



The Conceptualization of Irregular Warfare in the Indo-Pacific Region



Dr. Sandor Fabian
Gabrielle Kennedy

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Authors:

Dr. Sandor Fabian
Gabrielle Kennedy

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About the Authors

Dr. Fabian is a former Hungarian Special Forces officer with 20 years of military experience. Dr. Fabian served in multiple national assignments including the senior Special Forces desk officer and advisor to the Hungarian Chief of Defense and held the Force Assessment and Evaluation Branch Head position at the NATO Special Operations Headquarters.



Dr. Fabian is currently an instructor, curriculum developer supporting the NATO Special Operations education, training, exercises, and evaluation efforts. Dr. Fabian is also an adjunct faculty member at University of Central Florida and Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University where he teaches intelligence and cyber security related classes.

Dr. Fabian a graduate of the Hungarian Miklos Zrinyi National Defense University, holds a Master's degree in Defense Analysis from the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, a graduate certificate in U.S. Intelligence Studies and a Ph.D. in Security Studies both from the University of Central Florida. Dr. Fabian additional training and education includes the U.S. Marine Corps Basic Officer course, Infantry Officer course, Expeditionary Warfare School and several courses at the U.S. Joint Special Operations University and the NATO Special Operations School.

Dr. Fabian is the author of the book titled "Irregular Warfare: The Future Military Strategy For Small States" and published several articles in peer-reviewed journals including the Strategic Security Journal, the Defense and Security Analysis Journal, the Special Operations Journal, the Combating Terrorism Exchange Journal, the British Defence Studies journal and the Hungarian Sereg Szemle and Honvedsegi Szemle journals. Dr. Fabian has also contributed several articles at the Modern War Institute, Small Wars Journal, and the British Royal United Service Institute. Dr. Fabian's research interest includes irregular warfare, Russian and Chinese approaches to conflict, U.S. foreign security assistance and special operations.

Gabrielle Kennedy is an analyst at the Irregular Warfare Center. In this role, she has conducted research related to operations in the information environment, regional conceptualizations of irregular warfare, resilience to occupation, and malign influence. Prior to joining the Irregular Warfare Center, Gabby was employed in the U.S. intelligence community and later worked as a senior analyst at Exiger Government Solutions, where she provided analysis on the nexus between federal supply chains and counterintelligence. Gabby holds a B.A. in international relations, Russian, and Middle East studies from Baylor University. As part of her honors thesis, she conducted research on the short-term evolution of Russian disinformation ways, means, and motivations.





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Preface

This report is the second in a series of volumes in which the Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) explores the commonalities and differences of the conceptualization of irregular warfare across U.S. allied and partner stakeholders in regions important for U.S. national security. This volume focuses on the Indo-Pacific region.

The Indo-Pacific region stretches from the U.S. Pacific coastline to the Indian Ocean. Home to more than half of the world's population, nearly two-thirds of the world's economy, and seven of the world's largest militaries, the Indo-Pacific has long been recognized as vital to the security and prosperity of the United States. The region faces several challenges that have major implications for U.S. security and partnerships in the region. The Indo-Pacific governments are confronted with natural disasters, resource scarcity, internal conflicts, and governance challenges. Additionally, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might to pursue a sphere of influence in the region while the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) continues to expand its illicit nuclear weapons and missile programs.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States (February 2022) clearly states that “the United States is committed to an Indo-Pacific that is free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient. To realize that future, the United States will strengthen our own role while reinforcing the region itself. The essential feature of this approach is that it cannot be accomplished alone: changing strategic circumstances and historic challenges require unprecedented cooperation with those who share in this vision.”¹

To contribute to the success of this vision, the IWC has compiled its second volume in a series of reports in which IWC strives to understand the commonalities and differences of the conceptualization of irregular warfare (IW) across U.S. allies and partners. Understanding and bridging the gaps between the conceptualization of IW on the part of the United States and its allies and partners is a key first step to future cooperation and greater resiliency in the face of inevitable irregular threats.

This report compares such conceptualization across six academic institutions from countries of the Indo-Pacific region, including the Indian Manohar Parikkar Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, the Sri Lankan General Sir John Kotelawala Defense University, the Operations Research Center of the Philippine Army, the Singaporean S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University, The Malaysian National Defense University, and the Australian University of New South Wales. Representatives from these institutions provided responses to an IWC-generated formal survey and attended a semi-structured interview. Questions in both the survey and interview centered on how these institutions conceptualize IW, which IW threats they identify, what their research agendas are, and how they teach concepts related to IW.

Like the first volume of this series of geographically-focused reports, this second volume should be of interest to defense and foreign policy decision makers, defense practitioners, and scholars in the United States and allied and partner nations across the globe, the media, defense industry representatives and non-governmental organizations, and others concerned about the challenges associated with IW.





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Executive Summary

To maintain critical competencies and to develop new capabilities in IW, continued and wide-ranging study of the concept must remain a high priority. With a focus on the Indo-Pacific region this report is the second in a series of volumes exploring the commonality and difference in ideas related to IW across U.S. allies and partners. Identifying base-line knowledge of IW-related thought in allied and partner academic and professional military educational institutions and exploring areas of potential cooperation on issues relevant to IW are critical to U.S. national security interests and the success of the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy.

