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Lt. Col. Shawn Kadlec
20th CBRNE Command

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HMA in the GRAY ZONE

by Lt. Col. Shawn Kadlec [20th CBRNE Command]

How do the military, other government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the private sector cooperate with each other when they find themselves conducting mine action tasks typically considered the purview of each other's sectors?

As demonstrated in Iraq and elsewhere, armed conflicts rarely end in immediate peace. More broadly, conflict does not only concern direct violence between adversaries. It may involve anything from nonviolent forms of influence (i.e., soft power) to the use of proxy states or nonstate actors, who wage war against each other on behalf of other states (e.g., American and Russian use of proxy forces in Syria). These realities mean humanitarian mine action (HMA) programs will increasingly take place in a *gray zone*—that space between armed conflict and peace, in which military and civilian agencies must operate simultaneously.

In response to the complexity of an operational environment without clearly demarcated states of peace and war, the United States Department of Defense (DoD) conceived what it calls the *competition continuum*; first put forward in the Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning (JCIC) and then further developed in Joint Doctrine Note (JDN) 1-19. In turn, the U.S. Army continues to refine Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) as the future operating concept for employing its capabilities across the competition continuum, to support U.S. national security policy and goals. The HMA community, along with the broader stability and development communities, should understand these concepts and ideas, because the “competition” in the gray zone is not about delineating military and civilian roles. Rather, it is about military and civilian organizations finding appropriate circumstances in which to best employ their capabilities or to defer to others’ capabilities when needed. It behooves the international HMA community—military, government, NGO, and private sector—to develop methods of cooperation and collaboration that apply across the competition continuum. Despite recognizing the need for better civil-military integration, the DoD has not codified a doctrinal concept or idea for how to effectively collaborate with other government agencies, NGOs, or the private sector.

However, the private sector and academics have created many models of partnership and collaboration continuums that can serve as an intellectual foundation for developing complementary efforts between civilian and military organizations. We should look to them as a starting point to improve gray-zone cooperation in circumstances that force the military into overlapping its traditional mission space with those of other HMA operators.

According to editors of *The Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction*, “[t]he existential differences between conflict and post-conflict are becoming increasingly blurred.”¹ The U.S. DoD has defined this space as “competition below armed conflict.” It may involve anything from nonviolent forms of influence (e.g., cyberattacks, economic sanctions, security assistance, etc.) to the use of proxy states or nonstate actors, who wage war against each other on behalf of other states. The situation in Mosul, Iraq, exemplifies a gray zone: though the Iraqi military retook Mosul, nonstate actors continued attacking the city with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and conventional munitions.² Syria provides an even more complex example of a gray zone. Within the broader Syrian conflict, the United States, Russia, Turkey, and Iran are using proxy forces to advance their national interests in the region and disrupt their adversaries’ interests.³ As a result, there are limited military forces from these countries operating in Syria, certainly not enough to establish security and to begin stability operations akin to post-war efforts in Iraq or Afghanistan.⁴ These circumstances, highlighted by a lack of armed conflict between national militaries, pose “jurisdictional” challenges to military forces, government agencies, and the civilian sector.

Such gray zones, in “limbo” between peace and armed conflict (or, “large-scale ground combat operations” in current U.S. Army parlance), are just enough at peace to dispatch non-military HMA operations into them. However, there is still just enough war to keep military forces deployed in them as well. This may trigger an overlap among military forces and civilian aid organizations conducting mine action (or other stability operations) in the gray zone.

