



INSIGHTS

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Perspectives Apart: *Unveiling the Indo-Pacific Understanding of Irregular Warfare*

The turn toward strategic competition, due to the increase in conflict outside the bounds of conventional war, has also pivoted security researchers and practitioners toward the idea of irregular warfare (IW). Though IW has been practiced and written on for centuries, the term is not conceptualized in similar fashion across the world—or even across the organizations constituting the U.S. government. Though a globally uniform idea of IW is not likely, and perhaps not even desirable, due to regional and historical differences in conflict experience, it is still critical for the Department of Defense (DoD) to understand how allies and partners conceptualize IW in order to engage them effectively. The Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) has worked to fill this gap with a series of regionally focused studies and follow-on workshops on the conceptualization of IW. The first study in the series focused on the European conceptualization of IW through engaging with PME institutions in the region. The second study followed the same methodology but turned to the Indo-Pacific region. The results of the second study show that, like Europe, countries in the Indo-Pacific conceptualize IW differently, requiring a nuanced understanding of these regional conceptualizations to engage partners and allies in the region effectively.

GABRIELLE KENNEDY
*IWC Analyst (Contractor,
Valens Global)*

SANDOR FABIAN
*IWC Chair of Engagement
(Contractor, Morgan 6)*



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.

AN UPDATED VIEW OF THE PENTAGON'S TAKE ON IRREGULAR WARFARE

The criticality of competency in IW to the U.S. Department of Defense was laid out most recently in *Joint Publication 1 Volume 1 Joint Warfighting* (JP 1 Vol 1), published on 27 August 2023. JP 1 Vol 1 describes IW as:

A form of warfare where states and non-state actors campaign to assure or coerce states or other groups through indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities, either as the primary approach or in concert with conventional warfare. The term “irregular” highlights the character of this form of warfare, which seeks to create dilemmas and increase risk and costs to adversaries to achieve a position of advantage. IW may employ the threat or use of organized armed violence for purposes other than physical domination over an adversary. States and non-state actors may conduct IW when they cannot achieve their strategic objectives by nonmilitary activities or conventional warfare.

Though the U.S. defense community took a step toward providing a consensus definition of IW for its own joint forces, it is difficult to provide an all-encompassing definition that incorporates all aspects of IW and completely addresses challenges for allies and partners.

Other official characterizations of IW by the Department of Defense include:

- US DOD Directive 3000.07- “A violent struggle among state and nonstate actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s)”
- The 2020 Irregular Warfare Annex to the 2018 National Defense Strategy- “A struggle among state and nonstate actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy. IW favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary’s power, influence, and will.”
- US Army Field Manual 3-0- “The overt, clandestine, and covert employment of military and nonmilitary capabilities across multiple domains by state and nonstate actors through methods other than military domination of an adversary, either as the primary approach or in concert with conventional warfare.”

Though progress has clearly been made in terms of the U.S. DoD conceptualization of IW, the United States can capitalize on opportunities to build competency in the IW domain by understanding IW perspectives of allies and partners. To do this, the DoD must not only rely on its own conceptualization of IW, but it also must accept how its partners and allies conceptualize the activity given their respective regional histories, geographies, and geopolitical situations. The IWC, as the central mechanism for developing the DoD’s IW knowledge and advancing the Department’s understanding of IW concepts and doctrine, is working to bridge these gaps and achieve this level of understanding.

IWC CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF IW

Working to address this gap on regional conceptualizations of IW, IWC wrote the second installment of its the series on the Indo-Pacific conceptualization of IW. Like the first iteration in the series on Europe, the IWC study on the Indo-Pacific conceptualization of IW focused on key private military education (PME) institutions in the region. In this, IWC utilized a multi-step research approach that first asked representatives of these target PME institutions to provide answers to a questionnaire on 1) institutional thinking surrounding the conceptualization of IW; 2) the perception of IW-related threats; and 3) the target institution’s teaching and publishing on IW. After this first round of questionnaires, representatives participated in an informal interview where questions similar to those on the questionnaire were posed, allowing researchers from IWC to seek clarification on points made in answers to the questionnaire and allowing participants of the study to further expand on their answers.

At the culmination of the study, participants presented on their institutional or national conceptualization

of IW at an IWC-hosted workshop that culminated in a roundtable, allowing attendees a chance to ask participants of the study to elaborate on topics that came up in the briefings delivered at the workshop or in the study itself. Participating institutions included the Indian Manohar Parikkar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), the Sri Lankan General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU), the Singaporean S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University (RSIS), the Operations Research Center of the Philippine Army (ORCPA), the Malaysian National Defence University (UPNM), the Australian University of New South Wales (UNSW), and the Australian Defence College.

SHARED WORDS BUT NOT MEANINGS

Unlike the study on the European conceptualization of IW, the research in service to the Indo-Pacific conceptualization finds that all institutions surveyed utilize the term IW while some European institutions used the NATO-preferred term “hybrid threats.” Though this might seem to portray an image of a greater degree of consistency among the Indo-Pacific institutions than was seen in the European institutions, this is not the case. Most of the Indo-Pacific institutions were at different points in their thought process regarding IW, with some institutions not having a specific definition of IW. Additionally, the institutional acceptance of ongoing evolution in the definition of IW varied widely. An example of this dichotomy is the dynamic nature of IW and the need for a definition to reflect this, as noted by UPNM, while RSIS utilized a more static and concrete definition of IW.

