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IW PERSPECTIVES

The Essential Role of Policy, Doctrine, and Education in Irregular Warfare

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Irregular warfare (IW) is vital in today's military planning. It's complex and constantly changing, using methods that aren't typical and adapting strategies as needed. Conventional warfare aims to fight and beat enemy forces. IW, however, works in messy political and social situations where standard rules of engagement don't always fit. Because IW covers so many areas, the armed forces need to improve how they handle it. This means updating their policies, battle plans, teaching, and practice to meet IW's demands. Policy needs to address new challenges like threat networks, information operations, terrorism, and cyber-attacks within a greater strategic framework. It must be flexible to match military actions with national goals and the changing nature of irregular conflicts. The weaponization of transnational criminal organizations, the interference in





countries' elections via operations in the information environment (OIE), and other emerging threats require a policy that can adapt and respond effectively. Doctrine guides military operations; it needs to grow by taking concepts from different areas, like fighting cyber insurgents and intricate OIE, and focusing on a complete approach that mixes direct and indirect methods to handle IW. Education and training matter just as much. Military training centers must emphasize the social, political, and cultural parts of irregular activities. Training needs to go beyond the usual conventional combat. It should include live runs that look like IW to help people think fast and make good decisions. We train and educate our IW practitioners to enhance their cognitive dominance over adversaries. Combining these elements gives practitioners, academics, and policymakers an intelligent way to handle IW. This approach is critical to winning missions and keeping the country safe in today's and tomorrow's fights. DoD can achieve this by improving education, doctrine, and policy related to IW.

ORIGINS OF IW

IW is an inherently political, often violent struggle that supports a political, social, or cultural change using or relying on established and evolving unconventional concepts, doctrine, and capabilities. Unlike conventional warfare, IW does not emphasize destroying the opposing armed forces or controlling territory. Instead, the focus is on gaining and maintaining the support of a population to influence and effect protracted political change. IW often occurs in complex operational environments, which involve combating irregular threats and potential or active-state adversaries who seek to deter, threaten, or initiate armed conflict. The concept of IW is not new; its roots can be traced through various forms, such as guerrilla warfare, insurgency, and other asymmetric combat methods. Historical figures like [T.E. Lawrence and Mao Zedong](#) conceptualized frameworks that underpin modern irregular tactics. Lawrence's involvement in the Arab Revolt and Mao's guerrilla strategies during the Chinese Civil War highlights how leveraging socio-political contexts, terrain, and civilian populations can offset the strengths of more conventionally powerful opponents. These early frameworks laid the foundation for understanding how IW can disrupt traditional military advantages and achieve strategic objectives through unconventional means.

THE IMPORTANCE OF POLICY AND DOCTRINE

In today's security environment, successfully implementing IW requires adjustments to policy and doctrine. Currently, the DoD lacks comprehensive policies needed to address IW. Policies related to IW must be flexible and adaptable to address the changing landscape of threats such as terrorism, insurgency, cyber warfare, and threat networks. The doctrine needs to shift from solely supporting large-scale combat operations to incorporating a mix of combat and non-combat actions that highlight intelligence, counterintelligence, psychological operations, and civil-military activities during competition and in preparation for conflict. [Effective IW policy](#) demands robust interagency coordination and international partnerships, recognizing that many modern threats are more functional than geographic and transcend national borders. A comprehensive policy framework must combine military tools of influence to ensure a holistic government approach toward security



challenges. This integration includes involvement, efforts for regional stabilization, support for governance structures, and strengthening local institutions against threat network operations and occupying forces.

TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Training for IW requires a significant change from traditional warfare training methods. IW forces need to understand the culture, language, and social patterns of where they operate. This understanding goes beyond what conventional warfare demands. They need hands-on training to prepare troops to tell friends from enemies, which IW operators commonly face. Training should encompass real-world cases and simulations that reveal the intricate nature of IW settings. Educational programs in military academies, [professional military education](#), and other institutions must incorporate case studies and historical analyses of past IW engagements. Incorporating a range of IW scholarship into educational programs helps to provide valuable insights and shows how tactics evolve, enabling soldiers to think and adjust quickly, which are crucial abilities for the unpredictable realm of IW. Teaming up with other government agencies and global partners also enhances IW education. It boosts the effectiveness of IW plans by building a common understanding and collaborative approach to shared threats.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS WITH CHINA

[China's approach to IW](#) differs from that of the United States by blending its policy, doctrine, training, and education to fit its strategic culture and geopolitical aims. Chinese policy puts the Communist Party and national sovereignty front and center, shaping security strategies through broad guidelines. Their doctrine mixes old and new tactics, zeroing in on asymmetric edges and political warfare. The [People's Liberation Army](#) trains hard, with challenging drills, tech skills, and mental prep, preparing their forces for all sorts of situations. Their education stresses loyalty to the party line and fresh strategic thinking, building a solid base for IW. With its flexibility and patience, the Chinese approach to IW could give China an edge in long-lasting conflicts. This allows China to adapt and improve its tactics as situations change. On the other hand, the [American approach](#) emphasizes tech advantages and quick results. Our approach is effective in short-term conflicts but may struggle to sustain its effectiveness in drawn-out conflicts and adapt to changing non-traditional battlefields. As the United States continues to operate in the framework of great power competition, it is imperative that we understand different strategic cultures shape countries' practices of IW.

CHALLENGES FACING THE DOD

The DoD recognizes the value of IW, yet it faces challenges in prioritizing it over traditional combat. A key obstacle is the widespread preference for conventional warfare throughout the department. Many view conventional warfare as more straightforward to plan and execute. It provides clear markers of success, such as captured territory or defeated enemy forces, which don't always apply to IW funding, which poses another challenge. IW operations require substantial resources; they need long-term



investment in intelligence networks and methods to engage with local populations. These efforts often lack quick results, leading to less [funding or attention than](#) big-ticket conventional items like aircraft, ships, and tanks. IW also calls for different abilities and approaches from military personnel. It demands ongoing education and training programs that might take a back seat to more traditional combat training.

CONCLUSION

The 21st-century security landscape is marked by complexity and unpredictability. IW, a constantly evolving challenge, demands a fundamental shift in how the United States approaches military strategy. By investing in policy, doctrine, education, and training tailored to the unique demands of IW, the DoD can enhance its capacity to navigate these complex environments. This transformation requires a cultural shift within the military, prioritizing adaptability, cultural understanding, and a long-term perspective. If the U.S. sees China as a pacing threat, maybe more attention should be paid to how they operate. Ultimately, the success of the United States in the face of future challenges hinges on its ability to master the art of IW. Failure to do so leaves the nation vulnerable to threats that defy traditional military solutions.



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