



Special forces from Gulf Cooperation Council nation attempt to hook boarding ladder onto U.S. Army vessel "Corinth" during visit, board, search, and seizure training in Arabian Gulf during exercise Eagle Resolve, March 17, 2015 (U.S. Air Force/Kathryn L. Lozier)

The Insufficiency of U.S. Irregular Warfare Doctrine

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As the United States enters a new era of near-peer competition, current irregular warfare (IW) doctrine is insufficient to counter adversary irregular strategies intended

to disrupt and degrade the Nation over time. China and Russia, Iran and North Korea, and violent extremist organizations (VEOs) have been using irregular methods, including infor-

mation, cyber, drug, economic, and unconventional warfare, to avoid and offset U.S. conventional military advantages. While aware of threats, U.S. strategists struggle to define them, as evidenced by the frequent use of non-doctrinal, poorly defined terms such as *hybrid*, *gray zone*, *nontraditional*, *unconstrained*, and *asymmetric* warfare. The doctrinal terms *irregular warfare* and *unconventional warfare* (UW) provide a common point of departure for the discussion, but are incomplete, generally not well understood, and

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often misused. To be successful in this new era of irregular competition, U.S. planners must reassess and update IW-related terms, concepts, and authorities required to counter irregular threat strategies.

Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, defines IW as “a violent struggle among state and nonstate actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s).”¹ This definition evolved largely out of post-9/11 counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and is focused on influencing the relevant population to defeat insurgencies. While appropriate for COIN environments, current IW doctrine is not focused on countering strategic irregular threats intended to undermine the United States over time. Traditional, or conventional, warfare also falls short. Traditional warfare consists of major force-on-force operations and is characterized as “a violent struggle for domination between nation-states or coalitions and alliances of nation-states.”² While traditional warfare covers nation-state level competition, it is insufficient to counter most state-sponsored irregular threats. The risk of escalation with China, Russia, Iran, or North Korea—all current or potential nuclear powers—is too high for traditional warfare to be a viable strategic option in most cases. This is why the indirect approach is so attractive to U.S. adversaries and why they have become highly skilled at operating below the level of traditional conflict and are careful not to provoke one.³ While conventional capabilities may certainly be leveraged in nontraditional warfare, major combat operations against near-peer competitors is seldom a feasible strategic option.

UW, a related concept to IW, is often misused and generally not well understood outside of the special operations forces (SOF) community. UW is not merely the opposite of conventional warfare, but is defined as “activities to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating with an underground, auxiliary, or guerrilla force in a denied

area.”⁴ UW is currently only conducted by SOF, primarily Army Special Forces, who are specially organized, trained, and equipped to conduct UW by U.S. Special Operations Command.⁵ While UW is focused on coercing, disrupting, or overthrowing hostile governments, it adds the complex requirement of working with or through an insurgency or resistance movement to achieve UW objectives. Recent UW examples include U.S. SOF support to the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan and anti-Islamic State forces in Syria. Adversary definitions of UW often differ from the U.S. definition and include a much broader scope of non-traditional warfare activities. These are discussed in more detail later, but suffice it to say, the current U.S. definition is too narrow to counter the broad range of irregular strategies being employed by America’s adversaries.

The Use of Unrestricted Warfare

National strategic documents clearly outline the irregular threats posed by China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and VEOs. U.S. strategists previously referred to this group as “4+1” and more recently as “2+2+1.” The National Security Strategy makes a clear case that the 2+2+1 are actively competing against the United States, its allies, and partners.⁶ The document states, “many actors have become skilled at operating below the threshold of military conflict—challenging the United States, our allies, and our partners with hostile actions cloaked in deniability.”⁷ It further details how adversaries are disrupting and degrading sources of American strength utilizing transnational criminal organizations, cyberspace, and economic warfare.⁸ The key takeaway is not that they are competing with the United States, but *how* they are competing. U.S. adversaries are not interested in a conventional fight, but prefer to attack indirectly so as not to provoke conventional conflict. The National Defense Strategy adds, “Both revisionist powers and rogue regimes are competing across all dimensions of power. They have increased efforts short

of armed conflict by expanding coercion to new fronts, violating principles of sovereignty, exploiting ambiguity, and deliberately blurring the lines between civil and military goals.”⁹ The NDS also acknowledges adversarial use of threat strategies, short of open warfare, to achieve its goals that include information warfare, ambiguous or denied proxy operations, and subversion.¹⁰ Both documents make a clear case that the most senior U.S. leaders understand the irregular nature of the threats the Nation is facing.

