

# Escalation and Irregular Warfare

## We Need to Be Irregular Warfare Hustlers, Not Just Irregular Warfare World Champions

Dr. Thomas R. Searle

**W**e all had many thoughts as we watched Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine unfold in the winter and spring of 2022. One of them should have been, "This is the new price of victory in irregular warfare." Nations do not resort to conventional invasions when they can achieve their goals through irregular warfare (IW). Russia's total and permanent defeat in its IW campaign was evident from Vladimir Putin's decision to escalate from irregular to conventional warfare. For anyone who was unsure about Russia's defeat in IW, Putin announced that he had no other choice; he had to escalate to the largest war in Europe in almost eighty years.<sup>1</sup> On the surface, this claim seems like an odd statement since Putin chose IW as his method for controlling Ukraine throughout the first twenty years of his reign. Thus, Putin's claim that he had no choice did not mean he was ignorant of IW and could not think of other ways to control Ukraine; rather, he was announcing that all his IW efforts had failed. He was escalating to conventional warfare because he was defeated in IW, and conventional warfare was his only option to reverse that defeat.

Ukraine and its European and U.S. backers certainly wanted Ukraine to defeat Putin's IW campaign, but they did not want to force Putin into the full-scale invasion he launched in response to Ukraine's victory in IW. This article explains how things went so badly wrong and then provides a "hustler" strategy to avoid similar mistakes in the future.

### **Inappropriate Experience and False Assumptions About IW and Escalation**

Two factors led the U.S. military, and by extension, U.S. allies and partners, astray concerning IW: inappropriate experience and false assumptions. The inappropriate experience came after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks when the United States focused on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency against foes like al-Qaida, the Taliban, al-Shabaab, the Islamic State, and other terrorists and insurgents. This provided a wealth of experience and hard-won knowledge about IW, but these opponents were typically fighting as hard as they could. They did not have vast but unused capability and capacity that needed to be deterred. As a



A U.S. Army Special Forces soldier assigned to 20th Special Forces Group (Airborne) and a Lithuanian National Defence Volunteer Forces (KASP) member conduct mission planning during exercise Saber Junction 2018 at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, on 16 September 2018. In the Saber Junction 18 training scenario, special operations forces worked alongside the KASP to conduct irregular warfare in enemy-occupied territory in support of the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade as they executed land operations in a joint multinational environment. (Photo by 1st Lt. Benjamin Haulenbeek, U.S. Army)

result, the reasonable goal was to defeat these enemies as quickly and completely as possible, and the desire for rapid and decisive success also fit nicely with the preferences of the U.S. military.<sup>2</sup> The December 2017 *National Security Strategy* officially shifted the focus from counterterrorism to great power competition and later strategic competition with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia.<sup>3</sup> Unlike terrorists, the PRC and Russia have enormous unused capability and capacities that needs to be deterred. The need to deter escalation calls into question the value of a decisive IW success, like that achieved by Ukraine, since that success led to unwelcome escalation in the form of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion.

The United States also based its approach to IW against the PRC and Russia on a false assumption. The false assumption was that all U.S. adversaries, including

Russia and the PRC, choose IW because they believed the United States would defeat them in conventional warfare.<sup>4</sup> If true, this assumption would mean that U.S. conventional forces successfully deter all U.S. adversaries from a conventional war. However, this assumption is problematic in two ways. The first problem is that the PRC and Russia might not accept the notion of total and irreversible U.S. superiority in conventional warfare. For example, U.S. wargames do not indicate that the United States would be certain of defeating the PRC in a war over Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> PRC estimates might well see a PRC victory as possible in the foreseeable future or even today. By the same token, before 2022, the Russians were not particularly awed by U.S. conventional forces. One global survey by U.S. News and World Report even ranked Russia as the world's strongest military with the United States in second place.<sup>6</sup>

Even official U.S. national security documents list Russia and the PRC as “peers” or “near peers,” indicating that the United States itself did not believe a decisive U.S. victory over Russian or PRC conventional forces was guaranteed.

The second, and even more serious problem with the assumption of successful conventional deterrence is that even if Russia and the PRC believe their forces are inferior, U.S. conventional forces are irrelevant if they will not enter the fight. When Putin escalated to large-scale conventional warfare in Ukraine, he knew he would not have to fight U.S. forces.<sup>7</sup> The United States and NATO were probably correct in not extending NATO Article 5-type commitments to a non-NATO country like Ukraine since doing so would lower the value of NATO membership.<sup>8</sup> However, escalation to conventional warfare became much less risky for Russia once U.S. forces were off the table.

