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# The Future of Warfare is Irregular

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*The future of warfare conjures thoughts of cyber war, autonomous vehicles on the battlefield and flying overhead, cutting-edge artificial intelligence that integrates warfighting and information, and sleek new weapons and aircraft that promise to revolutionize war. However, the future of war is simpler in concept: it is irregular. The inclusion of irregular warfare as a foundational component of national security will ensure that the United States will have the capabilities, flexibility, and scope to militarily compete with great power rivals on the global stage. This article lays out how China and Russia are already challenging the United States using irregular means and expands on how the United States can leverage irregular warfare to build its response to increasing asymmetric threats. The main argument is that the United States has seen irregular warfare as a twenty-year anomaly and national security leaders are keen to focus on competition with geo-political rivals like China and Russia through conventional military means. However, this shift away from irregular warfare will make the United States less capable of competing with its adversaries by limiting engagement below the level of armed conflict and focusing solely on winning a conventional war through technological overmatch. This article*

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*uses the definition of irregular warfare laid out in the 2020 Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy: unconventional warfare (UW), stabilization, foreign internal defense (FID), counterterrorism (CT), and counterinsurgency (COIN).*

## IRREGULAR WARFARE AS A HALLMARK OF NATIONAL STRATEGY

As striking images of Afghans crowded into cargo planes during the frenetic American withdrawal from Afghanistan in August of 2021 flooded TV and phone screens around the world, it seemed to confirm the idea of a paradigm shift: the era of irregular warfare was ending, and one of state-against-state competition was emerging. Indeed, only a few months later, the world was shocked yet again when Russian tanks and artillery rumbled into neighboring Ukraine. Surely this was a sign that great powers felt free to assert themselves and lay claim to their interests, even if those interests lay across sovereign borders. However, a recent trend in state-on-state warfare should not be taken as confirmation that an era of irregular warfare has ended. It is perilous to discount irregular warfare as passé. Policies like relegating irregular warfare to an annex of the National Defense Strategy instead of a main strategic line of effort, and refocusing budgets on high-end capabilities and weapon systems highlight how the United States national security infrastructure has quickly reduced irregular warfare to lesser importance. The United States may have made its much-vaunted shift to focusing on strategic competition, but it is irregular warfare, not just new technologies or next generation aircraft, that will allow the American military to compete with its nation-state rivals. The *Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy*, released in 2020, defines irregular warfare as “a struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy.”<sup>1</sup> Irregular warfare is itself a means of strategic competition. Investing in irregular warfare capabilities and personnel broadens the spectrum of military competition and provides the means to counter rival powers below the level of full-scale armed conflict. Ignoring irregular warfare in favor of focusing on the types of weapons that will win a direct war with China or other rivals offers an incomplete, and, hence, losing strategy.

The topic of the future of warfare conjures thoughts of cyber war, autonomous vehicles on the battlefield and flying overhead, cutting-edge artificial intelligence that integrates warfighting and information, and sleek new weapons and aircraft that promise to revolutionize war. However, the future of war is simpler in concept: it is irregular. Irregular warfare capa-

bilities need not be analog or archaic, as new technologies can be incorporated for low-intensity conflict or subversion operations. Irregular warfare is a way of war that can embrace cutting-edge technologies and capabilities to make operations more efficient, but even with technology irregular warfare remains population-centric. At its heart, future conflict will be relational and revolve around access and influence in contested regions. If a direct, open conflict between nuclear powers breaks out, where all this new technology would meet on the battlefield, the ramifications would be catastrophic. A state actor who controls competition at the level below the threshold of armed conflict will have the advantage going into any escalation to open conflict. Embracing irregular warfare provides a state the ability to take the advantage in open conflict, and out-compete nation-state adversaries, ensuring that any breakout of armed conflict occurs on the periphery or through proxies and can be contained. Even if this is the beginning of a new security paradigm, irregular warfare remains just as relevant, if not more so, in this supposedly new era of increased state versus state conflict.

First, it is important to establish what irregular warfare is and how it is implemented. The *Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy* lays out five core missions within irregular warfare: unconventional warfare (UW), stabilization, foreign internal defense (FID), counterterrorism (CT), and counterinsurgency (COIN). These core missions span capabilities and embrace interagency expertise. Although United States Special Operations Command includes four of these five within its core activities, irregular warfare is not just the domain of special operators. Irregular warfare often elicits images of the counterterror and counterinsurgency operations of the last twenty years, but to see it as only that is limiting. Irregular warfare and strategic competition are not mutually exclusive concepts. A more productive view of irregular warfare is as a means of competition in the space below the threshold of armed conflict, i.e. without the direct exchange of hostilities. Irregular warfare is a complement and key component of competition. Although the Global War on Terror era may be ending, the stage for irregular warfare has never been bigger.

