Syria, for example, the Slavonic Corps has participated in the conflict overtly since 2013, and the Wagner Group—with two thousand personnel at a time—has done so since 2014. Both organizations participated in the liberations of Palmyra, as well as significant engagements in Deir ez-Zour Province. Roles ranged from forward advisors, trainers, commanders, and even whole maneuver units. These units are equipped with tanks, artillery, and heavy weapons. These organizations are closely tied to official

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<sup>159</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 41–42.

<sup>160</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia's New Ground Forces*, 48–54.

<sup>161</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia's New Ground Forces*, 49–58.

<sup>162</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 28.

<sup>163</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 83–89.

Russian military forces. Private contractors who perform well in combat even receive official military honors.<sup>164</sup>

In the near abroad, Russia can rely on ready-made proxy forces that can draw on their historically ethnic Russian background in support of a given cause. In Ukraine, the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic—both separatist organizations—are supported by their own armed militias, Cossacks, Serbs, Chechen fighters, PMCs, and Russian forces. This creates a healthy mix of organizations confusing enough for Western analysts and Ukrainian forces but well adapted for Russian hybrid-maneuver doctrine.<sup>165</sup> In these locations, Russia used proxy forces and irregular forces to conduct the full range of military operations. Where there existed a gap, such as in border security, heavy armor, indirect fire support, or close air support, conventional troops worked in as needed.<sup>166</sup>

### *Technology*

Russia is using its improving technology to overhaul its CF, strategic weapons, and management of the information space. First, technology is improving the mobility, survivability, and lethality of its CF. Increased costs are pushing the Russian military to seek technical solutions that automate soldier actions and make efficient use of munitions.<sup>167</sup> For example, the new Armata system is a common chassis that supports twenty-eight different types of survivable vehicles that enable small crews to switch between platforms with little logistical or proficiency impact.<sup>168</sup> Many of the Armata platforms, as well as other armored vehicles, like the T-90, are equipped to supply targeting data to tube and rocket artillery units for rapid, overwhelming fires.<sup>169</sup> Additionally, many units that operate on the periphery of the state's A2/AD systems will use a combination of an electronic curtain (visual, infrared, and radar disruption), aerosols, and smoke specifically designed to inhibit Western UASs and

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<sup>164</sup> Asymmetric Warfare Group, *Russian Private Military Companies*, (Ft. Meade, MD: Asymmetric Warfare Group, April 2020), 65–70.

<sup>165</sup> Asymmetric Warfare Group, *Russian Private Military Companies*, 76–79.

<sup>166</sup> Shultz, "Great Power Competition."

<sup>167</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 75.

<sup>168</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia's New Ground Forces*, 44–45.

<sup>169</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia's New Ground Forces*, 58–61.

cruise missiles. All these systems have been tested in recent actions in Ukraine against conventional units and are utilized in yearly joint exercises.<sup>170</sup>

Technology is supporting enhancements in areas in which American CF do not typically train. For example, Russian ground forces may be one of the only state actors to require units to train under nuclear conditions.<sup>171</sup> Additionally, as noted above, electronic-warfare units now exist at the company level and are embedded with PMCs and proxy forces. They facilitate jamming, spoofing, and disruption of GPS-enabled aviation equipment and weapons.<sup>172</sup>

The Russian military and policy makers alike are willing to weaponize information and conduct cyber operations on a scope and scale that few other nations have been as willing to overtly do. In many ways, kinetic action seems to simply support information or cyber operations. In the cyber domain, hacktivist units—such as Cyberberkut or Advanced Persistent Threat 28 (Fancy Bear) and 29 (Cozy Bear)—conducted attacks on critical infrastructure in specific locations that had a global impact. Electrical grids in Ukraine, denial-of-service attacks in Georgia, and the NotPetya attack are all well-known examples.<sup>173</sup>

In 2014, Russia established its national control center to coordinate information and cyber operations at the state level.<sup>174</sup> In a typical crisis involving Russian forces, Putin’s government will use their control over the media to limit sources of information available to the public and to control the domestic narrative. Cyber units, or even bots, will ensure that there is a pro-Kremlin spin on events occurring within close geographical proximity to any forces involved. Additionally, a simultaneous, internationally oriented operation will delay any potential response. Cyber-enabled information operations will also target enemy troops and their families. For example, an information-operations officer will text an enemy soldier something akin to “you are surrounded” while also notifying his family of their son’s death. The family will call the soldier, thereby activating the signal and revealing the location of a particular unit. The operation will then be passed off to a tactical unit supported by

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<sup>170</sup> Foreign Military Studies Office, “The Russian Army’s Smoke Screen Production and Training,” *OE Watch* 10, no. 5 (May 2020): 14.

<sup>171</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia’s New Ground Forces*, 63–68.

<sup>172</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia’s New Ground Forces*, 80–83.

<sup>173</sup> Shultz, “Great Power Competition.”

