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Synthesizing Strategic Frameworks for Great Power Competition

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Abstract: This article examines the theoretical foundations necessary for conceptualizing and operationalizing modern great power competition through the innovative synthesis of three influential military frameworks: Colonel John R. Boyd's observe, orient, decide, act (OODA) loop, Colonel John A. Warden's systems analysis, and Chinese colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui's unrestricted warfare theory. The research demonstrates how complementary frameworks provide strategic practitioners with comprehensive capabilities for identifying systemic vulnerabilities, orchestrating cross-domain effects, and maintaining decisive advantage through superior decision-making processes. The analysis reveals how modern competition transcends traditional military boundaries, necessitating organizational architectures capable of implementing synchronized operations across multiple competitive domains. This theoretical synthesis supports the proposal for an Interagency Action Committee on China (IAC-C) and identifies the foundational principles of a cross-domain organizational framework.

Keywords: observe, orient, decide, and act loop, OODA, systems analysis, unrestricted warfare, great power competition, cross-domain operations, inter-agency coordination, gray zone warfare, liminal warfare

Introduction

Modern great power competition demands strategic frameworks beyond traditional boundaries. As the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* identifies, "inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now

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the primary concern in U.S. national security,” requiring capabilities to operate across diplomatic, informational, military, and economic domains simultaneously.¹ Chinese colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui’s revolutionary unrestricted warfare theory provides essential insights that complement the pinnacle of American operational thought represented by Air Force colonel John R. Boyd’s OODA loop theory and Colonel John A. Warden’s systems analysis.² Understanding contemporary competition requires synthesizing these frameworks: Qiao and Wang identify expanded competitive space, Boyd’s OODA loop maintains advantage through superior observation and adaptation, and Warden’s analysis enables systematic parallel targeting. This synthesis provides a comprehensive approach for an era where technological integration and globalization blur military and nonmilitary boundaries while creating novel capabilities and vulnerabilities.

Understanding contemporary competition requires examining how these three frameworks complement each other. We begin with unrestricted warfare’s expansion of the competitive space, then examine Boyd’s decision-making framework, before exploring Warden’s systems analysis, and finally demonstrate their synthesis in the IAC-C and principles for a cross-domain organization.

Unrestricted Warfare by Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui

The People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) sobering assessment of its technological and doctrinal deficiencies drove China’s military modernization in the 1980s.³ The PLA, shaped by Mao Zedong’s “people’s war” doctrine emphasizing massive infantry formations and guerrilla tactics, found itself increasingly outpaced by modern warfare capabilities demonstrated in conflicts like the 1982 Falklands War and the 1983 U.S. operation in Grenada. Although Deng Xiaoping initiated significant reforms through his 1985 “Strategic Transformation,” reducing troops by one million and investing in air force, navy, and missile capabilities, PLA leaders recognized their persistent technological disadvantage against Western militaries. This made the search for asymmetric counters to American military superiority particularly urgent.⁴

Operation Desert Storm (17 January–28 February 1991) provided Chinese strategists Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui—both PLA Air Force political warfare officers at senior colonel rank—their first detailed assessment of American military capabilities.⁵ Their political warfare backgrounds shaped their theoretical approach to unrestricted warfare, extending analysis beyond conventional military operations into comprehensive national power employment. Operation Desert Shield’s five-month buildup demonstrated America’s capability to mobilize and deploy strategically significant combat forces globally, while the combat phase revealed technological superiority that rendered conventional

military competition futile.⁶ Their analysis of both U.S. advantages and vulnerabilities led to the unrestricted warfare theory—a framework for defeating technologically superior adversaries by expanding conflict beyond traditional military domains.⁷

The Coalition's opening night attacks crystallized the scale of America's technological advantage. Within hours, Lockheed F-117 Nighthawk stealth aircraft and Tomahawk cruise missiles had penetrated Iraq's integrated air defense system to strike key command and control nodes across Baghdad. This demonstration of precision strike capabilities and systematic targeting methodology represented warfare at a level of sophistication far beyond China's capabilities. By the second day of the air campaign, Iraq's nationwide air defense network had effectively collapsed, leaving Coalition aircraft free to operate with near impunity.⁸

The U.S.-led Coalition's systematic isolation of Iraq demonstrated sophisticated integration of military and nonmilitary power through United Nations resolutions and economic sanctions.⁹ This revealed how coordinated diplomatic, economic, and military actions could create compounding effects beyond battlefield impact, degrading civilian morale, political stability, and economic activity.¹⁰

These observations shaped three interconnected theoretical concepts forming unrestricted warfare's foundation.¹¹ The first, supranational combinations, built on Operation Desert Storm's Coalition-building approach but envisioned expanding beyond traditional military alliances. While the U.S.-led Coalition demonstrated effective international coordination for military operations, Qiao and Wang saw opportunity for more comprehensive integration of state and nonstate actors. From China's perspective, coordinating actions across international organizations, multinational corporations, criminal organizations, terrorist groups, media entities, and individual actors could create strategic effects without relying on conventional military operations.¹² The Gulf War's United Nations mandates and international sanctions demonstrated this potential, but the authors believed future conflicts would require orchestrating an even broader range of state and nonstate actions.¹³