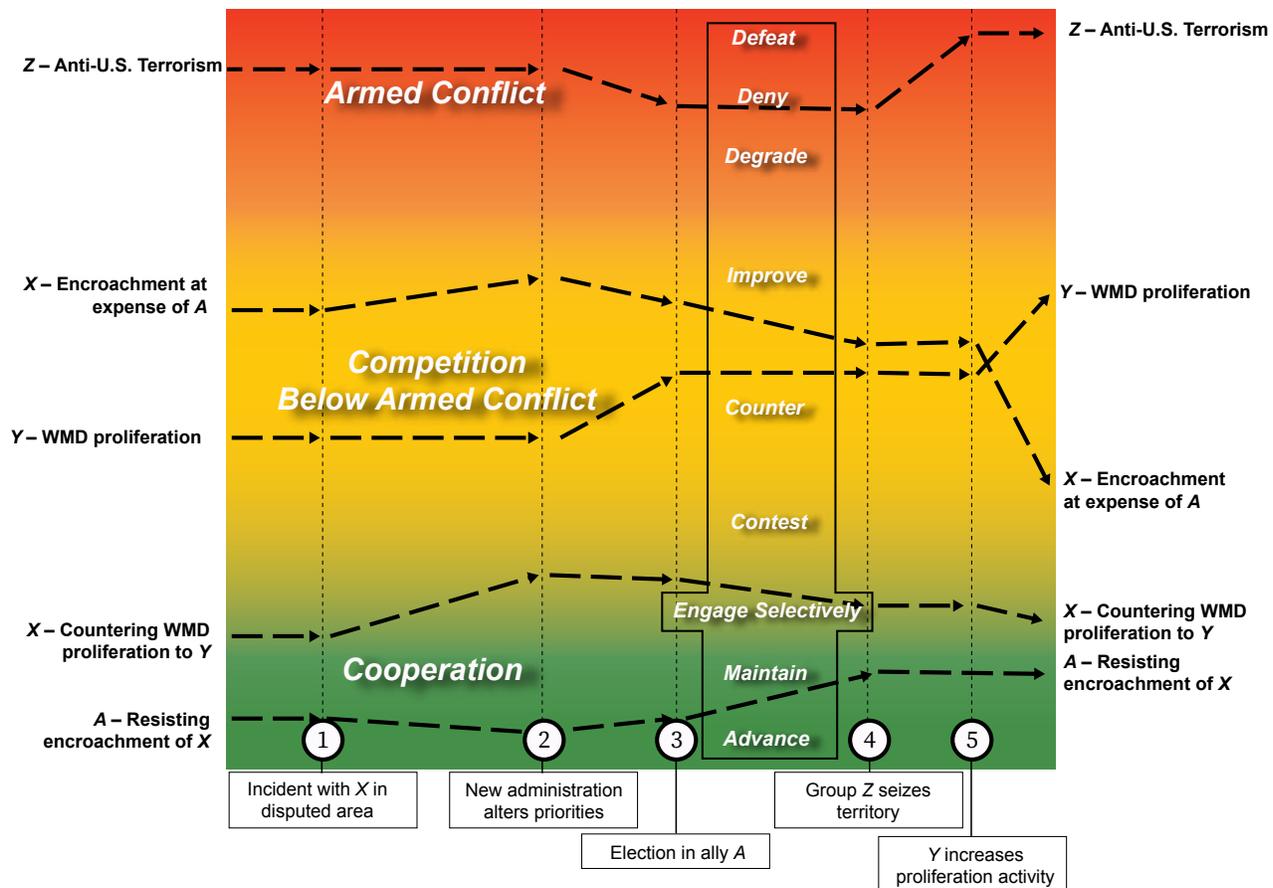


Figure 1. Depiction of the competition continuum and examples of friendly and adversary activities along the continuum. The black boxes enclose military objectives along the continuum. Figure courtesy of Stephen Marr, Nicholas Hargreaves-Heald, Hiram Reynolds, and Hannah Smith.⁵

To better address different sectors' overlapping efforts in that middle ground between war and peace, it is useful to examine the DoD's JCIC, which describes the gray zone as comprising a "competition continuum – a flexible spectrum of strategic relations that range from cooperation to competition below armed conflict to armed conflict itself."⁵ The U.S. Joint Staff's JDN 1-19 further describes the competition continuum as "enduring competition conducted through a mixture of cooperation, competition below armed conflict, and armed conflict."⁶

The competition continuum does not replace the artificial peace/war dichotomy of the past with an artificial trichotomy; nor does it envision distinct transition points between cooperation, competition, and armed conflict. Rather, it seeks to describe an environment in which the United States may simultaneously cooperate and compete with other international actors. For example, the United States cooperates with China on anti-piracy operations while competing with China regarding freedom of navigation.⁶ Similarly, the DoD could find itself conducting HMA activities in cooperation with adversarial states, or as a competitive response to counter adversary influence in a country or region important to United States interests. Among competitors with the United States,

China has a growing HMA program and international outreach (e.g., China recently donated mine-clearing equipment to Cambodia).⁷ In response, the United States could re-focus or increase spending on military and civilian HMA programs as part of a larger national and international strategy to promote a "free and open Indo-Pacific" as an alternative to China's Belt-Road Initiative.⁸ While the civilian HMA community already operates alongside military forces, competition below armed conflict will intensify the geopolitical role of HMA and of other facets of stability operations.

