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Inter Populum

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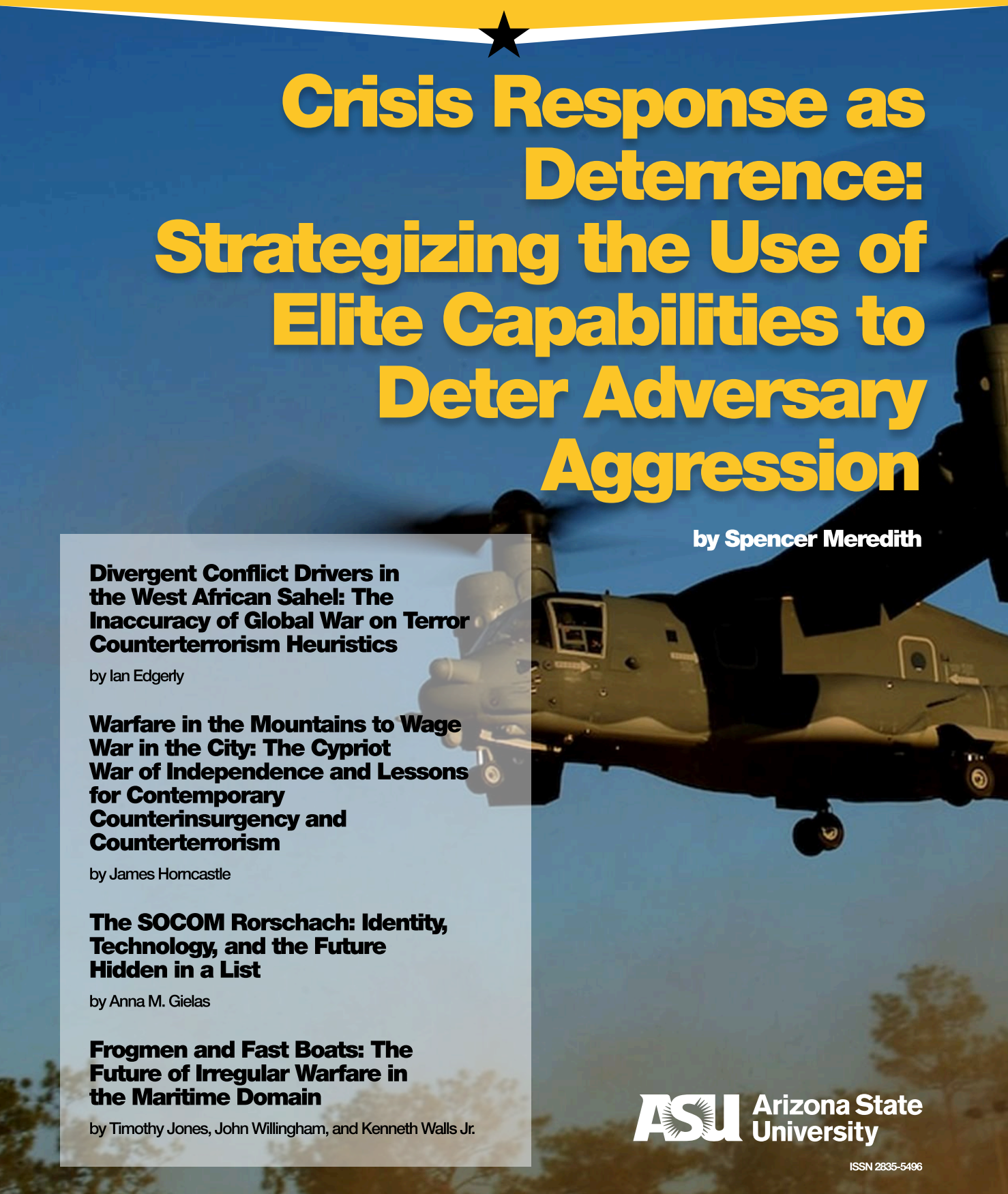

Crisis Response as Deterrence: Strategizing the Use of Elite Capabilities to Deter Adversary Aggression

by Spencer Meredith

Divergent Conflict Drivers in the West African Sahel: The Inaccuracy of Global War on Terror Counterterrorism Heuristics

by Ian Edgerly

Warfare in the Mountains to Wage War in the City: The Cypriot War of Independence and Lessons for Contemporary Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism

by James Horncastle

The SOCOM Rorschach: Identity, Technology, and the Future Hidden in a List

by Anna M. Gielas

Frogmen and Fast Boats: The Future of Irregular Warfare in the Maritime Domain

by Timothy Jones, John Willingham, and Kenneth Walls Jr.

