

Irregular Warfare

Then and now

by Maj David Pummell

Irregular Warfare: A violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s). Also called IW.¹

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What is Irregular Warfare (IW)? Initially framing IW doctrinally may help develop a logical answer on how the Marine Corps can best support the *National Defense Strategy* through an IW approach. The cornerstone *Joint Publication, JP-1 Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, describes warfare in two purest forms: traditional and irregular. Traditional warfare is defined as a violent struggle between nation-states or coalitions and alliances of nation states. This has been the preeminent form of warfare since the mid-1600s, which evolved from the central German region east of the Rhine River—described as Westphalia. Napoleon Bonaparte matured this form of warfare with his Prussia campaigns. IW earned the title to highlight its non-Westphalian context. The strategic point of IW is to gain or maintain control or influence over, and the support of, a relevant population.

The *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) released in 2018 places emphasis on great power competition. Competition is not clearly defined. In the conflict continuum, competition is placed between the

bookends of peace and war. *Joint Doctrine Note 1-19 (JDN 1-19)* “Competition Continuum” was released in June 2019 and describes the range of cooperation, adversarial competition below armed conflict, and then armed conflict. Competition below armed conflict will take various forms but tends to occur over an extended period. A couple of the more famous competition periods earned titles such as *The Great Game*, the period in the mid-1800s played out in Central Asia between Victorian England and Tsarist Russia. A modern version, titled *The Cold War*, was a period of competition between the Soviet Bloc countries and the U.S.-led Western

powers from 1945 to 1990. The critical facets of competition are the whole of government approach and appreciation of the competition calculus that understands the threshold of risk and redlines for escalation to avoid a transition to conflict. (See Figure 1.)

IW has been conducted under many titles; the shortlist includes small wars, counter insurgency, guerilla warfare, unconventional warfare, asymmetric warfare, and operations in the grey zone. This lexicon can initially be confusing, but once we understand the hierarchy of IW, the terms present common functions and approaches. They may best fit as individual operations and activities under the overarching term of IW. (See Figure 2 on next page.)

A summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the *National Defense Strategy* was released in October 2020. IW is a persistent reality requiring the application of valued resources from across the U.S. Government. IW can be successful when those resources are applied well in advance to shape and influence.

Regional partners are influenced, allies are supported, and relationships developed and sustained well before any indication and warning of crisis or conflict. This takes years done properly; it would be preferred to have up to a decade to influence and shape a region to best support competition and reduce an adversary’s desire to expand their agenda.

The central idea of the Irregular Warfare Annex is to implement a core competency for both conventional and special operations forces, sustaining the ability to impose costs and create dilemmas for our adversaries.²

Our Nation’s enemies, adversaries, and competitors apply constant pressure through competition

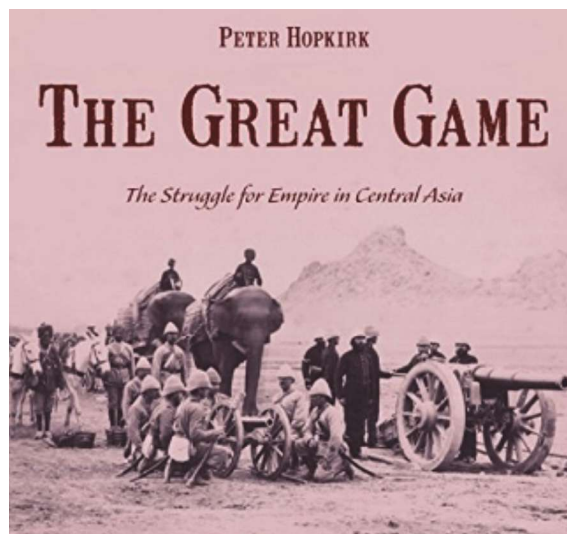


Figure 1. Front cover *The Great Game* authored by Peter Hopkirk. (Figure provided by author.)

