Irregular Warfare in 2024: Lessons Learned, Paths Forward

Description

2024 in Review: A Glimpse Ahead

The global security environment in 2024 proved as unpredictable as everâ??yet, beneath the headlines, several clear themes and patterns emerged. A review of our articles published throughout the year reveals deeper insights into how irregular warfare is evolving across multiple fronts, from the Indo-Pacific to the Sahel, and from space to the bottom of the sea. This was not a year of singular, decisive battles but of incremental advances and strategic maneuvering in unconventional ways.

In 2024 technology continued to be a transformative force, redefining the operational limits of both small insurgent groups and global superpowers. Actors wielded narratives and perceptions as critical tools in modern warfare. Partnerships and resilience played pivotal roles in shaping alliances, bolstering societal defenses, and destabilizing adversaries. Meanwhile, strategic competition in the gray zone blurred the lines between war and peace, making indirect warfare the centerpiece of great power rivalries. Below is a synthesis of major trends, lessons learned, and interesting data points that can help contextualize and forecast what might come next.

Disruptive Technologies

In 2024, technology cemented itself not merely as a tool but as a revolutionary force in irregular warfare, reshaping the contours of conflict and enabling actors to achieve strategic objectives. This shift showcased a range of capabilitiesâ??drones, cyber tools, space-based systems, and artificial intelligence (AI)â??that altered the operations of both state and non-state actors while exposing vulnerabilities that require urgent attention.

The modern battlefield exemplified this transformation, where Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) evolved from basic surveillance tools into strategic force multipliers. These drones now execute precision strikes, deliver logistical support, and perform in new ways every day. Adversaries like insurgents and narco-criminals have demonstrated remarkable ingenuity, adapting commercially available drones for offensive purposes, as explored in *Harnessing Insurgent and Narco-Criminal Drone Tactics for Special Operations*. Conversely, the inability of conventional forces to fully address this threat underscores the urgent need for improved counter-drone capabilities, as highlighted in *How*

the US Army Can Close its Dangerous and Growing Small Drone Gap.

Beyond traditional domains, the accessibility of space-based technology has redefined strategic competition. Once dominated by superpowers, satellite intelligence is now leveraged by smaller actors to gain operational advantages. The Wagner Group, for instance, utilized Chinese satellite intelligence to enhance situational awareness and precision targeting, a trend analyzed in *The Wagner Groupâ??s Use of Chinese Space Intelligence*. This democratization of orbital assets increases the complexity of competition, as the control and security of space-based systems become critical priorities for all actors.

Cyber capabilities have similarly grown as a key aspect of irregular warfare, becoming indispensable tools for economic sabotage, espionage, and influence. These operations often cloak attribution, allowing state actors to conduct sophisticated intelligence operations, control public perception, and exploit critical infrastructure. The vulnerabilities this creates are explored in *Secret Cyber Wars*, which examines how cyber tools are deployed covertly to destabilize adversaries. Exacerbating the problem, the integration of AI amplifies their reach, enabling actors to craft precision-targeted propaganda, manipulate public opinion through disinformation, and even employ deepfakes to erode trust in institutions.

AIâ??s impact extends beyond information warfare into operational efficiencies and decision-making processes. Pilotless systems capable of reconnaissance, swarm-based offenses, and surface and subsurface autonomous strikes have introduced new dimensions of unpredictability on the battlefield. Their transformative role is discussed in *Autonomous Ghosts â?¦ Reshaping Irregular Warfare*, which illustrated the lethality of these technologies. However, reliance on such systems also creates vulnerabilities. Cyberattacks, drone hacking, and satellite jamming threaten to neutralize technological advantages, as emphasized in *Eroding Global Stability: The Cybersecurity Strategies of China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran*, which highlights the growing reality of adversarial collusion.

AI and autonomous systems are revolutionizing warfare. Yet, they raise ethical concerns about accountability and decision-making, demanding new norms for the laws of war. As these technologies proliferate, the need for common standards becomes ever more pressing. 2025 will undoubtably see a growth in capabilities and a constant challenge to balance with ethical regulations.

Narrative and Perception as Weapons

In warfare, technologyâ??s influence goes far beyond tactical advancementsâ??it reshapes the narratives that drive perceptions and outcomes. The precision and reach of AI-driven propaganda, akin to the disruptive potential of drones, illustrates how innovation impacts both the physical and cognitive dimensions of conflict. Nowhere is this more evident than in social media, which is now the frontline for

amplifying messages in real-time. The Israeli Air Forceâ??s experience, detailed in *Winning the Operational Air Campaign but Losing the Information War*, underscores how failures in digital narrative management can undermine tactical victories. Similarly, in *Israelâ??s Pyrrhic Victory in the Gaza Strip*, the authors note that â??any nonstate actor or state with the right social media campaign has the ability to portray a *just war*,â?• showing us that real-time dissemination of open-source data can galvanize global sentiment against military actions, even when operational objectives are achieved.

