

The Pentagon Just Issued New Guidance on Irregular Warfare: What Does It Say and Why Should You Care?

Description

On September 29, 2025, the Pentagon released a new Department of Defense Instruction (DODI), numbered 3000.07 and titled [“Irregular Warfare.”](#)¹ Clocking in at 32 pages and consisting of 80 to 90 percent highly technical or moderate jargon (according to a ChatGPT analysis of its text), the new DODI nonetheless made a splash across the irregular warfare community of interest. Why is that? What does the new DODI say (in plain English), what does it mean, and what is its likely impact? I’ll answer those questions in turn.

Why is this news?

Let’s start with an obvious and reasonable question: Why should anyone outside of some deeply wonky offices in the Pentagon care about a new DOD instruction? To answer that, it’s worth briefly explaining what came before. The U.S. military’s understanding of irregular warfare has a [long history of change](#), but the term was [defined in 2008](#) as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s).”

While that definition suited the U.S. military’s experiences with the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, in the years that followed, the definition became less and less satisfying. [Scholars of irregular warfare](#) have advanced numerous criticisms of this definition, not least of which is its emphasis on violence, since it seemed to omit non-violent activities such as information operations. In the wake of the Pentagon’s issuance of the [2018 National Defense Strategy](#) and its emphasis on competition between the U.S. and its peer or near-peer states, the definition’s limitation to state versus non-state actors seemed to preclude irregular warfare as a [tool of competition](#)—an implication that even cursory scholarship of the Cold War would render ridiculous. The [Irregular Warfare Annex](#) to the 2018 strategy tried to update the definition and improve its [relevance for competition](#), but that document was rendered irrelevant when DOD superseded the 2018 NDS with a [new version in 2022](#) that did not have such an annex and made only three minor mentions of irregular warfare.

The new DODI is news, therefore, primarily because it formally updates the U.S. military’s definition of irregular warfare (IW), as follows:

IW is a form of warfare where states and non-state actors campaign to assure or coerce states or other groups through indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities. IW provides an important complement to other joint force activities, operations, and investments in both competition and conflict.

Addressing some critiques of the prior definition, this new rendering expands the aperture to encompass violent and non-violent activities, all manner of actors, and the spectrum of both pre-war competition and war itself. While the definition's emphasis on indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities could limit what may fall into this category of warfare, the other changes comprise a considerable broadening from what came before.

On a wonkier note, the DOD Instruction is news within military policy circles because it replaces a [DOD Directive](#). The change [suggests a shift](#) from high-level policy statement (a directive) to more detailed implementation and managerial guidance (an instruction). That change is evident by the more than doubling in length of the new document relative to its predecessor, with the bulk of its additional pages dedicated to lists of detailed tasks for the military services, combatant commands, and other entities. The DODI also goes beyond the issuance of tasks and includes requirements (e.g., by the Joint Staff) for assessments of progress in the accomplishment of those tasks and the furtherance of irregular warfare capabilities across the U.S. military. The DODI is thus both a statement of policy and an implementation plan.

What do these changes mean?

The broadening of the new definition goes even further than adding non-violent activities and state-based competition. The new instruction explicitly adds space and cyber as domains in which the military can conduct irregular warfare. It states that irregular warfare is not solely the purview of special operations forces but is expected of conventional forces as well. It allows for the conduct of irregular warfare reactively to counter adversary activities that threaten U.S. interests as well as proactively, to create dilemmas, deny access, or subvert an adversary's capability and capacity to engage in aggressive or coercive behaviors. It directs the uniformed services to develop and maintain the military capability to conduct or support IW as a core competency. It asserts that DOD will conduct irregular warfare in permissive, semi-permissive, and hostile environments as well as in denied areas. And it says that the Pentagon's forces will conduct irregular warfare in collaboration with, and in support of, other U.S. government agencies, foreign allies and partner nations, relevant international organizations, and other necessary mission partners, which presumably includes proxy and surrogate forces. These statements appear to more forcefully direct much of what the 2018 IW Annex attempted to establish.

In addition to these broadening aspects, the new DODI also expands the list of specific activities to be considered explicitly as irregular warfare. While it includes missions such as unconventional warfare, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency as did the previous directive, it adds counterthreat finance, counter-transnational organized crime, operations in the information environment, and aspects of security cooperation and security force assistance that were mentioned in the IW Annex but not so explicitly included in prior guidance. It also broadens the purpose of irregular warfare. While the new definition itself states that the U.S. conducts IW “to assure or coerce states or other groups,” other paragraphs of the DODI add that irregular warfare will be used to “erode an adversary’s legitimacy, influence, and political will” or bolster “the legitimacy, influence, and political will of allies and partners engaged in a political struggle or confronting acute forms of coercion.”

At this point, you may (rightly) be wondering what is *not* irregular warfare? If it consists of violent and non-violent activities conducted by special operations and conventional forces in all domains and environments, reactively and proactively, with or against allies, adversaries, state and non-state actors, for the purposes of stabilization or destabilization, is there anything left that doesn’t qualify as IW?

On this point, the new DODI provides little in the way of explicit limitations. The definition itself emphasizes “indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities,” which attempts to carve out a more limited space than the whole of the U.S. military’s activities. However, one need only to look at the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan to recognize that some of the activities the DODI calls out expressly as irregular warfare—counterinsurgency, for example—were hardly “non-attributable.” The same can be said about the military’s security force assistance and counterterrorism activities worldwide, many of which were publicized in [press releases](#) of the commands and organizations conducting them.