JDN 1-19 also provides a lexicon that defines the geopolitical goals and strategic objectives of military activities along the competition continuum. The three broad ideas of competition—armed conflict, competition below armed conflict, and cooperation—also contain a range of military objectives, which should mirror country-specific policy goals and whole-of-government efforts (see Figure 1). Importantly, JDN 1-19 uses the DoD's *Law of War* manual, which is based on national and international law, as a basis for defining the various forms of armed conflict and lethal activities that span the continuum.⁶ Competition below armed conflict and cooperation apply to the civilian-HMA community because this is

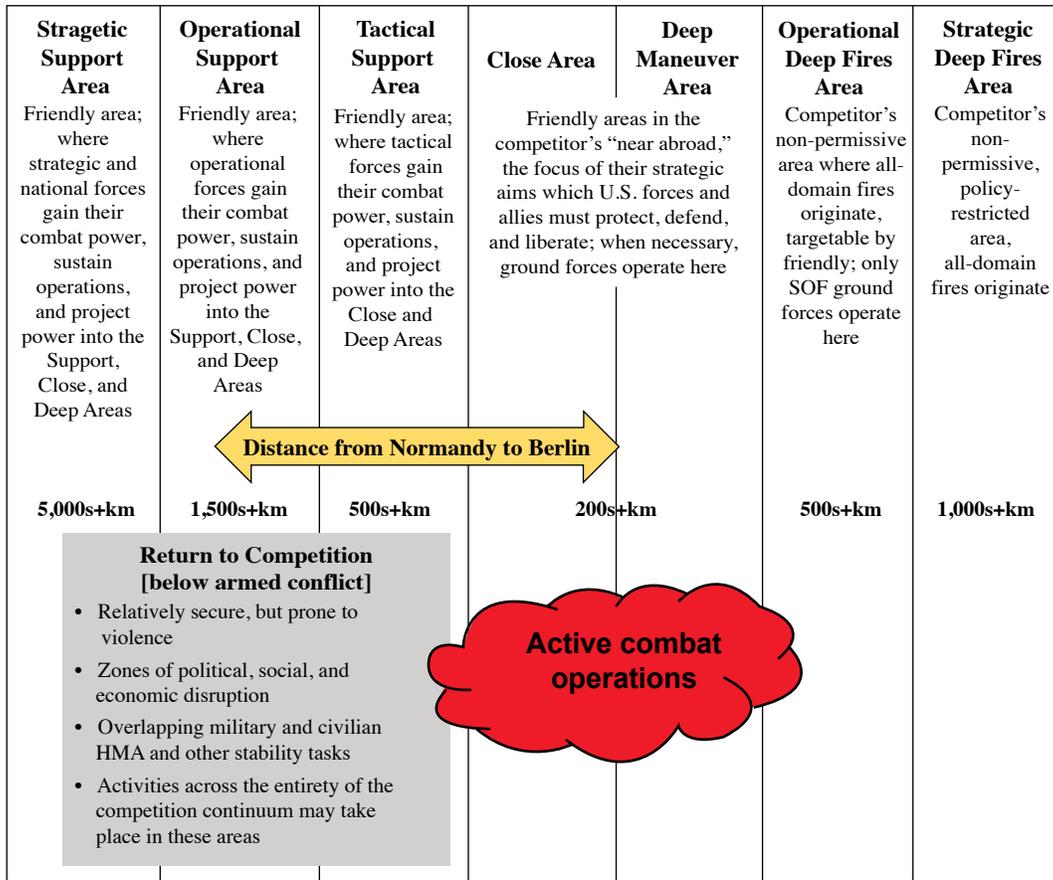


Figure 2. The linear battlefield is typically associated with large-scale ground-combat operations (e.g., World War II).¹² Using World War II as a hypothetical example, HMA activities could have taken place throughout France, Belgium, etc. as the Close and Deep Maneuver Areas progressed into Germany. Figure adapted from *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*.¹³

where the lines between military and civilian HMA tasks blur in post-conflict and geopolitically contentious environments.

These DoD terms, concepts, and definitions have implications for the international HMA community because the DoD will conduct its HMA activities under this construct and associated legal norms. Specifically, understanding DoD objectives associated with the cooperation and competition below armed-conflict portions of the continuum will allow others to assess DoD's commitment to country-specific HMA programs, and will enable cross-sector organizations to identify appropriate opportunities and methods for cooperation with DoD forces.

