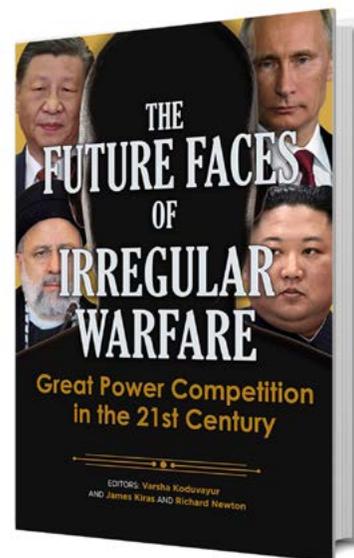


intelligence in public media

The Future Faces of Irregular Warfare Great Power Competition in the 21st Century

Reviewed by JR Seeger

Edited By: Varsha Koduvayar, James Kiras, and Richard Newton
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Reviewer: The reviewer is a retired CIA officer.



The Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) is the Department of Defense–funded “battle lab” for irregular warfare (IW) created in 2021. It is focused on supporting warfighters facing challenges in any aspect of modern conflict other than conventional warfare. IWC conducts training, produces publications, and holds conferences. In the case of this book, IWC assembled a set of papers focusing on geostrategic issues related to irregular warfare. It is worth noting here that there is no consensus in the US government on the definition of irregular warfare, nor is there a consensus on what agency in the US government should lead in addressing this challenge.

Even a brief review of this topic demonstrates that the US military and the Department of Defense remain

challenged in describing the nature of modern warfare where US conventional force-on-force operations are rare and our strategic adversaries (often described in the same documents as “strategic competitors”) have an entirely different view of warfare. In the 1990s, IW was described in DOD doctrine as “military operations other than war.”^a

In the first decade of this century, US doctrine changed the name to irregular warfare. This reflected the transition from post-Cold War “peacekeeping” and “peace-making” efforts in the 1990s, to post-9/11 counterterrorism, unconventional warfare, and counterinsurgency operations. However, the DOD definition for IW remained a challenge, with the central doctrinal publication arguing that IW was characterized as *a violent struggle among state*

a. Department of Defense, Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-07: Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War* (June 16, 1995)

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The Future Faces of Irregular Warfare

and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s). In IW, a less powerful adversary seeks to disrupt or negate the military capabilities and advantages of a more powerful military force, which usually serves that nation's established government.^a

In 2020 the unclassified summary of the IW annex to DOD doctrine on warfighting, IW is characterized as

a struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy. IW favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will. It includes the specific missions of unconventional warfare (UW), stabilization, foreign internal defense (FID), counterterrorism (CT), and counterinsurgency (COIN). Related activities such as military information support operations, cyberspace operations, countering threat networks, counter-threat finance, civil-military operations, and security cooperation also shape the information environment and other population-focused arenas of competition and conflict.^b

In the most current definition issued in September 2025, IW is defined 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.^c

It is in this confusing intellectual and political environment that IWC works to bring some degree of clarity.

Both the title of this book and the jacket, with the faces of the leaders of Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, are misleading. This is not a book that provides a coherent discussion of how these US adversaries use IW in their conflict with the United States. Nor is it a clear discussion of how the United States should address these challenges. Rather, this book is best viewed as a textbook on multiple opinions on IW rather than a thoughtful discussion on the single topic offered in the title.

IWC published this book specifically for military practitioners and the book relies heavily on doctrinal jargon and references from DOD publications. In the 15 chapters, the discussions range from definitional discussions on what precisely is irregular warfare, through doctrinal discussions of how the US military should adapt to the challenges of IW, to discussions on how adversaries are using IW to advance their strategic goals against US and allied defenses. Each chapter begins with an abstract and ends with a summary and recommended further reading.

Even with its limitations as a coherent work on IW, every intelligence professional will be well served by reading the book. The US defense establishment is struggling to understand and respond to a complex and ever changing political and military environment. Our warfighter colleagues will demand help from the Intelligence Community on this set of problems. The IC will only be able to assist if intelligence professionals are clear on both the threats from our adversaries and how warfighters understand those threats. ■

a. Department of Defense, Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 1: Joint Warfighting* (July 12, 2017).

b. "Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy." Department of Defense publication (www.media.defense.gov)

c. DOD instruction 3000.07 Irregular Warfare (www.media.defense.gov)