

Irregular Competition

Conceptualizing a Whole-of-Government Approach for the United States to Indirectly Confront and Deter State and Nonstate Adversaries

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Despite increased global interest in “gray-zone” activities, the United States does not have a whole-of-government policy to deter or indirectly confront state and nonstate adversaries in this expanding security domain. With the release of the December 2017 *National Security Strategy*, a policy shift occurred overnight that fundamentally changed the direction that the U.S. security enterprise had been heading for two decades.¹ After sixteen years, trillions of dollars spent, and hundreds of thousands of lives lost during the War on Terrorism, the United States redirected its primary focus away from asymmetric threats and looked instead toward

Notwithstanding a redirect toward conventional security concerns, America’s state and nonstate adversaries continue to operate globally with malign intent through unconventional security efforts. Consequently, there is a need for the United States and like-minded nations to indirectly implement a discreet set of activities—during times of peace, competition, and war—to maintain international order.

Gray zone, fourth generation, new generation, irregular, hybrid, asymmetric, compound, and unrestricted “warfare” or “conflict”; all these terms, and many others, have made their way into the contemporary lexicon. Each comes with bias and a preconceived definition. Ask anyone in the national security arena if the United States should have some type of irregular warfare capability in its toolbox and the answer will undoubtedly be “yes.” Ask people to define “irregular warfare” and the answers will be numerous, vague, and confusing. Establishing common meaning that everyone agrees on would be helpful but would also cost precious time and likely prove impossible. Therefore, for the purposes of this article, the term “irregular competition” is utilized to describe this space. The reason for the use of this term is to avoid inherent bias that comes with the more

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strategic competition, sometimes referred to as “great-power competition” or “near-peer competition.” The 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, released by the White House, continues and reinforces the strategic competition policy direction.²

common terms listed above. Irregular competition is defined as state and nonstate actors engaging in activities during times of peace, competition, and war to influence populations and affect legitimacy. These activities by themselves are unlikely to elicit a kinetic response. Additionally, “whole-of-government” will precede “irregular competition” in this article to emphasize the necessity for government synergy. This article will answer the following question: How might the United States conceptually model a whole-of-government approach to irregular competition?



(Composite graphic by Jeff Buczkowski, Army University Press)

security concern for the United States with other states like Russia, Iran, and North Korea close behind.

The *National Security Strategy* acknowledges persistent threats from extremist and terrorist organizations as well, but these nonstate actors are no longer the top priority they were in the nearly two decades following 9/11. In this era of strategic competition, one might assume that the lessons and concepts associated with irregular competition have limited applicability since priorities have shifted. This assumption is incorrect. As David Ucko and Thomas Marks have written, the two sets

of challenges—traditional and nontraditional—share crucial traits:

Both employ diverse lines of attack to undermine resolve and build leverage, often by exploiting vulnerabilities within target societies—economic, social, and/or political. Both weaponize narratives to confuse analysis, co-opt contested audiences, and lower the cost of action. And both revolve around questions of legitimacy, or the right to lead, so as to shape new and long-lasting political realities.⁴

“Whole-of-government” needs defining for the purposes of this article. There are numerous ways to define this term, including several acronyms that attempt to capture the idea. “DIME” will be used here to define a whole-of-government strategy that encompasses the diplomatic, informational, military,

Definitions and Context

It is often said that irregular-competition-type activities take place somewhere “between peace and war,” and that these activities by themselves are unlikely to elicit a major conventional military response.³ This statement is only partly correct. For example, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is executing an aggressive irregular competition campaign to influence (global) populations and affect (Russian) legitimacy far from the battlefields. The specific irregular competition activities in isolation, however, remain unlikely to elicit a major conventional military response. The notion of “between peace and war” is inaccurate since irregular competition persists regardless of any state of peace, competition, or conflict.

As outlined in the *National Security Strategy*, the Chinese Communist Party is the primary strategic



and economic instruments of power. A few caveats should be made regarding nonstate actors and DIME. First, nonstate actors may not have a government, as in whole-of-government. Second, nonstate actors may not have a formally recognized nation to govern, utilizing elements of national power. Third, nonstate actors may not have a standing military, represented by the “M” in DIME. Despite these realities, nonstate actors may nevertheless behave similarly to a government that may govern territory like the way a recognized nation does and may engage in military-like activities. Examples include the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria during the height of the “caliphate,” the Maute and Abu Sayyaf groups in Marawi (which attempted to govern but never truly got there), the Taliban in Afghanistan today, and numerous other insurgent groups throughout history who have governed or attempted to govern. This is not to imply that there is no difference between state and nonstate actors. Instead, the point is that nonstate actors sometimes behave in ways similar to state actors and, as a result, one should not limit one’s thinking to nation states alone when considering whole-of-government

