

Innovative Thinking on the Role of Irregular Warfare in Strategic Competition: Key Insights from the Irregular Warfare Initiative and Joint Staff J7 Office of Irregular Warfare Essay Contest

Description

Lisa McKinnon Munde

Editor's note: Many thanks to our judging panel including Rich Tilley, Lauren Lyons, Amy Frumin, Katherine Muther Gilmore, David "Mojo" Garten, Chris Booth, Kyle Atwell, Amber Oliva, Catrina Doxsee, Kevin Bilms, and Lisa Munde.

The Irregular Warfare Initiative and the Joint Staff J7 Office of Irregular Warfare and Competition co-sponsored an [essay contest](#) to generate new ideas and expand the community of interest for irregular warfare in the context of strategic competition. Participants were asked how irregular warfare activities can help the United States address challenges presented by Russia and China in the context of strategic competition.

ESSAY PROMPT: *How can irregular warfare activities help the United States address challenges presented by Russia and China in the context of strategic competition?*

We received over sixty entries from a diverse group of participants, including undergraduate students, medical students, military personnel from all services within the US Department of Defense, foreign service officers from the US Department of State, as well as experts from industry, think tanks, the legal community, academic institutions, and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The contest generated a wealth of thought-provoking insights and ideas about the role of irregular warfare in competition—from leveraging lawfare for advantage to the role of offensive cyber operations to countering private military companies like the Wagner Group globally.

The range of innovative insights offered by authors underscores the need for continued dialogue and collaboration among policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to respond to security challenges in today's rapidly changing technological and geopolitical landscape. As an example of this dynamic environment, when we first began planning for this contest, Russia had yet to invade Ukraine and advanced AI platforms like [ChatGPT](#) were not yet released to the public. We hope that the ideas and recommendations from the contest will help inform future applications of irregular warfare (IW) and

enable the United States to deter malign activity from adversaries like Russia and China.

Overarching Trends and Insights from Entries

An analysis of the arguments and recommendations articulated from over sixty submissions pointed to four overarching insights at the intersection of irregular warfare and strategic competition: (1) the importance of acknowledging the central role of IW in strategic competition and future operating environments; (2) the criticality of investing in and fostering partnerships and building partner capacity; (3) the need for a comprehensive overhaul or reimagining of IW and its operating context; and (4) the imperative to identify gaps, opportunities, and areas that merit further investigation. The section below illuminates key insights around these themes, including excerpts from contest winners and finalists.

FOUR OVERARCHING TRENDS AND INSIGHTS FROM ENTRIES

1. *Importance of acknowledging the central role of IW in strategic competition and future operating environments.*
2. *Criticality of investing in and fostering partnerships and building partner capacity*
3. *Need for a comprehensive overhaul or reimagining of IW and its operating context.*
4. *Imperative to identify and address gaps, opportunities, and areas that merit further investigation*

Trend #1: Importance of acknowledging the central role of IW in strategic competition and future operating environments

Many essays highlighted the importance of irregular warfare in today's global landscape and argued that decision-makers should place greater emphasis on IW. Authors pointed out that in prioritizing irregular warfare and building capacity in this area, the United States and its partners can confront challenges from adversaries like Russia and China more effectively, while also mitigating the risk of unintended nuclear escalation.

Some pieces argued that conventional overmatch will be increasingly irrelevant, direct or conventional confrontation will not be useful or effective in geostrategic environments, and IW approaches should, therefore, be prioritized. Furthermore, focusing on irregular warfare can help to build collaboration with partners and counter adversaries in the process. As the US government examines the security landscape and develops approaches for the future, authors argued that it will be crucial to recognize and elevate the significance of irregular warfare and its role in shaping the future of activities across the competition continuum, including conflict.

Jacob Ware, whose [essay](#) was selected as a finalist, offered a unique perspective by pointing out that while somewhat counterintuitive at face value, effective counterterrorism capability underpins success in strategic competition and is a prerequisite for the joint force to be able to focus on campaigning and integrated deterrence. Ware notes that “beyond alliances, tactical counterterrorism also strengthens US bilateral relations with weaker partners plagued by insurgent threats. In the Belt-and-Road era, the United States must emphasize and offer its own comparative advantages, such as counterterrorism, to smaller states, to ward off Chinese influence. While higher-order goals of regime change or even democratization have consistently failed, more narrowly defined (though often maligned) missions to build capacity or to support allied-led counterterrorism and counterinsurgency capabilities have succeeded in strengthening partner forces and degrading terrorist adversaries. For evidence, look no further than the successful Kurdish ground campaign against the Islamic State in Syria. Supported by US intelligence and air assets, the Syrian Democratic Forces not only militarily defeated the terrorist organization, but also deepened its partnership with the United States.”