There are two additional, potential limiters of what might be considered irregular warfare that can be inferred from the DODI. The first is that irregular warfare should be conducted as part of a whole of government effort, synchronized with the activities of other relevant U.S. government agencies. The implication of this emphasis is that irregular warfare should not be something DOD conducts in a vacuum. The second is that irregular warfare should be conducted as a *campaign*, or a set of activities synchronized in time and space, and across domains, to achieve higher-order effects. In other words, DOD should avoid conducting irregular warfare activities as “one-off” events. Yet, in neither of these cases does the DODI say that isolated or singular military activities are *not* the realm of irregular warfare. The DODI thus represents not just a semantic redefining of irregular warfare, but an attempt to blow the doors off the confines of its prior interpretations that may exceed the comfort level or risk tolerance of some senior decision makers.

What impact will this have?

As the observations above make clear, the net effect of the DODI could be a substantial intellectual expansion of irregular warfare capabilities and activities. This is further bolstered by the instruction's guidance on the Irregular Warfare Center (IWC), a relatively new entity that was created by an [act of Congress](#) to help institutionalize lessons of the United States's post-9/11 irregular wars and educate military leaders on the challenges of irregular warfare now and in the future. The instruction's language on the IWC helpfully clarifies its roles, position, and standing within the department and hopefully will empower the IWC to fulfill its mission. Beyond that, the instruction's detailed lists of tasks to subordinate entities and inclusion of regular, required assessments of the accomplishment of those tasks and the military's irregular warfare capabilities hold the potential to drive actions in a more concerted and productive manner than did previous approaches, such as addressing irregular warfare in an annex, as the Pentagon did for the 2018 National Defense Strategy.

The proof of these potential impacts will, however, be in the pudding of the years to come. The U.S. military's cultural disposition and traditional incentives toward high end, direct, attributable, attrition-centric warfare presents substantial headwinds to the successful implementation of this instruction. Whether it is the [Army's](#) disestablishment of the Asymmetric Warfare Group or attempts to [cut special forces](#), the [Air Force's disbanding](#) of its air advisory unit, the [Marine Corps's](#) shuttering of the Center for Advanced Operational Culture and Learning, or the [Navy](#) shedding its [maritime civil affairs](#) forces, it is not hard to find examples of the services's predilection for cutting capabilities primarily oriented toward irregular warfare to free up dollars for high-end weapons systems.

As I [concluded](#) years ago when examining the military's deficiencies in assessing operational progress, the key to advancing the kinds of changes the new instruction seeks is not simply the issuance of high-level guidance. Doing so also requires the identification and empowerment of an *institutional champion* for those tasks (and the ideas they represent) within the department and each of the services. Here, the new instruction ostensibly assigns this role to the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, though in practice this role has been (and will highly likely continue to be) deferred to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD(SO/LIC)).

The [issues that negatively impact](#) ASD(SO/LIC)'s ability to effectively play that role have been well discussed [elsewhere](#); suffice it to say, the office suffers from a number of chronic and, at times, crippling, issues. While the new instruction's requirement for the Joint Staff to conduct an annual assessment of "the joint force's military capability to conduct and support IW operations necessary to implement [combatant commander] global, functional, and regional campaign and contingency plans" holds the potential to help push through the services's cultural headwinds against irregular warfare, successful implementation of the new instruction's substantially broader intent will almost necessarily require substantially empowering (and fixing) ASD(SO/LIC). Ensuring that the Joint Staff does not similarly defer the assessment to a lower echelon—such as U.S. Special

Operations Commandâ??will also be important.

Closing thoughts

The new irregular warfare instruction, while written in verbiage that is almost impenetrable to all but the policy and planning shops across DOD, represents a potentially substantial expansion of irregular warfareâ??s stature across the department. The fact that the Pentagonâ??s top policy official signed out a more robust document with a significantly broader definition, detailed lists of implementation tasks, and requirements for regular assessments of task completion, capability development, and institutionalization is a notable development for those who believe irregular warfare should be a core competency and sizable arrow in the U.S. militaryâ??s quiver. That said, the department has issued [implementation guidance](#) for irregular warfare before, only to see the uniformed services ignore it and cut IW capabilities in line with their cultural dispositions for high end conventional forces and weapon systems.

While the new instruction rightfully attempts to leverage institutional mechanisms to advance its aims beyond what a proclamation from the Under Secretary for Policy might achieve on its own, its reliance on the same underpowered champion for irregular warfareâ??ASD(SO/LIC)â??will likely undermine any lasting impact. Going forward, it seems likely that the new instruction will result in some advancements of irregular warfare within the department, but these improvements will not come easily, quickly, or without continued bureaucratic grinding by IW proponents. If irregular warfare itself is an external campaign of coordinated activities to advance U.S. interests through influence (as opposed to attrition), so too will the advancement of irregular warfare be an internal campaign of a similar nature for similar ends.

¹*Authorâ??s Note: While President Donald Trump issued an [Executive Order](#) authorizing the Department of Defense to call itself the â??Department of Warâ?• (DOW) as a secondary title, that change has yet to be codified in law. Additionally, the new instruction was issued as a â??DOD Instruction,â?• still carries the DOD (as opposed to DOW) logo, and uses â??defenseâ?• (as opposed to â??warâ?•) titles throughout. This article follows suit, given its focus on the instruction itself.*

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