

Proposing a Conflict Map to Guide Warfare

by MAJ Blair Wilcox and MAJ Jonathan Bate

The Department of Defense (DoD)'s description of war in current doctrine using a "conflict continuum" that ranges from "peace" to "war" isn't enough. As current conflict literature notes, conflict varies in its type and scale. Different forms of violence can occur simultaneously. To be successful, an intervening military force must address each form appropriately rather than using a blanket approach.

In this article, we propose a "conflict map," which seeks to enable accurate diagnosis of a conflict. Only by first understanding the type of conflict can military commanders develop an optimal operational approach. The best response differs by each sector of the conflict map. U.S. conventional forces are optimized to produce high returns to violence in only certain zones and must adapt to confront the enemy across the conflict space if the United States hopes to maintain its military and political supremacy.

Wrong kind of war

After 16 years (and counting) of combat in Afghanistan, eight years of combat in Iraq and a significant re-engagement against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014, DoD is struggling to find a coherent narrative for the types of conflict it will have to suppress in the years to come.¹ As company-level officers during the Iraq War, the authors were recipients of the Army's retraining programs during the "pivot" to counterinsurgency (COIN) post-2007 after the failed conventional approaches during the 2003-2005 mismanagement of violence.

Looking to the next horizon, it's hard to conceptualize where the Army should focus its attention. Following the theater-wide implementation of COIN between 2007-2011 in Iraq; to conventional tactics used to degrade ISIS; to the hybrid conflicts between Russia and Ukraine in 2014; to the supposed "weaponization" of social media in the 2016 election, the "demand signals" from the international environment are endless. What narrative can we use to help us make sense of the wide range of conflicts that exist in the current operating environment?

As an organization, the U.S. Army will continue to "pivot" from one conflict and tactic to the next, never winning the strategic fight, but will be highly adept at overcoming the needs of the current engagement if it doesn't reframe its understanding of conflict. U.S. forces are excellent at overcoming and adapting to the tactical and operational problems they face, but our forces lack the theoretical narrative to help clearly define the entire map of conflict; leverage comparative advantages in combat; and outsource problems when the application of violence achieves diminishing returns.² The Army needs to stop pivoting from one conflict zone to the next and get ahead of the problem by accurately understanding the context of warfare in the years to come to best align forces against threats.

A major part of DoD's problem is that it often fights the wrong kind of war. The U.S. Army's doctrine, organization and equipping standards create an institutional preference for conventional forms of violence. In the language of economics, the Army is characteristically a "supply-side" organization. It looks at conflict and applies varying levels of violence to change the environment. Supply-side-oriented conventional tactics levied against insurgent networks in Vietnam or Iraq, for example, were not able to achieve lasting stability.

Success in war depends on countering the enemy with the correct approach, aligning the appropriate tactics with enemy forces; therefore we propose a "demand-side" model to understand conflict. To understand how to win in the future, the U.S. Army must analyze the dominant demand signals the adversary displays through its applications of violence and array appropriate countermeasures to address the threat. As history has shown, enemy forces do not always fight the way we want them to. Rather, as asymmetric-conflict-theory literature has shown, weaker forces often seek to avoid their opponent's strength and draw it into a type of conflict that levels the playing field.³

For example, French forces under Napoleon succeeded against their Prussian adversaries using linear warfare. However, in Spain, Napoleon faced a hybrid threat consisting of both regular British forces and Spanish guerrilla forces. He failed in Spain because his strategy only addressed the conventional threat.

The “range of military operations” and the “operational analysis – full-spectrum operations” in current doctrine provide colorful vignettes for conflict that fail to provide practical application for brigade commanders and below.⁴ The intent of this article is not to provide a comprehensive framework for how the warfighter ought to view conflict; it is meant to begin filling the gap between relevant literature on the nature of warfare and the practical applications of combat power. Our discussion isn’t to present a comprehensive *new* theory of warfare but to use existing theory in a relevant form to present measurable mechanisms that practitioners can use to “diagnose” the state of conflict in a given area and apply the appropriate measures of force (including realizing the fact that “no use” of force may be an appropriate response for a stable endstate). Our analysis hopes to open up a dialogue between theory and practice (academia and military leadership) by distilling critical variables from the literature that are useful for conceptualizing the battlespace while simultaneously accounting for the comparative advantages inherent in U.S. forces task-organization and doctrine – namely, the production of kinetic force.