Evening view of the Blue Shield Casino, owned by the King Romans Group, in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone in Bokeo Province, Laos. China’s influence in the region goes beyond electric grid control and environmentally disastrous dam building. Chinese casinos and microcommunities—hotbeds for human trafficking, illegal weapons sales, methamphetamine shipping, and wildlife smuggling—undermine local economies and build dependence on cash infusions from Beijing. (Photo courtesy of Slleong via Wikimedia Commons)

irregular competition. Nonstate actors may employ the instruments of power found in DIME.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that several U.S. adversaries—with particular emphasis on China and Russia but knowing that others do it as well—manage to execute whole-of-society irregular competition as their authoritarian reach allows mobilization of resources beyond just the government. While whole-of-society action may be ideal in effecting irregular competition, authoritarianism is contrary to U.S. principles and, as a result, this expansion of irregular competition activity to mobilize society itself is likely out of reach for the United States. U.S. education about irregular competition, however, should not be discounted.

Adversarial Irregular Competition Demonstrated

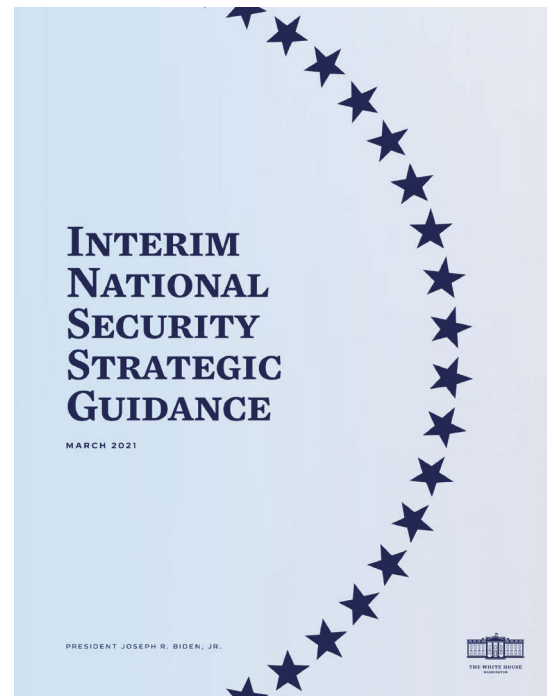
While it can be said that irregular competition—as defined above—has been employed in various forms for centuries, research here is focused on the turn of the twenty-first century onward as the global technological and threat landscapes have evolved considerably since then. America’s adversaries are adept at operating in this space. As former White House national security advisor Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster emphasized throughout his book *Battlegrounds*, these actors synergize disinformation, denial, disruptive technologies, coercion, and other tactics to accomplish strategic objectives below the threshold of what might elicit a military response.⁵

Examples originating from the Chinese Communist Party alone include

- artificial island-building and fishing fleet intimidation in the South China Sea;
- debt diplomacy and economic coercion throughout the Indo-Pacific, along the Silk Road, and into Africa to influence state behavior in ways beneficial to China; economic espionage and theft of intellectual property;
- military intimidation of Taiwan;
- funding research on alternative approaches to international law to rewrite history; efforts to influence politics in Australia and New Zealand; hostage diplomacy;
- seizing unmanned underwater vessels;
- internment and genocide of Uighurs in Xingjian to cleanse Chinese soil of indigenous non-Chinese cultures;
- co-opting small countries in Southeast Asia;
- river patrols, casinos, and the establishment of Chinese microcommunities in the Mekong River Basin to exert influence on host nations;
- strong-arming the extradition of overseas critics back to China; and
- influencing foreign media, sports, and Hollywood organizations to maintain a positive image of China.⁶

In the case of Russia, irregular competition has become a steady-state endeavor. This can be seen in

- the employment of the Wagner Group and other nonuniformed proxies in Syria, Ukraine, Georgia, Estonia, and elsewhere;
- employment of the Night Wolves Motorcycle Gang to execute information operations and proxy conflict in Australia and Ukraine;