<sup>174</sup> Shultz, “Great Power Competition.”

intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) or other means. That location may or may not be confirmed by the use of UASs before it is promptly bombarded by artillery.<sup>175</sup>

### *Underground Warfare and Urban Terrain*

Russia does not avoid urban and underground fights. It has demonstrated time and again, be it in Chechnya or throughout the near abroad, that Russia pursues its objectives, even if it means going underground or fighting in urban terrain. During the Second Battle of Donetsk in 2014, for example, Russian forces made good on their earlier mistakes from the Russo-Georgian War. Specialized equipment, such as enhanced optics, armor, and artillery, enabled both conventional and proxy forces as they sought to seize key terrain. Notably, in these recent operations, both ground forces and proxy forces feel unconstrained by the presence of civilian populations and international norms that seek to avoid civilian casualties. As such, forces were far more willing to use overwhelming force if it led to a tactical victory, in spite of the costs.<sup>176</sup>

In addition, Russia and its adversaries make heavy use of trench warfare and tunneling to increase survivability. For example, separatists had little choice but to move into urban terrain and underground as Ukraine marshaled its superior numbers, air support, and artillery to conduct modern siege warfare over a wide geographical area around Donetsk. It is this very situation that eventually led to increased involvement on the part of conventional Russian ground forces.<sup>177</sup> Finally, one cannot forget the vast underground, deeply buried facilities inherited from the time of the Soviet Union. There is a massive network of bunkers, tunnels, and secret subways that are two hundred to three hundred meters deep. In many cases, they are underneath major cities. Their intent is to protect key command structure. In a future conflict, especially on the Russian periphery, there is little reason to assume that Russia would not make use of its existing underground infrastructure.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 33–34.

<sup>176</sup> Asymmetric Warfare Group, *Modern Urban Operations: Lessons Learned from Urban Operations from 1980 to the Present* (Ft. Meade, MD: Asymmetric Warfare Group, April 2016), 31–33.

<sup>177</sup> Michael Kofman, Olesya Tkacheva, Jenny Oberholtzer, Andrew Radin, Brian Nichiporuk, and Katya Migacheva, *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017), 42.

<sup>178</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*, 40–45.

### *A Crisis Scenario in the Vicinity of Kaliningrad and Emerging Asymmetries*

During competition with Russian forces, a US brigade would not only see the effects of Russian information operations in Western media in between trips to the field. They would see Russian-sponsored proxies and contractors, and even the occasional tangential NSA, operating with advanced weaponry supplied by Russia and pushing the boundaries of close proximity. Future conflict with elements of the Russian security apparatus—depending on how you define it—would likely occur in a less populated area of the near abroad. Alternatively, conflict could occur in an area, like Syria, in which US forces operate in close proximity to a state actor or NSA directly supporting a Russian interest and in which the government seeks to contest the United States as the sole superpower. This report will focus on a scenario that could trigger action by state actors participating in collective security arrangements in the Baltic region. This is an important area of focus because it is of greater national interest to Russia than some other regions—like the Middle East or North Africa—in which they currently invest.



Figure 7. The Baltic Sea Region and Kaliningrad<sup>179</sup>

<sup>179</sup> Nicolás de Pedro, Panagiota Manoli, Sergey Sukhankin, and Theodoros Tsakiris, *Facing Russia's Strategic Challenge: Security Developments from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea* (Brussels, Belgium: European Parliament, 2017), [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/603853/EXPO\\_STU\(2017\)603853\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/603853/EXPO_STU(2017)603853_EN.pdf).



In the likeliest scenario, Russian forces may close the Suwalki–Kaliningrad gap under the direction of Putin and under the leadership of the Western Military District’s newly established Operational-Strategic Command West.<sup>180</sup> The Western Military District would build up large forces in disparate elements across the length of the Belarusian-Lithuanian border, under the auspices of a joint exercise. The exercise would include elements of the 20th, 6th, and 1st Armies, the 1st Air Force, and 1st Air Defense command.<sup>181</sup> In addition, hybrid forces may seize terrain between the Belarusian border and Kaliningrad along the Suwalki Gap. Russia would deny the seizure for as long as possible. Two airborne and Spetsnaz brigades would augment forces in Kaliningrad as elements of Russia’s newest division are moved to the region to divert NATO attention elsewhere. The Baltic Fleet may appear to mobilize its coastal troops to threaten or seize islands in the Baltic Sea close to Russian shipping lanes (shown in figure 7). Russia would seek to concentrate massive CF that threaten the Baltic states and eastern Ukraine, in order to deter a Western response.<sup>182</sup>

First, Russian forces’ willingness to use hybrid tactics would delay a US response and disrupt Western mobilization efforts. Political leaders would take time to confirm the identity of nonuniformed personnel moving into Lithuania and around the Kaliningrad-Polish border. Any US forces in close proximity to the area would not be given the authority to take any action until the intent of Putin and the president of the United States become clear. At the ground level, US brigades in Europe and the continental United States would see Russia repeat its earlier denial-of-service and infrastructure-oriented cyberattacks.<sup>183</sup> These attacks would not evoke a massive outcry from the US public, but they would be large enough to cripple the mobilization of select conventional organizations.

Second, however, Russia would eventually lose this advantage. The West would not take long to uncover the true identity of the forces present. Western leaders and their populations would acknowledge Russian involvement. Local Belarusian and Lithuanian populations would not flock to join the Russians in large numbers due to poor narrative

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<sup>180</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia’s New Ground Forces*, 89.

<sup>181</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia’s New Ground Forces*, 89–92.

<sup>182</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia’s New Ground Forces*, 91–93.