To hold up its end of the dialogue, however, the Army needs to update its understanding of the nature of the battlefield and the context within which forces will be engaged. There needs to be a bridge between the academic literature and the practitioner. For example, in a recent discussion with Dr. Stephen Rosen and the Modern Warfare Institute at West Point, Rosen commented that the U.S. Army lacks good theory but is excellent at adapting to the needs of the immediate fight.⁵ Here we hope to outline a method whereby military leadership views the battlespace using existing literature, expresses doctrinal principles with the appropriate academic language and subsequently uses that language (informed by the literature) to make practical and informed strategic recommendations for the use of force.

The model

As we said, the “peace” or “war” spectrum contained in current U.S. doctrine (Figure 1) is no longer adequate. Most modern conflicts fall somewhere in between. To further complicate the situation, there are multiple types of conflict occurring simultaneously in warfare.



Figure 1. Notional operations across the conflict continuum. Our leaders use the military instrument of national power across the conflict continuum in a variety of operations and activities that are commonly characterized in three groups, as this figure depicts. (Adapted from Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*, Jan. 17, 2017)

U.S. forces, technology and doctrine are designed to defeat and destroy enemy forces with conventional ordnance. Army task-organization, training and doctrine are all fundamentally driven by the singular purpose of achieving overwhelming force to kill the enemy. Again, using the language of economics, any mission that attempts to complicate this simple premise diminishes returns within the “marketplace” of U.S. engagements where forces specialize in the application of violence to achieve stability. The United States achieves the greatest returns to violence when we can achieve stability through conventional effects.

The endstate for this endeavor is to provide commanders a framework to discuss the battlefield with their subordinate commanders in a way that raises the appropriate questions and can equip subordinate units to say, “If you want these effects, I need the following resources.”

Partially informed by civil-war literature,⁶ state-building literature,⁷ military doctrine (Joint Publication 3-0) and economic theories of production (particularly the Cobb-Douglas production function), our model presents a language to interpret any conflict environment. Strategic-level commanders and policymakers and below are able to “diagnose” their position on the model using three variables: group type, group size and observed levels of violence.

With probabilistic determinations of these criteria, the military leadership can position themselves on the “map” and infer the likelihood of stability post-kinetic responses; have an informed discussion about the limits of military force; raise appropriate questions about operational areas for which forces are not appropriately staffed or resourced; and request subsequent training and assets. This map forces planning functions that ensure the Army shows up to the fight with the right team and the appropriate set of tools to overcome challenges to stability.

Our model classifies adversaries along two dimensions: type (criminal to political) and size (small to large). The interaction of these two variables produce measurable levels of violence that will fall within expected ranges.

Table 1 and Figure 2 depict the zones and examples of each type of conflict in each zone.

		Type of adversary		
		Criminal	Hybrid	Political
Size of adversary	Large	Drug cartels	ISIS Russian elements in Ukraine 2014	Nation-states
	Small	Gangs	Russia / U.S. elections Mafia organizations	Insurgent groups

Table 1. Adversary type and size zones.

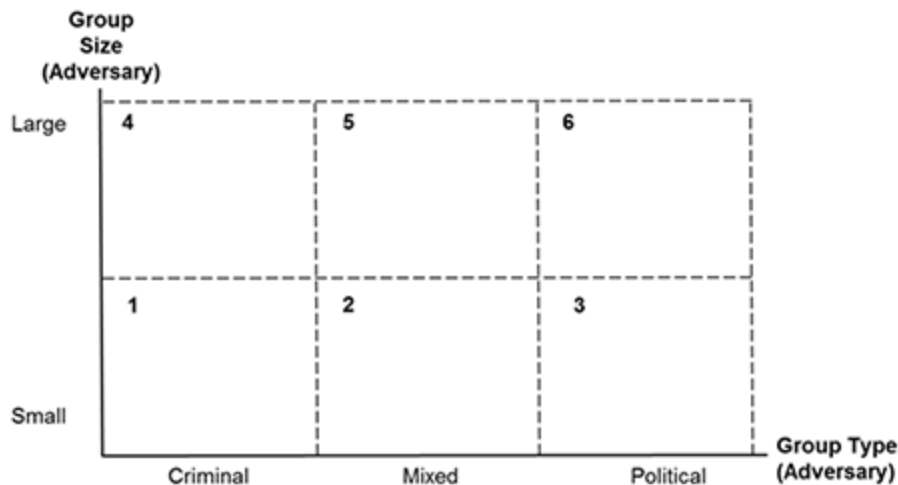


Figure 2. Zones and type of likely conflict in each.

Type of adversary matters

There is much work in the current civil-war literature about distinctions between criminal and political groups and their uses of violence. The distinctions between political and criminal organizations betray insights into the

structures and methodologies that adversaries naturally develop. Understanding group type is critical when third-party interventions or incumbent host-nation forces attempt to confront potential adversaries.