Threatened use of unrestricted warfare, not to be confused with IW or UW, is not new. For years, U.S. military and professional debate has examined and incorporated elements of unrestricted war, albeit under a variety of models and names. Recognition of recent successful employment of unrestricted warfare against the United States is starting to emerge in military and political dialogue and the national strategic documents outlined. At a time when many aspects of the conventional U.S. military are at their peak, primary competitors are freely employing unrestricted warfare to counter U.S. strength.

As early as the 1980s, the Chinese began the process of modernizing their conventional force structure, power projection capability, and doctrine. The unprecedented success of the U.S.-led coalition in the Gulf War provided the Chinese with a template for future war through recognition that technological dominance gave the United States and its allies unparalleled information that could exploit an opposing force.¹¹ Recognizing the difficulty and expense of trying to match the U.S. conventional military in the near term, the Chinese focused on overcoming the conventional advantages that contributed to military dominance. Unrestricted warfare doctrine was a by-product of this quest, ultimately introduced to the public in February 1999 when two Chinese PLA Air Force colonels, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, published the book *Unrestricted Warfare*.¹²

Unrestricted Warfare hypothesized that modern warfare would no longer



Soldiers assigned to 7th Special Forces Group conduct urban warfare training during Emerald Warrior 17 at Hurlburt Field, Florida, March 7, 2017 (U.S. Air Force/Barry Loo)

conform to the Clausewitzian principles of using armed forces “to compel [the] enemy to do our will,”¹³ but had instead transformed into a layered and interminable campaign “using all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one’s interests.”¹⁴ Such campaigns would integrate information and resources across multiple domains simultaneously, creating a “battlefield of battlefields” in order to reduce an opponent’s superiority on one battlefield by forcing the opponent to deal with many battlefields concurrently.¹⁵ The result would be the fading distinction between soldiers and civilians because war would be everywhere—battlefields would be “virtually infinite.”¹⁶ Traditional operating domains (land, sea, air, space, cyber) would expand in every direction, including politics, economics, trade, culture, legal, information, infrastructure, and even the national psyche.

Qiao and Wang suggest that most unrestricted warfare activities would occur prior to any formal declaration of war and

would be a mixture of covert and overt, licit and illicit activities. “Combatants” would be representative of the population: civilians, businessmen, politicians, servicemembers, entrepreneurs, criminals, and terrorists, all constantly shifting between roles. Conventional military battles would be secondary in nature and complementary to other efforts, if they occurred at all.¹⁷ The ultimate goal would be to diminish the United States and its allies, creating conflict without crossing thresholds that would result in open, conventional combat.

Iran employs unrestricted warfare for many of the same historical and practical reasons as China. As outlined in his paper, “Unrestricted Warfare in Chinese and Iranian Foreign Policies,” Canadian Lieutenant Colonel M.R. Perreault outlines the similarities in how both nations see themselves and the world—threatened by the West and driving toward regional supremacy.¹⁸ As a result, China and Iran both seek to offset U.S. power and influence, but neither are capable of achieving their desired results through application of conventional

military means. Because Iran lacks the size, influence, and resources of China, their application of unrestricted warfare may be more aggressive. Lacking the same options as China, and operating in a vastly different regional environment, Iran’s employment of unrestricted warfare comes in the form of support for terrorism and subversion through surrogates. Through its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Iran supports numerous regional terrorist and militia groups, including Hamas, Hizballah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Taliban, and Iraqi Shia groups.¹⁹ The success of Iranian unrestricted warfare strategy can be seen in the current conflicts in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, all battlefields where conventional forces support the layered and simultaneous application of influence by other means.

Russia also subscribes to unrestricted warfare strategy, dubbed “New Generation Warfare” by Russian general Valery Gerasimov in February 2013.²⁰ Gerasimov described the evolution of Russian hybrid warfare whereby future conflict will be defined by the “tendency

toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace.”²¹ Conflict will focus on a series of “asymmetrical operations using a host of [strategic] capabilities to ‘nullification of an enemy’s advantages in armed conflict.’”²² Like the Chinese unrestricted warfare model, the Russian version simultaneously links limited, targeted military operations to layers of “information operations, cyber warfare, legal warfare, economic war, and any other activities that are directly linked to the designated strategic outcome.”²³ These layers are constantly evaluated and modified to achieve the desired effect of “shifting stable and thriving state[s] into a web of chaos, humanitarian upheaval and outright civil war, making it susceptible to foreign intervention.”²⁴ In his article, “Conventional and Unconventional in Military Actions,” Romanian lieutenant general Teodor Frunzeti characterizes unconventional war as a “political struggle with non-political and non-military means, putting into practice . . . political, economic, psychological, propaganda, military measures against a state to destabilize its political power.”²⁵

