A Framework for Countering Organised Crime

Strategy, Planning, and the Lessons of Irregular Warfare

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CISA   College of International Security Affairs

COA   Course of Action

COG   Centre of Gravity

CVs   Critical Vulnerabilities

E-W-M   Ends-Ways-Means

FARC   *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*

IW   Irregular Warfare

LOE   Line of Effort

MDMP   military decision-making process

Summary

During the initial phase of our SOC ACE research, we identified challenges common to both counterterrorism and to combating organised crime. On the basis of these commonalities, we introduced an 'Irregular Warfare lens' to better assess and respond to organised crime. With counterterrorism, this lens has helped place the problem of violence within its essential *political* context and as a component of a struggle of *legitimacy*, with fundamental implications for response. A similar reorientation, we argued, is necessary for organised crime (Ucko & Marks, 2022c).

In this second phase, we propose an analytical framework, designed for irregular warfare challenges, to aid assessment of, as well as response to, organised crime. This framework – the Framework of Analysis and Action – builds on an instructional method long used within the College of International Security Affairs (CISA), at the U.S. National Defense University, to prepare practitioners for insurgency, terrorism, and state-based subversion. It has proven utility, both in the classroom and in the field. In this report, it is adapted specifically for organised crime, to guide those charged with responding to this challenge with their analysis and planning.

The Framework of Analysis and Action offers a sequence of prompts, informed by two decades of experience, both positive and negative, with irregular warfare. It consists of two parts: the Strategic Estimate of the Situation (which maps the problem, explores its drivers, frames, and strategies, and critiques the current response) and the Course of Action (which uses the strategic estimate to design an appropriate strategy, complete with a theory of success and an assessment of assumptions, legal authority, metrics, phasing, and risk mitigation).

A key function of the framework is to position security challenges within their social, political, and informational contexts. For organised crime, this involves *mapping* the relevant actors, their behaviour, and their placement within a unique political-economic system. Appropriately, the first question within this framework is 'what is the problem?'. It then guides the user through the steps necessary to craft *a course of action* that is responsive to the assessment and features all relevant components of strategy.

To assist application, this report walks through each section of the adapted framework. Throughout, reference is made to cases of organised crime to demonstrate the insight thus gained. We welcome the implementation of this framework to both historical and contemporary problem sets and anticipate thereby its continued evolution as a practitioner's toolkit. An abbreviated 'user's guide' for the framework is included in Appendix A to facilitate its rapid employment.

1. Introduction

Despite the efforts of many, and the occasional operational success, the effort to counter organised crime is not going well. According to the 2021 Global Organized Crime index, 'the global illicit economy simply continue[s] along the upward trajectory it has followed over the past 20 years, posing an ever-increasing threat to security, development and justice – the pillars of democracy' (Global Initiative, 2021, p. 8). Wherever governments seek to draw the line, criminal actors find profitable ways of crossing it; wherever governments fail to deliver on human need, criminal actors capitalise on citizens' desire or despair. As of now, more than three-quarters of the world's population 'live in countries with high levels of criminality, and in countries with low resilience to organized crime' (Global Initiative, 2021, p. 12). On aggregate, the associated activity amounts to an illicit form of governance, furnishing alternative services to a wide range of clients, be they the vulnerable and weak or a covetous elite.

The breadth of organised crime, its clandestine nature, and its blending of creative and destructive effects make it difficult to counter. In past SOC ACE research, we argued that the response to organised crime often shares certain pitfalls with counterterrorism, at least since 9/11 (Ucko & Marks, 2022c). Both efforts have been stymied by 1) conceptual uncertainty of the problem at hand; 2) an urge to address the scourge head-on (be it violence or crime), without acknowledging its socioeconomic-political context; and, therefore, 3) unquestioned pursuit of strategies that miss the point, whose progress is difficult to measure, and which may even be counterproductive. This convergence is based on the common features of the two phenomena, which are both concerned with i) collective actors, who ii) use violence and coercion among other methods; and who have iii) corrupting, or outright destructive effects on society. Though organised crime is not consciously political in its ideological motivation, it is – like terrorism – deeply political in its origins, activities, and effects.

Given the conceptual overlap, and the common pathologies that undermine response, the lessons from countering terrorism are relevant also to the countering of organised crime. Focusing on the concept of 'irregular warfare', our past research identified six key lessons, touching upon 1) the socio-political embeddedness of the problem, 2) the tendency to militarise the response, 3) the mirror-imaging of state assistance programmes, 4) the invaluable role of community mobilisation, 5) the dearth of strategy, and 6) the need to engage more closely with questions of political will. As argued elsewhere, these challenges point to a need for greater strategic competence both in assessing the problem of organised crime and in designing a response (Ucko & Marks, 2022c).

To generate this strategic competence, this follow-on report sets out an analytical toolkit to assist planners and policymakers with the crafting of strategy. This 'Framework of Analysis and Action' builds upon lessons – negative and positive – learned via years of experience with irregular warfare, defined by the Department of Defense as 'a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant

population(s)' (U.S. Department of Defense, 2007, p. 1).[1] It is a framework that finds its origins within the U.S. National Defense University's College of International Security Affairs (CISA), where for two decades it has been used to teach strategic planning for complex and intensely political challenges (Ucko & Marks, 2022a).

The framework consists of two parts: the Strategic Estimate of the Situation (which maps the problem, explores its drivers, frames, and methods, and critiques the current response) and the Course of Action (which uses the strategic estimate to design an appropriate strategy, guided by a theory of success). The framework is in this report adapted for organised crime, to enable the *mapping* of relevant actors and the *crafting*, thereby, of a viable response. By design, the framework responds to the six key lessons identified in our earlier work.

This report goes through the framework and explains its adaptation to organised crime. Appendix A provides a summation of the toolkit, a 'user's guide', that will facilitate application of the framework. Testing to date suggests great potential and we look forward to sustaining a dialogue with those engaged with countering organised crime to further evolve this toolkit. Indeed, since the beginning, this framework has been a living product, enriched by theoretical application in the classroom and practical use in the field.

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[1] Though the U.S. Department of Defense is currently updating this definition, it remains by far the most helpful elucidation of the challenge found in doctrine (Ucko & Marks, 2022b).

2. The Framework of Analysis and Action: background and adaptation

The concept of 'Irregular Warfare' emerged from the realisation that terrorism has context – and that context matters. Terrorism – sub-state actors using or threatening violence against civilian targets for the purpose of political communication – can take on entirely new significance depending on the group's social and political standing, the sophistication of its strategy beyond the 'senseless' attacks, and – most fundamentally – its legitimacy, or mobilising potential. 'Irregular Warfare' sought to capture these dynamics. The term was intended to help move beyond the narrow confines of a 'War on Terror' and force consideration of the 'struggle for legitimacy' underlying the violence.

The Framework of Analysis and Action takes this issue of context as its inspiration. It places the terrorist act within its broader strategy, queries the structural conditions that determine legitimacy, and assesses the resonance of the group's narratives among contested audiences, thereby to design a comprehensive response to a truly political problem. Thus, while the framework was developed to tackle issues of terrorism, its most fundamental role is to help identify when terrorism is but part of an *insurgency*, and what this implies for response. Indeed, as the Pentagon once recognised, 'insurgency and counterinsurgency are at the core of IW' (Department of Defense, 2007, p. 10). This is an important distinction, in that contrary to terrorism, countering insurgency involves 'comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency *and address its root causes*' (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018, p. xiii - emphasis added). The point is that, if the insurgent's rebellion exploits structural or systemic issues to gain strength, the response must be similarly political and mobilising.

Just how to orchestrate that response is the focus of the second half of the framework, which leads to the crafting of strategy. With the strategic estimate as a blueprint, a strategy can be developed that addresses the problem within its context, balancing actions to counter the threat with those intended to remove its nourishment. In designing this response, the framework leans heavily on the military's decision-making process (MDMP), particularly its focus on operational design and campaigning. These conceptual tools compel identification of a theory of success, of ends, ways, and means (objectives, methods, and resources), and of relevant metrics, or of how progress may be measured. Assessments of legal authority, planning assumptions, and risk and mitigation are also indispensable (yet often missed) components of this decision-making process.

Figure 1: A graphical depiction of the original Framework for Analysis and Action, showing the Strategic Estimate (the assessment) in relation to the Course of Action (the proposed strategy)
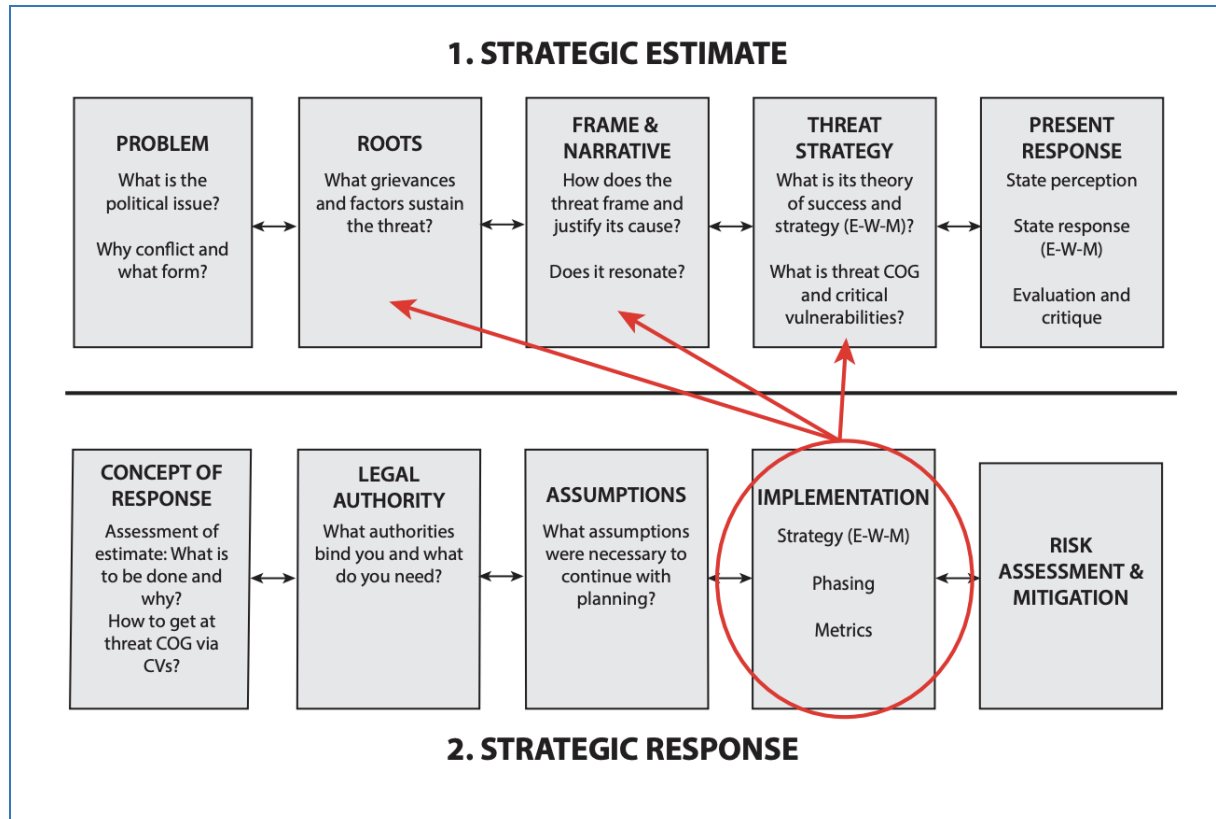
Source: Ucko, D.H. & Marks, T.A. (2022). *Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Analysis and Action*, 2nd ed. National Defense University Press.

If our responses to terrorism and to organised crime share certain pitfalls, and if the above framework was designed to correct for these within the context of counterterrorism, how can it be adapted and applied to contexts of organised crime? The case for relevance rests on the common foundation of terrorism and organised crime in irregular warfare; both speak to a coercive struggle for legitimacy between ostensibly licit and illicit structures. On this basis, the framework has much to offer to our understanding and countering of organised crime. Initially, however, a few potential obstacles must be ironed out.

First, the adaptation requires acknowledging the different political context of organised crime and terrorism or insurgency. Whereas insurgency implies antagonism between the state and its adversary, government actors are often complicit with the problem of organised crime. The issue is primarily one of greed and corruption, whereby criminal influences pervade state structures and incorporate them within the illicit activity. The relationship can go deeper yet, with states using criminal networks to access votes, compete against other states, or to do their dirty work. The very mention of 'conflict' in the framework therefore requires care, as the assumption of a confrontation does not necessarily hold when describing organised crime. Instead, it becomes necessary to track the interplay of systems rather than assume a duel of two antagonistic actors.