<sup>183</sup> Pope, *Interagency Performance in Counterterrorism Operations*, 16.

management and a burgeoning acknowledgment of past Russian tactics.<sup>184</sup> If there is a delay at the policy level, it may occur with the authorization of echelons at all levels to fight back in the information and cyber domains. This could occur as political leaders execute their decision-making processes for crises. Eventually, sanctions would impact the significant decision-making process as 80 percent of critical Russian military imports are Western-supplied GPS systems and are vulnerable to cyberattacks.<sup>185</sup>

Third, the United States would likely decide to rally NATO and escalate from competition to conflict. Over time, both sides would struggle to support their maneuver units logistically. Initially, NATO forces would struggle to get into the fight. The Russian navy would close the Straits of Denmark to NATO ships, and other A2/AD systems would limit air mobility into the immediate area of operations. As a result, US brigades would struggle to deploy rapidly, as they must move vast distances over land via any means necessary. Over time, however, Russia would face the greater logistical woes, as amplified in the Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts. These would be critical failures in an all-out conflict with the West. US maneuver brigades and long-range strike capabilities would actively target overt Russian logistical and command nodes wherever they may be. Targeting efforts would become difficult when in close proximity to NSAs and civilians.

At the operational level, Russia would effectively control disparate organizations through well-protected, underground command infrastructure and well-rehearsed hybrid maneuver tactics. Russian effects in the cyber domain and across the electromagnetic spectrum would be highly effective. Russian tube and rocket artillery would create significant problems for US brigades seeking to close the distance between maneuver forces. However, as they receive casualties through close contact with NATO forces, their weaknesses would reveal themselves. Russian forces would be unable to sustain the losses in such a fight. Conscripts would be intimidated by punitive, “antiretreat troops” into becoming “volunteers” under long-term contract.<sup>186</sup> Proxies would prove to be harder to control over time as casualties increased

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<sup>184</sup> Miller, interview.

<sup>185</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia's New Ground Forces*, 82–83.

<sup>186</sup> Sutyagin and Bronk, *Russia's New Ground Forces*, 42.

on both sides. Although, initially, manpower would prove a liability for NATO troops, they would, over time, regain the advantage.

US troops would hold the advantage in mission command at the tactical level because the well-led force would adapt in tactical situations and in urban terrain. However, maneuver units may struggle to respond appropriately to the wide range of actors present in ad hoc, hybrid forces, given a confusing array of legal authorities not specifically designed for this scenario.<sup>187</sup>

This scenario highlights that in the case of Russia, any combat operations would be characterized by a hybrid threat, contested mobilization, long-range movement, and maneuver, use of complex terrain, and continually frustrated mission command. As such, the functional areas in which US forces are currently most at a disadvantage (given time constraints), if not addressed, would potentially be decisive in determining the outcome of the conflict.

### Commonalities between China and Russia

Each threat actor poses unique challenges for the United States' CF. However, the literature review and assessments of China and Russia suggest several issues for the Army's maneuver brigades. The two actors actually have more in common than may appear initially.

First, China and Russia share common strategic foundations and mirror each other's policy goals. Each uses historic grievances as a pretext for the use of force within what they consider to be their own spheres of influence. Both seek an increase in status and are willing to use force but with varying degrees of specificity and violence. Both are virtually "unconstrained by public opinion or alternative power centers, which enable them to be faster and more aggressive in . . . decisions."<sup>188</sup> Furthermore, both are insecure and sensitive to any narrative that opposes their regime and might arouse constituent populations.<sup>189</sup> Each state has an incentive to localize conflicts to regions close to their borders and to form tacit or

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<sup>187</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 21.

<sup>188</sup> Howard, "Great Power Competition."

<sup>189</sup> Pope, *Interagency Performance in Counterterrorism Operations*, 3.

explicit agreements to limit their use of force.<sup>190</sup> Each is building de-escalation into doctrine, training, and operations.<sup>191</sup>

Second, both militaries are actively modernizing their systems and structures to remain on the forefront of what they believe to be the future of conflict—highly technological kinetic events that include a variety of actors. Specifically, this assessment shows that both are moving to smaller, more expeditionary offense-minded organizations that can be supported by overhauled logistical systems and better-integrated command structures. China and Russia rehearse mobilization on a large scale and are involved in present conflicts that have tested those systems. The effectiveness of each modernization effort varies depending on their traditional strengths and weaknesses, as well as service cultures. Finally, at present, the United States possesses the advantage in strategic mobility.

Third, China and Russia have each invested heavily in technologies in the information, cyber, and electromagnetic domains. Both weaponize information to subvert governments and influence populations to control their own domestic affairs and those of others. Both, but specifically China, continue to make massive gains in the cyber domain based on their national investments in digital capabilities. These capabilities will continue to be used to target specific organizations and key infrastructure. Interestingly, there is a physical component to these operations that most often plays out across the electromagnetic spectrum. Specifically, our threats understand our reliance on GPS satellites to operate navigation and communications equipment. Russia and China embedded these counter-GPS capabilities at the tactical level and have demonstrated a continued willingness to place these systems at locations that support any actor even temporarily aligned with their objectives.

On the ground, hybrid tactics will increasingly be a means of avoiding direct conflict with US troops and keeping the costs and risks of conflict at a minimum. Both China and Russia increasingly use private military companies, contractors, and other elements of state power to achieve their objectives. Many of these organizations operate under the umbrella of A2/AD systems that cause hesitation on the part of Western militaries and will ultimately frustrate

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<sup>190</sup> Roberts, *Future Conflict Operating Environment Out to 2030*, 37.

