Thought leadership

Organizing CAPIA: *A Planning Framework for 21st Century Irregular Warfare*

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Executive Summary: From Awareness to Action

Irregular warfare (IW) has emerged as a defining competitive arena of the 21st century. The first paper in this series set the stage by describing how IW is no longer a peripheral activity but a persistent, daily contest that shapes global power dynamics without triggering open conflict. The second paper built on this foundation, demonstrating how adversaries such as China, Russia, and Iran leverage cumulative, cross-domain pressure — economic coercion, cyber intrusion, proxy violence, political manipulation, and sustained influence campaigns — to achieve strategic outcomes while avoiding the deterrent power of U.S. conventional forces. Together, these papers made clear that the U.S. cannot solely rely on traditional models of deterrence, response, or operational design. To remain competitive, the U.S. must significantly expand how it plans and conducts operations and campaigns to include robust irregular warfare.

This third paper moves from understanding the problem to developing the solution. It introduces CAPIA — Capabilities, Access, Partnerships, Information, and Authorities — as a planning framework designed to connect environmental and "human domain" understanding to sophisticated operational design in IW. Earlier tools primarily validated whether a plan was feasible, but CAPIA is built to shape the environment itself, enabling planners to maneuver through influence, narrative control, target audience engagement, partner engagement, access expansion, and authority management in the same ways traditional military campaigns maneuver through various types of terrain, weather, and firepower. CAPIA provides a disciplined, repeatable method to link what we possess, where we can operate, who we must align with, and the legal or policy boundaries that shape our tempo and legitimacy.

Ultimately, IW is a positional and multi-domain contest, not an episodic or linear fight. The side that shapes conditions earliest — by influencing key actors, altering access, establishing narrative legitimacy, and narrowing adversary options — gains advantage long before a crisis becomes visible. CAPIA provides the connective tissue that organizes the operational approaches required to compete in that space. It translates the complexities of IW into a coherent approach for sequencing actions, aligning partners, shaping perceptions, and maneuvering across procedural, legal, informational, and physical domains with coherence and speed. In doing so, CAPIA bridges the persistent gap between strategic intent and operational execution.

Why Existing Planning Models Fall Short in IW

The limitations of traditional planning constructs

The planning frameworks that dominate U.S. military doctrine — the Joint Operational Planning Process (JOPP), service-specific military decision-making process, variations of multi-domain operations (MDO), and legacy Cold War approaches — were built for environments characterized by clear boundaries, observable force dispositions, predictable escalation thresholds, and decisive engagements. They are also grounded in an increasingly obsolete premise that the most powerful operational approach is exclusively the delivery of kinetic power. In such environments, planners could rely on very familiar linear sequencing, well-defined phasing, predictable adversary actions, and force-on-force attrition to achieve operational objectives.

Irregular warfare does not operate under such conditions. Instead, it presents an environment where the boundaries between peace and conflict are deliberately blurred, where adversaries operate across cognitive, economic, digital, legal, and informational domains, where influence often outweighs firepower. Traditional planning methods still treat influence, legitimacy, and perception as supporting considerations rather than primary drivers of strategy. They continue to prioritize physical terrain, order of battle, and conventional resource allocation even when the decisive effects are occurring in information ecosystems, political alliances, civil society networks, and ambiguous operating spaces.

Furthermore, the multi-domain environments that matter most in IW — digital access and arenas, social sentiment, legal frameworks, local elite influence, informal power structures, economic dependencies, and proxy networks — are poorly integrated or omitted from existing planning tools. Operational constraints and risk calculations in IW tend to emerge from authorities, access, partnerships, public perceptions, and political risk, not from force ratios or terrain, and legacy planning models simply are not built to elevate these variables to the foreground of analysis. As a result, traditional planning frameworks often validate feasibility but fail to help the U.S. maneuver in the competitive space where adversaries are most active.

Why IW requires a positional, not attritional, logic

IW demands a fundamentally different operational logic. It is not about destroying enemy forces or seizing territory; it is about shaping choices, altering incentives, and closing off the pathways an adversary relies on to gain advantage. In IW, conflicts unfold cumulatively. They are fought through sustained pressure — legal, informational, diplomatic, economic, cyber, and political — that gradually shifts the environment. These cumulative pressures can ultimately be decisive, even if they never resemble a conventional battle. With enough time and synchronized influence across domains, an adversary can be forced into a position where escalation could cause unacceptable risk or victory could become structurally unattainable.

