



INSIGHTS

Vol. 1, No. 1, December 2022

Irregular Warfare Campaigning and the Irregular Warfare Center

The United States' ability to conduct an effective irregular warfare campaign is hampered by political realities and Department of Defense cultural norms. While there are many overlapping deficiencies, this inaugural IWC Insights paper discusses three prominent barriers to success: 1) a quick-win culture that incentivizes short-term fixes; 2) the lack of adequate irregular warfare education throughout the interagency community; and 3) promotion and leadership selection processes that undervalue the development of necessary language, cultural, and regional expertise for irregular warfare application. Each of these problems often reinforces the others. The Irregular Warfare Center aims to empower and promote research, education, and engagement with a wide range of interagency professionals, global partners, and members of civil society to increase their awareness of irregular warfare threats, cross-fertilize often segregated activities, and develop holistic approaches to combat present and future irregular warfare challenges.

The United States (U.S.) must develop its capacity to campaign more effectively to achieve its strategic objectives, which includes how it conducts irregular warfare.¹ While often stringing together tactical victories and short-term diplomatic successes, the United States has consistently struggled to employ irregular warfare to bring about favorable political end-states. Examples of this phenomenon include Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. Directing a range of military and non-military capabilities—including diplomatic, informational, and

economic elements—toward accomplishing a policy objective is crucial to combatting revisionist adversaries who are increasingly competing below the threshold of war, attempting to subvert U.S. conventional military superiority. However, there are at least three prominent barriers that stand in the way of effective IW campaigning.

First, cultural norms within military and political institutions prioritize quick victories and easy wins, which leads to an improper emphasis on metrics focused on tactical performance rather than strategic effectiveness. Second, the

IWC MISSION: The IWC serves as the central mechanism for developing the Department of Defense's (DOD) irregular warfare knowledge and advancing the Department's understanding of irregular warfare concepts and doctrine in collaboration with key allies and partners.

KEVIN D. STRINGER, PH.D.
Colonel, U.S. Army, Retired



MADISON URBAN
IWC Analyst

lack of access to professional IW education for non-military government professionals, who are nonetheless involved in the planning and execution of campaigns, further hinders a unity of effort. This situation is amplified by military professional education that often does not fully integrate IW into its curriculum. Finally, in the human domain, the selection criteria for political appointees and senior military officers often don't prioritize the language, regional, and cultural expertise needed for IW campaigning. This Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) Insights paper aims to engender a critical conversation on these three sub-areas in order to promulgate further research and dialogue that leads to improved IW campaigning for the military, the wider interagency community, global partners, and civil society. It also offers areas where the emerging IWC can assist this effort.

THE CENTRALITY OF CAMPAIGNING

The struggles of the United States to campaign effectively have led to strategic failures despite numerous tactical victories. A campaign, as defined by the military, is “[a] series of related operations aimed at achieving strategic and operational objectives within a given time and space.”² Military, diplomatic, and intelligence professionals have consistently proven their ability to successfully complete missions, eliminate terrorists, invest in allies, forge partnerships, sanction malevolent actors, seize assets, and expose threats. At the highest strategic level, there is also often bipartisan and interagency consensus about goals and the most prominent challenges facing the homeland. Over the last decade, there has been agreement that China poses a significant threat to U.S. national interests, that the United States should lead the way in technological development and innovation, and that nuclear proliferation should be halted. However, between these agreed-upon goals and the men and women tasked with implementing them is the necessity to craft a plan to leverage the complete range of power toward the goal--a campaign.

Increasing the United States' ability to effectively campaign is central to the Biden

Administration's recently released National Defense Strategy 2022 (NDS). In his introduction, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin argues that a “business as usual” approach will not be sufficient to counter the challenges posed by China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, and violent extremist organizations.³ Part of the necessary shift is a greater focus on campaigning which will enable the United States to “gain and sustain military advantages, counter acute forms of our competitors' coercion, and complicate our competitors' military preparations.”⁴ The NDS also highlights that effective IW campaigning will rely upon the “intelligence sharing, economic measures, diplomatic actions, and activities in the information domain conducted by other U.S. departments and agencies” which “may prove more effective” than military activity.⁵

Greater synchronization needs to occur within the Department of Defense (DoD) as well as with the Department of State (DOS), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Security Council (NSC), the Department of the Treasury (USDT), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and other relevant law enforcement personnel for IW campaigning to succeed. However, as currently constructed, the incentives and priorities of these departments and agencies often work against effective campaigning and necessitate change as discussed throughout this IWC Insights paper.