For example, in a case study of both Rio and Recife, Brazil, it was only when Brazilian police forces changed their tactics from a conventional maneuver approach (reminiscent of the tactics used in classic COIN) to a law-enforcement approach that they were able to achieve lasting results.⁸ Changing the tactic to fight criminal groups, rather than political groups, brought success. The criminal or political nature of the adversary impacts the type and scale of violence the enemy employs.

Criminal groups often need the institutions of the state to operate.⁹ Their livelihood is contingent on preying on their neighbors. The burden of government exceeds their capacity and threatens the organization; therefore they operate within the confines of the state because this serves the group's best interest. Furthermore, criminal groups tend to care about the welfare of group members, normally the leadership, and disregard concerns for the larger population. Concerns for collective-good distribution are localized to a select few (to those who "pay" into the organization), and time horizons are characteristically shortened the smaller the group. Criminal groups are normally vertically structured to retain tight control between principles and agents, and the benefits to the group are normally localized to group members.¹⁰ Violence, therefore, will be localized and pursuant of the criminal network's strategic goals, but generally not concerned with revolution.

Political violence, however, is concerned with the overthrow of the state or conflicts between states in the classic sense. Political grievances are classically concerned with the state's legitimacy and result in civil war or in interstate conflict. Political violence in small-group behavior is normally directed at the state and indicative of classic rebel movement aimed at the government's overthrow. Rebel groups are motivated by a mix of both greed and grievance-based mechanisms but tend to publicize their movements as driven by more ideological reasons (whereas criminal groups may not).¹¹

Groups using political violence normally have longer time horizons, and the benefits of their efforts may extend to nonparticipants in a way that criminal violence and behavior do not. (This is why mafia organizations occupy an interesting middle ground between criminality and political violence.¹²) Political violence among large organizations is characterized by classic kinetic exchanges between states throughout history. U.S. forces are optimized at achieving high returns to violence in political-violence conflicts between large groups and have adapted to fight well against smaller political groups during recent COIN campaigns.¹³

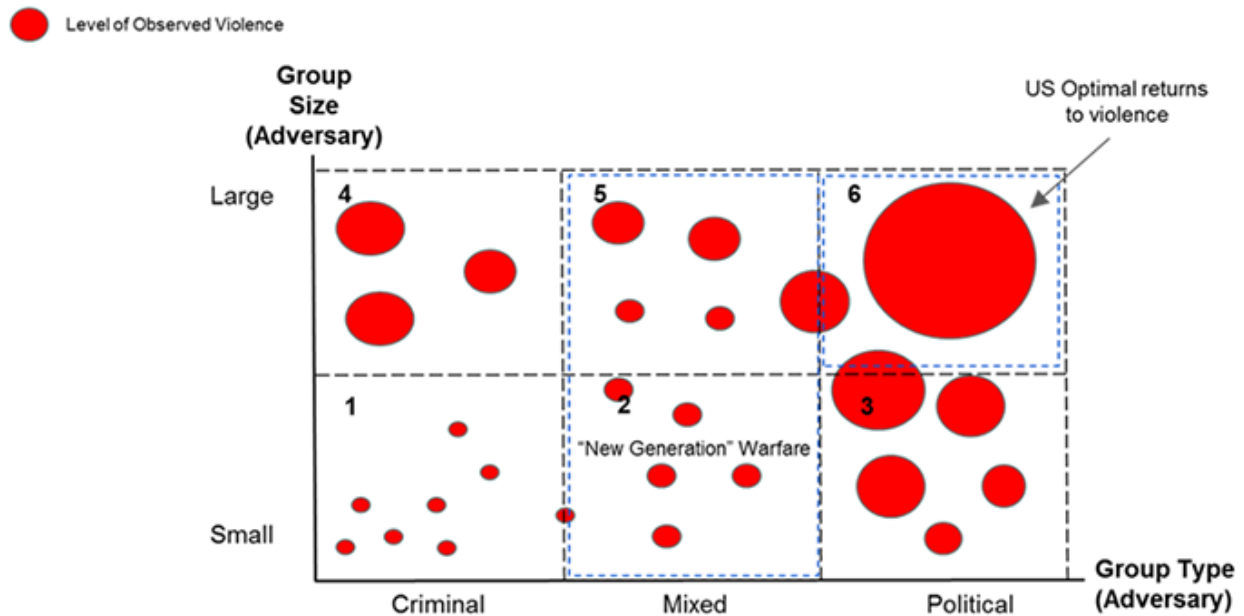


Figure 3. Types of adversaries and levels of observed violence.

