

Intelligence in Public Media

Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare

Seth Jones (W.W. Norton, 2021), 276 pages, illustrations, maps, bibliography, index.

Nonstate Warfare: The Military Methods of Guerrillas, Warlords, and Militias

Stephen D. Biddle (Princeton University Press, 2021), 436 pages, illustrations, maps, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by J.R. Seeger

In the 21st century world of great power competition, Russia and China demonstrate on a regular basis that they actually prefer to operate in a “grey zone” between war and peace. Seth Jones, senior vice president and director of International Security Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, uses biographies of three leaders from Russia, Iran, and China as a starting point for a discussion of what is called in current military and strategic studies “irregular warfare” between the United States and near-peer adversaries. Stephen Biddle’s work serves as an excellent companion, focusing as it does on the low end of the conflict spectrum where the United States faces indigenous hostile forces. Given the rising tensions with our near-peer adversaries and the growing professional interest in operations in the grey zone of war and peace, these two books are essential reading.

The space between war and peace has always been a playground for the adversaries of powerful states. For as long as there has been written human history, there has been “irregular warfare.” Throughout the 20th century, revolutionaries, insurgents, and bandits conducted small scale operations against major powers, especially the European colonial powers. The goal: levying a price on the colonial or occupying power while avoiding direct conflict where the major power would use all means necessary to destroy the irregulars. Irregular warfare tactics were limited to raids, ambushes, and assassinations.

The difference between 19th and 20th century histories of irregular warfare and today is that the US and our allies face near-peer adversaries also willing to conduct long-term irregular operations. Unlike revolutionaries, insurgents, and bandits, our adversaries are interested in global strategic gains. The networked nature of the modern world allows both small and near-peer adversaries to conduct hostile operations using drones, GPS guided missiles, sophisticated improvised explosive devices, attacks inside communications and computer

systems, and propaganda operations through social media platforms. Coupled with the use of proxies such as private military contractors and local militias, irregular warfare has become the primary means of attacking the US and our closest allies.

The problem with most discussions on irregular warfare is they do not address the importance of synchronizing the capabilities of the entire US government and, most especially, the capabilities of the intelligence community. If the United States intends to succeed in the grey zone, it needs to avoid a fractured effort in which the US military works on one set of goals and objectives, US diplomats on another, and the CIA “third option” either is not considered or is not integrated into a single strategic vision.

In *Three Dangerous Men*, Jones focuses his attention on strategic thinkers in Russia, Iran, and China: Valery Gerasimov, Qassem Soleimani, and Zhang Youxia. Jones begins by providing his own definition of irregular warfare. This is especially important because irregular warfare, hybrid warfare, and conflict in the grey zone are used interchangeably in books and journals. Whenever multiple terms are used for what appears to be the same set of actions, the reader must worry if the terms are of any use at all. Jones’s definition is precise and serves the reader as the starting point for his discussion.

In irregular warfare...a country designs and uses these tools to undermine its adversaries as part of a balance of power competition without engaging in set-piece battles.... Some might object to using the term “warfare” to describe non-violent actions...that is not how US rivals see it. (11)

From this point, Jones offers detailed biographies of the three men, including discussion of where they came from and how they gained their strategic perspectives. He demonstrates that each of these three are experts in irregular warfare. Key to the discussion is that there are

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two very clear similarities among the three men: All are combat veterans, and all studied US operations from the end of the Cold War to the end of the first decade of the 21st century. While combat experience might be an obvious requirement for military leaders, Jones points out that all three men have frontline combat experience. This is a rare thing inside the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA). Zhang served with PLA forces during the late 1970s and early 1980s during both the very hot and cold war with Vietnam.

Military leaders across the entire globe are expected to have a basic understanding of military history and some understanding of their most likely adversaries. Jones underscores that all three men are true students of modern US military history. They have read and understood the reason US forces were so successful in the first Gulf War, the Balkans, and the early battles in Afghanistan and Iraq. What makes this book so valuable to military and intelligence professionals is Jones' hard work in capturing their writings and public speeches. His book is filled with very concise quotations from each of his dangerous men, and the bibliography alone makes this book worth reading.

