

# CREATING AND CULTIVATING FLEXIBLE WARFIGHTERS

A Case for Support for the Institute for Future Conflict | United States Air Force Academy







“Our nation’s future security and stability depend on our ability to train and equip the next generation of leaders — to serve with integrity and agility, to anticipate and confront future conflict.”



# CREATE AND CULTIVATE

The Institute for Future Conflict at the U.S. Air Force Academy focuses on adequately preparing cadets for the world they will commission into as officers. The challenges and threats they will confront in the U.S. Air Force and Space Force over the course of their careers are daunting and increasingly complex.

The U.S. must also be prepared to deal with new and emerging technologies such as first-person-view drones, loitering munitions, AI-powered weapons and cyber threats.

The IFC, established in 2019, has a simple but essential mission: to create and cultivate flexible warfighters who are prepared to prevail in conflict regardless of what form it may take in the future.

To achieve this mission, the IFC works across all three major units at the Air Force Academy to develop warfighters in the classroom, on the military training ground and through athletic competitions.



# IN THE CLASSROOM: INTELLECTUAL TRAINING

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Among the greatest advantages the United States has over its adversaries are the quality, skills and motivations of the individuals who join its all-volunteer force. At the Air Force Academy, the quality of the academic program shapes future officers, sharpens their skills and deepens their motivations.

## FUTURE CONFLICT MINOR

The USAFA superintendent approved a future conflict minor in August 2025. The minor includes four unique courses and one elective. Together, they ground cadets in the operating environment and understanding how U.S. adversaries fight and think. The classified final course puts these tools into practice.

### First course: Strategic Competition

Through seven one-page policy memos, the course asks cadets to wrestle through some of the toughest questions facing the joint force. They are instructed to be concise, coherent and persuasive in their memos. If they can convince their boss in a single page of text, anticipating objections and thinking a step ahead of their adversaries, they will be well-positioned and prepared for the unforeseen challenges that arise in conflict.

Cadets are asked to solve problems such as:

- What actions could the U.S. have taken to have successfully deterred Vladimir Putin from invading Ukraine in 2022?
- How can the U.S. deter and counter risky and unsafe aerial intercepts by the People's Liberation Army Air Force in the South China Sea?
- Put yourself in the position of People's Republic of China strategists and devise a plan to take Taiwan.

By answering these questions in a single page of text, cadets are forced to think through what might work, how their adversaries are likely to respond and the potential consequences of their proposed course of action. The course ends with a four-day war game in which cadets devise a competition campaign plan, defend that plan to a group of retired flag officers and PhDs, and then put their plan into practice. Cadets design near-, medium- and long-term goals and are graded on how well they achieve those goals and whether they are successful in blocking their adversaries from achieving their goals. In other words, cadets are required to respond to their adversaries while not losing sight of their original goals.

### Second course: Adversary Doctrine

Cadets learn how adversaries such as the People's Republic of China, Russia, North Korea, Iran and violent extremist groups fight. They study doctrines, examine case studies and sharpen their insights through seminar and discussion-based courses. Cadets leverage the reading and information available to them to solve existing challenges. The course is structured similarly to Strategic Competition, with policy memos based on real-world questions and a culminating war game.

### Third course: Fiction and Future Conflict

This course is designed to help cadets see the world from the perspective of their adversaries. How does Xi Jinping think? What was in Vladimir Putin's mind when he invaded Ukraine? Understanding how our adversaries think, what motivates them and what they consider important when making decisions is essential to deterrence.

If the United States sees our adversaries only as mirror images of ourselves, then we will take actions that might counter or deter us but may not be successful in deterring our adversaries. To help cadets develop this additional perspective,





the Institute for Future Conflict uses fiction. Fiction uniquely engages the imagination and is one of the only art forms that allows us to live a life that is not our own.

Cadets are asked to read fiction, write fiction and think about future conflicts. They learn to write in the world of the novel they are reading, utilizing information gleaned from the text to complete their writing assignments. This ability to imagine and inhabit another person and see the world from their perspective is key to knowing our adversaries, developing future war plans and anticipating adversary responses.

### **Capstone course: Problems in Strategy and Tactics**

This classified course, known affectionately and unofficially as the “Jedi course,” meets in a sensitive compartmented information facility. Cadets work on real-world, classified problems that come to USAFA from combatant commands and the Pentagon. Cadets work in small teams made up of people from different disciplinary backgrounds, putting into practice all the skills they have learned throughout the course of the minor to solve a wicked problem.

Cadets balance what they find in the unclassified world with what exists in the classified world to come up with a workable solution that they brief back to senior leaders at the end of the course.

## **WARFIGHTER TALKS**

Every month, the Institute for Future Conflict hosts a warfighter talk for cadets, faculty and permanent party that is designed to dive deeply into a topic in the news. These talks offer cadets an opportunity to hear from

recognized experts about what is happening in the world and act as a supplement to their intellectual and military training.