This consideration is important but surmountable. Though the framework targets a threat and thereby implies conflict, it does not presuppose that the problem is wholly external to the government – or even cohesive. It does assume an actor behaving in threatening ways – to interests, values, or order – but it is up to the analyst to account for where it is located, what motivates it, how it operates, and what structure it has assumed. Within the mapping of threat strategy, there is ample opportunity to dissect unexpected complicity between licit and illicit actors, or the failure of the government to resist crime's corrupting influence.

A second obstacle concerns the application of the framework's military terminology to civilian contexts. Beyond the rather basic and certainly remediable point that civilians are often unfamiliar with military terminology, the more serious objection concerns the perceived securitisation of how we think of and frame crime. As noted in our earlier work, organised crime already lends itself to a militarisation of response, as governments seek seemingly quick and decisive victories over complex problems. The fear is that by applying military terminology to non-military problems, this bad habit will be reinforced.

On this point, it should be stated that nothing in this framework encourages a militarised or heavy-handed approach to the problem. The language of 'threat' and focus on 'defeating' its strategy do point to an *adversarial logic*, but this orientation is only appropriate given the harm and predation of organised crime (presumably the very reason for assessing the problem at all). In seeking to stop this harm, the framework does not privilege one response over another; that is the task of the analyst. If anything, the framework encourages a more comprehensive tack, in that it compels interrogation of what fuels the problem and of the threat's socio-political legitimacy. Reflecting on these questions should discourage merely palliative or narrowly suppressive approaches, but ultimately the framework only serves analysis, it does not define it.

Left to resolve, then, is the lack of civilian familiarity with the lexicon and tools of military planning. Such familiarity can be helpful, because military doctrine presents a well-honed process for developing strategic assessments and courses of action – one with no real equivalent within the civilian world. The framework seeks to export this process to a bigger audience. Meanwhile, it also broadens the military's approach in two ways: by elevating the focus from operational matters to the strategic level, or where matters of national policy are set; and (accordingly) by incorporating more than just military concerns, reflecting the political nature of the challenge. Thus, whereas the terminology leans on a military lexicon, and requires some familiarity therewith, there is nothing inherently military about the tool or the analysis it yields.

A final comment on usability: this framework presents a series of prompts, presented in a sequence found to optimise analysis and response to irregular warfare challenges. On this basis, the framework enables *interrogation* of a problem, but it is not a checklist. Though it forces attention to key questions, it is the user who must weave together the relevant data, make the case, and draw appropriate conclusions. The framework should unlock strategic, creative, and critical thinking; it is not a substitute for analysis.

With this introduction, the rest of this paper adapts and explains the Framework of Analysis and Action and, thereby, provides a guide for crafting strategy to counter organised crime. Appendix A provides a 'user's guide' that lends itself to quick application.

3. The Strategic Estimate of the Situation

To French Marshal Ferdinand Foch, strategy was fundamentally about applying knowledge to real life; hence his key question, *de quoi s'agit-il?*, or 'What is it all about?' (Général de Lattre, 1949, p. 588). In practice, however, the strategic process often begins with identifying solutions rather than problems, resulting in interventions that are 'blind to context, and politics in particular' (Marquette & Peiffer, 2022, p. 473). This approach is as counterproductive as it is common (Andrews et al., 2012, p. 237).

To encourage a better starting point, the Framework for Analysis and Action devotes its first half to developing a Strategic Estimate of the Situation. Within military terminology, an estimate is an assessment of a problem that allows for and informs planning; the 'situation', in turn, is simply the set of circumstances that are to be assessed. In all cases, the estimate unpacks the problem, places it in political context, and maps the strategies of its various players, including the state. The point is to identify relevant opportunities and obstacles to help design a better way.

This endeavour can be time-consuming and difficult, but it is also indispensable – particularly when the 'situation' is ambiguous and complex, as is the case with most irregular challenges. Analysis of terrorism is readily politicised: witness the United Nations' inability to even define the term. On organised crime, Skaperdas suggests that 'perhaps the hardest aspect of the struggle…, before even one begins to talk about the engineering of the problem, is *assessing reality*' (Skaperdas, 2001, p. 180). In both contexts, analytical clarity confronts the clandestine nature of the challenge, its entrenchment within a complex political economy, and the normative biases that subvert understanding.

Figure 2: Graphical representation of the Strategic Estimate section of the framework, as adapted for organised crime.
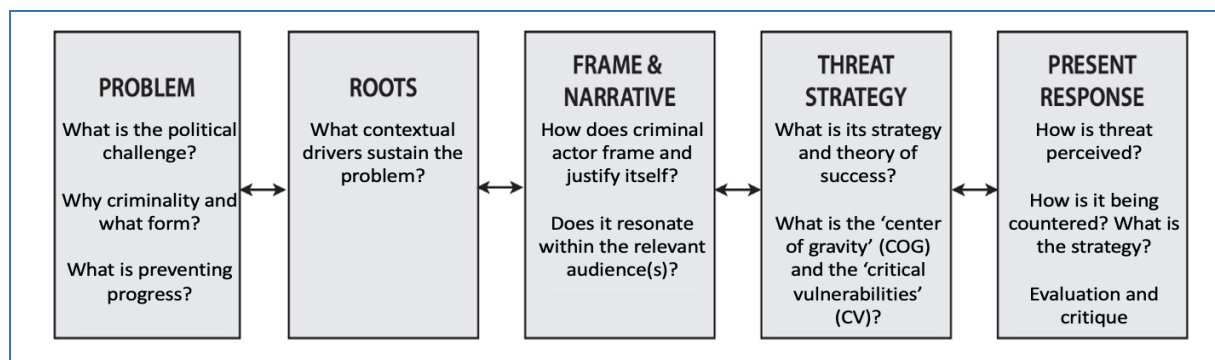
The strategic estimate breaks down these complex problems into five components, represented in Figure 2 as boxes, so as to inspire and justify the response proposed through the framework's second half. Specifically, the strategic estimate defines the problem, its societal and political drivers, its expression, and its functions, along with the role of the present response in shaping the problem. The following section explains how.

3.1. Problem statement

The intent of this first step is to capture, concisely and precisely, the essence of the problem. This summation of a complex challenge into a brief problem statement is important, not only to aid communication, but – more fundamentally – because the distillation of knowledge is itself a strategic exercise of prioritisation. What is it that truly matters, why, and to whom?

Identifying the problem is deceptively difficult, as the answer is so subjective. It may relate to the criminal act itself, or to deeper issues fostering criminality as a symptom, or to the reasons why the state is unable or unwilling to respond. Is illegal migration the problem, or is it the economic disparity fuelling this phenomenon, or the revenue collected by predatory smugglers? Is the problem the existence of gangs, their use of violence, their trading in drugs, or their corruption of officials – or is it the state's loss of control? The framing of the problem will inform the strategy and the definition of success. As such, crafting the problem statement forces the mind to prioritise and be precise.

Beyond the analytical difficulties of unravelling that puzzle, practitioners also tend to engage with problem identification in a very siloed way or in a manner driven by position and mandate. In other words, the analyst may be tasked with but a component of the problem (drugs, human trafficking, or smuggling, as opposed to the political drivers fuelling these crimes) and this narrow scope will limit the response. The bureaucratic segmentation of analysis is itself a problem because criminality, in its methods and effects, seldom fits within the siloes thus created.

The Framework of Analysis and Action seeks to address this challenge by encouraging the emplacement of problematic behaviour (be it terrorism or criminal activity) within its social and political context, to highlight in turn the need for cross-cutting actions by way of response. Through the boxes that follow the problem statement, the analyst is asked to identify specifically the drivers of the problem, the contending narratives of legitimation, and the broader functions of crime in society – as well as the role of the response in shaping the problem. The intent of this analytical journey is to challenge the analyst's pre-existing biases and assumptions, to foster a more comprehensive assessment of the threat, and to point towards more strategic engagement. It follows that while it is placed first, the problem statement cannot be completed until the other components of the strategic estimate have been interrogated. This first box is the synopsis rather than a starting point for analysis.

3.2. Roots

In past research, we emphasised the socio-political embeddedness of organised crime, namely, its structural drivers and legitimising functions within a particular context. This type of perspective, also known as a political economy lens (Berdal & Sherman, 2023), speaks to the 'roots' of the problem, or the forces that perpetuate or enable harmful behaviour and which will probably require redress as part of any effective response.

MacGuire proposes this type of analysis for poaching and ivory trafficking in Kenya. The 'key drivers' that sustain this criminal behaviour, he suggests, 'broadly constitute the

endemic corruption of Kenyan politics, the ethnically fragmented nature of the Kenyan polity and society, high levels of socioeconomic marginalisation and the prevalence of small arms' (Maguire, 2017, p. 65). Unless somehow addressed, these factors are likely to perpetuate the problem, regardless of any palliative remedy. Similarly, the roots of drug trafficking in Rio de Janeiro can be seen in the socioeconomic exclusion of the *favelas*, the internalised helplessness of the local population, extensive government corruption, and abusive security operations (Ramos da Cruz & Ucko, 2018, pp. 39–43). Enforcement activity that does not address these factors will struggle to stem the flow of new recruits into drug-trafficking gangs.

Addressing drivers is never easy, but it is often necessary. The difficulty lies in identifying which roots are analytically meaningful, neither downplaying nor overstating their effect. Because crime is often about enrichment, it is for example tempting to reduce root causes to a discussion either of greed or of poverty. Yet while deprivation may lead to desperation, and thereby to crime, clearly not all poor people are criminals, and many criminals are not poor. Similarly, while greed is a common *motivation*, it is activated by perceived *opportunity*, which forces more careful analysis. Indeed, arriving at specific answers requires identifying the *intervening variables*, such as demographic details, geographic location, or socioeconomic opportunity, that vary the effect of structural realities across populations. This approach forces consideration of both the push and pull factors for criminal involvement, which may include perceptions of impunity, a dearth of licit options, or outside sponsorship of the criminal activity. Such dissection is crucial to avoid mistargeted interventions.

Social movement theory provides a useful lexicon for the task. It proposes three analytical lenses, the relationship of which helps determine the role of context (*macro*) in fuelling individual participation (*micro*) in collective efforts at change (*meso*). The better this relationship is understood, the easier it is to discern societal embeddedness, and the more precisely root causes can be targeted. This also means acknowledging that motivation for criminal behaviour will vary across the network or organisation, with leaders and followers responding to different stimuli. The key is to understand these nuances, to identify the drivers, so as to design a workable response.

If identifying roots is difficult, addressing them is harder still. We will return to this topic in our discussion of response, but two points already bear noting. First, the purpose of the 'roots' analysis is to inform a response: the greater clarity and precision in our diagnosis, the less likely it is that our interventions will be mistargeted. This mindset should drive analysis in this part of the framework. Second, because resolving entrenched societal problems is usually very complex, the response may aim to foster resilience rather than remove the driver itself. This may mean creating alternative mechanisms for coping with structural realities, rather than expecting the latter to be resolved. Severing the bonds between criminal networks and their clients, providing possibilities for self-sustainment and protection away from the criminal enterprise, or restoring faith in the licit system as opposed to its illicit counterparts will all help address the effects of root causes, even if the latter remain in place. Either way, none of this is easy.

3.3. Frames and narratives

This section helps identify the storyline used to legitimise criminal behaviour, or how those involved view their actions. Understanding such justification is important, as it can help with building convincing counternarratives or alternative visions that might channel behaviour.

Social movement theory again provides a valuable method via its work on *framing*, or the process of attributing meaning to events (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, pp. 74–88). The metaphor of a frame is apposite, as the stories we tell also concentrate our minds on one aspect of reality, while excluding the rest, producing a curated impression for a particular effect. To help understand this process, social movement theory proposes three frames or lenses through which reality is viewed: the diagnostic explains what is wrong and (most critically) whom to blame; the prognostic pushes for a solution or way out; and the motivational encourages personal participation despite risk and sacrifice. Each plays a key role in changing perception and behaviour.

In the case of criminal groups, the diagnostic frame most commonly focuses on the lack of legitimate options. Gangs, for example, typically present a primitive ideology of societal exclusion and marginalisation (Skaperdas, 2001, p. 185). Blame is placed on the government and system, which are cast as uncaring and corrupt. This lens sets up a prognostic frame that posits crime as just, as necessary, or as excused by the failures of the system. The motivational frame, meanwhile, compels the involvement of others in this criminal enterprise, perhaps by emphasising solidarity with a constructed 'in group,' a cause bigger than oneself, and the great benefits that come with participation. Gang colours, signs, and other shibboleths are mobilised to sustain participation even in the face of risk (Arias, 2014, 2017). A sense of honour, power, and strength is mobilised to foment an incredibly strong sense of belonging between the individual and the group.