Their second concept, supradomain combinations, extended Operation Desert Storm's successful military domain integration into a broader theory of cross-domain operations.¹⁴ The authors noted how Coalition air strikes against Iraqi electrical infrastructure impacted not just military command systems but created cascading effects across multiple domains. This observation led them to theorize that deliberately orchestrating actions across political, economic, technological, cultural, and psychological domains could achieve strategic objectives more efficiently than pure military force. The authors specifically cited how media coverage of precision strikes against Baghdad shaped both Iraqi and

international perceptions, demonstrating warfare's expansion into the information domain.¹⁵

Supra-means combinations, their third concept, directly addressed limitations they perceived in America's technology-centric approach.¹⁶ While Operation Desert Storm demonstrated the devastating potential of precision weapons and information warfare, Qiao and Wang argued that any method capable of achieving strategic effects constitutes a legitimate instrument of warfare. They noted how economic sanctions damaged Iraq's military capabilities as effectively as airstrikes, leading them to advocate developing integrated capabilities for financial warfare, lawfare, ecological warfare, psychological operations, and cyberattacks alongside traditional military means. China needed to transcend conventional military boundaries, coordinating all instruments of national power to achieve strategic effects.¹⁷

Qiao and Wang outlined specific scenarios like countering the U.S. intervention in Taiwan through synchronized cyberattacks, financial operations, lawfare, and media warfare—avoiding domains where American military advantages dominate.¹⁸ This would allow China to achieve situations of *fait accompli*, ensuring their goals are achieved without successful American military intervention. This comprehensive approach offered China a viable path to compete with technologically superior adversaries.¹⁹

Qiao and Wang inverted America's Operation Desert Storm model. Instead of using nonmilitary means to support military operations, they advocated nonmilitary operations as the main effort through networks of state and nonstate actors to achieve objectives without armed conflict. The authors specifically criticized America's sequential approach in Operation Desert Storm—using economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and information operations to set conditions for military action. Instead, they advocated simultaneous employment of multiple instruments in ways that would make a military response difficult or counterproductive.²⁰

This approach reflected China's strategic position relative to the United States. Rather than attempting to match American military capabilities directly, unrestricted warfare theory sought to exploit the very interconnectedness and technological dependence that gave the United States its conventional advantages.²¹ By orchestrating effects across multiple domains using diverse means, China could potentially achieve strategic objectives without having to overcome America's conventional military superiority. Their framework called for using the very institutions, organizations, and networks that supported American power—international financial systems, global media, multinational corporations, and international law—as instruments to constrain U.S. freedom of action.²²

Operation Desert Storm served as both a demonstration of American

power and a catalyst for developing strategies to nullify conventional military advantages. Qiao and Wang's analysis revealed how warfare can evolve in an interconnected world, where coordinated multidomain actions transcend traditional frameworks.²³ This raises fundamental questions about how government and military organizations must adapt to operate effectively across multiple domains while integrating diverse instruments of power. Understanding and applying these concepts becomes crucial for developing comprehensive approaches to modern strategic competition.²⁴ Having examined how unrestricted warfare expands the competitive space beyond traditional military domains, we now turn to Boyd's framework for maintaining decision-making superiority within this expanded battlespace.

A Discourse on Winning and Losing by Colonel John Boyd

The observe, orient, decide and act (OODA) loop originated as Boyd's framework for understanding success in aerial combat but evolved into a comprehensive theory of competition applicable from tactical to strategic levels. Through rigorous analysis of military history and scientific principles, Boyd demonstrated how superior decision-making processes create compounding advantages in competitive environments.²⁵

Boyd's theory originated from Korean War observations where North American F-86 Sabre pilots consistently outperformed technically superior Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-15s flown by Soviet, Chinese, and North Korean pilots through better visibility and hydraulic controls enabling quicker transitions between maneuvers. This tactical insight led Boyd to explore how superior decision-making processes create compounding advantages in competitive environments.²⁶

Observation in Boyd's framework extends far beyond simple information gathering. It encompasses active collection and filtering of information across all relevant domains of competition.²⁷ Organizations must deliberately structure their observation processes to gather comprehensive information while filtering irrelevant data that could slow decision making.²⁸

Orientation serves as the cognitive engine of Boyd's framework, shaping how organizations interpret and understand their observations.²⁹ Boyd identified this as the most crucial element because it determines how organizations process information and generate options for action. Orientation integrates cultural traditions, institutional experience, and information to create a better understanding of the competitive environment.³⁰

The *decision* element operates through two distinct pathways: explicit analytical processes and implicit guidance control. Explicit decisions involve conscious analysis and choice, while implicit guidance enables rapid action based

on deeply ingrained understanding. The balance between these pathways shifts based on time available and the nature of the competition.³¹