As they say, the first step in solving a problem is recognizing that we have one. Our experience in IW against terrorists and insurgents left us ill-prepared to discourage escalation since these adversaries had very limited ability to escalate. Russia and the PRC, on the other hand, can escalate to conventional and even nuclear warfare at any time. They pursue their goals through IW because it is a lower-cost option, not because it is their only option. U.S. conventional and nuclear forces, and the certainty of retaliation, make direct conventional or nuclear attack on the United States extremely costly and hence unlikely. However, there will be times and places, like Ukraine in 2022, when U.S. nuclear and conventional forces are “not on the table,” to use President Joseph Biden’s phrase.<sup>9</sup> How can we discourage escalation to conventional warfare in such cases?

The key to preventing escalations like Russia’s escalation in Ukraine will be to stop limiting our thinking to traditional deterrence through superior force. After all, the leaders of the United States and NATO deliberately and explicitly took their forces off the table, making them irrelevant to Putin’s calculations. The key to preventing escalation in such cases will not be merely to increase the costs of escalation to conventional warfare but to increase the positive incentives for the adversary to continue his losing IW strategy using a “hustler” approach.

Let’s consider an analogy. Imagine a large, violent, short-tempered young man who is an enthusiastic but

mediocre pool player. Let’s further imagine that on two different nights, two different pool players walk into the bar and play pool against him. On the first night, the player who walks in is a world champion pool player. They will play exactly one game because the world champion will quickly and easily trounce and humiliate our large, violent, short-tempered young man. How will he respond to being humiliated and losing access to the pool table for the rest of the night? He might head home, watch some TV, and go to bed early. However, it is more likely that he will escalate his competition with the pool world champion by using his pool cue as a club, since it was not doing him much good as a pool cue. The best-case scenario for the world champion is that he collects whatever the bet was on the first game, but more likely he will never get that money, ruin a shirt in the scuffle, and he might even break his expensive pool cue or get seriously hurt.

Now let’s consider a different person walking into the same bar and challenging that same large, angry young man to a game of pool. This new guy is a good pool player, but he is not a world champion; he is a hustler. Our hustler could quickly and easily defeat the large, angry young man, but he does not do that. Instead, he keeps the game close, and there are follow-on games, and those are close as well. Sometimes the large, angry young man wins. Always, he thinks he could have won, and that he might win the next game, so he keeps playing pool against the hustler. They play all night, and when the bar closes, the hustler has collected a lot more money from the large, angry young man than the world champion did, and the young man did not escalate the competition to violence.

What is the difference between the world champion and the hustler? They are both good pool players.

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In fact, the world champion is better at pool than the hustler is. So how did the hustler make more money than the world champion while also avoiding the risk of escalation and injury? The world champion had the mistaken idea that his goal should be a rapid, decisive victory and forgot the risk of escalation. The hustler, on the other hand, knew the goal was to keep the young man playing pool all night and to slowly take all his

The people of Taiwan who are horrified by the prospect of being ruled by the CCP could attempt a rapid and decisive victory in IW/political warfare by pressing for a binding referendum in which the people of Taiwan would vote on whether they wanted to permanently reject the possibility of being governed by the CCP, outlaw the presence of the CCP on the islands, and enshrine these items in the constitution of

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money while making escalation seem silly and unnecessary. The hustler did this by keeping the games close and letting his opponent win sometimes, so the young man would retain the hope of winning at pool and stay focused on that.

### **Applying the Hustler Model in Real-World IW**

Taiwan is the obvious case for trying out this hustler model in the real world. For decades, opinion polling has indicated fewer than 10 percent of people in Taiwan support immediate or eventual unification with the PRC and rule by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).<sup>10</sup> The more than 90 percent of Taiwanese who do not want to be ruled by the CCP are in a long-term IW struggle against the CCP and its determination to someday rule over them. The Taiwanese are supported in this struggle, to some extent, by the United States and other freedom-loving nations who hope the people of Taiwan can forever enjoy democracy and self-determination outside the control of the CCP. Some might claim this support constitutes IW against the CCP, or even the PRC. However, since IW does not have to include explicit announcements comparable to a declaration of war, there is room for disagreement over whether the United States is conducting IW against the CCP or merely trying to prevent the success of the CCP's IW against Taiwan.

a new independent nation of Taiwan. But while such an action might represent victory for the anti-CCP faction in IW against the CCP, it might also cause the CCP and PRC to escalate the conflict to a conventional invasion or even a nuclear strike, neither of which would be good for Taiwan. Instead of seeking rapid and decisive victory in IW, and increasing the risk of escalation, Taiwan's anti-CCP majority might be better served by a "hustler" strategy of keeping hope alive in the CCP that peaceful unification is possible in the future. This would mean that there must always be a pro-unification party in Taiwanese politics with nontrivial representation in Taiwan's legislature (the Legislative Yuan). The pro-unification party must retain some hope of increasing its influence or forming a coalition with other parties that might bring Taiwan under CCP rule. It would also mean enough economic interaction that the CCP would believe it had nonmilitary options for pressuring Taiwan, if necessary.

