

Winning Without Fighting: Resilience as National Security Imperative

Description

The Irregular Warfare Initiative (IWI) Editorial Team is proud to launch a new series featuring leading thinkers in the irregular warfare community critically engaging with recent IW-related publications. Curated by IWI editors [Barbara Elias](#) and [Lewis Fraser](#), this series goes beyond traditional book reviews. Contributors have been encouraged to challenge ideas, draw connections to their own expertise, and explore how the works shape broader debates in the field.

We are excited to kick off the series with a piece by Jacob Shapiro, Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University and co-founder of the Empirical Studies of Conflict Project. A distinguished scholar and veteran, Shapiro brings deep field experience and academic rigor to his analysis of [Winning Without Fighting: Irregular Warfare and Strategic Competition in the 21st Century](#) by Rebecca Patterson, Susan Bryant, Ken Gleiman, and Mark Troutman.

What is the New Strategic Environment?

In *Winning Without Fighting*, Patterson et al. lay out a vision of modern geopolitical competition that departs from traditional U.S. strategic thinking. They argue that we have entered a new era defined by two main elements: the return of strategic competition with China and Russia and a world increasingly plagued by recurring crises—pandemics, climate change disasters, and technological disruptions.

For the authors, this strategic competition is less about preparing for traditional warfare and more about long-term, persistent competition in the space between peace and war. Despite this shift, they argue, the United States’ strategic culture has remained rooted in an outdated binary: war versus peace. Meanwhile, its adversaries—China and Russia—are creating a new reality by utilizing non-military forms of power more effectively, and by tapping military force for actions in this grey zone.

All of this is happening in an environment where shocks are the norm rather than the exception. The COVID-19 pandemic, climate disasters, and cyberattacks illustrate how easily states can be thrown off course. The ability to endure and recover from these shocks with resilience is, the authors argue, just as important to national security as military strength.

This argument has many compelling aspects, but perhaps the book's most important contribution is how starkly it illustrates that, while some U.S. policy makers and strategic thinkers may talk about war and peace as a binary, the country's foreign policy has operated intensely in the space between war and peace for 80 years now.

So What is to Be Done?

Patterson and her co-authors contend that the U.S. must adapt its strategic approach, shifting focus toward what happens between war and peace. This means incorporating new tools of power and embracing the types of competition that adversaries already exploit.

The first half of the book delves into why the U.S. strategic approach is the way it is. It attributes much of this to strategic culture—a deeply ingrained mindset that shapes how the country views and conducts international competition. The authors contrast this with the strategic thinking of China and Russia, which operate differently. Chapter 3 focuses on these differences, illustrating how China has embraced economic coercion and technological dominance as core elements of its geopolitical playbook.

The major analytical contribution of *Winning Without Fighting* is its discussion of the instruments of power. The book builds on the traditional DIME framework—Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic power, which has been widely used in national security discourse—by introducing “resilience” as a fifth element to the strategic toolbox.

Resilience is roughly defined as the ability to absorb, manage, and recover from crises that will inevitably strike the U.S. and its allies. The logic is simple: countries that can withstand repeated shocks without losing strategic momentum will have an advantage over the long run.

This new perspective reframes geopolitical competition as a contest of endurance rather than just raw power. The most interesting parts of the book's second half focus on how this principle should guide military, economic, informational, and resilience strategies. While the book's recommendations seem like they were tailored to a second Biden administration, they open important conversations for today's shifting political landscape.

The Difference Between Expressed and Revealed Strategic Culture

Winning Without Fighting reveals three important contradictions in U.S. national security policy:

First, one of the book's core arguments is that the U.S. has historically failed to think beyond war and peace. This may be true of the professional literature and much of the popular discussion of

national security policy, but key aspects of 20th century history suggest the actual policy was quite different.

In many ways, the U.S. consistently competed strategically outside of war, particularly during the Cold War, which the authors discuss in Chapter 4 as a potential model for future U.S. foreign policy. Economic power was explicitly leveraged to contain the Soviet Union. The U.S. invested substantial assets in information warfare, including the [United States Information Agency](#) (USIA), funding Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and other media campaigns. Military statecraft was similarly prominent—arms deals, basing agreements, and security partnerships were a key part of Cold War strategy, and after 9/11, the United States doubled down on overseas basing well beyond active combat theaters.

In short, the U.S. has been engaged in the space between war and peace for decades. The key difference today is that adversaries are doing so as well.

