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Irregular warfare in strategic competition

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ABSTRACT

After two decades of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US military has shifted to preparing for large-scale combat operations. However, it would be a mistake to discard hard-earned lessons from these conflicts. Despite contemporary advances in technology and important differences between current US competitors and the Soviet Union, irregular warfare will play a prominent role in the new era of strategic competition. It was a prominent form of US-Soviet competition during the Cold War, is already used extensively by the United States and its competitors and remains attractive given concerns about escalation between nuclear-armed powers. Given the continued relevance of irregular warfare, we focus on two main lessons from the US experience. First, since irregular warfare is about influencing populations and achieving political goals without large-scale combat operations, influencing and working alongside the partner is the primary mission. The second lesson follows directly from the first; if irregular warfare is ultimately about achieving policy goals with an economy of military force, IW is a team sport requiring joint and interagency collaboration to be effectively implemented.

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Introduction

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and the shift in focus from counterterrorism to strengthening deterrence against China and addressing the challenge posed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine promulgated in the US National Defense Strategy (The United States Office of the Secretary of Defense 2022) represents a major pivot in US grand strategy. The United States is reducing its footprint in the Middle East and Africa, and increasingly prioritizing threats from Russia and China (Bowen 2022; Negatu 2022; O'Rourke 83). Will irregular warfare remain important in a new era of strategic competition? If so, what are the lessons from two decades spent fighting counterinsurgencies?[1]

Answering these questions requires defining irregular warfare (IW). It is typically associated with activities like training guerillas to fight a government, covert use of

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limited military force, or countering insurgents. But its scope is broader. The US Department of Defense defines IW in an annex to the 2018 National Defense Strategy (2020) as "a struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy. IW favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will." It is executed through five core missions: unconventional warfare, stabilization, foreign internal defense, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency. It also includes related activities such as military information support operations, cyberspace operations, countering threat networks, counter-threat finance, civil-military operations, and security cooperation. The doctrinal definition of IW is quite broad, but from the core missions and related activities, we can get a clearer sense of irregular warfare in practice. In our view, IW is focused on achieving policy objectives, just like conventional warfare, but with an economy of military force. In addition to traditional tasks like counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and working covertly or with resistance forces, irregular warfare also includes the use of the military instrument of national power to engage with allies and partners. This includes building their security sectors during peacetime or war as well as influencing their civilian populations. The key is that IW involves the military instrument of national power and therefore is distinct from other forms of influence involving economic or diplomatic means.

We argue that irregular warfare (IW) is a critical component of great power competition. During the most recent era of strategic competition, the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union competed by training and equipping proxies while avoiding direct conflict and its corresponding risk of nuclear escalation (Byman 2018). We expect IW approaches to remain attractive strategies for great powers to avoid the costs of conventional warfare or the risks of escalation with nuclear-armed competitors (Beauchamp 2022). Consider Russia's war in Ukraine. Although different in many respects from Cold War-era proxy wars – Ukraine is a democratic state defending itself rather than a non-state proxy – the United States has prioritized training, equipping, and advising Ukrainian forces (the influence portion of IW) rather than direct engagement.

Furthermore, US competitors are already operating comfortably in the area below the threshold of armed conflict, often referred to as the gray zone. Russia uses private military companies like the Wagner Group; Russia and China used information operations to influence US domestic politics; and China uses gray-zone conflict to alter the status quo in its near seas without triggering a conventional conflict (Cooper and Shearer 2017; Gomez and Chase 2022; Jebb and Jones 2022; Kim 2020; Marco 2023; Marten 2019; Shevchenko 2014). We often think that US adversaries and competitors rely on irregular warfare strategies because of their conventional military weakness compared to the United States. While this may be the case for actors like Iran and DPRK, China is both developing its conventional military capacity to match the United States while simultaneously positioning irregular warfare as a central tenet of its military doctrine (Kania 2016; Krieg and Rickli 2019). Russia's strategic approach to irregular warfare displays what has been termed "an impressive degree of political-military integration" (Sherr 2017, IV). In Ukraine in 2014, Russia's tactics included a covert operation combined with informational warfare to annex Crimea, working with local proxies to foment conflict in

the Donbas, and the use of "lawfare" and informational warfare to justify its territorial claims and weaken the Western response.[2]