In contrast, Ukraineâ??s transparent and consistent messaging, explored in *From the Shadows to the Social Sphere* and *I Want to Live: Psychological Warfare for the Modern Era*, demonstrates the power of cohesive narratives to rally domestic support and secure international aid. One author comments, â??Despite the Russian narrative aiming to disparage HUR [Ukraineâ??s military intelligence agency], the Ukrainian agencyâ??s actions reveal a nuanced truth. Diverging markedly from traditional intelligence practices, HUR has not only stepped out of the shadows but has also embraced transparency through active engagement on social media platforms.â?• This â??strategy of engagementâ?• serves as a blueprint for countering adversary propaganda and sustaining resilience during protracted conflicts.

However, narratives intersect with legal warfare, or lawfare, as detailed in *Combatting Russian Lawfare with a Cognitive Shield*, which the authors claim that â??the typology of Russian lawfare has been well-explored: some researchers distinguish up to 36 types of Russian lawfare, depending on the warfare domain and legal environment.â?• Russiaâ??s integration of legal systems and disinformation campaigns demonstrates the hybrid nature of these tactics, which challenge conventional responses and require coordinated legal, informational, and kinetic strategies.

Non-state actors have also leveraged narratives to gain legitimacy and influence. Groups like ISIS and the Taliban use popular platforms as powerful propaganda tools, where â??social media amplifies messages and ideologies, with every user potentially becoming a broadcaster. Perhaps most crucially, these platforms boost morale by instantly sharing successes, attracting support, and creating a global community among disparate groups.â?• These strategies are explored in *The Digital Battlefield: How Social Media is Reshaping Modern Insurgencies*.

Superior narratives have the power to reinforce public support, weaken adversary morale, and secure international legitimacy. Ukraineâ??s adept use of social media has been pivotal in countering Russian disinformation and maintaining Western support, while Israelâ??s challenges reveal how tactical successes can be overshadowed by failures in the information domain. At the same time, persistent disinformation campaigns erode societal trust and destabilize institutions, creating fertile ground for insurgencies and hybrid threats.

These lessons highlight that as competition increasingly centers on the contest of narratives, the ability to craft and sustain compelling stories is as critical as physical actions. Today, integrating narrative control into broader strategies is an essential component to ensuring that operational successes translate into lasting strategic advantages.

Partnerships, Resilience, and Humanitarian Leverage

The power to shape narratives is also inseparable from the strength of societal resilience and bolstering partnerships. Effective storytelling fosters collective identity and reinforces governance, while adversarial disinformation exploits societal fractures to sow instability. Throughout 2024, partnerships, resilience, and humanitarian dynamics emerged as essential pillars of enduring influence and stability. Whether through promoting cooperation among allies or exploiting adversariesâ?? vulnerabilities, these elements stressed the importance of trust and governance in navigating conflict and competition alike.

The value of genuine partnerships was perhaps most evident in Ukraineâ??s collaboration with NATO and other Western allies. As explored in *The Key to Ukrainian Victory Is Partnering, Not â??Ukrainifyingâ??*, partnerships rooted in mutual trust and aligned objectives proved far more sustainable than imposing external models. Ukraineâ??s ability to bolster its defense capabilities and societal resilience serves as a blueprint for fostering lasting alliances and mobilizing citizens â??one that Taiwan should take special note of. Conversely, Afghanistanâ??s collapse reminds us of the perils of neglecting legitimacy and local agency, a lesson detailed in *The Cacti and the Grass: The Collapse of Afghanistanâ??s Security Forces*.

Regional partnerships further highlight the importance of context-sensitive approaches. In West Africa, multinational coalitions attempted to stabilize fragile states amid insurgencies and external influence. *Shifting Sands: The Future of West Africaâ??s Power Dynamics and the Sahel Alliance* expressed the necessity of inclusive and adaptable strategies to navigate diverse environments and counter complex threats.

At the heart of these partnerships lies societal resilience, a strategic asset crucial for withstanding conflict and fostering long-term stability. Governance, social cohesion, and economic capacity emerged as key metrics for gauging resilience, as detailed in *A Guide for Measuring Resiliency*. The inability to address grievances or establish credible governance often leads to rapid societal collapse, leaving populations vulnerable to insurgencies and adversarial exploitation. This dynamic was evident in Afghanistanâ??s failure to maintain legitimacy, a cautionary tale for states navigating similar waters.

Humanitarian vulnerabilities also play a notable role in the competitive battle between threat actors. Adversaries weaponized migration and resource scarcity to exert geopolitical pressure and strain alliances, as examined in *People as a Weapons System: Moscow and Minskâ??s Continued Attempts to Weaponize Migration*. Similarly, historical reminders like *Dry Pipes, Liberated Water, and Struggles for Legitimacy*, reaffirm the historical importance of resource management as a lever of influence against a more capable military power.