Congress authorized funding for the creation of the IWC in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 to address these shortcomings and synthesize U.S. government efforts on IW while advancing collaboration with partners globally.⁶ The creation of the IWC has been described as potentially “a once-in-a-generation opportunity to fix a critical gap in [the United States'] national security arsenal” because it provides a much needed “dedicated home for the study” of IW.⁷ The IWC aims to conduct innovative research to advocate for long-term strategic thinking, leverage research to educate practitioners to increase the effectiveness of IW campaigns, and promote consideration of structural changes that make IW campaigning a priority.

QUICK WIN CULTURE

U.S. political structures often incentivize a short-term perspective, hindering campaigns that require multi-year engagement. Turnover in Congress every two years and at the executive branch potentially every four years can disrupt or undermine IW campaigning even if the strategic objective does not change. Many political appointees in prominent leadership positions serve short stints with the goal to fix a situation or make their mark on foreign policy rather than a commitment to improving and extending campaigns that outlive their tenure.⁸ This situation leads to difficulty in sustaining a campaign, even within one administration let alone when there is a shift in the White House itself.⁹

Furthermore, an overemphasis on political calculations or how to sell a campaign to the American people can eliminate effective solutions. For instance, in his reflections on U.S. failures in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus commented “when we recognized that we couldn’t “win” the war, we did not even seriously consider that we might just “manage” it.”¹⁰ Effectiveness is not necessarily synonymous with winning. Particularly in an IW context, the threats are not suited to a victory or defeat dichotomy. The United States is not going to defeat Russian information operations in the Balkans or reverse Chinese economic expansion in Africa. Effective management as a strategic priority rather than victory necessitates a longer-term vision than incentivized by actual political cycles.

Similarly, senior military leaders at the general and flag officer ranks are driven to short-term solutions by rigid, “up or out” career paths, short-term assignments, and the pressure to show “success” in a brief evaluation period. There are also larger cultural factors and assumptions that promote this approach including domestic political timelines and aspirations to transform societies into the American image. A cautionary example is the U.S.-led NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A). While producing excellent measures of performance ranging from increased literacy among Afghan security personnel to growing the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and police manning levels above 300,000

personnel, it ultimately failed as an organization in transforming the ANSF into a sustainable fighting force.¹¹ Among a variety of factors, the failure of NTM-A was due in part because of an inability to build a strategy that took into consideration the local power dynamics and Afghan culture. This deficit resulted in a well-trained, Americanized military that was out of sync with the local culture and power structures and that would prove to be unsustainable.¹²

Both these political and military cultures result in the development of improper metrics, focusing on measures of performance and not measures of effectiveness. Examples include the amount of money spent on development projects in Afghanistan and the number of terrorists killed in the Counter-ISIS campaign. These types of statistics do not equate to effective outcomes. Tactical victories are highlighted as proof of success—likely because it makes the military and United States look good—rather than a metric related to how a specific tactical victory fits into the broader campaign. It is imperative that campaign plans be developed and communicated with a broad range of relevant stakeholders (e.g., DOS, USDT), each of which should understand and be able to frame their operations and metrics for success in light of the broader mission.

An inability by any one of the relevant stakeholders to understand how their specific mission fits into a campaign can lead to the development of a system of measurement that incentivizes ineffective or even counterproductive actions. The development and commitment to long-term solutions instead of short-term band-aids is difficult and rubs against many of the institutional political and cultural norms present in the irregular warfare context. This situation will require a shift in thinking, internal incentives, and communication with the American public.

MINIMAL IW PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

The limited access to IW education for non-military personnel, who are nonetheless involved in the planning and execution of IW campaigns, further hinders the integration of IW campaigning

efforts. The incomplete alignment of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic efforts historically has led to IW campaigning failure, in part due to an overreliance on military power which can rarely address the underlying political, cultural, and economic drivers of conflict. In a context where each pillar provides critical resources to advancing an IW campaign, each relevant stakeholder should have access to IW education. Incentivizing IW education for officials at the DOS, USAID, NSC, USDT, FBI, and other relevant law enforcement personnel would further elevate the capabilities and understanding necessary to synthesize interagency efforts. This education should not be confined to understanding the military aspects of an IW campaign but encourage an interdisciplinary understanding of how the U.S. government should coordinate a range of efforts to compete with various threats as well as assist in further developing relationships with foreign peers and partners across multiple levels of government. The development of education must be informed by rigorous research that is willing to challenge DoD norms and concentrate efforts on advancing efforts to adapt to new strategic realities.¹³

Beyond the civilian government agencies, even within the DoD and its existing institutions of professional military education (PME), a lack of access to IW education must be addressed. Expanded access to IW-specific PME for military personnel should include courses that are focused on understanding and synthesizing both the military and non-military elements of IW, the ways in which the military can bring elements of hard and soft power to bear, as well as developing cultural expertise to aid strategic and campaign planning.¹⁴ Current efforts fall short despite recent instruction from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that PME must reflect the position that “IW strategically is as important as traditional warfare and that DoD must be equally capable in both.”¹⁵ Furthermore, increasing the range of professional expertise in teaching positions beyond the traditional defense establishment will also be central to elevating the role of diplomatic, economic, and informational tools in advancing a common strategic vision.

