

COMMENTARY

Many Ways to Be Irregular: The Real Definition of Irregular Warfare and How It Helps Us

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ABSTRACT

The U.S. military has long struggled to define and understand irregular warfare (IW). This essay argues that IW should be defined as “all warfare other than conventional warfare,” shifting the focus from finding a universal characteristic to analyzing the specific irregularities of each conflict. To support this approach, the essay provides a detailed definition of conventional warfare, which has remained stable for a century, and contrasts it with the diverse ways warfare can be irregular. By embracing the complexity and variety of IW rather than seeking a rigid definition, this framework allows for greater flexibility, adaptability, and creativity in both exploiting and countering irregular threats.

KEYWORDS

irregular warfare;
conventional
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unconventional
warfare; defining
warfare

The Problem: Negative Terms

There is a forever war between U.S. military doctrine and the English language, particularly with negative definitions. Words with positive definitions tell us what something is, while words with negative definitions tell us what something is not. In English, we routinely create words with negative definitions by adding a negative prefix, such as *un-*, *non-*, or *ir-*, to a word with a positive definition. This is how words with positive definitions such as *cool*, *negotiable*, and *responsible* are transformed into *uncool*, *nonnegotiable*, and *irresponsible* which mean, respectively, *not cool*, *not negotiable*, and *not responsible*. Negative prefixes give the English language an enormous number of terms with negative definitions. As an aside, it is worth noting that a negative definition does not mean the term describes a bad thing. For example, the term *nontoxic* has a negative definition, but it is obviously better than the positive term *toxic*.

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Negative definitions are not problematic for the English language but do pose a problem for U.S. military doctrine. This is because the military prides itself on its bias for action. Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Guardians want to know what to do, and we look to military doctrine to tell us what to do and how to do it. By telling us what something is, a positive definition puts us one step closer to knowing what to do. A negative definition, on the other hand, does not tell us what to do. At best, a negative definition might tell us what not to do. For example, conformists know that they should always conform in every way. On the other hand, nonconformists must choose from a vast array of different ways not to conform. The nonconformists might insist on walking backward wherever they go, keeping their eyes shut and living as blind people every Tuesday or laughing uproariously every time anyone says the word “of”. As this example indicates, negative definitions are a blessing if you crave options, and a curse if you want everyone to agree on exactly what to do.

The U.S. military, and particularly the Special Operations community within the U.S. military, has a long and unsatisfactory relationship with two different negative terms: unconventional warfare (UW) and irregular warfare (IW). Historically, the U.S. military has taken a bad approach to both by imposing positive definitions on these negative terms. The appeal of a positive definition is obvious since it helps the U.S. military decide what to do. The reason this is a bad solution is that imposing a positive definition on a negative term immediately creates confusion and conflict between the U.S. military and every other speaker of the English language.

The current U.S. military definition of unconventional warfare is: “Activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area.”¹ This definition has remained fairly stable for decades even though, from this positive definition, one would think the term should be: support to resistance and insurgency rather than unconventional warfare. This definition of UW has caused unending difficulties within the U.S. military and the interagency community since, in English, unconventional means “not conventional.” Support to resistance and insurgency is not conventional warfare, but there are many other types of warfare that are equally not conventional and most English speakers are reluctant to limit unconventional warfare to support to resistance and insurgency.

In English, unconventional warfare and irregular warfare are nearly synonymous, and the U.S. military has traditionally imposed positive definitions on both terms. However, while the definition of UW has been remarkably stable, the definition of IW has changed to follow the latest unconventional threat. Thus, during the Cold War, when communist insurgencies were the new and alarming unconventional threat, the definition focused on them; after 9/11, when the focus of concern shifted to jihadi-inspired terrorism and insurgency, the definition shifted to focus on this new irregular threat; and now, as the most dangerous unconventional threats seem to come from nation-states like Iran, Russia, and the People’s Republic of China, the definition is shifting focus once again.² Of course, the continuous redefinition of IW highlights the inability of a positive definition to capture the full variety inherent in a negative term like irregular.

