

Irregular Warfare

Defining the Debate

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There is a debate over how to define “irregular warfare.” Conventional thinking advocates for a conservative definition of irregular warfare that hinges on adversarial engagement utilizing lethal force that is violent and militarized. For example, the 2007 *Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept* defines irregular warfare as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations.”¹

However, there is a growing awareness and recognition that classical irregular warfare doctrine requires rethinking and a less conventional understanding and approach. Forward-thinking theorists believe that irregular warfare exists across the cooperation-competition-crisis-conflict continuum. Irregular warfare is increasingly used to describe the ever-present condition of enduring competition among nations, whether that competition is lethal or nonlethal; militarized or nonmilitarized; embroiled in armed conflict or below the threshold of armed conflict. Current doctrine found in Joint Publication 1, *Joint Warfighting*, for example, defines irregular warfare as “a form of warfare where states and non-state actors campaign to assure or coerce states or other groups through indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities, either as the primary approach or in concert with conventional warfare.”²

This debate of definitions is important, because it ultimately informs U.S. national security, defense, and military policies. It also informs how resources are allocated. Thus, it is a political issue, as well. Given this complexity, predicting what future warfare and battlefields will look like is a dangerous and risky business, and pundits or subject-matter experts are rarely accurate in their predictions. Moreover, the U.S. military has often been accused of preparing for the war that it wants to fight, not the wars in which it is required to fight.



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Current U.S. Army doctrine and readiness focuses on large-scale combat operations. Large-scale combat operations are, by nature, extensive multinational, joint combat operations involving multiple corps and division size units and include conventional and irregular forces on both sides.³ But what happens if an adversary elects for a strategy that depends wholly on unconventional and asymmetric tactics and operations to achieve a desired end state?

There may be a scenario wherein a sophisticated adversary seeks to engage and attack the United States in a manner for which it is unprepared. For example, it is often stated that the support of the populace in democratic nations is a center of gravity in war. However, a democratic society, such as the United States, can be divided and polarized to such an extent that trust between political parties does not exist. Truth and facts can be called into question and politicized for personal and partisan gain. The populace can be divided, confused, frustrated, and hopeless to such an extent that they lose significant trust and confidence in public institutions.

At a critical moment, perhaps during a major natural disaster or a national event such as a presidential election period, for example, an adversary could conduct an asymmetric attack that damages or destroys critical national infrastructure; debilitates our military and strategic deterrence capabilities; or significantly damages our international influence. Can a nation so polarized and lacking trust in national leaders and institutions see past their partisan divides to focus on an external enemy? If a devastating attack under the threshold of armed conflict can achieve a strategic objective of the enemy or deny and damage the strategic interests of the United States and its allies, it may be worth the risk. And without the support of the public or electorate in a democracy, our leaders cannot mobilize the Nation for war.

Irregular warfare, liberally defined, takes these scenarios into consideration. We must have the political will, resources, doctrine, and capabilities to meet the enemy where they are, not where we wish them to be. We must be willing and able to engage our enemies with all levers of national power on their homeland, in their homes, on their airwaves, and against their national interests. We must be willing and able to engage with

persistent staying power to achieve long-term gains. We must be willing and able to dominate our adversaries in a comprehensive, absolute game of narrative, perception, influence, and information.⁴ We must be willing and able to engage in infinite irregular warfare.

The articles that follow in this special edition discuss all manner of issues and topics in irregular warfare. We are deeply appreciative of the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Liberty, North Carolina, for curating this edition and thank the authors for their submissions. We hope you enjoy this edition and that it instigates further constructive, professional debate and discourse. ■

Editor's note: *The 2025 General William DePuy Writing Competition, the U.S. Army's premier writing contest, is focused on the topic of security challenges presented by a world that is increasingly borderless, multicultural, and interdependent. The theme of the 2025 DePuy writing competition finds roots in the definition of irregular warfare, wherein state and non-state actors struggle and compete for power. Read how to enter the contest at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/DePuy-Writing-Competition/>.*

Notes

1. Department of Defense (DOD), *Irregular Warfare (IW) Joint Operating Concept (JOC)* (Washington, DC: DOD, 11 September 2007 [obsolete]), 5, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA496061.pdf>.

2. Joint Publication 1, *Joint Warfighting*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 27 August 2023 [CAC required]), II-7, https://jdeis.js.mil/jdeis/new_pubs/jp1vol1.pdf.

3. Field Manual 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2023), para. 1-46.

4. Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., "China—A Deadly 'Infinite Game': Army Chief McConville," *Breaking Defense*, 29 March 2021, <https://breakingdefense.com/2021/03/china-a-deadly-infinite-game-army-chief-mcconville/>.

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