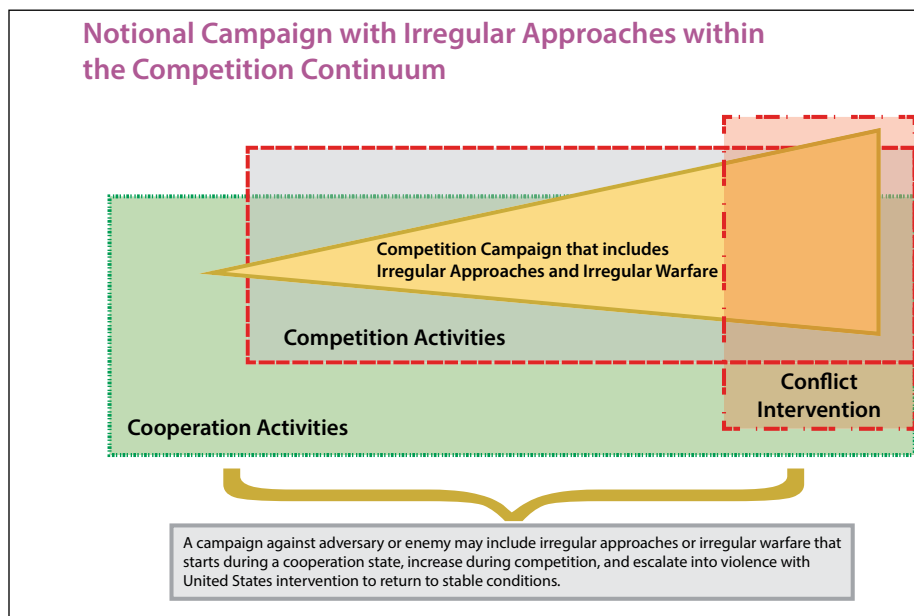


Figure 2. JP 3-05 Special Operations irregular approaches in competition. (Figure provided by author.)

across the world. Both state and non-state actors use IW in the various forms to achieve their objectives. The United States must engage in competition as a form of IW and change the calculus and desire for the adversary to expand and influence.

One of the critical elements of winning in competition is the development and sustainment of strong alliances and partnerships. Empowering regional partners and creating a synergy between allies builds an enduring strategic approach to apply power against the adversary.

A thorough understanding of the contemporary operating environment illuminates the opportunities and defines the risk formula of risk to mission, force, and politics. Applying the strategic approach in competition to seize on the opportunities while managing risk will keep the effort from escalating into conflict by crossing an unacceptable threshold.

The challenge of maintaining a capable IW force is the requirement not to neglect or degrade the capability to conduct traditional warfare with the rapid strike options needed to win. To comprehend the requirements of IW today, it is important to understand the history and diversity of IW. History will not provide the solution for today, but it will

add a deeper understanding and value to the formula for success. Since many examples took place during the “analog age,” how would those same scenarios



Figure 3. 1805 Battle of Derna. (Credit: U.S. Marine Corps History Division.)

play out today in the “digital age” across all domains that present both new opportunities and risk. Looking at a few historical and international examples then narrowing the scope to United States. IW involvement will illuminate those trends of success and key mistakes that exhaust limited and precious resources.

During the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), the Continental Army was pitched against the experi-

enced British force. Francis Marion was a Continental Army officer operating in the South Carolina region using guerilla tactics against the British. Not committing his force to frontal attacks, Francis Marion wore down the larger British force with a campaign of surprise attacks, ambushes, and raids before then withdrawing into the South Carolina swamplands. His force was able to sustain the pressure against the British by subsisting off the land and cooperating with the local population by earning their trust. A British colonel who was repeatedly unsuccessful against Marion Francis’s Irregular Force referred to him as the “Swamp Fox.”

All Marines are at least passingly familiar with the Barbary Pirates and the Marine Corps’ participation during that campaign. The Barbary Wars were a series of conflicts in the late 1800s to early 1900s involving the United States against the Barbary States, specifically Tunis, Algiers, and Tripoli in North Africa. The First Barbary War was conducted from 1801–1805; this was mainly a naval war where the United States fought to secure free trade, navigation, and security of the seas. (See Figure 3.)

It was during the First Barbary War Lt Presley O’Bannon and a handful of Marines recruited and trained a mercenary army that marched 521 miles through the African desert from Alexandria, Egypt, to Derna, Tripoli, to achieve a decisive victory against a much greater force in the defense.

The Second Barbary War took place in 1815; this war was against the regional pirates who impeded freedom of the seas and demanded tribute payments for passing shipping. The United States and allied European countries countered the pirates with superior ships, cutting-edge nautical technology, and weaponry of the period.

Therefore, it could be said that the campaigns of the Swamp Fox and the Barbary Wars, specifically the Battle of Derna, help set a baseline for IW. The common elements of a small, well-trained, and equipped force, departing from traditional warfare, partnered with an indigenous force as a force-multiplier operating in austere conditions

involving asymmetric techniques are found across the majority of IW case studies. Elements and variations of these conditions remain present in the IW spectrum today and how we analyze the elements of IW in the multi-domain environment.

