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Winning the Gray Zone: The Importance of Intermediate Force Capabilities in Implementing the National Defense Strategy

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“War is both timeless and ever-changing.” This edict is among the first sentences in *Warfighting*, the doctrinal publication every U.S. Marine Corps second lieutenant receives at The Basic School as a cargo pocket-sized combat Bible.¹ Beyond basic training, this imperative to adapt to change in combat environments is recognized at the Pentagon’s highest levels. “The Nation must field sufficient, capable forces to defeat enemies and achieve sustainable outcomes that protect the American people and our vital interests,” states the 2018 National Defense Strategy. “Our aim is a Joint Force that possesses decisive advantages for any likely conflict, while remaining proficient across the entire spectrum of conflict.”² To maintain that decisive advantage, in addition to the lethal force that is the hallmark of the U.S. military, the Joint Force needs a toolset of “Intermediate Force Capabilities” (IFCs) that include non-lethal weapons as well as other non-lethal tools. IFCs will bridge the gap that exists between a mission of mere presence and the use of lethal effects, allowing active measures when presence alone is



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insufficient to deter malign activities or when the use of lethal or destructive force is neither desired nor appropriate.

The changing elements of war's essence in the 21st century highlight the urgent need for policymakers to commit to developing IFCs to support current and future warfighting requirements. This also challenges us to consider a counter-intuitive thought: that the overall lethality and effectiveness of the Joint Force can be **enhanced** by the integration of capabilities that are designed NOT to kill or cause gross physical destruction.

The Gray Zone: Where Wars Can End Before They Begin – or Start Unnecessarily

In recent years, and as emphasized in the National Defense Strategy, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has rightfully focused on development of overwhelming lethality to deter and defeat potential adversaries. While the United States must always be ready to prevail during a high-end conflict – and overwhelming lethality represents a significant deterrent to conflict in the first place – the Nation must also be able to overwhelmingly compete and deter activity short of traditional armed conflict. In the language of emerging Joint Doctrine, this is known as the “Competition Below Armed Conflict” portion of the “Competition Continuum.” It is also referred to as the Gray Zone, Hybrid Warfare or Irregular Warfare. We will use the term Gray Zone since it captures the essence of the fact that global conflict is rarely defined in black (total war) or white (peace).

Intermediate Force Capabilities are tailor-made to provide the Joint Force options in the Gray Zone. It is the Gray Zone where the Joint Force operates on a daily basis. It is the Gray Zone where “state actors use a range of actions short of armed conflict... through proxies that destabilize regions without attribution”³ in order to meet their objectives without triggering a conventional war (e.g., China’s island reclamation in the South China Sea; Russia’s annexation of Crimea). It is also the Gray Zone where state actors conduct unsafe and unprofessional actions, for example, blatantly harassing our fleet by approaching too close on the open seas and making propaganda points, while the United States moves out of the way instead of using lethal force and risk triggering an international crisis.⁴

A recent bipartisan congressional report stated that competitors are likely to use “covert and gray-zone tactics to avoid a traditional U.S. military response.”⁵ In addition, a recent Defense Science Board study noted, to ensure U.S. military dominance the United States “needs to be more aggressive in the Gray Zone” by building “a set of unique multi-domain military capabilities to counter adversary regional military advantages and force them to consider the costs of their actions.”⁶ It is the Gray Zone, and also during armed conflict, where IFCs can



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support dynamic force employment by "providing options for proactive and scalable employment of the Joint Force"⁷ and enhancing flexibility to adapt to evolving situations where intermediate force can play a complementary role to lethal means.

As a recently released annex to the *National Defense Strategy* states, "To control the tempo of adversarial competition, the Department must manage escalation dynamics and dictate the character, scope, intensity, and terms of this competition to our adversaries."⁸ The development and sustainment of IFCs is necessary for the Joint Force to engage in day-to-day situations around the globe, where lethal force is often not the desired, or appropriate, first response. IFCs can provide proportional, measured force to address a range of threats – in a manner that mitigates the potential for collateral damage. As a result, IFCs may enable greater speed of action, and provide "prudent means to achieve the best possible strategic outcome within given resources or policy constraints."⁹

Words Matter

"Intermediate Force Capabilities" is a non-doctrinal term evolving from the DoD Non-Lethal Weapons (NLW) Program. Why do we need a new term to explain the same thing? Primarily associated with law enforcement, the term non-lethal weapons conjures up images of rubber bullets, bean bags, and pepper spray. Additionally, in an era of enhanced lethality, the "non-lethal" descriptor has severely limited the mainstreaming of related capabilities into the warfighting paradigm. For decades, the Services have limited investments in, and planning for, NLW to policing and security force communities. The broader term of "Intermediate Force Capabilities" is forward looking and more accurately describes a range of force options beyond traditional NLW that are now achievable due to maturing technologies.