Amid these challenges, renewable energy was presented as a unique opportunity to align humanitarian efforts with strategic objectives. As detailed in *Solar Diplomacy: The Role of Renewable Energy in Great Power Competition*, leadership in green technologies can project soft power while reducing vulnerabilities tied to resource dependence. This dual-use approach offers a pathway to influence without coercion, demonstrating the potential of resilience-building initiatives to shape competition dynamics.

These anecdotes reaffirm the importance of trust and credibility in forging effective partnerships and fostering resilient societies. Addressing grievances, promoting equity, and strengthening governance directly enhance institutional legitimacy, which is essential for stability. Conversely, neglecting these dynamics risks fracturing alliances and undermining long-term security. As the landscape increasingly intersects with humanitarian challenges, proactive investments in resilience, whether through renewable energy, resource management, or inclusive governanceâ??will be vital for mitigating risks and projecting influence. Balancing these dual objectives requires an integrated approach, blending development and security strategies to navigate convoluted geopolitics.

Gray Zone: Strategic Competition and Proxy Wars

The intricacies of gray zone activitiesâ??marked by deniable operations, economic coercion, and proxy conflictsâ??signals the importance of adaptability and coalition-building in modern warfare. Just as effective partnerships and resilience strengthen societal defenses, they are critical for navigating the ambiguity of this space, where actions become distorted lines between war and peace.

To this end, Chinaâ??s approach to the gray zone exemplifies a subtle and long-term strategy designed to reshape the international system and erode adversarial resilience without overtly acting and risking armed conflict. As explored in *Chinaâ??s Gray Zone Air Power* and *Beijingâ??s Long Game: Gray Zone Tactics in the Pacific*, Beijingâ??s gray zone tactics are employed to buy time and prepare for a potential kinetic conflict with the US. Like other gray zone actors, China prefers exploiting asymmetries and vulnerabilities to gain advantages. Some other irregular opportunities China employs are manipulating global trade networks, international law, supply chains, and financial systems, along

with covert cyber operations, while constantly striving to maintain a proactive force posture. These maneuvers, often deniable, reflect a comprehensive approach that integrates economic and political tools with military might.

Russia and Iran, too, continue to demonstrate strategic proficiency in the gray zone through the use of proxy forces and hybrid warfare. The Wagner Group and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, as analyzed in *Boxing with Shadows: Drawbacks in US Counterstrategies Against the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Russian Wagner Group*, extended their influence in Africa, while largely overlooked by most. Likewise, in Ukraine, Russiaâ??s hybrid strategies blended conventional and cyber warfare, and disinformation campaigns with proxy operations. *Two Years On: Russiaâ??s Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine and the Continuing Lessons for the Future of Irregular Warfare* and *The Age of Decentralized Information Warfare is Here* highlight how disinformation campaigns, advanced electronic warfare, and irregular forces have tested Ukraineâ??s sovereignty and NATOâ??s resolve, which have nevertheless remained largely intact.

The Middle East and North Africa provide additional examples of proxy warfare, illustrating an interwoven tapestry of sectarian, ideological, and power-based struggles. Articles on *Hamasâ??s military buildup*, Hezbollahâ??s potential transition (*â??The Day After Nasrallahâ?•*), and innovative warfare methods show the regional complexities that lie between military and political operations. In West Africa and the Sahel, gray zone competition takes a different shape. *Shifting Sands: The Future of West Africaâ??s Power Dynamics and the Sahel Alliance* examines how insurgencies, coups, and external interventions destabilize governance, creating an environment ripe for exploitation by state and non-state actors alike.

Economic and maritime domains also play a role in gray zone competition. The resurgence of privateering, discussed in *Irregular Warfare at Sea: Using Privateers to Seize Chinese Commerce*, demonstrates how economic disruption can merge with irregular operations to challenge adversaries on unconventional fronts. These examples highlight the versatility of gray zone tactics, which extend well beyond traditional military engagements.

Gray zone operations thrive on ambiguity, complicating deterrence and escalation management. Adversaries exploit this uncertainty to advance their objectives incrementally, often shielded from accountability using proxies, lawfare, or cyber operations. This lack of attribution undermines international norms and muddles collective security responses.

To counter gray zone tactics effectively, states must integrate all the tools at their disposal in an integrated manner, while fostering alliances and building resilience. Transparency and adaptability remain essential for outmaneuvering adversaries. The lessons of 2024 emphasize the need for

strategies that anticipate and disrupt gray zone maneuvers, reinforcing stability in an increasingly contested world.

