

China's Irregular Approach To War: The Myth Of A Purely Conventional Future Fight

Description

This Irregular Warfare Initiative article was originally posted through our partner organization, the Modern War Institute at West Point.

Since early March, up to [220 boats](#) from China's maritime militia have been moored near Whitsun Reef in the South China Sea. The Philippine government has asked the Chinese government to direct the ships to leave its exclusive economic zone, but Beijing has denied that the ships are part of the militia, saying they are merely ["fishing boats"](#) sheltering from sea conditions. These actions fit a recent pattern of Chinese leaders turning to irregular warfare to achieve strategic aims in the South China Sea: China sends its maritime militia to a location in the South China Sea to reinforce Chinese sovereignty claims and then ratchets up control with little involvement by conventional forces.

The actions of the maritime militia are part of a body of evidence that Beijing has embraced irregular warfare as central to its military strategy. Despite this evidence, and a first-rate Irregular Warfare Annex to the US National Defense Strategy (NDS), many in the Pentagon believe that irregular warfare is a relic of the last two decades and that future war will be conventional. Before divesting too many irregular warfare capabilities, however, national security leaders should look closely at what Chinese officials' words and China's military actions say about how the People's Liberation Army might actually fight a war. In fact, leaders should examine how US plans for distributed operations might not be reducing risk, but shifting risk from conventional to irregular threats.

In a recent CNA study, we found that in a future, large-scale conflict, Chinese forces will likely employ a modern and unique irregular warfare concept, focused on information and influence, tightly integrated with conventional capabilities. A return to great power competition does not portend a shift away from irregular warfare to conventional warfare, but rather an amalgamation of the two.

The Past as Prologue: Irregular Warfare as an Integral Part of Great Power Conflicts

The first reason US forces should expect to encounter irregular warfare in a conflict with China is that such activities have been an integral part of conflicts involving great powers for three-quarters of a century. In fact, irregular warfare activities [are so prevalent](#) that it would be strange to fight a large-

scale conventional war and *not* see them.

Using the definition of irregular warfare in the [NDS Irregular Warfare Annex](#)—asymmetric warfare involving state and nonstate forces fighting over legitimacy and influence of key populations—we built an original dataset of sixty-seven post-World War II conflicts. We found thirty-four that involved a great power adversary (China, the Soviet Union, or Russia) conducting irregular warfare activities, either directly or indirectly via training and support for irregular activities by a state or nonstate partner. Irregular warfare activities in these great power conflicts manifested in five discrete types.

Regular forces conducting irregular warfare activities during a conflict is the first type. Such activities include hit-and-run attacks, raids, and assassinations, as well as nonkinetic operations like cyber or information operations focused on influence. During the [2008 Russia-Georgia War](#), for example, Russian state forces, as well as third-party actors, used cyberattacks against official Georgian websites and traditional information operations through official and semiofficial state media to influence the population and sow confusion. Russian forces coordinated their cyber and information efforts with kinetic operations to maximize the effect.

Irregular forces conducting irregular warfare activities make up the second type. These armed forces are not part of a state's officially recognized military, and include militias, partisans, and private military contractors. Irregular forces often fight alongside an adversary's regular forces, such as in the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979, when [Chinese forces armed ethnic-minority militias in Vietnam](#). More recently, Russia has been employing private military contractors to fight in conjunction with its regular forces in [Syria](#) and [Ukraine](#), as well as deploying them to [Libya](#).

Special operations forces conducting irregular warfare missions are the third type of irregular warfare we observed. Great power adversaries have employed special operations forces for direct action, unconventional warfare, counterterrorism operations, and foreign internal defense. Representative historical examples include operations by Chinese reconnaissance units, which [played a key role in the 1980s conflict with Vietnam](#), as well as US and UK special operations forces supporting European partisans fighting Axis occupation in World War II. Russian special operators have conducted direct action, reconnaissance, and targeted killing in [Afghanistan](#), Georgia, [Ukraine](#), and [Syria](#).

Proxy forces supported by great power adversaries are a fourth category. Support to state or nonstate proxies was the most common type of irregular warfare activity that we found in our data, and [broader research](#) finds that proxy support was a key characteristic of Cold War conflicts. Perhaps the best-known example is [US support to the mujahideen](#) during the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. China [supported insurgents in Cambodia in the 1980s](#) and the [Communist Party of Burma](#) for decades. More recently, Russia has [provided training and equipment](#) to Khalifa Haftar's forces in Libya.