The *action* element completes the OODA loop, but Boyd emphasized that effective action requires more than simple execution of decisions. Action in Boyd's framework must be purposeful, decisive, and designed to shape the competitive environment.³² Organizations must structure their actions to simultaneously accomplish immediate objectives while setting conditions for future success. This dual nature of action—achieving current goals while influencing future competitive dynamics—highlights why Boyd insisted that activity must flow from clear strategic intent rather than tactical convenience.³³

Boyd's analysis revealed that principles determining success in tactical air combat applied across all levels of competition. His framework illuminates how organizations achieve decisive advantages through superior decision-making processes, whether at strategic, operational, or tactical levels. The true power emerges through operating inside the OODA loop—creating conditions where an opponent's orientation becomes increasingly disconnected from reality. As the adversary's understanding deteriorates, their actions become progressively less relevant to the actual competitive environment, eventually leading to decision-making paralysis.³⁴

The complexity of modern competition, with its interconnected domains and rapid technological change, makes Boyd's emphasis on mental agility increasingly vital.³⁵ His "destruction and creation" process (the cognitive mechanism for decomposing existing mental models and synthesizing new understanding) provides organizations a systematic methodology to analyze existing concepts and synthesize new understanding while maintaining both speed and accuracy in their decision cycles.³⁶ This process is particularly relevant today as organizations must process unprecedented volumes of information across multiple domains while maintaining strategic coherence.³⁷

Boyd's emphasis on orientation explains why simply gathering more information or acting more quickly fails to guarantee success in modern competition. Organizations must instead develop robust processes for analyzing information and updating their understanding of the competitive environment. This is especially critical given how emerging technologies and interconnected systems create novel competitive dynamics that can quickly invalidate existing mental models. Orientation thus serves as the fulcrum of modern competition, determining how organizations interpret information and generate options for action in increasingly complex environments.³⁸

Organizations achieve this adaptive capability through what Boyd termed *fingerspitzengefühl*—an intuitive mastery enabling rapid, effective action without requiring explicit analysis.³⁹ Boyd borrowed this German military term, which translates as "fingertip feeling," from his extensive study of the *Wehr-*

macht's command philosophy during World War II. The concept was central to German military doctrine that emphasized decentralized decision making (*auftragstaktik*) and developed through the German General Staff system since the late nineteenth century.⁴⁰ This capability develops through repeated application of the destruction and creation process, systematically breaking down and reconstructing understanding to better match reality. The resulting implicit guidance allows appropriate action at a high tempo while maintaining strategic coherence.⁴¹

The framework's enduring relevance stems from its focus on mental processes rather than physical capabilities.⁴² Whether in military operations, business competition, or strategic rivalry between nations, success flows from the ability to maintain accurate orientation while operating at a faster tempo than opponents. Boyd's contribution lies in systematically explaining how organizations can develop and maintain these crucial capabilities through repeated application of the destruction and creation process.⁴³

While Boyd focused on decision-making processes, John Warden approached military theory from a different angle. His revolutionary systems theory emerged from a fundamental challenge to traditional military thought. Where Carl von Clausewitz emphasized defeating an adversary's center of gravity through decisive battle, Warden argued that enemies should be understood as complex interconnected systems, with military forces representing only one component of national power.⁴⁴

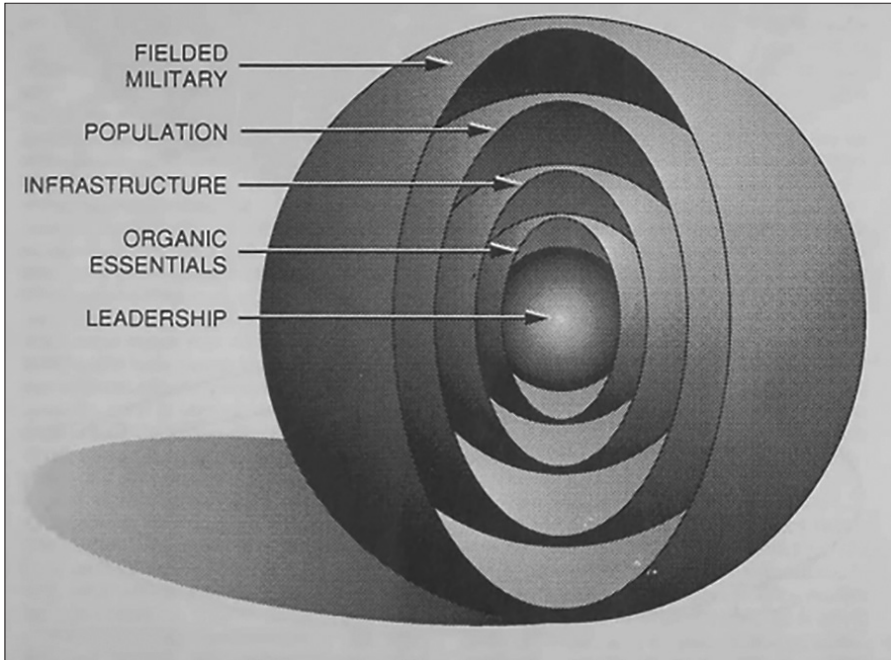
The Enemy as a System by Colonel John Warden III