The report finds that there is no overarching or consistent definition of IW used among relevant institutions in the Indo-Pacific region. This trend trails through other findings uncovered by this investigation, such as the lack of codified threats and the lack of institutionalized education on IW. On a more granular level, the report finds that geography impacts conceptualization of IW, with proximity to a potential adversary and the geographic nature of the state correlating with the approach to defining IW. Though the responses of the participants should not be construed as definitive answers for the entire region or even their associated states, the geographical, institutional, and general definitional trends found through this study allow this research an application wider than the institutions studied.

This report finds that there is no codified or unified approach in the Indo-Pacific region to conceptualizing IW, addressing IW-related threats, or teaching IW-related content. Most of the institutions studied tied IW to domestic issues and those that are not strictly related to defense and must, therefore, be addressed by other parts of the state. The answers of institutions surveyed also displayed a strong relationship between IW tactics and violence. This, combined with the fact that non-state actors are seen as IW actors across the region, displays the impact of the Indo-Pacific states' experience with insurgency and terrorism on the current-day conceptualization of new threats and tactics used by adversaries.





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Introduction

The United States has long recognized the Indo-Pacific as vital to its security and prosperity and has committed itself to stronger ties and more support to allies and partners to ensure a free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient region. The IWC recognizes its vital role in such efforts. As the primary driver of developing the Department of Defense's (DoD) understanding of IW, the IWC intends to better integrate concepts related to IW into national defense strategy by fostering collaboration and developing a unified effort across the DoD, the U.S. interagency, and allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region. A pivotal cornerstone of such integration efforts is advancing the DoD's understanding of IW and relevant foreign concepts in close collaboration with other U.S. government stakeholders, key international allies, and partners.

This project is especially important and timely given the recent publication of the new U.S. definition of IW. Published on 27 August 2023, *Joint Publication 1 Volume 1 Joint Warfighting* defines 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.”²

To ensure effective cooperation and collaboration with partners and allies in the Indo-Pacific region, it is critical to understand the similarities and differences between the new U.S. definition and the concepts of U.S. allies and partners. This study parses out the details of how key institutions from the Indo-Pacific region conceptualize IW, understand irregular threats, and teach related concepts. Insights gleaned from these responses illuminate the similarities and differences in IW conceptualization of key institutions from the Indo-Pacific region on IW, yielding a more robust and informed path toward cooperation for the United States and its partners and allies. This is a vital component to establishing future avenues for deeper cooperation on relevant topics and the joint development of optionality in addressing irregular threats from near peer adversaries.





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Methodology

As the second volume of this report series, this study is based on the same survey and subsequent semi-structured interviews as the first volume that was published on European institutions. The respondents associated with the second volume are representatives of institutions from the Indo-Pacific Region. The overall project was conducted between 1 August 2023 and 20 January 2024. The survey was conducted between 1 August 2023 and 15 December 2023. The in-depth semi-structured interviews were held from 1 November 2023 to 5 January 2024. The survey questions addressed the target institution's conceptualization of IW; which irregular threats the institution considers and prioritizes; how the institution teaches concepts related to IW; whether the institution publishes on the topic; the level of the institution's connection to a broader community focused on IW; and who makes up the institution's faculty, courses, and target audience. The responses to survey questions directly shaped the interview portion of the research, providing potential avenues of further exploration. The report itself is broken into two sections: 1) a report of the study, assessing each institution and its responses; and 2) an analysis section, discussing the similarities and differences in thought regarding IW found through participant responses. When reporting each institution's survey and interview responses, this study strives to utilize language that is as close as possible to how the institution itself responded to preserve fidelity to the original answers provided. Several themes arose from the survey and the interviews, serving as guidance for future areas of cooperation or potential areas of contention between the United States and its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region.

The six subject institutions were specifically selected to ensure sufficient variation in the sample while maximizing response quality. The investigation was conducted at the Indian Manohar Parikkar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, the Sri Lankan General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, the Singaporean S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University, the Operations Research Center of the Philippine Army, the Malaysian National Defence University, and the Australian University of New South Wales. The strategy behind the case selection was to harvest data from institutions with different levels, purposes, and training audiences while also ensuring geographical dispersion within the Indo-Pacific region.





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India: Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

The Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) was established in New Delhi on 11 November 1965. MP-IDSA is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defense, security, and international relations. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defense and security-related issues. MP-IDSA has a well-qualified and multi-disciplinary research faculty drawn from academia, the defense forces, and the civil services, representing a diversity of views. Research at the Institute is driven by a comprehensive agenda and by the need to provide impartial analyses and policy recommendations. MP-IDSA's journals, monographs, briefs, and books are the principal mediums through which these analyses and policy recommendations are disseminated. In addition, the news media also carry the views of the institute's experts in the form of op-eds, interviews, and participation in debates. MP-IDSA conducts several national and international conferences every year and regularly holds round tables and workshops on important developments, serving as a forum to debate important aspects of national and international security since its inception. MP-IDSA provides annual training programs to civilian and military officers of the Government of India. Lectures by experts from both inside and outside the institute and from outside form the core of these programs.