Planners therefore need a framework that allows and encourages them to anticipate adversary options, understand likely choices, and position friendly forces and partners — both physically and virtually — so effectively that the adversary begins the contest already at a disadvantage. IW is fundamentally about shaping the environment, not reacting to it. This is the logic that leads directly to CAPIA — a framework designed to build positional advantage through shaping, sequencing, integration, and persistent pressure across all domains.

> Strategic effects in IW rarely emerge from a single decisive action. They are the product of cross-domain synchronization — diplomatic engagement aligned with partner training, information operations aligned with economic incentives, and cyber shaping aligned with political outreach. When these actions reinforce one another, the combined effect becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

The CAPIA Framework — Purpose, Logic, and Function

Before introducing the CAPIA framework, it is important to establish the origins, purpose, and evolution of the earlier Capability, Intelligence, Access, and Authorities (CIA2) framework. CIA2 was developed to enable repeatable planning in the sensitive activities space against complex problem sets, with an initial focus on violent extremist organization (VEO) targets. Over time, this framework expanded to address hard targets and the challenges of great power competition. As adversaries became more complex, it became clear that CIA2 could not scale without broader partnerships across academia, government, and industry. In parallel, the rise of commercial data in the information age revealed that both sensing and projecting information had become the critical elements of competition, reshaping traditional intelligence efforts.

CIA2 has been the backbone of our operational planning and proposal development because it thrives in the “as-is” environment. It gives planners a rigorous, rapid, flexible, and disciplined method to validate whether a proposed plan can be executed with the capabilities, intelligence, access, and authorities currently available. CIA2 forces clarity at the outset, surfaces feasibility challenges early, and ensures that our concepts and plans are grounded in reality. Its purpose is straightforward: to answer the question, “Given the environment as it is today, can we execute this effectively, responsibly, and within required constraints?” In that role, CIA2 remains indispensable.

However, IW requires more than operational validation. It requires environmental design — the deliberate shaping of the cognitive, informational, political, and human terrain. IW requires modifying narratives, expanding or denying access, cultivating partners, creating new pathways for action, and using authorities to establish opportunities that do not exist at the beginning of planning. In IW, decisive ground rarely exists in the physical world; it is created through influence, legitimacy, perception, and presence in a primarily virtual environment. The side that shapes that environment earliest and best gains leverage without ever firing a shot.

This is the fundamental distinction between CIA2 and CAPIA. CIA2 helps us navigate the world as it is today. CAPIA is designed to shape the future by recognizing human capital as the dominant force in achieving and displaying legitimacy. CIA2 asks whether a plan is executable. CAPIA asks how we design the environment so that the plan succeeds — and how the adversary’s plan does not.

As our competitors manipulate information environments, lawfare, partner relationships, financial leverage, and daily access, the United States needs a comparable, more coherent system for competitive environmental design. CAPIA is that system.

Why CAPIA was created

CAPIA expands the scope of planning beyond feasibility into deliberate environmental maneuver. It was designed not just to help planners respond to existing conditions, but to help them create new ones through influence operations, narrative shaping, partner alignment, legal and political maneuver, access development, and multi-domain integration. In contested environments defined by ambiguity, proxy competition, and shifting alliances, CAPIA offers a structured way to design advantage rather than merely exploit it.

The five components

The CAPIA framework is organized around five components that determine success in irregular warfare:

- **Capabilities** encompass the tools, platforms, human expertise, and influence assets available to generate effect. In IW, this includes traditional military capabilities but extends to intelligence, digital influence, and partner capabilities that shape the operational environment.
- **Access** includes the physical, digital, political, and human pathways that enable presence, maneuver, or influence. Access determines not only where we can operate but how we are perceived when we do.
- **Partnerships** reflect the networks of local actors, influencers, institutions, civil society organizations, allies, and commercial entities that can amplify U.S. efforts or restrict adversarial freedom of action. Partnership is often the decisive variable in IW.
- **Information** refers to both the environment and a maneuver element. It includes narrative dominance, public awareness, audience perceptions, data, deception, and how actors shape cognition and behavior.
- **Authorities** define the legal, policy, and political boundaries of action. In IW, authorities determine tempo, attribution, deniability, risk, and the scope of permissible activities.

