
Full Spectrum Dominance: Irregular Warfare and the War on Terror

By Maria Ryan

Redwood City, CA: Stanford University
Press, 2020

328 pp. \$60.00

Hardcover ISBN: 9781503609990

Ebook ISBN: 9781503610668

Reviewed By Dr. Bryce Loidolt

One might assume that a history of America's 21st century turn to irregular warfare would have little to offer policymakers grappling with the challenge of great power competition. In *Full Spectrum Dominance: Irregular Warfare and the War on Terror* however, Maria Ryan offers a meticulous account not of how the United States might organize itself for futuristic high-tech warfare or geopolitical competition, but, rather, how it came to elevate a form of warfare that many U.S. defense planners and practitioners would prefer to view through the rear-view mirror. And yet, the lessons implied by Ryan's impressive piece of scholarship should serve as a cautionary tale not just for practitioners seeking to ensure irregular warfare remains a "core competency" of the U.S. military, but also for those managing the tradeoffs and dilemmas of the contemporary strategic environment.¹

Processes of change and adaptation are often complex. Bureaucracies can be rigid and stuck in their ways, as a range of human and organizational factors produce or obstruct innovative behavior.² An Assistant Professor of American History at the University of Nottingham, Ryan's explanation for

America's warm embrace of irregular warfare offers an analytically rich account. It is a series of "complementary tracks" Ryan argues, that led the United States to adopt what was at the time a "countercultural definition of warfare."³

Some aspects of the book's argument are by now self-evident. To Ryan's credit, these receive the least of her attention. Few will raise an eyebrow when they read that 9/11 was the initial motivator for greater recognition of the problem of weak and failed states. Nor will many find it surprising that U.S. experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan both motivated and manifested this growing emphasis on non-traditional threats and interagency approaches to addressing them.

In other instances, the book masterfully covers new ground. Ryan makes a well-documented claim that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, often argued to be a devotee of the concept of a technology-driven Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), played a pivotal role in this shift to a decidedly low-tech form of warfare.⁴ This amendment to the historical record is likely to be one of many enduring legacies of this important text. The chapter on organizational change in the U.S. State Department also nicely supplements U.S. military and defense-centric works examining this period in U.S. foreign policy.

Much of the book explores U.S. activities in the Philippines, Georgia, and Sub-Saharan Africa, so-called "peripheral theaters." Although much has been written on the first of these, the other two are often overlooked in the post-9/11 historiography. Through the conscientious use of publicly-available primary source materials, Ryan does an admirable job of piecing together the context, motivations, and contours of U.S. campaigns in each of these three locales.

These cases might appear strange bedfellows at first glance. Yet, nearly two decades ago, President Bush declared the Philippines, Georgia, and Yemen as

Dr. Bryce Loidolt is a Research Fellow at National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies. Prior to joining NDU, he was a Defense Analyst at the RAND Corporation.

constituting the “second stage” of the War on Terror.⁵ In this respect, Ryan’s inclusion of sub-Saharan Africa – a rather diverse and vast region in its own right—rather than Yemen, may perplex some readers.

Even so, the similarities Ryan identifies across her cases are striking. The United States appeared to vastly overestimate—and perhaps even exaggerate—the extent of al-Qaida’s presence or the risk that it might appear. Regularly described as a successful case of small footprint intervention, U.S. activities under Operation Enduring Freedom—Philippines (OEF-P) were designed to counter the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which Ryan describes as “more of a criminal nuisance than a serious terror threat.”⁶ Georgia is also emblematic of this propensity, as the United States directed its attention to the Pankisi Gorge, where it believed al-Qaida militants had gathered, but where Ryan contends the links between local militants and al-Qaida were tangential at best. Nowhere is this inflation of the terrorism threat more apparent than in sub-Saharan Africa, where U.S. efforts were largely designed to *prevent* the emergence of Islamist militancy in areas where it had generally been absent.

It is difficult to dispute Ryan’s conclusion that the conflation of local and transnational militancy led the United States to commit serious errors throughout the Global War on Terror, a point well-made by proponents of so-called “global counterinsurgency” at the time.⁷ Ryan may at times overstate the purely local nature of the conflicts in each theater, however, while understating the extent of al-Qaida’s global reach. Bin Ladin’s network did indeed attempt to build operational links to at least some of these theaters prior to 9/11, which could certainly have warranted some level of concern on the part of the United States.⁸ More broadly, the claim that al-Qaeda “referred more to a mode of activism, not an organization” is more contested than Ryan’s narrative would lead the reader to believe.⁹

Just as the United States may have exaggerated the transnational ties of local militants, Ryan contends that it also under-appreciated each conflict’s historical and cultural context. Grounded in a “superficial” belief that weak or failing states were the root causes of terrorism, the United States engaged in a decidedly technocratic approach to extending government control.¹⁰ Across the three cases the United States utilized train and equip programs designed to build the capacity of local security forces, and subordinated development goals to security objectives in ways that were controversial and potentially counterproductive.

Executed with little appreciation for the political nuances of the recipient state, these policy instruments generated few, if any, positive results. In the Philippines the ASG remained active and resilient. In sub-Saharan Africa U.S. activities and decisions are blamed for failing to prevent the rise of not one, but two, al-Qaida affiliates on the continent. And, in Georgia, local security forces were never able to conduct an effective operation to assert control in the Pankisi Gorge, ostensibly one of the major initial motivations of U.S. support.