Starting in 1889 lasting until 1902, the Second Boer War was an irregular war in its purest form; it lasted thirteen years, pitching a guerilla force, the Boers, against the standing British Army. “Boers,” the Afrikaans

term for farmers, used raiding tactics in plain clothes then blended back into the local population. This is also the origin of the term commando, describing the Boer militia force. The Dutch East India Company instituted “Commando Law” in the early settlement period, requiring the Boers to equip themselves with horses and firearms to defend the settlements. Thus, groups of mounted militia were organized into “commando” units. During the Second Boer War, commandos numbered in the range of 25,000 and used the tactics of marksmanship, tracking, camouflage, and concealment against a British force of over 450,000 conventional soldiers.

Lord Kitchener, initially Chief of Staff and then Commander of the British Expeditionary Force, applied a series of tactics against the Boers designed to break their will by restricting their freedom of movement and ability to blend into the supportive local population. To restrict the movement, Kitchener constructed over 8,000 blockhouses, usually within line of sight of each other, combined with the employment of barbed-wire fences and mounted patrols across the Transvaal. Supporting the blockhouse strategy, Kitchener attempted to further remove local support from the Boers by creating internment camps for the local population—also described as concentration camps. Under horrid conditions, large amounts of civilians



Figure 4. River patrol with the indigenous raft in Malaya circa the 1950s. (Credit: Special Air Service Regimental Association.)

were interned into 46 camps without the appropriate level of medical care or nutrition, and disease was rampant.

The Boer War ended by Treaty in May of 1902. The British learned that the only terrain they controlled was the terrain they physically occupied, so adopting the tactics of denial, persistent pressure, and containment brought the Boers to the peace table. A British win came at a tremendous cost to both sides. The British used the lessons learned from the Boer War in their following involvement in irregular wars

such as the Malayan Emergency, where the IW operations and activities were conducted in a maritime environment.³ (See Figure 4.)

The United States was involved in Nicaragua for over twenty years (1909–1933). To achieve the objectives, the United States synchronized several lines of effort for the strategic approach. The establishment of neutral zones was designed to protect American lives and property while the conduct of security operations separated and

disarmed the various political combatants. The endstate was a successful election process resulting in free elections in 1928 and 1932. The Marines simultaneously trained and organized the Nicaraguan military while conducting a counterinsurgency campaign targeting the key combatants such as Augusto C. Sandino. (See Figure 5.)

One of the elements to success in Nicaragua was the “whole of government approach” by the United States in applying both military and diplomatic power. The military approach was to



Figure 5. Marines in Nicaragua capture Sandino’s colors. (Credit: Marine Corps History Division.)

secure the key terrain while relentlessly pursuing the agitators to deny them access to the local population, a key source of support.

A significant factor of the Nicaragua Campaign was the use of the Marine Brigades' organic airpower for combat and logistic support. The aviation support provided direct casualty evacuation, assault support, logistic support, and close air support.⁴ Based upon the lessons learned from the campaign, the Marine Corps more than doubled its small wars formal instruction from 9 hours in 1925 to 94 hours in 1935—reinforcing the value of the lessons that contributed to the *Small Wars Manual* later published in 1940.

The Marine Corps approach to Vietnam was complex. It sought to contain the fluid insurgency where the center of gravity was again the population. The combination of large conventional operations gave the focused counterinsurgency efforts and distributed smaller forces time and space to organize and establish rapport with the population. In 1967, the United States established the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS). CORDS facilitated the specific military organization as part of the whole of government approach. CORDS was a pioneering effort to unify the military with other components of the government. Numerous programs existed within the architecture of CORDS designed to defeat the insurgency such as the Provisional Reconnaissance Units. One that has gained notoriety is the PHEONIX program. It is important to use accurate references when researching PHEONIX; based upon some of the unclassified information available, both fiction and nonfiction PHEONIX has developed somewhat of a controversial history. PHEONIX was not an assassination program as described in some documents. U.S. advisors assisted Vietnamese partners in finding, fixing, and finishing key influencers of the insurgent networks. The finishing was often kinetic, but finishing solutions also included imprisonment. The challenge of the program was the distributed elements across Vietnam working with partner forces that would often take in-

dependent action. This effort was filled with both success and failure. The partnered concept was similarly repeated in Afghanistan with the various Afghan Militia and local police groups; based upon lessons learned from Vietnam, the effort was considerably more successful, but there is still debate on the enduring effect. (See Figure 6.)