Colonel John Warden III's approach marked a decisive break from earlier strategic bombing theories due to the increasing complexity and interrelated nature of nation-states. Unlike the Italian airpower theorist Giulio Douhet, who focused on industrial centers and population morale, Warden targeted leadership and critical nodes for strategic paralysis.⁴⁵ This approach leveraged precision weapons and recognized how systematic pressure, not widespread destruction, could compel state behavior change.⁴⁶

Drawing from systems analysis in biology and physics, Warden observed that all complex organisms shared similar organizational patterns—from human bodies to electrical grids to nation-states. This observation led him to develop a universal model for analyzing and affecting enemy systems that could be applied across different scales and types of conflict.⁴⁷

Warden's "Five Rings" model presented a dynamic framework for analyzing enemy vulnerabilities through concentric rings, with leadership at the center as the system's brain (figure 1).⁴⁸ The model's power lay in its adaptability—the specific composition of each ring could be adjusted based on the target system being analyzed, whether a nation-state, terrorist organization, or military unit.⁴⁹

Figure 1. The Five Rings model



Source: John A. Warden III, "The Enemy as a System," *Airpower Journal* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 47.

The innermost ring, leadership, remains constant as it encompasses both strategic decision makers and their command-and-control mechanisms—the only elements capable of altering strategic direction or surrendering. The second ring, system essentials, contains critical processes necessary for the system's function.⁵⁰ For a nation-state, this includes electrical power generation and petroleum refineries. For a terrorist organization, it might include financing networks and bomb-making facilities.⁵¹

The infrastructure ring comprises the physical and organizational networks that connect and support other system components. In a state system, this includes transportation networks and industrial facilities.⁵² For a military unit, it would include supply lines and communications systems. The population ring represents the human dimension: the workforce, supporters, or fighters, depending on the system analyzed. The outermost ring contains protective elements—conventional and paramilitary forces for a state.⁵³

The model's revolutionary aspect lay in its systematic analysis of ring interactions. Damage to inner rings multiplied effects throughout the system—destroying electrical facilities simultaneously degraded military command and control, civilian telecommunications, and industrial output.⁵⁴ The advent of

precision-guided munitions made this systematic approach viable by enabling reliable strikes against specific vulnerabilities.⁵⁵

Having established the theoretical framework, Operation Desert Storm provided the crucial first test of Warden's systems theory through parallel warfare—striking multiple rings simultaneously to overwhelm Iraq's ability to adapt or repair critical systems.⁵⁶ The campaign's opening night demonstrated this revolutionary approach as Coalition aircraft struck more than 150 separate targets across all five rings within the first 24 hours—more targets than the Eighth Air Force hit in all of 1943.⁵⁷

These coordinated attacks immediately validated Warden's theory about system interdependence. The systematic targeting of Iraq's electrical grid cascaded into nationwide communications failures, degraded air defense capabilities, and disrupted military command and control. Within hours, Iraqi phone service fell precipitously, key leadership offices were isolated, and air defense centers lost contact with their units.⁵⁸ This demonstrated how attacking critical nodes could achieve strategic impacts far beyond direct damage.

The campaign's effectiveness stemmed from precise identification of Iraqi system components within each ring. Leadership targets included command bunkers and communications nodes. System essentials focused on electrical generation and oil refineries. Infrastructure targets encompassed transportation networks and military supply lines. While population centers were avoided for political reasons, military forces were systematically isolated and degraded through attacks on other rings.⁵⁹

The Five Rings model, while revolutionary in Operation Desert Storm, requires adaptation based on the specific adversary system being analyzed. Not all systems exhibit the same degree of centralization or vulnerability patterns.⁶⁰ Therefore, in future applications of this model, adjustment to each ring, especially the core, must be informed by the assessment of the adversary. The rings must be adapted as adversary behavior changes within its system, as political objectives change, or with the methods with which we are attacking the system.

Synthesis and Application of Three Theories

Contemporary military doctrine recognizes six warfighting domains where competition and conflict occur: air, land, maritime, space, cyberspace/electromagnetic spectrum, and the cognitive domain.⁶¹ The synthesis of unrestricted warfare, Boyd's OODA loop, and Warden's systems analysis provides frameworks for operating across all domains simultaneously, as modern competition rarely confines itself to single-domain operations.

Modern great power competition requires strategists to identify systemic vulnerabilities, orchestrate multidomain operations, and maintain decisive

advantage through superior decision making. The synthesis of Warden's systems analysis, unrestricted warfare theory, and Boyd's OODA loop creates this framework by combining systematic vulnerability analysis, comprehensive methods for exploitation, and a process for maintaining initiative across all domains of competition. This integration enables strategists to understand complex interstate systems, develop coordinated cross-domain campaigns, and maintain competitive advantage through superior observation and adaptation.

