

A New Playbook for Irregular Warfare: How the United States Can Win Without Fighting

Description

During the final stretch of the 2024 American presidential election, the Department of Justice [seized 32 web domains](#) linked to “Doppelganger,” an aggressive Russian disinformation campaign to influence American voters. Meanwhile, China has continued to exploit the US sanctions regime [to promote its own currency](#), the renminbi, as a viable alternative to the dollar. And while [wildfires](#) and [winter storms](#) ravage expansive regions of the country—not long after Hurricanes [Helene](#) and [Milton](#) had exposed glaring deficiencies in the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA’s) [planning](#) and [budget](#)—forecasters and politicians alike grapple with an increasingly grim future defined by [extreme weather and climate change](#).

What do these challenges have in common? According to the siloed US national security enterprise, perhaps not much. But that assumption betrays a critical lack of vision. In reality, Americans are under siege every day, often by forces that they neither perceive nor understand. The United States is at war—not kinetically, but instead on the intangible battlefields of internet chat groups, currency exchanges, security cooperation agreements, and natural disaster responses. As the [2022 National Security Strategy](#) (NSS) warns, the contemporary security environment is best described as an era of strategic competition and transnational crises. And the [simultaneity](#) of these challenges will be a defining feature of American foreign and domestic policy in the 21st century.

How should the US government conceive of this new “Great Game” in which it is uncomfortably enmeshed? How does one measure a state’s relative position in the ongoing geopolitical clash? And what does “winning” mean in this environment? These questions serve as the primary impetus for [Winning Without Fighting: Irregular Warfare and Strategic Competition in the 21st Century](#)—a new book by Rebecca Patterson, Susan Bryant, Ken Gleiman, and Mark Troutman which establishes a holistic vocabulary and strategic framework for outcompeting America’s adversaries. In a modern era of “irregular” challenges that often fall below the traditional threshold of armed conflict, the United States must employ a more expansive toolset of non-kinetic and cost-effective means, drawing upon American advantages and undermining enemy weaknesses.

Strategic Drift

Today's threat landscape is daunting. A renewed era of strategic competition—featuring [revisionist autocratic actors](#) such as China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and violent extremist organizations—is at the forefront of national security concerns. But *Winning Without Fighting* also adopts the idea, which underpins the [2022 NSS](#), that the world has entered an [“age of crises”](#) or a [“world of the polycrisis”](#). Indeed, the concurrent threats posed by the increasing (and often [mutually-reinforcing](#)) effects of climate change, health crises, mass migration, and the introduction of disruptive technologies will challenge the resilience of all national governments, consuming increasing amounts of economic and military power to counter them effectively. Experts may debate whether strategic competition or transnational crises pose the more significant problem, but the United States must manage both.

However, America is strategically adrift. The US government, having failed to secure meaningful military success in any recent conflict, has determined the best way to succeed is to double down on preparing for a large-scale conventional operation while neglecting to recognize that its adversaries are already waging an asymmetric war using all instruments of power. As a result, America's leaders often pursue a narrowly cast military-, technology-, and deterrence-centric strategy—instead of a more appropriate whole-of-society approach leveraging *both* kinetic and non-kinetic tools of military, economic, and information statecraft, as well as national resilience. At best, this flawed construct inadequately employs the necessary tools of competitive statecraft and produces suboptimal strategic outcomes; at worst, it could precipitate strategic defeat.

Strategic Culture

This dependence on overwhelming military force is rooted deep in American strategic culture. Relying on the work of [Colin Gray](#) and [Tom Manhken](#), *Winning Without Fighting* argues that American strategic culture suffers from a binary conception of war and peace incompatible with the gray-zone style of competition in which it is currently enmeshed. This binary also extends to the definition of war itself, which Americans conceive of solely as military conflict—in contrast to the more holistic [Chinese view of warfare](#), which also encompasses economic and informational competition, and to [Russian strategic culture](#), which prefers authoritarian governance and strategic depth in the form of a well-controlled near abroad. And while military power remains necessary in a world that features a [stalemated Russo-Ukrainian War](#) and an [escalating Middle East conflagration](#), it is not sufficient.

This strategic culture deeply affects the framing of national security issues in the policy discourse. Even when the government develops sound conceptual frameworks for competing below the threshold of war—such as [“irregular warfare”](#), the [“competition continuum”](#), and even [“integrated deterrence”](#)—these supposedly whole-of-society concepts are often solely or mostly led by the

Department of Defense (DoD) rather than the interagency process. They often focus disproportionately on the role of applied violence rather than the large toolset of non-kinetic means at America's disposal. Instead, the United States needs a more holistic strategic framework.

Irregular Warfare: The Ends

Winning Without Fighting advances irregular warfare (IW) as the concept that should guide US foreign and domestic policy in the 21st century. While every term is flawed, IW captures two essential areas of focus: 1) the "irregular" nature of today's competition, which should involve a greater reliance on non-kinetic means of competitive statecraft; and 2) the idea that such competition is indeed "warfare," even when it is waged non-kinetically, thereby instilling greater urgency and purpose into an American policy discourse that often neglects peacetime threats. Therefore, *Winning Without Fighting* arms policymakers, experts, and students with the vocabulary for addressing today's challenges if the threat landscape is marked by "strategic competition" and an "era of crises," then the predominant domain will be the "gray zone" between war and peace, where "irregular warfare" must be the prevailing strategic concept.