In 2004, the Honorable James Webb, former Senator of Virginia, visited the Marine forces in Afghanistan. Senator Webb, a former Marine Corps officer, received the Navy Cross during the Vietnam War. After completing a few days of battlefield circulation in Afghanistan, he concluded his trip with an assessment stating that you could remove the names of the tribes and villages in Helmand province and the counterinsurgency problem set would almost be an identical problem set to that of Vietnam.

To give the historical examples highlighted in this article the justice they deserve, deeper, individual study is required. They do illuminate the consistent trends in IW over decades that set the stage for the discussion of

conducting modern IW in a fast-paced multi-domain environment. Depicting IW in the current operating environment is informed by a review of the *Small Wars Manual*, and a study of the adversarial approach of both China and Russia.

The Marine Corps' role in the series of small wars in the early years of the 20th century placed the Marine Corps in a position to be well suited for IW based upon its expeditionary nature and connection with naval power. Lessons from operations spanning from 1890 to 1930 in central and South America in a series of documents were published on the small wars culminating in 1940 with the release of the *Small Wars Manual*.

The classic *Small Wars Manual* remains relevant and educates the force on the subject, combined with threat analysis of an adversary and comprehension of the contemporary operating environment an IW mission concept can be developed for that specific environment and threat with clearly defined efforts and endstate.

In 1995, two Chinese People's Liberation Army colonels authored a book titled "Unrestricted Warfare." Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui followed the tenants of Sun Tzu and the "Art of War" and devised an approach to support China's goal of being the global superpower by 2049.⁵ Their intent is to win without fighting, a "War without gunsmoke." This is accomplished through a series of strategic efforts that fall below the threshold of conflict for the United States. The Chinese types of warfare are categorized into the three mutually supporting warfare's: economic warfare, the use of international loans and financial manipulation to gain influence and achieve strategic goals; network warfare, the manipulation of all forms of media; and lawfare, designed to manipulate international law, norms, policies targeting the abroad audience. These types of warfare operationalized through the Chinese "One Belt One Road" initiative provide the global expansion for strategic investments. This is executed by a "Port, Park, City" plan to invest in a nation of interest by financing and building a port, then a



Figure 6. Capt Andrew Finlayson with members of a provisional reconnaissance unit (1969). (Credit: Col Andrew Finlayson, USMC[Ret].)

park to support the port population, which in time expands into a city. The city evolves into a sequential plan of “Safe City, Smart City,” connecting the city to the Chinese digital enterprises through Chinese owned security cameras systems and communication networks. This is a template of adversarial competition. What can the United States do to change the adversarial competition calculus below the threshold of conflict? This is one style of modern Irregular Warfare.⁶

The Russian approach to great power is different from the Chinese; it could be described as less methodical and implemented on a shorter turn in the competition continuum. It has become a phrase among strategists regarding Russia: “When the little Green Men show up, you have failed in the competition.” The Little Green Men and the Russian IW approach tie directly to the Gerasimov Doctrine.⁷ The Russian Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, drafted

a series of articles laying out his views on Russian security concerns and the future operating environment. Shortly after publishing the doctrine, the Little Green Men showed up in Crimea in 2014 to support the Russian sponsored insurrection of Ukraine. Defined as “Hybrid Warfare,” using a blend of traditional and IW, Russia is strengthening their posture in both the near and far abroad regions. The Gerasimov Doctrine uses military power detached from the government; the traditional term would be mercenary, but the employment is more complex and operates in the “Gray Zone.” The use of Russian special operations and intelligence operatives to apply an adaptive approach sets in motion a now proven design for regime change. The use of covert and clandestine means justifies response on the world stage for the sequential use of overt military power. The sterile uniformed military presence removes an immediate affiliation to a government-sanctioned action.

The larger overt military operation is then conducted to achieve the endstate.⁸ Gerasimov’s view of the operating environment is that the United States is a strategic threat to Russia. This is a second style of modern IW.