Definition of irregular warfare

While the existence of the concept is recognized, there is no specific definition for IW. It is recognized as a concept distinct from traditional warfare and unconventional warfare. IW is seen as an asymmetric conflict between state and non-state actors (such as insurgents, guerrillas, terrorists, or violent extremists) aiming at challenging the legitimate political structure and/or overthrowing government. The state use of IW requires the use of proxies to achieve political goals. State-sponsored proxies typically employ indirect approaches to conflict, but IW operations may also deploy the full range of military and other capabilities of the sponsor state. Non-state actors also employ IW, with ambiguous postures and multi-domain covert or indirect actions being the most common behaviors observed. Irregular forces are typically organized with structures that can both plan and execute operations. The types of weapons employed in IW operations are usually restricted to small arms, rocket launchers, hand-held missiles, mortars, and similar man-portable weapon systems.

IW present in all domains. It can extend from military, political, economic, social, and psychological measures with the objective of either gaining local support or suppressing the population by deploying larger capacities than the state in establishing a new order. The aim is to disrupt and challenge the status quo by use of various coercive actions. The adherents of IW intentionally try keeping it below a certain threshold of conflict to prevent an all-out conventional military response. The objective of IW campaigns is to establish superiority or legitimacy and influence over geographic areas or over specific target populations, thereby challenging existing political systems. Irregular forces seek to upset a prevailing peace or create a “no war, no peace” scenario. Irregular forces often seek to change the status quo through means from coercion to non-kinetic subversive actions such as cyberattacks, economic coercion, disinformation campaigns, and more recently, the weaponization of migrants.





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Once irregular forces occupy and become administrators of a territory, they do so not based on any civilized agreements like constitutions, democratic methods, or laws, but through brutality and a ruthless bureaucracy. They rely on revenue from illegal trade, similar to the way that ISIS generated income from illegal sale of oil, ransoms, extortions, and selling and trading antiquities. Once the trappings of a more legitimate government manifest, irregular groups often have a difficult time maintaining control. This is seen through the downfall of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Tamil insurgents and separatists headed by Velupillai Prabhakaran in Sri Lanka, when they began solidifying a regular state and created conventional forces like an air force and navy. The Sri Lankan and Indian armies couldn't control the group as long as they employed guerilla tactics, but, like ISIS, when they attempted to hold large swathes of territory and started solidifying an administration, their elimination and decimation was made easier.

Identified irregular threats

The primary IW threats considered by the MP-IDSA are those facing the Indian government most directly. The survey respondent ranked these threats by priority in the following order, from highest to lowest: the use of non-state actors and proxy wars in border states, left-wing extremism, cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, election meddling, and the weaponization of migration. According to the MP-IDSA, India has been engaged in an irregular conflict with proxies supported by Pakistan and some Western powers in border states such as Jammu, Kashmir, and Punjab. Numerous foreign powers also provide support to left wing extremists, funding these movements through illegal money transfers by the Hawala network; organized crime network whose activities include extortion, drug and human trafficking, kidnapping, ransoms, and bank robberies; and through a supply of counterfeit Indian currencies. Cyber-attacks have become a regular occurrence in India, with attacker deniability and anonymity making it difficult for Indian authorities to identify and target perpetrators. Disinformation campaigns are another concern for both MP-IDSA and the Indian government, with the mobilization of violence and hate crimes becoming increasingly important as the Indian population remains very vulnerable to disinformation. A final consideration listed by the respondent includes election meddling, particularly as it relates to manipulating migration to cause shifts in poll numbers by increasing the population size of one particular group, which presents a recent and difficult challenge for Indian authorities.

Teaching irregular warfare concepts

The concept of IW does not have its own curriculum at any educational level. However, its tactical-level characteristics are included in academic syllabi and curricula in Indian military training schools like the infantry school, as well as officer courses from the junior level all the way up to the higher commander level at the National War College. While tactical-level IW education reaches all officers from the mid-level to senior commanders, operational and strategic level IW considerations are not part of their current curriculum. Other IW aspects such as economic coercions, cyber-attacks, election meddling and migrant issues are only introduced in general officer level education at the National Defence College. Additionally, the complex critical and creative thinking skills that are paramount in making timely decisions and creating effective strategies to address IW challenges are not taught at the necessary depth. The respondent emphasized that IW is not just a





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military problem. Effective IW responses require a whole-of-government and even a whole-of-society approach, which demands that the armed forces, civil servants, police, revenue, emergency services, etc. are all trained and educated together about how to collaborate and operate in the IW environment. Such a training and education philosophy is currently missing in India.



Sri Lanka: General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University

The General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU) of Sri Lanka was initially established as the General Sir John Kotelawala Defence Academy in 1981. The Academy was elevated to university status in 1988, and it was renamed the General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University on 11 October 2007. A member of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (United Kingdom) and the International Association of Universities (IAU), degrees awarded by KDU are accredited by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in Sri Lanka. The mission of the University is to ensure a high-quality, learner-centered education through undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs. The university also conducts high-quality research across many disciplines in the field of defense, in both residential and non-residential settings. The university strives to be nationally and internationally recognized for its unique ability to engage both undergraduate and graduate students in distinctive and interdisciplinary defense-related higher education that best serves both the state sector and society at large. In 2023, KDU was ranked No. 1 in Sri Lanka for Quality Education.