<sup>191</sup> Roberts, *Future Conflict Operating Environment Out to 2030*, 42.

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any deployment into a theater. Unlike the US Army, however, each military actively rehearses the integration of these actors and is willing to fight alongside them. There is also a financial and military aid component. Each proliferates weapon systems, such as PGMs and A2/AD systems, in locations that will challenge US mobility, entry into a theater, and maneuver.

Finally, both states possess large numbers of deeply buried facilities that protect key infrastructure. While Russian proxies are more adept at the use of trench and tunnel warfare, we should not discount use of underground warfare, especially where proxies are active. Each actor has also proven willing to move into urban terrain. While both states face the same challenges a US maneuver brigade would face in urban terrain, Russian and Chinese forces would feel far less constrained by concerns over the civilian population and collateral damage.

Based on these highlighted asymmetries, the US Army's maneuver units will not be participating in what may be considered wholly traditional combat operations against clear and coherent forces acting on behalf of unitary state actors. Rather, maneuver units will be challenged in unexpected ways that frustrate or exceed their presently organic authorities and capabilities.

### Part 3: Implications for the Army's Maneuver Brigades

The previous section described how Russia and China may approach conflict and described what that looks like in practical terms. In so doing, several asymmetries emerged—some of which were unique to the actor, with others common to both China and Russia. This section discusses the implications of those asymmetries for the US Army's maneuver brigades.

In short, maneuver brigades must be able to *participate now* in contemporary competition *and* conduct multidomain maneuver in future conflict. The following question remains: How do the largest conventional deterrence and finish forces—maneuver formations—fit in? For example, if we were to participate in a long-term cold war grounded in concepts of nuclear-based deterrence, then history suggests that proxy wars are likely. Ought a conventional maneuver unit be reshaped for a proxy war? Should brigades be bigger, smaller, or just train differently? Is it an innovation issue or just a talent-management and leader-development problem?

Many organizations within the DoD, as well as an emerging contingent of authors, are tackling these issues. Some suggest that the United States is currently in a state of conflict.<sup>192</sup> Beehner and Collins suggest that conflict must be balanced with current threats from violent extremist organizations and transnational criminal organizations. Dr. Christopher Harmon explains, “Low intensity conflict will exist everywhere we are, even if it is not the main threat. . . . What is debatable is just the high intensity part. [The US military] needs an awareness of both, even if [low intensity is] not the main effort.”<sup>193</sup> Richard Hunt and Richard Shultz write that a kinetic event with a proxy force, lesser power, or intervention in an internal war is highly likely. Even if a US response is heavily weighted by SOF or other government agencies, there inevitably is a direct-action conventional component.<sup>194</sup> Although their insights were from a study of the Vietnam War, the implications of their argument—that conventional troops still have a role, depending on the duration and intensity of the conflict, level of political

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<sup>192</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*, 3.

<sup>193</sup> Harmon, interview.

<sup>194</sup> Hunt and Shultz, *Lessons from an Unconventional War*, 200–210.

commitment, risk of failure, ability to localize the conflict, and the proximity of the threat to the United States or a specific interest—remain relevant today.<sup>195</sup>

Maneuver brigades will participate in future conflict, regardless of its form. The asymmetries highlighted in this report suggest that given the pace at which events will likely unfold, CF therefore need to first be able to participate in shaping operations to some extent. In other words, they ought to be able to participate in strategies designed to perpetually deter adversaries by increasing the costs associated with a kinetic action taken against the United States or an ally.<sup>196</sup> Second, given their core competency of large-scale maneuver operations in the land domain, brigades ought to be able to survive and fight against the full range of threats. That idea is not new, but so far strategic planners have paid insufficient attention to the role of non-state participants on the battlefield during great power conflict. Brigades must be able to fight those threats where they are at—increasingly in complex terrain.<sup>197</sup> Third, as Beehner and Collins write, they must do so by decreasing the effectiveness of the threats of cyberattacks, electronic warfare, and information operations.<sup>198</sup> While maneuver organizations may not take the lead in these efforts, they will nonetheless feel the full effects of enemy efforts in those domains if they do not prepare properly.

Two other organizations have tackled similar problems and offer a perspective worth examining. First, the US Marine Corps conducted a strategic review examining very similar research questions. In March 2020, the US Marine Corps published its new *Force Design 2030* document. As part of their methodology, the organization first acknowledged the “shift in missions, from inland to littoral, and from non-state actor to peer competitor.”<sup>199</sup> The organization noted several trends in the operating environment, which include the proliferation of lethal technology and the networking of those systems into an A2/AD strategy.

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<sup>195</sup> Hunt and Shultz, *Lessons from an Unconventional War*, 213–20.

<sup>196</sup> Pope, *Interagency Performance in Counterterrorism Operations*, 3.

<sup>197</sup> Pope, *Interagency Performance in Counterterrorism Operations*, 3.

<sup>198</sup> Beehner and Collins, *Dangerous Myths*.

<sup>199</sup> David H. Berger, *Force Design 2030* (Washington, DC: US Marine Corps, Department of the Navy, March 2020), 2,

<https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/Docs/CMC38%20Force%20Design%202030%20Report%20Phase%20I%20and%20II.pdf?ver=2020-03-26-121328-460>.



