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PERSPECTIVES



The Future of Irregular Warfare: The United States is Winning, Now What?

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Since at least the Cuban Revolution during the Eisenhower administration, the conventional wisdom has been that the U.S. [consistently fails in irregular warfare](#) (IW) and that dramatic changes are required to remedy this situation. In the spirit of full disclosure, the Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) is an effort by the U.S. Congress to address the perceived IW crisis. The consensus view is so pervasive that, in a recent irregular warfare planning effort, a retired U.S. Army three-star, turned to this author and said: “maybe if we get this right, we will finally win a war.”

This narrative of universal [U.S. failure](#) and [enemy triumph](#) in IW could not be further from the truth, and a better approach to IW must start by accepting





the impressive U.S. track record in IW. This brief essay will start by reviewing the IW performance of the United States compared to that of Russia, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and Iran. Having proven that questions about why the U.S. is losing and why adversaries are winning are based on false premises, the essay concludes by offering some new premises and some better questions we should be asking.

U.S. Success in Irregular Warfare

The U.S. won the Cold War without defeating Soviet nuclear or conventional forces. From the Soviet perspective, they successfully deterred a U.S. nuclear attack on the USSR. They also successfully deterred a conventional invasion of the USSR. Yet, the U.S. still destroyed the USSR through hostile actions below the level of direct large-scale armed conflict, i.e., through IW. NATO enlargement constitutes another, spectacular IW success. (There were 16 NATO members in 1990. Since then, [15 nations have joined NATO](#) and Sweden is expected to join soon.) Anyone who doubts that NATO enlargement constitutes IW success by the U.S. needs to consult Vladimir Putin who views it as [aggression below the level of armed conflict](#), i.e., as Irregular Warfare. We must also acknowledge that comparable expansion of Russian, PRC, or Iranian military alliances would be seen as Irregular Warfare successes.

The defeat of the Soviet Union, and NATO enlargement, are part of a larger pattern of U.S. success through IW. For other examples, consider the so called [Color Revolutions](#) that toppled the governments of Yugoslavia (2000), Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), Kyrgyzstan (2005), Moldova (2009), Armenia (2018), and Bolivia (2019), drove Syrian forces out of Lebanon in 2005, and caused major civil disturbances that threatened to bring down many other regimes. The U.S. government does not claim credit for Color Revolutions, but deniability is an aspect of many IW activities. Moreover, Russia, the PRC, and many others [blame the U.S.](#) for all Color Revolutions. It is certainly the case that individuals and [organizations funded by the U.S. government](#) assist democratic dissidents and that Color Revolutions are based on democratic principles long advocated by the U.S. government. All this makes it fair to consider Color Revolutions examples of U.S. IW success. The same could be said for the [Arab Spring](#) revolutions of 2011 that brought down the governments of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen, and forced government reforms in Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, and Oman, since these represented similar pro-democracy revolutions.

In addition to population-centric IW successes like the collapse of the USSR, Color Revolutions, and NATO enlargement, the U.S. has also enjoyed significant success in IW efforts that are not population-centric. These include strategic sabotage efforts such as Cold War programs that deliberately allowed the Soviets to [steal faulty technology](#) leading to disastrous accidents inside the USSR and the [Stuxnet](#) cyber weapon that sabotaged the Iranian nuclear program. Additional examples of non-population centric U.S. success in IW would be the financial warfare innovations by the [Treasury Department](#), the extraordinary economic sanctions imposed on [Iran](#) and [Russia](#), and the targeted killing of Iranian Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, which [significantly degraded Iranian IW](#) efforts in the Middle East.

While Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a conventional war, Moscow also considers U.S. support for Kiev to be [Irregular Warfare against Russia](#). This U.S. IW campaign has been spectacularly successful



and has dramatically weakened Russia [diplomatically](#), [militarily](#), and [economically](#). The war has also damaged Russia's reputation as a [Great Power](#) and even as a [functioning state](#). The level of U.S. IW victory increases every day as Russia continues to waste enormous resources for minimal gains.

We also need to acknowledge U.S. adversaries' assessment of U.S. IW efforts. In Russia, the so-called [Gerasimov Doctrine](#) is an attempt to explain spectacular U.S. success in Irregular Warfare to the Russian Army in hopes of countering it. In the PRC, [Xi Jinping is terrified](#) of becoming the victim of a U.S.-sponsored Color Revolution, as the USSR was. The PRC has also criticized [U.S. actions as "salami slicing" tactics](#) (i.e., IW) and insisted that these tactics will not work. Of course, these complaints announce the PRC's fear that U.S. IW might work, and the PRC's inability to find a countermeasure to "salami slicing" that is more effective than public complaints.

Adversary Failure in IW

In addition to recognizing U.S. successes in IW, debunking the idea that the U.S. is being trounced in IW also requires us to acknowledge the IW failures of Russia, the PRC, and Iran.

Russia's catastrophic failure in IW is plain for all to see. Before 2022, when outsiders were lauding [Putin's supposed brilliance in Irregular Warfare](#), Putin himself recognized that in Ukraine—the most important target of his IW efforts—his campaign failed. As Putin admits, he launched his full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 because his IW campaign was doomed and he was left with "[no other choice](#)" than a major conventional war to avoid strategic defeat in Ukraine. Fortunately for the U.S., by replacing an inexpensive failed IW campaign with a disastrously expensive failed conventional warfare campaign, Putin has [put his entire regime in jeopardy](#).