Though the exact messages and areas of emphasis will differ, all political narratives are informed by these three frames. Even where the narrative has not been made explicit – in a manifesto, or even more informally – they exist, as an implicit rationale for action. By deconstructing these narratives, or storylines, we can understand how the collective actor of concern links structure with agency and justifies its own transgressions. We can then assess which component, or components, appear to resonate most, or 'sell', among contested audiences, be it through ethnographic research, polling, or big-data analysis of social media trends. Needless to say, such analysis also requires identifying which audiences are of greatest concern. From then on, the response can engage more precisely with the struggle for legitimacy that lies at the heart of irregular warfare.

3.4. Threat strategy

Mapping the threat strategy is essential to understanding the adversary, what it is attempting to achieve, and how. It also serves as a blueprint for the response that is to follow, as it can then be keyed to the identified strengths and weaknesses of the strategy it is targeting. The question as concerns organised crime is whether we can speak of these actors as pursuing a 'strategy'. The term implies intentionality and design, and it

may be argued that, in contrast with ideological or political actors, criminal groups lack a concrete plan or end-state. It is a fair point but does not undermine the methodology.

Even if it is not clear or articulated, and even if it is not terribly effective, all collective entities follow a plan – it is simply how they operate. Criminal actors may have no political objective, but they do seek profit and that presumes an approach or business model. The approach may not be advertised, but in this respect, criminal outfits are akin to other irregular or clandestine actors: all seek a predictable, supportive, rules-based environment to operate in, which almost always means influencing or subverting the system at hand. Thus, the challenge lies in surveying the totality of actions taken and to deduce from the whole the underlying strategy, which in turn can inform our response.

Mapping a strategy requires methodology. The Framework of Analysis and Action leans on the tools of U.S. military doctrine, which defines strategy as the relationship between ends, ways, and means (Lykke, 1989, p. 3), or how resources are used to attain goals. It is a helpful model, particularly if elevated from its typically narrow military application to consider the range of activity at the strategic level.

Beginning with the ends, or goals, the question may seem self-evident for criminal groups, which are literally defined by their illicit pursuit of profit. And yet, there is reason to dig deeper. A group such as the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) certainly sought profit, but this goal coexisted with an ideological project, complicating the assessment of strategic objectives. For poaching networks in Kenya and elsewhere, are the criminal actors driven by raw profiteering or a search for subsistence (Humphreys & Smith, 2017, pp. 32–37)? If corruption is the crime, is it used to generate profit, to subvert institutions, or as an accepted, if technically illegal, way to get things done (Blundo & Olivier de Sardan, 2006; Walton, 2013)? Clearly, for criminal groups, the objectives vary, even if profit will typically be an important part of the whole.

For the ways, or methods, the first step is to query the overall *strategic approach*. What is the strategy and how does it work? Is it localised or transnational, violent or non-violent, clandestine or overt? As but one example of possible variance, Cockayne and Pfister distinguish between criminal groups that are 'predatory', in that they 'prey upon the resources of authority structures, in open conflict with them'; 'parasitic', in that a group preys but in a sustainable manner; or 'symbiotic', in that they 'coexist with existing authority structures', either through overlaps or outright complicity (Cockayne & Pfister, 2008, p. 18). The wording will vary, but a crucial part is determining the actor's theory of success, or how it aims – over time – to achieve its goals (Hoffman, 2020). Such an assessment can in turn reveal how to engage.[2]

The next step is to map out the strategy in greater detail. While law enforcement will often focus squarely on the criminal behaviour, the latter is often supported or enabled by, or in other ways related to, other activities whose role must also be understood.

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[2] For example, to continue with the typology suggested by Cockayne and Pfister, symbiotic actors 'may be more open to political settlements that bring favorable economic payoffs', whereas predatory actors are less likely to be interested in formal state integration and may require a heavier emphasis on criminal justice (Cockayne & Pfister, 2008, p. 18).

Where does the criminal enterprise find its workforce? How does it shape the environment? How does it cultivate allies and partners? How do coercion or corruption contribute to the strategy? Mapping the strategy helps answer these questions.

Mapping a threat group's strategy involves accounting for its various actions, which can be daunting and overwhelm analysis. The framework uses specific prompts to help locate and order relevant information. These are based on the study of past irregular conflicts (for the aetiology of this approach, see the work of Thomas A. Marks, such as Marks, 2005, 2007). It is proposed that an insurgent strategy involves *five* possible components. Mobilise people and resources *politically*, and find the issues to which they will rally. Simultaneously, win over domestic *allies* who will support the cause on tactical issues even if they hesitate to do so strategically. Use *violence* as appropriate to the situation to enable these two fundamentally political activities. Use *non-violence*, such as subversion, propaganda, offers of negotiations, or inducements, to make violence more effective. And *internationalise* the struggle, making it difficult to contain or terminate within national borders.

These components inspire five questions that must be asked of any challenge of political violence. Adapted to the context of organised crime, they read:

- What, if anything, is the threat doing *politically* to bring about its desired objectives?
- How, and why, is the threat using external *enablers* to reach its objectives?
- How, and why, is the threat using *violence* in service of its criminal activity?
- How, and why, is the threat using *non-violence* in service of its criminal activity?
- How, and with what effect, is the threat *internationalising* its criminal enterprise?

When interrogated, these prompts help identify relevant activity (beyond just the criminal behaviour). The next step is to organise the resulting data in a way that helps analysis of strategy. Given the breadth of uncovered activity, it becomes important to 'nest', or organise, the data, so that actions are grouped within their logical category. The field of military design is helpful, given its defined levels of analysis: tactical activity exists within operational categories, and operational categories contribute to a strategic purpose. Distinguishing between these levels helps to map the strategy, so that its structure and content can inform the design of response.

Mapping can be done bottom up (from the tactical to the strategic) or top down (the other way around). Either way, tactical activity (or the specific example of actions taken) is grouped within conceptual *campaigns*, or bundles of activity, based on a common intent or character. These operational campaigns are then grouped together in a *line of effort* (LOE), a major pillar of the strategy with its own purpose. The resulting hierarchy of actions is demonstrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3: The logical relationship among ends, ways, campaigns, and means.
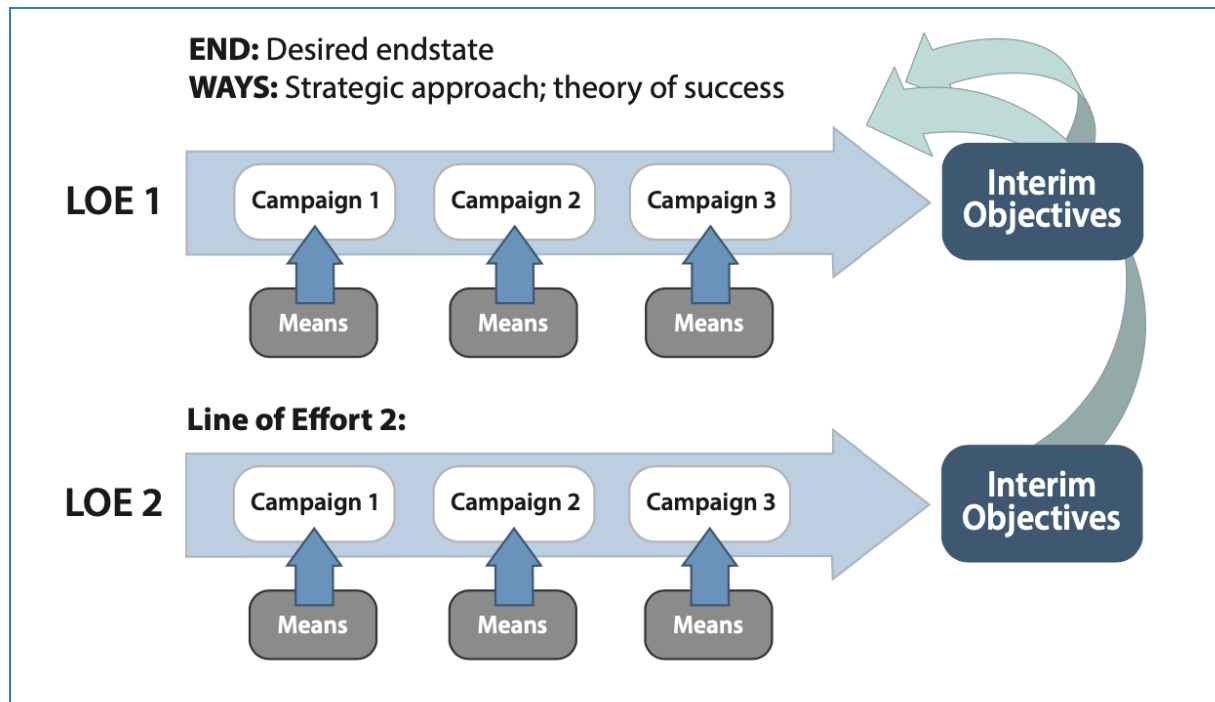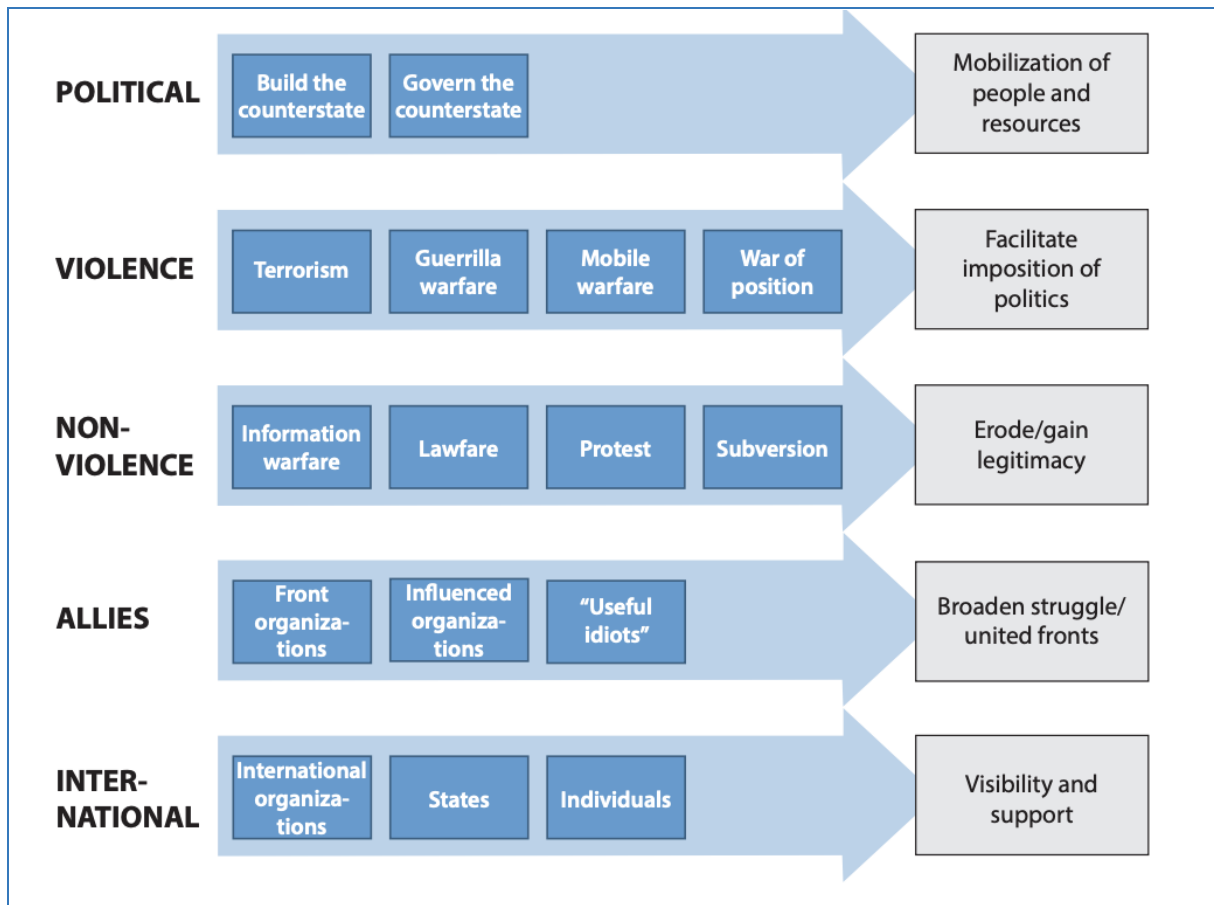

Source: Ucko, D.H. & Marks, T.A. (2022). *Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Analysis and Action*, 2nd ed. National Defense University Press.

