

## Irregular Warfare: If We Ever Stop Arguing About IW, Then IW Will Be Dead

### Description

Large-scale combat operations win through maneuver warfare and war of attrition. Irregular, unconventional, and political warfare wins through [exhaustion](#). They target will, cohesion, legitimacy, and endurance. They erode the foundations of power rather than destroying its visible structures.

Irregular warfare (IW) refuses to sit still. It shifts with politics, adapts to technology, and lives in the [human domain](#) where definition is always contested. That is why the argument matters. If we ever stop arguing about irregular warfare, then irregular warfare will be dead. Not because it disappears, but because we will have turned it into a static concept, disconnected from strategy and stripped of utility.

This tension sits at the heart of the problem. Practitioners want clarity. Policymakers want clean definitions. Bureaucracies demand terms that can be codified, resourced, and measured. Yet as LTG Mike Nagata observed on a recent [Irregular Warfare Institute podcast](#), "So long as we can't settle on a definition of the term, the likelihood we're going to make this a useful instrument for national security purposes, or frankly, for any other purpose, is pretty low." He is right. But he is also incomplete. The failure to settle the definition is not only a weakness. It is also a source of strength. The debate itself forces rigor. It exposes assumptions. It sharpens thinking.

[DODI 3000.07 Irregular Warfare](#) codified the current definition: "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." Yet the debate continues.

[Eisenhower understood](#) this paradox: "Plans are worthless, but planning is everything." The same logic applies here. Defining IW is worthless. Understanding IW is everything. A perfect definition gives comfort but not insight. The argument over definition builds understanding. It forces us to ask hard questions. How does this help me do strategy? How does it contribute to campaigning? How does it allow me to communicate with decision makers? If a definition does not answer those questions, it is not useful, no matter how widely accepted it may be.

Sometimes perfect is the enemy of good enough. The "good enough" definition in DODI 3000.07 will allow the national security community to keep debating while having a definition that can

be applied.

There is another problem. The [proliferation of terminology](#) has created intellectual paralysis. Gray zone. hybrid warfare. cognitive warfare. unconventional warfare. irregular warfare. Each term carries nuance, but together they create confusion. The solution is not to invent more terms. It is to impose discipline. Irregular warfare should be understood as the military contribution to political warfare. [Political warfare](#), as Kennan framed it, is the space of strategic competition short of war. Or said another way, more precisely, [strategic rivalry](#). When we talk competition and rivalry we should be drawing from the [Joint Concept for Competing](#), which arguably is one of the most overlooked and unappreciated, yet important documents ever produced by the Joint Staff. It explains not just where we operate, but why.

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This framing matters because it restores coherence. Strategic competition and strategic rivalry are not defined by large-scale combat operations. Those remain the most dangerous course of action. They demand deterrence and preparation. But they are not the most likely. Political warfare is. It is persistent. It is continuous. It is conducted below the threshold of armed conflict. And irregular warfare is how military forces contribute to it.

[Sun Tzu captured the essence](#): “The supreme art is to attack the enemy’s strategy.” Irregular warfare is a tool for doing exactly that. Large-scale combat operations win through [maneuver warfare](#) and [war of attrition](#). Irregular, unconventional, and political warfare wins through [exhaustion](#). They target will, cohesion, legitimacy, and endurance. They erode the foundations of power rather than destroying its visible structures.

The distinction is not academic. It is operational. A war of attrition grinds down forces and resources over time. A war of maneuver seeks speed and positional advantage to collapse an enemy’s system. A war of exhaustion attacks the enemy’s ability to sustain conflict at all. Irregular warfare operates primarily in this third mode. It targets economies, narratives, alliances, and political cohesion; the will of the people. It turns strength into burden and advantage into liability.

This is where [cognitive warfare](#) enters the discussion. Modern competition is increasingly a contest for cognitive superiority. Adversaries seek to shape perception, influence decision-making, and fracture societies. Technology amplifies their reach. Open societies are vulnerable. Disinformation, propaganda, and manipulation exploit trust and openness. The objective is not always to persuade. It is often to confuse, divide, and exhaust.