HUMAN DOMAIN

Finally, political and military leadership selection processes de-emphasize language, regional, and cultural expertise, albeit in different ways. The political appointment system often places individuals with the right connections, but little background in implementing foreign policy or the complexities of regional dynamics, in positions that oversee the development of campaigns.¹⁶ The appointment system compounds the previously discussed issue of a quick-win culture that prioritizes speed. The combination of a desire for speed and a lack of understanding of the nuances of implementing national security policy often leads to poor decision-making. A greater emphasis should be placed on elevating career civil servants and the expertise of those who are steeped in the complexities of regional history, language, and culture and who operate on longer time horizons than an appointee who owes his position to a man or woman who will have to be re-elected and thus would like results in under four years. Regardless of the background of the policymaker, the IWC endeavors to offer executive education level courses that provide greater insights into IW for these important decision-makers and stakeholders.

The military leadership selection process suffers from the opposite problem. Military leadership has served for years, but the selection process is primarily tailored to fighting traditional warfare. The career paths that lead to positions of leadership most often do not emphasize cultural expertise but prioritize the ability to command troops. While command will remain fundamental to conducting military operations relevant in traditional or IW contexts, the United States is not just fighting traditional battles, and cultural expertise is critical in crafting realistic strategies and building a functioning IW campaign. Within the military system, non-standard career paths should be encouraged and a greater valuation placed on cultural fluency, interpersonal acumen, and language skills.¹⁷

These additions to leadership criteria are not altogether a radical shift as historic and modern examples show the value of these skills. The

development and adaptation of U.S. military postures in Asia have been significantly helped by the leadership of men who were fluent in Mandarin, like General Joseph Stillwell in World War II and Lieutenant General Charles Hooper during the Obama Administration's pivot to Asia.¹⁸ The interwar business expertise of Major General William Donovan, Director of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and the Civilian Conservation Corps experience of Major General Robert Frederick, Commander of the 1st Special Service Force, contributed to the development of the modern Central Intelligence Agency and U.S. Army Special Forces.¹⁹ These examples exemplify how proficiency in language or management or other skills that might initially be deemed non-essential to military command can be crucial to the achievement of both tactical and strategic priorities in the IW context.

Although many departments are notably better at attracting and developing personnel with cultural fluency than DoD, the lack of relevant cultural and linguistic skills does extend beyond the military. In 2020, one report found that after spending nearly two decades in the Middle East and amid a strategic shift to focus on China and the Indo-Pacific, the Department of State "still has more Portuguese speakers than Arabic and Chinese combined and more Albanian speakers than Urdu, Dari, or Farsi."²⁰ The lack of linguistic proficiency is a problem of education and prioritization. It is one thing for the United States to have minimal cultural fluency in the wake of a cataclysmic shock, like 9/11. However, the lack of evidence in this capacity 20 years later calls into question how the national security apparatus is educating and incentivizing its people to develop critical human domain skills.

ROLE OF THE IWC

Political realities and long-established cultural norms will complicate the advancement of these changes as they require a shift in vision and priorities. The IWC will undertake strategic research while collaborating with leading experts to illuminate current and future irregular threats. This research will be steeped in history and

cultural realities that challenge assumptions and prompt hard consideration of the business-as-usual approach while contributing to the development of new strategies and education. The Center will advocate for greater awareness and increased education on IW threats and approaches throughout the interagency community. Multi-stakeholder events will endeavor to bring together a range of interagency, international, and non-governmental partners building networks and avenues for cooperation. Engagements with a range of international partners will further increase learning, collaboration, and empowerment to increase the capacity of the United States to address irregular strategic challenges. Positioned within the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, the IWC has a unique ability to influence both DoD policy and education as well as increase teamwork with global partners.

CONCLUSION

The interplay of political and military structures, incentives, and norms in IW campaigning has led to inefficiency and undermined the United States' ability to achieve strategic objectives. The critique of the military is not intended to devalue the importance of traditional deterrence or of military officers in developing command and tactical expertise. It is precisely because of this strength that adversaries are turning to IW. Similarly, the assessment of political culture or appointees is not intended to diminish the role of the electoral process in holding the various branches accountable to the American people. These systems are an important check on power. However, it should also be acknowledged that both an emphasis on traditional warfare and short-term policymaking can complicate good decision-making and be exploited by adversaries in an irregular context. These enemies want to use the American military and political system against itself.