A second core argument in *Winning Without Fighting* is that the United States should invest more in political warfare. One of the most difficult U.S. experiences in this domain—the extended Vietnam War era (1962-1975)—paradoxically shows how durable political alignments can be. Domestic divisions around the civil rights movement undercut U.S. credibility as a champion of democracy. Support for the autocratic South Vietnamese government damaged America’s legitimacy in many parts of the world. And the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975 arguably called America’s alliance commitments into question.

Yet through all that tumult, U.S. influence endured where it mattered most, particularly in Western Europe and with key allies in South Asia. This era shows that political warfare is about more than crafting an effective strategy—it requires managing domestic and international legitimacy—and that alliances and global perception can sustain a great deal of stress, especially if backed by on-the-ground commitments of forces, as the U.S. maintained in key theaters throughout the Cold War.

Third, the gap between rhetoric and reality in U.S. strategy can be prodigious. The authors argue that U.S. policymakers wrongly view war and peace as a dichotomy, rather than recognizing the space in between. This may be true, though the 2022 National Defense Strategy concepts of Integrated Deterrence and Campaigning are a clear move toward the kind of strategic competition the authors advocate.

Rhetoric aside, the U.S. already operates heavily in the space between war and peace. The U.S. is the unambiguous world leader in peacetime military statecraft, running global exercises, selling arms, and maintaining forward bases. Security cooperation programs are a hallmark of U.S. engagement, and

while no one has done a comprehensive accounting, they are likely the largest financial investment in overseas engagement once all the costs of deploying U.S. forces for exercises are considered. And decades of U.S. economic policy have established an international trading system favorable to U.S. interests. Indeed, the existence of Beijing's efforts to establish an alternative to the [dollar-dominated SWIFT system](#) (an interbank payment messaging platform) which the authors discuss in Chapter 3 actually implies that the U.S. has dominated the very pathways of economic influence which the authors later argue U.S. policymakers fail to treat as important tools of statecraft.

So, while U.S. leaders may talk in binary terms of "war" and "peace," their actions reflect an understanding of persistent competition. And while the current administration's emerging strategic posture may prove to be an outlier, the system has long embraced many of the principles the book advocates, as the authors' discussion of the Cold War so nicely highlights.

What Next?

Where does *Winning Without Fighting* take us? Overall, the book makes a valuable contribution to strategic thinking. It offers a framework for competition that acknowledges the realities of a crisis-prone world and provides a fresh perspective on resilience as a key instrument of power. And some of the authors' recommendations open up important discussions.

First, the authors argue for a more coherent U.S. information strategy. This will be challenging under the Trump administration for many reasons. Developing a viewpoint-neutral approach to information warfare is challenging, especially when foreign nations amplify and leverage narratives from domestic actors. And many of the U.S. institutions that the authors identify as pillars of an information strategy—such as the Global Engagement Center (GEC) and Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA)—have been disbanded or substantially reoriented. Revitalizing support for journalism and fact-based media is a promising path, but the disbanding of USAID and cessation of funding to the National Endowment for Democracy, a Reagan-era organization that supported investigative journalism and pro-democracy actors around the world, raises the very real question of how the federal government can engage on this front.

Second, the argument for a resilience framework is a key takeaway from the book. The authors propose resilience-building at four levels, each of which suggests some practical actions. At the individual level, the authors want citizens to stockpile essential supplies. A tax credit for emergency preparedness supplies (like the electric vehicle tax credits that drove adoption of electric vehicles) is an obvious step here. At the community level, the authors advocate for promoting awareness and cooperative disaster response norms. Providing federal grants to states to strengthen community-government coordination is an obvious step, especially since state and local officials often lead

disaster response efforts. At the national level, the authors advocate for a coherent federal resilience strategy. This idea makes sense but will require significant cross-agency coordination that may be challenging to staff with ongoing reductions to the federal workforce. Finally, at the international level, the authors suggest strengthening allies to improve collective resilience. This approach was a critical part of U.S. success during the Cold War; the challenge will be executing on this priority under the current administration's shift toward a more transactional foreign policy.

Winning Without Fighting provides a framework for understanding modern strategic competition. While its discussion of U.S. strategic culture focuses more on what U.S. leaders have said than on what they do, the book makes a valuable contribution by highlighting the importance of resilience in an era of persistent shocks. The case for resilience as national security policy should motivate policymakers grappling with what else America can do to compete effectively in a world where the line between war and peace is increasingly blurred. And because it involves significant investments at home, it may be more palatable to the Trump administration than calls for investments overseas.

The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

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