Irregular Warfare Conceptualization of South and Central America

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Preface

This report arises from a shared belief that irregular warfare (IW) in the United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR) cannot be fully understood through institutional doctrine alone. For decades, countries in South and Central America have served as strategic partners to the United States. While U.S. doctrine remains the most visible reference point, regional actors have developed their own IW frameworks that are sophisticated, deeply rooted, and often more aligned with their lived experiences.

This study aims to highlight those intersections to illuminate the regional vocabulary of irregular warfare that is already taking shape. These frameworks are informed by national experiences, local threat perceptions, and historical legacies that influence how irregular threats are interpreted and addressed. This project seeks to follow the conceptual paths established by those who navigate the complexities of irregular warfare on the ground and to map the ecosystem in which these understandings develop.

Many regional actors emphasize the integration of criminal, insurgent, and informational tactics, viewing IW through a population-centric lens. Across different countries we observed recurring concerns regarding issues such as territorial control by non-state actors, hybrid threats, and the destabilizing effects of transnational criminal networks. Although these shared concerns often manifest in distinct terminologies, the underlying logics related to legitimacy, sovereignty, and resilience runs parallel.

Executive Summary

This study, conducted from April 2024 to May 2025, represents the first dedicated regional effort to examine how institutions and national actors in South and Central America conceptualize irregular warfare. The research combined survey dissemination, informal interviews, document review, and embedded outreach and was carried out under the purview of the Irregular Warfare Center (IWC). Unlike previous studies that narrowly focus on doctrine, this project aimed to understand the full range of perspectives that shape IW across the continent, not only at the institutional level, but also across informal networks and embedded experiences.

Participants included instructors from war colleges, military and civilian academics, retired officers, and defense consultants. Their contributions reflect a complex and dynamic intellectual landscape: IW is rarely taught under a unified doctrinal label but rather embedded within broader subjects such as intelligence, insurgency, terrorism, and counter-narcotics. Across the continent, IW thinking is fragmented and often transmitted through informal channels or shaped by Cold War legacy practices. In many cases, formal materials are lacking, and the subject remains taboo or politically sensitive. Nonetheless, respondents demonstrated a clear understanding of hybrid threats and evolving challenges, contesting American frameworks while also engaging with them in innovative and culturally grounded ways.

Introduction

IW in South and Central America is neither new nor marginal. Yet despite its prominence, there has been a persistent lack of structured engagement on the topic—particularly in terms of U.S. cooperation. Technical assistance, military education programs, and counterterrorism training are long-standing features of U.S. defense collaboration with in South and Central America. But the strategic conceptualization of IW—its adaptation, doctrinal framing, and philosophical foundations—has largely been overlooked.

When we launched this study, the premise was that the USSOUTHCOM AOR is home to diverse and evolving irregular warfare ecosystems that need to be better understood. These ecosystems are shaped by national histories, operational realities, and regional threat environments. In many cases, IW is conceptualized in ways that resist external templates. The Cold War's imprint lingers, with many senior figures carrying institutional memory, even as younger officers push for curricular reform and the adoption of new strategic paradigms. What we found was not a lack of understanding, but rather a spectrum of grounded, pragmatic, and at times conflicting approaches to the same set of irregular challenges.

Methodology

The research relied on a qualitative, multi-phase approach that privileged trust-building and informal dialogue over rigid data collection. Surveys were distributed through secure and flexible channels and tailored to the respondent's preferences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted before and after survey completion, often in multiple rounds. This allowed us to build rapport and enabled participants to speak candidly—especially in settings where IW remains a politically sensitive subject.

The survey instrument, adapted from prior IWC efforts in Europe and the Indo-Asia-Pacific, explored core themes such as doctrinal framing, threat prioritization, curricular integration, academic publication, and international engagement. Respondents came from institutions across the Southern Cone, Andean region, Amazon basin, the Central-American isthmus, and hybrid operational environments. These included formal military schools, national war colleges, defense universities, and consulting networks. We also engaged with subject matter experts who collaborate across multiple countries, offering comparative insights into how IW frameworks vary from one context to another.

Importantly, much of the information gathered was shared off the record. Because IW remains uncodified or selectively taught in many countries, formal documents were either unavailable or withheld. In several cases, respondents pointed to embedded content—IW concepts present but unnamed within training modules on internal security, insurgency, or border operations. Informal networks proved most productive, highlighting the importance of discretion, personal trust, and long-term engagement.

Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the voluntary contributions of numerous professionals across South and Central America. We express our utmost gratitude to Lieutenant Colonel Patricio Trejo, Argentina; Colonel (Ret.) Mag. Gilberto Frizon, Brazil; Colonel Nicolás López Pulgarín, Colombia; Colonel Adalberto García, El Salvador; Colonel (Ret.) Fredy Rodriguez, Honduras; Brigadier General (Ret.) Augusto Álvarez Torres, Peru; and Colonel Gustavo Vila Frugoni, Uruguay.

We are also grateful to Dr. Sandor Fabian and analyst Gabrielle Kennedy of the IWC, who supported the initial phase of this study.

We thank the instructors, researchers, and both active and retired officers who generously shared their insights—often off the record. While many of the respondents preferred to remain anonymous, those acknowledged by name represent only a small portion of the broader group whose input informed this effort. Their inclusion does not imply institutional endorsement, and no affiliation or specific perspective should be attributed to any individual contributor.

Every effort was made to ensure that responses remained confidential and unlinked to identifiable institutions. This study is the product of aggregated insights and independent analysis. It does not reflect current U.S. government priorities or formal policy positions, nor does it imply any institutional relationship, endorsement, or cooperation beyond voluntary academic exchange. Nevertheless, the importance of building mutual understanding through collaboration cannot be overstated. This report underscores the need for sustained dialogue rooted in trust, respect, and the conceptual sovereignty of partner nations.