Yet there is a danger here as well. Cognitive warfare risks becoming another term in an already crowded lexicon. It risks being treated as something new and distinct, when in reality it is an extension of political warfare into the cognitive domain. The tools are new. The logic is not. The human domain remains central. That is where irregular warfare has always operated.

This raises a harder question. Are we now calling everything irregular warfare? There is a tendency to label new capabilities as irregular simply because they are novel. Drones. cyber operations. electronic warfare. Long-range precision fires. These are not inherently irregular. They are tools. They operate across the spectrum of conflict. Their novelty does not make them irregular. Their application does.

Irregular warfare is not defined by tools. It is defined by purpose and method. It is about working through and with populations. It is about influencing legitimacy and governance. It is about enabling resistance, supporting partners, and creating dilemmas for adversaries. It is fundamentally human. That is why it is both old and timeless.

This is also why special operations forces play a central role, but not an exclusive one. Irregular warfare is not the sole domain of SOF. It is the responsibility of the joint force. Yet SOF brings specialized capabilities. Unconventional warfare. foreign internal defense. psychological operations. civil affairs. These capabilities are essential. But they must be integrated into a broader whole-of-government approach that includes conventional forces, civilian agencies, and partners.

The separation of military and civilian contributions is critical. Political warfare is inherently whole-of-government. Military forces provide only one component. Civilian agencies shape governance, economics, diplomacy, and information. If irregular warfare is treated as a purely military function, it will fail. If it is integrated into political warfare, it becomes powerful.

History reinforces this point. In [2008, the National Defense Strategy](#) recognized the need to master irregular warfare on par with conventional combat. [Secretary of Defense Robert Gates](#) identified the imbalance. The military focused on future major wars while neglecting ongoing irregular conflicts. The problem was not capability. It was mindset. The institution valued what it could measure and control. Irregular warfare resisted both.

That tension remains. Strategic competition today is defined by a spectrum of cooperation, competition, and conflict. States seek cooperation when possible. They compete when necessary. They prepare for conflict even as they seek to avoid it. Within this spectrum, irregular warfare operates continuously. It shapes conditions before, during, and after conflict.

Adversaries understand this. They exploit revolution, resistance, insurgency, terrorism, and civil war to achieve political objectives. They operate through proxies and partners. They blur the line between

state and non-state actors. They seek advantage without triggering decisive response. They practice political warfare with discipline and intent.

The United States faces a choice. It can treat irregular warfare as a niche capability, or it can integrate it into a broader strategy of political warfare. The former leads to marginalization. The latter offers relevance. But integration requires clarity of thought, not consensus of definition.

Consensus is often the enemy of good strategy. It produces lowest common denominator definitions that satisfy everyone and guide no one. A useful definition does not need consensus. It needs utility. It must help practitioners think, plan, and act. It must inform decision makers. If it does not, it is worthless.

This brings us back to the central thesis. If we ever stop arguing about irregular warfare, then irregular warfare will be dead. The argument is not a sign of failure. It is a sign of vitality. It reflects the reality that IW operates in a dynamic environment where adaptation is constant. It forces practitioners to engage with complexity rather than hide from it.

But there is a counterargument. Endless debate can become self-indulgent. It can delay action. It can create confusion. At some point, institutions must act. They must organize, train, educate, equip, and optimize forces. They must develop doctrine. They must allocate resources. Without some level of definition, action becomes difficult. The DODI 3000.07 forces the Department of Defense/War to take action.

This is the balance that must be struck. We need enough definition to act, but not so much that we stop thinking. We need enough consensus to communicate, but not so much that we eliminate debate. We need enough structure to organize, but not so much that we constrain adaptation.

Irregular warfare lives in that balance. It is not clean. It is not stable. It is not easily defined. But it is essential. It is the way military power contributes to political warfare in an era of persistent competition and especially in [strategic rivalry](#). It is the way strategy is executed short of war.

The final question is simple. Are we arguing to understand, or arguing to define? If the goal is understanding, the argument will sharpen strategy and operational art. If the goal is definition, the argument will end. And when it ends, irregular warfare will no longer evolve.

That is when it will die.

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