At this point, the reader must be asking why, if the U.S. military craves positive definitions, does it insist on using negative terms like unconventional warfare and IW.³ The answer is that these negative terms accurately capture the unwelcome strangeness of warfare that is not the conventional warfare the U.S. military understands and considers normal. The terms unconventional warfare and IW appear more often in public debate when the warfare of the day does not conform to the public's expectations. The U.S. military is even more invested in a specific, conventional, understanding of warfare than the public is and hence, the U.S. military is even more disconcerted by warfare that is not conventional and violates expectations. Imposing a positive and, in the case of UW, static definition on these negative terms gives the U.S. military the comforting illusion that it has captured all the unwelcome strangeness in a single positive definition and the positive definition offers the hope of a single solution that will lead to success in every non-conventional situation.

The Two-Stage Solution to the IW Problem

First, let's recognize that the U.S. military has invested too much in the UW term for too long to be willing to radically redefine it now. Instead, we should focus on the more realistic goal of fixing the definition of IW.

To fix the IW term, we can look at how another community handles the problem of negative definitions, specifically the term irregular. The medical profession uses the term irregular heartbeat. As every English speaker would expect, there is essentially one way to be regular but many ways to be not regular or irregular. In this case, a normal or regular heartbeat falls within well-defined limits in terms of speed and rhythm. An irregular heartbeat, on the other hand, can take many forms such as being too slow or too fast, jumping between being too slow and too fast or having any rhythm other than the normal rhythm, etc. Different forms of irregularity will have very different implications for treatment. For example, we want to slow down a heart that is beating too fast, but slowing down a heart that is already too slow could be fatal. Thus, using the same treatment for all irregular heartbeats would be disastrous, and trying to find such a treatment is a dubious quest, but it would be the implied task if medicine imposed a positive definition on the term irregular heartbeat.

The term irregular heartbeat does not tell us what treatment to apply, but this does not make it a useless term. On the contrary, it works well for both the patient and the medical professional because the first question they are asking is whether the heart is doing its job. The quickest and easiest way to check is to listen to the heartbeat. A regular heartbeat is a good sign whereas an irregular heartbeat is a bad sign requiring further investigation. The focus then turns to finding exactly how the heartbeat is irregular, such as whether the heartbeat is too fast or too slow, and how to treat the specific irregularity. Thus, medical professionals deal with the negative definition of irregular heartbeat with a two-stage solution. In the first stage, they determine whether the patient has a normal or irregular heartbeat. If the heartbeat is irregular, then they go to the second stage and determine

exactly what is irregular about the heartbeat. This produces a positive definition of the patient's condition and indicates the specific treatment required.

Applying this approach to IW gives us an accurate definition of IW as warfare that is not regular or conventional. (The U.S. military prefers the term conventional warfare over regular warfare, just as the medical community prefers the term normal heartbeat over regular heartbeat.) As with the irregular heartbeat, this definition of IW leaves us with the follow-up or second-stage challenge of defining exactly what is irregular about a particular instance of warfare and how to deal with that irregularity. This two-stage approach to IW also tracks with the ever-expanding list of IW activities, which started with five in 2010 and grew to twelve by 2021⁴, since the activities are positive terms with associated doctrine.

Defining Conventional Warfare, The Many Ways to Be Irregular, and their Implications

At first glance, defining IW as warfare that is not conventional warfare seems unhelpful since it merely forces us to define conventional warfare. Fortunately, conventional warfare has had a very stable definition for a century and provides a great starting point for defining IW. Since World War I, conventional warfare has had the following characteristics:

- It is conducted by the uniformed armed forces of recognized nation-states, during times of recognized hostilities between them, in areas recognized as theaters of armed conflict.
- The armed forces are attempting to destroy one another using self-propelled metal warships on the surface of the sea, submarines below the surface of the sea, aircraft attacking targets on land and sea and in the air, and armies attacking each other with direct and indirect fire from cannons, rockets, missiles, machineguns, grenades, etc.
- The ground troops increase their mobility using cargo aircraft as well as wheeled and tracked vehicles, often protected by some sort of armor.
- Outside their vehicles, soldiers seek cover and concealment using camouflage, trenches, and foxholes.
- Military forces are commanded by designated military authorities, assisted by extensive staff, and the entire system is connected by wired and wireless electronic communications.