The following section provides core institutional descriptions of the schools and academies consulted during this study. Each entry reflects how these institutions engage with irregular warfare—whether through formal doctrine, teaching frameworks, operational history, or national security mandates—and offers insight into the broader conceptual ecosystem within which they operate.

Argentina: National Defence University

The Universidad de la Defensa Nacional (UNDEF), located in Buenos Aires, is Argentina's principal institution for higher education in defense and strategic studies. Established in 2014, UNDEF was created to unify and modernize the country's military and defense-related academic institutions under a single, civilian-led university framework.

Prior to UNDEF's creation, Argentina's defense education landscape was highly fragmented. Each branch of the Armed Forces—Army, Navy, and Air Force—operated its own university-level institutions. In addition, the Ministry of Defence managed the *Escuela de Defensa Nacional (EDENA)*, founded in 1950 under the name *Escuela Nacional de Guerra*.

The establishment of UNDEF aimed to consolidate these separate entities into a cohesive academic structure. This integration was designed to improve coordination, elevate academic standards, and ensure the meaningful inclusion of civilians, so that Argentina's defense ecosystem could benefit from the expertise of non-military specialists in multiple areas. In doing so, it also aligned national defense education with both strategic priorities and the values of a modern public higher education system in the country.

Definition of irregular warfare

Argentine military thought conceptualizes IW as one of several natural expressions of human competition. Rooted in a philosophical and historical understanding of conflict, IW is seen not as an aberration but as a particular level of violent contest within a broader continuum—where war, in all its forms, is the final manifestation of political, social, and economic antagonisms. Rather than drawing rigid distinctions between conventional and irregular modes of conflict, Argentine doctrine emphasizes the context-specific nature of warfare. This allows the Armed Forces to adopt a more fluid, adaptable interpretation of IW that is responsive to both historical lessons and emerging threats.

In practice, the term Asymmetric Warfare is more commonly used than IW in Argentina's military education and planning frameworks, particularly at the operational level. This terminology reflects a pragmatic focus on conflict scenarios involving state and non-state actors, the use of unconventional tactics, and the broader dynamics of power asymmetry. It also underscores an awareness of the diffuse, hybrid nature of contemporary threats, especially in complex environments where legal, informational, and economic dimensions intersect with traditional combat considerations.

The reactivation of specialized institutions such as the Escuela de Operaciones Especiales—now under the newly established Comando Conjunto de Operaciones Especiales (CCOEs)—signals a significant step toward institutionalizing IW-related competencies. This reorganization reflects an Argentine effort to modernize its force structure and doctrinal capabilities through integrated joint-force training, with an eye toward both domestic and regional contingencies that may fall outside conventional frameworks.

This flexible, philosophically informed conceptualization of IW allows Argentina to frame security threats through a systemic lens rather than relying solely on prescriptive doctrine. By understanding IW as one mode among many within the logic of strategic competition, Argentine defense planners are better positioned to recognize the political and social roots of irregular threats—such as insurgency, criminal governance, or foreign interference—and to respond with integrated, multi-domain approaches.

Moreover, the preference for the term "Asymmetric Warfare" reflects Argentina's sensitivity to contemporary operational realities. It acknowledges that modern threats often do not fit within a single typology, and that effective responses require doctrinal versatility, joint and combined force coordination, and the ability to operate across legal and informational boundaries. The restructured institutional framework surrounding the CCOEs provides a platform to implement this thinking in practice—bridging the gap between doctrine, education, and force deployment in irregular or hybrid contexts.

In sum, Argentina's conceptualization of IW is grounded in both historical reflection and forward-looking adaptation. It privileges intellectual flexibility, institutional learning, and doctrinal pragmatism, allowing the Armed Forces to address irregular challenges not as outliers, but as central elements of contemporary defense strategy.

Identified irregular threats

Argentina's evolving national defense posture has led to two coexisting schools of thought regarding irregular threats—one minimalist, the other more expansive. The minimalist perspective, historically dominant in civil-military policy circles, holds that its armed forces' mission is limited to defending against external, state-based threats, such as incursions from foreign militaries. Under this model, irregular phenomena—whether transnational terrorism, drug trafficking, or cyber-influence operations—are regarded as matters for internal security forces or foreign affairs, rather than military engagement.

However, a pragmatic shift has emerged within professional military education and operational analysis. Increasingly, irregular threats are understood not merely in tactical terms, but as part of a broader strategic ecosystem in which non-state actors, economic coercion, and information manipulation challenge national sovereignty and social cohesion.
This more comprehensive view identifies the following categories of irregular threats:

> Terrorist networks, both international and regionally embedded; narcoterrorism and transnational criminal syndicates, especially those operating across porous borders cyber-enabled influence operations, including the manipulation of narratives and disruption of critical infrastructure; foreign economic leverage, where state or corporate actors exploit fiscal dependency or critical infrastructure control; and non-state militias, often operating in gray zones beyond formal state control.

While not formally codified in Argentine national security doctrine, this expanded threat framework is increasingly referenced in academic, strategic, and operational contexts, particularly in institutions like the Escuela Superior de Guerra and within the curriculum of newly revitalized training centers.
Teaching irregular warfare concepts

IW is not always taught under that exact label in Argentina's military education system, but its core components are deeply embedded in the curriculum across UNDEF institutions. Instruction is approached through a multi-level framework blending historical case studies, geopolitical analysis, and scenario-based planning. This allows faculty to incorporate IW-related content without triggering political sensitivities about the military's domestic role or reviving debates over internal security responsibilities.

Moreover, the institutions take advantage of the academic autonomy allowed under the UNDEF umbrella. This permits instructors, especially those with advanced degrees in history or strategic studies, to tailor course content to reflect both conventional doctrine and emerging irregular paradigms. The military's engagement with new global realities is increasingly interpreted through the lens of strategic influence rather than formal battlefield conflict, blurring the boundary between irregular warfare and grand strategy.

