



13 January 2023

# PERSPECTIVES



## Great Power Competition, Irregular Warfare, and the Gray Zone

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### *Introduction*

What do an assassination in Berlin, illegal trafficking by trans-national criminal organizations, cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, drone attacks against critical infrastructure, and private military companies serving as government proxies all have in common? They may seem like random and unconnected events. But they are all components of comprehensive adversarial strategies whose ultimate goal is subverting the European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and partner states by undermining government legitimacy, destabilizing their societies, and weakening their populations' and their governments' resolve. Russia's intervention in Crimea in 2014 and in the Ukraine in 2022, Iran's use of proxies throughout the Middle East, and China's increasingly aggressive actions in the South China Sea have brought strategic competition back to center stage. This growing threat of inter-state conflict has shifted military attention to conventional warfare, but, this type of conflict could pose huge financial, military, and political risks for the states involved and cause unimaginable destruction, even without the use of nuclear weapons.

Consequently, as during the Cold War, conflict between the ideological competitors is likely to be irregular activities in the Gray Zone, i.e. below the level of organized, inter-state violence. Our adversaries are already using disinformation, cyber warfare, [lawfare](#), covert operations, proxy forces, and other lethal and non-lethal tools to achieve their strategic objectives. The ambiguous nature of these tactics has disrupted decision-making, created strategic ambiguity, destabilized democratic governments, and offset NATO's conventional military advantage. Democratic states are not currently prepared to deter or defend themselves against these Gray Zone threats.

### *Irregular Warfare in the 21st Century*

Irregular warfare is not new. Formidable armies such as Napoleon's Grand Armée and Hitler's Wehrmacht struggled to control irregular forces which exploited their knowledge of the local environment to disrupt communication and supply lines. During the Cold War, the U.S. engaged in "political warfare" and the Soviet Union used "active measures" to lessen the likelihood that their rivalry would lead to war.

Nevertheless, contemporary irregular warfare differs significantly from irregular warfare of the past. First, the type of actors and the way in which they are employed is different: Private military companies, cyber hackers, and criminal organizations are increasingly being used as [state proxies](#). Second, as was seen in the Donbass region of the Ukraine in 2014, [conventional forces supported irregular forces](#), instead of what was traditionally the reverse relationship.

Third, non-lethal activities, such as influence and cyber operations, are used with greater frequency. As the result of globalization, a 24/7 news cycle, the weaponization of information technology, and new information sources—especially social media—the effectiveness of non-lethal tactics has drastically increased. Combined with other multi-domain, non-lethal actions such as cyber-attacks, sponsored demonstrations, economic coercion, and the sabotage of infrastructure, Russia's disinformation campaign in Ukraine successfully exploited societal vulnerabilities, weakened government





institutions, and undermined the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state. Revisionist powers have also employed influence operations to exacerbate and exploit societal divisions in other democracies. It can be argued that information has become the strategic center of gravity in contemporary conflict, and irregular warfare has become at least as important as conventional warfare.

Western states try to make a clear distinction between competition and warfare, leaving them vulnerable and ill-prepared to defend themselves against states that define warfare as a continuum. Russia uses irregular tactics to try and ensure the battle is won before military operations begin. China's "Three Warfares" strategy reflects Sun Tzu's indirect approach, or war by other means. Although NATO faces complex, dynamic, and multi-domain challenges, it has largely focused on deterring, and if necessary, defeating near-peer adversaries in large-scale combat operations. While conventional forces underpin security, it is a mistake to assume that future conflict will be conventional. More importantly, NATO's struggles in Afghanistan and Iraq show that conventional military forces are vulnerable to adversaries' use of irregular tactics and strategies.

### **What is Irregular Warfare?**

What the U.S. calls irregular warfare, NATO calls hybrid warfare, Russia calls *New Generation Warfare*, and China calls *Unrestricted Warfare*. The lack of a universally-accepted definition for contemporary conflict has led to a debate over what it means and what it encompasses. Some argue that these terms are too abstract and are simply the latest attempts to categorize activities that support conventional military operations. Thus, irregular warfare is generally misunderstood, and is often used as catch-all term for non-conventional tactics and operations.

This misuse of the term has significant ramifications for international security. First, if we cast the definitional net too wide, irregular warfare has little practical use for policymakers. Define it too narrowly and policymakers fail to appreciate the significance of irregular tactics and strategies.

Second, the lack of a common definition allows different government agencies and departments to act in ways which fit their bureaucratic inclination, leading to these departments not having any cause to challenge their preconceived notions. More importantly, such blinkered thinking limits their understanding of contemporary threats and opportunities.

Third, irregular warfare has historically been associated with guerrilla warfare, counterinsurgency, and counter-terrorism. Thus, conflict between state and non-state actors was often relegated to special operations forces and perceived as less important to national security.

To help mitigate these challenges, it is important to have a common understanding of the threat. The 2021 version of the *NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions* defines a hybrid threat as one "that combines conventional, irregular and asymmetric activities in time and space" and an irregular activity as the "use or threat of force by irregular forces, groups or individuals, frequently ideologically or criminally motivated, to effect or prevent change as a challenge to governance and authority."<sup>1</sup> These definitions are incomplete, too broad, and too narrowly focused on military aspects. Taking these factors into account, in 2021 the U.S. changed its definition of *irregular warfare* to a "struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy." This definition better describes the multi-domain and often non-violent nature of contemporary irregular threats, and why it is difficult to mitigate such threats.