A Year of Insights, a Future of Possibilities

Reflecting on the year, IWIâ??s 2024 essays paint a vivid picture of a world in flux. These developments offer several critical insights for practitioners, policymakers, and scholars of irregular warfare: *the transformative power of technology, the critical importance of shared legitimacy in partnerships, and the growing role of gray zone tactics in great power rivalries*. Beneath the surface of buzzwords like â??resilienceâ?• and â??legitimacyâ?• lies their undeniable truth: these concepts often tip the balance between success and failure. Irregular warfare is no longer a sideshow; it is at the epicenter where power is contested, and alliances are forged. This is a realm where success depends on mastering complexity and integrating whole-of-society strategies to outpace adversaries operating in the shadows.

Looking ahead to 2025, the challenge will not simply be to respond to these evolving dynamics, but to anticipate and shape them. The character of war has always adapted to its context, and todayâ??s context is one of nuance, interconnectivity, and relentless change. Itâ??s a daunting challenge, but one that reminds us of a fundamental truth: resilient societies, anchored by credible institutions and compelling narratives, are best positioned to endure. As the rules of engagement evolve, so too must IW strategies. This is not about fighting harder or even smarter; it is about staying one step ahead in a contest defined by shifting boundaries and deniable actions. The future of warfare is [irregular] one where resilience, creativity, and the ability to shape narratives will determine the balance of power.

To those navigating this shifting terrain, whether as a practitioner or scholar: your role is vital. The lessons of 2024 illustrate the importance of rigor, creativity, flexibility, and foresight. The coming year will demand the same relentless commitment to innovation and collaboration. As irregular warfare becomes the defining feature of modern conflict, let us not merely adapt to the rules but redefine them. After all, the greatest advantage lies not in mastering the game but in changing it entirely.

Thank you!

This yearâ??s achievements were made possible by a diverse and dedicated community of contributors, readers, and partners. Your insights and expertise have pushed boundaries, sparked debates, and advanced our collective understanding. Whether through in-depth essays, podcast contributions, collaborative research, or thought-provoking discussions, youâ??ve been at the heart of IWIâ??s growth.

To our volunteers, who tirelessly lend their time and talents, and to our partner organizations, who amplify our impactâ??thank you. Your contributions have been invaluable in shaping a shared vision for the future of irregular warfare.

As we turn the page to 2025, IWI remains committed to fostering dialogue, sparking innovation, and championing collaboration. Together, weâ??ve laid a strong foundation, and thereâ??s much more to achieve. I invite each of you to stay engagedâ??share your perspectives, challenge assumptions, and collaborate on the ideas that will define the next chapter.

In a world marked by constant upheaval, the work we do together isnâ??t just importantâ??itâ??s essential. Thank you for being part of this journey. Letâ??s continue to shine a light on new pathways toward shared awareness, stability, and security.

Keep Warfare Irregular!

Sincerely,

Guido Torres
Executive Director

Irregular Warfare Initiative

Top 10 Most Read Articles of 2024

Weâ??re thrilled to highlight our top 10 most read articles. This year has brought remarkable insights into irregular warfare, strategic competition, and unconventional tactics shaping the strategic environment. Hereâ??s what resonated most with our audience:

1. **Russian Electronic Warfare: From History to the Modern Battlefield**
   Explore the evolution of Russiaâ??s electronic warfare capabilities, from Cold War strategies to their deployment on todayâ??s battlefields.
2. **Harnessing Insurgent and Narco-Criminal Drone Tactics for Special Operations**
   Delve into the innovative use of drones by insurgents and narco-criminals and how special operations forces can adapt these tactics.
3. **A Full Spectrum of Conflict Design: How Doctrine Should Embrace Irregular Warfare**
   Rethinking military doctrine to fully integrate irregular warfare into the spectrum of conflict design.
4. **I Want to Live: Psychological Warfare for the Modern Era**
   A fascinating look at how psychological warfare evolves to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

5. **The Wagner Groupâ??s Use of Chinese Space Intelligence**
Unpacking the Wagner Groupâ??s reliance on Chinese satellite intelligence for operations.
6. **Eroding Global Stability: The Cybersecurity Strategies of China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran**
Analyzing how state-sponsored cyber activities destabilize global security.
7. **Irregular Warfare at Sea: Using Privateers to Seize Chinese Commerce**
Revisiting the concept of privateering as a strategic tool in maritime irregular warfare.
8. **Arctic Defense: The US Needs Polar Special Operations Forces Aligned With the 5 SOF Truths**
A call to action for specialized operations in the increasingly contested Arctic region.
9. **Bridging the Gap: Why Conventional Forces Need Irregular Warfare Training**
Highlighting the importance of irregular warfare training for conventional military forces.
10. **The Age of Decentralized Information Warfare is Here**
Examining the rise of decentralized information operations and their implications for the future of conflict.

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