Brazil: Special Operations Training Center *"Coronel Gilberto Antônio Azevedo e Silva"*

The Centro de Instrução de Operações Especiais (CIOpEsp), officially named *Centro de Instrução "Coronel Gilberto Antônio Azevedo e Silva"* is the Brazilian Army's premier institution for training in special operations. Located in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, CIOpEsp operates under the Comando de Operações Especiais (COpEsp) and is renowned as the "berço das operações especiais" (cradle of special operations) in Brazil.

The origins of CIOpEsp trace back to 1957 with the establishment of the first special operations course in the Brazilian Army. Initially, these courses were conducted at the *Centro de Instrução Paraquedista General Penha Brasil*. In 1989, the responsibility for these courses transitioned to the 2nd Special Forces Company. Recognizing the need for a dedicated training center, the Núcleo do Centro de Instrução de Operações Especiais was established in 2002 under the 1st Special Forces Battalion. By 2004, it evolved into the current CIOpEsp, and in 2011 the center relocated to its current location.

Definition of irregular warfare

The Brazilian Army, particularly through its special operations doctrine, defines IW (Guerra Irregular) as the principal expression of indirect action, in contrast to the direct-action roles carried out by elite commando units. Within this doctrinal framework, IW is not only formally recognized but structurally embedded into operational and strategic planning. It encompasses guerrilla warfare, revolutionary warfare, subversion, and operations by irregular forces whether carried out by non-regular actors or by regular forces operating outside conventional norms.

IW is doctrinally subdivided into two primary forms: guerra insurrecional (insurrectional war) and guerra revolucionária (revolutionary war). Guerrilla warfare is defined as combat activity conducted in enemy-occupied territory, primarily by local forces - military or paramilitary - aimed at degrading the occupying authority's influence across the political, psychological, economic, and military domains. Subversion, in contrast, is seen as a gradual and often covert campaign designed to erode societal cohesion and institutional legitimacy, typically through ideological, moral, and psychological destabilization.

The Brazilian military structure further distinguishes the roles of Forças Especiais (Special Forces) and Comandos (Commando Forces) within this framework. Commandos focus on direct-action missions against high-value targets, whereas Special Forces are trained and tasked with conducting protracted irregular campaigns. They areoften embedded in local environments and designed to shape operational space through population-centric influence, to friendly forces, and to assist with disruption of adversarial networks. This division is codified in Brazilian field manuals and military education curricula and reflects a deliberate investment in strategic versatility.

The concept of an Área Operacional de Guerra Irregular (Operational IW Area) underscores the importance of geographic and political context in planning and executing IW missions. It frames IW not as an ad hoc capability but as a structured, long-term mode of engagement requiring coordination across domains and agencies.

Identified irregular threats

This comprehensive doctrinal treatment of IW shapes how Brazil identifies, classifies, and prepares for modern security threats. Rather than treating IW threats (such as organized crime, insurgent movements, or subversive campaigns) as tactical anomalies or domestic law enforcement issues, the Brazilian Army sees them as part of a broader, strategic continuum of irregular conflict. This perspective justifies the investment in specialized training, doctrinal development, and strategic planning tools aimed specifically at long-term, non-linear forms of warfare.

By framing IW as an enduring, population-centric, and ideologically contested space, Brazilian doctrine enables planners and operators to integrate political, psychological, and informational factors into threat assessments and mission planning. It also allows them to anticipate hybrid forms of aggression, such as the intersection of criminal and insurgent activity (e.g., narcoguerrilla threats), and to apply IW principles to the cyber domain and influence operations.

Ultimately, this doctrine provides Brazilian forces with a conceptual and operational toolkit to confront irregular challenges not as isolated problems, but as strategic threats requiring patient, adaptive, and multidimensional responses both domestically and abroad.

Brazil's irregular threat landscape, as articulated by its Special Operations community, includes both traditional threats and emerging digital-era challenges. These include guerrilla groups, sabotage, domestic and transnational terrorism, narcoguerrillas, and insurgencies.

A particularly significant concept is Guerrilla 4.0, described as the digital evolution of irregular warfare. This includes cyberattacks on national infrastructure, information operations, disinformation campaigns, and hacktivism. It also includes psychological warfare in and through cyberspace. Brazilian special operations frameworks identify these hybridized threats as increasingly critical due to the country's reliance on digital infrastructure, rising disinformation flows, and criminal convergence including ties to regional instability or global adversarial networks.

Teaching irregular warfare concepts

Irregular Warfare is taught as a doctrinally explicit and integrated subject within Brazil's Special Operations Forces (SOF) education pipeline. It is not treated merely as a concept within a continuum, but as a primary domain of strategic and asymmetric conflict. Instruction emphasizes the role of Forças Especiais in conducting indirect action campaigns, often in hostile or denied environments. Linking IW to cyberwarfare and information operations has been introduced into the special operations curriculum, ensuring that personnel are trained in recognizing and countering modern irregular threats in both physical and digital arenas.

While Brazil does not formally incorporate ancient or non-Western doctrines into its national IW curricula, the Centro de Instrução de Operações Especiais encourages international education. Officers have studied at foreign institutions (e.g. Europe), and material from Russian hybrid warfare doctrines and Western irregular strategy has been informally incorporated into instruction. Some of this external knowledge has been institutionalized through internal reports and academic publications.

Though financial and structural limitations constrain broader institutional adoption, there is significant autonomy at the instructional level. This allows officers to design updated training modules based on contemporary threats while merging of academic expertise and field relevance within Brazilian SOF education from their extensive experience from peacekeeping missions.