Russia’s successful operations in Ukraine and Georgia are representative of the new model. Russia succeeded in delegitimizing the Ukraine government and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization supporters, while also seizing large areas of Ukrainian territory by employing a blend of SOF, proxy forces, corporate entities, civilians, intelligence agents, political agitators, media, and transnational criminal elements. As stated in the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) white paper “Counter-Unconventional Warfare,” “Funded by the Kremlin and operating with differing degrees of deniability or even acknowledgement, the Russian government uses ‘little green men’ for classic [unconventional warfare] objectives . . . causing chaos and disrupting civil order.”²⁶ The speed and effectiveness of employing multiple “battlefields” simultaneously took the United States and its allies by surprise.²⁷ Russia’s conventional forces played a supporting, nondecisive role, demonstrating Russia’s commitment to unrestricted warfare as a strategic tool.

North Korea is the most recent country to adopt and employ unrestricted warfare. Through media manipulation, intelligence infiltration, sabotage, espionage, cyber hacking, and military threats, North Korea has been able to protect its ruling regime while simultaneously developing its nuclear and conventional warfighting capabilities. Its application of unrestricted warfare has successfully frustrated U.S.-led sanctions and U.S.–South Korean military might. Although their capabilities are more limited than China, Russia, or Iran, all of these regimes support North Korean efforts as part of their own unrestricted warfare campaigns. The political tension and chaos caused by the North Korean strategy increases U.S. costs in national treasure and political attention. Similar to support to North Korea, several specific irregular tactics are utilized by multiple adversaries and worthy of further analysis.

Drug Warfare

A growing body of scholarly work points to the deliberate use of illicit narcotics by 2+2+1 as both a chemical weapon and funding strategy. Utilization of illicit narcotics in this manner is not a new concept. The Western powers leveraged the opium trade extensively during the 19th-century Opium Wars both to exploit China economically and to degrade its population and military power.²⁸ As early as the 1940s, Mao Zedong realized the potential of using drugs as a weapon and mounted a coordinated drug warfare campaign against the West, officially targeting “Japan, the United States military forces in the Far East, neighboring countries throughout the Far East, and the United States mainland.”²⁹ Currently, the Drug Enforcement Administration assesses that the vast majority of the most dangerous illicit drugs (for example, fentanyl and other synthetic opioids) are imported from China through direct mail or smuggled through Canada and Mexico.³⁰ Long-time analysts Ralph Little and Paul Pilliod describe how Islamic extremists and China are deliberately using drug warfare to weaken Western target populations. They state,

“There is a remarkable correlation to [China’s] historical experience of the opium wars in the mid-1800s, in which foreign nations fostered Chinese addiction, leading to the takeover of their assets. This episode was led by the British, with German, French, Dutch, American, Russian and Japanese support—just the nations where the new wave of synthetics has struck.”³¹ U.S. adversaries understand that drug addicts cannot serve in the military. They also pay fewer taxes and eventually become an economic drain on society.

China is not alone in using drugs as a weapon. Joseph Douglass stated, “While the dubious distinction of initiating large-scale political war with drugs goes to the Chinese, it is the Soviets who have made trafficking the effective political warfare and intelligence weapon it has become.”³² Douglass further outlined how both the Chinese and Russians effectively utilized the drug trade throughout the Cold War to undermine the United States economically, socially, and militarily to great effect. Qiao and Wang define *drug warfare* as “obtaining sudden and huge profits by spreading disaster in other countries.”³³ This distinction highlights that the illicit drug trade is more than just a profit-making business but also a form of warfare used to threaten the security of other nations. The USASOC white paper asserts that drug warfare is one piece of a wide spectrum of warfare tied to a broader Chinese military strategy meant to destabilize an adversary.³⁴

Jihadists have also adopted the tactic to target American and Western youth and use the immense profits to finance terrorist activities.³⁵ Both Hizballah and al Qaeda have issued fatwas encouraging the use of drug warfare as part of their overall strategies against the West.³⁶ This tactic is literally a “two for one” for VEOs as they use drugs to undermine target populations while simultaneously reaping enormous illicit profits to fund other nefarious activities. In 2016 alone, over 63,000 Americans were killed by drug overdose³⁷ at a cost of over \$500 billion to the U.S. economy.³⁸ The numbers are staggering, and when viewed through an irregular strategic lens, a

brilliant strategy—intended to poison a target population while degrading military capabilities and bankrupting the economy—comes into focus.

