

The Colombia Case Study: Legitimacy, Naming, and Irregular Warfare

Description

Conflict does not end; it reclassifies.

Abstract

Information and influence operations are often described as [modern capabilities shaped by post-9/11 irregular warfare doctrine](#). In practice, they represent a [longstanding function of statecraft that predates current terminology and frequently persists long after formal conflict ends](#). This article uses Colombia as a long-term case study to examine how U.S. influence operations adapted across three overlapping phases of irregular conflict: [active insurgency](#), [negotiated political transition](#), and [post-settlement fragmentation](#).

Drawing on archival sources and firsthand operational experience in Colombia, the article examines how authority over narrative changes as conflicts move toward settlement. It highlights the [operational and policy challenges that emerge when former adversaries can no longer be publicly identified](#) as such, even as violence continues through criminalized armed actors outside the peace process. The Colombian experience demonstrates that [struggles over legitimacy do not end with peace agreements](#). Instead, influence operations must adapt to shifting legal and political categories that redefine violence itself. As the Department of War refocuses on great power competition, preserving irregular warfare capabilities requires retaining this institutional memory.

I. Introduction: Influence Across Phases of Irregular Conflict

Irregular Warfare is often discussed as occurring in specific moments or eras. Doctrine and contemporary debates make clear that [IW stretches across competition, crisis, and conflict](#). It is driven by [struggles over legitimacy and influence](#), whether open violence is taking place or not.

Colombia provides a rare long-term example of this process. Over more than fifty years, the country moved through cycles of [political violence, organized insurgency, negotiated peace, and post-agreement fragmentation](#). Throughout each phase, U.S. information and influence efforts have both shaped events and been shaped by changing political conditions on the ground and across the cognitive domain.

This article argues that information and influence operations should not be understood as support functions tied only to combat operations. Instead, they are persistent tools that operate before, during, and after armed conflict. Using Colombia as a case study, the article examines how U.S. influence efforts adapted across three overlapping phases: active insurgency, negotiated political transition, and post-settlement fragmentation, with particular attention to how official language determines who can be openly opposed, accommodated, or integrated into political life.

II. Phase One: Influence Operations Against a Coherent Insurgency

During the final years of Colombia's armed conflict with the FARC, the information environment was relatively clear. The [FARC was widely recognized as a single insurgent organization with a defined political agenda](#), identifiable leadership, and a longstanding claim to revolutionary legitimacy. Because there was little ambiguity about the group's identity or aims, influence efforts could directly challenge its narrative in the public sphere.

U.S. and Colombian influence operations during this period focused on three linked objectives: [countering insurgency propaganda, weakening the organization from within, and encouraging individual fighters to demobilize](#) and rejoin civil society. Together, these efforts aimed to make the prolonged armed struggle appear increasingly costly while presenting the political settlement as a legitimate alternative. [A key enabling factor was the ability to clearly name the FARC as an enemy insurgency](#). That authority made it possible to openly label its violence as illegitimate and to maintain consistent messaging across domestic and international audiences. As Colombia moved toward negotiations, however, this freedom to explicitly name the adversary narrowed, setting the conditions for a more constrained information environment.

III. Phase Two: When the Adversary Could No Longer Be Named

As peace negotiations began and the FARC prepared to enter formal politics, the rules governing public language changed. Continuing to describe the group as an insurgent enemy [risked undermining the credibility of the peace process](#) itself. Influence efforts, therefore, shifted away from attacking the FARC's narrative and toward reinforcing reconciliation, lawful political participation, and the normalization of dissent through nonviolent means. As the thought experiment of *The Liberator's Dilemma* suggests, post-conflict environments are marked more by moral and political ambiguity than by resolution, [complicating efforts to exercise influence without undermining legitimacy](#).

This restraint was a deliberate signal to domestic and international audiences that political resolution was credible and durable. However, [violence did not disappear; it changed form](#). Armed actors who rejected demobilization continued coercive, illicit, and violent activities, but their actions could no longer

be addressed using a counterinsurgency framework or the FARC label. The policy response was reclassification. [Groups and individuals who rejected the settlement were treated as armed criminals or narcotraffickers rather than insurgents](#). While necessary for legal and diplomatic reasons, this reclassification fragmented influence efforts by removing a single, clearly defined adversary and dispersing narrative authority across competing legal and political categories.

IV. Phase Three: Fragmentation and Narrative Dislocation

The peace settlement changed how violence looked in Colombia, but it did not eliminate coercion. As the FARC formally demobilized and entered politics, [dissident elements and hybrid criminal networks moved into the space left behind](#). These groups operated through loose, [networked arrangements tied to local economies rather than ideology](#). While they remained coercive and dangerous, they no longer fit the traditional definition of an insurgency. Although U.S. influence activities became less visible after the peace agreement, they persisted indirectly [through security cooperation, development assistance, embassy messaging, and support to Colombian institutional legitimacy rather than direct narrative confrontation](#).