Chile: National Academy of Political and Strategic Studies

The Academia Nacional de Estudios Políticos y Estratégicos (ANEPE) is situated at Santiago, Chile. The Academia Nacional de Estudios Políticos y Estratégicos (ANEPE) is Chile's premier institution for higher education in defense and strategic studies. Established in 1947 as the Academia de Defense Nacional, it was renamed in 1975 toits current name. ANEPE operates under the Ministry of National Defence and serves as the academic, research, and extension arm of the ministry. Its mission is to enhance knowledge in defense and security among members of the Armed Forces, public security forces, state administration, and the private sector.

The academy offers a range of academic programs and is a full member of the Asociación de Colegios de Defensa Iberoamericanos. It actively contributes to scholarly research through its various initiatives and publications, such as the journal *Política y Estrategia*

Definition of irregular warfare

The Chilean defense community does not treat IW as a standalone or formally codified doctrinal category. Instead, it is addressed primarily through adjacent frameworks such as Hybrid Warfare, Asymmetric Warfare, and Operations Other Than War (OOTW). There is a broad recognition that traditional definitions of war presuppose the involvement of state actors, and for this reason, the Chilean approach conceptualizes IW-related challenges more as strategic security problems involving non-state actors and irregular dynamics.

As such, the term "Irregular Warfare" is used sparingly and often replaced by the broader and more politically neutral label of "irregular threats." Within the Chilean Army, asymmetric conflict models provide the analytical foundation for addressing these challenges emphasizing institutional adaptability, cross-agency coordination, and preparedness for gray-zone dynamics that blur the boundaries between peace and conflict.

This conceptualization significantly impacts how Chilean defense institutions frame and respond to irregular challenges. By treating IW not as a distinct doctrinal category but as a dimension of broader strategic security concerns, Chile's approach prioritizes institutional adaptability and multi-agency coordination over fixed military doctrine. It reflects a preference for whole-of-government responses to irregular threats, particularly those involving non-state actors or hybrid tactics.

As a result, Chilean responses to these threats often emphasize resilience, deterrence, and the integration of military capabilities with civil authority in contexts short of open warfare. The avoidance of the term IW itself also signals a deliberate effort to align internal security priorities with constitutional limits on military involvement in domestic affairs, while still preparing for the complex, often transnational character of emerging threats. This has led to a growing interest in cyber defense, critical infrastructure protection, and information operations, areas where asymmetric and hybrid threats increasingly converge.

Identified irregular threats

Chile's perspective on irregular threats is influenced by its national strategic assessments as well as regional agreements. A significant reference point for this understanding is the 2003 Conference on Multidimensional Security, organized by the Organization of American States (OAS) in Mexico. This conference established a regional consensus on the changing nature of non-traditional threats.

In this context, Chile recognizes several core irregular threats, including:

- Terrorism
- Transnational Organized Crime, which encompasses drug trafficking, illicit arms trade, and human trafficking
- The global drug issue
- Corruption
- Money laundering
- Cyberattacks that target critical national infrastructure
- The risk of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) being acquired or used by terrorist groups

These foundational concerns are further elaborated in Chile's 2020 National Defense Policy, which also highlights additional threats such as:

- Irregular migration
- Illegal exploitation of natural resources
- Hybrid threats
- Climate change and environmental degradation
- Geopolitical tensions and issues related to territorial integrity

Overall, these factors contribute to a complex and multi-layered understanding of the various challenges that Chile faces.

Teaching irregular warfare concepts

In Chile, IW is not taught as a dedicated doctrinal topic. Instead, its component threats are addressed individually, each approached based on its own characteristics and operational implications, rather than being bundled under a single conceptual label. While certain national-level documents and professional discussions reference hybrid warfare, most military education institutions opt to engage directly with the specific nature of each threat, such as terrorism, organized crime, cyber threats, or disinformation, rather than situating them within a unified IW doctrine.

At the operational and tactical levels, institutions such as ACAGUE (Academia de Guerra del Ejército), the Escuela Militar Bernardo O'Higgins, and their equivalents in the Navy and Air Force provide more practical instruction on asymmetric and irregular threats. These lower-level academies operate with greater curricular flexibility and are closely tied to the day-to-day realities of Chile's armed forces, enabling them to adapt multiple conceptual frameworks depending on the mission context. Instruction may draw from NATO doctrine, UN peacekeeping experience, or regional security practices.

Academic freedom plays a significant role in shaping how these topics are taught across institutions. As a result, there is no single, standardized methodology for addressing irregular threats, and the content often depends on the background and orientation of individual instructors. While this fosters intellectual diversity and relevance to current challenges, it also means that there is currently not a formal, unified Irregular Warfare training pipeline in Chilean military professional education.

This decentralized and threat-specific approach to IW directly shapes how Chilean defense institutions understand and respond to irregular challenges. By avoiding a unified IW doctrinal framework, Chile emphasizes flexibility and modularity treating each threat (such as terrorism, cyberattacks, or organized crime) as distinct in origin, behavior, and response requirements. This conceptual fragmentation allows instructors and practitioners to tailor analysis and operational planning based on the specific attributes of each challenge, rather

than attempting to fit all irregular phenomena into a single model.

As a result, Chilean responses tend to focus on context-driven threat mitigation, often involving multi-agency coordination and a strong reliance on strategic assessments that differentiate between domestic and transnational risks. This method reflects a deliberate effort to avoid over-militarizing internal security issues and to maintain a clear distinction between defense and law enforcement roles, in line with constitutional boundaries. It also contributes to a broader institutional preference for whole-of-government approaches to security, particularly in areas like cybersecurity, critical infrastructure protection, and influence operations, where military and civilian responsibilities intersect.

Ultimately, by viewing irregular threats through separate doctrinal and operational lenses, Chilean defense institutions preserve doctrinal pragmatism prioritizing relevance, adaptability, and legal clarity over conceptual uniformity.

