

Irregular Warfare in the 21st Century: Autocracy's Global Playbook

Description

Anne Applebaum, [Autocracy, Inc. The Dictators Who Want to Run the World](#), (Penguin Random House 2024)

Irregular warfare (IW), often hailed as the [oldest](#) form of warfare, remains an enigma within the US defense apparatus and government at large. The Department of Defense (DoD) offers [conflicting definitions](#), while Congress's attempt at clarification in the [National Defense Authorization Act \(NDAA\) for Fiscal Year 2024](#) only muddies the waters further. This definitional quagmire, as Lieutenant General (Ret.) Michael Nagata astutely [observed, has left the United States struggling in its efforts to become](#) the most effective practitioner [of IW] around the world.▪

While the United States grapples with semantics, its adversaries have wholeheartedly embraced IW as their preferred mode of confrontation. Autocratic forces, both in liberal and illiberal polities, are dismantling borders to establish a globalized support network that ensures their survival and enables their coordinated efforts to reshape the post-1989 world order.

<https://irregularwarfareinsider.podbean.com/e/irregular-warfare-in-the-21st-century-autocracy-s-global-playbook>

Enter Anne Applebaum's latest work, *Autocracy, Inc.* Set for release on July 23rd, this book offers a compelling account of how autocrats are collectively fortifying their domestic and international power. Applebaum, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for *The Atlantic*, isn't breaking new ground in exposing this cooperative network. [Hal Brands](#), [Samantha Power](#), and [Maria Stephan](#) have been writing about autocratic forces working in tandem to spread their influence and nourish their survival since about 2021. Rather, the value of *Autocracy, Inc.* lies in its detailed analysis of modern autocratic cooperation, its juxtaposition of current challenges with historical episodes of repression, and its guidance on how to fight back.

In presenting her case, Applebaum paints an alarming picture of contemporary autocratic power and reach, while, perhaps unknowingly, revealing how the United States' autocratic adversaries are coalescing around common IW advantages. Viewed through the lens of IW, Applebaum's analysis makes clear that countering Autocracy, Inc.'s efforts requires both understanding their intricacies and investing in initiatives that undermine their efficacy while still embodying the very democratic

values they are employed to dismantle.

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Misinformation/Disinformation

Disinformation in warfare may be as old as war itself and is even permitted under international humanitarian law. However, Autocracy, Inc.'s tactics, depart from traditional disinformation campaigns in both kind and degree. Rejecting battlefield delimitations, autocrats pursue a permanent and comprehensive struggle against their opponents, exploiting globalized information and communication technologies. The Internet has become their potent IW tool, allowing autocratic forces to inject unrealities directly into foreign populations, bolstering their legitimacy while stoking political and social discord.

Having honed their distortion skills by constricting and contorting the information funnel vis-Ã -vis their populations, autocratic leaders now exploit global information networks. They employ tactics such as information laundromats sites mimicking legitimate news organizations to propagate foreign-produced fake news. Russia, China, and Iran make their falsehoods appear local and credible to foreign audiences. Today, Russia can not only convince its own citizens about American biolabs or that Ukraine was responsible for the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 but also convince citizens and even some decision-makers in democratic societies of the same. Americans witnessed this first-hand last year when Republican congress members stalled military aid to Ukraine while reiterating Kremlin-bred falsehoods.

Applebaum also draws out the not-so-coincidental connections between seemingly isolated efforts of autocrats in Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and elsewhere to use communication technologies to project their distortions around the world, poisoning the well of potential US partnerships with countries in Africa, Latin America, and beyond. She also warns that less malign forms of Beijing-controlled media are becoming increasingly available across the developing world, projecting softer, more favorable images of China in the hopes of accruing foreign support in a zero-sum game of global influence.