A related consideration that cuts across all CAPIA variables is the integration of commercial capabilities as a bridging function. A whole-of-government approach is powerful, but in practice, it is often constrained by gaps in access, speed, scale, technical reach, or just a lack of familiarity between different government organizations that requires time and effort to overcome. Thoughtful integration of commercial partners can significantly assist and speed the bridging of those gaps, and thereby enable a more effective "whole-of-nation" approach. This does not replace core government functions or authorities; it augments them. Commercial integration can provide advanced electronic warfare technologies as capabilities, expand virtual and physical access through enterprise networks, and enable the collection, fusion, and visualization of commercially available data at scale. These partnerships form connective tissue that accelerates action and integration across the framework, while authorities remain the essential control mechanism through which the government manages risk, legitimacy, and accountability.

What CAPIA delivers that existing tools do not

CAPIA elevates influence, partnerships, access, information, and authorities to the center of operational design — where they belong in IW. It helps planners design campaigns that maneuver through legitimacy, perception, access, and partner networks rather than simply through physical terrain. CAPIA makes it possible to identify where positional advantage can be created before adversaries act, and to design actions that shape decision space over time. It clarifies how authorities and access define operational tempo and flexibility. By integrating cognitive, legal, economic, digital, diplomatic, and physical actions into coherent, sequenced campaigns, CAPIA turns strategic guidance into operational reality.

In short, CAPIA transforms the logic of positional IW into a practical, repeatable methodology that captures the variables traditional models ignore.

How CAPIA Expands Upon Current Planning Tools

Although CAPIA enhances existing planning processes, it does not replace them. Instead, it provides a necessary design layer that sharpens the Joint Operational Planning Process by framing problems in terms that relate specifically to irregular warfare. CAPIA naturally fits between mission analysis and course-of-action development because it identifies the variables most likely to determine success — access, influence, authorities, partnerships, and information.

CAPIA also addresses critical gaps that legacy models were never engineered to solve. First, it treats influence as a primary planning factor, rather than as an annex appended to a conventional plan. Second, it integrates partnerships and human networks as decisive elements, acknowledging that they often determine legitimacy, access, and resilience. Third, it incorporates authorities and political constraints as operational variables, recognizing that these shape deniability, tempo, and risk. Finally, it reframes access as a form of positional ground, recognizing that presence — physical or digital — can either open or close operational opportunities.

By codifying these elements, CAPIA enables repeatable and scalable campaign design. It allows planners — whether part of a small forward SOF detachment, a COCOM-level planning team, or an interagency working group — to design campaigns that are integrative, sequenced, and optimized for cumulative advantage.

CAPIA as the Engine for Positional Play Planning (PPP)

If CAPIA is the framework, Positional Play Planning (PPP) is the logic that brings it to life. PPP is designed for environments where influence, perception, and narrative determine outcomes as much as — or more than — military force. It focuses on three principles: position, tempo, and audience.

CAPIA directly supports each of these principles. It reveals where positional advantage exists or can be created across cognitive, human, political, and digital terrain; it clarifies the variables that shape tempo: approval pathways, partner willingness, authorities, and access constraints; and it identifies the audiences that matter most in the environment — whether they are political elites, military partners, civil society actors, diaspora groups, or the broader population — and the mechanisms by which they can be influenced.

PPP produces three core operational artifacts: a narrative baseline, an audience map, and a positioning timeline. CAPIA generates each of them. CAPIA's Information component provides the raw material for defining the narrative landscape. Partnerships and Access determine which audiences matter, why they matter, and how best to engage them. Capabilities, Authorities, and Access define what actions can be sequenced, how quickly they can occur, and where reversibility or deniability must be built in.

Executions joining multiple capability or access vectors can be accomplished through CAPIA. Application at scale becomes far more complicated due to the understanding of red (adversary), green (neutral), blue (friendly), and yellow (unknown) systems on a global playing field. PPP is the scaled and intentional application of CAPIA to probe and sense these systems based on root cause analysis of a strategic end state. Modulating both frequency and amplitude of activity, both geographically and functionally, reduces risk and speeds the bias for understanding.

In this way, CAPIA functions as the IW equivalent of a mission-variable set. Instead of focusing on terrain, force ratios, or traditional METT-TC considerations, CAPIA evaluates the variables that actually shape the IW battlespace, converting positional logic into executable design.

Enabling Multi-Domain Maneuver Through CAPIA

While PPP provides the conceptual logic, multi-domain maneuver provides the operational method, and CAPIA enables both. In irregular warfare, maneuver is rarely about physical movement. It is about sequencing influence, adjusting access, shaping narratives, managing authorities, deploying cyber tools, and engaging partners in ways that reinforce one another.