Group size matters

We've found the variable that Mancur Olson identified (characteristics inherent in the size of groups determine their collective behavior in an anarchic environment) usefully descriptive when identifying how groups behave and adapt to the use of violence and how they organize to overcome increasing levels of complexity. In small groups, for example, voluntary agreement is more likely to achieve collective benefits.¹⁴

Each individual in a small group bears the full cost and risks of the decisions he makes that contribute to the public goods all enjoy. Each individual benefits from the peaceful order achieved through voluntary submission to the group. The individual costs of production are far outweighed by the benefits the individual receives from the group's aggregate production. The benefits received from mutual cooperation in small groups outweighs the benefits to defect, thereby overcoming the problem of collective action.¹⁵ It makes sense, therefore, that in small criminal groups violence against the state is antithetical to the group's goals because the group preys on the wealth of the larger society as a business model.¹⁶

Furthermore, we should fully expect small-scale criminality due to the efficiency of small-group behavior and the environment created by social stability. Violence, however, is not an efficient tool for the criminal in this realm, as it may attract the mechanisms of the state that would threaten its existence. This area, therefore, is characterized by small criminal groups, structured hierarchically internally, but with limited connection to other groups and low levels of observed violence. The critical observation from this zone is the recognition that stability is not the **absence** of violence but rather the **appearance** of small, disconnected criminal violence.

U.S. assets are not well organized or trained to operate in this zone. Any attempt to use them as pacification elements will incentivize the structural complexity of criminal groups and intergroup coordination, and increase violence that transitions groups away from low-level criminality toward political goals and larger group organization. Critically, exogenous incumbent responses shape the enemy as much as intrinsic group grievances. Government or third-party forces must understand the battlespace, therefore, to deprive the enemy the ability to organize and transition into more threatening postures.

Large organizations, however, do not develop through voluntary agreement.¹⁷ Incentives to "free ride" outweigh the logic of contributing to the needs of a large group without some form of coercion.¹⁸ In other words, why would I work to contribute to the collective public good if, by doing nothing, I can benefit from an equal access to public goods?

Large organizations, therefore, have to incentivize individual behavior through organizational processes (rank and promotion) or by developing a core constituency that maintains the leader's power, as is common in many authoritarian structures.¹⁹ Large criminal groups face an interesting dilemma. First, if they do not want to govern, they must organize themselves hierarchically to retain tight control between principles and agents to achieve goals that prey upon the state and its population but do not threaten the state's existence.²⁰ This, in practice, is difficult and requires the strategic uses of violence and tight control over operatives. We should expect groups that are large and criminal in nature to use violence to achieve their strategic goals but struggle with the incumbent more directly over the right to rule.

Organizational structures internally will be hierarchical. Also, there may be more direct linkages between criminal groups the larger they get, as it serves the interests of smaller groups to bandwagon if predation goals align. Columbia's Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia and Ejército de Liberación Nacional would serve as useful case studies for this sort of conflict zone.

Implications and propositions

Fundamentally, every zone in the conflict map exists simultaneously in every confrontation. Analyzing enemy group size, type and observed violence demonstrates the active zone; however, the potential for a transition is always present (Figure 3). In fact, the transition is exactly what U.S. units are looking for. Transitioning from large-group political violence to small-group criminal violence is "peace" and exactly what forces fight to achieve.

One could imagine the conflict map guiding division-level planners and commanders in the organization, plus outfitting a joint task force. Instead of applying monolithic applications of violence to achieve stability through the continual supply of violence, commanders assess the adversary type (demand signal) and build the right team for the right job. This map helps guide strategic-level planning for preconflict evaluation during intelligence preparation of the battlefield or joint intelligence preparation of the operational environment to achieve optimal returns to the applications of violence and modify adversary group size and type to achieve strategic goals.

This brings us to the immediate function of the map (Figure 3). The United States is currently unprepared to fight new-generation warfare (Zones 2 and 5 on the map).²¹ New-generation warfare is violent, but the levels of observed violence are inconsistent (not enough to attract enduring attention), and the goals of the agents are mixed between political and criminal affiliations. New-generation warfare is not “declared” and doesn’t officially terminate; however, it has the potential to inflict significant damage to states not prepared to counter messaging and prevent the transition to more violent zones.

In Zone 2 of this typology, adversary organizational strength comprises small, disconnected groups with mixed criminal and political affiliations that use violence infrequently. Incidences of this type of warfare indicate mafia structures (the Yakuza in the 1950s) to Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election through commercial marketing.

Groups could also be large and highly structured, normally with stronger state ties and political affiliations that conspire to weaken states in ways that draw reciprocal attention short of war. Russian interference in Ukraine in 2014 exhibits this type of warfare.