It is worth contrasting the remarkable stability of conventional warfare over the past hundred years with the extraordinary changes in conventional warfare between 1820 and 1920. In 1820, there were no aircraft or submarines, warships were made of wood and powered by sails, there were neither wired nor wireless electronic communications, there were no indirect fire or motor vehicles, armies wore brightly colored uniforms and marched toward the enemy shoulder to shoulder across open fields, military staffs were little more than a collection of the commander's chums and a few errand boys, and the feudal

kingdoms and empires that conducted conventional warfare were hopelessly disorganized compared to the industrial-era states of 1920.

There have been periods during the last hundred years when conventional wars were relatively rare compared to other forms of armed conflict, but the common understanding of conventional warfare has been surprisingly stable for a long time.

Two additional points require emphasis before moving to the concept of IW. First, IW, like diplomacy, can take place with or without conventional warfare. Since the start of conventional warfare does not mean the end of IW, the two are often intertwined and mutually supporting. Second, different nations have different relationships with any given conflict. For example, the Second World War was the largest in human history, involving unprecedented levels of conventional warfare and IW, but for neutral nations like Sweden or Turkey, the Second World War involved no warfare of any kind. By the same token, at the time of this writing Ukraine and Russia are engaged in a large conventional war, but many nations, such as Poland and Belarus, that are not direct participants in the conventional warfare, are supporting one side or the other and are therefore conducting IW activities against the side they oppose. Thus, the same event can be conventional warfare for some parties, IW for other parties, and not warfare at all for neutrals who take no part in the contest.

Defining the key aspects of conventional warfare allows us to identify some of the ways warfare can be irregular. The specific irregularity, like a specific type of irregular heartbeat, gives us clues as to how to handle that specific case. To structure our discussion, we will define conventional warfare in terms of the 5W's—*who, when, where, what/how, and why*—and then define IW in these same terms and consider the implications for the conduct of IW. The findings are summarized in Table 1 below, followed by a more extensive discussion of each of the 5W's.

5Ws	Conventional Warfare	Irregular Warfare (IW)	Implications for IW
Who	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uniformed armed forces of nation-states on both sides. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uniformed forces on one side, irregular forces on the other (e.g., insurgents, terrorists, criminals) States using proxies, surrogates, intelligence services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diverse actors create complex coordination challenges. Requires adaptability in strategy and operations.
When	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fixed periods of interstate conflict. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No time constraints; often prolonged. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IW campaigns have fluid start and end points. Rules of Engagement (ROE) and authorities evolve continuously.
Where	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Defined state territories and international waters. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No territorial limitations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Geographic flexibility affects ROE and authorities.
What/How	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct/indirect combat to defeat enemy forces. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sabotage, subversion, guerrilla warfare. Support to one party in a conventional war without direct involvement. Information, economic, and financial warfare. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conventional forces have a smaller role, while SOF and non-DoD actors have a larger role. Security Force Assistance (SFA) and Security Cooperation are key.

Why Conduct One Over the Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• States maintain control.• Clear, legitimate, and state-enhancing outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lower cost and risk than conventional warfare.• Opponents struggle to identify who, where, when, and how they are being engaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conventional warfare is rare; IW is continuous.• IW is harder to control and produces more ambiguous outcomes.
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Table 1: Comparative analysis of conventional and irregular warfare, highlighting key distinctions and their strategic implications.

Who

Who participates in conventional warfare: Conventional warfare is conducted by the uniformed armed forces of nation-states operating against the uniformed armed forces of the opposing nation-states.

Who participates in IW: IW is conducted by, or against non-state actors such as terrorist organizations, revolutionaries, insurgents, and criminal organizations. IW is also conducted by nation-states through combat or other warlike activities by forces other than their uniformed armed services. Such forces include proxies, surrogates, intelligence services, and irregular armed civilians as well as military personnel out of uniform like the “Little Green Men” Russia employed in Crimea in 2014.