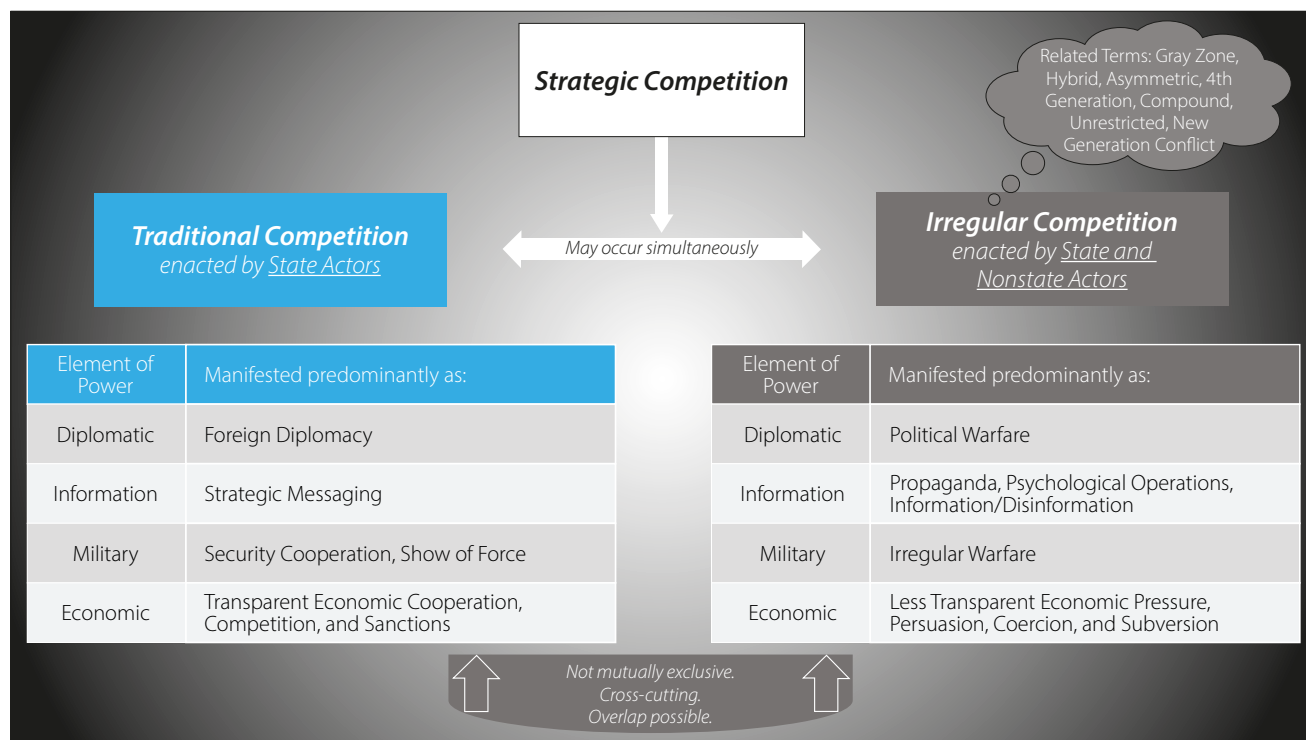
To view the *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2021), visit <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

- election meddling in Europe and America;
- financing foreign political parties like the repressive Maduro regime in Venezuela;
- energy coercion;
- flying close to U.S. warships in attempts to elicit an overreaction;
- cyber-enabled disinformation campaigns; and
- poisoning of critics.⁷

Iran sponsors terrorism globally, often through proxies. It also illegally transfers and sells weapons, and routinely uses armed small boats to harass UK and U.S. warships⁸ North Korea utilizes irregular competition by routinely threatening other nations with nuclear devastation, which has resulted in its designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, as well as its successful assassination of individuals considered to be a political threat.⁹

From a position of weakness, nonstate actors often employ components of irregular competition to gain a relative advantage over better-resourced adversaries. These initiatives include, but are not limited to,

- disinformation campaigns to purport government illegitimacy;
- propaganda initiatives to incite violence;



(Figure by author)

Figure. Irregular Competition as a Subcomponent of Strategic Competition

- money laundering and the creation of shell companies/fake nongovernmental organizations to support terrorism;
- the use of piracy, kidnapping for ransom, cyber-crime, and other forms of transnational organized crime to raise funds for illicit operations;
- sarin attacks on public transportation; and
- online radicalization to recruit new members.¹⁰

Numerous other examples exist from other countries and organizations that may be categorized as irregular competition as well, so the above list should not be considered exhaustive. Instead, the purpose of the examples provided is to inform the reader of the tremendous depth and breadth of this elusive operating environment. This ambiguous arena with unclear parameters and often conflicting definitions is the background for this research.