As an example, various violent tactics (suicide bombings, improvised explosive devices, shootings) might be grouped within a conceptual *campaign of terrorism*. That campaign may then feature alongside other violent campaigns ('guerrilla warfare' and/or 'mobile warfare'), each of which has a specific character and purpose. The alignment of various violent campaigns may produce one violent line of effort (LOE), which ties together all that the group is doing violently and explains its strategic rationale. As another example, an LOE devoted to 'resource acquisition' may encompass campaigns of donations, remittances, extortion, and taxation. The latter campaign may then, conceptually, comprise sub-campaigns structured around the main targets of taxation: merchants, traders, households, or visitors.

The method relies on 'nesting', or the grouping and placement of activity within its relevant category. The result is a map of the strategy, which can be assessed from the bird's eye view (the lines of effort, demonstrating the strategic pillars and their objectives), from the operational perspective of conceptual campaigns (the main content of each LOE, also known as operational art), or from a tactical perspective of specific types of activity. Figure 4 provides a visual representation of this method down to the campaign level, using as the example a generic insurgency group (*sub-campaigns* could in theory be used to order further the tactical content of each campaign). Though this diagram does not feature the *means* used to resource the strategy, these would logically populate each campaign and should be identified, as doing so can help determine areas of strength and weakness and how the actor has specialised for particular tasks.

Figure 4: A standard insurgent strategy, mapped as lines of effort and campaigns.

POLITICAL	Build the counterstate	Govern the counterstate			Mobilization of people and resources
VIOLENCE	Terrorism	Guerrilla warfare	Mobile warfare	War of position	Facilitate imposition of politics
NON-VIOLENCE	Information warfare	Lawfare	Protest	Subversion	Erode/gain legitimacy
ALLIES	Front organizations	Influenced organizations	"Useful idiots"		Broaden struggle/ united fronts
INTER-NATIONAL	International organizations	States	Individuals		Visibility and support

Source: Ucko, D.H. & Marks, T.A. (2022). *Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Analysis and Action*, 2nd ed. National Defense University Press.

Figure 5 applies this method to a criminal organisation, namely the Brazilian gang Comando Vermelho. The mapping is based on the organisation's strategy in the late 2010s, when it dominated Rio de Janeiro's favelas. At this time, the government response to the gang focused near-exclusively on its drug trafficking, but as revealed by applying the method above, Comando Vermelho's strategy was more complex. Certainly, it trafficked drugs, but the gang also used a political LOE to provide basic state functions, including governance, taxation and arbitration, to gain local legitimacy (Sullivan, 2013); a violent LOE to strengthen its rule; and a non-violent LOE to corrupt and subvert Rio's politics. The totality of the strategy is what made it so difficult, even futile, to address the drug trafficking in isolation (Dowdney, 2003, p. 53).

Figure 5: A mapping of the operational art of Comando Vermelho, late 2010s
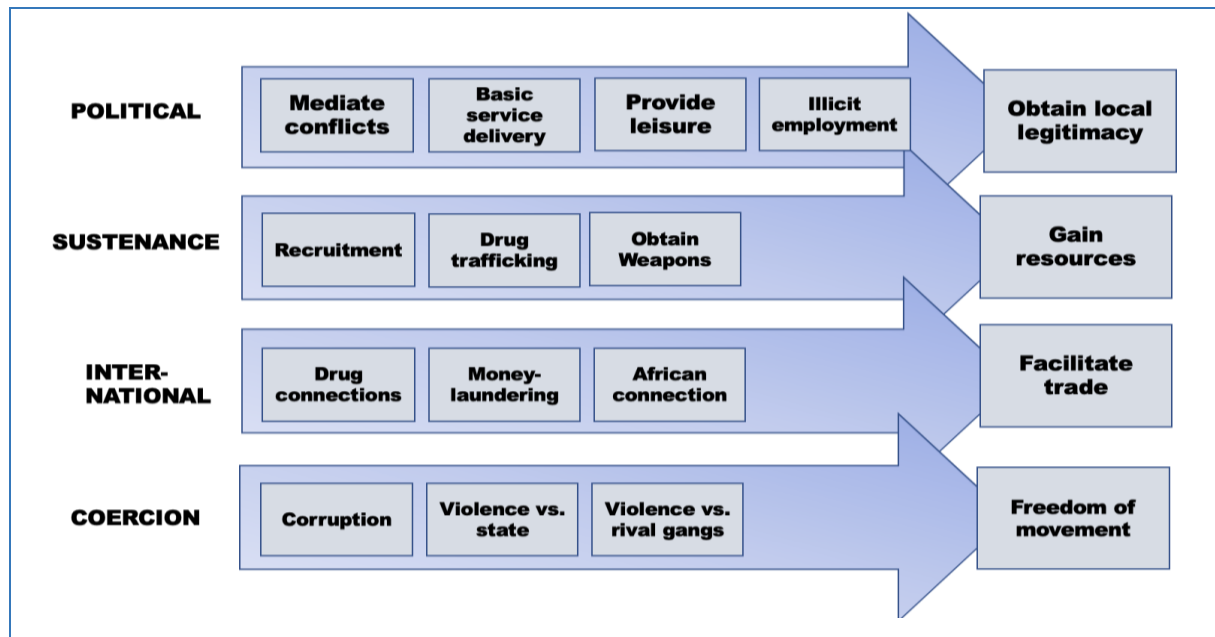
Source: Ucko, D.H. & Marks, T.A. (2022). *Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Analysis and Action*, 2nd ed. National Defense University Press.

As indicated by Figure 5, the names of the LOEs and of the campaigns will vary depending on the case. Regardless, when a blueprint has been achieved, the next step is to assess the strategy for its strengths and weaknesses. In military doctrine, this type of assessment involves the determination of a *centre of gravity* (COG), or of a central source of cohesion and power without which the entire strategy would collapse (Echevarria, 2007, p. 182). Given the socio-political nature of irregular warfare, it seldom offers up a physical target that, if struck, will generate a decisive blow. Instead, it is necessary to query the intangible dimensions of the situation, so as to give meaningful direction to the strategy that will follow.

Given that irregular warfare is a struggle for legitimacy, it is often here that one finds the COG. Legitimacy, in this context, determines the 'beliefs and attitudes of the affected actors regarding the normative status of a rule, government, political system or governance regime' (Schmelzle, 2012, p. 7). Be it phrased in terms of *common interests*, *united fronts*, *ideological appeal*, *support*, or *credibility*, what matters is the recognised right to lead and the normative power to shape behaviour over time. With legitimacy, there is strong potential for mobilisation – of people, allies, support, and momentum. Without legitimacy, the cost of doing business is dramatically increased, as are the efforts required to sustain new political realities.

Legitimacy matters to criminal enterprises, as they must coerce or compel individuals to cooperate. Even where the criminal groups are predatory, they succeed because of a lack of state legitimacy – because the state's normative influence and power are too weak. Left in the middle are relevant populations and actors, who calculate based on interests and affinity and act accordingly. If a response can affect these calculations and achieve sustained influence, it will win the struggle of legitimacy and enable success – yet this is of course far easier said than done.

Because affecting legitimacy is difficult (it may require repairing the state's relationship with its own people), inroads must be developed gradually to finally gain access. To this end, it is helpful to query the mapped strategy for 'critical vulnerabilities' – chinks in the armour through which the beating heart of the problem can be struck. As defined in U.S. military doctrine, a *critical vulnerability* is a component 'deficient or vulnerable to direct or indirect attack that will create decisive or significant effects' (U.S. Department of Defense, 2021, p. 54). Many targets are important but not vulnerable, while some are vulnerable but not important. The task lies in finding the overlap to produce an initial attack that may start to affect matters of legitimacy.

The strategic estimate can help in this effort. Looking at the roots of the problem (the drivers of mobilisation), the frame and narrative (the threat's worldview), and the threat strategy (its operationalisation of ends, ways, and means), we can discern the weak points and poor connections in the approach. These may be mismatches between frames and strategy (what is said versus what is done), between roots and strategy (what fuels legitimacy versus the threat's mediation of grievances), or between components of the threat strategy itself (misalignments of objectives, approach, and resources). These, then, are the vulnerabilities that initial efforts can strike to build a better strategic position for subsequent action.

3.5. Present response

Having dissected the problem, we turn to a critique of the present response. A dispassionate assessment of current practice is necessary to identify what is already being tried, why, and whether it is working. Only thus can a better response be proposed.

In assessing the present response, a basic question is which response and actor the analysis should focus on. The answer depends on who is using the tool and why. Since organised crime is typically a transnational challenge and requires a range of actors to respond, it is highly unlikely that whatever response is being assessed will be the sum total of the strategy or unfold in isolation. Instead, the key will be to assess the relevant actor's contribution to the whole, so that the same actor can improve its response, not just in attacking the problem but also in working better with others.

This analysis involves three steps. First, what is this actor's *perception* of the problem and of its own purpose in responding to it? What is the lens through which the issue is tackled, and is it seen as a priority? Second, what is the *strategy* currently being attempted? A key concern is identifying, even if it is unstated, the current 'theory of success', or the hypothesis informing the effort. This context helps explain the strategy, not as a list of actions, but as an approach undergirded by logic – even if it is faulty.

The third and most challenging step involves critiquing the response. Is the perception correct? Is the response neglecting (or overestimating) the peril at hand? This interrogation leads naturally to a critique of the strategy itself. What within the response is working and what are its weaknesses? Are there key roots, or parts of the threat strategy, that are being missed? Do we understand what motivates the criminal actor and those who rely on its functions? If the response is not making evident progress, does

this relate to perceptions of interests, resource limitations, the wrong approach, or the right approach applied on too small a scale? If the strategic estimate identified a centre of gravity and critical vulnerabilities, does the present response address them?

In explaining a response's lack of success, analysis should consider the key variables of political will (motivation) and capacity (opportunity). Limitations in either, or in both, must be acknowledged before bold new strategies are suggested. A lack of competence or of interest need not be immutable, but specific measures will be required to address either shortfall. In other words, it may be necessary to 'heal thyself' before seeking new ways of attacking the problem. The question, then, is exactly why the actor charged with response is pursuing a strategy that is evidently not working. On that basis, can we do better?
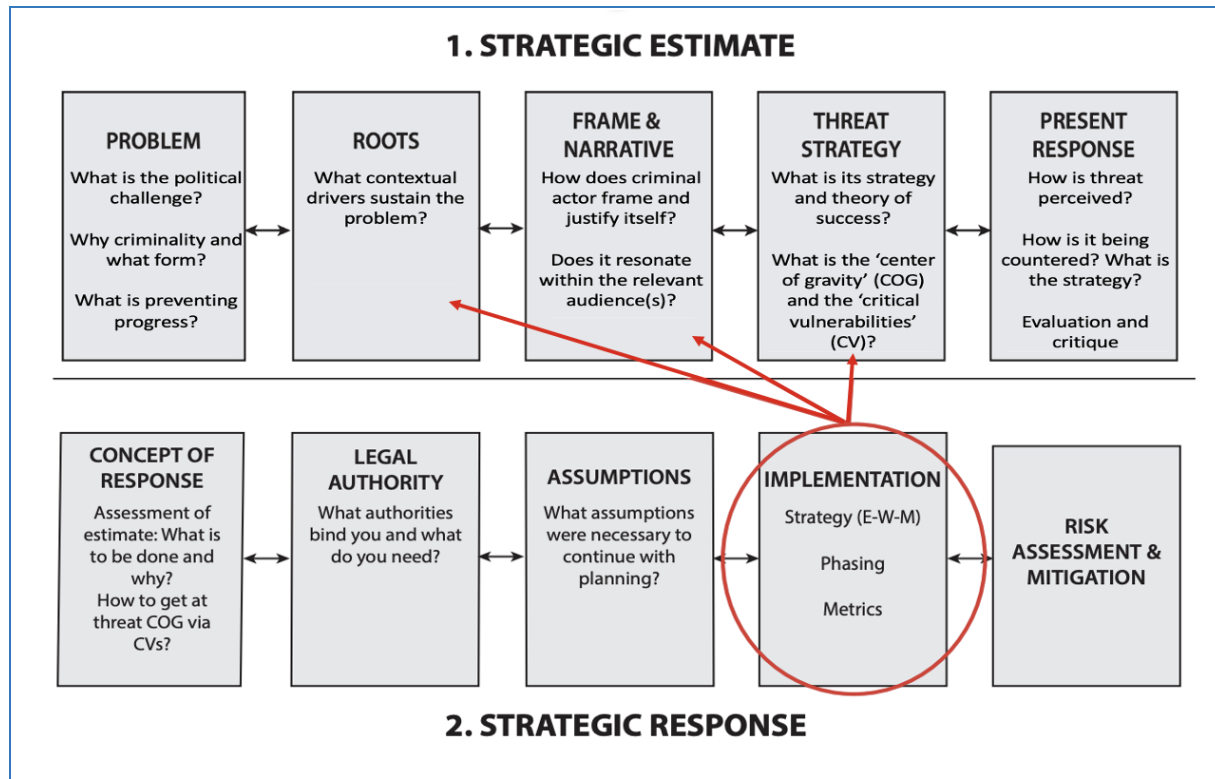
4. The Course of Action (COA)

The second half of the Framework of Analysis and Action uses the Strategic Estimate of the Situation to create a Course of Action (COA). In a world where the term 'strategy' is frequently misused, the utility of this framework lies in ensuring that the proposed response is indeed *strategic*. The key lies again in the prompts, as the second half of the framework requests a clearly defined objective along with a theory of how to get there. Along the way, it also forces the strategist to engage with assumptions, to ascertain legal and cognitive constraints, and to determine the risks and metrics of what is being proposed. In this manner, the framework offers a roadmap for the crafting of strategy, though exactly what that strategy will involve remains the prerogative of the analyst.