CAPIA allows planners to synchronize actions across cognitive, cyber, legal, economic, diplomatic, and physical domains. Each of the five CAPIA variables helps clarify where and how actions should occur, who needs to be involved, and what sequencing will create cumulative advantage. Because IW campaigns must be carefully calibrated — especially when deniability or reversibility matters — CAPIA helps planners understand which actions must occur first, which must remain non-attributable, and where visible or attributable actions may create leverage rather than escalation.

Maneuverability in IW is also about resilience. CAPIA helps planners identify vulnerabilities in partner ecosystems — political, digital, institutional, and cultural — and determine where investments in legitimacy, governance, narrative protection, and civil engagement can deny adversaries the space to operate. In doing so, CAPIA supports both offensive and defensive aims, creating options for friendly actors while systematically denying options to adversaries.

Practical Application: What a CAPIA-Informed PPP Campaign Looks Like

CAPIA, combined with PPP, provides a structured way to translate strategic objectives into synchronized, multi-domain actions that shape the environment before adversaries act.

A CAPIA-informed process begins by defining the problem in IW terms. Practitioners assess available capabilities — including influence assets and partner strengths — and then examine where the United States and its partners have access or need to expand it. They identify which partnerships are necessary, which relationships must be cultivated, and which actors must be neutralized or co-opted. They analyze the information environment to understand dominant narratives, audience perceptions, and intervention points. Finally, they assess authorities to understand what is permissible, what requires higher approval, and what risks must be managed.

This analysis produces a clear picture of how positional advantage can be created. For example, countering Chinese influence in a Pacific Island nation might involve sequencing diplomatic engagement, targeted information operations, infrastructure investment, and support to local institutions — all informed by CAPIA. Dissuading Russian proxies in the Caucasus would involve mapping Russian

access, identifying partner vulnerabilities, and aligning legal, cyber, economic, and informational tools to constrain proxy mobilization. Preempting Iranian paramilitary influence in a fragile state would require understanding local governance gaps, identifying IRGC leverage points, and employing covert influence, advisory operations, media shaping, and economic incentives to create conditions unfavorable to Iranian expansion.

From such scenarios, CAPIA produces operational outputs: a narrative baseline to guide influence efforts; an audience map identifying key actors and engagement pathways; and a positioning timeline sequencing actions to create cumulative advantage. CAPIA also helps generate integrated CONOPS options and clear assessments of risk, reversibility, and escalation pathways.

Finally, PPP begins to tell a global story. While these efforts are inclusive, they often lack a higher strategic aim beyond the island nation, a proxy in Sub-Saharan Africa, or IRGC influence within a fragile state. PPP addresses this gap by nesting the island nation within the 1st and 2nd island chains, linking proxies from Sub-Saharan Africa to the Middle East and North Africa, and tracing IRGC influence to overseas money laundering networks to the Western Hemisphere. In doing so, PPP elevates IW to a global scale and creates a pathway to communicate that understanding across a Whole of Nation.

Institutional Implications — What Must Change to Implement CAPIA

CAPIA is a powerful planning framework, but its effectiveness depends on the institutions capable of acting on it. Implementing CAPIA at scale requires building a joint and interagency cadre fluent in IW planning. Today, expertise in influence, authorities, and partner networks is unevenly distributed and concentrated in niche organizations. A dedicated IW planning cadre should rotate across operational units, interagency staffs, and partner institutions to build consistency and shared understanding.

Combatant Commands also need persistent IW planning elements. Most COCOMs have small cells or ad hoc working groups, but few have permanent, resourced teams capable of running CAPIA-informed planning on a continuous basis. IW campaigns unfold over years; planning structures must match that timeline.

Institutionally, CAPIA should be embedded into doctrine, planning guidance, and campaign design templates. IW annexes, OIE guidance, SOF doctrine, and COCOM campaign plans should adopt CAPIA's structure to ensure planners treat influence, access, partnerships, and authorities as core design variables rather than afterthoughts.

Authorities remain a major friction point. CAPIA helps identify these constraints, but streamlined approval processes and flexible authorities are needed to enable timely action.

Finally, CAPIA-informed planning demands interoperable tools — common operating pictures for influence, partner networks, narrative mapping, authorities, and access — that enable collaborative planning across classifications and between the United States and its partners.

