

Boxing with Shadows: Drawbacks in US Counterstrategies Against the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Russian Wagner Group

Description

This article is part of Project Proxies and Partners, which explores the promises and pitfalls of security cooperation in war, at peace, and in between. We invite you to contribute to the discussion, explore the difficult questions, and help influence the future of proxies and partners. Please [contact us](#) if you would like to propose an article, podcast, or event.

This article is the second in a Proxies and Partners series looking at successes and failures of US strategies against IRGC and Wagner. Please find the first installment [here](#).

In this second installment of our analysis, we shift our focus from the seized opportunities and tactical victories achieved against groups like the Wagner Group (and its Africa Corps) and the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to a more critical examination of where U.S. strategies have faltered.

Though distinct in their origins and operations, the Wagner Group and the IRGC share a commonality in their ability to maneuver within the gray zones of international law and conflict. These entities exploit legal ambiguities and operational gaps, which enables them to operate subversively and effectively against conventional Western approaches and strengths. In this analysis, we aim to understand the complexities and challenges that have hindered more robust US countermeasures, offering a comprehensive review of the lessons that might be drawn from these experiences.

<https://irregularwarfareinsider.podbean.com/e/boxing-with-shadows-drawbacks-in-us-counterstrategies-against-the-iranian-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-and-russian-wagner-group/>

Our exploration begins with a discussion of the less visible arenas of conflict where both the Wagner Group and its Africa Corps and the IRGC have operated with a concerning degree of freedom. These areas, often overlooked or underestimated by international observers, have allowed such groups to entrench themselves and expand their influence below the radar of traditional surveillance and countermeasures. We will assess the implications of this permissibility and the strategic blunders that have allowed it to persist. Furthermore, we will critique the US government's efforts to synchronize its national assets to effectively counter these threats. Despite considerable resources and a broad

array of tactics at its disposal, the US has faced challenges in integrating its military, intelligence, and diplomatic tools in a cohesive strategy against such agile and unconventional foes. This section will highlight specific instances where this lack of integration resulted in missed opportunities to curb the malign activities of the Wagner Group and the IRGC.

By unpacking these aspects, this article aims not only to shed light on where the US response could have been tightened but also to foster a deeper understanding of the strategic recalibrations needed to effectively confront non-state actors, proxy groups, and the states supporting them. Both the Wagner Group and IRGC are building a sophisticated web of influence and connectivity, aimed at extending their geopolitical reach through military, economic, and political channels.

As these entities continue to adapt and evolve, so must the strategies employed against them. If the U.S. fails to confront these entities more effectively, it risks ceding critical regions to adversaries who exploit instability, undermine U.S. allies, and threaten global security. The repercussions could include increased regional conflicts, stronger anti-Western alliances, and diminished U.S. influence in strategically important areas such as the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe.

This reflective inquiry seeks to contribute to that ongoing evolution, proposing pathways for more effective engagement and containment of such groups in the future. This article is vital reading for policy, military, and intelligence analysts and decision-makers who are tasked with protecting U.S. interests abroad. The lessons drawn from assessing the U.S.'s missed opportunities in effectively countering Iran's IRGC and Russia's Wagner Group offer insights that can be applied to emerging threats from similar state-affiliated entities. Failure to learn from previous missteps and act decisively now could leave the U.S. vulnerable to an ever-expanding sphere of adversarial influence, particularly problematic in an environment of strategic competition.

Missed Opportunity #1: Flourishing in Obscurity

Wagner Group and Wagner-affiliated shell organizations have traditionally functioned in areas that have poor governance, receive little international investment, and grapple with internal security issues. This criminal syndicate offers security-related assistance to these nations in exchange for valuable natural resources such as gold, diamonds, petroleum products, and lumber. Moreover, the lack of extensive media coverage and reporting on regions where the Wagner Group is active creates a shroud of obscurity, allowing it to carry out its operations with minimal international scrutiny.