Irregular Competition as a Subcomponent of Strategic Competition

"Irregular competition" should be understood as one of two subcomponents of strategic competition. The other subcomponent is "traditional competition." The

National Security Strategy does not contemplate such a construct so the figure is provided for illustration. Traditional competition is predominantly government focused while irregular competition is people focused. The emphasis of this article is on irregular competition, not traditional competition, so little will be discussed about the latter. It is crucial to note, however, that the figure cannot adequately emphasize the overlap that exists between irregular and traditional competition. Lines between the two are not clear but are instead blurred and cross-cutting; activities can and should occur in both at the same time and are not mutually exclusive.

As depicted in the figure, the DIME instruments of power in irregular competition manifest differently than they do in traditional competition. The *diplomatic* instrument of power, for example, is manifested in irregular competition as political warfare. In his book *On Political War*, which remains a seminal work on the subject, author Paul Smith describes political warfare as the use of "political means to compel an opponent to do one's will, based on hostile intent."¹¹ It is a calculated interaction between an actor and a target audience, including a competitor's government, military, and/or general

population, which uses a variety of techniques to coerce certain actions, thereby gaining relative advantage over an opponent.¹² Furthermore, political warfare's coercive nature leads to the weakening or destroying of an opponent's political, social, or societal will, and forces a course of action favorable to an actor's interest.

The *informational* instrument of power is manifested in irregular competition as propaganda and psychological operations. According to Smith, propaganda is driven by national objectives, has many aspects, and has a hostile and coercive political purpose. Psychological operations, on the other hand, are driven by strategic and tactical military objectives and may be intended for hostile military and civilian populations. Whether propaganda or psychological operations are discharged, the primary vehicle is the use of "words, images, and ideas," which, when combined, may enable information and disinformation campaigns to alter a target audience's opinions. It involves heartening friends and disheartening enemies, of gaining help for one's cause and causing the abandonment of the enemies.¹³ Propaganda and psychological operations involve both information and disinformation and may be cyber-enabled.

The *military* instrument of power is manifested in irregular competition as irregular warfare, where the security sector of both state and nonstate actors attempts to influence populations and affect legitimacy. The U.S. Department of Defense's *Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex* makes clear that irregular warfare favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities.¹⁴ According to the U.S. military, irregular warfare includes five primary activities: unconventional warfare (enabling resistance movements), foreign internal defense (supporting another country's security programs), counterterrorism, stability operations, and counterinsurgency. Beyond what is formally written in military doctrine, irregular warfare might also encompass such things as support to political warfare (defined earlier), counter-unconventional warfare (countering an adversary's will and capability to enable a resistance movement), proxy warfare, military information support operations (also known as psychological operations), cyberspace operations, countering threat networks, countering threat finance, civil-military operations, and security cooperation. As evident above, the military's irregular warfare construct is quite expansive.

The *economic* instrument of power is manifested in irregular competition as economic pressure, persuasion, coercion, and/or subversion. In adapting Smith's writing to the subject of irregular competition, activities undertaken in the economic space are intended to inflict necessary economic damage to force political change. Conduct here will differ according to whether the actor is authoritative or democratic since standards, laws, norms, and the ability to mobilize an actor's resources differ. Economic activities in irregular competition support furthering political goals without the use of direct confrontation. With the interconnectedness of global economies, economic activity executed as part of any irregular competition strategy must be carefully calculated and integrated with all other instruments of power to achieve political objectives but not provoke direct conflict.

Concluding Thoughts

Very few people agree on the finer points surrounding irregular competition and this article will surely not rectify that. Irregular competition is a sensitive subject, but the United States, its partners, and its adversaries are all involved in it ... one way or another. To paraphrase a quote from Leon Trotsky, you may not be interested in irregular competition, but irregular competition is interested in you.¹⁵

When studying literature, or congressional testimony, or military doctrine, it is understood that gray-zone or hybrid warfare activities are those conducted by adversaries. They are threats that must be identified, prevented, countered, or mitigated. Irregular competition, on the other hand, is a proactive tool that the United States and its adversaries may both employ to confront and deter. Political, cultural, religious, legal, psychological, and historical factors among diverse populations must all be considered on this journey. This is a people-centric struggle in which cognitive awareness and emotional intelligence are more important than military power. Additionally, any irregular competition strategy must be flexible enough to transform with space, cyber, surveillance, social media, and other technological innovations. Cold War era irregular competition constructs like "resistance" and "subversion," for example, are important and relevant in this campaign but must be adapted to the current operating environment where adversaries are plugged in and hyper-networked. This expanding physical and virtual operating



space makes working by, with, and through like-minded partners more important than ever. The threat space is bigger than any one actor can manage. As U.S. Gen. Richard Clarke noted, “leverage exporters of security, and pull them in with shared interests.”¹⁶