Technology Advancement Enables Competition Continuum Dominance

While the DoD is coming to terms with the strategic concept of a competition continuum, current and emerging technologies provide tools that will enable U.S. forces, in cooperation with allies and partners, to control the scope and pace of escalation. Advancements in directed energy, human effects modeling, and other fields facilitate the expansion of legacy NLW technologies well beyond traditional law enforcement applications. Optical interrupters or dazzling lasers, originally developed for hand-held short-range applications, are now able to reach out to longer ranges. These systems provide an obscuring glare to personnel on foot, in vehicles, and on vessels, in order to deliver unambiguous warnings or to counter surveillance equipment (such as cameras in unmanned aerial systems). Initial versions of these systems are already being used operationally. Flash-bang munitions (bright flashes and loud noises) with



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longer duration and intensity of effects can be used for room clearing or as indirect fire to suppress personnel at extended ranges.

The list of advantages IFCs provide continues across domains – in the sea and air as well as on land. Occlusion technology that uses dissolvable material to obstruct vessel propellers in a reversible but effective manner to counter small boat threats is under development. Directed energy technology, including millimeter wave and high power microwave, has demonstrated the potential to offer immense improvements in range, precision, and reliability in the speed-of-light delivery of near-instantaneous effects against a wide range of counter-personnel or counter-materiel targets without causing permanent injury or gross physical destruction. Growing opportunities exist for the integration of these technologies with manned or unmanned platforms and autonomous systems in order to provide operationally significant, multi-domain IFCs.

Fear of the New?

Introduction of new technologies have often been prevented, unnecessarily restricted, or delayed for a simple reason: fear. “Technology can inspire fear, but a *Terminator* nightmare scenario – in which armed robots run amok – is not the only possible vision of the future,” writes Rick Smith, CEO of Axon (formerly TASER) in his book, *The End of Killing*.¹⁰ “The debate, as it too often does, devolves into simple and simplistic caricatures. Either you’re with the robots or you’re against them.”¹¹

As Smith explains, natural fears exist when developing and committing to new technologies. History is full of examples – the introduction of electricity into the home, radios in automobiles, reliability of DNA testing as evidence in judicial proceedings, the utility of the Global Positioning System – all groundbreaking technologies and capabilities in their own right – yet at the time of their initial development or introduction were often met with skepticism or distrust. Frequently, a new technology is held to a higher standard: “What’s new must be ‘perfect,’ not ‘better’.”¹² IFCs, by necessity, will employ new technologies. Directed energy (DE), in particular, shows promise with respect to scalability of effects and providing those effects at extended ranges. Technology developers will have to gain the confidence of DoD civilian and military leaders, Congress and the public to employ DE weapons across the competition continuum. Long-term investment – not only in DE, but in all forms of IFCs – is well worth the cost.



A Prudent and Necessary Investment

At first glance, investing in intermediate force could be viewed as a dollar-for-dollar budgetary take-away from lethal capabilities. This is a narrow and limited viewpoint. There are many reasons why IFCs are a wise investment. While lethality is absolutely essential for the U.S. military, the act of killing can generate significant and long-lasting impacts on all involved. For the governments and people on whom lethal force is inflicted, a conflict cycle that could potentially be limited can often escalate unnecessarily, resulting in prolonged hostilities and further casualties on all sides.

The avoidance of inadvertent civilian casualties remains a DoD priority. All military operations are conducted in accordance with the Law of Armed Conflict. Indeed, the *Department of Defense Law of War Manual* explicitly notes that U.S. forces in a conflict must act “in accordance with the principle of distinction,” in which combatants “may not make the civilian population and other protected persons and objects the object of attack.”¹³ The Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy has noted, “Our efforts to protect civilians are critical to defeating our adversaries and accomplishing missions, strengthening our relationships with allies and partners, and demonstrating our moral leadership.”¹⁴ With Secretary of Defense Mark Esper’s backing, the Department is developing a new policy directive on civilian casualty avoidance that supports the goals of the *National Defense Strategy* and in which IFCs can play a useful role.