Trend #2: Criticality of investing in and fostering partnerships and building partner capacity

Given the timing of the contest amid conflict in Ukraine, many authors focused on countering Russian malign activity and praised US efforts between 2014 and 2022 that helped prepare Ukraine for their somewhat unlikely success thus far in the conflict. Nearly all essays highlighted the imperative to invest in partners and partnerships as a strategy for confronting Russia and China to mitigate their attempts to undermine the global order.

In recognition of fiscal realities, many authors made the business case for partnering in terms of the value of partner approaches both from a financial and effectiveness perspective. While many of the essays focused on traditional security assistance and ways the United States government should expand the scope and goals of such programs and initiatives, others focused on exploring non-traditional partnerships with industry (e.g., technology and manufacturing) and NGOs. Many authors highlighted that Russia and China are well-positioned to out-compete the United States as they are centralized, and therefore better at integrating whole-of-nation approaches.

In his piece, Cadet Anthony Marco argues for expanded security cooperation for countering Russian influence and the Wagner group in the Sahel. He points out that although “enacting a larger-scale, long-term regional approach to foreign internal defense comes with inherent risks, it would restore Western credibility in the region and offer an alternative to governments seeking to avoid the destructive effects of outsourcing to private military companies.”

While a majority of pieces focused on IW approaches for countering Russia, finalist Cliff Lucas [offers](#) insight on partnering to counter malign Chinese influence by noting that while “creating and training

resistance forces may seem antithetical to promoting stability in the region—advising partner nations in capabilities to patrol their shores and enforce international law provides an avenue to hold China accountable for its aggressive behavior more effectively.â•

In another China-focused piece, Midshipman Charles Wright explains how partners can enable overarching IW approaches and aid in tasks like logistics and resupply. He uses the example of the US Marine Corps and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations in the South China Sea by noting that “the Marine Corps has laid out a plan to populate islands with small unit ship killer teams that will assist in area denial missions of large enemy surface combatants. The difficult piece of this is inserting these teams and keeping them resupplied. Our partners in the area could utilize their knowledge of the waters to close that final distance of logistics.â•

Trend #3: Fundamentally Overhaul/Reimagine IW and the Operating Environment

These essays argued for a large-scale shift or overhaul in the way we conceptualize the nature and character of conflict, the operating environment, and the value and applications of IW. Authors characterized familiar advantages like air superiority and technological overmatch as outdated presuppositions—and as such argued that decisionmakers should instead prioritize IW and indirect or asymmetric approaches.

Many pieces argued for the United States to better exploit asymmetries by applying lessons learned from Iraq and Afghanistan, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, Dutch resistance in World War II, and appeals to leverage the collective memory of our own “revolutionary” roots. Authors also advocated a reimagining of IW activities as a “preventative” rather than a “reactionary” toolkit—with increased emphasis on unconventional warfare (UW), resistance, and civil affairs.

Cadet Hannah Lamb offers such a [reimagining in proposing a semi-doctrinal implementation of UW](#) noting that “an over-the-horizon UW campaign has potential to address the [National Defense Strategy](#) priority of limiting the expansion of adversarial spheres of influence, while simultaneously maintaining the Biden administration’s promise that it [will not insert American soldiers into Ukraine](#). This approach would entail the training and equipping of irregular Ukrainian fighters outside Ukraine in order to subvert the occupying force.â•

Trend #4: Gaps, Opportunities, and Areas to Explore

Given the dynamic operating environment, many authors focused on gaps and opportunities in several areas including in medical logistical support capability, lawfare, cyber operations, civil affairs, information domain, and AI. For example, many authors, including the contest winner, presented

arguments that the United States should be more proactive in leveraging AI and tech breakthroughs, including commercial technology, for advantage.

In his winning [essay](#), Moellering offers recommendations for contending with technological advances by pointing out that “in order to be effective in this space, the US military must change how it thinks about its operating environments, which requires integrating digital exhaust training into all exercises. This will help those on the ground better visualize how adversaries use their data against them and will create a culture that understands the importance of AI and how it can work for them. It will also help translate what operating in this new environment looks like for the experienced combat veteran who is well versed in irregular warfare but reluctant to adapt to the rapidly changing technologies that now permeate the operational space. And it will give operators a distinct advantage as the United States integrates its own AI tools into its intelligence and operations processes, as they will already be familiar with the benefits and vulnerabilities of AI.”