Arizona State University

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Tactical Gains, Strategic Costs: A Strategic, Ethical, and Normative Evaluation of Israel's War on Hamas in Gaza

Nelly A. Hernández Valdez, Security Studies Program Alumna, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., USA.

ABSTRACT

This article evaluates Israel's counterterrorism campaign in Gaza through strategic, ethical, and normative lenses. While the military has achieved tactical successes—such as dismantling Hamas battalions and killing senior leaders—these have come at the cost of strategic coherence, international legitimacy, and moral authority. Drawing on the Dahiya Doctrine, just war theory, and mass atrocity prevention principles, the research argues that Israel has prioritized body counts over undermining Hamas ideologically, failed to empower moderate political alternatives, and in doing so has crossed critical thresholds under international humanitarian law. The marginalization of diplomacy, censorship of dissenting voices, and exclusion of women from decision-making reflect broader gaps in Israel's approach. As a liberal democracy, Israel bears the responsibility to uphold higher standards—not only for ethical reasons but because strategic success depends on it. The elimination of Hamas and the pursuit of lasting peace will not be achieved through annihilation, but through the deliberate balancing of force, restraint, and diplomacy.

KEYWORDS

Israel-Hamas; counterterrorism; just war theory, mass atrocity prevention; international humanitarian law

Introduction

On October 7, 2023, Hamas triggered a war with Israel by carrying out the deadliest terrorist attack per capita, massacring 1,200 innocent people—of whom at least 809 were civilians—and taking at least 251 hostages. [1] While Israel's history has always been intertwined with the fight against terrorism, the unprecedented scale of the October 7 attack compelled Israeli leaders to launch an intensive aerial and ground campaign in the Gaza Strip, with the stated objectives of destroying Hamas, rescuing the hostages, and ensuring that Israel would no longer face existential threats from Gaza.[2]

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In response, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have conducted a retaliatory invasion of Gaza involving approximately 40,000 combat troops, dropped at least 70,000 tons of explosives—exceeding the combined weight of bombs dropped on London, Dresden, and Hamburg during all of World War II—[3]displaced around 90 percent of Gaza's population, and killed over 60,000 people.[4] As a result, Israel's counterterrorism campaign has itself become one of the deadliest for a civilian population per capita, both in terms of speed and scale. As the conflict has escalated beyond its initial objectives, it becomes necessary to critically assess not only the military outcomes but also the broader ethical and strategic implications of Israel's counterterrorism campaign.

With the collapse of the January 2025 ceasefire and the intensification of violence against civilians, an essential question arises: whether the same degree of kinetic power that has effectively destroyed Gaza's infrastructure and weakened Hamas militarily has also succeeded in dismantling the ideology that sustains the terrorist group. This research seeks to answer the following question: To what extent has Israel's counterterrorism campaign against Hamas been effective, and to what extent has it adhered to the moral and legal standards of just war theory and mass atrocity prevention?

This research is structured into six analytical sections. The first section provides a background on Hamas. The second examines Israel's counterterrorism doctrine, with particular focus on the principles and implications of the Dahiya Doctrine. The third analyzes the specific strategies and tactics employed by Israel since the October 7 attacks. The fourth section applies just war theory to assess the ethical dimensions of Israel's response and identify key shortcomings in its adherence to its principles. The fifth section evaluates the ongoing war in Gaza through the lens of mass atrocity prevention, guided by Scott Straus's analytical framework. The final section explores alternative strategies and tactics that were not pursued but could have offered more effective or ethically grounded outcomes.