The COA half of the framework is again based on the military's decision-making process (MDMP), which is codified in doctrine to guide planning. Though most institutions have a planning method of some type, the MDMP is by some margin the most detailed and operational. This advantage stems in part from the superior resources bestowed upon the military, which allow it to create bespoke entities and processes for planning. Equally so, it reflects the military's mandate to overcome unfamiliar threats in high-stakes environments. The military's toolkit therefore provides a solid blueprint, but it must be adapted for irregular warfare, so that its operational tools may be applied at the strategic level, where matters of policy are set, and account for its non-military aspects.

Much like the strategic estimate, the COA comprises five boxes (see Figure 6). The first – *concept of response* – outlines the proposed strategy, demonstrating the break with current practice. The second concerns *the legal authority* underpinning or required for the proposed response. The third clarifies any *assumptions* that were necessary to allow planning into an uncertain future. The fourth box details the envisaged *implementation* of the strategy across time and space and how its success may be measured. And the fifth box considers the *risks* created by the strategy and their possible mitigation. The remainder of this section goes through these boxes, adapting them to organised crime.

Figure 6: The Strategic Estimate, COA, and their interaction, as adapted to organised crime.

1. STRATEGIC ESTIMATE

PROBLEM	ROOTS	FRAME & NARRATIVE	THREAT STRATEGY	PRESENT RESPONSE
What is the political challenge? Why criminality and what form? What is preventing progress?	What contextual drivers sustain the problem?	How does criminal actor frame and justify itself? Does it resonate within the relevant audience(s)?	What is its strategy and theory of success? What is the 'center of gravity' (COG) and the 'critical vulnerabilities' (CV)?	How is threat perceived? How is it being countered? What is the strategy? Evaluation and critique

CONCEPT OF RESPONSE	LEGAL AUTHORITY	ASSUMPTIONS	IMPLEMENTATION	RISK ASSESSMENT & MITIGATION
Assessment of estimate: What is to be done and why? How to get at threat COG via CVs?	What authorities bind you and what do you need?	What assumptions were necessary to continue with planning?	Strategy (E-W-M) Phasing Metrics	

2. STRATEGIC RESPONSE

4.1. Concept of response

The concept of response provides a *brief synopsis* of the recommended course of action. Using the strategic estimate's critique of the present response as a pivot, this box conveys the change in direction and, in broad terms, its implications. The key is to account for the new strategy's *theory of success*, or why the recommended approach will attain the desired conditions (Hoffman, 2020; Mooney, 2017). What constitutes a good theory of success will always be subjective, though it should be supported by the analysis in the strategic estimate. It might be possible, for example, to demonstrate why the proposed response addresses more effectively (than the present response) the roots, the frames and narrative, and/or the threat strategy. Justification might also relate to the targeting of any strategic centre of gravity or critical vulnerabilities identified. What remains essential is to communicate the overriding logic for the response: why is it not only better but the best way forward given the context at hand (Freedman, 2014)?

To be clear, the best strategy is not the one with the loftiest ideals or greatest ambition, but rather the one that can most viably attain its objectives at an acceptable risk. Added constraints will be found in the actor's determination of interest – as communicated in its official documents, as implicit in its policies or as determined, and argued, by the analyst – and in 'political will', not just of the actor charged with response but of all the implementing parties upon which it will rely. Where political will is at some point lacking, and this is usually the case, the strategy must engage with the potential ways in which it can be affected – and by whom.

Phasing can be a helpful ally when setting out a concept of response and justifying its theory of success. Breaking the response into a sequence allows for piecemeal yet meaningful progress towards an objective that, in the short term, may seem implausible. Of course, the journey across phases is seldom linear, and it is up to the analyst to balance convincingly the short-term imperatives with longer-term ideals. Indeed, trade-offs lie at the heart of strategy, and a good concept of response should demonstrate familiarity with this reality.

4.2. Legal authority

For most licit actors, strategy must be based on legal authority. Acting within the rule of law bestows the legitimacy so critical for irregular warfare, be it for international or domestic audiences. The need to resolve legal ambiguities is also particularly pressing within irregular warfare, given the tendency of these challenges to blur legal lines, employ ambiguity, and cover their tracks. It may be tempting to mirror such disrespect for the rule of law, but doing so will undermine legitimacy. Conversely, establishing and communicating a clear legal case can be a force multiplier, even when (or especially when) engaging against a threat that deliberately rejects this same set of constraints.

Organised crime raises legal difficulties that can subvert the state's response. These may relate to the transnational nature of the problem and the difficulty of coordinating cross-border authorities (Wheatley, 2022). For example, maritime interdiction – be it of trafficking, smuggling, or piracy – must untangle the legal constraints that apply in territorial seas, on the high seas, and ashore, plausibly in loosely governed or fragmented states (Roberts, 2017, p. 226). Elsewhere, governments require legal guidance to target armed gangs operating among civilian populations, to engage effectively without trampling on the rights of the community. Where the level of violence is high, what are the appropriate rules of engagement to balance force protection with population security?

In extremis, where crime meshes with armed conflict, one must identify whether humanitarian international law or human rights law is the more appropriate legal framework, and how these may be combined to account for a fluid or volatile situation. If the criminal entity is capable of fighting off the state or imperils the local population, the state response may at times need to escalate from peacetime law enforcement to military action, to displace the threat and enable the resumption of governance. This type of escalation raises ethical as well as legal dilemmas relating to the use of force, institutional authorities, and the legal status of your adversary.

Colombia's struggle against FARC provides a helpful illustration. When the government in Bogotá ramped up operations against FARC in 2002, it legislated a way of flexibly scaling its legal authorities to the threat, thereby allowing it to switch between international humanitarian law (or the Law of Armed Conflict) and human rights law depending on the operation. Through judicial review of the threat, the state would distinguish between 'operations during hostile scenarios' and 'operations to maintain security'. During the latter, peacetime law enforcement prevailed, making the use of force a last resort. Throughout the former, the state could respond robustly to a well-armed and dangerous adversary – yet even then, the rules of engagement privileged

demobilisation and capture (von der Groeben, 2011).[3] Any switch in legal authorities would also be independently reviewed before and after the act.

Colombia's innovation demonstrates that, for a response to be effective, the laws may need to change. Criminal organisations are adaptive and actively exploit legal loopholes to avoid sanction; as seen with illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing, legal 'forum-shopping' can paralyse the response (Ralby, 2017, p. 132). The state can react to such setbacks by updating its legislation – be it to catch up with evolutions in cybercrime, impose tougher sanctions as deterrence, enact emergency measures in response to crisis, or resolve issues of extraterritorial jurisdiction. A key example of such innovation, used by the U.S. government against the mafia, is RICO legislation (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization), which allowed for broader and more severe punishment of crimes based on their belonging to a common conspiracy.

Though updates to law are sometimes needed, the key is to adapt without undermining the government's perceived legitimacy. Just because something can be ruled legal does not mean that it will be seen as legitimate. In that sense, writing one's own laws is like printing one's own money – another government prerogative: both may appear to be easy solutions but can rapidly backfire. Establishing legal authority, therefore, is an area requiring great care and scrutiny.

4.3. Assumptions

The crafting of strategy is about forecasting, as the analyst suggests actions to be taken and their likely effect. Hence, 'planning' necessarily makes assumptions to bridge gaps in knowledge or control for unknowable variables. Assumptions are necessary but also full of risk. The only way to mitigate this risk is to ensure that assumptions are used responsibly and that they are clearly communicated. It should be clear that if the assumptions prove false, the strategy will require review.

Accounting for assumptions can be challenging. First, making explicit assumptions about the future grants the planner the tantalising power of deciding how events will unfold, at least on paper. This liberty can be abused, even unwittingly, to predict developments simply because they help the proposed strategy. To gauge against this tendency, assumptions should relate to uncertainties *beyond the plan's anticipated outcomes*, but which would have a bearing on its execution.

Even where assumptions relate to the plan's environment rather than its outcomes, great care is still required. Because assumptions are inherent to everything we do and plan to do, an immediate danger lies in identifying too many assumptions, which quickly becomes counterproductive. The problem is compounded within multi-agency planning efforts, as each agency brings its own assumptions to the table, stemming from its

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[3] As von der Groeben further explains, the status of an operation would be determined on a case-by-case basis by a *Grupo Asesor* and an *Asesor Juridico Operacional*, based on the military balance and the organisational capacity of the adversary (based on intelligence). The norms would be set up to inform several types of actions at once rather than one by one, and ex post investigations would help to ensure dedication to the principle at hand.

culture, frames, and interests. An added danger lies in assumptions masking poor thinking or presupposing an unlikely setting for the strategy.

In the face of these challenges, three conditions can prove helpful. First, assumptions must be *valid* – that is, the presumption about the future must be reasonable given available evidence. Validity can be assessed, via research or 'red-teaming,' the art of critically evaluating a strategy – oftentimes, external review is indispensable (U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2008). Second, assumptions should be *important*, that is, their negation must significantly affect the strategy (Dewar et al., 1993, p. 9). For every assumption made, the bearing on the plan should be obvious. Third, an assumption should be *necessary*, that is, it should resolve a significant gap in knowledge and thereby allow planning to proceed. As is clear, the *necessity* of an assumption exists in tension with its *validity*, as an unquestionably valid assumption is not necessary, and all necessary assumptions must nonetheless be sufficiently valid.

Given the pitfalls involved, the goal is to end up with as few assumptions as possible but as many as needed. Striking this balance is inevitably subjective. Still, the point is to identify whatever assumptions have been made – be they explicit (those communicated to aid planning) or implicit (those that snuck their way into the process without anyone noticing) – to test them rigorously based on evidence, and to render them clearly. At that point, assumptions candidly delimit the future setting in which the strategy may work. On this basis, some thought may also go to the consequences of an assumption being proved wrong. This is the process of identifying risk, to which we will return.

4.4. Implementation

This section provides the breakdown of the strategy. It covers the *objectives* to be reached, the *strategic approach* adopted, the *strategic art* and *campaign architecture* employed, the *means* required, the main *phases* of the plan, and the *metrics* to gauge progress and sequence transitions. Enveloping and informing these components is the theory of success, or the big idea as to why the proposed strategy will work.

This significant section raises two questions: one of substance and one of style. First, what content goes into a strategy and, second, how can a complex plan be made intelligible to others? Each question is dealt with in turn.

4.4.1. *Using the Strategic Estimate of the Situation to craft a response.*

Interrogation of the strategic estimate, and knowledge of comparable cases, can help determine what the strategy must address. The strategic estimate mapped the threat strategy to inform the priorities and content of the counterstrategy. If an adversary is engaging in a campaign of corruption to facilitate a criminal enterprise, a campaign of counter-corruption may be required – this much is clear. Yet by identifying the specific sub-campaigns of this conceptual campaign – organised by target or method – the precise priorities of the response are revealed. Similarly, the other LOEs and campaigns of the threat strategy should be used to design the response, thereby negating the intended effects of these actions.