In addition, for the warfighters ordered to inflict lethality—from infantry soldiers on the battlefield to Predator drone aircraft operators thousands of miles away—the split-second decision to pull the trigger or push the “LAUNCH” button commences a complex and immensely consequential sequence of psychological events that can extend for months, if not years, beyond a single event. The increased availability of options is among the many reasons intermediate force is beneficial for warfighters over the long term. Investing in IFCs provides operators with opportunities to train and sustain responses to stressful engagements that reduce the human cost of unnecessary killing and the long-lasting effects of doing so.

Even though IFCs are often employed during operations and widely available for procurement, personnel across the Services—beyond the law enforcement community—rarely train to use them. Consequently, either lethal force options become the default solution, resulting in the human costs of killing and potential for increased hostilities, or intermediate force options are employed too late or not at all, resulting in the loss of competitive advantage to one or more of the Nation’s adversaries. IFCs are tailor-made for such scenarios. Acoustic hailers paired with language translation devices, dazzling lasers to obscure vision, flash-bang warning munitions,



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directed energy active denial technology – are all options that can expand decision time and space. These readily available IFC tools can assist warfighters in validating that a perceived hostile intent or act is, in fact, hostile, and neutralize a potential threat quickly and effectively, without having to take a human life unnecessarily.

Additionally, during high-intensity conflict, use of IFCs can assist in minimizing the destruction of critical and sensitive infrastructure – reducing the risk of alienating the local population and decreasing the time and costs associated with operations to stabilize, rebuild and transition to host nation governance. As we have seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, establishing a safe and secure environment is of paramount importance. More than lethal tools are needed to enable stability and prevent future “forever” wars.

IFCs also allow American forces to maintain credibility in information operations, reducing opportunities for adversary propaganda, misinformation and manipulation of social media. Intermediate force options enable engagement against an adversary while simultaneously reducing a competitor’s ability to accuse U.S. forces of unnecessary escalation of violence during that engagement. IFCs thus enable the United States to invert this narrative. By limiting the risk of casualties and escalation, U.S. policymakers can accurately and credibly highlight the willingness of a competitor to escalate and use unnecessary lethal force because the adversary lacks the technological skill, tactical discipline, and technical training. In many cases, the ability to send the right message – to a variety of audiences – may be just as important as the ability to deliver lethal effects.

Into the Gray Zone and Completing the Deterrence Equation: The Way Ahead

Skilled application of intermediate force complements lethal force, reduces unnecessary casualties and destruction of critical infrastructure, and boosts warfighters’ versatility and adaptability across all phases of warfare. Winning in the gray zone means completing the “deterrence equation,” that is, precluding adversary aggression in competition below armed conflict with intermediate force capabilities in a manner similar to equipping the U.S. military element of national power with overwhelming lethality as a deterrent to armed conflict.

Today, U.S. military investment and focus are understandably on enhancing lethality to deter high intensity conflict or prevail, if necessary, if armed conflict cannot be avoided. That was pertinent to the 20th century and is necessary for the 21st century as well. However, modern warfare compels political leaders and operators alike to adapt to realities which require a recognition that overwhelming lethality needs to be accompanied by other options. Developing and mainstreaming IFCs across the Joint Force requires sustained senior civilian



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and military interest in an examination of the possibilities through concept development, wargaming, experimentation, training, education, and rules of engagement that enable deployment. In this respect, IFCs represent the essential complement to exclusively lethal options; the scalability and applicability of intermediate force across the strategic and tactical competition continuum demonstrates their utility.

Intermediate force capabilities represent an effective and comprehensive approach to solving complex problems and communicating with competitors. “Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting,” says Sun Tzu.¹⁵ For U.S. forces, preparing to fight and compete in an exclusive high-intensity conflict mindset is ineffective and unsustainable in the world of 21st century warfare. “Like war itself, our approach to warfighting must evolve,” advises the basic warfighting doctrine. “If we cease to refine, expand, and improve our profession, we risk becoming outdated, stagnant, and defeated.”¹⁶

As Lt. Gen. David Allvin, then Joint Staff Director for Strategy, Plans, and Policy, recently testified, “The technological and geopolitical influence on the character of war necessitates the evolution of not only the tools with which we fight, but the operational concepts and the general posture of our forces.”¹⁷ Intermediate force capabilities can help close the conceptual and operational gaps between policy and posture and help achieve the *National Defense Strategy* objectives.

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