It is also important to define strategic competition. “Strategic competition” has been thrown around as a term that is seen as an update to the obsolete term, “great power competition.” Although the phrase was used in the 2018 *National Security Strategy* and the Biden Administration’s *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, it remains ill-defined and exists more as a catchall for how each administration views competition with China and other aspiring rivals to American power. The Joint Staff has tried to clarify

what constitutes competition through the publication of *Joint Doctrine Note 1-19: Competition Continuum* (JDN 1-19), where competition is defined as a continuum of “enduring competition conducted through a mixture of cooperation, competition below armed conflict, and armed conflict.”<sup>2</sup> This joint document, however, is light on details and lacks strategic direction. The Biden Administration interim guidance does lay out a national security priority that is aimed to “promote a favorable distribution of power to deter and prevent adversaries from directly threatening the United States and our allies, inhibiting access to the global commons, or dominating key regions.”<sup>3</sup> This priority highlights the need for irregular warfare capabilities within the strategic competition landscape. Irregular warfare provides the tools in which a country can stabilize, or destabilize, regional power relationships, providing the means to compete without resorting to direct military confrontation.

The major distinction made in the 2018 *National Security Strategy* is not just an embrace of the shift to strategic competition, it is the reorientation of the military from being able to fight two wars simultaneously, known as the two-war construct, to focusing on deterring and ultimately winning a single war against a great power rival, now known as the one-war construct.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Jonathan Schroden notes that even though the *Irregular Warfare Annex* was published after irregular warfare was not mentioned in the 2018 NSS, “the IW Annex is a secondary document and IW is currently not a strategic priority.”<sup>5</sup> Without focus on irregular warfare, American military dominance relies solely on deterring and winning a single great power conflict through conventional means. The merits of the one-war approach require another debate, but taken as that is the current standard, the one-war construct would be bolstered by embracing irregular warfare. Irregular warfare is instrumental in preparing the operating environment, shoring up alliances, fomenting resistance, and securing the influence and regional access necessary to be able to deter or win a great power conflict.

A comprehensive strategy of irregular warfare would allow the American military and its allies to compete with its main rivals in contested regions. An integrated strategy would be one where investments are still made to ensure technological advancement at parity or beyond the pacing threat to deter full-scale war while also investing in irregular capabilities, personnel, and access and influence among key populations. The competition phase is marked by a struggle for access and influence. To win at competition one must not only deter future aggression, but also comprehensively gain the advantage in the region through economic, diplomatic, and military efforts. Irregular warfare is well-suited to support whole-of-

government efforts and provides the means to project soft, sharp, and hard power. It provides the joint force commander and the current political administration options with which to engage allies and push against adversaries. Irregular warfare activities and military modernization can coexist; in fact, marrying the two provides the best means of actively competing with adversaries while deterring and preparing for future conflict. However, as Schroden points out, over the last twenty years there has been a continuous line of thinking that irregular warfare “has somehow been a distraction from the harmonious conduct of national defense as opposed to an instrumental component of it.”<sup>6</sup> Military leaders and policymakers have seemed impatient to return to focusing on large scale combat, failing to realize that irregular warfare is a key component of preparing the space for future conflict, and is integral to wider strategies.

Many in the American defense sector take the idea of strategic competition to mean a break from past irregular campaigns to embrace technology and return to preparation for multidomain warfare. The gusto with which the Services are promoting concepts like Joint All Domain Command and Control, the Marine Corps’ Force Design 2030, The Fourth Age of Special Operations Forces, and a return to investment in next generation technologies shows this in action.<sup>7</sup> Although these concepts do not lack merit and mark a willingness to prepare for the next fight, they do not offer much material with which to win the competition phase. Instead, these modernization efforts put all the proverbial eggs in the deterrence basket, striving to ensure that the United States can continue to technologically outpace its rivals and deter adversary aggression through presence and technological overmatch. That is unrealistic. A more fruitful endeavor would be to pair these modernization efforts with investment in the competition phase to shape the environment and actively work to outmaneuver rivals.