Michael Listner, another contest finalist, offered a perspective on the role of lawfare and articulated a call for “legal tiger teams” as specialized, cross-functional teams with diverse, specialized expertise to pursue “resourceful legal authorities outside of the mainstream.” Listner notes that “both the PRC and the Russian Federation recognize war exists outside of the Clausewitzian scope of kinetic warfare and the Westphalian view of war to include media, psychological, and legal facets. It is in this sphere both the PRC and the Russian Federation engage in great power competition to the detriment of the existing international legal system. The United States must recognize the reality of hybrid warfare and meet the challenge posed by its existence.”

In a particularly innovative essay on a topic that does not receive adequate emphasis from the IW community of interest, Mason H. Remondelli [opens a dialogue about the medical and casualty planning considerations associated](#) with “a conventional large-scale combat operation against a technologically comparable adversary [that] will also generate substantial combat casualties for US service members and create the need for prolonged-casualty care in a denied, hostile operational context.” He argues that “to address the challenges in combat casualty care elucidated by a theater-wide distributed multi-domain environment, policymakers and military leaders should establish irregular warfare trauma systems and covert medical intelligence networks to increase the US medical sphere of influence.”

On behalf of IWI and the JS J7 OIWC, we would like to extend our gratitude to those who answered the call and submitted a piece for this contest. Your contributions have been invaluable and have provided leaders with a diverse range of perspectives and insights to inform modern debates in irregular warfare. We appreciate the outstanding effort and thought that went into each submission and are proud of the opportunity to share them with the wider community of interest in the field of irregular

warfare via this piece. We look forward to continued engagement and ways to collaborate to bridge the gap between practitioners, scholars, and policymakers.

THE WINNING ESSAYS

GENERAL CATEGORY | WINNER AND FINALISTS

WINNER

[Captain Matthew Moellering, USA | Hiding in the Noise: Preparing the Irregular Warfare Community for the Age of AI](#)

The winning essay in the general category came from Captain Matthew Moellering, an Army Special Forces Officer in the second cohort of Army Artificial Intelligence Scholars at Carnegie Mellon University. His [essay](#) provides recommendations for how the IW and special operations communities might approach challenges and opportunities inherent in the rise of technologies like artificial intelligence and machine learning. His piece provides an analysis of the implications of emerging technologies from AI-enabled facial recognition technology for human intelligence or tradecraft to data poisoning of machine learning algorithms as well as recommendations for proactively contending with crucial yet often overlooked challenges like mitigating digital exhaust.

FINALISTS

[Major Clifford Lucas, USAF | In The Gray Zone, This Much is Black and White: SOF Must Develop Partner and Ally Nation Capabilities](#)

[Mr. Jacob Ware | The Enduring Importance of Tactical Counterterrorism for Strategic Competition](#)

[2nd LT Mason Remondelli, USA | Strengthening the Medical Sphere of Influence through Guerilla Trauma Systems and Covert Medical Intelligence Networks](#)

[Mr. Michael Listner, Esq. | Lawfare: Tiger Teams to Deploy Law in Hybrid Warfare](#)

[Major Juan Quiroz, USA | The Oblique Approach to Irregular Warfare: Civil Affairs as the main effort in Strategic Competition](#)

UNDERGRADUATE CATEGORY | WINNERS AND FINALISTS

WINNERS (TIE)

[Hannah Lamb \(USMA\) | Great Power Proxies: Opportunities for Unconventional Warfare in Ukraine](#)

Charles Wright (USNA) | How Irregular Warfare Activities Can Help the United States Address Challenges Presented by Russia and China in the Context of Strategic Competition

In the undergraduate category, Cadet Hannah Lamb from the United States Military Academy and Midshipman Charles Wright tied. Lamb shared an innovative approach for long-range unconventional warfare in Ukraine. Charles presented an argument for the United States to take a balanced approach to irregular warfare as an element of an overarching security strategy.

FINALISTS

Anthony Marco (USMA) | Forces of Destabilization: Countering Wagner Group in the Sahel

Sam Konen (USMA) | Irregular Warfare in Ukraine

Logan Bolan (Utah State) | And Two Shall Put Their Tens Of Thousands To Flight: Increasing the Pace of Innovation for Irregular Warfare in Allied Nations And Partners

Lisa McKinnon Munde directs IWI's Project Maritime, a special series focused on exploring challenges and opportunities at the intersection of irregular warfare and the maritime dimension. Lisa is a Hoover Veteran Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University whose research focuses on maritime security and ocean governance. She graduated from the United States Naval Academy, served as an intelligence officer, and holds an MA in Latin American studies from Stanford University. She is the Director of Plans, Doctrine, and Studies at Naval Special Warfare Command in Coronado, CA.

Photo: US Marine Corps by Sgt. William Chockey.

Date Created

2023/03/27