Ryan’s conclusions warrant some qualification. Narratives of overall failure in any of these campaigns may overlook some of their successes, however modest. Although this reviewer shares her frustration with the so-called “self-congratulatory” commentary on OEF-P, a number of objective, systematic analyses have found that the Armed Forces of the Philippines adopted more discriminatory tactics as a result of U.S. training, equipment, and advice.¹¹ Moreover, a RAND study found that U.S. security assistance to Africa lowered the likelihood of civil war and of terrorist violence when employed in conjunction with peacekeeping operations.¹² Using vague metrics or impossibly high standards for success, Ryan’s narrative at times would benefit from a more robust and balanced treatment of the outcomes she describes.

Perhaps its most significant shortcoming is that *Full Spectrum Dominance* is lacking in prescriptions. This may be because there are simply no easy answers to the challenges the book identifies. There can be little doubt that understanding the grievances driving conflict and instability is as important as it is challenging. Putting this insight into practice is no easy feat. An erroneous perception of irregular warfare successes may also continue to drive the United States to intervene in these kinds of conflicts, and blindness to the “political cause(s) of violence” is a recurring, and perhaps unavoidable historical trend.¹³

What, then, can U.S. policymakers and practitioners gain from a historical analysis of secondary theaters in a global conflict against an adversary that is no longer a priority?

Ryan’s analysis, in fact, points to several plausible conclusions. As the Joint Force considers how to sustain irregular warfare as a “core competency,” it is reasonable to assume that the large-scale, manpower-intensive campaigns attempted in Iraq and Afghanistan will not be the preferred model. Instead, policymakers continue to extol the virtues of so-called “small footprint” interventions, even as scholars provide more sobering conclusions.¹⁴ Situated within the latter chorus of rigorous analyses, *Full Spectrum Dominance* suggests that U.S. policymakers should temper their expectations. No matter how well-intentioned, U.S. efforts seemed to fall woefully short in each of the theaters Ryan explores. U.S. policymakers should thus not view this approach as a necessarily effective fall-back option amidst a prioritization of more high-tech forms of warfare.

Yet, the more prescient lessons U.S. policymakers can derive from Ryan’s insightful analysis are hardly limited to irregular wars. The narrative of a “Global War on Terror” yielded unnecessary alarmism, myopia, and strategic overreach. The result was counter-productive over-investment in theaters that were of secondary importance. One might wonder

whether there is a similar risk in policymakers’ framing of interstate competition, the global challenge of the day. Avoiding similarly poor outcomes in addressing Russian adventurism and manifestations of Chinese ambition may require a more discerning approach to strategy and policy than the one *Full Spectrum Dominance* describes.

Ultimately, Maria Ryan has made an enduring scholarly contribution by providing an important and compelling account of how military bureaucracies can adopt and implement change, but also the strategic strait jackets that formulaic approaches to combating transnational threats can impose. *Full Spectrum Dominance* manages to strike a commendable balance between scholarly rigor and accessibility, making for an indispensable addition to our understanding of America’s post-9/11 wars.

Notes

¹ Richard D. Stephenson, “NDS Irregular Warfare Annex Implementation Plan,” October 23, 2019, available at https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/MECC2019/mecc2019day1brief8_iw.pdf?ver=2019-10-17-143158-750.

² On these, see, e.g.: Peter R. Mansoor and Williamson Murray Eds, *The Culture of Military Organizations*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War, French and British Military Doctrine between the Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Adam Grissom, “The Future of Military Innovation Studies,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 5 (2006): 905-934.

³ Maria Ryan, *Full Spectrum Dominance: Irregular Warfare and the War on Terror*, (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 3.

⁴ Fotios Moustakis, and Rudra Chaudhuri, “The Rumsfeld Doctrine and the Cost of US Unilateralism: Lessons Learned.” *Defence Studies* 7, no. 3 (2007): 358-375.

⁵ President George W. Bush, “Remarks at Ceremony Marking the 6-Month Anniversary of the September 11 Attacks,” March 11, 2002, available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/coalition/cr/rm/2002/8729.htm>.

⁶ Maria Ryan, *Full Spectrum Dominance*, 54.

⁷See, e.g.: David J Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 4 (2005): 597-617; David Martin Jones, and Michael Lawrence Rowan Smith, "Whose Hearts and Whose Minds? The Curious Case of Global Counter-Insurgency," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 1 (2010): 81-121.

⁸911 Commission report 58; 147; James J.F. Forest, "Al-Qaeda's Influence in Sub-Saharan Africa Myths, Realities, and Possibilities," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 5, no. 3-4, (September 2011): 63-80.

⁹Maria Ryan, *Full Spectrum Dominance*, 52; Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "Revisiting the Early al Qaeda: An Updated Account of its Formative Years," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 1 (2012): 1-36; Rohan Gunaratna and Aviv Oreg, "Al Qaeda's Organizational Structure and its Evolution," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 12 (2010): 1043-1078.

¹⁰Maria Ryan, *Full Spectrum Dominance*, 214.

¹¹Maria Ryan, *Full Spectrum Dominance*, 75; Stephen Watts et al., *Countering Others' Insurgencies: Understanding U.S. Small-Footprint Interventions in Local Context*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014), 104-110; Geoffrey Lambert, Larry Lewis, and Sarah Sewall, "Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines: Civilian Harm and the Indirect Approach," *PRISM* 3, no. 4, (September 2012): 116-136.

¹²Stephen Watts et al., *Building Security in Africa: An Evaluation of U.S. Security Sector Assistance in Africa from the Cold War to the Present*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018).

¹³Maria Ryan, *Full Spectrum Dominance*, 214.

¹⁴See, e.g.: Mara E. Karlin, *Building militaries in fragile states: Challenges for the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 4, no. 1-2 (2018): 89-142.