Direct participation as a third party to a conflict is the fifth type, involving a state's insertion of forces into a conflict in which it is not a primary belligerent. Often, adversaries begin by supporting proxy forces and then join the conflict with their own forces. Examples include [Soviet participation](#) in Afghanistan's civil war on the side of the Afghan government and [Russian combat operations in Ukraine on the side of the separatists](#). The Soviet Union also directly participated in combat on the side of Ethiopia in the Second Ogaden War.

Modern Chinese Irregular Warfare

Our examination of Chinese military writings reveals how Beijing might leverage three of the five types of irregular warfare in a contemporary conflict. The term "irregular warfare" does not itself appear frequently in Chinese military writing. Ironically, this is a sign of its centrality. Irregular warfare activities are so fully integrated with conventional tactics and operations that they are not identified as "irregular." The leadership of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) no longer sees utility in the conventional "people's war" approach, which involved human-wave attacks in land-centric battles. The PLA is now preparing to fight concurrently across multiple domains, is focused on winning what it calls ["informationized wars,"](#) and takes information superiority as the driver of operational planning. Many elements of irregular warfare, such as psychological warfare, legal warfare, and cyberwarfare, are central to the PLA's concept of information warfare and its theory of victory in a conventional conflict. In Chinese military writing and current operations, we find three principal elements of irregular warfare: the "three warfares," special operations forces, and paramilitary forces.

The three warfares (ä, ?æ??) are the coordinated use of [public opinion, psychological, and legal warfare](#) methods to [stifle criticism of the Chinese Communist Party, spread positive views of China](#), and influence foreign governments in ways favorable to China, according to the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission. The three warfares shape the battlespace by creating a favorable strategic and operational environment prior to hostilities. One PLA researcher described the interactive nature ([Chinese source](#)) of the three warfares: legal warfare to provide the basis for launching an attack, public opinion warfare to delegitimize the adversary, and psychological warfare to demoralize the adversary. Already, China is employing public opinion warfare against Taiwan to generate confusion and [undermine faith](#) in government and political institutions. In the run up to and during a conflict, we would expect Chinese forces to ramp up these efforts, especially against nations hosting US forces. For example, China could promote narratives about US military abuses of a local population, some exaggerated and some imagined, to turn the population against its government's support to the United States.

Special operations forces are another irregular warfare element featured in Chinese military writing. As [Dennis Blasko points out](#), PLA special operators do have a narrower spectrum of missions than those of their US counterparts. Chinese special operations forces are more akin to an earlier incarnation of the 75th Ranger Regiment in the missions they train for: reconnaissance and direct action. Unlike US Army Special Forces, they do not specialize in [unconventional warfare](#). This suggests that they are ill-suited to provide support to insurgencies or to organize indigenous resistance groups. The limited capability of Chinese special operations forces means that they will mostly likely be employed in more standard support, integrated with other forces. For example, they could conduct reconnaissance or raids against key communications and logistics nodes. They might also be able to operate from maritime militia platforms in order to covertly access littoral territory.

Paramilitary forces are a third element of Chinese irregular warfare, composed of the People's Armed Police (PAP), the maritime militia, and private security companies.

The PAP is charged with responding to domestic unrest, maintaining social stability, fighting terrorism, and protecting national sovereignty. Despite its domestic focus, the PAP does operate internationally as well. In 2018 the China Coast Guard [was transferred](#) to the PAP, giving it a maritime security role. The PAP also operates a [base in Tajikistan](#) suspected of supporting counterterrorism operations along the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border, as well as inside Afghanistan. PAP units have also [deployed on UN peacekeeping missions](#). Its role as the primary national-level force for maintaining internal stability and policing restive Tibet and Xinjiang suggest that the PAP is more focused on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency missions than the PLA is. This raises the possibility of PAP ground units being deployed beyond China's borders during a conventional war to carry out counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations.