But adversarial definitions are much more refined. The Russians describe contemporary conflict as 6<sup>th</sup> Generation Warfare or *New Generation Warfare* (NGW). These definitions are based on the belief that the main battlespace is the mind of the opponent and that strategic outcomes can be accomplished without resorting to conventional military operations. Consequently, influence operations can demoralize an opponent, slow down decision-making, and limit the government's ability to respond. In commentary about the nature of contemporary warfare, Russian Chief-of-Staff Gerasimov noted the "[protest potential of the population](#)" as a key factor. This focus reduces the need to deploy conventional military power and decreases the risk of conflict escalation. Consequently, the Russians have placed information operations at the center of their doctrine and operational planning.

The Chinese, meanwhile, describe contemporary warfare as *Unrestricted Warfare*. They believe that to achieve strategic goals, China must move beyond reliance on military power and compete in multiple domains using both military and non-military means. In 2003, China issued the "Political Work Guidelines of the People's Liberation Army," describing "three warfares" which are to be executed during peace and war. The first, psychological warfare, is the application of military, diplomatic, and economic pressure to weaken an adversary's will. The second, public opinion warfare, is focused on the overt and covert manipulation of information to influence international and domestic decisions and policies. The third, legal warfare, refers to the exploitation of international norms to support Chinese strategic objectives.

NGW and Unrestricted Warfare share key similarities. First is the importance of information. Second is the target of irregular operations—an adversary's population. In contrast to the traditional view of war whose goal is to engage and destroy the enemy's armed forces, contemporary warfare is population-centric. Therefore, a key tactic is targeting the population through influence operations. Third is the view that relations between states cannot be viewed as binary, i.e. war or peace. Rather, international relations is a continuous, unending struggle using the full range of non-lethal and lethal tactics. At certain points competition may become



more acute and cross over into conventional military operations. Fourth, China, Russia, and other competitors share the view that because of U.S. military dominance and the staggering cost of conventional or nuclear war, the main area of competition will be the [Gray Zone](#). Competition in this arena allows revisionist, revolutionary, and rogue states to economize the use of force, decreases the likelihood of escalation, and makes it easier to avoid attribution or retribution.

In a nutshell, our adversaries' usage of contemporary warfare is based on multi-domain tactics, implemented covertly and overtly below the threshold of war. In contrast, NATO is focused on military threats that can be deterred or defeated by conventional military means. There are significant negative ramifications associated with this view. Embracing a narrow conventional view of war does not prepare leaders to identify or mitigate the range of irregular threats. Moreover, a narrow perspective constrains doctrine development and training. And by overemphasizing the preferred mission of a conventional paradigm, NATO narrows its understanding of contemporary threats. To foster stability in an era of strategic competition dominated by irregular warfare, democracies must reassess their understanding of security-related terms, concepts, and authorities to ensure they can identify and mitigate irregular challenges.

## **Irregular Warfare Challenges**

Various irregular warfare attributes make it difficult for democracies to respond. First, irregular tactics attack states in their most vulnerable areas. With their emphasis on freedom of speech, transparency, and the rule of law, democratic states are at a disadvantage when compared to authoritarian regimes. Second, NATO views security through the historical lens of conventional and nuclear deterrence. But deterring conventional aggression is not synonymous with strategic competition. Thus while the militaries of democracies prepare for the conventional war our adversaries are not eager to fight, Russia and China seek to reshape the international environment through diplomacy, economic coercion, disinformation, cyber-attacks, lawfare, and proxy forces. A third challenge is the difficulty identifying gray zone "attacks" that are designed to remain below legal, detection, or response thresholds. Russia's use of proxies in the Crimea, Iranian sponsored cyber-attacks, and the [Chinese creation of islands in the South China Sea](#) illustrate the blurry conflict continuum. This makes it difficult for Western decision-makers to [identify if they are being attacked and by whom](#).

In summary, contemporary irregular warfare is based on an indirect, continuous, and population-centric strategy in which adversaries employ a mixture of multi-domain tactics to subvert, erode, and/or exhaust the West's will to resist. While the best known example is the Crimea, the use of irregular tactics also led to loss of government control over parts of [Moldova and Georgia](#). These tactics are also being used to foster instability in other democratic states. For example, Russian disinformation created a narrative that the Estonian and Latvian governments discriminate against their Russian minority populations. They then exploited this narrative to justify economic and political actions against those countries. These sub-threshold activities don't cause a military response, yet they undermine democratic cohesion and security.

The use of irregular warfare as a tactic will continue to increase, aided by domestic instability in Western democracies, the poorly checked exploitation of international law, and emerging technologies, among other factors. To protect their societies, strengthen deterrence, and minimize the risk of conflict escalation, Western countries must be able to identify, deter, and counter non-lethal and lethal irregular activities. Barring this, our adversaries will continue to use low-cost irregular tactics to gain strategic advantages.

But how do we defeat irregular tactics in the gray zone? The first step is to update traditional views of deterrence, defense, and resiliency. This has consequences for education, training, doctrine, and strategy. Some countries have already revised their national security strategies to focus on irregular threats. A number of Nordic states have revived Cold War "Total Defense" strategies, taking a comprehensive whole-of-society approach that includes all elements of national power. Additionally, NATO also has taken some steps in the right direction. In February 2021, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg called for the alliance to reorient its focus to threats from Russia and China., and the 2022 [NATO Strategic Concept](#) describes what must be done to mitigate the irregular threats to the Alliance. NATO's ability to strengthen its capability and capacity to counter them is one of the most important challenges facing the

Alliance.

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## **Endnotes**

1. AAP-06, *NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions*, (Brussels, BEL: NATO Standardization Office, 2021), p. 65 and p. 72.

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