The synthesis begins with Warden's systems analysis revealing how components of national power form complex networks of interdependence. Applied to China's Belt and Road Initiative, for example, systems analysis shows how infrastructure investments create interconnected diplomatic, economic, and security effects throughout Southeast Asia. These investments simultaneously generate economic leverage, establish potential military logistics networks, and create diplomatic pressure points that can be exploited through coordinated action.⁶² The hydroelectric dams along the Mekong River demonstrate this interconnection—Chinese control of upstream water resources simultaneously affect regional food security, economic development, and inter-state relations.⁶³

Unrestricted warfare theory transforms this systems analysis into operational advantage by providing methods for simultaneously affecting multiple system components. Where Warden identifies critical nodes, unrestricted warfare's supradomain combinations enable synchronized application of diplomatic, economic, and information operations to subtly create opportunities for compounding effects.⁶⁴ For instance, systems analysis reveals vulnerabilities in China's semiconductor supply chain, while unrestricted warfare theory enables coordinated response through export controls (economic), diplomatic pressure on supplier nations (political), and information operations highlighting technological dependencies (informational).⁶⁵ This operational framework allows strategists to orchestrate effects across multiple domains while maintaining coherence between tactical actions and strategic objectives.⁶⁶

Boyd's OODA loop completes the synthesis by providing the cognitive framework for maintaining advantage while conducting parallel operations. His emphasis on rapid observation and orientation enables processing of information from multiple domains while maintaining an accurate understanding of the competitive environment.⁶⁷ When economic data reveals limited Chinese access to cheap food and energy, faster OODA loops allow rapid adjustment of diplomatic and economic efforts to exploit this insight.⁶⁸ Most crucially, Boyd's concepts of tempo and initiative explain how to maintain advantage while conducting parallel operations across domains.⁶⁹

This theoretical integration—combining Warden's systematic analysis, unrestricted warfare's multidomain operations, and Boyd's decision cycle framework—creates compounding advantages in practice. Consider China's

maritime militia operations in the South China Sea. Systems analysis reveals how these operations connect to broader territorial claims, economic interests, and regional influence efforts. Unrestricted warfare theory enables simultaneous counterpressure through partner nation capacity building, economic initiatives, and information operations exposing coercive behavior. Boyd's OODA loop ensures these efforts maintain coherence while adapting to changing conditions faster than adversary response cycles.⁷⁰ This synchronized application of multiple instruments of power creates effects that would be impossible through single-domain operations.⁷¹

The theoretical synthesis of these three frameworks requires organizational innovation to enable practical implementation. Traditional interagency processes, designed for sequential policy development rather than integrated operational execution, cannot achieve the speed and synchronization this framework demands. To operationalize this theoretical synthesis, leaders should establish an Interagency Action Committee on China (IAC-C) positioned adjacent to the National Security Council's Deputies Committee with a focus on policy execution, rather than policy recommendations.⁷² This organizational structure enables rapid OODA loop completion crucial to Boyd's framework while aligning with national objectives.⁷³

The IAC-C's mission centers on countering Chinese unrestricted warfare operations through coordinated defensive measures and competitive actions below the threshold of armed conflict, while also executing synchronized cross-domain operations to advance U.S. policy objectives within American legal and ethical constraints.⁷⁴ Rather than conducting unrestricted warfare as defined by Qiao and Wang—which remains outside U.S. doctrine—the IAC-C would orchestrate whole-of-government campaigns that both defend against adversary operations and proactively shape the competitive environment. This dual approach includes defensive measures such as countering political warfare, protecting critical infrastructure and economic systems, and exposing malign influence operations, while simultaneously executing offensive initiatives including economic statecraft, information campaigns, diplomatic pressure, and technology competition to achieve strategic advantage. When necessary and legally authorized, the IAC-C would coordinate competitive actions across all domains—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic—to impose costs on adversary behavior and advance American interests, always maintaining adherence to U.S. legal frameworks and ethical standards that distinguish American statecraft from authoritarian approaches. By combining representatives and leaders from relevant agencies with regional combatant commanders under a flattened organizational structure, the IAC-C enables the speed and adaptability that Boyd's framework requires while maintaining the coherence that Warden's systems approach demands.⁷⁵

The IAC-C's value as a coordinating body naturally diminishes as competition escalates toward open conflict. During crisis, leadership should transition to the appropriate combatant commander, with other agencies moving into supporting roles to maintain cross-domain coordination while enabling clear military command and control.⁷⁶ This organizational flexibility ensures effective execution of irregular warfare during competition while preserving unity of command during conflict.⁷⁷ The IAC-C thus provides leaders and commanders with the organizational framework needed to implement this theoretical synthesis across the full spectrum of inter-state relations.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the IAC-C represents merely one potential organizational manifestation of this theoretical synthesis. Multiple institutional configurations could effectively implement these principles, depending on strategic or operational context, existing organizational architectures, and specific competitive domains. Nevertheless, any organizational framework designed to execute this theoretical synthesis must incorporate several fundamental capabilities that transcend specific structural arrangements. While the IAC-C provides one concrete organizational model for implementing this theoretical synthesis, any effective structure must embody certain fundamental principles that transcend specific institutional arrangements. Understanding these core principles illuminates how organizations must evolve to meet the demands of modern great power competition.