Economic Warfare

The economy is arguably the most important of the four instruments of national power and a key target of near-peer adversaries' indirect attacks. As mentioned, both China and Russia include the concept of economic warfare as part of their unconstrained warfare doctrines. Historically, economic warfare encompassed sanctions, trade embargoes, blockades, and quarantines, as well as competition for markets and raw materials.³⁹ The possession or denial of natural resources, sources of production, and wealth have served as root causes of warfare throughout history. A prime example is Japan's reaction to U.S. trade and oil embargoes in the late 1930s, which Japan perceived as an act of war and precipitated the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Modern economic warfare, however, is not merely about trade embargoes, sanctions, and commerce. The modern economic warfare environment includes cyber theft of trade secrets, currency and market manipulation, globalization, and interconnectivity on a scale not seen to date. Economic warfare is merging with cyber war to make the notion of embargoes enforced by ships of the line seem quaint. Regarding China, Harold Furchtgott-Roth stated, "competition and property rights are blurred and diminished."⁴⁰ He also references the coming fight over 5G cellular technology and the U.S. response to Chinese attempts at dominance in 5G highlighting property rights and intellectual property theft as key components of economic warfare.⁴¹ New economic flashpoints are also emerging in Africa, as China seeks control over raw materials and rare earth elements (REEs). In 2010, China controlled over 90 percent of African REE mining, forming, manufacturing, and refining, essentially creating a monopoly on these key resources. China is also expanding its influence in developing regions through economic investment with

no strings attached. Unlike the United States, China does not demand free and fair elections, human rights vetting, or anti-corruption measures in return for economic aid. Lack of quid pro quo is enticing for developing nations that merely wish to gain new infrastructure or aid with no expectation of repayment. China's Belt and Road Initiative—a massive infrastructure effort to develop a Eurasian land bridge from China to Russia, Central Asia, Indochina, and India, coupled with a maritime Silk Road from China through Singapore to the Mediterranean—is a prime example. The United States has little influence and less control over these geographic areas that have significant economic impact in the United States and globally. The competition for raw materials and markets will provide enormous potential for conflict in the years to come.⁴²

Cyber Warfare

Information and cyber also represent significant irregular challenges, as the world has grown increasingly dependent on information and communication technology. Regimes have adapted their information and cyber doctrine to overcome historical U.S. technological advantages. The Russian cyber attack on Estonia in 2007, for instance, served as a significant warning regarding adversary intent and capabilities. It was the "first cyber-attack in history that affected a country nation-wide," according to Helen Popp, counselor for cyber issues at the Estonian embassy in Washington, DC.⁴³ During what came to be known as a distributed denial-of-service attack, Estonians could not access online media, government Web sites, or bank accounts.⁴⁴ The coordinated hybrid attack on Georgia just a year after the Estonia attack was another example of Russia's threat to U.S. allies.⁴⁵ Even more concerning, the jury is literally still out on claims that Russian state-backed hackers leveraged information and cyber warfare to influence the U.S. Presidential election in 2016. If true, a state's ability to directly influence the outcome of a U.S. election could represent one of the most effective irregular warfare cam-

paigns in history and serve as a prelude of future battles.

Open source media reports are replete with examples of the nefarious use of the cyber domain by adversaries other than Russia. These include China's theft of F-35 Joint Strike Fighter plans to create its J-31 aircraft, Iranian hackers charged with attacks on U.S. banks and infrastructure, and a North Korean release of damaging emails from the Sony entertainment company.⁴⁶ As acknowledged by then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey in 2015, cyber is "the only major field of warfare in which the United States doesn't have an advantage over its foes."⁴⁷ Commanders of every U.S. combatant command have echoed this sentiment. Information and cyber are not only key enablers for conventional forces and operations but also important weapons in the unconstrained warfare arsenal.