Irregular competition as depicted by the four-pillar model presented in the figure is truly a “whole-of-government” endeavor. Unfortunately, most who spend time thinking about such matters are not able to mobilize the whole government. For example, the U.S. military’s special operations community thinks, plans, and trains on the concept of irregular warfare with great consistency. Unfortunately, irregular warfare alone, implemented primarily by the security sector, is not enough. Despite attempts to envision irregular warfare as whole-of-government and something bigger than the military, the literature and practice as it exists today is military-centric and incapable of orchestrating all the instruments of power highlighted in the figure. In fairness to those who study and practice irregular warfare, those professionals are well aware of irregular warfare’s shortcomings; they have labeled irregular warfare efforts as only “whole-of-department,” and they

An undated photo of Russia’s Trefoil military base in the Arctic. An essential region for Russia’s aggressive military, economic, and political aspirations, the Arctic has become a focal point for irregular competition. Russia exploits weak governing mechanisms to advance its own military posturing, natural resource claims, and projection through the Northern Sea Route. (Photo courtesy of Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation via Wikimedia Commons)

understand that the military alone is not in a position to lead a whole-of-government endeavor in this space.

To rely on one, two, or even three elements of the DIME construct in implementing irregular competition is insufficient. All four instruments combined are essential to planning, synchronizing, and leading a true whole-of-government campaign. It is in fact a “campaign” that is needed since this word implies that any strategy developed must be continuously refined and executed over many years, perhaps decades.

The ideas highlighted here likely lead to more questions that must be addressed but go beyond the scope of this article. These questions include but are not limited to the following: Who should lead such a whole-of-government effort? What does it look like to take the strategic objectives of irregular competition and translate them into pragmatic activities? What are the political costs

and benefits of implementing such a strategy? How do we educate and inform our own citizens as well as our foreign partners of the importance of irregular competition? While these questions must be carefully considered and answered, the United States and its friends must first simply embrace the concept of whole-of-government irregular competition itself. This requires political will that transcends administrations and rarely provides legislators with quick evidence of success in exchange for the cost of doing business in this space.

This article and the model it proposes are not intended to take the place of existing doctrine or practice. Those who are well read on U.S. doctrine will immediately realize that the definitions presented in this work are a hybrid of many things. The reader is encouraged to focus on the overarching idea of whole-of-government irregular competition rather than any organizational or cultural dogma encoded in doctrine. Furthermore, this article is not meant to imply that an irregular competition strategy should replace any current plan or policy. On the contrary, the intent is to illuminate the unfortunate reality that no whole-of-government strategy for irregular competition exists—and that the United States needs one to complement and render its strategic competition objectives achievable. The principles of irregular competition discussed here appear occasionally in disjointed, unrelated, incomplete literature or doctrine—not policy—mostly geared toward the military. No policy exists. There is no obligation within the U.S. government for institutions to collectively think about the principles of irregular competition, no office or individual charged with synchronizing a holistic effort, no institution empowered to provide interagency education

on the subject (although the military is considering it), and no strategic plan to build a multinational irregular competition network of like-minded partners and allies. As the Defense Department itself has written, “No single U.S. Government department or agency has primacy in the prosecution of irregular conflict or adversarial competition.”¹⁷

The question asked in the opening of this article was “how may the United States conceptually model a whole-of-government approach to irregular competition?” The answer to this question is a whole-of-government irregular competition policy model, illustrated in the figure, that includes four pillars: political warfare (the diplomatic element of power), propaganda and psychological operations (the information element of power, which may be cyber-enabled), irregular warfare (the military element of power), and economic pressure, persuasion, coercion, and/or subversion (the economic element of power). Without whole-of-government synchronization, numerous agencies, organizations, and individuals across the U.S. government are left to execute their irregular competition programs—if they even exist—without common understanding, direction, or purpose. If the United States instead develops a whole-of-government irregular competition strategy with the four elements outlined in this article, the country will increase its capacity to deter and confront adversarial state and nonstate actors in this new era of competition. ■

The views expressed here are the author's alone and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of Defense or the U.S. government.

Notes

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