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In that context, the “element which shoots first has a decisive advantage.”<sup>200</sup> As such, forces that can survive and operate within range of those lethal systems will be the most successful. The chief shortfalls identified include long-range precision fires, air defense systems, UASs, electronic warfare, and capabilities designed for the gray zone. To fill these gaps, the Marine Corps is divesting of key capabilities and examining reorganizing conventional infantry battalions.<sup>201</sup>

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) took a slightly different approach in the development of its new operating concepts and doctrines. This makes sense for two reasons. First, Israel is not generally considered a great power in the current literature. As such, it is more of an observer and may pull advantage from multiple great power actors present on the battlefield. Second, many of the threats (great power or otherwise) operate in close proximity to the Israeli population. As a result of that close-proximity fight, Israel does not have to be nearly as expeditionary as any other force. Their operations disrupting the cross-border movement of men and material in support of Iranian proxies often requires deconfliction at all levels with state actors.

Israel’s various security forces adopted what some might call a competitive-strategies approach. This approach focuses on the peacetime use of military power to shape a competitor’s choices and objectives.<sup>202</sup> The doctrine supporting this strategy is known as the *Mabam Doctrine*, or the war-between-wars doctrine. This doctrine signaled a clear shift from focusing on exclusive covert operations and lightning conventional victories to operations that were integrated and preemptive in nature.<sup>203</sup> Tangible changes include the overhauling of urban-training certifications and increased linkage of CFCF with the intelligence and interagency community, SOF, and air forces.<sup>204</sup> Additionally, the IDF requires all units to undergo subterranean combat training. At the tactical level, units are increasingly modular, fight light, and train survivability against threats with fires overmatch. For example, headquarters and staffs are exceedingly small and mobile, and weapon systems and training

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<sup>200</sup> Berger, *Force Design 2030*, 2.

<sup>201</sup> Berger, *Force Design 2030*, 1–12.

<sup>202</sup> Mahnken, *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century*, 7–8.

<sup>203</sup> Dima Adamsky, Whatsapp interview with author, June 29, 2020.

<sup>204</sup> Benjamin Anthony, Zoom interview with author, June 19, 2020.

are focused on shortening and replicating the kill chain when required as a retaliation for enemy use of PGMs.

### Gaps and Recommendations

In pursuit of its new MDO concept, and specifically large-scale combat operations, the US Army writ large has identified several gaps. They largely pertain to mission command; deployment into an A2/AD environment; the integration of expeditionary requirements for intelligence, fires, and deep-sensing capabilities at the corps and division level; air defense; and the mobility and survivability of maneuver units during operations. Current priorities for manning and equipping include upper-echelon headquarters (the corps level), the establishment of multidomain task forces (MDTF), and security force assistance brigades.

This report discusses several of the gaps, both new and previously identified, that are most applicable to maneuver units and within the scope and classification level of this document. This analysis should be largely—but not wholly—in line with current efforts across the DoD.

The analysis suggests that maneuver brigades need to be able to participate in shaping operations because the period of transition from competition to conflict will be brief and intense. To do so, CF need to do the following things:

1. *Facilitate the transitions between competition and conflict through SOF-CF I3.* In short, SOF have the habitual interagency relationships and authorities most effective for competition without the combat power. Conventional maneuver organizations have the inverse. Many organizations within the SOF community are revisiting the integration of SOF and CF. These initiatives—known collectively as SOF-CF integration, interoperability, and interdependence (I3)—are meant to reduce friction in the contemporary operating environment. Given years of overlap during the Global War on Terror, results-oriented mission planning,<sup>205</sup> and the persistent use of military engagement by both organizations, I3 is an appropriate method to retain lessons learned. While there is general adherence to I3 in combat environments, there

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<sup>205</sup> Pope, *Interagency Performance in Counterterrorism Operations*, 1.

is an emergent gap during training and shaping operations in the competition phase.<sup>206</sup> Challenges emerge with “incompatible communications, inefficient command and control, and unfamiliarity with tactics, techniques, and procedures.”<sup>207</sup>

Furthermore, the Army has designated unique mission sets to both SOF and CF. Core SOF missions are listed as “Direct Action, Special Reconnaissance, Counterterrorism, Hostage Rescue and Recovery, Counter-WMD, Foreign Internal Defense, Security Force Assistance, Counterinsurgency Operations, Foreign Humanitarian Assistance, Military Information Support, or Civil Affairs Operations.”<sup>208</sup> CF, however, are designed for large-scale combat operations in the land domain.<sup>209</sup> Yet both forces continue to find themselves deployed for missions that may be outside their core mission set. Senior leaders within the SOF community recently acknowledged both policy maker and organizational preferences toward what are essentially “hyper-conventional” operations and strikes against NSAs.<sup>210</sup> As a result, both SOF and CF core skills are atrophying.<sup>211</sup>

The trends and asymmetries highlighted in this report suggest that the threats posed by state actors, their proxies, or proliferated weapon systems will prevent any SOF or CF organization from wholly owning a particular mission set. As such, the sheer numerosity and density of problem sets will necessitate the use of both SOF and CF in close proximity to one another, sometimes in mutually supporting roles. Neither SOF nor CF organizations will have time to await the arrival of a liaison officer or to study the capabilities of another friendly organization or adjacent unit.