Advancements in space and cyber warfare, artificial intelligence, and machine learning will further complicate the gray zone. An increasing reliance on IW, coupled with rapid advancements in technology that have low barriers to entry, increase the importance of understanding both approaches and employment of irregular warfare. Failure to understand IW equates to only preparing for the most dangerous form of conflict while underinvesting in a common, complicated, and complex form of conflict.

While many aspects of IW warrant further attention, we focus this paper on two main lessons from past US experiences with irregular warfare. First, partner forces are as essential in strategic competition as they were in the counterinsurgency and counterterrorism fights of the last two decades. Since irregular warfare is about using the military instrument of national power to influence populations and achieve political goals without large-scale combat operations, influencing and working alongside the partner is at the core of the mission. The second lesson follows directly from the first; if irregular warfare is ultimately about achieving political goals with an economy of military force, IW is a team sport requiring joint and interagency collaboration to be effectively implemented.

Irregular warfare in strategic competition

Lesson 1: The partner is the mission

The 2022 National Defense Strategy emphasizes the essential role of partners and allies in strategic competition (The United States Office of the Secretary of Defense 2022). Strong relationships with allies and partners are important to build warfighting advantage and deter conflict with adversaries. Building these relationships has long been a core goal of US foreign policy – and the US military has an important role to play in furthering this goal alongside other instruments of national power. Reflecting this strategic priority, the US military spends a substantial amount of time and money working with allies and partners. The US SOF deploys to over 100 countries annually to train alongside partner forces (Kashkett 2017, 27; The United States Office of the Secretary of Defense 2021). The US military conducts varied exercises within key theaters, like Europe and the Indo-Pacific, advancing US influence by reinforcing partnerships and generating connections (Wolfley 2021). Once successfully built through security cooperation, these relationships can be leveraged for future IW. Training and equipping programs are also key means of deterring or intervening in conventional conflicts – yet require IW tools to implement. For example, US support for Ukraine hinges on training and equipping Ukrainian forces to defend against Russian aggression (Atwell 2023), building on 8 years of training and advising between 2014 and 2022 by the US and its NATO allies (Chinchilla 2022). Army Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABS) were created specifically in recognition that the US Army needs trained military advisors who can assist allies and partners with building conventional military capacity over the long term. In addition, building partner capacity and counterterrorism efforts help contain transnational threats caused by internal instability, such as the spread of refugees, terrorist activity, and disease. They

also increase US influence with aid recipients in the context of strategic competition (Ware 2023).

During the past two decades of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, the US relied on partner forces to supply local knowledge and expertise and supplement or substitute for limited US troop presence (Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss 2023). Furthermore, building partner capacity of local forces was the linchpin for US exit strategies in these conflicts (McInnis and Lucas 2015). Efforts to build partner capacity have a mixed record, with the initial collapse of western-trained Iraqi Security Forces to ISIS in 2014 and Afghanistan National Security Forces to the Taliban in 2021 after over a decade and billions of dollars invested in each of these forces (Hamasaeed and Nada 2020; Maizland 2023; Metz 2023).

A large and growing body of literature from both practitioners and scholars can help us understand why US partners often struggle to build military capacity. Under strategic competition, the goals of security force assistance will be different than when assisting partners fighting internal threats. However, the mechanisms of influence – how security force assistance providers persuade and sometimes impose upon a partner to make painful defense reforms – will remain similar (Karlin 2018; Tecott 2021). While working with partners is in many ways an art, subject to interpersonal dynamics, understanding the causes of common problems of partner warfare will allow military practitioners to optimize partnered military engagements from the strategic to tactical levels. The main lesson to take away from scholarship is that security force assistance providers can better manage partner dynamics by placing conditions on aid and crafting effective relationships with local counterparts (Berman 2019; Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker 2017; Schroden 2021).