Definition of irregular warfare

Similar to the Indian case, while the existence of the concept is recognized in Sri Lanka there is no specific definition for IW. There are initiatives in Sri Lanka within the Ministry of Defense to revise existing concepts and analyze the transformation of warfare. Current understanding of IW as a general concept is driven by Sri Lanka's status as an "island nation" and the country's long struggle with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) insurgency. IW is considered a method of conflict used by insurgents aiming to overthrow legitimate governments or gain control over territory and population. While insurgents can be—and most of the time are—supported by outside (state) actors, IW is primarily a domestic struggle between the state and non-state actors. Ambiguous postures and multi-domain covert or indirect actions are the most common behaviors attributed to non-state actors. Violence is a necessary condition for IW in this understanding. While Sri Lanka has strong ties with the United States, U.S. definitions do not necessarily influence Sri Lankan concepts. Sri Lanka develops its own definitions that are specifically tailored to local realities.

Identified irregular threats

While Sri Lanka recognizes that it faces numerous IW-related threats, no prioritized list of such threats exists. However, the respondent identified the following IW related threats: violent extremism, terrorism, organized crime, information operations, cyber-attacks, and drugs and arms trafficking. The Sri Lankan government still





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considers the reorganization of the LTTE to be its top IW threat. The LTTE's legacy leaves some government security officials concerned that it could inspire terrorism both in Sri Lanka and throughout the Sri Lankan diaspora internationally. Although there have not been major terrorist incidents in Sri Lanka since the ISIS-inspired 2019 Easter Sunday suicide attacks, the fear of similar incidents remains a major concern for Sri Lankan authorities. Organized crime, cyber-attacks, and drugs and arms trafficking challenges all seem to be related to efforts to reorganize the LTTE movement. Sri Lankan authorities recently identified several entities, such as the Tamil Eelam Cyber Force, as hacking threats to government and private websites in Sri Lanka, while promoting the LTTE cause online. Former LTTE intelligence operatives were recently arrested for alleged involvement in drugs and arms trafficking from Pakistan to Sri Lanka. As made clear by the predominance of the LTTE in descriptions of several threats mentioned by the respondent, the conceptualization of IW-related threats rests heavily on Sri Lanka's past experiences with the insurgent movement.

Teaching irregular warfare concepts

The concept of IW does not have its own curriculum in any educational level at the subject institution. However, it is taught in different modules at KDU, such as strategic studies, terrorism, and modern warfare. While modules like terrorism and modern warfare are designed for military students only, the strategic studies program has a mix of military and civilian, cross-governmental and cross-sectoral students. Literature used in these programs are a mix of regional expert publications and Western works, meaning that concepts from the latter do indeed penetrate the Sri Lankan education system, but do not necessarily influence official government and military concepts. Faculty members publish on topics that are related to IW (e.g., violent extremism, terrorism, cybercrime, information operations), but there are no IW-focused research agendas or publications at the subject institution. Its publications primarily target government officials and the defense sector.



Philippines: The Operations Research Center, Philippine Army

Established in 2017, the Operations Research Center, Philippine Army (ORCPA) is responsible to the Commanding General of the Philippine Army on all matters pertaining to strategic research, special studies, policy studies, and lessons learned. The ORCPA conducts research and synchronizes, coordinates, and integrates the research efforts of different branches and units of the Philippine Army, serving as a catalyst for developing capabilities to enhance organizational adaptability, soldier survivability, and combat effectiveness to defeat both current and emerging threats. The ORCPA has published on subjects such as counterinsurgency operations, counterterrorism initiatives, best practices and narratives for task force operations, and the heroism of soldiers in the Battle of Marawi in 2017. These products are distributed to internal and external stakeholders, including foreign military schools and foreign libraries. Beyond its academic role, the center has also been considered part of the military's soft power, connecting the military with civil society through the publication of military achievements and heroic stories.





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Definition of irregular warfare

Though there is ongoing debate within Philippine military and academic circles about the definition of IW, the respondent defined IW as armed rebellion, insurgency, violent extremism, and terrorism, along with the application of measures to prevent and counter them. While violence is not considered a necessary condition of IW in this conceptualization, most IW activities are violent. IW can be performed by both state and non-state actors to safeguard sovereignty or to gain or extend political power and/or territorial control. IW can be both proactive and reactive. While the Philippine definition is heavily influenced by the country's long-lasting experience with domestic insurgencies and violent extremist organizations, illicit activities of state actors such as China's illegal activities in the West Philippine Sea region (South China Sea) are also considered part of IW. Additionally, while the Philippine Army is actively engaged in IW, it is not considered a military-specific activity and effective responses require not only whole-of-government, but also whole-of-society strategies. Effective civil-military cooperation is a foundational requirement for success in IW. Military engagements in IW should be minimal and show restraint.