Lawfare

In terms of elusive American concepts, IW stands in good company with lawfare, recognized as first officially entering the American security lexicon in 2001 decades after China integrated it into its military doctrine in the 1960s. Today, the powers-that-be in Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and the like have

outgrown the limited [categories](#) of lawfare described in Orde Kittrieâ??s leading [book](#) on the subject. Autocratic forces are now working in harmony to rejigger the moral and legal underpinnings of the international system; gain influence and legitimacy at the expense of the United States and its allies; and normalize actions that, while currently illegal, are necessary to meet their autocratic objectives.

For example, Chinese talk of win-win cooperation and Russian amplification of a new multipolar world order are packaged to promote an idea of greater fairness and equality than the current US-centric world can offer. The normalization of the abnormal in Syria, where Russian and Syrian forces used UN coordinates to strike hospitals during the Syrian Civil War, further encapsulates how autocrats are seeking to rewire what is considered â??acceptableâ?• to serve their needs and interests. These autocratic forces are also pressing forward a narrative of the erosion of universal values, decrying notions of democracy, freedoms, and liberties as decadent or globalist. Take, for example, Putinâ??s portrayal of Russiaâ??s war against Ukraine as â??fighting for the freedom of not only Russia but the whole worldâ?• and that the â??dictatorship of one hegemonâ?is decrepit.â?• It is not difficult to guess what â??one hegemonâ?• he is invoking.

Autocrats have also learned to copy and paste the language of repressive legislation from one another to control their populations under the guise of â??rule of law.â?• Uganda, Yemen, Cambodia, and several other countries have passed laws to â??catchâ?• activists pressing for reform that are modeled on Russian and Chinese anti-extremism legislation. Many of these laws also target NGOs, charities, and academic programs with possible foreign links or funding. Investigations and prosecutions are lodged against civic organizations and their members using laws criminalizing â??foreign agentsâ?• and â??terrorism.â?• These laws, while domestically aimed, amplify and legitimize autocratic accusations and narratives that anyone fighting for democratic reform poses a national security threat and is nothing but a US-sponsored foreign spy. Such portrayals cut deeply against American soft power.

Proxies and Security Assistance

During the Cold War, proxy strategies earned a reputation as a means of conducting â??[war on the cheapâ?](#)• while avoiding direct, kinetic confrontation. Today, autocrats are capitalizing on proxy forcesâ?? value to secure a better return on their IW influence and legitimacy-seeking investments. By financing not only traditional proxies like Hamas, Hezbollah, and Houthi rebels, which are linked to Iran but also [modern private security and military forces](#), like Russiaâ??s Wagner Group (or â??[Africa Corpsâ?](#)•), Autocracy, Inc. seeks to generate new security dilemmas that put pressure on the democratic systems of its foes while helping its autocratic friends retain a firm, repressive grip over their populations. Indeed, these forces have started building their own sub-support network. Last fall,

the *Wall Street Journal* [reported](#), based on U.S. intelligence, that the Wagner Group was planning to send the Pantsir-S1, an anti-aircraft artillery system, to Hezbollah.

China has [learned](#) from watching Iran and Russia, slowly [growing out](#) its networks of proxies and private military and security companies. This growth, which helps autocrats expand their regional and global influence, has [significant consequences](#) in the modern era of great power competition where the struggle for influence is intentionally maintained below the level of armed conflict. China's entry into the market of private security forces is coupled with its increasing exportation of its [domestic security model](#). The proliferation of Chinese surveillance technology around the world not only raises Beijing's global profile as a reliable provider of domestic security assistance vis-à-vis the United States but also creates an avenue for the technology's legitimization and normalization, embedding Autocracy, Inc.'s values and interests in liberal and illiberal societies alike.

