

Two Years On: Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine and the Continuing Lessons for the Future of Irregular Warfare

Description

Introduction to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in Context

Russia's escalating war against Ukraine, especially the past two years since the full-scale invasion in 2022, has highlighted several critical lessons regarding irregular warfare and its broader implications for global security and stability. While irregular warfare is widely understood to reference approaches to conflicts that emphasize subterfuge and using proxies, the [US Department of Defense recently redefined irregular warfare](#) in *Joint Publication 1 Volume 1 (Joint Warfighting)* as "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." Far from comprising the minority of struggles across history, [irregular warfare is ironically far more prevalent](#) than traditional warfare in the study of past, current, and future conflicts.

First and foremost, the conflict in Ukraine underscores the importance of hybrid warfare strategies, which blend conventional military operations [with irregular warfare approaches such as cyber-attacks, misinformation campaigns, and economic coercion](#). This approach has been particularly evident in Europe, where Russia's use of cyber warfare and disinformation has aimed to destabilize political systems and sow discord among NATO allies. The European response, emphasizing the need for [more robust cyber defenses and counter-disinformation strategies](#), reflects a key lesson in addressing the multifaceted nature of modern conflicts.

In Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, the invasion's repercussions have primarily manifested in [economic and humanitarian domains](#), illustrating the global reach of contemporary warfare's consequences. The disruption of agricultural exports from Ukraine and Russia, vital for global food security, [has particularly affected countries in the Middle East and Africa](#), where reliance on wheat and other staples from the conflict zone is high. This situation has underscored the necessity for nations to diversify their sources of essential commodities and enhance resilience against external shocks. In Southeast Asia, the conflict has demonstrated the [vulnerability of global supply chains to geopolitical tensions](#), particularly in critical sectors such as semiconductors and agriculture. Additionally, the economic sanctions against Russia have illustrated [the double-edged nature of such measures](#), affecting not only the targeted nation but also countries with economic ties to

it, highlighting the interconnectedness of the global economyâ??â??.

These lessons from the Russian invasion of Ukraine emphasize the need for a holistic understanding of modern warfare, which transcends traditional military engagements, including cyber, economic, and informational dimensions generally understood as the realm of â??strategic competition.â?• They also highlight the importance of preparedness, resilience, and international security cooperation in navigating the complexities of contemporary global conflicts, considerations that influence the evolution of [irregular warfare approaches](#).

The Ukrainian War in a European Irregular Warfare Context

Starting with the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, Russia has pursued its objectives in Ukraine [through a range of military options](#) that include not just conventional force deployment but also support for pro-Russian rebels, cyber operations, and other irregular activities within Ukraine and the broader regionâ??â??. Prepositioning its forces under the [deception of joint military exercises](#), Russia launched its full invasion in February of 2022. Only through valiant Ukrainian defensive actions were the [Russians halted outside Kyiv](#) in March, and the country was saved from rapid capitulation. In the intervening years since Russiaâ??s initial invasion in 2014, the US and other allies worked extensively with the Ukrainian military and civil authorities to [greatly increase the resistance potential of the populace](#). These efforts to assure our Ukrainian partners through this irregular warfare approach proved critical in blunting Russiaâ??s invasion.

For its purposes, Ukraine has engaged in irregular warfare approaches to counter Russiaâ??s invasion. Within the occupied territories of Kherson, Luhansk, Donetsk, and Crimea, Ukrainian [special operations forces have directed a sustained partisan resistance](#) to Russian occupation. Information operations directed at beleaguered Russian soldiers have also resulted in [tens of thousands of surrenders](#). Further afield, [sabotage operations against critical Russian infrastructure](#) are regularly attributed to or claimed by Ukrainian intelligence or military services or both. The extent to which Ukraine has applied irregular warfare approaches to combat the Russian invasion is a direct reflection of the support provided by the US and its allies. Additionally, Ukraineâ??s successes and failures directly inform how all of [Europe is revising its approach to irregular warfare](#).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the widespread engagement in irregular warfare have had far-reaching consequences for the security, political, and humanitarian landscape of Europe. The invasion has also had profound humanitarian impacts, contributing to [Europeâ??s largest refugee crisis since World War II](#). Repeatedly, Russia has sought to [â??weaponizeâ?• the flow of migrants](#) from Central and South Asia to pressure European countries to reduce aid to Ukraine. Both sides engage in proxy warfare, rely on clandestine sabotage operations, and employ information operations to advance their

objectives. The conflict underscores the complex interplay of historical grievances, geopolitical ambitions, and modern military strategies shaping contemporary international relations. As the region most directly influenced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we are seeing in Europe the most profound and rapid evolution of irregular warfare approaches.

The Ukraine War's African Impacts

As Russia has become increasingly isolated from Western countries, it has turned to the developing world for allies. Before COVID-19, many African countries were among the fastest growing in the world, but the [pandemic reversed decades of progress, with the Human Development Index dropping](#) for the first time in nearly three decades. The war in Ukraine has further disrupted Africa's recovery, particularly affecting critical imports like wheat, fertilizers, and steel for countries like Kenya, Cameroon, and Ghana. The war has also [strained government revenues in African countries](#), reducing trade and taxation income while increasing public indebtedness. Imported inflation has hit several African countries, with notable increases in costs such as transportation and food prices.