To these findings on best practices for working with allies and partners, we add three additional observations. First, partner warfare requires cultural understanding and social intelligence. Second, long-term success when working with partners requires transition planning for when external assistance ends. Finally, working with partners often creates tension between US interests and values, necessitating strategic thinking about what to prioritize in a particular partnership.

Since irregular warfare centers on influencing populations, understanding culture is a key pathway to waging irregular warfare successfully, as well as countering the attempts of US competitors to wage irregular warfare. Understanding a local population's language, culture, and heritage is essential to build trust and influence at the tactical, operational, and strategic level (Ball 2021). Cultural awareness and relationships can increase US access and influence vis-a-vis adversaries (Koven and Mason 2021; McGurk 2021). However, heritage also presents strategic targets that US competitors use to undermine US allies or partners (Clack 2022). Aggressors can leverage a shared cultural heritage to justify false territorial claims based on "history" or "common heritage," eroding the nationalism of a local population that seeks to resist this subversion (Salo 2022). For example, when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, the Russian government repurposed local Crimean cultural sites and historically significant monuments to reflect Russian rather than Ukrainian nationality (Kishkovsky 2021). This tactic of cultural manipulation is also evident in the Chinese funding of certain African heritage museums, allowing China to gain social credibility with a local

population and bolster pro-communist or pro-democratic sentiments in a developing nation (Sutton 2018). In the event of the use of force to compel Taiwan to reunite with the mainland, China would undoubtedly use such references to shared history and culture to justify its aggression.

The central problem in building partner capacity is how to make it sustainable after the security force assistance provider leaves. As previously noted, the United States has a checkered record of building sustainable partner forces to maintain security gains once external forces withdraw. For example, the tribal leaders who organized against al-Qaeda and contributed to a decrease in insurgent activity during the US "surge" in 2006 fell apart after US forces withdrew (Biddle, Friedman, and Shapiro 2012).

Although failures dominate the news, there are multiple cases of successful build partner capacity missions, such as US assistance to Colombia under Plan Colombia, the US partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces and Iraqi Security Forces to defeat ISIS, US development of the Republic of Korea Army during and after the Korean War, and US security force assistance to Ukraine (Chinchilla 2023). It is important to note that US security force assistance is just one factor contributing to the outcome in each of these cases. However, analysis of security force assistance provides an opportunity to identify the underlying mechanisms for improving the levers of influence that the United States does control (Berman 2019; Sinnott and Atwell 2020). Some mistakes to avoid include a large US footprint that may crowd out partner forces from owning the security paradigm or undermine their legitimacy with the population (Atwell and Bailey 2021; Wilson 2006). Alternatively, the US might need to focus on choosing partners more carefully based on whether they can become self-sufficient upon withdrawal of external support (Paul et al. 2013).

Finally, balancing US interests and values is an important challenge in working with partners (Jebb and Atwell 2022). The US may not always be able to select partners with similar values. In the context of foreign internal defense, corrupt and ineffective states are most likely to face insurgencies (Goldenberg et al. 2016). This poses challenges from tactical to strategic levels when the US aligns with a government or military alleged to be corrupt or party to human rights violations (Qobil 2010). Influencing a partner to overcome these challenges is difficult under the best of circumstances. During strategic competition, the US may find it even harder to influence the local partner since, depending on its domestic politics, it may be able to defect to another great power supporter (Blankenship and Joyce 2020). Despite their lack of shared values and the limited opportunities to influence them, potential partners might still possess capabilities, access, and freedom of action that make collaboration necessary. Despite these challenges, proxy war scholarship has begun to outline best practices for gaining more compliance from local partners, including under conditions where the aid recipient may have more leverage than the external actor (Elias 2023; Mott 2002). Tactical and strategic military leaders need to recognize the gap between US interests and values when working with partner forces and be provided a framework for operating within these challenges (Tankel 2017).