Put this way, it all seems obvious, yet (as indicated in our earlier research) responses to irregular threats often overlook critical components of their adversary's strategy, typically because of a near-exclusive focus on its use of violence (in the case of terrorism and insurgency) and of criminality (in the case of organised crime). In contrast, the holistic mapping of the threat strategy encourages a multifaceted response and, by extension, identifies the means necessary for its execution. At the same time, it is insufficient merely to mirror image the opponent's approach, or to let its strategic decisions dictate the terms of engagement. Instead, the response must at some point impose its own logic and purpose to achieve the necessary change. This is the theory of success that should guide its unfolding.

An important aspect in this endeavour may be to address the roots of the problem. This is arguably the most complex and politically sensitive component of the response, as it seeks to reform the structures of power, change conditions on the ground, and rewire social contracts. In many cases, the drivers of criminality are deeply entrenched, so alleviating them will require time and effort and probably be destabilising, creating new winners and losers. There is also the question as to whether meaningful change is even possible.

To return to Colombia, the factors that fuel drug trafficking in that country relate to the limited governance in the parts of the country where coca is grown. Both the counterinsurgency campaign against FARC and the subsequent peace process sought, in different ways, to address this root of the conflict by spreading the government to the periphery. As has become clear, this is a very difficult undertaking. A full 95% of the country's population live in the *sierra* region in the west, where the country's major cities are located. Only 5% inhabit the savanna and the Amazon region, which are underdeveloped and inaccessible and where, not coincidentally, criminality thrives (Marks, 2003, pp. 134–135). Given the incentives of electoral democracy and limitations on resources, there are compelling reasons for any government to focus on the developed majority rather than the more isolated minority. Meanwhile, given the lack of alternative livelihoods, the profits of the drug trade, and the power of local gangs, there are compelling reasons for the rural population to turn to coca cultivation. Undoing this political-economic order is anything but simple (Ucko, 2022, p. 167).

These difficulties are typical and point to the need for humility and creativity in addressing roots. One principle may be to focus less on resolving social and political contradictions and to work instead towards fostering greater resilience. Though serious grievances will likely remain, resilience implies an ability to prevent their maturation into desperation, criminality, and violence. Even with this lower bar of ambition, however, achieving progress remains a tall order.

Addressing the frames and narratives implies reducing the appeal of crime or of the services that criminal organisations provide. This effort strikes at the heart of the struggle for legitimacy that defines irregular warfare. Rhetoric alone is unlikely to sway in the absence of action. Even so, it is helpful to understand the worldview of those whose behaviour the strategy seeks to change. The strategic estimate's analysis of framing can provide some guidance. It may be, for example, that seams emerge between the three different frames – the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational – that can be exploited. It is also worth returning to the assessment of frame resonance to help target information campaigns and public diplomacy.

The strategic estimate's final box, the present government response, also informs the crafting of strategy, as it identifies where the current strategy is working and where it is not. This assessment also identifies the reasons for limited success, be they inadequate political will or resources, thereby pointing to priority areas that must be addressed if more ambitious action is proposed. It may for example be necessary to work on altering conceptions of interest, an admittedly daunting task, by fostering greater awareness of what inaction will yield and of what can be achieved through a more effective approach (Idris, 2022; Malena, 2009). Therein lies the purpose of strategy.

4.4.2. Mapping and presenting the strategy.

Beyond good ideas, a second requirement is the ability to present strategy clearly, not least when it is complex and involves multiple actors interacting over time. The search for clarity requires structure. To this end, we return to the terminology of operational design, adapted for the strategic level. We have already encountered the framework of ends, ways, and means, to which we can add 'phasing' and 'metrics' (or measures of effectiveness). Each of these components requires explanation. It should be immediately emphasised, however, that all these components must be integrated: the strategy should be one unified product, with respective components informed by one another and the strategy's overall logic. Figure 7 provides a graphical representation of how the different components fit together.

Figure 7: A sample integrated strategy, representing strategic art, campaign architecture, phasing, transition points, and measures of effectiveness.
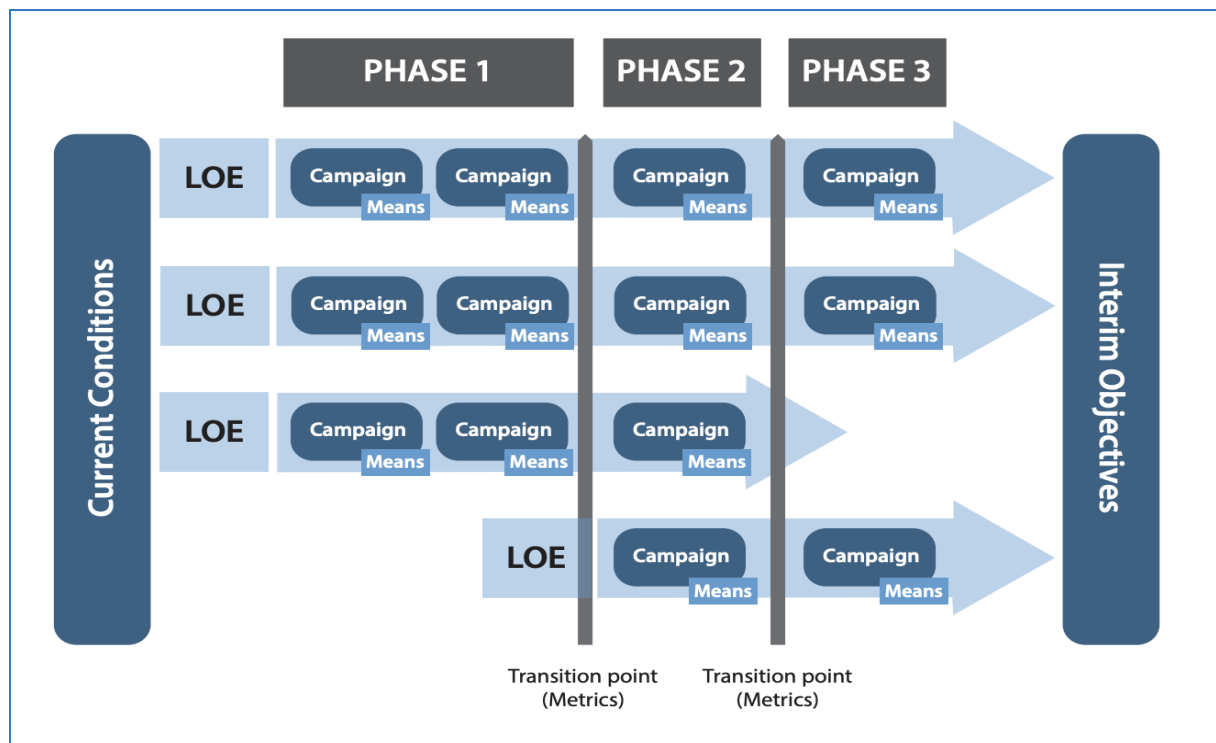
Source: Ucko, D.H. & Marks, T.A. (2022). *Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Analysis and Action*, 2nd ed. National Defense University Press.

The *ends* of the strategy are the objectives or conditions being sought. These must be carefully articulated, or the strategy will lack direction. Importantly, the ambition of the strategy is scoped by the planner, on the basis of available means, time, political will, or other limiting factors as well as the need for positive change. Thus, the desired objectives might be to manage or contain rather than solve a problem, or even just to set up a more enabling context for follow-on action.

The *ways* and *means* are treated together, because without means there are no ways. The first step is to state, as in the concept of response, the overall *strategic approach* and its theory of success. This part of the Framework then takes this vision further, explaining the operationalisation of strategic intent, or the 'how' of the plan. The plan must provide a compelling sequencing of action to demonstrate its accumulation towards identified ends. A helpful way to visualise this journey is to work backwards from desired objectives, via the interim conditions that they necessitate, and thereby arrive at an incremental roadmap that can translate into phases and their content. Thus, rather than react to the present conditions, the key lies in doing so in a way that enables a subsequent step, that in itself is a precursor to the next step, with ultimate goals guiding the action.

This approach puts a heavy premium on the role of *phasing,* which if used judiciously can help prioritise and set the goals to be achieved over time. Separate phases could, for example, address different elements of the strategic estimate (roots, frames, and threat strategy) or to 'stop the bleeding' first before more enduring actions are considered. Clearly, the more phases, the higher the level of abstraction, and of risk, and so planners should extend the strategy no further than necessary. The phasing must, for example, acknowledge the likely effects of each step along the way and the reactions of other actors.

Within each phase, the plan should be able to present the broad strategic intent and how it translates, via nesting, into operational campaigns and tactical actions. Each phase will have its own lines of efforts, thereby producing over time a map of the strategy that can be grasped both at the macro level, to discern its overall logic and shape, and at the micro level, to reveal operational and tactical detail and their relation to the whole. It is vital, throughout, to recall the strategic purpose of actions taken.

Metrics are essential both in determining when transition points between phases have been reached and to gauge strategic success. Even so, the question of metrics is bedevilling, as irregular warfare concerns intangible aspects such as legitimacy, governance, support, and influence. The challenge is compounded by what many practitioners see as a fetishization of metrics, leading to the counting of whatever can be counted. The common practices in countering organised crime of measuring arrests or seizures made, conviction rates, money confiscated, or investigations launched can quickly mislead, in that they fail to consider how these figures relate to an unknowable whole or to the problem at hand.

To do better, it is helpful to distinguish between *measures of performance* (MoP) and *measures of effectiveness* (MoE). Measures of performance – effectively inputs – are what is being done to address a problem. If more naval patrols are to stop smuggling, measures of performance gauge whether the patrols were carried out as intended.

These institutional self-assessments can be important but say little about the effect of actions taken.

Measures of effectiveness, in contrast, are concerned with strategic outcomes. The purpose of our actions is not the effort put in, or even the output thereof, but the *outcome* as it relates to the identified problem. David Kilcullen makes this distinction in his discussion of roadbuilding in Kunar Province, Afghanistan. He notes that 'what has made this program successful is not the road per se. . . . [It is that] people have used the *process of the road's construction*, especially the close engagement with district and tribal leaders this entails, as a framework around which to organize a full-spectrum strategy' (Kilcullen, 2011, p. 71). If the teams building the road provided the input, and the road was the output of their effort, the outcome was a political shift in allegiances and a reconfiguration of legitimacy.

Measuring cognitive and political effects is difficult; a major review describes it as 'quite hard if not impossible' to get right. The review points to various challenges, including the intangibles at the heart of the matter, the paucity of reliable data, institutional disagreement over what matters, the reproducibility of data-gathering methods across time and space, and the political pressure to demonstrate success (Connable, 2012, p. 93). Given the added resistance to anecdotal evidence, many resort instead to the 'illusion of science' – colour-coded graphs, stoplights, arrows pointing up or down – to mask a lack of knowledge, of published standards, or of any real consensus on what success should look like (Arnhart & King, 2018, pp. 20–29). Because metrics are nonetheless indispensable to measuring progress, this is a conversation that requires more care and honesty.

Despite the complexity of the strategy and the difficulty of communicating it, the most important condition remains the profound idea of what will generate success. No amount of terminology or mechanical cramming will substitute for it. The need to retain a clear focus on what matters is precisely the reason for nesting, so that all details provided are linked to the bigger picture. Everything must flow from this central idea, lest style suffocate substance.

4.5.   Risk and risk mitigation

A change in strategy implies not only new opportunities but also new risks – and these should be communicated. Doing so can be challenging; to one analyst, despite the growth of various 'risk frameworks' and other methodologies, risk assessment is too often 'ill-defined and misleading' (Mazarr, 2015).

At the risk of oversimplification, risk can be understood as that which can go wrong due to the change in strategy. This category can be further divided into two types: the plan's likely *points of failure*, due to a lack of capability or capacity, and the *risk of unintended consequences*, or those that flow from the strategy's successful execution.

In countering organised crime, risks of failure are easy enough to foresee: do we have enough means, are they sufficiently capable, and are we adequately coordinated internally and externally to produce the desired effect? Risks of success require a more strategic awareness, to identify the strategy's unanticipated second-order effects.

Reitano details, for example, the perverse outcomes of costly enforcement to curb illegal immigration: 'the more challenging a border becomes to cross, the more militarised the levels of enforcement, the more necessary a smuggler becomes and the more risk-accepting, professional and corrupt that smuggler will need to be to perform his function successfully' (Reitano, 2017, p. 209). Going further, what is the cost of ever-stricter and even dehumanising enforcement mechanisms to the very values in whose name we seek to counter criminal activity (Erickson, 2017, p. 248)? Do these enforcement mechanisms create a bigger and more professional adversary, mounting costs, and misery for many, and – if so – what have they achieved to counterbalance these outcomes?