The IRGC's expansive organizational [infrastructure](#) has under its umbrella legitimate and illegitimate organizations, which permit it maneuverability in various sectors. These include universities,

construction agencies, financial institutions, and transportation companies. The IRGCs' armed forces—its Navy, Army, and Air Force—are on par or more advanced in training and capabilities than Iran's *Artesh*, or military armed forces. It also has the Quds Force, its expeditionary force focused on extraterritorial operations. The IRGC conducts operations and provides military support to diplomatically-isolated countries like it did for Syria's Bashar al-Assad during the Syrian Civil War. Through its illegitimate organizations, the IRGC is also involved in criminal activities. For example, the US Drug Enforcement Administration accused both the IRGC's Quds Force and Hezbollah of smuggling drugs and weapons in North Africa in an operation dubbed [Project Cassandra](#). The Quds Force has also been tied to drug smuggling plots in Turkey, Azerbaijan, Italy, and Venezuela.

The Wagner Group and IRGC's operations thrive in the shadows, largely due to the lack of comprehensive media coverage and reporting on these regions. Journalists and media organizations often focus on more prominent global issues, and these lesser-known areas tend to slip under the radar. This lack of attention provides a convenient cloak of obscurity for both organizations to exploit, enabling them to conduct their activities discreetly and with minimal accountability. Exploiting weak governance and limited international focus, the two groups secure deals that benefit their interests at the cost of these vulnerable nations. Addressing this issue requires increased international awareness, vigilance, and efforts to expose and curb such exploitative activities.

There is a need to raise awareness about notable aspects of Iran and Russia, among other adversaries' asymmetric controlled release of information. For instance, the continued reporting of the number of Iranian-backed attacks on [US installations in Iraq and Syria](#) is an important transparency endeavor. While such attacks have [occurred for years](#), the intensity has increased since the October 7 Hamas attack and subsequent Israeli counterterrorism campaign into the Gaza Strip. Relatedly, the United States should continue declassification efforts to shine a light on adversaries' activities, such as [the push](#) from the [Defense Intelligence Agency](#) to declassify and exhibit the Iranian drones found in Ukraine and Iraq.

Missed Opportunity #2: Poor Harmonization of National Assets

The United States faces challenges in coordinating its instruments of national power. Different government agencies and departments may operate with distinct agendas and limited communication, sometimes resulting in poor synchronization across a spectrum of domains and disciplines. In foreign policy, there are instances where diplomatic initiatives and military actions may not align perfectly, causing some mixed signals and confusion among allies and adversaries. On the domestic front, the legislative process may, at times, appear disjointed, impacting the effective implementation of comprehensive solutions to pressing issues. While the US has made significant strides in [enhancing](#)

[collaboration](#) across departments and agencies over the past 20 years, there is still more work to be done. One area of possible improvement is a whole-of-government acceptance of a common vocabulary to describe a problem and achieve unity of effort in resolving it, similar to the [Department of Defense's memo](#) from August 2023. This document provides an overview of the Department's Irregular Warfare Implementation Guidance, and it introduces concepts that will facilitate a more holistic approach to both deterring adversaries' gray zone activities and combatting terrorism.

Russia's [new generation warfare](#) strategy, also referred to as [non-contact warfare](#) or [sixth generation warfare](#), is an example of using soft power (from across the whole of government) to achieve national objectives. Russia's strategic blunder in Ukraine and seemingly continuous tactical catastrophes will severely impede or, more likely, fully disallow another conventional war. The magnitude of casualties and the cost of refitting the ground forces have made that goal prohibitively expensive financially and politically for many years. This will force Russia to rely on irregular capabilities, operate in areas where its rivals are not contesting, and exploit institutional limitations placed upon democratic institutions. Even if the Russian military [reconstitutes](#) its operational capabilities more quickly than Western experts have predicted, the [losses to its professional officer corps](#) will likely limit the army's ability to project power in the short term. Its material reconstitution cannot replace the decades of expertise that were lost or the reputational damage to the Russian military sustained by the failures to sustain combat operations.