Can the Taiwanese deceive the CCP into continuing its losing IW strategy? The key to successful deception is to find something false the target person already believes and reinforce that belief. In our pool-playing example, the large, angry young man wants to believe he can win at pool, and by making the games close, the hustler keeps him deceived and keeps him playing pool rather than escalating to brawling. Likewise, the key to deceiving the Nazis



Ukrainian soldiers assigned to 1st Battalion, 80th Airmobile Brigade, conduct an enter-and-clear-trenches exercise 2 November 2016 at the International Peacekeeping and Security Center in western Ukraine. Soldiers assigned to 6th Squadron, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, as part of the Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine, were responsible for training Ukrainian Ground Forces to increase their capacity for self-defense. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Elizabeth Tarr, U.S. Army)

about the location of the D-Day landing was to provide enough evidence to confirm their pre-existing expectation that the attack would come in the Pas-de-Calais, where the English Channel is narrowest.<sup>11</sup> This evidence enabled the Nazis to discount the counterevidence and retain their false belief for weeks even after the D-Day landings.<sup>12</sup> In the case of Taiwan, the CCP very much wants to believe that all ethnic Chinese, including those in Taiwan, want to be reunited with the Motherland and ruled from Beijing, that is, by the CCP. In the eyes of the CCP, China's decades of unprecedented economic and technological success make joining the PRC the obvious and logical choice for anyone lucky enough to have the opportunity to do so. The Taiwanese would be well advised to regularly emphasize their cultural connection to the mainland and continuously praise the Chinese Communists for their successes, their efficiency, and their ability to get things done, while

remaining politely silent, except among themselves, about China's corruption scandals, oppression, abuse of Hong Kong, party purges, etc.

This approach may sound like a risky strategy for Taiwan. After all, the CCP rightly considers itself the world's expert on united front strategies, that is, using cooperation with noncommunists to advance the goals of the CCP and expand the influence and control of the CCP.<sup>13</sup> Allowing a pro-unification political party to have a nontrivial and legitimate role in Taiwanese politics would effectively bring agents of CCP influence, and even traitors, into position of real, if limited, power and authority. This weakens Taiwan, just as deliberately missing shots puts the hustler in a weaker position for winning pool games. But it decreases the risk of escalation and keeps the CCP playing IW, just as deliberately missing shots keeps the large, angry young man playing pool. The alternatives, such as outlawing pro-unification parties, barring CCP members from

visiting Taiwan, arresting and deporting all CCP members currently on the islands, blocking all PRC media from reaching Taiwan, and all the other measures that would indicate that CCP IW against Taiwan is doomed to fail, would dramatically increase the risk of escalation to conventional invasion or nuclear annihilation.

For generations, the policies of Taiwan and its friends have successfully sustained both Taiwan's independence and the CCP's hope of future peaceful reunification, while not causing the CCP to escalate to conventional or nuclear warfare. This might be due to luck, CCP caution due to the risks of escalation, CCP optimism about the likelihood of peaceful reunification, CCP distraction by other priorities, a successful hustler strategy by Taiwan and its friends, some combination of these factors, or other factors. However, the hustler strategy cannot be discounted as a contributing factor, and hence, the hustler strategy should be part of U.S. thinking about IW now and in the future.

## Broader Applicability of the Hustler Model

The hustler model is not just applicable to IW but should be considered in conventional warfare as well. Specifically, it is important to note that since 2022, whenever Russia faces an increased risk of defeat in conventional warfare in Ukraine, the Russians threaten to escalate to nuclear warfare. Since the level of outside support to Ukraine is a key factor in whether or not Russia will be defeated, Russian nuclear threats increase when the battlefield situation gets worse or outside support increases, and threats decrease when the battlefield situation improves and outside support decreases.<sup>14</sup> These threats have been effective in discouraging or deterring the United States and other supporters of Ukraine from providing more effective assistance to Ukraine more rapidly and, arguably, have helped prevent Russia's defeat in conventional warfare.