Background

The Birth of Hamas

Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya, better known as Hamas, was founded in December 1987 during the outbreak of the First Intifada, a Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation. Although ideologically rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas's immediate emergence was triggered by a specific event: a traffic accident in Gaza involving an Israeli truck that killed several Palestinian workers and sparked riots.[5] Within days, the unrest evolved into a sustained uprising. On December 14, 1987, the Muslim Brotherhood issued a leaflet calling for resistance, marking the official birth of Hamas. Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, a cleric and longtime member of the Brotherhood, is credited as the group's founder.[6] He positioned Hamas as the Brotherhood's political arm in Gaza, aiming to reassert Islamist leadership in the Palestinian resistance against Israel.[7]

The Genocidal Spirit of Hamas

Hamas's raison d'être is the elimination of the State of Israel. Rooted in a genocidal ideology, the group seeks the complete "liberation" of Palestine—from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea—and the establishment of an Islamic state through armed jihad.[8] To pursue this aim, Hamas employs a threefold strategy: providing social services to build

popular support, participating in politics to challenge the authority of the secular Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Palestinian Authority (PA), and conducting guerrilla operations and terrorist attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians.[9]

Hamas's categorical rejection of Jews and of peaceful resolution is explicit in its original 1988 Covenant, which declares: "The stones and trees will say: O Muslims, O Abdullah, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him."[10] The document also dismisses diplomacy outright, insisting that "initiatives, proposals, and international conferences are all a waste of time and vain endeavors."[11]Although Hamas issued a revised charter in 2017 that softened some of its overtly antisemitic language—claiming opposition to Zionism rather than Judaism—it continued to deny Israel's right to exist and reaffirmed its goal of establishing an Islamist Palestinian state across present-day Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, while fully endorsing the "right of return" for all Palestinian refugees.[12]

Governing Gaza

Hamas's rise to power was shaped by both popular support and the vacuum left by Israel's 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Although Israel's military campaign had weakened Hamas operationally, its refusal to bolster the PA under Mahmoud Abbas alienated Palestinian moderates. [13] In the 2006 elections, Hamas won a legislative majority, capitalizing on its reputation for social services and rejection of corruption associated with Fatah.[14] Tensions between Fatah and Hamas culminated in a violent split in 2007. Hamas seized full control of Gaza after routing Fatah forces, establishing itself as the de facto authority. It then created parallel institutions, including a judiciary and internal security apparatus, often ruling with authoritarian methods. Elections have not been held in Gaza for the legislature since 2006, nor for president since 2008.[15]*Leaders and Funding*

Claims that Hamas maintains distinct political and military wings are deeply misleading. From its inception, the organization has operated as a unified structure. Its founder, Ahmed Yassin, played both spiritual and operational roles. As he famously stated, "We cannot separate the wing from the body. If we do so, the body will not be able to fly."[16] Successive leaders such as Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi and Yahya Sinwar have similarly embodied this duality. Sinwar, for example, formerly led Hamas's military wing before assuming political leadership and was a principal architect of the October 7, 2023, attacks prior to being killed in an Israeli airstrike.[17]

Hamas's financial infrastructure is both transnational and opaque. The group sustains itself through a complex web of state sponsorship, diaspora contributions, and the misuse of charitable organizations. Iran alone is estimated to contribute up to $100 million annually to Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups.[18] Turkey and Qatar have also provided political support and financial assistance, with Hamas's political bureau based in Doha. Domestically, Hamas capitalizes on the "dawa"—its social welfare network—which serves not only as a tool for grassroots legitimacy but also as a covert logistical platform for financing terrorism. As Levitt notes, "The dawa serves as the ideal logistical infrastructure for a terrorist network—blurring the lines between charity and terror." The dual-use nature of these institutions makes counterterrorism efforts particularly complex and challenging.