As such, the Army needs to relook how we enforce I3 first in training and second in education. First, CF units at the CTCs should conduct operations in concert with SOF at the tactical level during the beginning or ending phases of operations. This will force leaders on both sides to see the value in I3 in dealing with a mixture of state actors and NSAs during

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<sup>206</sup> Jason Wesbrock, Glenn Harned, and Preston Plous, “Special Operations and Conventional Forces,” *PRISM* 6, no. 3 (2016): 88–89.

<sup>207</sup> Wesbrock, Harned, and Plous, “Special Operations and Conventional Forces,” 86.

<sup>208</sup> Thomas, “Prologue,” 3.

<sup>209</sup> Cleveland, Linder, and Dempsey, “Special Operations Doctrine,” 13.

<sup>210</sup> Cleveland, Linder, and Dempsey, “Special Operations Doctrine,” 9.

<sup>211</sup> Ellis, Black, and Nobles, “Thinking Dangerously,” 112.

transition periods. It will also force units to confront the friction that occurs in real time, such as the discovery of incompatible communications equipment during forcible entry, a raid, or noncombatant evacuation operations.<sup>212</sup>

Second, I3 needs to be reinforced during professional military education. This will create a cadre of future senior leaders who have a good understanding of the full range of capabilities that may be at their disposal when in a complex situation.<sup>213</sup>

Third, the transition from competition to conflict will occur quickly. As such, any units already deployed in the combat area will have no choice but to work with their existing adjacent units at that moment in time. SOF and CF organizations will not have time to grow accustomed to each other or swap communications information. To reduce friction at critical moments, the Army should consider making liaison positions permanent.<sup>214</sup> This will allow for SOF to demonstrate their true value to conventional leaders (and the inverse) who will eventually hold command authority during the conflict phase of an operation.

Fourth, the increasing lethality of weapon systems and improved capabilities in the cyber and electronic warfare domains will make lethal targeting and raids high-risk operations.<sup>215</sup> For example, in a kinetic skirmish, the proliferation of ADA and A2/AD systems may preclude infiltration by a helicopter or ground assault force tasked with targeting a key enemy command and control node or electronic-warfare system. In these situations, SOF and CF will need to work closely with each other to set conditions for each other's maneuver operations.<sup>216</sup> Alternatively, in situations where the enemy is numerous and resilient, CF may find themselves attempting the same operations once reserved for specialized units.<sup>217</sup> We should ask ourselves if our conventional small units are currently capable of conducting sensitive site exploitation on objectives littered with highly technical, state-supplied equipment.

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<sup>212</sup> Long, "Limits of Special Operations Forces," 36.

<sup>213</sup> Wesbrock, Harned, and Plous, "Special Operations and Conventional Forces," 93.

<sup>214</sup> Wesbrock, Harned, and Plous, "Special Operations and Conventional Forces," 90–91.

<sup>215</sup> Long, "Limits of Special Operations Forces," 38.

<sup>216</sup> Long, "Limits of Special Operations Forces," 38.

<sup>217</sup> Long, "Limits of Special Operations Forces," 41.

2. *Gain authorities to participate now in competition and in future conflict.* The Army is examining responsibilities at the division and corps levels. These echelons have been deemphasized during the Global War on Terror and the decades-long emphasis on the brigade combat team concept. Current efforts shift the authority for use of operational and strategic capabilities to higher echelons where, in a common view, they belong. Two notable gaps emerge at lower echelons.

First, a brigade will likely be unable to communicate with its higher headquarters during a rapid transition to conflict. How then is it to execute or facilitate what will inevitably be perceived as politically high-risk kinetic or non kinetic operations?<sup>218</sup> Or for example, how is it to respond—either defensively or offensively—to information operations targeting their own soldiers and their families? The Army should carefully consider what multidomain enablers and capabilities it is comfortable delegating to echelons below the division level that will enable tactical units to both respond rapidly in communications-denied environments. To be clear, this does not mean that every strategic decision belongs with a rifle platoon.

Second, if actions do not cross a threshold of conflict, how does a CF—potentially the only existing US force in a given theater—contribute to strategic concepts, shaping operations, or non kinetic operations.<sup>219</sup> Will a brigade be able to secure itself by conducting counter-unconventional warfare operations against threat proxies? Or for example, how might a brigade working with a partnered force to support strategic deterrence be able to influence their partnered organization? Will forces be able to utilize the same nonlethal targeting techniques honed during the Global War on Terror by SOF organizations all over the world?<sup>220</sup> Certainly some authorities and capabilities ought not to be delegated to the lowest echelons. At the same time, some authorities and capabilities must not be retained at levels so high that they are virtually irrelevant. Further research is required to determine the right mix of authorities and capabilities that ensure fighting maneuver units remain relevant outside declared theaters of armed conflict long enough for additional combat power to arrive or policy decisions to be made.

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<sup>218</sup> Mahnken, "Thinking about Competitive Strategies," 15.

<sup>219</sup> Mahnken, "Thinking about Competitive Strategies," 28–43.

<sup>220</sup> James Roberts, "Need Authorities for the Gray Zone?," *PRISM* 6, no. 3 (2016): 21.

3. *Accomplish mobilization and deployment to the area of operations.* The US military is putting significant effort into tackling mobilization and deployment into an A2/AD environment. On the surface, the brigade plays far less of a role than do the elements that will actually conduct the transportation piece of any projection of combat power. However, given that A2/AD systems will have an impact on US brigades, we would be remiss if we did not address their role in mobilization and deployment. From this perspective, there are several gaps that appear during mobilization and deployment.

