

Dominating Conflict's Leading Edge: Five Principles for an Assertive Irregular Warfare Doctrine

Description

A new US president took office on January 20th, and will confront a dangerous national security environment shaped by Irregular Warfare (IW) challenges. From cyber warfare and gray zone conflicts to terrorism and insurgency, these challenges demand immediate, actionable solutions. As 2024 came to a close, the Irregular Warfare Initiative invited readers to contribute fresh, pragmatic, and non-partisan policy recommendations to help shape the next administration's approach to these threats. In our third article, Brandon Kirch presents the five key pillars to a new irregular warfare strategy.

Over the course of one week in late October, [North Korean troops](#) appeared in Ukraine, Israel launched [retaliatory air strikes](#) against Iran, and news broke that [Russia provided targeting data to the Houthis](#) in support of their effort to disrupt global shipping. These events occurred less than a month after [Israel invaded Lebanon](#), and only two weeks before a US presidential election. More recently, Syria's Assad Regime [collapsed](#) entirely and was replaced by a [new government](#) rife with terrorist affiliations. As a tepid ceasefire in Lebanon approaches its [expiration date](#), the time and space between international escalation cycles is decreasing. The Trump administration has taken office amidst a [volatile geopolitical environment](#) that will likely demand a majority of their bandwidth for the term's first 100 days, if not longer. A layered irregular warfare strategy will be essential if the US wishes to avoid further destabilization and reverse the [ever-increasing risk](#) of direct involvement in a broader war. Though specifics will depend on the events which unfold during the term, here are five principles that should be applied to develop an irregular warfare (IW) strategy to manage the gray zone's current challenges.

1. Accept Risk

The [cult of de-escalation](#) has [demonstrated](#) itself to be unfounded, particularly since the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine and Israel. Likewise, it is not escalatory to match activity an adversary is already conducting. If effective deterrence requires capability and credibility, then concerns about escalation or [triggering World War III](#), even when dealing with proxy forces, have so far only served to undermine the credibility half of that formula. [Ongoing](#) Houthi harassment of global shipping

lanes and [attacks against Israel](#), for example, warrant an offensive response targeting leadership and command and control, as opposed to [reactive strikes](#) against replaceable weapon systems. As nefarious geopolitical actors move with [increasing boldness](#) in the gray zone, the US must be able to counter with even stouter strategic momentum.

The [escalation concerns](#) echoing from [isolationist wings](#) of [both parties](#) are short-sighted and [overly cautious](#) excuses to ignore geopolitical reality. The new administration must argue to its populist constituencies that the domestic issues many voters prefer to focus on will be moot if a robust global deterrence posture is not maintained.

2. Proxy Deterrence

The new administration should increase efforts to arm, train, and equip partners and allies under threat from state and non-state adversaries. A [bloodletting](#) strategy involves staying on the sidelines while two adversaries exhaust each other in a long, drawn-out conflict. This doesn't require both nations to deplete all their resources. Instead, by equipping our allies with the tools to dominate their current fight, we can make these [make small wars shorter](#) and more costly for the aggressor, while also strengthening U.S. deterrence by showing the futility of attacking a U.S. ally. Special attention should be given to Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan. However, sufficiently arming allies like Kenya, Jordan, India, the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan, amongst others, in the near term would pay dividends later by making future small wars less appealing to aggressors.

Additionally, partner forces need not be limited to state actors. Although its landlocked geography complicates targeting efforts, serious consideration should be given to providing lethal aid to Afghanistan's [anti-Taliban resistance](#) groups, and/or conducting kinetic strikes on counterterrorism targets, be it [ISIS-K](#) or the [al Qaeda](#) presence that [continues to expand](#) since the re-establishment of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. It is unlikely that the Trump administration has any desire to touch Afghanistan's [both campaigns](#) rhetoric self-imposed a prohibition on re-engaging in that conflict but doing so could simultaneously deny terrorists safe haven, undermine credibility of the Taliban Regime, and discourage [PRC engagement](#) in the country.

3. Information Exposure

Both [state](#) and [non-state](#) actors are successfully using [information operations](#) as an irregular warfare strategy to counter US influence and credibility, and to cause chaos in the information space. Over the last decade, disinformation has created a bizarre public sentiment where default rejection of

[government credibility](#) and patriotic [western exceptionalism](#) co-exist without contradiction. The collective effort has been so successful that direct illumination and corrections of [adversary disinformation](#) by US authorities is [not considered credible](#) by large sections of the [US general population](#). In many cases, the direct revelation of an [adversary disinformation](#) effort by government entities can easily discredit the activity as merely another [“deep state”](#) lie.

Alternatively, the exposure of an adversary’s lie or secret activity which is plausibly inadvertent, rather than exposed through an official press release, can still be accepted by the public writ large by playing into patriotic sentiments without its credibility having been “tainted” by domestic political bias. US federal departments and the intelligence community’s agencies should seek avenues of information exposure through commercial and media sectors while declining to take credit, and when possible, avoiding noticeable involvement in the revelation at all.