If risks are identified, be they moral, strategic, or just operational, what to do? So long as the strategy is still being built, the obvious recourse is to modify it to ensure that the risks are avoided. This guidance appears obvious, yet it highlights the non-linear nature of strategy-making. As the plan is produced, each component must continuously relate to the others, with balancing and adjustments continuing throughout until one cohesive final product is achieved.

No matter how much tinkering, risk is unavoidable. At some undefinable point, it is no longer possible to tweak, and the risks left unaddressed must then be communicated as part of the final product. Doctrine calls these 'residual risks' – those that remain when the unnecessary or unacceptable risks have been eliminated (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2014, p. 1-10). The test for these risks is whether they are less significant than those created by staying the course, or not acting at all. There is really no objective way in which to measure such advantage. Nonetheless, this is a situation where some consideration is better than none, not to 'prevent bad outcomes' altogether, but to 'ensure that leaders make strategic judgments with eyes wide open to possible consequences' (Mazarr, 2015).

If 'residual risks' are deemed acceptable, the next step is to consider how they might be mitigated. Plans for mitigation can be fully-fledged branch plans with their own logic, sequencing, and prioritisation, or they could be simpler, pointing to measures that might reduce the gravity of the risks, should they materialise. Regardless, efforts at risk mitigation would typically go beyond what is already in the strategy, as their aim is to address the costs of that very strategy, be it because of a breakdown in the plan or the consequences of it succeeding. In that sense, risk mitigation will deviate from the preferred course of action; they are emergency measures, to be used only if necessary.

5. Conclusion

What motivated our study was the realisation that efforts to counter organised crime shared many of the pitfalls seen also in the world of counterterrorism, particularly since the 9/11 attacks. Much as with the response to organised crime, the so-called 'War on Terror' was stymied by 1) conceptual uncertainty of the problem, oftentimes cloaking political divergences; 2) an urge to address the scourge without acknowledging its social and political context; and, therefore, 3) pursuit of strategies that miss the point, whose progress is difficult to measure, and which may be counterproductive.

In the world of counterterrorism, 'Irregular Warfare' (IW) emerged as a corrective lens, in that it places terrorism within its essential *political* context and as a component of a struggle of *legitimacy*. This lens applies equally to countering organised crime, as do the lessons of IW. Our past work identified six lessons: the tendencies, in both fields, 1) to neglect the socio-political drivers of the problem; 2) to militarise our response (or to rely on a purely suppressive logic); 3) to neglect political differences among supposed partners; 4) to underinvest in community mobilisation; 5) to proceed without a clear sense of strategy; and 6) to wish away questions of political will (Ucko & Marks, 2022c).

The Framework of Analysis and Action proposed in this report helps to correct for these errors. In the Strategic Estimate of the Situation, the 'roots' section unpacks the socio-political underpinnings of organised crime and, together with the frames and narrative and threat strategy, points to the need for a more-than-militarised (or suppressive) response. In its discussion of framing and in its critique of the present response, the strategic estimate queries the different views of the problem, both at the state and local levels, and thereby gauges against mirror-imaging. In the course of action, the analyst can create a genuine strategy, informed by a theory of success that accounts for and must address issues of political will.

For organised crime, then, the contribution of this Framework of Analysis and Action is to enable a strategic *mapping* of the problem. The strategies thus created respond not just to the problem of criminality, but to the context that enables this phenomenon. Based as it is on the strategic estimate, the course of action is guided by identified opportunities and vulnerabilities and further supported by relevant metrics to track progress (or the lack thereof). This emphasis on testing what works is crucial for counter-crime activities, which can, and too often have, become self-justifying and logically circular.

We propose this framework to encourage greater strategic competence in sectors where the term *strategy* is often a synonym for a wish list or a collection of slogans. Such competence implies an ability to pinpoint the political problem underpinning criminality, its drivers, narratives, and expression, and to tailor a response that uses such analysis to propose a theory for how to proceed. Based on such analysis, strategic competence denotes the skill set necessary to craft strategy – one that unfolds across time and place, builds progress, and can demonstrably achieve set objectives. In this manner, the framework is proposed to extend a 'campaigning mindset' to a broader set of institutions than the military, because these institutions – more than the military – are those required for an effective response.

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Appendix A: User's guide: The Framework for Analysis and Action

This synopsis of the Framework for Analysis and Action assists in the production of a Strategic Estimate and Course of Action (COA) to counter organised crime. For elaboration and explanation of the Framework, please see:

- Ucko, D. H. & Marks, T. A. (2023). *Countering Organised Crime as Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Strategic Analysis and Action*. SOC ACE Research Paper No. 19. University of Birmingham.

- Ucko, D. H. & Marks, T. A. (2022), Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare, 2nd edition. National Defense University Press.

In using this Framework, please recall:

1   This is not a checklist to be approached linearly by responding to each prompt. The purpose is to interrogate questions that often are of concern and to generate critical strategic thinking. It is still up to the user to engage in the necessary fact-finding, analysis, and deduction.

2   *Never include anything just because the guidance tells you to do so*. Use the Framework and the associated terminology to interrogate your case; know (and demonstrate in your argumentation) why what you include is relevant and necessary to the strategy.

Figure 1: The Strategic Estimate, COA, and their interaction, as adapted to organised crime.
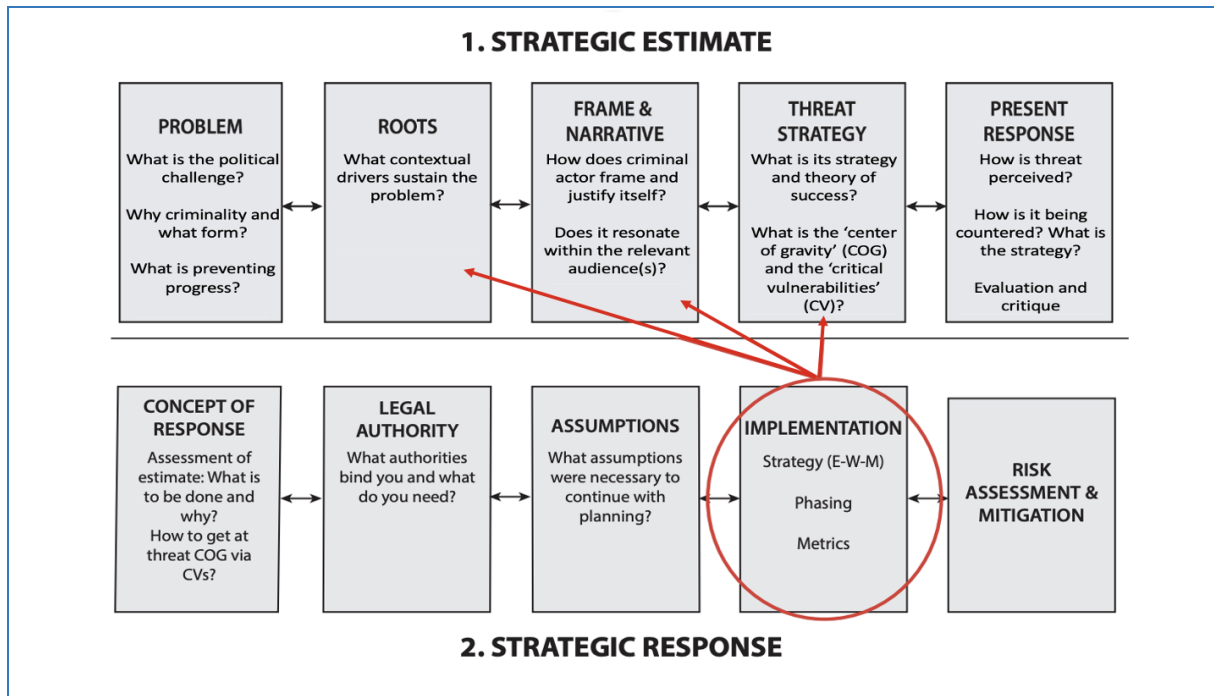
Strategic Estimate of the Situation

Problem

In two to three paragraphs, distil the nature of the problem that motivates your strategic estimate. Reflect on the following questions, but save details for later:

- What is the political nature of the problem being faced?

- What is the name and nature of the actor(s) representing a threat? Is it violent, non-violent, clandestine or overt, transnational, state-supported or sponsored, or a combination thereof?

- Provide the information necessary (and only that information) to explain the current state of affairs.

- Demonstrate the direction of the situation based on current trends: who is benefiting, who is hurting, and why does it matter?

- Why is this problem proving so difficult to counter? Why is a change in policy needed?

A map of areas discussed can be helpful.

<u>Note</u>: The problem statement is the distillation of the analysis encompassed by the entire Strategic Estimate of the Situation. As such, it cannot be finalised before the rest of the estimate is completed.

Roots

The 'Roots' section is concerned with the factors that sustain the threat and allow it to operate, even thrive. What drivers give the threat a conducive environment and may require resolution for the problem to be successfully addressed?

Analysis should interrogate how *macro* factors (context, structure) lead certain individuals in society (*micro*) to embrace criminal organisations (*meso*), either as a participant or benefactor. Each facet must be interrogated, not linearly but in an integrated manner. Specifically:

- Macro: what are the contextual factors that enable the threat, allowing it to amass support? Typical examples include entrenched inequity, poor governance, corruption, geographical isolation, lack of opportunity, abusive state behaviour, or unresolved historical legacies, but the list is far from exhaustive.

- Micro: assuming these drivers are relevant, why do they compel some but not others to support or engage in criminality? Can we determine what groupings or individuals are more likely to be driven to this end? Why them? Why not others?

- Meso: how does the criminal actor help mediate the drivers of participation and engagement? What are its functions socio-politically? Why are these functions not available through licit systems and networks?

The hard-nosed purpose of the roots analysis is to identify dispassionately what factors and flows are nourishing the threat, so that they may be addressed as part of a comprehensive response. As such, remember this intent and *do not get lost in the details*.

Frame and narrative

Identify and analyse the threat's:
- diagnostic frame (how it views the problem and apportions blame)
- prognostic frame (how it justifies its solution and use of criminality)
- motivational frame (how it motivates participation and support)

For each, establish the *narrative*, or the storyline. To the degree warranted, explain the threat's use of *frame alignment* to achieve resonance with other actors.

Evaluate the *resonance* of the framing structure among the *relevant or contested audiences*. Which are these? Use relevant data to support this evaluation.

Threat strategy (ends, ways, means)

Ends

What are the goals of the threat? Do they go beyond the illicit search for profit and entail also political or ideological agendas?

Ways

What is the threat's strategic approach? How does it seek to get what it wants (what is its *theory of success*)? Is the approach violent, non-violent, confrontational or clandestine, or something else? Is there a distinct 'schedule' that the threat associates with its plan?

Now the strategy should be *mapped* to facilitate construction of an appropriate counter. We do this by identifying *lines of effort*, *conceptual campaigns* (bundles of activity), and – as appropriate – *sub-campaigns*. In your analysis, always render explicit the relation of operational activity and strategic objectives (often via interim objectives).

Figure 2: The logical relationship among ends, ways, campaigns, and means.
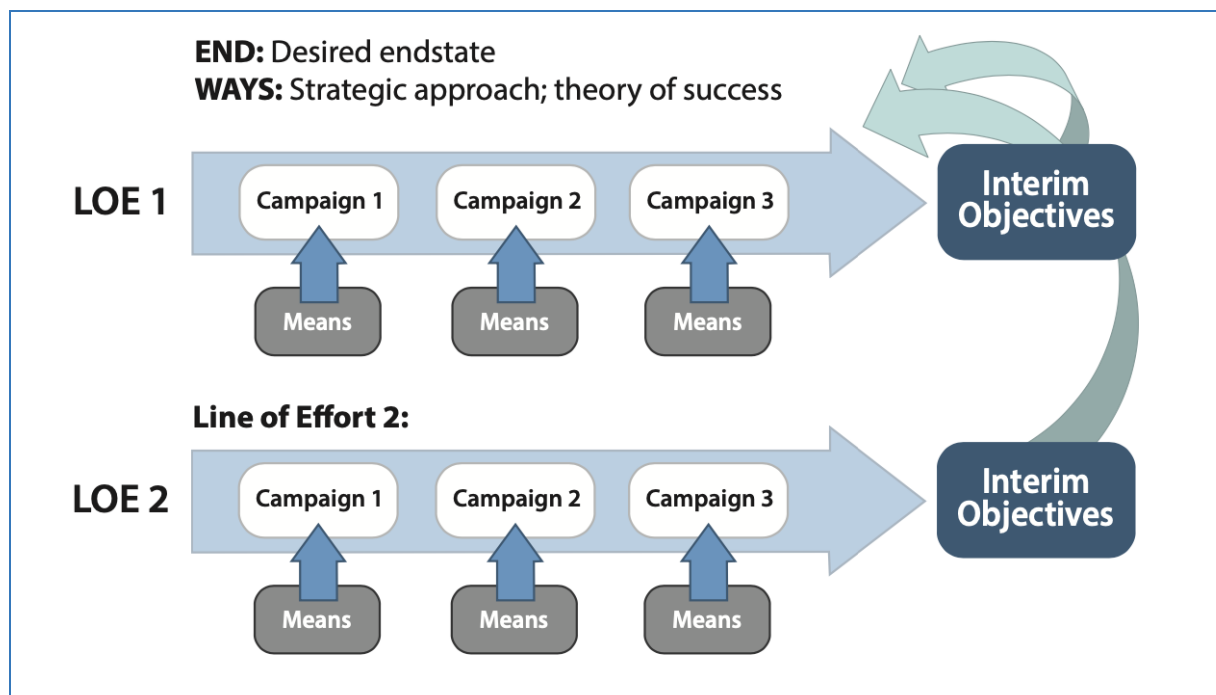
Source: Ucko, D.H. & Marks, T.A. (2022). *Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Analysis and Action.* 2nd ed. National Defense University Press.