Similarly, the Army's MDO concept will affect the HMA community because MDO includes stability operations and HMA activities conducted by Army forces.⁹ Within the MDO concept, a *return to competition* provides an example of how the ideas within the Army's MDO concept may affect civilian HMA organizations: "In the return to competition [below armed conflict], Army forces conduct three concurrent tasks: physically secure terrain and populations to produce sustainable outcomes; set conditions for long-term deterrence

by regenerating partner and Army capacity; and adapt force posture to the new security environment."¹⁰ To achieve these results though, military forces must also address armed conflict's governmental, social, and economic disruptions in addition to the immediate security situation.⁶ HMA helps DoD to address these disruptions and to produce sustainable outcomes through land clearance, securing weapons and munitions, and (re)generating partner-military capabilities and capacities needed for safer living environments.¹¹ This affects civilian HMA organizations because DoD's HMA activities can influence how the host-nation plans, prioritizes, and supports military and civilian HMA operations over the long term. As a result, military and civilian HMA entities may find themselves more and more intertwined—especially when military-led efforts transition to "whole of government" stabilization efforts, led by the Department of State (DoS) or by other civilian agencies.

How well the diplomatic, information, military, and economic instruments of national power converge across the competition continuum will factor prominently during competition below armed conflict, especially during the

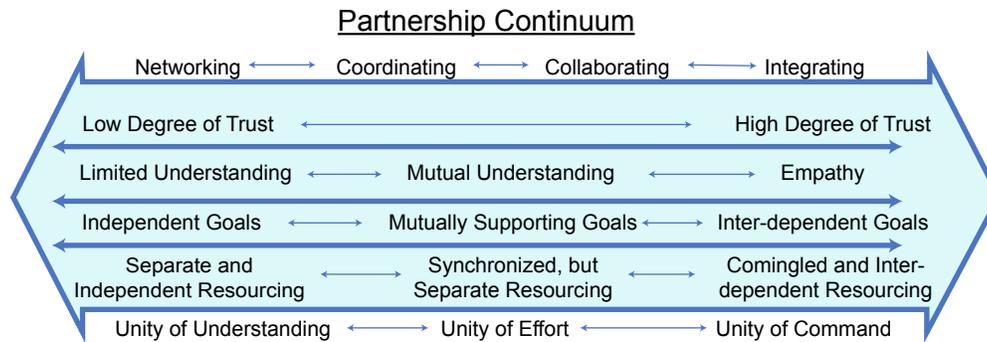


Figure 3. Synthesis of various concepts and definitions of “partnerships” and “collaboration.”
Figure courtesy of author.¹⁴

unstable periods immediately following armed conflict. The Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR)—a joint report by the U.S. DoD and the U.S. DoS—assessed such convergence in several, recent post-conflict environments and identified how convergence may fail. The SAR recommends that the U.S. Government assign DoS as the lead federal agency for stabilization, with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the DoD as supporting elements, due “to the lack of institutionalized DoD mechanisms to enable regular collaboration with interagency and international partners.” However, as noted in the SAR, the U.S. Government places security restrictions on government civilians. This limits their ability to deploy to conflict and post-conflict zones.¹³ The potential inability of DoS and USAID to establish a forward presence in conflict or post-conflict environments will, presumably, require the DoD to lead the convergence of U.S. Government capabilities with cross-sector HMA programs as part of the overall military effort during the early stages of stability operations in post-conflict environments. DoS will continue to be the lead federal agency for HMA programs and should assume responsibility once the security situation permits. However, it will likely have a military “face” in the immediate aftermath of large-scale, ground-combat operations.

Figure 2 illustrates a linear battlefield common to large-scale, ground-combat operations (e.g., World War II), with the “close area” being the *front line* commonly referred to in Hollywood movies. The operational and strategic-support areas (i.e., the rear)—established once the front line has passed through an area—should be relatively secure and capable of hosting HMA activities. While typically not engaged in direct combat, these support areas remain active zones of military activity in which deep fires (e.g., long-range rockets or ballistic missiles), special operations forces (SOF), or nonstate actors (e.g., insurgents) will use explosive hazards to disrupt military sustainment and stability operations. Furthermore, the political, social, and economic disruption caused by war “create conditions for intense competition among internal, regional, and global actors seeking

to retain or gain power, status, or strategic advantage within a new order.”¹⁶ Therefore, the security situation in these (loosely defined) post-conflict areas may prevent DoS or USAID personnel from assuming lead responsibility for implementing stabilization activities (including HMA). In these circumstances, the U.S. Army could opt to use a Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) to partner with other security forces and use its explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) or engineer personnel to provide HMA training to military forces or local civilians. If so, communication and cooperation between military forces and civilian HMA organizations would permit mutually-developed (or informed), military HMA programs to transfer to civilian authorities and organizations with minimal impact to the communities affected by explosive remnants of war (ERW).