4. Aggressive Economic Posture

Efforts by the PRC to [replace the dollar as the world currency](#) are under-appreciated threats to US national security, and [constitute an IW effort](#), but the economic sphere also offers irregular avenues of countering gray zone competition.

Proactive engagement with international development partners presents an opportunity to highlight how [China’s lack of rigor in development projects in other countries has led to the proliferation of unnecessary and unproductive projects, with critical infrastructure built in the wrong locations, using sub-standard materials and based on faulty assumptions about expected returns](#). This approach also allows for framing economic alignment with China as a poor investment, while offering western alternatives (US or otherwise). Disrupting the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) makes a Chinese global presence more difficult to maintain and impedes China’s ability to conduct irregular warfare against the US and its partners.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of [building resiliency into supply chains](#). [Decoupling from adversaries](#), with special focus given to Chinese-based manufacturing, combined with economic measures to incentivize the transfer of the manufacturing base to friendlier emerging economies like India, the Philippines, Vietnam, Brazil, and Mexico, would better protect the defense industrial base against material shortages during conflict. Industries with essential national security implications, such as microprocessors or aerospace research and development, which are currently based in vulnerable partner regions like [Taiwan](#) and [South Korea](#), could be relocated to the continental US for enhanced supply chain security. While corporate ownership could remain under foreign partners, leveraging geography to secure these industries serves the mutual interests of both the US

and its allies.

Additionally, in an effort to compliment the recent [Executive Orders declaring an energy emergency which focus mostly on fossil fuel dominance](#), the current administration needs to not forget the full range of energy options available, including nuclear and green energy options. The US has been a [net-energy exporter since 2019](#), but continued to draw from [Russia](#) and [other nations](#) for some level of direct imports. This is how Russia's Vladimir Putin was [previously able](#) to maintain leverage over Europe, specifically [Germany](#), since 2014. The US [cut off Russian crude](#) oil in 2022, but it remains dangerously dependent on imported petroleum. Of the [6 million barrels](#) of oil imported each day, [over a third](#) originates from outside of North America. Even as a net-exporter, this arrangement exposes the US to a risk of disrupting day-to-day resupply in the event that a global emergency forces a rearrangement of domestic supply routes.

5. Don't Overthink It

Irregular warfare is a [holistic methodology](#) like [counterinsurgency](#) or [Joint Operations](#), not an isolated warfighting domain. The tools and talent required to execute irregular warfare skillfully already exist within the [Department of Defense](#) and the federal [inter-agency](#) if and when [culture and bureaucracy](#) allow for them to be used. [Creating a dedicated service branch or new Department of Irregular Warfare](#) would miss the point that an effective irregular warfare strategy requires implementation across the force. Such an entity likely would not have the desired impact if the [risk-adverse](#) rigidity that prevented traditional entities from conducting irregular warfare continues to be pervasive in policymaking corridors.

Yet, an irregular strategy still requires support from the conventional realm. A robust irregular warfare effort likely would need to exist in parallel with [freedom of navigation](#) missions in key [sea](#) and [air lanes](#), the [Western Pacific](#), the [Arctic](#), and global [choke points](#) in order to maintain an advantageous posture for irregular warfare operations. The joint force would also continue to require [funding, equipment, and training](#) to a degree that ensures the capability and credibility of conventional US deterrence efforts.

Overlapping Effects

When applied together, the above irregular warfare principles can enable a robust and assertive global deterrence posture [without large deployments](#) of troops to ground combat zones like those seen during the Global War on Terror. Enabling proxies, protecting trade and fostering economic development, and the countering of disinformation narratives with finesse and discretion creates a series of overlapping

and sustainable effects that protect US interests while also preventing the escalation of localized conflict. These combined strategies would work toward [keeping wars small](#) and ideally short.

The challenge policymakers will face is managing a volatile geopolitical environment that [requires US engagement](#) while simultaneously placating a population that is [increasingly isolationist](#) and indifferent to geopolitical events. Americans generally understand conventional actions like strategic bombing and amphibious landings, but can struggle to appreciate the practical impact of more indirect concepts like [economic warfare](#) or the benefit of [supporting a proxy force](#). In the long run, the residual impact of these strategies answer that challenge by addressing the major [bi-partisan concerns](#) expressed by voters during the 2024 election: improving the [economy](#), reducing the [cost of goods](#), and avoiding heavy [entanglement in foreign wars](#).

Some constituencies [may not care](#) that 21st century gray zone dynamics [necessitate US engagement](#) or understand that such engagement requires an [approach](#) more closely resembling Sun Tzu than Clausewitz. However, by employing these irregular warfare principles, elected and appointed policymakers can justify foreign involvement with results that answer the demand signals of recent [polls](#) and [elections](#). By doing so, the US can balance national interests and public expectations, thus securing strategic dominance, influence, and legitimacy both abroad and at home.

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