Jones points out that the US military focus on how to defeat the conventional forces of Russia, China, and Iran misses the point entirely:

The United States remains ill equipped to compete with China.... The US military continues to focus primarily on low-probability conventional war with China, while Chinese military strategy is to avoid a major war. (171)

To anyone inside the US national security community, this should come as no surprise. In 1999, the Foreign Broadcast Information Service translated an academic document authored by PLA colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui. *Unrestricted Warfare* drew a roadmap to irregular-warfare for the PRC's use in a war with the United States. Of course, China experts rightly point to centuries-old writings by Sun Tzu and other military scholars as central to Mao's historic work, *On Guerrilla Warfare*. In sum, it is not that the Chinese military establishment hasn't said how they intend to fight. It is more likely the West hasn't been listening.^a

Jones is not the only academic who has focused his attention on the grey zone between war and peace. Stephen Biddle's *Nonstate Warfare* also addresses the importance of understanding irregular warfare. Biddle argues academics and military professionals must change their way of thinking about irregular warfare to address the complexities of 21st century war:

The new theory...begins by framing its dependent variable, its outcome to be explained, as a continuous spectrum of military methods, only the extremes of which resemble pure versions of... "conventional" and "guerrilla" war fighting. These extremes, moreover, are empirically very rare. Almost all real warfare for at least a century has been closer to the blended middle spectrum than either extreme. (7)

His central argument is that irregular war is the only war that the United States is likely to fight in the 21st century. Our adversaries—small and large—are not interested in conducting a conventional battle with US forces on land, sea, or in the air. At the same time, they also do not intend to conduct simple raids and ambushes more consistent with guerrilla operations of the first few decades after World War II. Instead, they will use all means available to win strategic conflict while keeping the battle just below the threshold of full-scale war.

Biddle offers a controversial solution to the challenge of irregular warfare. He suggests that the US military might consider returning to a force structure more closely aligned with the force structure of the Cold War rather than the modern design that grew out of the successes of the first Gulf War:

The force best suited for the future might be one that looks much more like US forces of the past.... The ideal force would be a balanced, medium-weight alternative with more dismounted infantry than the high-tech transformed force but more armor and artillery than the low-tech transformed force. In fact, this ideal force bears more than a passing resemblance to the structure of the legacy US land forces of the Cold War. (10)

Although both books are key primers to understanding how the US military might address 21st century

a. See Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Echo Point Books & Media, 1999); Ralph Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (Basic Books, 1993); Mao Zedong, *On Guerrilla Warfare* (Praeger Books, 1961).

battlefields, they only represent a small part of a larger discussion of US military strategy, operations, and tactics in irregular warfare. Traditional US and UK military journals, online journals, and RAND Corporation papers have all focused substantial attention on irregular warfare. The US Military Academy at West Point Modern Warfare Institute has partnered with Princeton University to create an Irregular Warfare Initiative.^a Unfortunately, in all these forums, the discussions focus only on the military aspects of irregular warfare. As both Jones and Biddle detail, irregular warfare is far more than just military conflict outside of conventional war. These discussions are absolutely necessary, but they are not sufficient for a successful US policy against either our near-peer adversaries or even against insurgents.

Jones comes closest to this argument near the end of his book when he addresses the importance of George Kennan in understanding how a new Cold War with Russia should be fought. Jones's previous book on US overt and covert efforts to support Poland's Solidarity Movement during the 1980s^b focused attention on how the Reagan administration synchronized its efforts toward a strategic goal. (181–83) Jones pointed to the Reagan administration's willingness to use all available US power, including diplomacy, economic sanctions, military deterrence, and covert action against the Soviets and their Warsaw Pact allies.

Reagan's team approach was reminiscent of the early Cold War effort to prevent Soviet and Chinese expansion in the 1950s, defined by George Kennan as "political warfare." In Kennan's words, this effort was designed to confront an expansionist regime in the Kremlin. In the broadest sense, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures...and "white" propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support to "friendly" foreign elements, "black" psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.^c

None of the three adversaries Jones identifies perceives any real distinction between war and peace, and they appear willing to risk economic sanctions to gain the strategic objectives of their nations. They see conflict as the inherent nature of international affairs.

If the United States intends to avoid a catastrophic, conventional war with one or more of these three adversaries, US policymakers must consider Kennan's political warfare as one means of confronting adversaries interested in conducting strategic irregular warfare. In the 21st century, until and unless the United States designs a whole-of-government strategic plan to confront our near-peers, we risk defeat at the hands of the "three dangerous men" and their successors. That is the most important lesson of both books reviewed in this essay.



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a. The US Military Academy describes the initiative as follows: The Irregular Warfare Initiative began as the Irregular Warfare Podcast in May 2020, when two active duty military officers at Princeton University recognized that there was an abundance of scholarly research on irregular warfare topics that was largely inaccessible to irregular warfare practitioners. The podcast was established to bridge this gap among scholars, practitioners, and policymakers, making research and experience-based insight more accessible across the force. More details can be found at <https://mwi.usma.edu/irregular-warfare-initiative/about-the-irregular-warfare-initiative/>

b. Jones, *A covert action: Reagan, the CIA, and the Cold War Struggle in Poland* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2018), 181–3.

c. George Kennan, *The Problem: The inauguration of organized political warfare*, Policy Planning Staff memorandum, May 4, 1948, available at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org>.