Principles of a Cross-Domain Organization

The synthesis of Boyd's OODA loop, Warden's systems analysis, and unrestricted warfare theory demands an organizational structure that can implement these concepts effectively. While the Interagency Action Committee on China represents one potential manifestation, any organization executing this theoretical framework must incorporate several fundamental capabilities.

Understanding Across Domains

A successful cross-domain organization requires a sophisticated understanding of perspectives across diplomatic, economic, military, technological, and informational domains, transcending simple data collection to achieve genuine analytical integration. This shared understanding, which Boyd emphasized through his concept of "similar implicit orientation," establishes the foundation for unity of effort.

The IAC-C demonstrates this principle by bringing together representatives from the Department of State, Department of Defense, Treasury, Commerce, Intelligence Community agencies, Department of Justice, and Department of Homeland Security.⁷⁸ This composition ensures coverage of diplomatic,

military, economic, legal, and domestic security equities while maintaining a manageable span of control. Law enforcement participation through the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) proves essential for addressing adversary operations within U.S. borders, while Treasury's inclusion enables synchronized economic statecraft.⁷⁹ When an economic analyst identifies potential vulnerabilities in China's energy supply chain, diplomatic and military representatives immediately grasp the strategic implications without lengthy explanations.

Flexibility in Structure

Structural agility enables four critical functions: delegating authority to appropriate organizational levels; flexibly designating main effort domains based on strategic priorities; rapidly incorporating subject matter experts; and minimizing friction from hierarchical structures.

Within the IAC-C, this flexibility manifests through its unique position adjacent to the Deputies Committee. This placement allows it to quickly shift priorities when opportunities arise while maintaining alignment with national objectives. For example, if intelligence reveals a new Chinese influence operation targeting Pacific Island nations, the IAC-C can rapidly reallocate resources and attention without waiting for a lengthy approval processes, demonstrating the adaptability that Boyd identified as crucial for maintaining initiative.

Smart Analysis of Systems

The organization must integrate sophisticated systems analysis methodologies that not only identify vulnerabilities within Warden's five rings but also map how these vulnerabilities intersect across domains. This enables identification of critical nodes where synchronized actions can generate compound effects.

The IAC-C applies this principle through Joint analytical cells that continuously examine China's system components—from leadership structures to economic vulnerabilities—and identify where coordinated pressure can achieve strategic effects. When analyzing China's Belt and Road infrastructure investments in Southeast Asia, these cells identify connections between economic leverage, potential military logistics networks, and diplomatic pressure points that can be exploited through coordinated action.

Coordinated Action Across Boundaries

Effective implementation requires cross-domain operational synchronization underpinned by appropriate authorities from senior leadership. This enables the simultaneity that Warden identified as crucial while providing the operational flexibility Boyd's OODA loop demands.

The IAC-C exemplifies this principle through its authority to coordinate operations across traditional agency boundaries. For instance, when countering China's maritime militia operations in the South China Sea, the IAC-C can synchronize partner nation capacity building (Department of Defense), economic initiatives (Treasury/Commerce), and information operations (State Department) to create effects that would be impossible through single-domain efforts. This synchronized application of multiple instruments generates the compound effects that unrestricted warfare theory identifies as decisive in contemporary competition.

Strategic Merit of the Concurrent Integrated and Synchronized Approach

Organizations implementing these principles represent a fundamental departure from conventional interagency coordination. Where traditional frameworks operate through sequential planning processes with minimal synchronization, cross-domain organizations function through concurrent integration from the outset. Rather than developing separate plans that must later be reconciled, representatives with decision-making authority collaborate simultaneously from conception through execution. This shift from “retrofitted integration” to “inherently integrated” planning eliminates the temporal gaps that adversaries exploit through accelerated decision cycles.⁸⁰ The resulting operational tempo enables the compounding effects that unrestricted warfare theory identifies as decisive in modern competition, while maintaining the precision targeting that Warden's systems analysis demands. The IAC-C exemplifies this approach by enabling senior representatives to develop comprehensive implementation strategies incorporating mutually reinforcing effects across all competitive domains, rather than attempting to harmonize separate agency initiatives after they have been developed.

Conclusion

The synthesis of Boyd's OODA loop, Warden's systems analysis, and unrestricted warfare theory provides military and civilian leaders with a powerful framework for modern great power competition. This integration enables systematic identification of vulnerabilities, orchestration of cross-domain effects, and maintenance of decisive advantage through superior observation and adaptation. The proposed Interagency Action Committee on China demonstrates how organizations can implement this synthesis. As interconnected technologies and societies create novel vulnerabilities while enabling new methods of exploitation, states that master this integrated approach—systematically analyzing adversary systems, orchestrating cross-domain effects, and maintaining faster decision cycles—will dominate twenty-first century competition.