Through a formula of historical study, lessons learned (in some cases relearned), and threat assessments, a concept for applying the Marine Corps power in competition and conflict is framed. Meeting the vision of the *Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, a maritime IW approach provides an adaptable capability to apply toward great power competition, crisis response, and conflict. A maritime IW force shaping and influencing the littoral region coordinated with the larger naval force securing the sea space connected across the all-domain environment depicts a force modernization concept that meets the requirements of the *National Defense Strategy* and supporting *Irregular Warfare Annex*. This type of strategic

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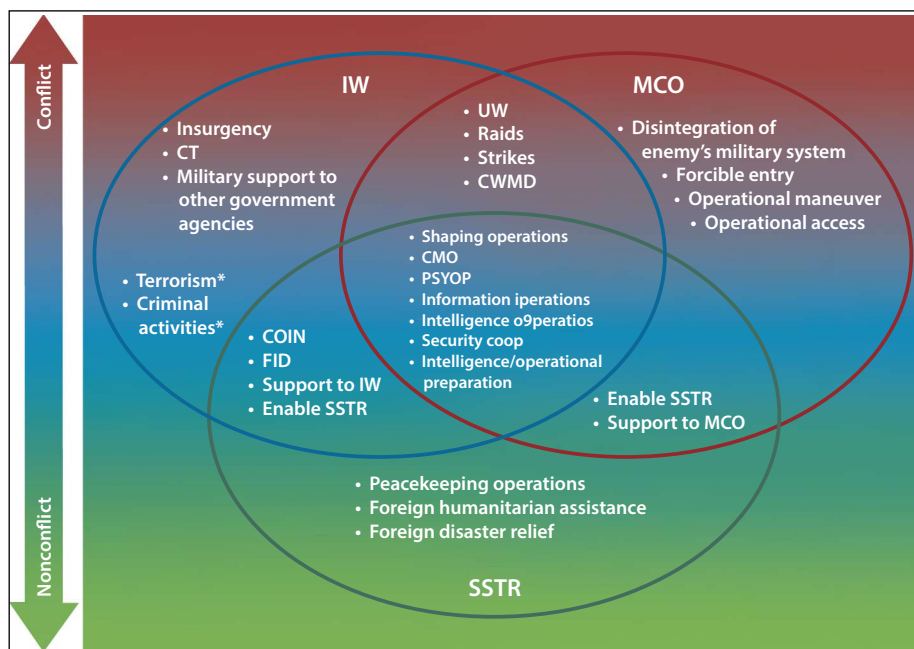


Figure 7. RAND, maritime irregular warfare venn diagram. (Credit: RAND Corporation.)

projection provides the approach needed to connect with key allies and partners that can influence an adversary’s risk calculus and desire to expand in the critical regions. (See Figure 7.)

The Maritime IW capability ensures all areas from land to sea are protected; the maritime region that often creates a gap and opportunity for the adversary will then deny freedom of movement in the maritime regions. The primary tasks of the Maritime IW force are to connect to the larger naval force patrolling the open seaways, increase the capability and capacity of ally and partner maritime operations, and deny freedom of movement to the adversary or insurgent that rely upon the maritime region for logistic and operational movements. Historical maritime IW operations include but are not limited to foreign internal defense, counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, counter-piracy, and counter-narcotics.

The Marine Corps is in the position to develop and sustain regional maritime partners and allies through multiple lines of effort executed simultaneously. Developing a maritime overarching approach that connects MARSOC forward elements with their networks that have been developed over years, the U.S. Marine Corps Security Guard Detachments globally postured at the U.S. Em-

bassies and rotational MAGTF deployments providing the combat power to support National Defense Requirements through regional demonstrations, international exercises, and other amphibious operations in the modern operating environment. This approach creates a sustainable multi-faceted capability that reaches out to the joint, interagency, and multi-national partners.

Distribution of the MAGTF across the region is executed through the Marine Corps Concepts Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations. The Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR) would capitalize upon the regional networks developed by MARSOC. The MARSOC elements would be in a position to assist with the reception, staging, onward movement, and integration of the MLR elements and fulfill information requirements as the elements deploy. MARSOC would then provide indications, warnings, and intelligence updates as the adversary monitors the MLR movements and reacts to the changes in the regional force posture.

Liaison officers or elements would then work directly with the regional U.S. government agencies to complete the “whole of government” approach further expanding the maritime network and capability. This layered ap-

proach would support the National Defense Requirements across the range of cooperation, competition, and conflict in the maritime regions.

The history and concepts illustrate the diversity of irregular warfare and implications in a maritime environment. The diversity of operations range from countering small insurgent elements to nation-state adversaries in great power competition. There is not a single solution to “can” and place on the shelf to execute when needed, but there are elements “common to all” for a sound irregular warfare approach. Modernizing the force to operate and win in the contemplator operating environment will result in an irregular warfare model integrating all domains.

Notes

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