To map the strategy, begin by interrogating the actions undertaken by the criminal actor. The following questions can be helpful in identifying the full range of the strategy:

- How, and why, is the threat acting *politically* to bring about its desired objectives?

- How, and why, is the threat using *violence* in service of its criminal activity?

- How, and why, is the threat using *non-violence* in service of its criminal activity?

- How, and why, is the threat using external *enablers* to reach its objectives?

- How, and why, is the threat *internationalising* the conflict?

Interrogation of these questions yields evidence of action, which can be grouped into conceptual campaigns. Two or more campaigns united in strategic direction and intent form a line of effort (LOE). These LOE should be labelled based on their character (for

example, violent LOE, international LOE, and so on). However labelled, each LOE has an *interim strategic objective* – a *purpose* – that contributes to the threat 's goal.

Means

It is important to note that the ends-ways-means construct is best conceptualised in symbiotic fashion – *its components do not comprise a sequential list*. The question of means should therefore accompany the mapping of ways above. Account to the degree possible for the specialised assets deployed to resource the strategy. A separate discussion of means may also be appropriate to indicate holdings, structures, bases, command and control structures, and so forth. Diagrams and maps can be important here.

Based on this mapping exercise, is it possible to determine the *centre of gravity* (COG)? The COG is the focal point of power and coherence, without which the threat strategy could not function or becomes irrelevant. In irregular warfare, the COG often relates to perceptions of legitimacy of the government or the threat, which in turn relate to the desire and interest of key actors to support or oppose either.

To identify ways of addressing the COG, determine the threat's *critical vulnerabilities* (CV). A CV is a component of the threat strategy that is deficient or vulnerable to direct or indirect attack, creating a significant effect. It may relate to mismatches between frames and strategy (what is said versus what is done), to gaps between roots and threat strategy (what drives participation versus the threat's ability to mediate these drivers), or to tensions within any component of the strategic estimate.

Present response

Note: This is a critique of the *current* response to the problem you are analysing. Focus on the response of the actor for which you are proposing a strategy, acknowledging that its actions will often contribute to a broader effort.

- Perception: How do we frame the threat and/or problem? How do we view our progress in addressing it? How do we describe our reason for countering it?

- Response: What is the current strategy? What is the theory of success?

- Critique: Is our perception accurate – of the threat, its progress, and our response? Are we making progress: what is working and what is not? Does the response address the symptoms of the problem or the problem itself? Is it appropriately addressing the roots of the conflict, the frame and narratives, and/or the threat strategy? As applicable, is it affecting the COG by exploiting the CVs?

  As part of this analysis, account for the role of *political will* and *capacity* (motivation and opportunity) in determining the present response.

Note: The two most common errors in this section are:

- Merely listing programmes. It is the interaction of strategies that is at issue.

- Confusing a past response for the present phase that currently matters. How to delimit the present phase is case-specific but it implies continuity with today's key dynamics.

The Course of Action (COA)

In crafting your strategy:

- make full use of the strategic estimate as the empirical foundation for the course of action; and

- bear in mind that this process is never linear. Each component of this framework must be in sync with the rest, until all are balanced and integrated into one cohesive whole.

Concept of response

Summarise your recommended response to the problem assessed in your strategic estimate. Illustrate *how* and *why* your plan differs from the present response analysed in the strategic estimate. The point is to be succinct. Capture your strategy in two to four paragraphs.

One way of crafting your response is by seeking to address the strategic *centre of gravity*, often via the threat's *critical vulnerabilities*. To the degree that the COG speaks to questions of legitimacy (often the case in irregular warfare), your response must be designed to address issues that undergird or define perceptions thereof. Your response should also be driven by a theory of success and/or the position that you want to attain and how. These theories must be grounded in *evidence*, drawn from your strategic estimate.

In describing the *type of response* you are proposing, demonstrate:

- The strategic approach of your response: its nature and intent. Be specific.

- In *broad terms*, the ends-ways-means construct of your response, its main phases, along with the theory of success.

- The interests that guide you and which actor your response is intended for.

On this basis, demonstrate why your proposed response is superior to the present strategy, not only for addressing the problem but also *strategically*, in relation to broader interests.

Legal authorities

Your plan should adhere to proper *legal authorities*. Ensuring that you have a legal basis requires interrogation of your planned action and consideration of legal ambiguities and challenges (these could arise from questions of sovereignty, use of force, constitutional constraints, or treaty law). If force is used, is it based on *international humanitarian law* (the Law of Armed Conflict) or *the rule of law* (a law enforcement approach) – or some hybrid of these?

Are the necessary international and domestic authorities in place for those actions that require legal clarification? If legal authorities are vague or lacking, can you implement temporary or new measures?

Be aware that legal considerations can be formal – the rule of law – or informal, relating to cultural, social, and religious factors that will constrain your response.

Do not use this section to list all laws that relate to your case. Restrict the analysis to the specific red flags that might prompt legal review and need clarification. Where authorities and legal backing are lacking, elaborate on the necessary changes in legislation.

Assumptions

Assumptions are used to fill gaps in required information or facts that are needed to continue planning. Your assumptions may relate to areas of continuity or change and delineate an environment in which your proposed course of action is relevant.

What assumptions did you *have to make* to allow for planning into the future? State and explain these assumptions. Bear in mind:

- Planning assumptions should be *valid* (supported by evidence), *important* (relevant to your plan), and *necessary* (address an area where uncertainty is crippling).

- As assumptions relate to key areas of uncertainty, aim to include as few assumptions as appropriate to enable planning. As far as possible, the strategic estimate should be used to provide the evidentiary basis for the strategy.

- Assumptions should relate to *variables beyond the scope* of your own response. Do not assume that desired conditions will apply if they do not already do so; do not assume problematic circumstances will change unless evidence suggests this is likely.

Implementation

This is the actual setting forth of the concept of response. *As appropriate to your case*, detail how your proposed strategy responds to the strategic estimate.

Consider these steps:

- Identify your strategic objectives (ends).

- Identify your strategic approach (the overall *nature* of response, its key *phases* and/or *LOE*, along with main *means* involved) – that is, *ways*, operationalised by *means*.

- Explain your theory of success.

This introduction to your strategy will allow you to get into further detail. In presenting the strategy, do not think of its constituent elements as separate but rather integrate them as one product that takes us from present to desired conditions via the necessary LOE, metrics, phases, and means (see Figure 3 below).

The LOE will likely differ across the phases of the plan so that each builds on progress made until desired objectives are reached. Different phases will be appropriate in addressing different elements of the strategic estimate – roots, frame and narrative, and threat strategy. Your response may have phases that are sequential and/or concurrent. They may be time- and/or conditions-based.

A promising way to arrive at a phasing construct is to work backwards from desired conditions to the incremental objectives necessary to reach this goal. By tracing the strategy from the desired conditions back to the present ones, necessary actions and their sequence become clearer.

In *resourcing your plan*, you must provide the details of what assets are tasked to accomplish your LOE and their campaigns. If the required means are not in place, they must be developed (and this must be acknowledged in your phasing structure).

Figure 3: A sample integrated strategy, representing operational art, campaign architecture, phasing, transition points, and measures of effectiveness.
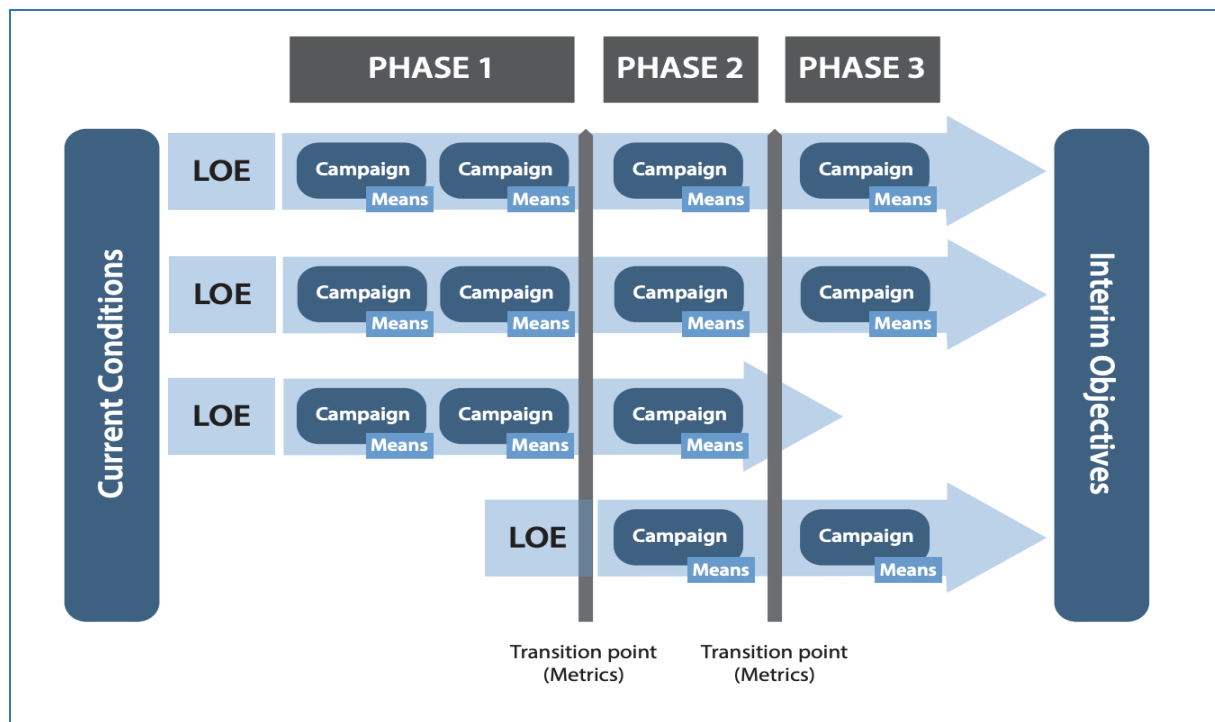
Source: Ucko, D.H. & Marks, T.A. (2022). *Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Analysis and Action*. 2nd ed. National Defense University Press.

What are the *metrics* by which you will assess the success of your plan and/or the shift between its critical phases? Consider the best indicators, or how best to capture the data necessary for these metrics, bearing in mind that they can be *tangible* (concrete) and *intangible* (abstract, such as perceptions, influence, trust). Focus on the *outcomes* desired by the plan rather than the *inputs* or their direct *output*.

Ensure that your response, as presented, appears *feasible* (it is a response that can be executed); *reasonable* (it is rational and logical); *acceptable* (within the bounds of relevant law and to the court of public opinion – both domestically and internationally); and *sustainable* (the results achieved will be consolidated rather than reversed). These terms are not a list of conditions to be checked off one by one, but crucial considerations to guide you throughout your planning and design.

Risk assessment and mitigation

Risk is the probability of failure in achieving an objective at an acceptable cost. Some of the questions to consider include:

- Where are the greatest risks of failure?

- What is the risk associated with your response even if it succeeds? What is the risk of executing the strategy to your other interests?

For each risk identified, consider first whether changes to your response can resolve this vulnerability. Edit the response as necessary to arrive at unavoidable, acceptable *residual risks*. For these, develop options for mitigation. If these risks are realised, what *alternative measures* could be taken to reduce their magnitude and damage?