



This documented briefing elucidates a concept—“netwar”—that we mentioned in an earlier paper on “cyberwar” (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1993).

At the time, we had begun to wonder about the implications of the information revolution for war and lesser modes of conflict. Our notion was that the information revolution would cause radical shifts in how societies come into conflict, and how their security forces should prepare and respond. When we coined the term “cyberwar” to discuss military implications for warfare, we realized that we needed a separate term to discuss conflicts short of war involving actors who may or may not be military. That term became “netwar.”

Its distinguishing element is that at least one of the protagonists, usually a nonstate actor, organizes as a network rather than a hierarchy. Network designs have been used throughout history with mixed results. Today’s information revolution, however, is making the network a much more effective form of organization, one that

may have overarching effects on society and security. For example, terrorist and criminal organizations are increasingly taking advantage of new information technologies to realize the full potential of highly decentralized, networked designs.

Netwar is blurring the line between peace and war, offense and defense, and combatant and noncombatant. As a result, the United States will face a new generation of nettlesome challenges that, in our view, will require new doctrines and strategies to combat them.