Implications of irregular participants: Irregular participants have specific implications and definitions under U.S. legislation and military doctrine (JP 3-05). Employing U.S. forces against terrorist organizations is Counterterrorism (CT). The employment of U.S. forces against revolutionaries and insurgents is Counter Insurgency (COIN). Employing U.S. forces to assist a partner nation in combating subversion, terrorism, insurgents, revolutionaries, and criminal organizations is Foreign Internal Defense (FID). Employing U.S. forces to assist foreign insurgents or foreign forces resisting occupation is Unconventional Warfare (UW). Employing U.S. forces to assist a foreign nation in reforming, improving, and expanding its armed forces, including during wartime, falls under Security Force Assistance (SFA) which in turn falls under Defense Security Cooperation (DSC). Covert action, typically by U.S. intelligence agencies, falls under Title 50 U.S. Code § 3093.⁵ U.S. support to foreign forces that are assisting U.S. Special

Operations Forces combatting terrorism falls under Title 10 U.S. Code § 127e.⁶ When the U.S. military recruits, trains, equips, and pays salaries to foreign militaries, paramilitaries, and individuals supporting U.S. IW operations, it falls under section 1202 of the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act.⁷

Thus, IW involves an extraordinarily diverse set of actors, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, capabilities, and limitations, and this creates a much wider variety of friendly and enemy options and friendly and enemy vulnerabilities than in conventional warfare. Taking full advantage of all the unusual tools available in IW, and defending against all of the adversaries' irregular options, requires even more imagination and mental agility than conventional warfare.

When

When does conventional warfare take place: Conventional warfare takes place when a recognized nation-state announces that it is in hostilities with another recognized nation-state. So much has been made of the lack of official declarations of war⁸ that commentators seem to have lost sight of how clearly and consistently nation-states announce the commencement of conventional warfare. When Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale conventional invasion of Ukraine in 2022, he announced it to the world on television.⁹ When former U.S. President George W. Bush invaded Iraq in 2003, he announced it to the world on television,¹⁰ just as his father had announced the start of conventional warfare against Iraq in 1991.¹¹ Conventional warfare also ends with a major public announcement such as the much-maligned announcement of the end of major combat operations in Iraq by President George W. Bush aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln on 1 May 2003.¹²

When does IW take place: By contrast, Putin made no similar announcement when his "Little Green Men," i.e., Russian soldiers pretending not to be Russian soldiers, entered Crimea in 2014. In fact, Russian spokesmen denied these IW operations were being conducted by Russian forces,¹³ or later, claimed that the Russian troops fighting in Ukraine were on vacation and not acting on orders from the Russian government.¹⁴ Similarly, when the U.S. military conducts counterterrorism strikes in places like Somalia,¹⁵ the operations are not acknowledged or are followed with minimal public announcement and certainly nothing like the dramatic public announcements that accompany the beginning and ending of conventional warfare. The beginning and end of IW operations and activities may require the approval of the highest levels of government but will rarely involve major public announcements.

Implications for IW: IW activities lack the clear beginning and ending characteristics of conventional warfare. Instead, IW typically starts long before conventional warfare and continues long after conventional warfare is over, and frequently IW campaigns begin and end without any conventional warfare taking place. This means IW requires a flexible mindset capable of frequently and carefully updating tactics, techniques, procedures, and

rules of engagement to accomplish missions while staying within evolving peacetime and wartime legal authorities and permissions.

Public announcement of IW events: The emphasis on publicly announced beginning and endings for conventional warfare does not mean Presidents and other heads of state never announce IW operations. For example, U.S. President Ronald Reagan made a major public announcement after U.S. planes bombed Libyan government facilities in 1986,¹⁶ and U.S. President Barack Obama announced the 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden immediately after that event as well.¹⁷ However, these announcements were made to announce the end of these operations. Reagan said that he had struck Libya in retaliation for a recent terrorist attack on U.S. servicemen in West Germany by Libyan agents, but also that he considered the matter closed and would not continue similar raids unless Libya conducted another terrorist attack. Likewise, Obama was announcing a major counterterrorism success but was also announcing to Pakistan that it was a single event that was now over and not the beginning of a campaign of unilateral U.S. attacks inside sovereign Pakistani territory. By contrast, the long campaign of U.S. counterterrorism drone strikes inside Pakistan was conducted with minimal publicity and without dramatic announcements signaling either the beginning or end of the campaign.¹⁸

Where

Where does conventional warfare take place: The geographic boundaries of conventional warfare are the territories of the contesting states and wherever their forces meet in international waters, but it excludes the territory of neutral states. For example, in 2024, if Ukrainian and Russian forces meet in Ukraine, or Russia, they are duty-bound to try to kill one another, and if captured, they are entitled to prisoner-of-war status. However, if Ukrainian and Russian military personnel are in uniform in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and attempt to kill each other, they are subject to prosecution for attempted murder by the Argentine legal system.

