

## Chapter 2

### Future Operating Environment

Over the next several decades, U.S. national security practitioners are likely to confront persistent global instability. Emerging from dynamics visible today, the future operating environment (FOE) will feature an increasing role for non-state actors; the diffusion of power manifested in a multipolar world; demographic shifts including accelerated urbanization; and increasingly adversarial competition for global resources. The spread of rapidly advancing information and weapons technologies will further enable this diffusion of power and adversarial competition, involving frequently changing combinations of state and non-state actors.<sup>12</sup>

As such, while the two-century-old trend of increasing irregular conflict will likely continue,<sup>13</sup> the threat of major state-on-state confrontation will endure. The U.S. Armed Forces must therefore further develop both its traditional and irregular warfare capabilities. As unconventional warfare (UW) will likely feature prominently in both forms of conflict, U.S. national security strategy must come to embrace Counter-UW, prosecuted against state and non-state adversaries.

*Diffusion of Global Power.* The U.S. National Intelligence Council (NIC) currently projects a much greater diffusion of global power in the near future, with the resultant multipolarity driving geopolitical instability. According to the NIC, “by 2030, no country—whether the U.S., China, or any other large country—will be a hegemonic power.”<sup>14</sup> Rising regional states such as China, Russia, India, Brazil, Indonesia, Turkey and Iran will assert growing power and influence regionally and globally to secure their political, social, or economic interests. The U.S. national leadership will thus employ the elements of national power in an international environment where alliances change more frequently and adversarial relationships are more common than in the past.

*Increased Prominence for Non-State Actors.* The diffusion of global power will also manifest itself as an increasing role of non-state actors seeking greater influence from the local-to-global level. The rapid spread of ever-improving weapons and information technology will prove an enabler in this respect: “individuals and small groups will have greater access to lethal and disruptive technologies (particularly precision-strike capabilities, cyber instruments, and bioterror weaponry), enabling them to perpetrate large-scale violence—a capability formerly the monopoly of states.”<sup>15</sup> Violent extremists as well as criminal organizations will to use these tools with little restraint in

*Russia’s campaign in Ukraine today is a prominent example of hybrid warfare. In the previous decade, however, during the 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both sides used combinations of regular forces, irregular forces, and criminal elements. Prior to the war, Russian military forces operating in Georgia as “peacekeepers” sustained a flourishing smuggling network in partnership with various Abkhaz, Ossetian, and Georgian criminal groups. Alongside Russian forces, this smuggling network moved into Georgia, while cooperating with separatist militias used by Russian forces to ethnically cleanse Georgians from the two breakaway regions. Similarly, Georgian military forces cooperated with guerillas operating in the area. Both sides thereby blurred the distinction between regular government forces, criminal elements, and militias.*