Talks have included:

- A 2024 panel of three Ukrainian officers and a senior enlisted, all of whom had operational experience against Russia.
- A 2025 top-secret brief on Operation Midnight Hammer, which featured pilots, planners and intelligence officers.

## **FICTION AND ESSAY COMPETITIONS**

Thanks to donor support, the IFC has sponsored an annual fiction and essay competition since 2023. Air Force Academy cadets and undergraduate students at other Colorado colleges and universities are asked to write either a short story or a policy-focused essay in response to prompts.

Cadets may be asked what lessons the PRC was learning from the conflict in Ukraine and whether these were the lessons the United States wanted it to learn. On the fiction side, cadets might be asked to write a short story set in a war in 2035. The idea is for cadets to imagine what the world and war might look like in a decade. The prompts are intentionally broad to allow for more cadet creativity.

The top three entries of each contest receive cash prizes. In addition, the IFC takes the winning cadets to the Pentagon, where they brief senior leaders on their essay or story.



# ON THE TRAINING GROUND: MILITARY TRAINING

The IFC provides connective tissue between the three major units at USAFA to help fulfill the superintendent's goals of creating warfighters to win, leaders of character and quality, and critical thinkers to adapt.

A new war gaming fellow embedded within the Cadet Wing exists both to support the Cadet Wing in the planning of training and exercises and to help integrate subject matter expertise — logistical planning, human performance optimization and artificial intelligence tools,

for example — into USAFA trainings. This provides better and more realistic training for cadets, and it reinforces how classroom learning can be leveraged and applied on the training ground.

In addition, the IFC will support training and other exercises within the purview of the Commandant of Cadets.

# THROUGH ATHLETIC COMPETITION: TEAM TRAINING

The IFC leadership believes cadets must be prepared to fight with their minds, as part of a unit and with their bodies. The IFC has hired a human performance optimization fellow embedded within the Department of Athletics. Through this arrangement, cadets will optimize their performance, which will make them better students, better members of their squad and, ultimately, better warfighters.

In the future, the U.S. will need every advantage it can acquire, and the nation has no greater resource than the individuals making up the joint force. The IFC's vision is

not only to help cadets develop good habits regarding sleep, exercise, diet and choices, but also to help show how competition is one of the few crucibles for future conflict that exists at USAFA.

In addition, the superintendent has asked the Department of Athletics to focus on combatives training, and the IFC is hiring another individual to meet this priority. The new courses this person will support will match future assignments cadets will have as they graduate.







## RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

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### Operational Experience

Every year, the IFC hosts four intermediate-level officers, two from the Air Force and two from the Space Force. During their first year, officers complete Air Command and Staff College and work on a research project based on their operational experience. The first year of the competitive fellowship allows officers to take a step back from the tactical-level problems that have consumed much of their time and work on connecting those day-to-day challenges to broader strategic concerns. They then publish their findings in policy-focused outlets.

In their second year at USAFA, the fellows are embedded in departments within the Dean of Faculty, where they bring their operational experience to the classroom and cadets by teaching courses.

### IFC Website and Publishing Platform

The IFC has established a website and publishing platform where cadets, faculty and outside experts publish articles on some of the most challenging national security issues facing the United States.



# OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUPPORT AND IMPACT

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The Air Force Academy established the Institute for Future Conflict as an innovative entity that will serve as an exemplar of 21st-century public-private partnerships. The culture-changing execution of its work does not happen solely with government dollars. To build on the success underway, the U.S. Air Force Academy Association & Foundation invites you to join along the following lines of effort.

Across the IFC, we have curated impactful funding and engagement opportunities necessary to elevate the institute to the next level while keeping it strong at its core.

## CADET ENHANCEMENT AND EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

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The IFC is working to be the connective tissue among the major units, allowing for more collaboration and interdisciplinary work. To do this work at the level of excellence for which USAFA is known, philanthropy is required in funding the following priorities:

- **Endowed Chairs:** Endowed chairs are highly prestigious and promise to be some of the most significant and lasting elements of the IFC. They support USAFA's recruitment and retention of top subject-matter experts and professors in fields of study related to the themes and goals of the IFC.

- **Fellowships:** Fellowships target coursework and experiential and hands-on research opportunities related to future conflict topics, understanding and technology. The IFC already has several fellowships and seeks additional fellowships to enhance cadet education and curriculum development in areas such as space policy, hypersonics and information warfare.

- **Cadet Competitions:** The IFC has an opportunity to support competitive cadet teams, demonstrating its commitment to pursuing an interdisciplinary understanding of future conflict challenges. Funding of competitions will allow the IFC director to

supplement cadet teams in strategic and technical competitions.