The definitions offered by the Indo-Pacific institutions surveyed were much farther from the U.S. conceptualization of IW than those offered by the European institutions featured in the first iteration of this research series. However, the University of New South Wales utilizes a definition most closely resembling a U.S. conceptualization of IW. The primary driver of this difference from more Western conceptualization of IW was a common thread through the answers of all Indo-Pacific institutions surveyed: their association between terrorism and insurgency with IW due to the region’s significant history of experience with these challenges. This focus also bled into other ideas that make up the institutions’ conceptualization of IW, making domestic security a primary IW-related concern and violence a necessary condition for IW. Additionally, this line of thinking impacts the institutions’ tendency to recognize IW as being exclusively employed by non-state actors. However, most institutions agreed that states can employ the practice through proxies, which has been especially true in recent conflicts.

DIFFERENCES IN THREAT PERCEPTIONS

The legacy of the region’s experiences with terrorism and insurgency was also visible in how the institutions surveyed ranked IW-related threats. Most of the threats discussed in both the questionnaire responses and interviews were focused heavily on domestic threats or threats that a U.S. audience would associate with criminal activity best addressed through a law enforcement paradigm. Examples included the manipulation of migration flows, a threat considered highly significant to India; the problems posed by drug and arms trafficking, which were echoed across the board; and the danger of terrorist attacks, which was also mentioned by all participants. Terrorism was not only mentioned by all participants in the study, but it was also a salient topic in the accompanying workshop, displaying the impact of the Indo-Pacific’s experiences with counterterrorism and counterinsurgency on regional conceptualizations and rankings of IW-related threats.

Though all participants noted that state actors cannot employ IW on their own, China was by far the most mentioned state actor related to sponsorship of such activities. This is likely due to the proximity of this adversary to participant nations, reinforcing that geography plays a role in IW conceptualization—a key takeaway from the study on Europe that geography plays a role in IW conceptualization. Though China was frequently mentioned as an IW actor by proxy, participants of the INDOPACOM IW Conceptualization workshop discussed the complex relationships these nations have with Beijing. One

particular interaction that exemplified this complexity occurred when a participant asked a presenter how the target country's population perceives Chinese activities deemed nefarious and within the spectrum of irregular warfare as defined by the United States. The presenter responded by citing examples of Chinese loans that the country will almost assuredly default on, which are often characterized by Western audiences as "debt trap diplomacy." In the presenter's view, this is a case of incompetence on the part of the target country's government and not the fault of the Chinese lender, which shocked many audience members. This answer exemplifies the commonly repeated theme that many Indo-Pacific states resent the need to choose between the United States and China as partners, which was also a principle repeated throughout both the study and the accompanying workshop. This frustration is one key subplot in understanding the differences between how the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners view and assess IW-related threats.

THE ABSENCE OF STANDARD IW EDUCATION

Like the results attained on the study questions related to the institutions' conceptualizations of IW and perceptions of IW-related threats, the study's questions that tease out how target institutions teach IW-related concepts revealed that there is not a unified approach throughout the Indo-Pacific. Institutions surveyed are at varying levels of dedication to teaching IW-related content, with many of them not having any curricula specifically dedicated to the issue. UNSW is the sole exception, offering a formal master's degree in IW. In the rest of the cases, IW is taught at varying levels of education as part of other courses, with an example being UPNM embedding IW-related topics into its broader strategic studies curriculum.

Unlike the European institutions surveyed in the first iteration of this series, which tended to focus on IW-related education at the theoretical level, it was far more common for the Indo-Pacific institutions surveyed to focus their IW education on both theory and practice at all education levels including the tactical level. As an additional point of distinction with European institutions, the Indo-Pacific institutions did not mention a linkage between the study of IW-related concepts and special operations forces (SOF). This is likely because the Indo-Pacific institutions surveyed tended to address their IW-related education and published work more broadly towards internal stakeholders, their associated government officials and defense sectors writ large, and foreign partners, rather than SOF audiences in particular.

BUILDING EFFICIENT COOPERATION THROUGH GREATER UNDERSTANDING

The differences in the findings between the first IWC study in this series on Europe and those in the second study on the Indo-Pacific region display a high degree of variation on the conceptualization of IW, the perception of IW related threats, and how the IW is taught in professional military education among different regions. However, the outcomes of this "Conceptualization of Irregular Warfare in the Indo-Pacific Region" study and the takeaways from the accompanying workshop reveal that this theme is not only true in a cross-regional sense, but it is also necessary to understand how individual constituent countries conceptualize IW, assess IW-related threats, and teach IW-related concepts. Without even a regional understanding, effective international cooperation on IW—which is critical for interoperability and competency in the space—is difficult, if not impossible. The IWC's research series on regional conceptualizations of IW is a key initial step to facilitating this type of cooperation and is necessary to and ensure that U.S. regional leadership on the issue is well-informed, thoughtful, and efficient.