Where IW takes place: Any warfare in neutral territory by the parties to a traditional war is inherently IW. These activities, such as World War II operations by the Axis and Allies in neutral Portugal and Turkey, are typically conducted by intelligence services making them irregular in both location and participants. IW can also take place inside the same territory as conventional warfare, if the participants or methods are irregular, for example, attacks on German forces in occupied France were IW when conducted by the French Resistance while attacks on those same forces were conventional warfare when conducted by uniformed Allied forces.

Implications of IW geography: Even when conventional warfare is underway, IW is not bound by the geographic limits of conventional warfare. Instead, IW has a different geography specific to the type of IW campaign underway. However, IW campaigns are not therefore geographically unbounded and may face very specific geographic restrictions and completely different rules of engagement, authorities, and permissions depending on where they are conducted. For example, assassinating Nazi officials in occupied Europe was a

common IW tactic during World War II,¹⁹ but similar assassinations were generally not conducted in neutral territory.

What/How

What sorts of operations are conventional/How is conventional warfare conducted: Conventional warfare operations directly attack the armed forces of the opposing power. Conventional operations can also indirectly attack the enemy's armed forces through things like sieges, blockades, attacks on transportation networks, attacks on industrial production, and other targets that weaken enemy forces by denying them logistical support. Of course, uniformed military forces have often been used against civilians, as in the famous Nanjing Massacre of 1937-38, but these are usually considered war crimes and hence not part of conventional warfare.

The tools of conventional warfare have been remarkably consistent and well-understood for generations. Overhead, military aircraft monitor and attack the enemy. Under the sea, submarines hunt surface ships and each other. On the surface of the sea, internally powered metal warships hunt submarines and each other while protecting themselves from air attack. On land, uniformed soldiers take and hold terrain, move across the land in wheeled and tracked vehicles that are often armored, and attack the enemy with direct and indirect fires from guns, rockets, and missiles while protecting themselves from air attacks. All these forces are commanded and controlled by national civilian and military leaders, supported by large staffs, relying on wired and wireless communications.

There have been some innovations. For example, in the past half-century, some of the overhead monitoring has been done from space and some of the wireless communication has been facilitated by satellites. Furthermore, in the past thirty years, some of the wired and wireless communication has involved cyber. Additionally, in the past two decades, a growing number of aircraft have been unmanned. In the future, some of the staff functions may be done by Artificial Intelligence. However, these technical innovations have enhanced rather than replaced conventional activities.

What sorts of operations are IW/How is IW conducted: President John F. Kennedy provided a famous description of IW methods during a speech in 1962 when he said:

This is another type of warfare, new in its intensity, ancient in its origins, war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by combat: by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him.²⁰

President Kennedy was a veteran of conventional warfare in World War II, speaking to the American public that had witnessed World War II, or grown up on stories of the war, and had internalized conventional warfare as the normal form of warfare. Kennedy was not providing a catalog of every possible IW technique but rather providing an emotional and impressionistic understanding of IW to help his audience recognize the challenges ahead.

As Kennedy suggests, an enormous variety of operations fall under IW and since no list of such operations could be exhaustive, we will not attempt such a list here.

However, one sort of IW deserves special attention and that is when a nation assists one party in conventional warfare rather than participating directly in the conventional fight. Two major examples, a half-century apart, are Soviet support to North Vietnamese forces that were conducting conventional warfare against U.S. forces in Vietnam, and U.S. support to Ukraine in the conventional warfare Ukraine has been conducting against Russia since February 2022. In Vietnam, the U.S. and North Vietnam were conducting conventional warfare and IW against each other, whereas the Soviets were conducting IW against the U.S. but not conducting conventional warfare. Similarly, after Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Ukraine and Russia are conducting both conventional warfare and IW against each other but the U.S. is only conducting IW against Russia and is not conducting conventional warfare.