This shift created [a fragmented set of actors](#) influencing efforts that had to be addressed simultaneously. Communities in contested areas primarily wanted physical security and basic services. Residual armed groups responded to calculations of profit, risk, and opportunity rather than political messaging. National audiences expected to see tangible benefits from the peace process, while international partners closely monitored government behavior for signs of commitment to the rule of law.

Measuring influence in this environment also became more complex. No single indicator was sufficient. Assessment required combining qualitative insights and quantitative data, including local attitudes, willingness to cooperate with lawful authorities, economic signals such as recruitment costs or extortion patterns, and indicators of process legitimacy such as voter participation, public trust, and compliance with reintegration commitments.

Two broader lessons extend beyond Colombia. First, [fragmentation after settlement is not an exception but a common feature of modern irregular conflict](#). Second, maintaining discipline in public language is critical. Avoiding the temptation to relabel criminal armed groups as insurgents, while consistently reinforcing rule-of-law narratives, helps preserve the legitimacy of political settlements without denying the reality of ongoing violence.

V. The Semantic Battlefield: Why Naming Matters in Irregular Warfare

Modern doctrine and scholarship largely agree on one core point: [irregular warfare is less about seizing territory and more about shaping legitimacy and influence](#). In this context, language is not just a communication tool; it is an operational one. The words used to describe actors and violence help determine who is seen as legitimate, what actions are considered acceptable, and which responses are authorized. Whether deliberate or emergent, [naming conventions function as de facto policy signals once institutionalized](#).

Ucko and Marks describe [irregular warfare as a process of mobilizing legitimacy rather than winning decisive battles](#). Political outcomes are shaped by how coercion, persuasion, and identity interact over time. From this perspective, naming is not a neutral act. Calling a group an “insurgent,” a “criminal,” or a “political actor” does more than describe behavior; it defines how that behavior is interpreted and what responses are considered appropriate. Legitimacy research helps explain why this matters. Categories that become widely accepted and taken for granted carry disproportionate power because [they reduce uncertainty and create shared expectations across institutions and audiences](#).

Political transitions reverse many of these advantages. Renaming actors to allow their inclusion in a peace process is often necessary for settlement, but it also [narrows the space for direct confrontation](#), even when violence continues in new forms. Research on framing shows that labels shape perceived options: what cannot be openly named is difficult to target, and what is downgraded in language can become disconnected from existing institutional tools. Contemporary irregular warfare scholarship further emphasizes that modern conflicts rarely feature a single, clearly defined opponent. Instead, they unfold across fragmented environments marked by overlapping actors, blurred categories, and persistent ambiguity. In such conditions, success depends less on how loudly narratives are pushed and more on the disciplined use of language that preserves legitimacy while still accounting for ongoing violence.

VI. From Operations to Policy: Preserving What Endures

Influence capabilities are especially vulnerable to institutional neglect because [their effectiveness depends on context, judgment, and disciplined use of narrative](#). These are skills that are difficult to formalize in doctrine and easy to lose when strategic priorities shift. Despite common assumptions, [great power competition does not make irregular warfare less relevant](#). It makes it more so. Today’s competitors increasingly rely on proxies, criminal networks, and deliberate ambiguity to advance their interests below the threshold of war.

For this reason, policy should focus on preserving function rather than organizational form. Influence capabilities must remain capable of operating across the full range of conflict phases, under rapidly

changing legal and political constraints, and [at the embassy and sub-national levels, where legitimacy is experienced by local populations](#). Success should be measured less by the volume of messages produced and more by the sustained coherence of narratives and the credibility of political processes over time. In fragile transitions, even well-intentioned influence efforts can be counterproductive if they drift out of alignment with policy or undermine the legitimacy they are meant to protect.

VII. Conclusion: Conflict Does Not End! It Reclassifies

The Colombian case demonstrates that Irregular Warfare is best understood as a long-term struggle over legitimacy rather than a sequence of isolated campaigns. Influence operations remained essential throughout insurgency, negotiation, and post-settlement fragmentation, but the authorities and constraints governing those efforts shifted as political categories changed. During active insurgency, the ability to clearly name the adversary enables the direct delegitimization of violence. During negotiations, success depends on restraint and signaling to sustain confidence in political settlements. After settlement, influence efforts shift again toward protecting the legitimacy of the rule of law in an environment where coercion persisted through criminalized actors.

The central lesson is not a specific technique but a mindset: preserving continuity across change. In Irregular Warfare, success depends less on rigid categories than on the sustained capacity to align language, policy, and action with political realities over time.

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