Colombia: Higher War School "General Rafael Reyes Prieto"

The Escuela Superior de Guerra is Colombia's foremost military higher education institution, dedicated to the study of national security and defense. It was founded in 1909 by decree and initially operated out of a colonial-era building located in the historic San Agustín sector of Bogotá. In 2016, the institution was officially renamed the Escuela Superior de Guerra "General Rafael Reyes Prieto," in honor of its founder.

Today, ESDEG is recognized as a major hub for defense education and strategic thinking in Latin America. It offers a wide range of academic and professional development programs, open to both military officers and civilian professionals, fostering an interdisciplinary approach to contemporary security and defense challenges.

Definition of irregular warfare

In the Colombian context, IW is not framed through a unified doctrinal lens but instead emerges from operational necessity and institutional adaptation. While not yet codified as a formal category in national defense doctrine, IW is increasingly recognized as a distinct form of conflict; one that differs significantly in structure, logic, and objectives from conventional warfare.

Colombia's education and policy communities emphasize the need to understand IW as a unique strategic environment. The aim is not only to fight, but to conceptually identify IW as a persistent and evolving threat landscape that requires constant adaptation. Academic and defense institutions are gradually introducing IW frameworks to senior leadership, ensuring that military and security forces develop the cognitive tools necessary to adjust norms, capabilities, and strategies to meet the challenge. Importantly, this process resists externally imposed definitions, advocating instead for localized doctrinal ownership grounded in Colombia's own security realities and institutional mandates.

Identified irregular threats

Colombia classifies irregular threats through a legal-institutional lens that reflects the differentiated responsibilities of state actors. Rather than importing generic threat typologies, the country uses its own operational taxonomy:

- Grupos Armados Organizados (GAO): Armed groups with insurgent or political aims.
- Grupos Delincuenciales Organizados (GDO): Criminal organizations engaged primarily in illicit economies.
- Grupos Armados Organizados Residuales (GAOR): Remnants or restructured factions of demobilized insurgent movements.

These categories reflect Colombia's attempt to synchronize doctrinal practice with constitutional law and interagency coordination. Yet in practice, these groups often exhibit hybrid characteristics combining territorial control, ideological messaging, insurgent tactics, narcotrafficking, and political violence. From an operational and strategic standpoint, they fall squarely within the realm of Irregular Warfare.

Teaching irregular warfare concepts

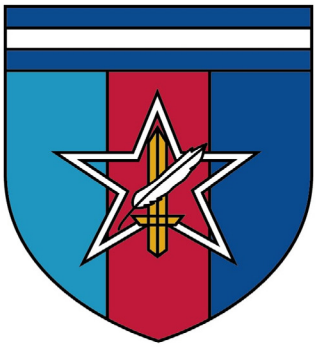
Although IW is not fully institutionalized in Colombian doctrine, its principles are gaining traction in

professional military education. The shift has been driven largely by Colombia's leadership role in regional security and its operational exposure to hybrid, networked, and transnational threats.

Academic and strategic institutions are increasingly focused on domains that reflect IW's complexity: special operations, destabilization campaigns, maritime narcotics trafficking, cyber defense, political warfare, and anticipatory models. These themes are reinforced through combined exercises, seminars, and subject matter exchanges often partnership with USSOUTHCOM, which cover everything from technological modernization to civil-military affairs and counterterrorism.

This evolving curriculum indicates a clear movement toward treating IW not as a discrete warfighting concept, but as a socio-technological threat environment that cuts across agencies, domains, and jurisdictions.

El Salvador: Military Training and Doctrine Command



The Comando de Doctrina y Educación Militar (CODEM) is the principal institution responsible for the development and coordination of military education and doctrine within the Armed Forces of El Salvador. Established February 8, 1993, CODEM was created to organize, plan, and execute policies related to military education and doctrinal development.

Its core functions include forming, perfecting, and specializing military personnel at all levels, coordinating academic activities across the Armed Forces to ensure a comprehensive and integrated military education system, and developing and updating military doctrine in alignment with national strategic needs.

CODEM oversees and manages several key educational and academic entities, including the Escuela Militar "Capitán General Gerardo Barrios," the Escuela de Comando y Estado Mayor "Dr. Manuel Enrique Araujo" (ECEM), the Colegio de Altos Estudios Estratégicos de El Salvador (CAEE), and the Centro de Historia Militar.

Definition of irregular warfare

The concept of irregular warfare in El Salvador is primarily approached through the lens of counterinsurgency, rooted in the country's 1980–1992 civil war. It is presented as fundamentally distinct from conventional war, characterized by its focus on non-state actors, asymmetric engagements, and population-centric operations. Instruction emphasizes the historical formation of specialized military units, such as the Immediate Reaction Battalions (BIRI: BELLOSO, ATLACATL, ARCE, ATONAL, and BRACAMONTE), as well as the integrated role of the Air Force and Navy in joint operations against guerrilla forces.

In recent years, this framework has evolved to include counterterrorism training, represented institutionally by the Comando Especial Anti Terrorismo (CEAT). Although broader doctrinal terms like IW are not widely adopted, the country's experience and curriculum reflect a deep institutional understanding of various conflict environments.

This counterinsurgency-rooted conceptualization significantly shapes how El Salvador identifies, prioritizes, and addresses irregular threats. Rather than framing IW as a separate doctrinal field, threats are analyzed through their proximity to internal instability and subversion, informed by the memory of protracted internal conflict. The emphasis on organized, population-focused military structures reflects a strategic culture that values rapid response, territorial control, and inter-service cooperation. As a result, emerging threats such as gangs, transnational criminal organizations, and terrorism are often addressed through frameworks originally built for insurgency suppression emphasizing presence, deterrence, and coordinated strike capacity.