Against this backdrop, Russia has [helped instigate coups and sought closer relations with authoritarian regimes](#) across Africa, often pairing these efforts with extensive disinformation and influence campaigns to undermine Western relations with the continent. Russia has been particularly active in seeking influence in Africa, employing tactics such as [political interference and spreading disinformation](#). A significant tool in Russia's approach is the Wagner Group and other private military companies active in several African countries. [Russian mercenaries have played significant roles in the recent coups](#) in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, and Sudan. This irregular warfare approach of leveraging proxies also aligns with Russia's broader strategy of positioning itself as an alternative to Western powers in Africa. Russian mercenary operations often include gaining access to [valuable resources like gold in return for their military services](#), extending Russia's political influence in the region. Interestingly, there are increasing reports of alleged [Ukrainian attacks against Russian mercenaries and their surrogates](#), indicating a growing and chaotic irregular competition across Africa.

Additionally, Russia's narratives concerning its invasion of Ukraine have found resonance in Africa through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube. These narratives often exploit existing tensions and grievances in the region, with a [focus on anti-Western sentiment and historical issues such as colonialism](#). The spread of such narratives aims to sway African countries to support Russia's actions and secure Russia's influence, especially as the country faces international isolation from the United States and Europe. This approach has been [successful in some African countries](#), where Russia's popularity stems from its role during the era of decolonization and its non-colonial history in Africa compared to Western powers. In many ways, this Russian approach to

Africa is a reapplication of the irregular warfare approaches used by the Soviet Union to [build a competing bloc](#) against the West during the Cold War.

The Middle Eastern Conflict as an Extension of the War in Ukraine

In the face of crushing sanctions on its defense industries from its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has [significantly deepened its cooperation with Iran](#), receiving hundreds of one-way attack drones (and now the means to [produce licensed versions](#)) and potentially long-range attack missiles. At the same time, Russia continues to militarily back the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad while providing diplomatic support to Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas, [both of which are effectively Iranian proxies](#). Since Hamas's electoral victory in 2006, Russia has [increasingly provided diplomatic support](#) as well as millions of dollars through a [Moscow-based cryptocurrency exchange](#). The Hamas terrorist attack in October 2023 instigated the massive Israeli counterattack against Gaza that has [already drawn in the United States, United Kingdom, and several other Western powers](#). Escalating violence has distracted Western attention from and support for Ukraine at a critical juncture, interrupting aid and [creating conditions more conducive to Russian gains](#). For instance, in November 2023, reports emerged that artillery shells desperately needed in and initially intended for Ukraine [were diverted to support the Israeli campaign in Gaza](#). As part of its global irregular warfare campaign, Russia is looking to facilitate battlefield successes in Ukraine by supporting Iranian proxies in the Middle East.

In the Red Sea, Ansar Allah, a Houthi-majority group long supported as a proxy of Iran, has [initiated a series of attacks targeting ships](#) it claimed were linked to Israel, as well as indiscriminate targeting of other ships. These attacks have raised concerns about the impact on global trade, particularly the flow of oil and grain, as the Red Sea is a crucial maritime trade artery. The navies of the United States, United Kingdom, and other Western allies have undertaken [an increasingly aggressive campaign](#) to intercept these attacks and now strike at their sources in Yemen. Ansar Allah's actions are seen as part of a broader proxy conflict between the United States and Iran, with the Houthis demanding a ceasefire in Gaza and an end to Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip as conditions to end their attacks in the Red Sea. The longer this situation escalates in Yemen, [the better for Russia, as Western attention, aid, and military might continue to be stretched](#) further and further away from the battlefields in Ukraine.

The Iranian proxy attacks on American-led coalition forces in Syria, Iraq, and Jordan can be linked to the Russian invasion of Ukraine through the lens of shifting global alliances and the intensification of proxy conflicts. The Russian invasion has heightened tensions between major powers, leading to a realignment of geopolitical interests. As the greatest strategic beneficiary of a West distracted from Ukraine, [Russia has lent its considerable support to Iran](#) and, by extension, to its proxies. American counter attacks against Iranian-backed surrogates in Iraq have drastically increased pressure on the

government of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani [to expel the United States and end a decades-long partnership](#), a stated strategic objective of Iran. By intensifying proxy attacks against American interests, both Iran and Russia aim to further their objectives while capitalizing on the current global realignment.

The rapidly escalating situation in the Middle East contributes to the complexity of international relations, where conflicts in one region can have ripple effects on other regions's stability and security. The complex nature of these conflicts and their potential links to a broader irregular warfare campaign, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine, illustrate the multifaceted and interconnected challenges in the region. These situations involve a mix of state and non-state actors, proxy warfare, and impacts on international relations and global trade, all contributing to the overall instability and security concerns in the Middle East and beyond.