In warning that the political elites who depend on Chinese surveillance technology may feel obligated to align themselves politically with China to retain power, Applebaum nevertheless overlooks the complexities of contemporary [great power security competition](#), making her claim seem speculative and attenuated even if there is evidence to support it. As Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Isaac Kardon [have explained](#), while countries have sought to play the United States and China off each other to get the best deal for distinct security objectives, authoritarian leaders accepting U.S. aid may feel compelled to seek more Chinese domestic security assistance not because of some allegiance to China but because of a desire to balance against the view of the United States as a conduit for promoting human rights and political liberties.▪

Understanding the Mission and Fighting Back

After demonstrating how today's autocrats are uniting to secure their survival and global status, Applebaum offers several recommendations for countering Autocracy, Inc. Among them is a directive to those committed to safeguarding democracy in their own countries and abroad to double down on their fidelity to democratic values. This includes promoting the notion of democracy and freedom as a real, viable alternative by using the legal avenues available in democracies to go after autocrats, their schemes, and their resources. It also means undermining autocratic forces in the [Information War](#), including by supporting current programs set up to fight and expose the epidemic of information laundering.▪ Such programs include the State Department's [Global Engagement Center](#) (GEC), founded in 2016 to pre-bunk misinformation campaigns before they launch.

Implementing these strategies requires redirecting resources and channeling a new level of creativity. [For example](#), in order to counter the spread of repressive Chinese security technology and assistance,

the United States must find a way to develop security assistance packages that can compete with Chinaâ??s while remaining committed to democratic values. Therefore, these efforts will need all the help they can get from policymakers and legislators.

Unfortunately, it looks like Washington may be headed in the opposite direction.

Last month, the House of Representatives [passed](#) its version of the 2025 NDAA. The [2024 NDAA](#) included provisions for countering disinformation and propaganda campaigns; combating malign foreign influence domestically; protecting against undue influence; promoting public diplomacy through engagements like Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Africa, and Radio Free Americas; and supporting the GEC. The [2025 bill](#) budgets for none of these. While the [Senate version](#) officially introduced last week by the chamberâ??s Armed Services Committee calls for coordinating and amplifying U.S. public messaging efforts with the GEC, a State Department official not authorized to speak publicly expressed to me his concern that, â??as things stand, the U.S. government could lose its only congressionally mandated center for countering the threat of Russian and Chinese misinformation overseas.â?•

The impact of efforts like the GEC is real. My parents distinctly remember the lengths their families in Poland went through to tune into Radio Free Europe and the inspiration it gave everyday people who wanted to bring Poland out from under Soviet communism. They also remember living in constant fear of the SÅ?uÅ¼ba BezpieczeÅ?stwa (Ministry of Internal Affairs Security Service) and Milicja Obywatelska (Citizensâ?? Militia), organizations responsible for the murders of democratic activists like Jerzy PopieÅ?uszko and Grzegorz Przemysk.

Today, rather than funding secret police units, autocrats have learned how to economize on terror tactics by weaponizing information. Applebaum, the wife of Polandâ??s current foreign minister, discusses how a smear campaign ended in 2019 when a man who had watched state propaganda television from jail murdered a Polish opposition politician. On January 6, 2021, after [disinformation](#) about a democratic election and new administration drove a mob to storm the U.S. Capitol, my parents, who never once second-guessed their decision to come to America, questioned whether there was hope for democracy anywhere if it was not possible hereâ??which is exactly what Autocracy, Inc. wants the world to believe.

In her [2021 article](#) that evolved into this book, Applebaum lamented that â??the bad guys are winning.â?• Yet, as she notes in her epilogue, all hope is not lost. Autocracy, Inc. can be stopped, but it requires effort from those living in liberal societies to â??make the effortâ?• to preserve their free and open way of life. This means learning to fightâ??and beatâ??Autocracy, Inc. and its subsidiaries in the IW arena they have mastered.

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The views expressed are those of the author 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: President of Russia Vladimir Putin with President of China Xi Jinping during Putin's state visit to China, May 16, 2024 (Kremlin.ru via [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Correction: A previous version of this article indicated that the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) was founded in 2023. It was founded in 2016.

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