Large-scale combat operations between two nuclear-capable great powers would be catastrophic and lead to unsustainable losses even before the use of nuclear weapons is considered. One need only to look at the incredible cost being incurred by the Russian army and air forces in Ukraine to see how lethal modern weapon systems can be. As the price of modern weapons systems increases, the American military’s ability to reconstitute after initial losses diminish. The F-35, for example, is often used as a punching bag for the excesses of the military-industrial complex. Although pilots and the Services that currently fly the jet find its capabilities to be stellar, the program cannot produce the jets fast enough to fill current orders and demand. The production line in 2021 was able to produce eleven jets a month<sup>8</sup> which includes jets going to international

customers, not just the US Services. It will take years to produce enough F-35s to fill the initial order made by the American Military Services. This is without factoring in replacing massive combat losses from a great power conflict. The F-22, the other fifth-generation fighter currently in the American inventory, paints an even bleaker picture. The initial order for the jet did not procure enough to be above the replacement level to account for normal wear and tear attrition,<sup>9</sup> and the production line has been closed for years, meaning it would take an incredible industrial effort to replace any F-22 losses. These losses become compounded when paired against an adversary that has a robust indigenous production capability of high-tech weapon systems like China. When considering the cost and amount of manpower that would be required to replace entire squadrons of aircraft, large vulnerable bases, and aircraft carriers and other warships, it makes sense for policymakers to embrace concepts like irregular warfare to try to secure victory before direct conflict even begins. Military strategy based solely on conventional overmatch is a losing proposition.

However, these modern weapon systems are not without use in the competition phase. Enduring presence, military cooperation, and a robust commitment to regional allies go a long way in helping deter conflict, and things like rotating bomber task forces and continual deployments of carrier strike groups ensure America's regional commitments have teeth. However, presence alone cannot win the competition phase. Through its five core activities, irregular warfare presents active measures that can be utilized to maneuver for advantage within the competition space.

Conventional overmatch is also being met with an evening of technology on the modern battlefield. As the world becomes more urbanized, it will be more and more difficult for military operations to bypass large urban centers. Urban warfare is considered a great equalizer, especially if the attacking force is concerned with civilian casualties. Although that claim is overblown,<sup>10</sup> urban warfare does degrade some conventional capability, and defending forces can more easily exploit vulnerabilities in the attacking force. Along with the increase in urbanization, Dr. Audrey Kurth Cronin points out that accessibility to technological innovations in warfare is rapidly increasing.<sup>11</sup> The lowering of barriers to entry for cyber tools, small drones, wireless communication, night vision, and other technology allows even remote armed groups to take advantage of modern military technology. This increases the burden of innovation for the United States military and pushes the goalposts for maintaining conventional overmatch across all battlefields. The fighting in Ukraine has shown how much damage a numerically inferior force can inflict with light, shoulder-fired weapons

against armor and low-flying aircraft. Further, the war has highlighted the efficacy of arming a proxy force to fight a geopolitical rival on the periphery of their influence, a more irregular approach to warfare. The losses being suffered by both sides in Ukraine show how destructive conventional, large-scale combat operations can be with modern technology. A better way forward is to invest in the competition phase, before the costs of full-scale conflict must be paid.

### **RUSSIAN IRREGULAR WARFARE AND THE RAMIFICATIONS OF DIVESTING FROM AN IW STRATEGY**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, at first glance, seemed to signal a return to great power politics and realist thought put into practice. Some proponents of a return to focusing the American military on future conventional and direct war with a rival great power may have seen the opening days of the invasion as confirmation that irregular warfare was a thing of the past and a new era of large-scale combat operations was beginning. However, as the Russian advance faltered, the airspace was left contested, and an admirable Ukrainian resistance made their presence known. The Russian war in Ukraine shows the pitfalls of large-scale combat operations on the modern battlefield. Russia outclasses Ukraine's military in technology and manpower and has the components needed to forge complex, joint operations. But Russia demonstrates, as Lionel Beehner and Liam Collins point out, that "capacity is irrelevant without strategy and will."<sup>12</sup> The Ukrainian military and resistance in the first few weeks of the war leveraged modern anti-tank weapons, armed unmanned aerial systems, and mobile air defense systems to stymy Russia's desire for a quick victory. These are capabilities that have been fielded with effect by state and non-state actors from ISIS to Houthi rebels to the urban battlefields of the Nagorno-Karabakh War, and no longer remain the domain of large, modern militaries as pointed out above. Russian and Ukrainian armed forces are each paying a terrible price for Russia's bet on conventional overmatch. As the war continues and more American troops are sent to Europe to reinforce NATO, this also points to a shortcoming of the one-war construct.

