

What is net assessment?

Net assessment is a multi-disciplinary approach born of the need to integrate Red and Blue strategy in a single place. Counterterrorism (CT) net assessment, in particular, examines this dynamic in the context of the strategic environment. The practice of net assessment identifies critical factors in the strategic environment that shape the capabilities possessed by opposing competitors. They describe the overall balance of capabilities each side possesses (hence the word “net”), and look for areas in which one side or the other creates and leverages opportunity through competitive advantage. These long-term, diagnostic studies provide a fundamentally different perspective on the factors that could define success or failure for U.S. policy, and help decision makers understand what factors within a competition are truly important to consider when creating strategies to achieve their desired outcomes.

“Net assessment is a multidisciplinary approach to national security analysis that is comparative, diagnostic, and forward-looking” (Skypek, 2010).

Why a diagnosis?

A good diagnosis will provide information to guide appropriate action, creating and maintaining advantage. Understanding our sources of advantage helps us to determine our leverage in a given situation, and the conditions in the strategic environment that favor opportunity. Where is our leverage waxing and waning and why? What can we control? What can we influence? Where can we cede control without losing influence? Where must we simply endure?

Net assessments are not about prediction, but accurate diagnosis of the nature of competition in a specific context, and developing a deeper understanding of the underlying levers or drivers of change and influence. It is a way of thinking differently about the world that frames terrorism and counterterrorism as a competition resulting not in winners and losers, but in asymmetries that confer advantages and disadvantages on all parties.

Net assessments don't recommend any particular course of action, but they do define the features or characteristics of what any good or appropriate course of action should include (Bracken, 2006).

What is the value of NCTC net assessments?

NCTC net assessments will assess the competitive balance between actors aligned with core U.S. interests and goals (Blue) and violent non-state actors (Red) – taking into account the past and present and seeking insights into the future – by studying the associated balances and interactions within a complex, dynamic environment (Green). The interaction of Blue, Green, and Red is conceptualized as a co-evolutionary ecosystem of competing interests and ideas where threats and opportunities abound.

For NCTC net assessments, competitive advantage is not about defeating the enemy in terms of military conquest, but achieving our socio-economic-political aims in the competition (*adapted from Tom Mahnken*). This approach to a theory of victory results in a paradigm of managing threats and opportunities vice making winners and losers. Competing effectively will require clear articulation of our interests and goals. NCTC net assessment, therefore, begins with an assertion of our identity and purpose to reframe the competition and our adversaries in ways consistent with our views and aspirations.