Identified irregular threats

The respondent provided the following prioritized list of IW threats, from highest to lowest: violent extremism and terrorism by local terrorist groups and foreign terrorist fighters, transnational organized crime (such as drug and human trafficking and illegal arms smuggling), Chinese illegal activities, information operations, and cyberattacks. These priorities are driven by the protracted crisis, as well as the most recent challenges, that the Philippine authorities have been facing. The threats to security in the Philippines have a long-standing history. There is practically no historical period when the Philippines wasn't grappling with destabilizing internal conflicts and threats. Local terrorist groups include the Maute/ISIS-inspired Dawlah Islamiyah and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, along with the Abu Sayyaf Group. Lately, there have also been concerns over violence due to the proliferation of private armed groups around the country, mostly in the Bangsamoro Region. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front-Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces and the Moro National Liberation Front have been a cause for concern in the past and are still considered so today. The Communist Party of the Philippines-New Peoples' Army continues to pose a threat to security in the country as well. The radicalization and recruitment of youth into extremist organizations is a major concern, and authorities have seen an increase in the use of the internet for these purposes. Transnational crimes are a major challenge not only for the Philippines, but also for every country in the region. Securing the country's borders and preventing transnational crime are endless uphill battles for the Philippine authorities. Illegal Chinese activities, such as illicit fishing and covert support to insurgent groups, are viewed as major IW threats to the Philippines. Philippine authorities have also seen an increase in cyberattacks directed against government websites and services. The perpetrators of these attacks have remained unidentified, though their modus operandi has been limited to denial-of-service and ransomware attacks.





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Teaching irregular warfare concepts

The concept of IW does not have its own curriculum in the subject institution because its primary focus is on research and publication. Researchers from the ORCPA have nevertheless provided guest lectures at multiple educational institutions on elements of IW. Military educational institutions in the Philippines focus on counterinsurgency theory and their practical implications at all levels of education.

While the ORCPA has not published anything with a direct focus on IW, it has produced several books and other types of publications on related subjects such as counterinsurgency operations and counter terrorism initiatives, best practices, and narratives of task force operations and the heroism of soldiers in the Battle of Marawi in 2017, for distribution to their internal and external stakeholders including national and foreign military schools and foreign libraries. While the ORCPA's primary audience is military professionals, it also engages with government officials, the private sector, civil society, and local community leaders and stakeholders. Besides regularly organizing face-to-face engagements, the ORCPA also has a public-facing website and a Facebook page. The official website and the social media page of the ORCPA share the activities, efforts, and achievements of the Philippine Army, as well as promote and share information regarding matters related to the mission and mandate of the Philippine Army in securing the nation. In short, ORCPA's purpose and mission is to educate and gain public trust and confidence.

RSiS Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University

Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) is a global think tank and school of graduate education offering Master of Science programs in strategic studies, international relations, international political economy, and Asian studies. Its five research centers and two research programs, led by the executive deputy chairman, and assisted by a dean on the academic side, drive the school's research, education, and networking activities. RSIS is consistently ranked among the top regional think tanks by international publications. Analysis and thought pieces by RSIS scholars and researchers are regularly featured in reputable publications, top-tier journals, and online platforms. Commissioned reports from RSIS are shared with policymakers and stakeholders and have been used in some cases to launch further studies or specific projects with other partner organizations from government and industry.

Since its inception, RSIS has expanded its research horizon to cover counterterrorism and extremism, Singaporean security and defense issues, traditional and non-traditional security issues, interreligious studies, economic multilateralism, and regional economic integration. Increasingly, RSIS research delves into emerging cross-cutting issues and technological developments with strategic impact and with disruptive national and international security implications.

RSIS provides a rigorous professional graduate education in international affairs with a strong practical emphasis, while also conducting policy-relevant research in defense, national security, international relations, strategic studies, and diplomacy. The research and education offered by RSIS is bolstered by the think tank's goal of fostering a global network of like-minded professional schools.





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Definition of irregular warfare

The future battlespace is characterized by irregular warfare to a large extent according to RSIS thinking. Future conflict will be fought in this space. The concept of IW was created by the West but has been coopted by its adversaries. The current conceptualization of IW is a range of covert and overt activities conducted by non-state actors to challenge the sovereignty and erode the legitimacy of the state by expanding and deepening their influence and control of a population. Non-state actors do not require a state sponsor but are more effective in IW if supported by a state. IW is the preferred method of non-state actors because it has a lower cost compared to conventional war. However, IW is not unique to non-state actors. Because state actors can covertly and overtly influence and control non-state actors, the respondent noted that the definition of IW in Singapore should change to include both state and non-state actors. Violence is not a necessary condition for IW, but many IW activities indeed include violence. IW is conducted at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels and in all domains. IW is different from conventional warfare because it focuses on influence rather than physical destruction. IW is not a military challenge. Rather, the military can only partially address the challenges associated with IW. Singapore recognizes the complexity of IW and has developed a total defense concept that assign roles and responsibilities in national defense to each sector of society.

Identified irregular threats

Singapore is facing a complex IW threat landscape since it is being threatened by both non-state and state actors. While Singapore is concerned with potential insurgency and terrorist activities, it is also a target for malign Russian activities and Chinese disinformation. Chinese Singaporeans are manipulated to some extent by Chinese information operations. Through them, other segments of the population might be mobilized. Malign IW activities are present in multiple domains, including physical security, energy and resource security, cyber security, information security, food security, environmental security, health security, agriculture security, and financial security. These and other emerging domains are being manipulated by state and nonstate actors to challenge the sovereignty and legitimacy of the government. The new generation of leaders must be educated in these domains to have the understanding and ability to look beyond traditional air, land, maritime, space, and cyber domains.