The difficult question: What methods are, and are not, warfare? This analysis has benefited from the impressively consistent understanding of conventional warfare methods over the last hundred years. However, there is no such consensus about what is—and is not—warfare. Some feel that warfare must involve violence or at least the threat of violence. Others embrace more expansive visions of warfare. What are we to make of terms like economic warfare, financial warfare, information warfare, or even George Kennan's term from the early days of the Cold War, political warfare? Are these metaphorical uses of the term warfare like the use of war in the War on Poverty or even the Cold War? Or are these genuine forms of warfare outside the conventional method of direct attack but within the IW realm? It is a judgment call and one we will not attempt to resolve here, but to the extent that these liminal cases are in fact warfare, they are IW and not conventional warfare.

The use of the word warfare within the IW term also creates problems within the U.S. government and with partners and allies. In many forms of IW, the U.S. military is working closely with, or even in support of, civilian agencies, departments, and international partners. These agencies, departments, and foreign partners are anxious to advance U.S. and partner interests and counter threats to those interests, but they are often uncomfortable having their activities described as warfare. From their perspective, warfare takes place only during wartime. Until there is a traditional war with large-scale conventional combat operations, they consider themselves to be at peace and hence not involved in warfare. Furthermore, there is concern that the term warfare implies the military should be the lead agency and non-military agencies are anxious to avoid subordinating themselves to the military in peacetime.

For all these reasons, interagency and international partners may be more comfortable with terms like strategic competition than IW for describing unfriendly activities below the level of conventional warfare.

Why

All warfare is conducted to protect and advance the political goals of the participants, so the purpose is identical for both conventional warfare and IW. There are, however, reasons for choosing one or the other.

Why conduct conventional warfare: Conventional warfare has several advantages over IW. First, conventional warfare, particularly when conducted within the laws of war, lends greater legitimacy to the outcome and the participants. Conventional warfare reinforces state authority since it is conducted by states through the overt actions of uniformed employees of the state in pursuit of the publicly announced goals of the state. Successful conventional wars, such as the North Vietnamese conquest of South Vietnam in 1975 and the U.S. liberation of Panama in 1989 and Kuwait in 1991, enhance the reputation of the victors while achieving their goals. Clandestine and covert actions, on the other hand, always have a nefarious and dishonest feel to them. Even when they succeed, it is hard to take credit for them and the outcome is less legitimate since the victor seems to have cheated. Governments also have a high degree of control over their uniformed armed forces, but much less control over irregular surrogates, making many IW operations more difficult to control than conventional military operations.

Why conduct IW: For non-state actors, there is no other choice. Either they conduct IW, or they conduct no warfare at all and find more cooperative ways to interact with their enemies.

For states, conventional warfare has some unattractive features. First, conventional warfare is spectacularly expensive. In fact, it is usually the most expensive activity states engage in, and the expense is not merely financial. Conventional warfare requires—and risks destroying—the most expensive land, sea, and air vehicles available at the time. They also involve enormous property damage while killing and maiming thousands, or even millions of government employees and citizens. Conventional warfare also involves enormous opportunity costs since it is difficult for a nation to do anything else while conducting conventional warfare. For example, President Lyndon Johnson blamed the Vietnam War for the limited impact of his Great Society programs: his administration simply could not do both at once.²¹

In addition to the cost, conventional warfare is enormously risky. Since conventional warfare is highly visible and closely associated with the national leadership conducting it, defeat is frequently fatal. Manuel Noriega and Slobodan Milosevic failed in conventional warfare and died in prison. Saddam Hussein failed in conventional warfare and was executed by his own people. Even winning in conventional warfare does not guarantee the leader's political future. For example, Winston Churchill was voted out of office immediately after winning World War II and George W. Bush lost the 1992 presidential election shortly after winning the 1991 Gulf War.

