

Competing



U.S. Marine Corps

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FOREWORD

Western conceptions of the international struggle among nations (and other political actors) often use binary war or peace labels to describe it. The actual truth is more complicated. Actors on the world stage are always trying to create a relative advantage for themselves and for their group. Sometimes this maneuvering leads to violence, but the use of violence to achieve goals is more often the exception than the rule. Instead, most actors use other means in their competitive interactions to achieve their goals. The competition continuum encompasses all of these efforts, including the use of violence.

There are several reasons for explaining the competition continuum to Marines. The first is to make them aware that from “recruitment to retirement,” they are an integral part of the Nation’s strategic competition with other actors. *Marines are always competing, even when they are not fighting in combat.* Next, understanding unleashes creativity. Once Marines understand the nature and form of competition, their innovative spirit will lead to the development of new kinds of competitive advantages. Finally, this publication expands the discussion on how and where Marines fit into the continuum and where to look for their natural partners in competition.

By design, this is a small book with a construction that parallels Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, *Warfighting*. It is not intended as a reference manual, but is designed to be read from cover to cover. This publication does not contain specific techniques or procedures we should adopt. Rather, it provides broad guidance in the form of concepts, with illustrations intended to stimulate thinking and encourage additional learning. It requires judgment in application.

We live in a time of renewed great power competition in an era of exponential technological and social change. Marines enjoy a rich heritage of advancing our Nation's interests in these kinds of struggles. As we look to the future, we must ensure today's—and tomorrow's—Marines do the same. Like maneuver warfare, competing is a way of thinking. We all need to read, study, and debate this publication with our fellow Marines. We must understand the importance of strategic competition and the essential role Marines play in it for our Nation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. H. Berger', with a stylized, flowing script.

DAVID H. BERGER
General, U.S. Marine Corps
Commandant of the Marine Corps

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Competing

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Chapter 1

The Nature of Competition

Total war and perfect peace rarely exist in practice. Instead, they are extremes between which exist the relations among most political groups. This range includes routine economic competition, more or less permanent political or ideological tension, and occasional crises among groups.¹

—MCDP 1, *Warfighting*

These words from the Marine Corps' warfighting philosophy frame the idea of competition for Marines. They also serve as a springboard for Marines to think about how they can contribute to winning the Nation's competitions, including the ones taking place below the threshold of violence.

Competition happens constantly in many forms amongst the nations of the world, in the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic arenas. Rivals often challenge each other in one of

them while they cooperate in a different one. Competitors include a wide range of political actors, from nation-states to groups organized around a single cause. While the discussion below will often refer to state versus state rivalries, in most cases the ideas apply equally to challenges with non-state actors. Competition in various forms and among many different actors is the norm in international relations (understanding how others approach competition is critical, as discussed in chapter 4).

The Marine Corps participates in the competitions of the United States in many ways. Foremost among them is to fight and win our Nation's battles, and to be ready to do so at all times. (War itself is a special kind of competition. How it fits into the overall continuum will be explored in detail.) The very existence of the Marine Corps is a competitive act, as it signals to potential rivals that there are vital interests our Nation will go to war to protect, and that those of a maritime nature are important enough that we have invested in a dedicated naval expeditionary force to protect them. The capabilities the Marine Corps generates in preparation for battle are also competitive, as these capabilities are what help *deter* a potential rival from selecting a course of action above the threshold of violence.

The Marine Corps, however, does not "win" our Nation's competitions alone. In fact, the Marine Corps is most likely to *support* or *contribute to* advancing US interests as part of a larger competitive strategy. The Marine Corps can do a great deal to help the United States compete successfully, but it will do so as part of a larger national effort that extends well beyond the military instrument of national power.

From recruitment to retirement, Marines have the *potential* to help the Nation compete successfully in many ways. It starts with the right mindset, one that recognizes the Marine Corps' top priority is to win battles, while also recognizing that war and warfare are segments of a larger spectrum known as the *competition continuum*. Marines need to be clear-eyed about this spectrum. Even when Marines are not at war in one of its many forms, they are still in a state of competition. While demonstrating the ability to fight and win wars is crucial for deterrence, a successful US foreign policy will avoid wars (especially against great power rivals) whenever possible.

COMPETITION EXPLAINED

Competition is a fundamental aspect of international relations. As states and non-state actors seek to protect and advance their own interests, they continually compete for advantage.²

Nations and other political actors pursue their interests constantly and in a variety of ways. Competition results when the interests of one political group interact in some way with those of another group. These interactions take place in a dynamic environment. Each move an actor makes towards fulfilling an interest changes that ecosystem. Any interaction of interests changes the situation as well.