Iran implements a strategy called [smart power](#), or a hybrid of hard and soft power, to further [its influence](#), as put forward in Iranian political doctrine. Tehran backs an [Axis of Resistance](#), including state and non-state actors, violent or otherwise, in the Palestinian Territories, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, among others, to secure its interests. Iran, like China, also engages in soft power activities to exert influence in the region, including establishing religious and cultural institutions in places like Lebanon and Syria, as well as key economic and political partnerships in places like Iraq.

The United States employs a diverse set of terms like [hybrid warfare](#), [gray zone activities](#), and [irregular warfare](#) without establishing a unified framework to harness the tools of statecraft. The US is gradually making [progress](#) in this area. Still, its adversaries and competitors such as Russia, Iran, and even China have functional, seemingly systematized approaches for combining both subtle (soft) and forceful (hard) influences, drawing on resources from both government and private sectors. While the US navigates a linguistic maze of terminologies that address specific nuances of warfare, its adversaries employ more streamlined, cohesive approaches. These governments leverage the resources and authorities from public and private sectors, forging partnerships beyond traditional bureaucratic boundaries. This integrated framework allows them to align diverse capabilities and expertise toward a common goal. The emphasis on a shared vision and

coordinated action reflects a strategic mindset that extends beyond military capabilities, recognizing the significance of economic, technological, and diplomatic dimensions in achieving strategic objectives.

The United States also has efforts to integrate national power instruments, however, they are not as comprehensive as the aforementioned adversaries' hybrid strategies. Two such frameworks are the DIME (Diplomacy, Information, Military, Economic) and MIDFIELD (Military, Information, Diplomacy, Finance, Intelligence, Economic, Law/Enforcement, Development) [approaches](#), utilized by various agencies, notably the joint military forces and diplomatic efforts.

More robustly, interagency [Joint Task Forces](#) (JTFs) integrate members of the Department of Defense with personnel from the Department of Treasury, Department of Transportation, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and various entities from across the intelligence community to collaborate and leverage their collective authorities to counter threats. However, these efforts are focused mostly on security threats, such as [Joint Terrorism Task Forces](#) throughout the United States. Most importantly, efforts like JTFs do not have soft power elements integrated, like adversaries' hybrid initiatives.

Conclusion

While geographically and operationally distinct, these groups' activities showcase a broader trend of exploitation by actors operating under the threshold of conventional international scrutiny.

The key to enhancing these efforts and confronting these challenges lies in the integration of strategies across all levels of government and the international community. A concerted push toward improved inter-agency coordination, coupled with a global commitment to transparency, accountability, and the enforcement of international norms, can significantly diminish the operational space for these organizations. It requires an enhanced understanding of the geopolitical landscape, improved coordination among national and international actors, and a steadfast commitment to upholding the rule of law. As these criminal entities adapt and evolve, so too must the strategies employed to counteract their influence.

The international response to such challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Increased awareness and reporting are critical in illuminating these shadowy operations and their impacts on regional stability. A concerted international effort to enhance governance structures and close legal and operational gaps will be essential in mitigating the influence of such groups. While the Wagner Group and the IRGC represent just two facets of a global issue, their activities offer critical lessons on the complexities of modern geopolitical conflicts. Addressing these challenges necessitates a robust

international policy framework that prioritizes long-term stability and governance—such as strengthening regional formal and informal security institutions and promoting sustainable economic development to counteract these groups— [fundraising streams](#) and [recruitment incentives](#)—over short-term security arrangements, like military interventions or temporary security agreements. By understanding and addressing the underlying economic and political conditions in which these groups thrive, the international community can better safeguard vulnerable regions from becoming pawns in broader strategic games and conflicts.

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The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University’s Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

Main Image: Silhouette of Person Shadow Boxing June 14, 2021 (Photo by Ron Lach at [Pexels](#))

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