

An Introduction to the Economic & Legal Warfare Project

Description

Irregular warfare thrives in the proverbial “gray zone”—that murky space between war and peace, conflict and stability. The past several decades have shown a need to move beyond Cold War-era orthodoxy, where military force was the primary lever of assertive power, to an environment in which non-military hard power takes precedence.

Today, states routinely leverage public diplomacy, information activities, and coercive trade practices as part of their approach to gain legitimacy and erode adversaries’ political or economic influence. The [Economic & Legal Warfare \(ELW\) Project](#) seeks to explore how state and non-state actors are leveraging these indirect and often abstract forms of influence—including economic and legal warfare—to shape outcomes without necessarily triggering conventional conflict.

Through a whole-of-government lens, ELW will examine current use cases and future applications of state power to coerce, pressure, and manipulate relevant populations in pursuit of key strategic objectives. Fitting with [IWI’s mission](#), this project will help national security policymakers, scholars, and practitioners understand this complex landscape and develop coherent policy recommendations through published articles, podcasts, academic collaborations, and policy dialogues.

While not strictly a military concept, [Joint Publication 1, Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States](#), outlines the Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic (DIME) model, emphasizing the interconnected nature of these instruments in achieving national security objectives. ELW builds on this approach, broadening the strategic planning to include non-kinetic domains that may seem unconventional in the irregular warfare discipline. In particular, ELW will examine the role of states’ coercive, resource-driven, economic, and trade policies on shaping favorable geopolitical conditions, underscoring its role as a critical component of modern and unconventional statecraft.

Economic and legal instruments are often viewed narrowly—as primarily coercive tools of national strategy. Sanctions, tariffs, and trade embargoes tend to dominate discourse, despite their [bluntness](#) and varying track records. *ELW* envisions an approach that includes more precision, more dynamism, and more agile use of economic tools and principles of [lawfare](#).

As security strategy evolves, the tools of the trade will expand and be applied in ways that challenge existing paradigms, legal frameworks, and government organization. We believe that integrating these

unconventional tools into strategies informed by irregular warfare— in ways that are asymmetric, minimally disruptive, and temporary— could profoundly reshape approaches to international relations. This shift in states’ behaviors suggests that more compelling modes of influence short of traditional deterrence through denial or the prospect of open conflict will emerge.

Key Topics We Will Explore:

- **Sanctions & Embargoes** — Exploring modern applications and limitations of coercive trade tools.
- **Investment Security** — Examining inbound and outbound controls in an era of supply chain resiliency, de-risking efforts, and integrated national industrial strategies.
- **Contingent Capital & Foreign Aid** — The strategic implications of conditioned economic assistance.
- **Disaster Diplomacy** — Leveraging natural disasters as moments of influence or opportunities amidst instability.
- **Dual-Use Technology** — Investigating civil-military crossover.

Strategic Resource Leverage — Exploring how control over supply chains, agricultural systems, and critical minerals can serve as instruments of influence, resilience, and coercion in geopolitical competition. Emerging threats are rapidly redefining the security landscape. Access to water and control over supply chains may create leverage for upstream states at the expense of downstream neighbors. Climate change is opening new Arctic shipping lanes, raising the stakes for polar security while threatening the relevance— and economic power— of chokepoints like the Suez and Panama Canals. Meanwhile, the increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters may generate both humanitarian crises and new opportunities for influence through aid and alliance-building.

If current practice is any indication, states are likely to consider non-traditional instruments of power to address these emerging threats. The strategic imperative to master these different toolsets has never been more urgent, as it is clear that the rules of engagement are shifting and will require a change in our response. ELW will be at the forefront of developing creative, effective, and practical applications of economic and legal power for 21st-century regular *and* irregular statecraft.

These tools are not the exclusive domain of the military or intelligence communities— in fact, many fall well outside of such traditional activities. Their relevance spans government agencies, private industry, and civil society, which underscores the need to democratize strategic thinking beyond traditional mainstream circles. Keeping with IWI’s mission, we invite thinkers, practitioners, and skeptics alike to join the ELW Project as we challenge assumptions, propose new frameworks, and help shape the evolving contours of state interaction and the continuous struggle for advantage.

Author Bios

[Matthew Flug](#) is Of Counsel at DLA Piper, advising on mergers and acquisitions with expertise in insurance, indemnification, and transactional liability. He also counsels on D&O and cyber insurance. Matthew is a senior advisor to Presage Global, General Counsel of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, and serves on the board of Help Ukraine — Operation Palyanytsya. He holds degrees from Syracuse (J.D.), Johns Hopkins (M.S. Applied Economics), and American University (B.S. Business Administration & International Relations).

[Patrick Sweeney](#) is Founder and Principal of American Kestrel Global Strategies Group, a firm that specializes in aligning U.S. technology, services, and capital to support strategic priorities at home and abroad. Patrick previously served as Vice President at Business Executives for National Security. He earned degrees from the University of South Carolina (B.A.) and New York University (M.A.).

[Tom Johansmeyer](#) is a Political and International Relations Ph.D. candidate at the University of Kent, researching insurance and economic security with a focus on cyber. Based in Bermuda and also working in the reinsurance industry, he previously led Property Claim Services at Verisk, estimating the cost of disasters worldwide. A frequent writer and speaker on disaster risk, Tom is also a U.S. Army veteran who served in the late 1990s.

The views expressed are those of the authors 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.

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