So, what does IW look like? *Winning Without Fighting* articulates three relative ends that the United States should always aim to achieve to bolster its competitive standing while diminishing that of the adversary. First is power, or the ability to affect others' behavior. This often involves coercive military and economic tools "to compel our enemy to do our will," in the words of [Carl von Clausewitz](#). Second is influence, or the ability to affect others' perceptions. And third, is legitimacy, or the collective belief among a relevant population that a certain actor or action is rightful. Influence and legitimacy require a greater reliance on tools such as informational statecraft, which can shape leaders' and populations' views of facts and reality, and national resilience, which can bolster a government's legitimacy among people under siege. To prevail in irregular warfare, the United States must pursue all three objectives simultaneously.

Irregular Warfare: The Means

While the United States must pursue the same long-term ends (power, influence, and legitimacy) as its adversaries, it should not use the same means. Autocracies like China and Russia have certain advantages, especially their ability to marshal state resources and control information. However, democratic states have advantages, too, including their economic vitality, more extensive networks of allies and partners, and the legitimacy of their political institutions. American strategies have traditionally neglected fundamental US advantages across the economic, informational, and resilience

elements of statecraft. However, [US IW strategies prevailed during the Cold War](#) and could prevail again today. *Winning Without Fighting* develops the foundation for a more holistic strategic approach based on the purposive integration of all instruments of statecraft and the more balanced participation of the agencies that wield them, with a particular focus on non-kinetic means that can generate power, influence, and legitimacy.

The first set of tools is military statecraft. While the United States must continue investing in conventional and nuclear forces to deter great-power war, it also has a variety of non-kinetic tools that are too often underutilized. Ironically, the United States “wrote the book” on non-kinetic military statecraft during the Cold War—using a variety of interpersonal tools (e.g., Key Leader Engagements and International Professional Military Education), organizational tools (e.g., Foreign Military Sales), and systemic tools (e.g., global force posture) to enhance military power, influence, and legitimacy among its allies and partners. These tools represent major advantages in IW struggles as adversaries seek to entice countries into their spheres of influence. Therefore, US military statecraft must be at the core of future IW efforts to combat enemy military and paramilitary threats worldwide while bolstering and expanding the American alliance architecture.

Second is economic statecraft. The academic literature and policy discourse often focus too much on sanctions and embargoes. However, American-led or -influenced economic institutions have been at the center of the global economy since the end of World War II, and the dollar is still the international currency of choice. Therefore, *Winning Without Fighting* chronicles the diverse economic tools available to American policymakers, dividing them into a useful typology of trade-based tools (e.g., boycotts and embargoes, import and export controls, and tariffs), capital-based tools (e.g., asset freezes, financial sanctions, and the provision or withdrawal of aid), and domestic policies (e.g., fiscal, monetary, and industrial policy).

Third is information statecraft. While the United States should never imitate its adversaries’ draconian manipulation of information, including mis- and disinformation campaigns, it has various advantages to leverage in this space. Information sharing (e.g., funding credible news outlets and promoting radio and TV broadcasting), international agreements on the right to information, and the prosecution of actors who perpetrate illegal information operations can help bring greater clarity and even truth to a murky information environment. And in more intense campaigns, infrastructure destruction—such as blocking internet access or targeting radio transmission towers—can help stall the adversary’s use of mis- and disinformation.

Lastly, *Winning Without Fighting* proposes the addition of a new instrument of national power: resilience, invoking the [National Intelligence Council’s 2017 Global Trends](#) report, which argues that “measuring a state’s resilience is likely to be a better determinant of success in coping with

future chaos and disruption than traditional measures of material power alone.â• The tools of resilience and the agencies responsible for ensuring national resilience (e.g., FEMA, the Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) have traditionally existed outside the national security sphere. But today, these agencies and their capabilities are critical for defending and advancing power, influence, and legitimacy. The states likely to prevail in IW are those capable of withstanding and mitigating severe shocks like climate change, pandemic disease, cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns. Therefore, resilience must be a priority for every presidential administration regardless of political party. But unlike other proposals for a [a grand strategy of resilience](#),â• or one [based on resilience](#),â• the authors of *Winning Without Fighting* emphasize that resilience is one element of a broader, more holistic approach.

However, it is not enough to employ these means. Good strategies are always flexible, adaptable, and robust, and thus policymakers must be able to assess their progress toward the overall ends over long time horizons. *Winning Without Fighting* develops a matrix of different military, economic, information, and resilience metrics, relating them to power, influence, and legitimacy, respectively. It also encourages the development of a more formal government-wide measurement framework and a culture of assessment to ensure that any IW strategy is meeting its goals.

Educating the Next Generation

Irregular warfare is not a battle or campaignâ•it is a long-term, multi-generational struggle. *Winning Without Fighting* not only articulates a strategic framework for current policymakers but also builds a common vocabulary for future decision-makers. It is a comprehensive primer for anyone interested in exploring Americaâ•s history, preferences, and outlook concerning IW, and it is meant to help students and practitioners alike reframe their thinking about strategic competition and Americaâ•s place in global politics. As we enter 2025, this strategic framework should guide important upcoming decisions on military competition, trade wars, countering harmful narratives, and combating dangerous transnational crises.

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