Hence, the IWC will promote the development of original strategic thought and unconventional thinkers to address these challenges. It aims to bring together scholars and practitioners to study and understand novel cultural and military realities relevant to the IW space. Given that IW

education is a central component of success for IW campaigning, the IWC will develop curriculum and provide educational opportunities for the U.S. government and foreign partners. Through integration and engagement, it will empower multiple stakeholders to enhance global partnerships and disseminate the best practices of IW campaigning. With applied research and envisioning different future scenarios, instead

of repeating conventional wisdom, the IWC will challenge assumptions and in doing so will engender important debates and conversations. The IWC aims to advance the capabilities of the United States to successfully wage IW campaigns in a rapidly changing world. This objective contributes to the U.S. maintaining its strategic advantage in the 21st century and beyond.

- 1 The definition and scope of irregular warfare is evolving. For the purposes of this IWC Insights paper, irregular warfare is defined according to the 2020 Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy as a “struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy” and which is waged by “leverag[ing] all irregular capabilities in our arsenal, including the unique abilities of our interagency and foreign partners.” As such, irregular warfare and irregular warfare campaigning are understood as a multi-agency endeavor that includes a range of military and non-military activities.
- 2 Joint Chiefs of Staff, DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, JP 1-02 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021), 29; Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Planning, JP 5-0 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020), I-8.
- 3 Department of Defense, National Defense Strategy, (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2022), iii, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.
- 4 Department of Defense, National Defense Strategy, 2.
- 5 Department of Defense, National Defense Strategy, 12.
- 6 Sec. 1299L of the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, P.L. 116-283, 134 Stat. 3388, <https://www.congress.gov/116/plaws/publ283/PLAW-116publ283.pdf>.
- 7 Charles Cleveland et. al, “Defense Department needs to capitalize on historic opportunity,” The Hill, November 6, 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/3721929-defense-department-needs-to-capitalize-on-historic-opportunity/>.
- 8 Heather Gregg, “Better Curricula, Better Strategic Outcomes: Irregular Warfare, Great Power Competition, and Professional Military Education,” Modern War Institute, March 15, 2022, <https://mwi.usma.edu/better-curricula-better-strategic-outcomes-irregular-warfare-great-power-competition-and-professional-military-education/>.
- 9 David Petraeus, “Afghanistan Did Not Have to Turn Out This Way,” Atlantic, August 8, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/08/us-withdrawal-afghanistan-strategy-shortcomings/670980/>.
- 10 Petraeus, “Afghanistan Did Not Have to Turn Out This Way.”
- 11 Martin Loicano and Craig C. Felker, No Moment of Victory: The NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan, 2009-2011 (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2021).
- 12 Loicano and Felker, No Moment of Victory; Petraeus, “Afghanistan Did Not Have to Turn Out This Way.”
- 13 Cleveland et. al, “Defense Department needs to capitalize.”
- 14 Elena Pokalova, “Teaching Irregular Warfare in the Era of Strategic Competition,” Modern War Institute, November 7, 2022, <https://mwi.usma.edu/teaching-irregular-warfare-in-the-era-of-strategic-competition/>; Gregg, “Better Curricula, Better Strategic Outcomes.”
- 15 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Officer Professional Military Education Policy, CJCSIS 1800.01 F (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020), 2, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/cjcsi_1800_01f.pdf?ver=2020-05-15-102430-580.
- 16 Derek Leebaert, “How Foreign Policy Amateurs Endanger the World,” Politico, October 26, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/amp/news/magazine/2022/10/24/destined-to-fail-how-political-appointees-endanger-foreign-policy-00063259>.
- 17 Pokalova, “Teaching Irregular Warfare.”
- 18 Barbara Tuchman, Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-45 (New York: Macmillan Company, 2001); U.S. Department of Defense, “Lieutenant General Charles Hooper,” accessed November 8, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220622111529/https://www.defense.gov/About/Biographies/Biography/Article/1273458/lieutenant-general-charles-hooper/>.
- 19 Anne Hicks, The Last Fighting General: The Biography of Robert Tryon Frederick (Schiffer Military History, 2006); James Stejskal, No Moon as Witness: Missions of the SOE and OSS in World War II (Havertown: Casemate Publishers, 2021).
- 20 Uzra Zeya and Jon Finer, Revitalizing the State Department and American Diplomacy (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2020) 20, https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/csr89_final.pdf.

The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Department of Defense, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, or the Irregular Warfare Center.