Endnotes

1. *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), 2.
2. Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999); John R. Boyd, "A Discourse on Winning and Losing," unpublished collection of briefings, Air University Library, Document No. M-U 43947 (August 1987); Boyd, "Patterns of Conflict," unpublished briefing (1986); John A. Warden III, "The Enemy as a System," *Airpower Journal* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 40–55; and John A. Warden III, "Air Theory for the Twenty-first Century," in *Challenge and Response: Anticipating U.S. Military Security Concerns*, ed. Karl P. Magyar (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1994).
3. The PLA's modernization marked a fundamental shift from Mao's mass mobilization doctrine toward recognizing the vital role of technology in modern warfare. This transformation reflected both internal assessments of PLA capabilities and external observations of evolving warfare requirements. Geoff Babb, "China's Military History and Way of War: A Backgrounder," *Military Review* (March 2023): 1–6.
4. Babb, "China's Military History and Way of War," 2–3.
5. Operation Desert Storm was the combat phase of the Gulf War, preceded by Operation Desert Shield's five-month buildup. The 42-day air campaign and 100-hour ground war demonstrated revolutionary advances in precision strike, stealth technology, and information warfare that fundamentally changed military thinking worldwide. See Keith L. Shimko, *The Iraq Wars and America's Military Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 51–89, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511845277>. Their political warfare backgrounds shaped their theoretical approach to unrestricted warfare, extending analysis beyond conventional military operations into comprehensive national power employment. See Dean Cheng, "Chinese Lessons from the Gulf War," in *Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples' Wars*, ed. Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2011), 5–7.
6. Prior to Operation Desert Storm, Chinese military doctrine focused primarily on continental defense against Soviet-style armies. The conflict forced a wholesale reevaluation of how warfare could be conducted across multiple domains simultaneously.
7. Qiao and Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 8–12.
8. Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, *Gulf War Air Power Survey: Summary Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 1993), 235–51.
9. Desert Storm demonstrated how coalitions could leverage UN legitimacy and economic sanctions to shape the operational environment before military action. See Thomas G. Mahnken and Barry D. Watts, "What the Gulf War Can (and Cannot) Tell Us about the Future of Warfare," *International Security* 22, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 151–62, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.22.2.151>.
10. Qiao and Wang, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 21–25.
11. The concept of "unrestricted warfare" does not mean warfare without any limits, but rather warfare unconstrained by traditional boundaries between military and nonmilitary activities. The authors argue that maintaining artificial distinctions between these spheres creates strategic vulnerabilities.
12. Supranational combinations represent coordinated actions between state and nonstate actors to achieve strategic effects. During Operation Desert Storm, this manifested primarily through UN sanctions and Coalition military operations, but the authors envisioned broader applications.
13. Qiao and Wang, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 177–79.
14. *Supradomain combinations* refer to orchestrating actions across multiple spheres (military, economic, diplomatic, etc.) to create synergistic effects that compound and re-

- inforce each other. The authors believed Operation Desert Storm demonstrated this potential but did not fully exploit it.
15. Qiao and Wang, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 134–37.
 16. *Supra-means* combinations expand available tools beyond traditional military hardware to include any method capable of achieving strategic effects. This concept reflects traditional Chinese strategic thought about indirect approaches while incorporating modern financial, technological, and nonstate actors.
 17. Qiao and Wang, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 141–46.
 18. While focusing on Chinese perspectives, the authors acknowledged that any actor could potentially employ unrestricted warfare concepts. They specifically warned that nonstate actors might prove particularly adept at coordinating actions across multiple domains.
 19. Qiao and Wang, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 162–66.
 20. Qiao and Wang, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 189–93.
 21. This framework fundamentally reframes competition by shifting focus from matching capabilities to exploiting systemic vulnerabilities through coordinated multidomain operations. This approach particularly appeals to actors facing technologically superior adversaries.
 22. Qiao and Wang, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 199–202.
 23. The authors drew heavily from Sun Tzu’s concept that “supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.” Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1963), chap. 3. They saw unrestricted warfare as a modern application of this principle using twenty-first century tools and methods.
 24. Qiao and Wang, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 208–10.
 25. John R. Boyd, “Destruction and Creation” (unpublished paper, 3 September 1976), 1–9.
 26. Chet Richards, “Boyd’s OODA Loop,” *Necessé* 5, no. 1 (2020): 142–65; and Boyd, “Destruction and Creation,” 2–3.
 27. *Active information collection* refers to deliberate efforts to gather and filter data rather than passive receipt of information. This requires dedicated resources and attention across all relevant competitive domains.
 28. Richards, “Boyd’s OODA Loop,” 146–47.
 29. Orientation represents the process by which organizations create meaning from observations. It combines cultural traditions, genetic heritage, information, and previous experience to generate understanding.
 30. Boyd, “Destruction and Creation,” 3–4.
 31. Richards, “Boyd’s OODA Loop,” 148.
 32. *Purposeful action* refers to operations designed to shape the competitive environment by affecting both immediate conditions and future possibilities, rather than simply responding to current circumstances.
 33. Richards, “Boyd’s OODA Loop,” 149.
 34. Richards, “Boyd’s OODA Loop,” 149–52; and Boyd, “Destruction and Creation,” 4–5.
 35. Domains encompass all areas where organizations must gather and process information, including physical, electromagnetic, informational, and cognitive realms.
 36. Richards, “Boyd’s OODA Loop,” 150–51.
 37. *Strategic coherence* refers to maintaining alignment between actions at all levels while adapting to changes in the competitive environment.
 38. *Fulcrum* in this context refers to the pivotal point around which competitive advantage is generated and maintained through superior information processing.
 39. *Fingerspitzengefühl* describes an intuitive mastery developed through repeated application of Boyd’s destruction and creation process, enabling rapid and appropriate action without conscious analysis.
 40. Richards, “Boyd’s OODA Loop,” 155–56.
 41. David S. Fadok, *John Boyd and John Warden: Air Power’s Quest for Strategic Paralysis* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1995).