Teaching irregular warfare concepts

IW is being taught as sub-module within multiple courses at RSIS, including courses on national security, intelligence, and counterterrorism. IW is being taught based on five categories of actors—left-wing, right-wing, ethno-political, politico-religious, and single-issue—that engage in covert or overt influence and destabilization activities to challenge constitutionally elected governments. The concept of IW is present at the operational and strategic levels of education to provide national security professionals with a base understanding of the concept and the implications. IW education emphasizes critical and creative thinking skills and the importance of recognizing and countering disinformation. IW education is viewed as extremely important because practitioners need a different set of skills to effectively conduct IW from those needed for fighting conventional wars. Students are a mix of military, law enforcement, intelligence professionals, and some civilians from various government





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agencies, as well as international students from regional partners and allies. Faculty publications focus on IW-related topics such as violent extremism, terrorism, cybercrime, and information operations, but there are no IW-specific research agendas or publications at RSIS. The institution's publications primarily target government officials and the defense sector but also aim to increase public awareness and understanding of the challenges associated with IW.



UPNM
National Defence University of Malaysia
Kewajipan • Maruah • Integriti

Malaysia: Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia

The National Defense University of Malaysia, or the *Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia* (UPNM), is a military university located in Sungai Besi Camp, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Originally named *Akademi Tentera Malaysia* (ATMA), or the Malaysian Armed Forces Academy, the institution was established on 1 June 1995. ATMA offered bachelor's degrees in the fields of engineering, sciences, management, and military training. On 10 November 2006, ATMA was upgraded to university status, creating the current UPM. The university's first intake of students was for the 2007-2008 session. The university is Malaysia's first institution catering to the needs and development of the Malaysian Armed Forces. The school hosts around 2,700 undergraduate students, with over 890 of them officer cadets that undergo four to five years of training.

Definition of irregular warfare

The definition of irregular warfare is a dynamically changing concept. The current Malaysian definition is domestically focused and strongly influenced by the country's recent experiences terrorism and counterinsurgency. IW is defined as non-traditional attacks carried out by non-state actors on a country, entities within a country, and on its common people. IW is carried out through guerilla methods, is vicious and barbaric in nature, and is waged against civilized people. IW-related conflicts always occur between a non-state actor and a state actor. State actors can therefore only conduct IW activities using proxy non-state actors. IW activities are conducted to challenge government legitimacy and create fear among the civilian population. Violence is a necessary condition of IW. While the military has a lot to offer in both executing and countering IW, it is seen not only as a military problem set, making the contributions from other government agencies crucial for the success of IW activities.

Identified irregular threats

The respondent provided the following prioritized list of IW threats, from most to least severe: terrorism, insurgency, civil war, transnational crime, far-right extremism, foreign disinformation, foreign intelligence activities, and the use of Malaysia as a base for cyber criminals conducting online scamming activities. The prioritization of these threats is driven by the contemporary threat the Malaysian government is facing and the probability of these threats materializing on Malaysian soil. The most significant threat facing Malaysia comes from religious extremism, with particular focus placed on Islamist extremism. Malaysia is also a transit hub for human, narcotics, and arms trafficking conducted by cartels and transnational organized crime groups. These





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groups are often supported by the intelligence organizations of state actors such as Iran, North Korea, and China. A particular state sponsored threat is Iran's use of student exchange programs to influence Malaysian society and export Shia ideology.

Teaching irregular warfare concepts

IW is being taught at all educational levels at UPNM, from bachelor's degrees to the National War College level. The concept is embedded into the school's strategic studies curriculum. Students are a mix of military and civilians. Civilian students are expected to join government service after graduation. The UPNM faculty is a mix of active-duty military personnel, retired military, and civilian academics. The IW education materials are taken from various international sources of reference and knowledge in the academic field. Faculty publications focus on specific disciplines, but no overarching IW research agenda exists at the institution.



Australia: University of New South Wales

The University of New South Wales (UNSW) was established in 1949 in Sydney, Australia. With seven disciplines, forty-seven schools, fifty-three centers and institutes, UNSW spreads across four campuses and is the home of more than sixty-thousand students from 132 countries. UNSW strives to address the challenges of today, ranging from climate change to breakthrough technologies. Since its foundation, UNSW has aimed to improve and transform lives through excellence in research, outstanding education, and a commitment to advancing a just society. UNSW has an expanding array of multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral collaborations. By connecting industry, government, and community groups to academics, students, and entrepreneurs, UNSW advances and optimizes the impact of its research and development.