Low observed levels of violence present the false appearance of stability. New-generation warfare is harder to “diagnose” and confront because the levels of violence may be observationally equivalent to clearly criminal organizational structures. Nevertheless, new-generation warfare is exponentially more dangerous and has the latent potential to challenge state authority in a real and practical way. This enemy is hard to fight because law enforcement is insufficiently equipped. Also, jurisdiction among international, federal or state elements complicates institutional management, and military forces are not optimized to attack the enemy in this zone.

So we ignore it. We ignore it until it coalesces into an element we can see and fight with greater clarity, and this is the problem. The U.S. Army cannot sit on its heels any longer because our enemies don’t. This type of warfare will take close coordination between law enforcement and DoD agencies. Every engagement in this zone will require a deliberate social-media effort to shape population preferences (much as Russia did in Ukraine in 2014 and in the United States in 2016). The “weaponization” of social media will be a significant mechanism in this zone.

Violence is present but not overpowering, and populations are critical for messaging, but the lack of clear conflict makes the commitment of conventional forces (U.S. optimized force structure) unlikely or politically infeasible. Large population centers, once thought to be the center of gravity only in COIN operations, will again become dominant “terrain” in the new generation of warfare.

The Army’s finite resource base cannot sustain continued operational pivoting. Strategically, the United States must dedicate forces to the conflicts wherein force task-organization and doctrine are optimized for maximum returns to violence. We are not prepared to fight and win in Zones 2 and 5 of the proposed conflict map. U.S. forces must be deliberate about the doctrine and assets it develops to confront the enemy in the new generation of warfare. Let’s do ourselves the favor now of ensuring we get ahead of the strategic problem so our enemies never have the opportunity to become worth fighting in the conventional space.

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Notes

¹ Tim Arango, "U.S. Troops, Back in Iraq, Train a Force to Fight ISIS," *The New York Times*, Dec. 31, 2014; accessed Oct. 10, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/31/world/us-troops-back-in-iraq-train-a-force-to-fight-isis.html?mcubz=3&_r=1.

² Jake Miraldi and Dr. Stephen Rosen, *How Innovation Happens in the Military*, Modern Warfare Institute, 2017.

³ Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations, 2005.

⁴ Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*, Headquarters DoD: Joint Chiefs of Staff, Jan. 17, 2017.

⁵ Miraldi and Rosen.

⁶ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Jacob Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations*, Princeton University Press, 2013; Ben Lessing, "Logics of Violence in Criminal War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59(8), 2015; and Nelson Kasfir, "Rebel Governance – Constructing a Field of Inquiry: Definitions, scope patterns, causes," in *Rebel Governance in Civil War*, edited by Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Mampilly, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

⁷ Mancur Olson, "Dictatorship, Democracy and Development," *The American Political Science Review* 3(87), 1993; and Ronald Wintrobe, "Dictatorship: Analytical Approaches," in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, edited by Carles Boix and Susan C. Stokes, 2009.

⁸ Lessing; "Rio's Post-Olympic Blues," *The Economist*, Oct. 5, 2017; accessed Oct. 5, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/americas/21730054-feuding-gangs-and-empty-coffers-are-pushing-up-murder-rate-rios-post-olympic-blues?frsc=dg%7Ce>.

⁹ Wintrobe.

¹⁰ Shapiro.

¹¹ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

¹² After mafia organizations achieve a monopoly on criminal activity, excessive predation on the society undermines their economic goals because they can't steal from everyone and expect them to continue to produce. This dilemma results in criminal groups providing "protection" rather than extorting material goods in exchange for taxation. These groups border on competing for functions that only states provide. (Wintrobe)

¹³ Interaction in Zone 6, "The Conventional Zone," follows a model laid out by Hirshleifer (1989). He proposed that the proportion of violence-producing inputs to the conflict ("guns") would determine the probability of winning a conflict. In this model, the probability of winning the conflict depends only upon the ratio of guns held by the two parties in the conflict.

¹⁴ Olson.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Wintrobe.

¹⁷ Olson.

¹⁸ Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War," *The American Journal of Political Science* 52(2), 2008; Olson.

¹⁹ Olson; Wintrobe; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Hilton Root, "The Political Roots of Poverty," *National Interest* 68, 2002.

²⁰ Shapiro.

²¹ Emilio Iasiello, "Russia's Improved Information Operations: From Georgia to Crimea," *Parameters* 47(2), 2017.

Acronym Quick-Scan

COIN – counterinsurgency

DoD – Department of Defense

HHC – headquarters and headquarters company

ISIS – Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

USMA – U.S. Military Academy