The maritime militia is the maritime component of China's national militia that plays a central role in China's gray zone activities to assert control over disputed territory. These irregular forces consist of civilian mariners and their fishing vessels, representing a portion of the Chinese fishing fleet. Most of the militia are civilian mariners who receive minimal military training. A subset of the [militia are full-time](#), better trained, and conduct no fishing activity. Maritime militia activities have included the 2009 harassment of [USNS Impeccable](#), the [2012 Scarborough Reef standoff](#), the 2014 [Haiyang Shiyou 981](#) oil rig standoff, a large surge of ships in waters near the disputed Senkakus in 2016, and the current events at [Whitsun Reef](#).

The historical record of employing irregular forces amplifies concerns that China would use the maritime militia in a war against the United States, closely integrated with conventional forces. Chinese writers discuss a number of [wartime missions](#) for the maritime militia, such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), counter-ISR, sabotage, anti-aircraft missions, raiding, and electronic

warfare. The more sophisticated missions such as electronic warfare would likely be conducted by the full-time militia members.

Private security companies are growing in prominence as Chinese corporations expand globally, especially in [China's Belt and Road Initiative](#). China has more than [five thousand private security companies](#), of which about twenty operate internationally. Although the activities of Chinese private security companies are increasing, they have not taken on the types of missions performed by US private security companies in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it is unclear to what extent the Chinese government trusts them to carry out activities in direct support of Chinese policy. Nevertheless, China's use of private security companies to advance its national interests remains an area to watch.

The Chinese military stopped its support to proxy forces after the 1980s, and we found no evidence in contemporary Chinese writing that Chinese military leaders are planning to support proxy forces in a future conventional war. Still, the historical record suggests that could change over time.

Implications for US Military Strategy

The modern Chinese approach to irregular warfare has a number of implications for the US military. First, Chinese forces are not waiting for conventional war to employ irregular warfare activities; the PLA is engaging in irregular warfare today. China is employing [lawfare](#) to achieve strategic aims. The maritime militia is enforcing China's sovereignty claims in the [East and South China Seas](#) against US partners and allies. This could be a double-edged sword for China. On the one hand, irregular warfare activities in the space below armed conflict have [proven effective](#) and [stymied US policymakers](#). On the other hand, they provide US forces with many opportunities to watch and learn as they prepare to counter irregular operations in a conventional war.

Second, US forces, by adopting warfighting concepts that emphasize distributed operations, might not be reducing risk, but rather shifting the risk from conventional to irregular threats. In response to the threat of advanced Chinese missiles, the military services have adopted warfighting concepts that emphasize distributed operations: [Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations](#) (Marine Corps), [Multi-Domain Operations](#) (Army), and [Distributed Maritime Operations](#) (Navy). The logic behind distribution is that US forces can have the offensive advantages of mass through advanced technology, while avoiding the disadvantages—namely, the larger and more concentrated the force, the easier it is to target. Chinese forces with a limited number of high-end conventional capabilities will be challenged to target small, dispersed US units. They will likely save those capabilities to hunt US submarines, aircraft carriers, and aircraft. To find and strike small units operating in third-party territory, Chinese forces might then leverage irregular capabilities such as the maritime militia, local Chinese populations, or the

data that resides at Chinese-owned companies.

Finally, US strategic documents such as the [National Defense Strategy](#) and new [Interim National Security Strategic Guidance](#), as well as distributed operations concepts, emphasize the importance of allies and partners. Our review of Chinese irregular warfare shows that Chinese forces are focused on influencing local populations in ways that could easily be shifted to break those relationships. Given the centrality of information and influence to Chinese strategy, it should be no surprise that Chinese forces are employing irregular warfare activities to those ends.

Department of Defense leaders would do well to consider these threats as they refine US approaches to competition and warfighting. Irregular warfare should not be treated as a separate domain, specific to counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, segmented off and studied by a niche community of specialists. Instead, the full spectrum of irregular warfare capabilities should be part of adversary threat estimates and incorporated into large-scale conventional wargames. As the military services exercise their distributed concepts, they should anticipate that adversary forces will combine advanced ISR, long-range precision munitions, *and* irregular warfare activities to target US forces, allies, and partners operating within these constructs. Acknowledging the full scope of conflict will better prepare the US military for the modern irregular warfare concept that Chinese forces have already begun employing in great power competition.

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The views expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position of CNA, the United States Military Academy, Department of the Army, or Department of Defense.

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