One approach for describing this environment uses the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic or DIME framework. These broad categories describe the kinds of tools political actors use in an effort to reach their goals. Often times tools from several categories are used together to fulfill interests or achieve goals. The gray box, “*Economic Competition: The Marshall Plan*” on the next page provides an illustration of an economic tool. It describes how financial aid to 17 countries in Europe after WW II was used by the United States to achieve post-war goals (diplomatic and informational tools supported this effort as well).³

Competitions are often labeled as “zero-sum” or “positive-sum.” A zero-sum rivalry means that if one group achieves its goal then the rival group cannot achieve its own. A good example of zero-sum competition is when two nations struggle over the ownership of an island; in most cases only one of them can physically control it at a time. Positive-sum means that more than one group can make progress toward fulfilling interests or achieving goals at the same time. For example, two nations may compete economically, but both may see their gross domestic product (GDP) increase simultaneously.

Competition manifests itself in several ways, such as when one actor attempts to impose its will on others. Another way is when one competitor acts to frustrate another’s plans, preventing them from achieving their goals. Both of those mainly apply to zero-sum struggles. In a positive-sum example, two economic rivals will try to best each other (like when they try to increase their market share in a particular industry at the expense of their rival) while both of their economies continue to grow.

Competition, especially at the nation-state level, is complex and it is *systemic*. For example, auto manufacturers in the United States compete with rival companies in the European Union and Japan, but this does not mean the US Government is also in direct competition with these governments, even though the auto manufacturers are based on their respective territories. Indirectly, the auto manufacturers may lobby their governments, asking them to take actions that favor their company in the global competition for auto sales. The individual actors are intertwined and interact with each other in many different ways. The details of this brief example are less important than it is for Marines to understand that strategic competition among international political actors is multi-layered and networked. Each competitor consists of many parts that interact in complex ways. As we see from these examples, competition and cooperation can coexist, and competition does not need to lead to conflict.

Economic Competition: The Marshall Plan

The European Recovery Program (better known as the "Marshall Plan") is a clear example of US economic competition following WW II. The stated goals of the plan were to rebuild war-torn areas of Europe, lower trade barriers, and modernize industry. In addition to improving prosperity and preventing the spread of Communism, the plan aimed to rehabilitate the economies of 17 countries to create the stable conditions needed for the survival of democratic institutions.

The plan was judged a success, providing \$13B (over \$128B in 2020 dollars) along with technical assistance. In addition to contributing to 15–25% growth in these countries during this period, it helped democracy grow despite the Communist threat.

THE CONTINUUM

There is no perfect model to use in explaining the competition continuum. The many feedback loops it contains make it very complex, so models will omit some details. However, models are useful because they help explain specific concepts and assist Marines in building their own visualization of the continuum.

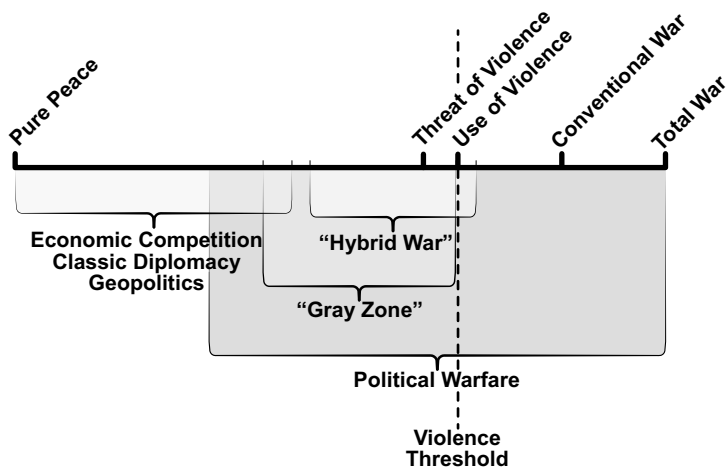


Figure 1. Linear Competition Continuum Model.

Figure 1 shows a linear model bounded by “pure peace” and “total war” (these boundaries are rarely, if ever, reached). This particular model shows different kinds of competitive acts in relation to the threshold of violence. It also clearly illustrates the wide spectrum of struggle that takes place between “peace” and “war,” which helps us avoid the trap of thinking we are in a