First, as the scenarios in this report demonstrate, US troops would feel the effects of cyberattacks, electronic warfare, and information operations beginning at home station. The Army needs to invest in the hardening of its garrison networks and review its mobilization processes that will prove critical to the rapid projection of combat power. Furthermore, soldiers need to be educated on the steps they can take to mitigate non kinetic operations that may target their families and various personal accounts. In locations outside the continental United States that are closer to future conflict, they will need to reexamine how units both in garrison and operational or combat deployments have hardened their communications and navigations infrastructure to avoid being crippled during the initial stages of conflict.<sup>221</sup>

Second, according to multiple interviewees from various communities within the DoD, both the United States and its adversaries assume that there will be time to solve logistical deployment issues. The military still uses, in some critical locations, parallel training and real-world mobilization infrastructure. For example, many logistical organizations primarily support units en route to combat operations in the Middle East, while training missions go unsupported. At the tactical level, this creates a culture in which training may seem unrealistic or experience none of the time constraints that will likely exist in a true crisis. Additionally, partnered forces are not required to train what is codified in status-of-forces agreements as a wartime mission. The Army should consider removing parallel real-world and training headquarters and consolidating under unified headquarters.

Finally, those organizations designated as light infantry or rapid-response forces ought to weigh carefully the utility and costs of adding vehicular systems that increase logistical

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<sup>221</sup> Lee, *AI Superpowers*, 15.

requirements to get into a given area of operations. Light infantry brigades' greatest advantage may, in fact, be their strategic mobility, and as such, they may have to assume some risk in the trade-off between survivability and ground mobility.

*4. Close the fires and effects gap.* This report, among many others like it, emphasizes the fires and effects overmatch that would be experienced by US forces in a future conflict against a great power. The Army currently has several initiatives that seek to settle the debate surrounding the appropriate echelon in which to place key enablers and assets. There are essentially two philosophies at the heart of this debate. On the one hand, pooled enablers at the division or corps levels make efficient use of scarce resources; improve training; and when coupled with rapid task-organization decisions, can enable tactical units like maneuver brigades, without a degradation in capability. On the other side of the debate, those who support the assignment of enablers at the tactical level—similar to a brigade combat team concept or expeditionary cyber platoons, for example—argue that redundancy and habitual relationships would be critical in the initial stages of a future conflict. Many organizations within the DoD side with the former argument.

The trends in threat hybrid tactics and capabilities suggest that a middle route will be necessary. In a resource-constrained environment, the manning, training, and equipping of fires and cyberattack or electronic-warfare enabler organizations will be a challenge. However, we should expect any existing organizations, as key capabilities, to be high-value targets for enemy forces. As such, creating redundancy and enhancing the connective tissue at the tactical level will be vital. As in the case of SOF-CF I3 initiatives, the best solution may simply be a uniquely and powerfully equipped liaison cell or geographical distribution.

There is a training component to this as well. Certainly, the creation of additional positions will have second- and third-order effects pertaining to life support, training, or reductions in other occupational specialties. If the Army assigns cyber, electronic-warfare, or information-operations soldiers with unique access to strategic tools at the tactical level, it will take discipline on the part of maneuver leaders to ensure that those soldiers are utilized properly. To do so, units going through CTC rotations will have to ensure that they do not repurpose those individuals for tasks they are not designed for. The training and evaluation of participating units will have to be adjusted slightly. Finally, many of the challenges posed by



state actors—such as electronic warfare, chemical warfare, or night operations—are already incorporated into training. However, few incorporate special programs, effects from enemy space operations, or cyber defense.

Although many in the US military may be unwilling to push these capabilities to the tactical level, consider that the findings show that each of our counterparts are placing these capabilities in the hands of their junior leaders, in spite of a culture that might suggest the opposite.

*5. Move to distributed mission command.* As this report discusses, the threats actors have designed entire systems around destroying and disrupting the US Army's ability to exercise mission command.<sup>222</sup> Our current experiences during CTC rotations and operational and combat deployments, as well as those of our allies, demonstrate the catastrophic results that can occur when headquarters do not exercise survivable mission command. Gaps are emerging each day as our adversaries' capabilities grow more lethal and advanced.

Fortunately for maneuver organizations, many of the emergent solutions are already out there, and they ought to be embraced wholeheartedly. Multiple reports discuss potential solutions. All revolve around the basic idea of distributed and networked mission command. For example, the IDFs use operations centers and headquarters that are significantly smaller and less robust than those of a US brigade. The Asymmetric Warfare Group (AWG), SOF organizations, and a small number of CF have tested new technologies (like AI) and structures under a concept of distributed mission command that is wholly designed to survive against a peer or near-peer adversary. Col. John Cogbill and Maj. Eli Myers detailed their experience at a CTC utilizing this cloud-based, redundant communications architecture linked to the US interagency apparatus. As they noted in their report, this shift required small departures in doctrine, less focus on future operations, trimming unnecessary bandwidth requirements, and even cutting out some rehearsals and face-to-face meetings that might have been ultimately

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<sup>222</sup> Roberts, *Future Conflict Operating Environment Out to 2030*, 65.

catastrophic to current operations. Ultimately, however, their efforts were grounded in the principles of mission command.<sup>223</sup>

6. *Plan on fighting hybrid threats in complex terrain.* The trends highlighted in this report remind us that kinetic events will increasingly occur in urban or underground terrain. This will occur because state actors or their proxies will in most cases seek to control or influence populations within their spheres of influence. Furthermore, our adversaries are making use of urban and underground terrain to create problems for state actors, to protect their key weapon systems and organizations, and in many cases to set conditions for tactical maneuver.

