

The Future is Irregular. Our Doctrine Should be Too

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Traditional warfare aims to win wars. Irregular warfare aims to secure or maintain the legitimacy of a government. Although the main difference between traditional and irregular warfare is the end state each aims to achieve, U.S. military doctrine defines them instead by their distinctive means. These doctrinal descriptions miss the point and undermine our ability to compete effectively against adversaries who approach warfare with a clearer understanding of its desired end state. This essay highlights some doctrinal deficiencies in our thinking about irregular warfare and explains why anchoring our doctrine in terms of strategic end states is the best way to prepare our forces for future operations.

The definition of irregular warfare (IW) has been heavily debated in recent years. The current Reference Copy of *Joint Publication 1, Volume 1 Joint Warfighting* (JP 1) defines irregular warfare as “a struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy.”¹ The previous doctrinal definition held that IW is “a *violent* struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s).”² This one-word difference may seem minor, but it highlights the distinction between ends and means in the debate over how to think about IW. Several services objected to dropping the term violent from the IW definition because, by Clausewitz’s definition, war includes violence, so without violence, it cannot be war.³ This argument also implied that the only purpose of the military is to fight wars. The logic of the new definition holds that IW can be conducted

¹ “Joint Publication 1 Volume 1: Joint Warfighting Reference Copy” (Joint Doctrine, Education & Training Electronic Information System, accessed April 2023).

² United States Department of Defense, Joint Staff, “Joint Publication 1; Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States” (United States Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 12, 2017).

³ Author’s notes from JP 1 writing conference June, 2019; Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret, First Paperback Printing (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 89.

across the competition continuum and that the purpose of the joint force is to support our nation's interests in deterring and, if necessary, conducting war and other operations along the entire continuum of competition. The definitional debate in JP 1 hinged on appropriate strategic goals rather than the division of methods between traditional and irregular warfare.

However, it is unclear whether the doctrinal debate is settled as no final version of JP 1 has been published since 2017, and several subsequent joint and Air Force doctrinal publications focus heavily on the means of IW rather than its ends. *Joint Doctrine Note 1-22* conceptualizes irregular warfare as a type of competitive activity below the level of armed conflict.⁴ *Air Force Doctrine 3-2 Irregular Warfare* (AFDP 3-2) explains that the concept of irregular warfare evolved from efforts to define conflicts that did not fit the traditional paradigm of large-force-on-force peer adversary confrontations.⁵ AFDP 3-2 further specifies that “the key distinctions between IW and traditional warfare are the context and conduct of the conflict, particularly with regard to the population.”⁶ Although operational level doctrine such as AFDP 3-2 is correct to outline and clarify which operational means are appropriate in specific contexts, it must still be grounded in an accurate understanding of strategic ends. Otherwise, it leaves forces in the field unclear on how their operational and tactical actions fit into the larger plan.

Current joint and Air Force doctrine lacks a clear framework explaining the strategic ends that can be achieved by traditional versus irregular warfare. The outlines of a useable taxonomy are already extant in the academic discourse and our joint doctrine. British Army officer turned academic Emile Simpson

⁴ “Joint Doctrine Note 1-22 Joint Force in Strategic Competition” (Joint Chiefs of Staff, February 2, 2023) I-1.

⁵ “Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-2 Irregular Warfare” (Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, August 10, 2020), 3, https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/AFDP_3-2/3-2-AFDP-IRREGULAR-WARFARE.pdf.

⁶ “AFDP 3-2,” 4.

argues that traditional war aims to set the stage for a political solution.⁷ This matches JP 1: “Traditional warfare generally assumes that the majority of people indigenous to the operational area are not belligerents and will be subject to whatever political outcome is imposed, arbitrated, or negotiated... The near-term results of traditional warfare are often evident, with the conflict ending in victory for one side and defeat for the other or in [a] stalemate.”⁸ This reflects the Clausewitzian understanding of war as an act of policy. Simpson extends the framework to operations on other parts of the competition continuum, contrasting traditional war with what he terms ‘armed politics,’ the end goal of which is to directly seek political as opposed to military outcomes.⁹ This tracks closely with JP 1: “The strategic point of IW is to gain or maintain control or influence over, and the support of, a relevant population.... An enemy using irregular methods will typically endeavor to wage protracted conflicts in an attempt to exhaust the will of their opponent and its population.”¹⁰ Thus IW directly engages relevant populations as its end goal. In contrast, traditional warfare engages an adversary military and its government and only engages populations as a collateral effect of the primary mission of military victory.

Two points are worth highlighting here. First, to answer the Clausewitzian critique that armed politics is still an extension of politics (i.e that IW is nothing more than traditional warfare of a different character); regardless of whether IW meets the Clausewitzian definition of war, it is a mission that the United States military is expected to execute. The key point is unlike most nature vs. character debates regarding future warfare, the debate over IW doctrine should be focused on the desired end state, not become mired in the means used to prosecute the war. Second, armed politics is an academic term.

⁷ Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First Century Combat as Politics* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1.

⁸ United States Department of Defense, Joint Staff, “JP 1,” 1.

⁹ Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, 1.