Definition of irregular warfare

While there is no institutionally accepted definition of irregular warfare at UNSW, all conceptualizations are based on Australian SOF's experiences in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency activities. The institution introduces the topic of irregular warfare logically. In other words, understanding the term "irregular warfare" requires an understanding of what constitutes "regular." Hence, regular warfare is regulated war, governed by the conventions, laws, and norms that have become well-accepted in international relations. Irregular warfare is, therefore, war in which participants operate outside of these regulations, succinctly understood by the Weberian concept of a state's possession of a monopoly of legitimate violence. The institution makes a point of articulating the challenges with "state" versus "non-state" binary views, and instead examines a level of "stateness." Also, the institution emphasizes the "warfare" part of the term to highlight that it is talking about coercive violence, hence the materials only gently address other elements of IW such as information operations, psychological operations, and cyber operations. The institution therefore advances the understanding that irregular warfare is the perpetration of organized violence by at least one non-state actor in a conflict. Violence is considered a necessary condition of IW in this view. There is key context for this approach, in that Australia does not have a rich library





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of definitional terms for these issues (there is a direct copy of the U.S. IW definition in some service documents, but it is otherwise absent). There is also an absence of sharply defined operational tasks (e.g., unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, security force assistance, etc.). This means that the institution is relatively unconstrained with the definitions it can advance. There is utility in a definition, because these variables collectively point to an absence of discussion on IW within Australian strategic policy (and that of several of its close neighbors). While IW is considered SOF-led, this does not mean that IW is considered exclusively a SOF responsibility.

Identified irregular threats

Across the UNSW institution, there is no prioritized list of IW threats. This is also partly due to overlaps in curricula. For example, cyber subjects inherently address non-state actors, but only at one end of the spectrum would they overlap with the phenomenon of IW as we define it. Overall, the UNSW faculty addresses states, non-states, criminal elements, and mercenaries within course materials, but in a topical way, as they relate to: 1) Australian national security policy (which is very light regarding non-state actors); and 2) prescient issues being discussed in Australian national security debates. Within the IW subject matter itself, the institution organizes the curriculum based upon distinctions between militia/mafiosi, guerrillas, insurgents, and revolutionaries.

Teaching Irregular Warfare Concepts

The Australian Special Operations Command partnered with UNSW in 2018 with the aim to insert IW-focused education into existing university curricula. The initial single course on IW evolved into a one-year master's program titled "Masters of Special Operations and Irregular Warfare." This program is aimed at military personnel and those in the security policy community, including security contractors, who would benefit from a better understanding of special operations as a military instrument and irregular warfare as a type of conflict. The program is also well-suited for postgraduate scholars seeking to develop a research competence in such fields. Contemporary armed conflicts have demonstrated a contest between state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence with a target population. Within this type of irregular warfare, the employment of special operations forces has been seen on an unprecedented scale, yet special operations remain an understudied and often misunderstood instrument of military policy. The Master of Special Operations and Irregular Warfare at UNSW-Canberra uniquely addresses this gap by offering students a combination of special operations-focused content alongside a selection of electives addressing broader issues in strategy and security. This program is ideal for military personnel and those in the security policy community seeking to broaden their understanding of special operations beyond the tactical and operational skills and capabilities involved. It also provides an excellent framework of reference for other government employees and contractors who would benefit from a better understanding of special operations as a military instrument. Faculty, such as counterinsurgency expert and former special advisor for counterinsurgency to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, David, in addition to contemporary educational approaches such as TED talks, guest speaker series, and podcasts, bring significant credibility and relevance to this program. The program's target audience is not exclusively SOF personnel. Approximately 10-15% of the students come from a SOF background while the rest are from a government service background, inclusive of Australia's other national security agencies beyond Defense. The students are self-selected, and paying tuition, which creates a student body that is very interested in the topic.





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Commonalities, Differences, and Implications

Institutions in the Indo-Pacific region are not unified in thought regarding IW. There is no universally accepted definition of IW across the institutions surveyed, even on a foundational level. Some institutions do not have a specific definition of IW; however, institutions that do not have official definitions of IW are at different points in the thought process regarding the term. For instance, both MP-IDSA and KDU do not have specific IW definitions but do recognize the existence of the concept. Other institutions, like UPNM, noted that the concept is dynamic and always changing. On the flip side, RSIS utilizes a more static, concrete conceptualization of IW. Unlike the European institutions featured in the previous report, all target institutions in this study utilized the term, “irregular warfare,” in their responses to the questionnaire and in the subsequent interviews. UNSW utilizes a definition most closely associated with a U.S. conceptualization of IW. In contrast, the definitions used by other institutions and their associated states reflect their individual experiences with domestic threats, which might have informed their stance on which entities can employ IW. For instance, every institution studied noted that non-state actors are most commonly associated with the ability to employ IW, with KDU most strongly associating IW with a domestic struggle. Many of them also noted that states employ the same tactics through utilizing non-state proxies. Others, like RSIS, reflected that the associated state-utilized definition of IW focuses too heavily on non-state actors and should accommodate the current reality—that states also employ IW tactics. Another theme seen among many of the target institutions is the necessity of violence in IW. KDU, UPNM, and UNSW all conclude that violence is a necessary condition for IW, while ORCPA and RSIS note that violence is not a requirement of IW but is often used in IW campaigns.