# RESEARCH AND OUTREACH

The IFC is coordinating privately supported internal and external research projects that enhance cadet education. These may require technical support and integration for the purpose of advancing research and analysis informing course content. To do this work at the level of excellence for which USAFA is known, philanthropy is necessary to fund five priorities that supplement IFC work:

- **Postdoctoral Fellowships in Quantum**

**Information Science & Technology:** These fellowships will support promising young scholars from a premier university as they teach courses within the quantum minor.

- **Cadet and Faculty Research:** Philanthropy can offer support to future-conflict-related research within the future conflict minor. Cadets and faculty will have opportunities to explore and solve relevant problems, learn through real-world application of classroom principles and build lasting collaborative relationships for the Academy, Air Force and Space Force.

- **Presenting and Publishing Research:** The IFC has developed [ifc.usafa.edu](http://ifc.usafa.edu) to assist with an energized outreach approach to inform interested audiences about IFC activities and achievements. The institute receives additional support from newly commissioned officers who are awaiting their first specialty training assignments.

- **Connectivity and Technical Support: Unmanned Aircraft Systems, Multi-Domain Lab, Cyber City, Space and Aero Labs:**

In keeping with the Future Conflict Review Report, the IFC is preparing to hire a second fellow for network and interdisciplinary integration within the unmanned aerial vehicle realm. This expert will connect the data and visualization outputs from more than 20 USAFA labs, centers and functional simulators. These analyses will support many individual, functional educational needs and facilitate the visualization of the Joint All-Domain Operational environment. This fellow will also be integral in building the exercises USAFA leadership is developing to meet the superintendent's priorities.

- **Prototyping and Experiments within Madera Cyber Innovation Center:**

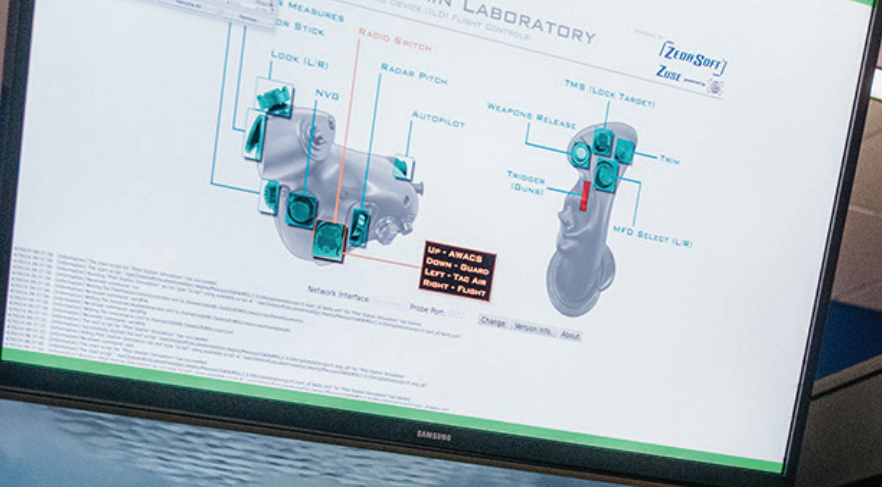
The Madera Cyber Innovation Center, which opened to cadets in 2025, will become the hub needed to spearhead the efforts of multiple IFC fellows. It will allow the fellows to successfully create the connectivity and integration architecture to enable the multi-domain "network of nodes" to present a coherent visualization of the future battlespace. Additionally, the Madera Center will allow cadets, faculty and active-duty organizations to engage in demonstrations and experiments to explore future offensive and defensive cyberspace tools and techniques.







# MULTI-DOMAIN LABORATORY



## MENACE-45

The MENACE-45 tactical display interface shows various radar and weapon status information. Key elements include:

- Top left: UP - AWACS, DOWN - GROUND, LEFT - TAG AIR, RIGHT - FLARE.
- Top center: RADAR, DEAR DOWN, and a small map.
- Left side: A radar display showing various targets and a scale from 1 to 16.
- Center: A radar display showing various targets and a scale from 1 to 16.
- Right side: A radar display showing various targets and a scale from 1 to 16.
- Bottom: A status bar with various indicators, including a clock showing 00:42:10 and 10:21:25.



# WE INVITE YOU TO SUPPORT THE IFC

Our nation's future security and stability depend on our ability to train and equip the next generation of leaders — to serve with integrity and agility, to anticipate and confront future conflict.

To be clear, the federal government and the U.S. Air Force will continue to provide adequate funding for the Air Force Academy's core programs. Government funding for baseline programming, however, is not enough to ensure the best possible experience for cadets nor to achieve excellence in all we do. Private support allows the Academy to seize opportunities and develop new programs more nimbly than the normal appropriations process allows.

We invite you to join in partnering with and supporting the Institute for Future Conflict at the United States Air Force Academy as it creates and cultivates flexible warfighters who are prepared to prevail in conflict regardless of the form it may take in the future.







TO LEARN MORE, VISIT [IFC.USAFA.EDU](https://www.ifc.usafa.edu)