Reassessing Doctrine

The United States is clearly engaged in a nontraditional conflict but possesses limited irregular doctrine and strategies to compete and win. Reassessing current doctrine presents several options. First, we must expand the current definition of IW to include all nontraditional forms of warfare. While the current definition focuses narrowly on influencing a relevant population in a COIN environment, an expanded IW definition should include identifying and countering near-peer competitors' irregular tactics, which are characterized by a conventionally weaker opponent using irregular means to degrade, disrupt, and eventually defeat a conventionally stronger foe—a fundamental premise of irregular warfare going back to the beginning of warfare itself.⁴⁸ U.S. IW doctrine must evolve from its current post-9/11, COIN focus to one that encompasses a broader spectrum of irregular threats.

A second option is to broaden the definition of UW with an expanded emphasis on near-peer competition. As mentioned, the current definition requires working with or through an insurgency, resistance movement, underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force, all



SEALs conduct military field operations during exercise Trident 18-4 at Hurlburt Field, Florida, July 11, 2018 (U.S. Air Force/Corban Lundborg)

of which do not always apply to near-peer irregular conflict. UW has not always been as narrowly focused as it is today. UW definitions from the Cold War era emphasized guerrilla warfare and resistance movements, but also included the concepts of political, psychological, and economic warfare, as well as sabotage and subversion supported and directed by an external force.⁴⁹ The Army UW definition from 1969 states, “UW consists of military, political, psychological, or economic actions of covert, clandestine, or overt nature within areas under the actual or potential control or influence of a force or state whose interests and objectives are inimical to those of the United States.”⁵⁰ UW doctrine continued to include the concepts of sabotage and subversion into the 1990s, and did not lose doctrinal ties to political, psychological, and economic warfare until well into the COIN era in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁵¹ Expanded UW doctrine should be less tied to working with and through insurgencies and resistance movements and more focused on the broader aspects of state-versus-state irregular conflict.

A third option is to leave the current definitions of IW and UW intact and develop an entirely new doctrinal concept to cover near-peer sponsored irregular threats (for example, hybrid, asymmetric, unconstrained, or nontraditional warfare). The new concept should be inclusive of all irregular methods, as well as conventional force and interagency capabilities to be fully effective. *Counter-Unconventional Warfare* states, “To prove successful, counter-UW must be strategic in conception and scope. It therefore must encompass the whole-of-government while employing the full range of synchronized IW functions in order to defeat an adversary’s unconventional warfare activities.”⁵² None of the current doctrinal options, traditional warfare, IW, or UW fully addresses state-sponsored irregular threats and strategies. Whichever doctrinal route is chosen, the key is to understand that the United States is engaged in a different type of war, probably not the one the Department of Defense (DOD) is best prepared to fight. Updated doctrine and authorities are required to compete and win.

In addition to doctrine, the authorities required to operationalize doctrine are a critical component in developing an operational approach. Homeland defense and homeland security authorities are especially relevant to the discussion of irregular attacks employed against the homeland. Homeland defense is focused on defending against state-sponsored attacks, while homeland security is focused on preventing criminal and terrorist acts.⁵³ Without question, interagency cooperation is important for both; DOD is the lead for homeland defense, while the Department of Homeland Security is the lead for homeland security. Historically, homeland defense has focused on defending the air and maritime approaches from air and missile attack, as these were the primary military threats to the homeland.

Under the new paradigm, however, enemies use indirect tactics to easily bypass conventional air and maritime defenses. Policymakers have a difficult time discerning what constitutes a state-sponsored irregular attack, possibly using transnational criminal organizations, cyber hackers, or other third parties as

surrogates versus a criminal or terrorist act. The distinction is extremely significant, however, when discussing homeland defense versus homeland security authorities. Under a new homeland defense framework, DOD could become the supported instead of supporting agency to counter state- or VEO-sponsored irregular attacks. Almost without saying, interagency cooperation and coordination would be critical for a national-level IW strategy, but DOD roles and authorities could and should be significantly expanded to counter indirect attacks.

These may seem like extreme, even radical, ideas to some, but history has proved that to survive and thrive, nations must understand and fight the wars they are in, not the wars they prepare for or hope to fight. The enemy always gets a vote, and it is not currently in 2+2+1's best interest to challenge the United States in traditional combat. A much more pragmatic approach is to disrupt, degrade, sabotage, and subvert the Nation over time using irregular strategies. The evidence outlined herein indicates that this is exactly what is occurring. To counter these efforts, the United States must understand the irregular fight it is in and develop the doctrine and authorities required to compete and win. America's future as a free and prosperous nation may very well depend on it. JFQ

Notes

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³³ Qiao and Wang, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 55.

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