With all institutions studied noting that irregular threats come from non-state actors with state actors utilizing IW tactics through employing proxies, it is clear that their respective state’s experience with terrorism plays a large role in the way that they conceptualize IW. In this same vein, terrorism was cited by every institution studied as an IW-related threat. The focus on terrorism and other domestic threats might be due to the lack of border sharing for many of these nations. The state actor most commonly mentioned was China, with proximity to this adversary likely playing a role. The respondent from the Philippines placed the most emphasis on China’s activity being irregular threats; this likely due to the island nation’s proximity to China and its stake in the West Philippines Sea (South China Sea). Many respondents also noted the threat of transnational organized crime to include human, narcotics, and arms trafficking—especially that which is supported by state actors like Iran, North Korea, and China. Crime was mentioned by each institution studied, reinforcing the fact that IW is largely seen as an internal issue, and, perhaps, making a whole-of-government approach necessary to combat IW-related threats. The island nations faced different threats than states like India that share borders with other nations. For instance, one of the threats mentioned by the Indian respondent was the weaponization of migration. This was not mentioned by any other respondents. On the flipside, cyber-attacks and disinformation are both often mentioned threats by respondents.

Much like the lack of a unified definition of IW or a common assessment of irregular threats, there is no collective approach to the institutionalized education on IW among the target institutions in the Indo-Pacific region. Most of the institutions surveyed do not have any curricula dedicated entirely to IW, with UNSW being the exception since it does offer a master’s degree in IW. At other institutions, IW is taught as part of other courses. For instance, UPNM embeds IW-related topics into its strategic studies curriculum. The institutions surveyed teach IW at varying levels of education. RSIS teaches the concepts of IW at the operational and





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strategic levels, with their curriculum reaching students of military, civilian, and private sector backgrounds as well as students from foreign countries. UPNM has a similar approach in that it teaches IW at all education levels—from the bachelor’s level to the national war college level—and to a mix of military and civilian students. In contrast to this approach, MP-IDSA currently teaches IW-related content at the tactical level and to only a military audience. Most of the target institutions publish only on IW-related topics with no dedicated research initiatives to IW itself. Of the institutions which publish on the topic, most of them provide this research to internal stakeholders, their associated government officials and defense sectors, and foreign partners.

Conclusion

As understood through the first report in this series on IW conceptualization, the United States cannot assume that its allies and partners all utilize a similar definition of IW to its own. This report on the Indo-Pacific region, the second of the series, bolsters the necessity of understanding the way that U.S. allies and partners think about IW not only at the regional level, but also at the individual level. The understanding that comes out of this report is a critical step in the path toward cooperation between the DoD and the target countries of this report. Empowered by the *Irregular Warfare Annex to the 2020 National Defense Strategy*, the DoD’s IWC plays an integral role in establishing the foundation for this cooperation through efforts like this report series. With the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States (February 2022) clearly stating the U.S. commitment to a free, open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient Indo-Pacific, the IWC chose to focus on the Indo-Pacific region in this second volume in its series on regional conceptualization of IW.

The responses of the target Indo-Pacific institutions indicate that there is not only no unified conceptualization of IW in the Indo-Pacific region, but that there is little consistency among these institutions in the way that they perceive IW-related threats or teach IW-related concepts. In addition to this, the conceptualizations used by these institutions vary widely from the U.S. conceptualization of IW. A particular point of deviation is on ideas surrounding the way that states interact with IW, with many Indo-Pacific institutions placing emphasis on irregular actors being non-state actors or proxies of a state. These ideas also impact the way that threats are triaged and understood, with IW threats most considered by the Indo-Pacific institutions typically being terrorism or internal threats. Like the report focused on European institutions, this analysis demonstrated that geography might impact the conceptualization of IW. The previous report noted that proximity to Russia impacted the lexicon used to describe IW by various subjects, while this report finds that geography impacts the perception of IW-related threats with the Philippines most directly mentioning China in its considerations of IW-related threats. Though state actors like China, Iran, and North Korea were mentioned, the report overwhelmingly points to the fact that many Indo-Pacific institutions view IW as a domestic issue with issues like terrorism and organized criminal activity being primary considerations.

Like the first report in this series, this study identifies the necessity of finding a common way to conceptualize irregular warfare in the long term to ensure solid international cooperation in this sphere. In the meantime, this series of reports seeks to fill in the gaps in understanding the way that irregular warfare conceptualization, the categorization of potentially irregular threats and methods, and the teaching of relevant topics differs throughout target regions. This is a critical first step to building bridges of cooperation. This report recognizes





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and brings to light the nuances in these areas, aiding interested parties in cross-cultural communication and streamlined cooperation on topics related to irregular warfare. Effective cooperation in IW cannot be built only on the definitions used by each state, and this is especially true since most of the states represented in this report do not have a common working definition of the term. Instead, fusing the academic community with military thinkers and leadership found at institutions like those studied is critical to develop an understanding of irregular warfare and associated threats more fully. The type of foundation that the research behind this series of reports builds seeks to make strides in creating an informed international coalition on the topic, thereby improving intellectual interoperability. As mentioned in the previous report, “irregular warfare mastery will not come from rushing to define irregular warfare, but it will come from the type of cooperation necessary to conceptualizing the topic fully.”

Endnotes

1. House, White. "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States. February 2022." (2022) pg. 7.
2. JP 1 Volume 1, Joint Warfighting, 27 August 2023, pg.



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