The PRC is not doing much better. Its IW efforts are making zero progress in resolving the Taiwan issue in Beijing's favor and seem to be having the opposite effect since residents of the contested island are becoming [increasingly hostile to the Chinese Communist Party](#). The PRC's IW efforts have also been counterproductive elsewhere by arousing active opposition from the U.S. and a growing number of other states. For example, the counter-PRC groupings known as [The Quad](#)—consisting of Australia, India, the UK, and the U.S.—and [AUKUS](#)—consisting of Australia, the UK, and the U.S.—have been energized by PRC IW. Likewise, the states bordering the South China Sea—Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines—have [hardened their attitudes against the PRC](#) in response to predatory PRC behavior, i.e. IW, in the region. [Europe is also taking a tougher line](#) with the PRC and the Belt and Road Initiative has [lost much of its luster](#) in many places and is producing lower than expected returns for the PRC. Furthermore, while [U.S. economic sanctions on the PRC](#) are nothing compared to those on Iran and Russia, they do target key technologies and are specifically designed to counter the conventional and irregular PRC threat to U.S. security.

At the time of this writing (November 2023), Iran's Hamas proxies are being pounded by Israeli firepower. [Iran claims credit](#) for the tactical competence Hamas showed in its October 7, 2023, attack. However, Israeli military operations will certainly leave Hamas weaker and Gaza poorer than they were before. Israel may eventually remove Hamas as the government of the Gaza statelet, reducing it to the status of a small but famous terrorist group and costing Iran one of its most important IW proxy forces.



[Hezbollah's obvious reluctance to join the fight](#) in a significant way indicates that it recognizes Hamas made a mistake on October 7 and that Iran does not want to lose two proxies in the same year.

From late 2022 through early 2023, Iran was wracked by long-running protests against the regime. Iran [blamed the U.S.](#) for the unrest claiming it was waging a [propaganda war](#), i.e., IW, against Iran. The protests and the government crackdown [killed more than 500 Iranians](#), created substantial dissension [within the regime](#), and led to additional [European sanctions](#). Regardless of whether the protests were U.S. IW against Iran, the results were identical to those from a successful campaign.

Some claim that Iranian IW enables Iran to [control four Arab countries](#)—Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon—but the picture is less rosy than it sounds. Iranian (and Russian) assistance [keeps the Assad regime in power](#) in Damascus, but the ongoing civil war left Syria a shattered nation with a per capita GDP that [ranks 198th in the world](#). This makes Syria a drain on Iranian resources rather than an asset for the foreseeable future. Yemen, [ranking 202nd in per capita GDP](#), is in even worse shape than Syria. Iran's [influence in Iraq](#) and [Lebanon](#) is challenged by [popular protests in both countries](#), thousands of [U.S. troops in Iraq](#), and the [enduring paralysis in Lebanese politics](#). It is hard to escape the conclusion that Iran's IW efforts have brought it [little benefit at high cost](#) and that some future IW success will not save the regime.

Abandoning False Premises, Adopting Better Ones, and Asking Better Questions

The U.S. is not invincible in IW and U.S. adversaries do not always fail, but the paragraphs above should put to rest the notion that in IW, the U.S. always fails and its adversaries always win. This means traditional IW questions about why the U.S. always loses and why its adversaries always win are based on false premises. To ask better questions we should start with at least three new premises and develop new questions based on them.

The first new premise is to take the Color Revolutions as seriously as U.S. adversaries do. From this premise new questions emerge such as: What works and does not work in facilitating a pro-democracy revolution? What are the challenges in consolidating success after a revolution (e.g., in [Libya](#)) and how can these be mitigated? What are the adversaries' techniques for countering Color Revolutions and specifically how did [Russia prevent a Color Revolution in Venezuela](#) and [how did Iran save the Assad Regime](#)? How should the U.S. counter the adversary's countermeasures?

The second new premise is to acknowledge adversary IW mistakes. From this premise new questions emerge such as: How did Putin fail so badly in IW against Ukraine leading up to the [Orange Revolution](#), the [Maidan Revolution](#), and [between 2014 and 2022](#)? How can the U.S. facilitate Putin's continued failure and avoid imitating his mistakes? How did the PRC spend so much and get so little in return from its efforts to [make unification with the PRC attractive](#) to the people of Taiwan, and in convincing its neighbors that [increased PRC power is a benefit to them](#)? How can the U.S. facilitate continued PRC mistakes while avoiding similar mistakes?

The third new premise is that Russia and the PRC have studied U.S. IW closely to [avoid the fate of the USSR](#). From this premise new questions emerge such as: How are U.S. adversaries trying to change the



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script and avoid Soviet mistakes? How can the U.S. thwart their efforts and create new traps for them? Kennedy-era reforms in U.S. IW helped win the Cold War but what will the U.S. need to conduct successful IW for the next half-century or more?

The three premises above and the related questions merely scratch the surface of what will emerge when we finally abandon the false narrative of consistent U.S. failure and adversary success in IW. The new premises and new questions do, however, start us on the road toward a more honest and accurate assessment of what the future of U.S. IW should look like.



Editor's note: A longer discussion of many of these points will appear in the forthcoming Irregular Warfare Center book, titled *The Future Faces of Irregular Warfare*.

About the Author:

Tom Searle is a retired U.S. Army Special Forces officer with more than 30 years of experience in the Special Operations Community. During his military career he deployed to combat with every Active and Reserve Special Forces Group, JSOC, and most AFSOC and NAVSPECWARCOM elements. He earned a Ph.D. in Military History from Duke University and is currently a Professor at the Joint Special Operations University.

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