The October 7 Attacks

"Kill as many people and take as many hostages as possible" were the instructions reportedly given to Hamas fighters ahead of the October 7, 2023 attacks.[19] On that day, Hamas launched a surprise, coordinated assault on southern Israel by land, sea, and air—executed primarily by over 1,000 members of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades.[20] The operation caused approximately 1,200 fatalities—including at least 809 civilians and 314 Israeli military personnel—and the abduction of at least 251 hostages.[21] Hamas employed swarming tactics designed to breach Israel's border defenses, paralyze command and control systems, overwhelm first responders, and sow widespread confusion.[22]

The attack inflicted unprecedented casualties: more than 14,900 people were wounded and required hospitalization.[23] One-third of the victims were massacred at the Nova music festival.[24] Other atrocities included the killing of unarmed and untrained female intelligence observation soldiers, and in one reported case, a nine-month-old infant hiding with her mother.[25] Many experts argue that, beyond inflicting mass casualties, Hamas's intent was to provoke a large-scale Israeli military response and escalate the conflict.[26]

Israel's Counterterrorism Approach: The Dahiya Doctrine

A persistent weakness of Israel's counterterrorism policy is the disconnection between its tactical military responses and a broader, coherent strategic vision. As Byman argues, Israel has long prioritized operational effectiveness and immediate deterrence over long-term political outcomes, often displaying "a focus on the present to the exclusion of future problems."[27] This short-term orientation is especially evident in Israel's application of the Dahiya Doctrine, a counterterrorism approach that emphasizes the use of overwhelming and disproportionate force in response to attacks by non-state actors.

The Dahiya Doctrine takes its name from the Dahiya neighborhood in Beirut, which was devastated by Israeli bombardment during the 2006 Lebanon War. Then-General Gadi Eisenkot, who later served as IDF Chief of General Staff, articulated the core logic behind the doctrine in 2008:

> What happened in the Dahiya quarter of Beirut in 2006 will happen in every village from which Israel is fired on [...] We will apply disproportionate force and cause great damage and destruction there. From our standpoint, these are not civilian villages, they are military bases. This is not a recommendation. This is a plan. And it has been approved. [28]

Promoted by Israeli military thinkers such as Col. Gabi Siboni, the doctrine explicitly embraces disproportionate force not just to neutralize enemy combatants but to deter future hostilities by imposing massive punishment.[29] This approach, however, is incompatible with international humanitarian law, which requires proportionality and the protection of civilians in armed conflict.[30] Despite these legal and ethical concerns, the doctrine has continued to shape Israel's operations in Gaza, notably during Operation Cast Lead (2008–2009), Operation Protective Edge (2014), and the current Swords of Iron War launched in response to the October 7 attacks.[31]

While the Dahiya Doctrine may align with one of the stated objectives of the Swords of Iron War—the destruction of Hamas's military capabilities—it is arguably ill-suited to advancing two other key goals: the rescue of hostages and the long-term prevention of

existential threats from Gaza. The use of overwhelming and indiscriminate force not only endangers the lives of hostages held in densely populated civilian areas, but also fails to prevent future violence. Despite having been implemented in previous conflicts, the doctrine did not deter Hamas from launching the October 7, 2023, attacks—the deadliest terrorist assault in Israeli history, underscoring its strategic limitations.

Moreover, key provisions of the Dahiya Doctrine, as formulated by Col. Gabi Siboni and General Eisenkot, appear to have been ignored. Among them are the recommendations to "reduce the period of fighting to a minimum," to "create an effective balance of deterrence," and to ensure that "the primary goal must nonetheless be to attain a ceasefire under conditions that will increase Israel's long-term deterrence and prevent a war of attrition."[32] Instead, the campaign has become prolonged and increasingly disconnected from its original objectives.

Notably, Gen. Eisenkot, who returned as a key adviser to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's war cabinet in October, resigned in June 2024, citing a lack of political will to end the war. In his words, "there are people sitting in the room who do not want to see the war end."[33] He further criticized the government's contradictory approach, pointing out that while Netanyahu claimed there would be no military occupation or new settlements, documents suggested otherwise.[34] Eisenkot's resignation highlights how political ambitions have overridden some of the doctrine's own strategic logic.