Regrettably, the DoD does not have a doctrinal concept or idea for a partnership/cooperation continuum to facilitate this kind of communication and collaboration. However, academics, business consultants, and others have written extensively on cross-sector partnerships and collaboration. Synthesizing various definitions and models creates a continuum of potential cross-sector, cooperative relationships (Figure 3). On the left, organizations can limit their cooperation to simply exchanging knowledge and information with each other to achieve unity of understanding. On the right, organizations cede organizational autonomy to integrate as teams with comingled-resources, mutually-determined, and interdependent goals to achieve *unity of command*. Presumably, most NGO-military partnerships will lie toward the left side of the continuum due to many NGOs’ adherence to the four humanitarian principles of humanity, independence, neutrality, and impartiality. Conversely, U.S. Government efforts should converge toward unity of command.¹⁴ By operating on a partnership/cooperation continuum, disparate organizations can effectively address the myriad of challenges faced in the competitive gray zone, without sacrificing their organizational values and missions.

Using a partnership continuum allows military and civilian organizations to identify appropriate circumstances for communication and cooperation. Returning to the SFAB example, early communication between its EOD forces and the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) will establish the unity of effort between U.S. Government agencies necessary to effectively transfer HMA programs to civilian authorities once the security situation permits civilians to enter the area. Furthermore, early communication with HMA NGOs identified by DoS will establish the civil-military relationships necessary for unity of understanding. When appropriate, NGO input into U.S. Army SFAB-HMA activities will nudge the relationship toward unity of effort—thereby enabling a more effective military program with a smoother transition to civil organizations. Once on the ground, civilian organizations must determine to what degree they will cooperate or collaborate with military or other government forces, especially when they encounter explosive hazards they are not trained or equipped to identify, render safe, or dispose of (e.g., certain types of IEDs or chemical munitions). If they choose not to train and equip themselves to do tasks typically associated with government forces, then to whom will they report hazards, and how will they cooperate with military or other government agencies in the area, if at all? Thinking of the civil-military HMA relationship as a continuum of options ranging from *networking* to *integrating* allows military and civilian organizations to better compete against explosive hazards (rather than against each other) in post-conflict (and other) environments, while simultaneously sustaining their organizational values and purposes.

In the complex gray zones of post-conflict HMA, more effective operations require better communication and cooperation between military and civilian organizations. Lingering violence often prevents an immediate civilian presence in support areas, where combatants' use of improvised munitions often means civilian HMA organizations are ill-prepared to operate safely. On the other hand, military forces do not typically have the expertise or experience to address

war's political, social, and economic disruptions. These realities require ongoing understanding and cooperation between military forces and civilian organizations. To achieve this, the U.S. DoD should further refine the JCIC, JDN 1-19, and the U.S. Army's MDO concept by incorporating an idea for a range of techniques and processes with which it can better cooperate with civilian agencies and organizations. Civilian organizations should review military doctrine and ideas as well, because they may find the DoD's gray zone conceptualization useful. From there, they might also contemplate the proposed partnership continuum, so that they can better prepare themselves to operate just below the level of armed conflict in the murky gray zone of post-conflict environments and alongside the military forces operating in them. Collectively, we can achieve better long-term results using each other's strengths at the right places and times to offset our respective weaknesses. After all, the competition in the gray zone of post-conflict environments is between those who would use explosive hazards to perpetuate instability and those who seek to solve war's political, social, and economic disruptions. 

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the 20th CBRNE Command, U.S. Army, or U.S. Department of Defense.

Lt. Col. Shawn Kadlec

U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel
20th Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, and Explosives (CBRNE) Command



Shawn Kadlec is a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army assigned to the 20th Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, and Explosives (CBRNE) Command. He is an EOD officer and former EOD battalion commander with combat experience in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a battalion commander, his subordinate units conducted HMA and C-IED training across the

Indo-Pacific region. Lt. Col. Kadlec is a graduate of the U.S. Army War College class of 2019.