Conclusion — CAPIA as the Foundation for Modern IW Campaigning

Irregular warfare is the defining strategic contest of our era. CAPIA provides the planning framework needed to compete deliberately, persistently, and from a position of advantage. By structuring campaigns around the variables that truly shape the IW environment — capabilities, access, partnerships, information, and authorities — CAPIA enables planners to shape conditions early, constrain adversary options, and generate cumulative positional advantage before crises emerge.

By aligning partners, navigating authorities, influencing narratives, expanding access, and integrating actions across domains, CAPIA closes the gap between strategy and execution. It offers a disciplined method to shape the environment in ways that favor U.S. objectives and restrict adversary plans.

The next papers in this series will build on this foundation, showing how CAPIA informs force design, organizational reform, and institutional changes that will allow the U.S. to make irregular warfare a core element of national strategy — not a peripheral activity.

About the authors

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Lieutenant General Michael K. Nagata (Retired) served in the U.S. Army for 38 years, 34 of which were in U.S. Special Operations Forces. He works today as the Strategic Advisor and a Senior Vice President for CACI International.

His final government position was Director of Strategic Operational Planning at the National Counterterrorism Center until 2019. Previously, Lieutenant General Nagata served as the Commander, Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT) in U.S. Central Command, from June 2013 to October 2015.

A native of Virginia, and graduate of Georgia State University, Lieutenant General Nagata initially enlisted as an Army Private, and later received a commission from the Army's Officer Candidate School as an Infantry Officer in 1982. He initially served as a Platoon Leader in the 2d Infantry Division before volunteering for Army Special Forces in 1984.

During his Special Operations career he served in various positions in both Army and Joint Special Operations. These included: Detachment Commander, Executive Officer, Battalion S-3, Battalion Executive Officer, and Group Operations Officer. Later, he served as the Commander of 1st BN, 1st Special Warfare Training Group, responsible for the Special Forces Qualification Course. In 1990, he volunteered and assessed for a Special Missions Unit (SMU), in which he served at various times as a Troop Commander, Operations Officer, Squadron Commander, and SMU Commander.

After graduating from the National War College, Lieutenant General Nagata served in the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence. He then served in the Intelligence Community as a Military Deputy for Counter Terrorism. As a general officer, he has served as the Deputy Chief, Office of the Defense Representative to Pakistan (ODRP), the Deputy Director for Special Operations and Counter Terrorism (J-37) on the Joint Staff, and Commander, SOCCENT, before his final assignment at NCTC.

Lieutenant General Nagata today resides in Arlington, Virginia with his wife Barbie, and their five adult children and two grandchildren are the lights of their lives.

Mark Haselton
Mark Haselton is a retired U.S. Army Special Forces officer with 23 years of service, including 18 years in Special Forces and a culminating assignment as Chief of Strategic Concepts for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. After six years in the intelligence community focused on unconventional warfare planning, he joined CACI in 2007 through its acquisition of The Wexford Group. He formerly led CACI's 1,100-person Special Operations and Asymmetric Solutions Group supporting USSOCOM missions globally. He now serves as a Subject Matter Expert and Solution Developer, contributing to CACI's ongoing research and assessments of irregular warfare threats to the United States.

Nick Wilcox
Nick Wilcox is a Senior PM at CACI and one of our lead practitioners supporting multiple geographic combatant commands, USD (I&S), the FBI, HSI, and Department of Commerce law enforcement elements, and coordinating across other government agencies and departments.

Nick started his career in the Department of Defense as an Analyst in the 82nd Airborne Division, and quickly advanced to serve as a Special Forces Engineer in both 5th Special Forces Group and 19th Special Forces Group. Nick has met with many challenges over his career both in contracting and in service, most notably in developing an HVI list partnered with the Iraqi Ground Force Command, supporting the establishment of multiple Task Force elements to include an Integrated Deterrence Task Force, TF 4025, the SREC, and the JICC. He has served as a Sensitive Activities Advisor with emphasis on great power, and as an analyst at SOJTF-A covering both the north and the west of Afghanistan. Most recently he has applied the knowledge and skills gained over the past two decades as a Program Manager providing commercial support to a range of SOF activities.

Nick continues to be a voice for application of irregular warfare across the whole of government by enabling planners and staffs alike as they apply multiple capabilities from the perspective of both an analyst and an operations professional.

A native of California's Central Valley agricultural center, Nick has completed a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, a Master of Business Administration, and an Executive Juris Doctorate along with several certifications including Lean Six Sigma Black Belt, Advanced Scrum Master, Lean Portfolio Manager, and the Project Management Professional Certification.