The modification in Israel's objectives became more evident following the collapse of the 42-day ceasefire that began in January 2025. On March 30, Netanyahu laid out an updated plan that, beyond disarming Hamas, explicitly promoted the Trump plan for permanently displacing Palestinians from Gaza, stating: "We will see to the general security in the Gaza Strip and will allow the realization of the Trump plan for voluntary migration."[35] As Eisenkot cautioned, Israel is now actively fragmenting Gaza—maintaining troops inside the territory and gradually taking control of key areas, including Rafah, the critical border crossing with Egypt.[36] By doing so, Israel is effectively ensuring that the only access into and out of Gaza is through its territory. The endorsement of forced displacement and the construction of what President Donald Trump called "the Riviera of the Middle East"[37] points to a broader strategy aimed not only at restructuring Gaza's political and security apparatus but also at transforming its geography and even its population.

Although some aspects of the Dahiya Doctrine—such as limiting the duration of conflict and pursuing a ceasefire under terms that strengthen deterrence—have been disregarded, its core principle of large-scale punishment and the destruction of entire urban areas has laid the groundwork for Israel's broader strategy. By destroying Gaza's infrastructure, the doctrine effectively eliminates the conditions necessary for Palestinians to sustain life in the territory, thus facilitating the promotion of so-called "voluntary migration." This same destruction also creates the pretext for a new phase of "development," aligned with the Trump plan, while enabling Israel to reshape Gaza's security, political, geographic, and even demographic architecture to match its vague long-term ambitions.

However, the doctrine fails to address the key drivers of terrorism: political grievances, perceived injustice, and ideology. Without confronting the underlying political and ideological forces that sustain groups like Hamas, Israel's decisions risk feeding a cycle of violence and ensuring long-term insecurity. Moreover, Israel is a liberal democracy that subscribes to the just war theory, the Dahiya Doctrine, even with the initial stated objectives,

is contradictory to its principles, which will be examined later in the Mass Atrocity Lens discussion.

Strategies and Tactics

Strategic Incoherence and the Limits of Military Powers

Under Prime Minister Netanyahu, Israel's war in Gaza appears to lack a coherent strategy. As strategist Colin Gray has noted, strategy is neither policy nor combat—it is the essential bridge between them.[38] If war is indeed the continuation of politics by other means, then it must be capable of producing political outcomes through military action. This is precisely where Israel's campaign falters: it lacks a clear and unified plan that connects its military operations to achievable political ends.

The three central goals for the war are clear: the destruction of Hamas, the rescue of the hostages, and the elimination of future existential threats from Gaza. However, military force divorced from political context is strategically meaningless. In this vacuum, the objective of eradicating Hamas has been interpreted primarily as the physical destruction of the group—not as an effort to dismantle its ideology or appeal, but "its removal as a quasi-state able to threaten Israel's borders."[39] While the physical elimination of a terrorist organization may be technically achievable, it directly conflicts with the parallel goal of rescuing hostages, who are being used by Hamas as human shields.[40]

This contradiction exposes a deeper weakness in Israel's approach: its overreliance on military means. For instance, Israel has justified the break of the ceasefire by claiming that doing so would accelerate the release of hostages. Yet, in practice, it has been negotiation—not force—that has secured the freedom of most hostages taken during the October 2023 attacks.[41] Without a political track to complement its military campaign, Israel's strategy risks collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions.

Another major gap in Israel's strategy is the absence of a credible "day after" plan for Gaza. In his address to the U.S. Congress, Netanyahu stated that the future of Gaza should be both demilitarized and deradicalized.[42] However, the means by which Israel is attempting to demilitarize Gaza—through widespread destruction—undermine the goal of deradicalization. Military experts have warned that the scale of devastation and the deep grievances it generates are likely to fuel further radicalization, potentially producing new Hamas recruits or even more extreme actors. As former U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin cautioned: "In this kind of fight, the center of gravity is the civilian population. And if you drive them into the arms of the enemy, you replace a tactical victory with a strategic defeat."[43]

Tactics

Despite the absence of a comprehensive strategy, the IDF, following the Dahiya Doctrine, has focused on large-scale aerial bombardments, ground invasion, siege tactics, urban and underground warfare, and the systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure suspected of serving as cover for Hamas operations. These tactics have been particularly successful in physically destroying Hamas leadership and reducing its military manpower.