Lesson 2: Joint and interagency coordination are essential to the success of irregular warfare

Influencing populations and establishing the legitimacy of governments requires synchronizing all instruments of national power to shore up support for US allies or partners and undermine support for its competitors or enemies. As such, IW is a team sport requiring significant coordination between joint and interagency actors within the US government.

Influence over a local population rests, to a large extent, on the legitimacy of the local government the United States is supporting. In counterinsurgency, the government and insurgents compete for legitimacy from the population. To be viewed as legitimate, the incumbent government improves security and non-security services to separate the population from the insurgents and establish control. This also has practical warfighting benefits since civilians will share actionable information on the whereabouts of hidden insurgents with COIN forces if they view them as legitimate (Berman, Felter, and Shapiro 2018; Kalyvas 2006). The problem is similar when the enemy is another state. Citizens are more motivated to fight and die to defend their homeland from external invasion when they believe in their government's ability to lead them; consider the powerful impact of President Zelensky's leadership on the defense of Ukraine. To build legitimacy, it is not enough to build the capacity of a partner's armed forces. Instead, interagency and intergovernmental coordination are critical to engage with the entirety of a local partner's governing institutions.

Improving or maintaining partner government services is often needed to gain support from the local population or to maximize a whole-of-society approach to defense. Consider Ukraine's effective use of mundane elements like trains, trash collection, and the Internet to mobilize the entire society for an effective defense (Lange 2023). External actors seek to build not only partner military capacity but also government capacity – leading to a broad range of US agencies participating in IW campaigns, from the Department of Justice to the Department of Agriculture, in addition to intelligence agencies and the military. The requirement to work through interagency actors is reinforced by many less-visible IW missions in Title 22 (State Department-led) environments, requiring military personnel to synchronize with interagency actors. Understanding how to optimize interagency coordination, from the tactical to strategic levels, is another area that provides important lessons from the post-9/11 era relevant to strategic competition (Johnston and Shinnick 2022).

In addition, working with partner forces requires cooperation within the US military. Both SOF and conventional forces are needed for this mission (Noonan 2021). The expertise and capabilities of the conventional and SOF communities are complementary rather than competitive and exponentially more effective in the IW space when working together. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were large-footprint counterinsurgencies that saw US conventional units engaging directly with partner forces from the strategic to tactical levels. Since the United States does not intend to take on similar large-footprint counterinsurgencies in the immediate future, it may be tempting to relegate working with partners to the SOF community since it includes units, such as Army Special Forces, designed specifically for this mission (1st Special

Forces Command 2021). However, in the context of a major power war involving LSCO, US conventional troops will fight alongside partner forces at all levels of war, as they have in every conventional war since the First World War. Should that time ever come, both conventional and SOF commanders will benefit from understanding the dynamics of influence, as well as having gained deep knowledge of the militaries of allies and partners through past security cooperation.

Conclusion

Irregular warfare will continue to be essential in the era of strategic competition against China and Russia. One of the great strengths of the US defense establishment is its identity as a learning organization (Atwell 2023). Many lessons learned from the post-9/11 era will be valuable in a new era focused on building warfighting advantage while deterring the threats posed by our adversaries; we focus on two important ones. Strategic competition will require the ability to work effectively with partner forces. In fact, shaping and influencing partners so that the open and free international order led by the United States can resist challenges from potential aggressor states is the entire point of the enterprise. But to succeed in the political elements of IW, synchronization across the US joint force and the interagency is imperative. In many ways, engaging in strategic competition will take the US military back to the future regarding force design and strategy, rather than presenting a hard pivot to conventional warfare (Atwell and Gage 2021).

Note

1. This paper was drafted following a workshop at the United States Military Academy at West Point in February 2023.
2. It is important, however, not to oversell Russian accomplishments in irregular warfare. Russia failed in 2014 to fully mobilize Russian-speaking populations in the Donbas, and had to send in conventional troops when its proxies were nearly defeated by Kyiv in August 2014 (Chinchilla and Driscoll 2021; Kofman 2016). And of course, in 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine with the bulk of its conventional combat power.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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