Moreover, while El Salvador has achieved a remarkable reduction in violence through decisive state policy, the security architecture remains shaped by a doctrinal lineage that privileges operational continuity over conceptual reinvention. This reinforces a pragmatic, effects-based approach to irregular threats, grounded more in institutional memory and national context than external doctrinal adoption.

Identified irregular threats

El Salvador confronts a complex array of irregular threats that continue to shape both its internal security dynamics and regional posture. At the forefront of these challenges are the *pandillas (*gangs), which have historically operated as dominant irregular actors. These groups engage in a wide spectrum of criminal activities

ranging from extortion and assassination to narcotrafficking and control over specific territories. Far from being peripheral threats, they have deeply embedded themselves into the social fabric of vulnerable communities, effectively becoming shadow governance structures in many urban and rural areas.

El Salvador also serves as a strategic corridor for illicit drug flows between South and Central America and the United States. The drug economy in turn reinforces other forms of transnational crime, making it a multiplier of insecurity. Human trafficking, especially targeting women and children, also ranks among the country's most acute irregular threats. Closely related to this is the growing challenge of transnational organized crime, which encompasses activities such as arms smuggling, money laundering, and illicit financial flows.

Additionally, while less visible in recent years, the potential for violent extremism is not dismissed. These concerns are especially salient given the fluid nature of regional threats and the possibility of foreign influence in ungoverned spaces.

Like many of its neighbors, El Salvador's threat environment is shaped not by a single actor or category, but by the convergence of criminal, insurgent, and hybrid dynamics. This is a common thread that runs through irregular warfare challenges across the Western Hemisphere.

Teaching irregular warfare concepts

The approach to irregular warfare education in El Salvador is threat-specific and historically grounded rather than doctrinally unified under the IW label. Instructional content is segmented between traditional counterinsurgency case studies centered on the civil war and emerging counterterrorism doctrine. Training covers operational organization, urban and rural combat tactics, air and naval support coordination, and modern-day security force integration.

The CEAT unit embodies the country's contemporary counterterrorism strategy, serving both as an operational and instructional model. Meanwhile, the "Plan Control Territorial" functions as the core curriculum for modern counter-gang operations, emphasizing military-police collaboration, intelligence-led targeting, civil-military relations, and high-capacity detention and rehabilitation systems.

Educational programs span multiple levels and audiences from infantry schools and joint command institutions to international forums. Instruction is extended to civilian officials, CFAC members, and even the public through outreach efforts designed to promote crime prevention, institutional trust, and civic awareness.

Honduras: [National] Defence University

The Universidad de Defensa de Honduras (UDH), headquartered in El Ocotal, Tegucigalpa, was established October 11, 2005, as part of the Armed Forces' institutional modernization process. It oversees all higher military education in Honduras under a unified structure that spans undergraduate to doctoral levels.

UDH includes within its structure the Naval School of Honduras, the Military Aviation School, Military Engineering Programs, the Command and General Staff School "Dr. Manuel Enrique Araujo", and the National Defense College. Its physical infrastructure features modern laboratories and a state-of-the-art library, supporting both technical and academic instruction.

Since 2012, the university has opened select programs to civilian professionals, reflecting a sustained commitment to civil-military integration. UDH has signed academic cooperation agreements with international institutions and the private sector as well as its distance education system in 2023. Since 2023, UDH graduated more than 10,000 professionals and maintains a student body of over 2,000.

Definition of irregular warfare

In Honduras, Irregular Warfare (IW) is not framed as a discrete doctrinal category. Instead, it is conceptualized as a continuity of conventional warfare, embedded within broader global conflict dynamics. This perspective reflects an understanding of IW as a form of confrontation that evolves across different theaters and strategic environments. The approach is deeply integrative, drawing on anthropological, social, historical, political, economic, technological, military, and law enforcement dimensions acknowledging that national particularities shape how irregular threats manifest and are countered.

This conceptualization prioritizes a comprehensive security vision, where IW is not limited to battlefield confrontation but extends to the destabilizing effects of non-state actors and the strategic influence of global dynamics. As such, IW is understood less as a doctrinal label and more as an analytical framework that links diverse variables affecting national security.

Identified irregular threats

The Honduran Armed Forces identifies several key irregular threats, prioritized according to constitutional mandates and national security interests. These include narcotrafficking, transnational organized crime, maras and gangs, terrorism, and political/social instability.

In operational terms such as maras and pandillas (gangs) are viewed as the most immediate and disruptive irregular threat, given their control of urban spaces and penetration of state institutions. Narcotrafficking and organized crime are interwoven with regional dynamics and are perceived as drivers of violence and corruption. Political and social instability, often exacerbated by external influences, is also viewed as a latent threat to governance and institutional resilience. While terrorism is listed among the concerns, it is considered a secondary but persistent threat vector.

Notably, these threats are selected not only based on domestic assessments but also in alignment with regional and international threat perceptions. This reflects an effort to position Honduras as a cooperative actor in hemispheric security frameworks.

Teaching irregular warfare concepts

IW is not yet formally institutionalized as a distinct area of instruction within Honduran defense education. Instead, it is examined and interpreted through its relationship to national security themes. According to the respondent, the concept is studied, analyzed, and discussed as part of broader debates on strategic intelligence and defense.

Educational efforts appear to be more individual than programmatic, shaped by personal academic initiative rather than a standardized curriculum. Instructors with operational and academic experience in strategic intelligence introduce irregular threats and IW-related content into professional and civilian forums. This includes work done through the Universidad de Defensa de Honduras and the Colegio de Defensa Nacional, although the focus remains on "threats to national security" rather than IW as a labeled discipline.

This broader, integrative view of IW as a continuity of conventional warfare shapes how Honduras defines and responds to security threats. Rather than constructing a distinct doctrinal identity around IW, threats are addressed through a multidimensional framework that integrates sociopolitical analysis, strategic intelligence, and national development planning.