Hamas Composition

The IDF has had tactical success in eliminating key Hamas leaders, including Yahya Sinwar, military chief Mohammed Deif, and Deif's deputy, Marwan Issa.[44] Before the war, Hamas's fighting force was estimated at 25,000 to 30,000 members.[45] According to Israeli claims, approximately 17,000 militants have been killed, and most of the group's 24 battalions have been dismantled.[46] However, data from ACLED, based on detailed IDF reports that include the timing, location, and nature of operations, suggest a lower figure—approximately 8,500 militant fatalities as of October 6, 2024, one year after the war began.[47]

While targeting Hamas's leadership may hold tactical and symbolic value, its strategic impact must be evaluated in light of the organization's specific characteristics. As Byman explains, targeting key figures like bomb makers, trainers, or recruiters can be effective because those roles require years of experience and are hard to replace.[48] In those cases, even if a group still has recruitment capacity, it may no longer be able to operate effectively. Nonetheless, Hamas does not have a profile to be defeated solely on this basis. Eliminating a terrorist organization by a decapitation strategy works best against small, centralized groups with one main leader and a short history.[49] In contrast, Hamas has operated for over 40 years, is deeply networked, and benefits from state support. If Hamas were vulnerable to this strategy, it would likely have ceased to function long ago.[50]

Figure 1. Hamas Leaders Eliminated by Israel

Hostages

Israel has succeeded in securing the release of nearly 60 percent of the hostages, reducing the total number from 251 to 59, of whom only 24 are believed to be alive.[51] Around 150 were released through ceasefire agreements, while military operations have rescued just eight.[52] Despite this, the new and more aggressive IDF chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Eyal Zamir, is pushing for renewed large-scale operations in Gaza—sparking concern among the Israeli public and hostage families, who favor negotiations over continued fighting.[53] Former hostages have testified that Israeli strikes made their conditions worse and left them fearing death from either their captors or the bombardments.[54]

Hamas Infrastructure

The IDF has also faced an especially complex challenge in Hamas's vast and sophisticated tunnel system beneath Gaza. Often referred to as the "Gaza Metro," this system has been under construction since 2007 and consists of 350 to 450 miles of subterranean infrastructure used for movement, weapons storage, ambushes, and command-and-control.[55] Despite sustained efforts during the current war, the IDF has only destroyed around a quarter of these tunnels.[56] However, urban warfare experts argue that eliminating Hamas's operational capabilities does not require destroying the entire network.[57] Strategically, Israel is prioritizing high-value targets—such as cross-border tunnels or those used for command and logistics—rather than attempting full eradication, which would demand years and a scale of resources that exceeds Israel's current capabilities.[58]

Before October 2023, the IDF's approach to tunnel warfare was based on the principle that only specially trained units should engage with subterranean threats, while regular troops were sent underground only as a last resort—an approach that contrasts with U.S. military doctrine, which generally advises avoiding tunnel environments altogether whenever possible.[59] This mindset has shifted dramatically, based on trial-and-error approaches, from unsuccessful attempts to flood tunnels to dangerous incursions resulting in casualties.[60] Today, the IDF has developed a new doctrine, combining surface and subsurface operations in dense urban environments.[61] Some IDF units now use Hamas's tunnels as corridors for offensive maneuvers—a first in modern urban warfare.[62] This transformation—from avoidance to integration—marks a paradigm shift that could shape how future militaries approach underground warfare.