42. *Tempo* refers to the relative rate that organizations can complete effective observation-orientation-decision-action cycles compared to their opponents.
43. Richards, "Boyd's OODA Loop," 157–58.
44. Warden III, "Air Theory for the Twenty-first Century."
45. *Strategic paralysis* refers to rendering an enemy's leadership unable to effectively command and control their forces or respond to attacks, even if those forces remain physically intact.
46. John A. Warden III, "The Enemy as a System," *Airpower Journal* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 40–55.
47. Warden, "The Enemy as a System," 43–44.
48. A system in Warden's model can be any organized entity with clear leadership, essential processes, connecting infrastructure, human elements, and protective mechanisms.
49. Warden, "The Enemy as a System," 45–46.
50. *System essentials* refers to those processes or capabilities without which the system cannot function. Their specific nature varies based on the system being analyzed but always represents critical enabling functions.
51. Warden, "The Enemy as a System," 46–47.
52. The Five Rings maintain consistent functional relationships even as their specific components change based on the system being analyzed. Each ring serves the same role regardless of scale or type of organization.
53. Warden, "The Enemy as a System," 47–48.
54. *Centers of gravity* represent nodes within each ring whose destruction would create disproportionate systematic effects compared to the effort required to attack them.
55. Warden, "Air Theory for the Twenty-first Century," 47–48.
56. *Parallel warfare* represents a departure from traditional "serial" warfare where targets were attacked sequentially. By striking multiple targets simultaneously across different rings, parallel warfare overwhelms an enemy's ability to adapt or repair damage.
57. Warden, "Air Theory for the Twenty-first Century," 238–39.
58. Warden, "The Enemy as a System," 52–53.
59. Cohen and Keaney, "Gulf War Air Power Survey," 240–41.
60. Warden, "The Enemy as a System," 52–53.
61. *Joint Operations*, Joint Publication 3-0 (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2022), I-10–I-12.
62. System components create networks of interdependence where changes in one area necessarily affect multiple other components through cascading effects across domains.
63. Jeffrey S. Lehmkuhl, "Irregular Influence: Combating Malign Chinese Communist Party Actions in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* (15 November 2023): 38–40.
64. Qiao and Wang, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 189–93.
65. Jason English, "Taming the Dragon: Countering China's Asymmetric Warfare," *Babel Street* (blog), accessed 28 August 2025.
66. Warden, "The Enemy as a System," 47–48.
67. Richards, "Boyd's OODA Loop," 146–47.
68. Orientation enables rapid processing of information while maintaining accurate understanding of the competitive environment across all relevant domains.
69. Richards, "Boyd's OODA Loop," 146–47.
70. *Response cycles* refer to the time required to observe, orient, decide, and act in response to changes in the competitive environment. Faster cycles enable maintaining initiative through superior adaptation.
71. Qiao and Wang, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 204–6.
72. Additional committees such as IAC-Russia and IAC-Iran should be considered for other strategic competitors. "What Is the National Security Council?," Council on Foreign Relations, 15 September 2025.
73. Richards, "Boyd's OODA Loop," 155–56.
74. Frank G. Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges," *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (2018): 30–47; and *Summary of the Irregular Warfare*

- Annex to the National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2020), 2.
75. “What Is the National Security Council?” Flattened organizational structure reduces decision-making layers while maintaining coordination across all elements of national power, enabling faster OODA loops in complex operations.
 76. R. Kim Cragin, “Confronting Irregular Warfare in the South China Sea: Lessons Learned from Vietnam,” *Military Review* (November–December 2024): 72–73. Unity of command becomes increasingly critical as competition escalates toward conflict, requiring clear lines of authority while maintaining interagency coordination capabilities.
 77. The IAC-C’s operations align with the doctrinal definition of irregular warfare as employing “the full range of military and other capabilities” to influence populations and erode adversary power through indirect approaches. See *Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy*, 2.
 78. The shift from sequential to concurrent planning reflects lessons from Joint operations. See *Joint Planning*, Joint Publication 5-0 (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2020), III-32–III-35.
 79. Lehmkuhl, “Irregular Influence,” 42–45.
 80. Lehmkuhl, “Irregular Influence,” 42–45.