IW, on the other hand, usually comes with much lower costs and risks. IW activities typically involve much smaller and less expensive forces and frequently much of the personal risk is being borne by foreigners. The clandestine nature of many IW activities

makes it easier to deny when they fail. Even a spectacular and undeniable IW failure, like the Kennedy administration's famous fiasco at the Bay of Pigs, had a minimal impact on the President's political future and the financial and human costs were trivial compared to conventional warfare. For example, if Kennedy had landed the U.S. Marine Corps at the Bay of Pigs and it had turned out the same way, the results would have been infinitely worse for his administration.

For anyone assessing the relative merits of conventional warfare and IW as methods of accomplishing national goals, Vladimir Putin's experience in Ukraine is highly instructive. Let's quickly review that history. In 2014, a pro-Russia President was forced out of Ukraine by street protests (the Maiden Revolution). Putin responded with a highly successful IW campaign that captured Crimea at nearly no cost, and less successful IW campaigns in several other Ukrainian oblasts that gained him control of about half of Donetsk and Luhansk at an acceptable cost. However, after 2014, Ukraine and its supporters were on the lookout for "Little Green Men" and Putin's other IW tricks. By 2022, it appeared that Putin had gained all he could in Ukraine via IW. Putin should have watched and waited and advanced his interests when and where he could with IW methods. Instead, he lost patience, doubled down on his maximalist goals, and escalated to conventional warfare.

Two years after switching to conventional warfare, Putin had roughly doubled the part of Ukraine he controlled, but at a catastrophic cost to his military (hundreds of thousands of casualties and so much equipment destroyed that he is pulling 60-year-old tanks out of storage); his economy (he is facing economic sanctions unlike anything imposed on a major country since World War II); and his nation (in addition to hundreds of thousands of casualties, hundreds of thousands of healthy and educated young men have fled Russia to avoid participation in the war). The cost increases daily, with no end in sight, while there is little reason to hope he will ever expand his territorial gains enough to justify the cost. Putin's switch from IW to conventional warfare makes a strong case for IW and highlights the risks of escalating to conventional warfare.

Conclusion

This essay has provided an explanation of why the U.S. military has had difficulty defining IW and proposed a two-step solution to the problem modeled on the way medical professionals treat an irregular heartbeat. The first step is to embrace the definition of IW as "all warfare other than conventional warfare" and assess whether a specific challenge falls into the IW category. The second step is identifying what is irregular about a specific instance of IW and how best to exploit or counter that form of irregularity.

The essay then provided a detailed description of conventional warfare that has remained stable for a century and did so in terms of the 5Ws: who, when, where, what/how, and why. It then used the description of conventional warfare to provide a detailed description of the many ways warfare can be irregular and investigated their implications.

By following the model medicine uses with irregular heartbeats, this essay has avoided the trap of seeking some magical element common to every instance of IW. Instead, this

essay embraces the vast diversity within IW and the enormous number of options it provides to IW practitioners. By emphasizing the myriad options available, it is hoped that the two-step approach suggested here will unleash the creativity and imagination of IW practitioners.

Endnotes

¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, January 2021, <https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/dictionary.pdf>.

² Jared M. Tracy, "From 'Irregular Warfare' to Irregular Warfare: History of a Term," *Veritas* 19, no. 1 (2023).

³ It is interesting to note that the Russians get by without the term irregular warfare and only use the term to describe how it is used in U.S. doctrine, even though the Russians have extensive doctrine for many different forms of irregular warfare. See Christopher Marsh, "Russia's 'Special' Way of War," forthcoming in *New Faces of Irregular Warfare*, edited by the Irregular Warfare Center (Washington, D.C.: Irregular Warfare Center, 2024). Perhaps centuries of Imperial Russian and Soviet experience with many forms of irregular warfare has made today's Russians more comfortable than their Western counterparts with warfare that is not conventional.

⁴ Office of Irregular Warfare and Competition, Directorate for Joint Force Development (J-7), *Curriculum Development Guide for Irregular Warfare*, June 3, 2022, 8.

⁵ U.S. Code, 50 U.S.C. § 3093, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/50/3093>.

⁶ U.S. Code, 10 U.S.C. § 127e, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/127e>.

⁷ *Public Law 115-91*, U.S. Congress, December 12, 2017, <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ91/PLAW-115publ91.pdf>.

⁸ Valery Gerasimov, "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight," *Military Review*, January-February 2016.

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