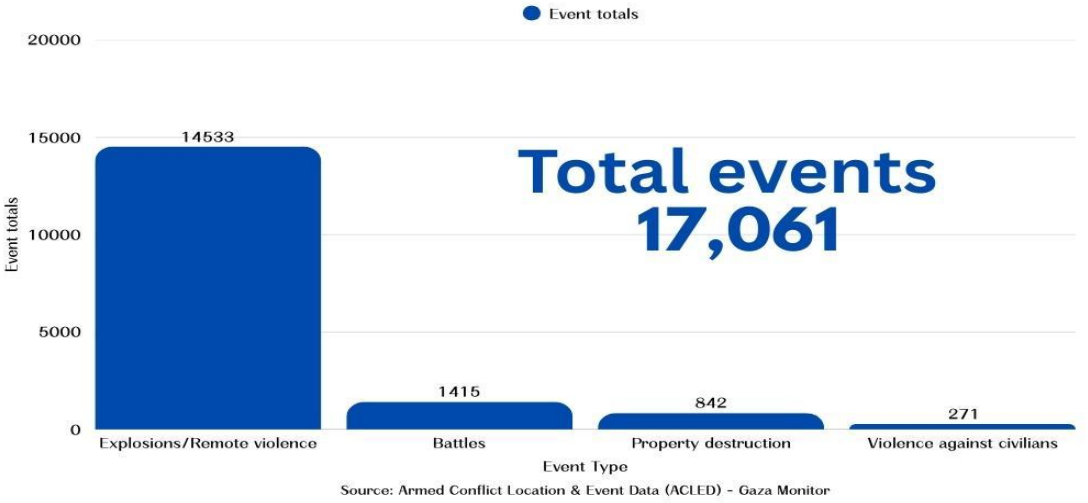

Figure 2. Total Number of Events by Type Conducted by Israeli Forces in Gaza as of April 2025.

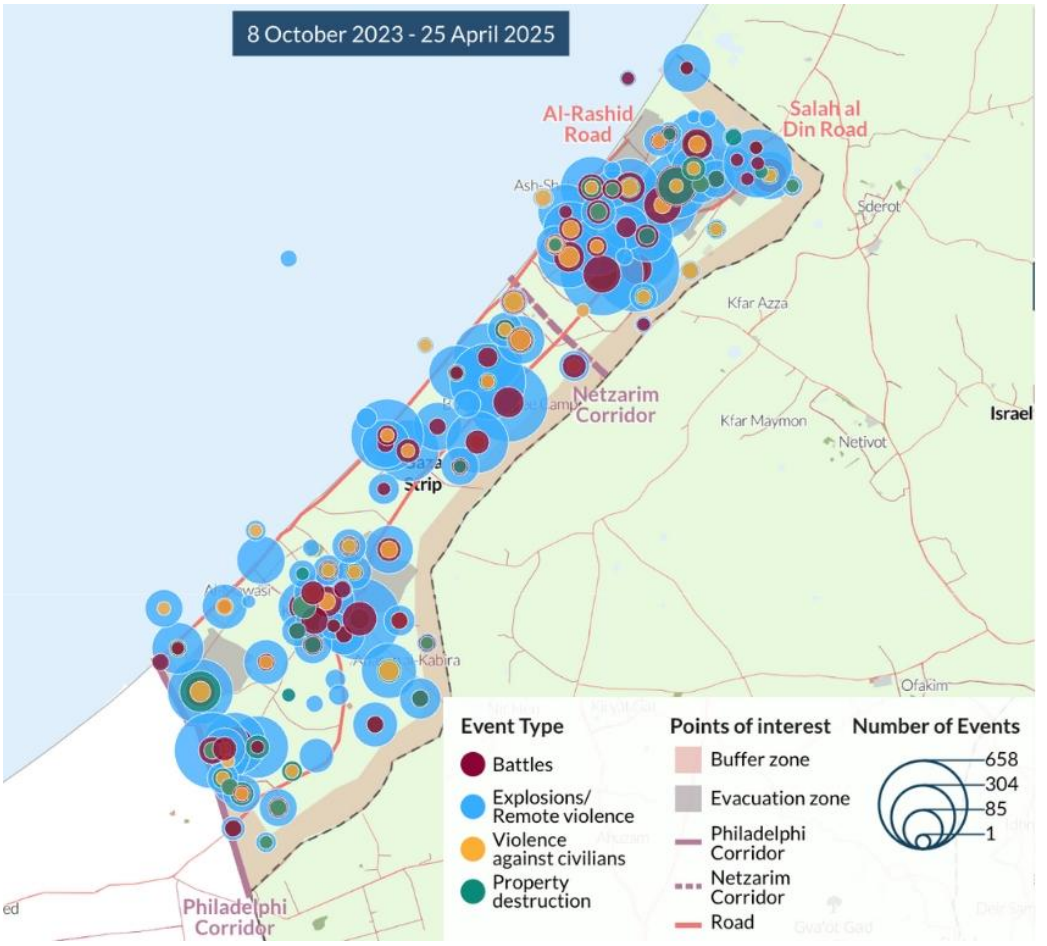

Figure 3. Distribution of Events Conducted by Israeli Forces in Gaza as of April 2025 (Source: ACLED – Gaza Monitor)