Instead of inspiring an era of state-on-state large-scale combat operations, the Russian folly in Ukraine should serve as a cautionary tale to ambitious great powers. It should reaffirm the effectiveness of competing in the so-called grey zone. The United States' chief rivals, Russia and China, are already deeply involved in irregular warfare activities to compete. Before

the invasion, Russia seemed to be able to continue its assertion of regional power. Its disinformation and cyber tools were feared in the West, Western sanctions were limited, and Russia had seemingly gotten away with snapping up Crimea, Donbas, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia without crippling pushback or galvanizing the West. Its military and counterinsurgency operations in Syria were considered successful, and celebrated at home,<sup>13</sup> and its most prominent private military company, Wagner Group, had increased its presence in the Middle East and across the African continent.<sup>14</sup> In short, Russia's usage of irregular warfare techniques and activities were contributing to success while muddying the waters on the international stage to a significant enough degree to avoid comprehensive punishment or significant consequences. Russia's decision to shift to large-scale combat operations and abandon its irregular campaign forced the West to coalesce into a unified opposition and impose great economic costs on Russia, while Western weapons in Ukrainian hands inflicted serious Russian losses.

#### CHINESE IRREGULAR ACTIVITIES

China, the main rival mentioned in the Biden Administration's interim guidance, will learn from Russia's mistake. China has increased its ability to operate in the grey zone militarily and leverages commercial entities to exert economic pressure. It has grown its cyber capabilities and looks to grow its reach through irregular forces. Its usage of civilian commercial fishing vessels as extensions of the PLA Navy in what has been dubbed the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) shows its efforts to exert power through irregular means. Vessels of the maritime militia can be found in many—if not all—disputed waters claimed in the South China Sea and East China Sea.<sup>15</sup> These unarmed (although they use their onboard water cannons to harass) commercial vessels pushing into disputed areas present dilemmas to coast guards and navies. China has wielded the PAFMM as a naval force multiplier while increasing uncertainty in their adversary's response options. China also has increased investment in military diplomacy through participation in multinational exercises, increased naval port calls, and military exchanges.<sup>16</sup> Although these activities are not irregular methods, they point to China's understanding of the benefits of increasing access and influence abroad through military means. The best way to counter actions like these is through irregular warfare efforts and further investment in the competition space.



## CONCLUSION

As America's two main geopolitical rivals are already steeped in irregular warfare activities, it makes sense for the United States to meet them in this space. By divesting from irregular warfare competencies and perceiving the last twenty years as a military anomaly, the United States military risks ceding the advantage to its adversaries despite a security strategy that directs focus on meeting the challenge of strategic competition. David Ucko says it best when he writes,

“Russia and China have both broadened their strategies to emphasize a range of nonmilitary lines of effort, used to interfere with their adversaries, destabilize target countries, and increase their own influence and reach. In failing to capture the entirety of this strategy, in failing to understand the sources of legitimacy for the counter-hegemonic narratives that Russia and China espouse, the U.S. response has also failed to engage optimally with the realities of great power competition.”<sup>17</sup>

Yet the Services continue to do just this. The Army has already closed its Asymmetric Warfare Group, the Marine Corps closed the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, and the Air Force has made plans to shutter the 6th Special Operations Squadron—the only squadron in the Air Force dedicated to the mission of foreign internal defense with mandated language and culture training.<sup>18</sup> By equating irregular warfare with the past or seeing it through too narrow a lens, the United States' military capabilities will rest solely on deterrence and the hope that it maintains conventional overmatch in a conflict that ends before the next one begins.

There are a multitude of ways the American military can better integrate irregular warfare into its activities. It is also important to remember that the aim of irregular warfare is to advance greater access and influence in contested regions. To secure those two goals a true whole-of-government approach is required, and military activities are only a part of the solution. Within the military, the Services can and should do a better job of expanding the irregular warfare curriculum throughout all levels of joint professional military education, should maintain certain centers of excellence dedicated to the conduct of irregular warfare, should articulate specific strategies in regards to irregular warfare, and should continue to invest resources into units dedicated to irregular warfare like the Army's Special Forces Groups, Civil Affairs Battalions, and Security Force Assistance Brigades, as well as the Air Force's 6th Special Operations Squadron. Investment in irregular warfare capabilities would serve to protect high-cost weapons programs

that could be preserved and not have to be used in a large-scale conflict.

Irregular warfare can and should be used to set the conditions on the margins and the periphery of contested regions. It should be integrated into American military strategy so that the United States can react to adversary action across the spectrum of conflict and competition. The best strategic outcome is to avoid large-scale conflict between two nuclear powers, and the way to succeed in that endeavor is to win the competition before the conflict. Irregular warfare provides the capabilities to exert military power to secure ever-important access to and influence within contested regions. The future of warfare is irregular, and the United States will lose this competition if it does not embrace irregular warfare. *f*

## ENDNOTES

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