First, maneuver organizations need to continue to innovate to incorporate the many civilian technologies that are out there that facilitate social media monitoring, 3D mapping of structures, underground communications, and use of unmanned systems. Our adversaries are already using commercial, off-the-shelf equipment to accomplish similar objectives. US maneuver organizations should continue to pursue initiatives that will allow them to mirror or disrupt our adversaries' capabilities.

Second, CF need to be trained and evaluated for the combination of urban and underground terrain they will experience when in conflict with a great power or one of their proxies. This type of terrain presents the most challenges to communications, authorities, or integration of enablers and will be inevitable in future conflict. Some CF, such as the IDF, already participate in the detection, mapping, monitoring, and neutralization of underground tunnel systems.<sup>224</sup> Ongoing efforts to incorporate unmanned systems, sensors, enablers, and unique methods at the tactical level in this type of terrain should continue.<sup>225</sup> Maneuver organizations should adjust their training requirements to include underground training for small units, like squads or platoons.

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<sup>223</sup> John Cogbill and Eli Myers, "Decentralizing the Fight: Re-Imagining the Brigade Combat Team's Headquarters," Modern War Institute, August 5, 2020, <https://mwi.usma.edu/decentralizing-the-fight-re-imagining-the-brigade-combat-teams-headquarters/>.

<sup>224</sup> Richmond-Barak, *Underground Warfare*, 1.

<sup>225</sup> Richmond-Barak, *Underground Warfare*, 93–104.

7. *Make our leaders fluent in the technology and concepts we expect to see in future conflict through adjustments in professional military education.* The military writ large has already put enormous effort into reforming its professional military education and training. However, our peer adversaries are constantly gaining new technologies that create new asymmetries between our forces. To maintain an asymmetry in leadership, maneuver units will need to find ways to ensure that their leaders are fluent in the technology used throughout their areas of operations.<sup>226</sup> Maneuver leaders need to understand hybrid frameworks and the roles of NSAs, proxies, and PMCs on the battlefield. Wherever possible, units will need to incorporate all the threats—not just state actors—into their education, professional development programs, and training.<sup>227</sup> However, given that most operational units already have significant requirements, much of that exposure will have to occur at every step of an officer's or noncommissioned officer's military education in between operational assignments.

### Conclusion

This report contributes to current efforts examining the role of the US Army's maneuver brigade combat teams in today's operating environment. It seeks to reconcile current training, reform, and modernization efforts that emphasize preparing for combat operations between state actors with observable realities today. These realities include the increasing numerosity of so-called low-intensity conflict, the prevalence of hybrid tactics, proliferation of lethal weapon systems to NSAs, and the tendency for those same actors to use underground and urban terrain to negate the technological capabilities of state actors. These trends also offer a lens through which to analyze Chinese and Russian forces. The findings of this report suggest that we have overemphasized preparing for large-scale operations at the cost of being better prepared for other, likelier conflict scenarios.

This report examines trends as well as likeliest versus most-dangerous scenarios in practical terms. In so doing, we described commonalities between China and Russia. Both share similar perceptions of the West that heavily influence policies, objectives, and

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<sup>226</sup> Ellis, Black, and Nobles, "Thinking Dangerously," 125.

<sup>227</sup> Cleveland, Linder, and Dempsey, "Special Operations Doctrine," 17.

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investments within their respective defense establishments. Each are pursuing technologies that maximize long-term asymmetric advantage against the United States through denial strategies, the proliferation of lethal weapon systems and technology, the use of proxies, and tactics that minimize US targeting capabilities.

The likeliest next fight is a form of hybrid conflict on one of their peripheries. It will include a mixture of actors and will be fought in complex terrain, using new technology. Within this context, several gaps emerged with respect to the integration of SOF and CF, the authorities and communication abilities required to operate during the transition between competition and conflict, mobilization and deployment of maneuver units, and the employment of fires and effects.

To fill these gaps, CF should revisit SOF-CF integration concepts that create a more optimal, symbiotic relationship, and they should seek to gain authorities that can be effective against any actor during the short-but-intense escalation associated with a kinetic event. Brigades must be able to accomplish and survive their initial deployment into a given theater. Maneuver organizations need to gain appropriate access to fires and effects systems that will complement the authorities required to maneuver during kinetic operations. Moving to a distributed mission command architecture will likely best enable continuous operations when communication between echelons is disrupted. Additionally, the findings suggest that a hybrid framework that incorporates urban and underground terrain may be the most realistic basis for training scenarios. Finally, where time and resources are short, education will necessarily fill emergent knowledge gaps. For specific solutions that are highly technical, doctrinal, or oriented at the policy level, either further research is required, the discussion exceeds the intended classification for this document, or the DoD has already designated an organization to examine the particular issue.

This report does not overturn or reject any current understanding of competition or future conflict. However, it does demonstrate the need to consider softening the perspective that the next fight is sure to be a direct clash between two large homogenous land forces. Additionally, it should add a sense of urgency for maneuver units to prepare for the fight now—regardless of whether it is referred to as a conflict or a competition.