¹⁰ United States Department of Defense, Joint Staff, “JP 1,” 1.

For military and U.S. policy purposes, irregular warfare is the appropriate mission because it excludes some tactics of armed politics, such as collusion with organized crime or terrorism, that are not U.S. military missions.

Both recent experience and our national strategy documents support the idea that irregular warfare will be more common in the future. The 2022 National Defense Strategy outlines strategic challenges of the next two decades as complex interactions, including emerging technologies, competitor doctrines, and an escalation of coercive and malign activities in the gray zone. It goes on to explain that “The PRC or Russia could use a wide array of tools in an attempt to hinder U.S. military preparation and response in a conflict, including actions aimed at undermining the will of the U.S. public.”¹¹ Simpson argues that although traditional warfare is still relevant, it is becoming less common because most modern conflicts are not simply polarized contests between two armed sides. Audiences outside the conflict itself matter greatly to the legitimacy of the outcome. His major example is Afghanistan post-2006 and the variety of sub-state actors that are not neatly aligned on either side of the conflict but have huge influence on the desired end state of creating a stable self-governing state.¹²

The ongoing Russian/Ukraine conflict is a more current example. Neither the annexation of Crimea in 2014 nor the 2022 invasion of Ukraine was intended to enable the military to set conditions for the two sides to come to an agreement. Rather, the use of force was designed to achieve a *fait accompli* that could be presented to the world as a legitimate expression of the will of the people. Russia’s goals are more akin to Simpson’s armed politics than to a traditional war despite both sides engaging in the sort of direct force-on-force combat usually associated with traditional warfare. To further complicate

¹¹ “2022 National Defense Strategy” (United States Secretary of Defense, October 27, 2022), 2-3, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

¹² Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, 67–89.

matters, both sides are also engaging in influence operations and asymmetric tactics typically associated with IW.

Because specific actions are often more visible and easier to codify than end goals, it is easy to think of IW as a collection of methods best suited to certain situations. Joint doctrine briefly and obliquely mentions the goals of IW, then segues into several paragraphs detailing the various techniques of irregular warfare and conditions in which they might be applicable:

“In IW, a less powerful adversary seeks to disrupt or negate the military capabilities and advantages of a more powerful military force...Irregular forces, to include partisan and resistance fighters in opposition to occupying conventional military forces, are included... Irregular threats typically manifest as one or a combination of several forms, including insurgency, terrorism, disinformation, propaganda, and organized criminal activity based on the objectives specified (such as drug trafficking and kidnapping). Some will possess a range of sophisticated weapons, C2 systems, and support networks that are typically characteristic of a traditional military force. Both sophisticated and less sophisticated irregular threats will usually have the advantages derived from knowledge of the local area and ability to blend in with the local population.”¹³

AFDP 3-2 draws heavily on joint doctrine and also focuses on specific IW methods without clearly explaining the strategic goal of IW as distinctive from traditional war. Furthermore, it divides IW into categories based on whether it is conducted by conventional or special operations military forces.

The extensive categorization of methods in doctrine is meant to educate military leaders who may not be familiar with IW. But it also creates some confusion. A casual reading of joint or Air Force doctrine might leave one

¹³ United States Department of Defense, Joint Staff, “JP 1,” I 6–7.

believing that counter-insurgency (COIN) and insurgency (unconventional warfare or UW, in doctrine) are just different tactics in the same way that propaganda or terrorism are tactics. When in fact, the specific tactics are means to pursue the ends of either insurgency (UW) or counter-insurgency (COIN), and not all irregular threats are acceptable tactics for the U.S. military. COIN and UW are categories that describe ends sought by IW. Terrorism, propaganda, networks, etc., are tactics that actors can apply toward either end. In both cases, the goal of either the insurgents or counter-insurgents conducting IW is to establish the legitimacy of their governance over a population.

Thinking about IW as a set of methods best used in certain asymmetric contexts essentially relegates IW to the portions of the joint force that specialize in those tactics, i.e., special operations forces. It also implicitly links great power competition with traditional warfare, which the current security environment shows is inaccurate. Russia's actions in Ukraine illustrate that our near-peer competitors also conduct irregular warfare; both by the belligerents using tactics typically associated with IW but, more importantly, by Russia's selecting an end state that can only be achieved with an IW strategy.

To establish an ability for the joint force to respond adequately, or ideally to seize the initiative, across the competition continuum, it is important to conceptualize IW versus traditional warfare in terms of strategic end states rather than methods. That way, members in each service branch specializing in various methods can find innovative ways to leverage their unique capabilities toward the desired strategic end state.

If the joint force is in a position where it needs to win a war, then the traditional paradigms of warfare apply. But in the likely scenario where the joint force is tasked with supporting the ongoing struggle to maintain the legitimacy and stability of our government's preferred world order, we need to have an irregular mindset that does not limit our thinking to either victory or

defeat. The best way to institutionalize such a mindset is to de-link it from any particular service interests or set of capabilities and insist that all military leaders maintain the flexibility to think in traditional or irregular paradigms. An excellent place to start would be clarifying and codifying distinctive strategic end states in our Air Force Irregular Warfare doctrine.

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