We should not think the Russian war in Ukraine is a unique case. Instead, we should recall that, during the Korean War, when the United States was the nuclear power facing the prospect of defeat in conventional warfare, it was the United States that started thinking about escalation to nuclear warfare.<sup>15</sup> There were many calls in the United States for escalation to nuclear warfare during the Korean War, just as there are calls in Russia for escalation to nuclear warfare today.

Unfortunately, U.S. military thinkers, planners, and doctrine writers rarely took the lessons of Korea to heart and were left mentally unprepared for Russian nuclear threats in Ukraine. During the Cold War, the United States focused on avoiding conventional military defeat during a Warsaw Pact invasion of West Germany. The prospect of a rapid and decisive U.S. victory over Warsaw Pact forces in conventional warfare was too remote to consider. Instead, questions about escalation to nuclear warfare focused on when, where, and how U.S. conventional defeat might become imminent and how escalation to tactical nuclear weapons could slow the advance of Warsaw Pact forces.<sup>16</sup> There was also a great deal of thought given to how escalation might be managed once nuclear weapons were used on the battlefield.

After the Cold War, U.S. thinking about conventional warfare focused on achieving rapid and decisive victory against adversaries—such as Serbia, the Taliban, Iraq, and Libya—who could not escalate to nuclear warfare. However, as we look at the potential for conventional warfare against nuclear-armed foes, like Russia and China, we need to revisit the question of when and why a nuclear-armed nation might escalate from conventional to nuclear warfare and how that should influence our conventional doctrine.

A full discussion of the issue is outside the scope of this essay, but there is every reason to believe that escalation to nuclear warfare is closely related to whether a nuclear nation's leadership believes they might lose in conventional warfare. The more likely and more costly conventional defeat becomes, the more likely the nation is to consider escalation to nuclear warfare rather than accept defeat. This makes sense logically and coincides with the observed results in the current Ukraine war and in the Korean War. We have seen Russian threats of nuclear warfare against Ukraine wax and wane inversely with Russian prospects for success. The same pattern was visible in Korea under the Truman administration.

From this evidence, it certainly appears there is a need for a hustler strategy in U.S. conventional warfare just as there is in U.S. IW. How do we know when rapid, decisive victory in conventional warfare will lead the adversary to escalate to nuclear warfare, and hence when we must avoid rapid, decisive victory in conventional warfare? In other words, when is it counterproductive to fight like the conventional warfare world champion and when must we be conventional warfare hustlers who keep the

enemy in conventional warfare by keeping their hope of winning alive? Just as importantly, how do we convince a nuclear-armed adversary to accept disappointment or even defeat in conventional warfare rather than escalate to nuclear warfare? In Korea, both sides settled for a stalemate. In Vietnam, the United States settled for a “decent interval” to withdraw its forces before its ally was completely and permanently defeated. In Afghanistan, the Soviets first and later the Americans withdrew their forces and allowed their allies to be defeated. In all these cases it was not rapid and decisive enemy success that convinced the nuclear power to accept disappointment or even defeat rather than escalating to nuclear warfare. The nuclear power was also not deterred from escalating to nuclear warfare by the enemy’s nuclear weapons since neither the North Koreans (in the 1950s) nor the Vietnamese, nor the Afghans had nuclear weapons with which they could threaten the United States or the USSR. This suggests that an exhaustion strategy is required to defeat a nuclear power without leading to nuclear escalation. This conclusion requires more research, but it is beyond dispute that the hustler strategy is tailor-made to achieve adversary exhaustion without escalation, and the United States will need such strategies in the new era of strategic competition.

## Conclusion

Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a shock in many ways. One of the shocks we have not fully recognized is that the invasion was Putin’s response to being defeated in IW by Ukraine and its partners. Incorporating this lesson into our understanding of IW is a critical next step in pushing our vision of IW beyond our experience in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency and into strategic competition against nuclear-armed peer and near-peer states. This article proposed adding a hustler approach to our current and preferred world champion approach to IW and even extended the hustler approach to conventional warfare. The world champion approach seeks rapid and decisive victory in one form of warfare without considering the adversary’s ability to escalate to a more lethal and expensive form of warfare. The hustler approach, on the other hand, seeks to keep the adversary in the game longer, without tempting him to escalate the conflict, by keeping alive his hope of winning, or at least improving his situation, without escalation. The hustler approach does not replace the world champion approach in all cases but instead puts another tool in our conceptual toolbox for strategic competition. ■

## Notes

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8. If countries could count on NATO’s Article 5 protections without joining NATO, what would be the incentive to join? Finland and Sweden rushed to join NATO after Vladimir Putin invaded a non-NATO country. They would not have joined if they believed they could get Article 5 protections without becoming a member.

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