This approach leads to a preference for whole-of-government and long-term strategies. The respondent advocates for IW responses that are embedded within national development agendas, rather than being limited to security operations alone. The linkage to economic development models, such as a proposed reevaluation of the Washington Consensus, indicates a conceptual openness to integrating macroeconomic and political frameworks into IW thinking.

Ultimately, Honduras treats irregular threats not just as security problems, but as systemic vulnerabilities. This drives an emphasis on sustainability, interagency coordination, and the importance of localized understanding over externally imposed models.

Peru: Higher War School of the Peruvian Army

The Escuela Superior de Guerra del Ejército del Perú (ESGE-EPG), or Peruvian Army War College, is the premier postgraduate institution of the Peruvian Army.

Established March 29, 1904, during the presidency of Manuel Candamo Iriarte, its mission is to train and develop General Staff officers and commanders to address both traditional military challenges and contemporary threats. Over its century-long history, ESGE-EPG has educated more than 4,000 General Staff officers, including personnel from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and National Police. The institution continues to evolve, incorporating modern educational methods and technologies to maintain its status as a leading military academic center in Latin America.

Definition of irregular warfare

The Escuela Superior de Guerra del Ejército del Perú conceptualizes Irregular Warfare (Guerra Irregular, GI) as doctrinally interchangeable with a broad array of conflict types subsumed under the national framework of Guerra No Convencional (GNC, Non-Conventional Warfare). This doctrinal model includes guerrilla warfare (GG), counterinsurgency (GCI), counterterrorism (GCT), subversion (S), and countersubversion (GCS), all treated as variations of a singular irregular threat category, expressed through the equation: GNC = GI = GG = GCI = GCT = S = GCS.

A critical distinction within this model is the differentiation between insurgency and subversion. Insurgency is understood under international norms as a theoretical right in response to illegitimate governance or occupation, while subversion is defined as an illegal internal threat to the constitutional order. As such, Peruvian doctrine centers not on "counterinsurgency" but on "countersubversion" as the appropriate operational and legal framework.

This conceptualization of IW as a unified category rather than a series of distinct phenomena shapes the Peruvian military's threat assessment and response. It frames terrorism, insurgency, and subversion within a historical continuum that draws heavily on the country's internal conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s. The result is a cohesive doctrinal posture that emphasizes population-centric operations, civil-military coordination, and intelligence-driven responses. By anchoring IW in operational behavior rather than formal legal typologies, the Peruvian approach privileges tactical flexibility and continuity over rigid threat classification.

Identified irregular threats

The institution identifies a broad and evolving spectrum of irregular threats, including subversion, terrorism, and transnational organized crime (Crimen Organizado Transnacional, or COT). Within COT, specific threats include narcotrafficking, illegal mining, corruption, human trafficking, arms and ammunition trafficking, money laundering, and cybercrime.

Additional threats addressed within the framework of IW include illegal immigration, unlawful operations in the cyberspace domain, social protests accompanied by civil unrest, and the dissemination of radical leftist doctrines. The institution also considers activities conducted by foreign actors, particularly autocratic and dictatorial regimes operating in the region, as irregular threats, especially when these involve external influence operations that seek to destabilize the national order or manipulate political and ideological landscapes.

Teaching irregular warfare concepts

Irregular Warfare is taught through the lens of unconventional warfare and is integrated into the broader military education curriculum not as a separate doctrine, but as a continuum of conflict that includes guerrilla warfare, countersubversion, and counterterrorism. Instruction reflects both theoretical foundations and operational lessons learned. The school adopts an indirect and asymmetric approach, grounded in the teachings of multiple strategists, including Sun Tzu, Mao Zedong, Trinquier, and Galula.

The teaching methodology includes analysis of Peru's own historical experience in internal conflicts, particularly its fight against Sendero Luminoso and the MRTA, as well as reference to international campaigns. The curriculum addresses the role of great powers in Latin America and examines how hybrid and asymmetric strategies affect all domains of human activity. There is also a focus on extremist ideologies, particularly their expansion into Latin American countries through religious, political, and subversive means.

Since the 1990s, instruction has emphasized shifting the center of gravity toward gaining and maintaining popular support, integrating civic action, civil affairs, and targeted operations into the military's IW toolkit. This long-term perspective helps anchor IW not as a tactical anomaly, but as a recurring strategic challenge.

This integrated conceptualization of IW as part of a single operational continuum deeply shapes how the Peruvian military interprets and addresses threats. Rather than distinguishing between terrorism, insurgency, and subversion as separate categories requiring distinct approaches, these are seen as different manifestations of the same irregular phenomenon. This produces a cohesive threat posture that prioritizes intelligence-led action, civilian-military coordination, and population-focused strategies. Historical memory and operational continuity also play a major role; doctrine remains closely tied to the country's past experience, especially in rural and jungle environments, where irregular actors have previously held sway. As a result, doctrinal flexibility and operational pragmatism characterize how the Peruvian armed forces prepare for and respond to contemporary threats.

Uruguay: Center for Higher National Studies

Located in Montevideo, Uruguay, the Centro de Altos Estudios Nacionales (CALEN) serves as Uruguay's premier postgraduate institution for defense and strategic studies.

As a full member of the Association of Ibero-American Defense Colleges, this is a civilian institution under the auspices of the Ministry of National Defense. It provides advanced education and training to both military and civilian personnel in the fields of national defense, security, and strategy. The institution also engages in research through its Center for Strategic Studies and publishes the annual journal *Estrategia*.