The Impact of Russia's Ukraine Experience in Deterring China

The outcome of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has several implications for China's ambitions regarding Taiwan, especially in the realm of irregular warfare. The resistance and resilience demonstrated by Ukraine against a larger, more powerful adversary have been [a crucial lesson for the international community](#), including China. This resistance has involved not just conventional military tactics but also elements of irregular warfare such as cyber defense, information operations, and the mobilization of civilian resources. The effectiveness of these tactics in Ukraine may lead China [to reassess the challenges it would face](#) in any potential action against Taiwan, especially considering the likelihood of Taiwanese resistance [employing similar irregular warfare strategies](#).

Another aspect of the conflict in Ukraine that could impact China's calculations is the international response, particularly the unity and [resolve shown by Western allies in supporting Ukraine](#). This response has included not only military aid but also economic sanctions and diplomatic efforts, demonstrating the potential consequences for nations that undertake aggressive military actions. For China, [this could serve as a cautionary tale about the potential diplomatic isolation and economic repercussions](#) it might face if it were to take military action against Taiwan.

People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Admiral Dong Jun, China's newly appointed defense minister, just [pledged China's unwavering support for Russia in its ongoing military activities against Ukraine](#). As Beijing has long asserted its rights to neighboring Taiwan, a Russian success in Ukraine would be an unmistakable message to China that it may pursue its territorial ambitions regardless of international opposition. Absent a Russian victory, the world's strong and unified response may thus act as a deterrent, encouraging China to consider non-military irregular means of achieving its goals or

to pursue a more cautious approach in its dealings with Taiwan.

Furthermore, the conflict in Ukraine has highlighted the importance of irregular warfare in modern conflicts, where military actions are combined with non-military tactics like cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion. Russia has effectively used these aspects of irregular warfare in Ukraine, [tools that China intends to employ against Taiwan](#). The Taiwanese government has learnt from Ukraine's experience, and is heavily focused on strengthening its capabilities [to counter these irregular warfare approaches](#). This includes bolstering cyber defenses, countering disinformation, and preparing for blockades or economic coercion scenarios.

Conclusion – Putting It All Together

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has significant implications for irregular warfare across multiple regions, including Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the broader strategic competition between the United States and China. In Europe, the conflict has [led to a reevaluation of defense strategies](#) focusing on countering irregular forms of warfare, such as cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, and hybrid threats. This has necessitated a shift in NATO's approach to security, emphasizing the importance of resilience against irregular warfare tactics. The conflict has also highlighted the need for [closer cooperation among European nations](#) to effectively respond to these evolving security challenges, responses that will increasingly require irregular warfare approaches.

In Africa and the Middle East, the invasion has underscored the global reach of modern irregular warfare tactics, particularly in the form of information warfare and political manipulation. Russia's use of [disinformation campaigns and political influence](#) to shape perspectives in Africa and the Middle East reflects a broader pattern of irregular warfare. These tactics aim to sway support toward Russia while undermining Western influence, illustrating [the importance of countering disinformation and influence operations to maintain regional stability](#). Escalating violence by proxies of Iran, which the war has made a close ally of Russia, threatens to distract the West from supporting Ukraine [to the Kremlin's benefit](#). In recent days, both Russia and China went to the United Nations [to condemn US and British precision strikes against Iranian proxies](#) engaged in indiscriminate terrorist attacks against commercial shipping off Yemen's coast. The situation in these regions highlights the need for comprehensive strategies that address the multifaceted nature of modern conflicts, including the role of information operations as a component of irregular warfare.

Finally, the conflict holds broader implications for the strategic competition between the United States and China. The international response to Russia's actions provides [insights into potential reactions to aggressive moves by China](#) in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly concerning Taiwan. The conflict

underscores the importance of a multifaceted approach to security, which includes not only military capabilities but also tools to counter hybrid and cyber threats. This necessitates closer cooperation among the United States, its allies, and partners in Europe and the Indo-Pacific to develop and adopt irregular approaches that address the evolving nature of global security challenges. The situation demonstrates the interconnectedness of global conflicts and the ever-evolving importance of irregular warfare in shaping the relevant environments and influencing their populations.

Disclaimer: The views expressed are the author's and do not represent official US Government, Department of Defense, or Department of the Army positions.

Doug Livermore is the vice president of operations at [The Hoplite Group](#), a global threat analysis company providing bespoke support to government and commercial clients. Doug also continues his military service as the Deputy Commander for [Special Operations Detachment 1st Joint Special Operations Command](#) in the North Carolina Army National Guard. In addition to his role as the Director of Communications for the [Irregular Warfare Initiative](#), Doug is the National Director of External Communications for the [Special Forces Association](#), National Secretary for the [Special Operations Association of America](#), Secretary of the [Corioli Institute](#), and serves on the Board of Directors for [No One Left Behind](#).

Main Image: A destroyed building in Kyiv, Ukraine. Published on June 12, 2023. ([Jade Koroliuk](#) via [Unsplash](#))

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