

## Redefining Irregular Warfare: Legitimacy, Coercion, And Power

### Description

by David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks

The Department of Defense is working on a new definition of irregular warfare, and the stakes are surprisingly high. The danger lies not just in forgetting whatever was learned from twenty years of engagement with substate actors through counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. Rather, in seeking to apply the term to state-based actors, the better to capture the subversive approach being used by America's principal adversaries, there is a risk that irregular warfare will lose all its meaning. The issue is certainly not that irregular warfare is irrelevant to the strategic competition at hand—quite the contrary—but rather that the US military system is proving too traumatized by its counterinsurgency past, and too mired in its own orthodoxies, to grasp the contribution of the term. Before the value that irregular warfare provides is lost, an interrogation of its meaning is necessary. On this basis, this article sets out a reworked definition of irregular warfare, one that retains its crucial focus of on legitimacy, coercion, and political power but that is also applicable to interstate competition.

*This Irregular Warfare Initiative article was originally posted through our partner organization, the Modern War Institute at West Point. Continue reading the full article [here](#).*

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