Definition of irregular warfare

The Uruguayan Armed Forces does not employ the term IW (Guerra Irregular) frequently or within a rigid doctrinal framework. When the term is used, it is understood as a synonym for Non-Conventional Warfare (Guerra No Convencional, GNC) and situated within a broader continuum: [Non-Conventional Warfare – Hybrid Warfare – Conventional Warfare]. Within this model, GNC encompasses three key manifestations of violence—terrorism, insurgency, and organized crime—which are often understood as overlapping, converging threats. This convergence gives rise to complex hybrid forms such as "criminal insurgency," increasingly observed across Latin America.

Within this framework, the Uruguayan Armed Forces recognizes seven primary types of operations involving potential use of lethal force, including conventional operations, special operations, counterterrorism, and resistance operations. Resistance operations are defined as irregular and population-based, conducted behind enemy lines to increase the cost and prolong the duration of occupation. Overall, irregular warfare is viewed as an enduring, population-centric form of conflict whose essential characteristics have remained consistent over time. Its conceptual foundation continues to draw heavily on classical strategists and historical precedent, reinforcing its place as a permanent element within the spectrum of armed conflict.

Identified irregular threats

In the context of national security, Uruguay faces several commonly recognized threats, including terrorism, insurgency, and organized crime, both transnationally and domestically. These threats are outlined in the 2020 National Defense Policy, which serves as a framework for understanding the country's security landscape.

Currently, the most pressing threat confronting Uruguay is the rise of organized crime, particularly as it relates to drug trafficking organizations. These criminal enterprises have become increasingly sophisticated, leveraging both local and international networks to facilitate the distribution of illicit substances. This surge in organized crime poses significant risks not only to public safety but also to the integrity of state institutions.

The prioritization of these threats is informed by strategic assessments that align with national defense objectives. Such assessments consider the convergence of various threats, illustrating how organized crime can intersect with other security challenges, including potential terrorism and social instability. By recognizing these interrelationships, Uruguay aims to devise more effective strategies to address its multifaceted security concerns.

Teaching irregular warfare concepts

Theoretical instruction draws heavily on classical thinkers like Sun Tzu, Mao Zedong, Giap, Guevara, and Lenin, as well as on case studies from Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. The institution places strong emphasis on the continuity of irregular conflict principles and promotes a return to classical sources, acknowledging that while technological tools evolve, the fundamental logic of population-centric irregular warfare does not.

This continuity is reflected in key principles such as winning and maintaining the support of the population as the central objective; blending political, psychological, and military strategies to undermine an adversary's legitimacy; leveraging asymmetry and local conditions to offset conventional disadvantages; and sustaining long-duration, low-intensity campaigns through adaptability and persistence. The institution also underscores the importance of narrative control, ideological framing, and indirect influence—traits that remain vital in both historical insurgencies and contemporary hybrid threats.

Additional authors consulted include both theorists and practitioners such as Galula, Trinquier, Petraeus, McCuen, Thompson, and Lind, along with contemporary analysts like Kaldor, Bunker, Realuyo, and Tokatlian, whose works explore the evolving manifestations of irregular warfare while reinforcing its enduring foundations.

Conclusions

This study confirms that IW in South and Central America cannot be reduced to a single doctrine or institutional formula. IW is not a monolithic concept nor is it universally defined across the region. Instead, it is conceptualized through layered and often decentralized frameworks transmitted informally through practice, shaped by lived experience, and interpreted through national legal and strategic lenses. Doctrinal articulation varies significantly, and even where IW is formally acknowledged, it is often folded into broader categories such as non-conventional warfare, hybrid conflict, or asymmetric operations.

How these countries conceptualize IW deeply influences how they perceive and respond to their most pressing threats. States that equate IW with countersubversion, for instance, tend to blur distinctions between terrorism, insurgency, and ideological threats, approaching all three with unified strategic frameworks. Others, like Chile or Uruguay, avoid the term altogether but still train and operate in environments shaped by irregular dynamics. In places like Colombia doctrine is still catching up with operational realities but educational and strategic communities are actively working to build conceptual clarity rooted in national context. In all cases, the way IW is framed impacts not just terminology, but operational tempo, legal posture, threat prioritization, and institutional ownership.

There is broad recognition that IW is multi-domain across the social, political, informational, and military dimensions. While conventional hierarchies and institutional inertia still limit adaptation in some contexts, many officers, educators, and analysts are actively modernizing their approach. They do so not as passive recipients of foreign frameworks, but as actors engaged in updating their own models based on regional needs, emerging technologies, and shifting threat landscapes. This intergenerational dynamic—senior leaders shaped by Cold War experience collaborating with younger professionals steeped in cyber, civil-military affairs, and AI-driven security trends—has created fertile ground for meaningful evolution.

Commonalities across the region are striking. Almost every country surveyed, regardless of its specific doctrine, views IW through the prism of internal destabilization, transnational crime, territorial control, and institutional subversion. Most recognize that the line between criminality and insurgency is no longer clear and that irregular threats thrive in the seams between law enforcement and defense. Many also express skepticism toward rigid foreign terminology, especially when divorced from domestic realities or used prescriptively.

This study's findings map not only national doctrines and pedagogical approaches but the broader ecosystems of individuals and institutions shaping IW across the hemisphere. They highlight a pattern of pragmatic adaptation: military colleges experimenting with new curricula, instructors relying on historical memory and operational insight, and civilian analysts building conceptual bridges where doctrine remains incomplete.

Ultimately, IW is not a fixed set of tactics to be downloaded. It is a lived and constantly evolving response to complex, diffuse threats. Future cooperation in this space—whether academic, operational, or strategic—must center on co-creation and mutual respect. Respecting the conceptual sovereignty of partner nations is not only a matter of political sensitivity; it is a prerequisite for genuine alignment and enduring interoperability.

This report offers a starting point. The voices captured here are not final answers, but invitations to deepen engagement, align priorities, and build a more inclusive, grounded, and resilient hemispheric security architecture capable of confronting the irregular challenges of the 21st century.