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**Assess Intermediate Force Capabilities (IFC)
and concept of operations for application
during the Competition Phase in an
environment of GPC**

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NPS NRP Executive Summary

Assess Intermediate Force Capabilities and Concept of Operations for Application During the Competition Phase in an Environment of Great Power Competition

Period of Performance: 10/24/2021 – 09/10/2022

Report Date: 09/15/2021 | Project Number: NPS-22-M342-A

Naval Postgraduate School, Defense Analysis (DA)



NAVAL RESEARCH PROGRAM
NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

ASSESS INTERMEDIATE FORCE CAPABILITIES (IFC) AND CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS FOR APPLICATION DURING THE COMPETITION PHASE IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project Summary

This research examines the potential effects of a set of intermediate force capabilities (IFC) to assess their strategic impact on a near-peer adversary during the competition phase. The effort attempts to gain insights and identify challenges to the employment of IFCs through several venues. Leveraging our defense analysis and operations research department faculty and students, this project conducted a workshop and analytical wargame to capture challenges and opportunities in a plausible great power competition (GPC) “gray zone” scenario. Wargaming assessed potential concepts for Special Operations Forces (SOF) employment of a set of IFC, emerging IFC concepts and technologies, and their implications for operations across the competition continuum.

The research leveraged the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) Warfare Innovation Continuum (WIC) and multiple Joint Campaign Analysis (JCA) and Wargaming Applications courses to develop its insights.

The primary focus of the effort was to determine the operational utility of IFCs for SOF to attain and maintain a position of advantage in the grey zone while deterring lethal conflict escalation. The effort was based on an exchange of ideas between the Joint Intermediate Force Capabilities Office (JIFCO) and NPS researchers to better understand current operational concepts and concerns, and identified two critical JIFCO issues for exploration. The research effort identified that IFCs do have the potential to provide utility to SOF to maintain an advantage in the gray zone, while countering lethal conflict and the risk of using IFCs is not significantly more than the risk associated with the current conduct of SOF doctrinal tasks. However, there are some caveats concerning the perceptions of risk associated with IFCs that may constrain their application

Keywords: *intermediate force capabilities, IFC, great power competition, GPC, wargaming, joint campaign analysis, gray zone, hybrid warfare, Joint Intermediate Force Capabilities Office, JIFCO*

Background

Intermediate force capabilities provide options that enable the warfighter to seize or regain the initiative in confrontational situations where potential adversaries appear to be demonstrating malign behavior. In these situations, IFCs may be appropriate, proportional responses to acts that may appear hostile, but fall short of acts or behaviors justifying the use of deadly force. IFCs represent a strategic risk mitigation investment that are designed to provide our warfighters tools to compete below the level of armed conflict without losing credibility in the information space. The lack of IFC puts the United States in a position of having to accept malign behavior to the point which it becomes “fait accompli” for peer adversarial expansionist objectives. IFCs are intrinsic in their ability to dissuade malign behavior and impose costs on near peer adversaries while minimizing collateral damage to infrastructure and permanent injury to personnel.

The wargames utilized in this work familiarized participants and observers with both IFCs and concepts for employment. Under the NPS WIC construct, an NPS student mini-study team, conducted in the JCA course, informed and underpinned the design and conduct of further research into our research’s two critical JIFCO issues. This mini-study was followed by an NPS faculty-advised student wargaming team in the Wargaming Applications course, that designed, developed, conducted, and analyzed a wargame leveraging the findings from the mini-study. The wargames



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modeled SOF utilization of IFCs in a South China Sea scenario to best posture SOF to deter escalation of events.

The overarching objective of this effort was to determine the operational utility of IFCs for SOF to attain and maintain a position of advantage in the grey zone while deterring lethal conflict escalation.

This effort focused on gaining insights into the following two major issues:

1. What utility do IFCs provide SOF to maintain advantage in the grey zone?
2. What are the risks of using IFCs?

Findings and Conclusions

This effort resulted in the following findings and conclusions for each identified issue.

Issue 1: IFCs do have the potential to provide utility to SOF to maintain an advantage in the gray zone while countering lethal conflict. When appropriately used, IFCs leverage technology to offer SOF increased options to confront adversaries, both state and non-state, and influence malign behavior in low-intensity conflicts or in conflicts below the threshold of violence. The proper use of IFCs hinges upon training, education, dissemination, permissions, and authorities. Furthermore, understanding the operational environment is crucial to ensure the effective use of IFCs and to understand the second and third order effects of potential proliferation of IFCs to host nation or partner forces. Several factors affect the utility of individual IFCs for SOF. These factors include, but are not limited to size, range, platform modularity, simplicity, deniability, and security classification.

Issue 2: The risk of using IFCs is not significantly more than the risk associated with the current conduct of SOF doctrinal tasks. However, there are some caveats concerning the perceptions of risk associated with IFCs that may constrain their application.

The greatest risk of using IFCs is the inability to prevent poor media interactions or malign adversary narratives from creating a counter-productive response that actually increases the risk of violent confrontation or increases the difficulty of accomplishing friendly force objectives.

A lack of education concerning IFCs among the leadership and staff of the Theater Special Operations Commands, coupled with underwhelming risk mitigation methods and the potential for massive negative blowback in the information space reduces the likelihood of tactical SOF elements gaining the necessary permissions from senior commanders to utilize IFCs in the field.

JIFCO should pursue a two-pronged approach for advocating the use of IFCs in SOF. They should approach technical integration support companies with the technology and the Theater Special Operations Commands with recommendations for doctrine, policy, and integrating the advanced technology IFCs JIFCO can provide.

Recommendations for Further Research



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The intermediate force capabilities and potential employment mechanisms are still nascent concepts that require further research to better understand how the special operations forces (SOF) community can use them to operate more effectively to establish a position of advantage, while preventing the escalation of violence. Essentially, these employment mechanisms will need to mature through continued programs of wargaming and campaign analysis research to best serve joint intermediate force capabilities office and the SOF community.

Acronyms

GPC	great power competition
IFC	intermediate force capabilities
JIFCO	Joint Intermediate Force Capabilities Office
JCA	Joint Campaign Analysis
NPS	Naval Postgraduate School
SOF	Special Operations Forces
WIC	Warfare Innovation Continuum