Counterterrorism and Just War Theory

Just War Theory is grounded in the idea that while there may be morally acceptable reasons to resort to war, the conduct of war must still abide by ethical constraints. One of its most prominent thinkers, Walzer, argues that terrorism is inherently unjust because it intentionally targets civilians: "Its purpose is to destroy the morale of a nation, or class, to undercut its solidarity; its method is the random killing of innocent people."[63] While Hamas defends its actions by invoking the language of anti-colonial resistance—echoing thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, who once wrote that killing an oppressor is an act of self-liberation—[64]Walzer challenges this logic. He warns that such reasoning can lead to moral nihilism, in which all members of the opposing society become legitimate targets.[65]

Just War Theory consists of three core principles: *jus ad bellum* (the justice of going to war), *jus in bello* (justice in how war is conducted), and *jus post bellum* (justice in the

aftermath).[66] Each principle provides a lens to evaluate a conflict's legitimacy and morality. *Jus ad bellum* asks: Was the war justified? *Jus in bello*: Were the methods used in war ethical? And *jus post bellum*: Was the war's aftermath handled justly? For Luban, the cornerstone of a just war is the existence of a just cause—"the paradigmatic example being self-defense."[67] In the case of Israel, following the deadliest terrorist attack in its history, the justification for war as an act of self-defense is clear. However, the conduct of that war, particularly under the Dahiya Doctrine, raises serious concerns under the *jus in bello* framework. As Walzer cautions, "It is perfectly possible for a just war to be fought unjustly."[68]

Jus ad Bellum

A war may be considered just not only when it is fought in self-defense, but also when it is waged with the right intention. In Israel's case, the initial justification meets this threshold: Hamas has repeatedly targeted civilians with terrorist attacks since its founding, and the October 7, 2023, massacre left little doubt about the need for a forceful response. However, right intention becomes more questionable as Israel's war objectives shift. The promotion of a "voluntary migration" plan for Gaza raises concerns about whether the aim is to make life unlivable for the 2.1 million civilians in the Strip—a tactic that could amount to ethnic cleansing.[69] In other words, right intention means no revenge, but Netanyahu's actions often seem guided by revenge, "perhaps to make up for his actual responsibilities for what happened."[70]

Jus in Bello

One of the most consistent critiques from human rights organizations and international legal bodies is that the Israeli leaders' treatment of Gaza's civilian population amounts to war crimes and crimes against humanity.[71] As of now, Israeli operations have killed over 62,122 Palestinians and injured more than 156,758.[72] Israel's general stance toward civilians has often appeared hostile—something reflected in the statement of its UN representative, who declared: "While the hostages were guarded by terrorists, Gazan civilians were their jailors," adding that these "so-called innocent civilians" were complicit in Hamas's crimes.[73]

Although Hamas fights unjustly—embedding itself within the civilian population and using them as shields—this does not exempt Israel from its legal and moral duty to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. Hamas's own disregard for civilian welfare is evident in its use of vast resources to build military infrastructure. According to the IDF, the value of just 30 discovered tunnels is estimated at $90 million—funds that could have been invested in public services for Gaza's residents.[74] Yet even in the face of Hamas's cynicism, Israel's response must remain within ethical limits. Acting as though high levels of collateral damage imply fewer civilians joining insurgent groups ignores both historical lessons and legal boundaries. As terrorism achieves its strategic objectives not through the act itself, but through the reaction it provokes from states.[75]

The principle of proportionality also prohibits the use of inherently immoral tactics, regardless of strategic utility. One such example is the use of starvation as a method of warfare, which constitutes a war crime under international law.[76] Around the Jabalia refugee camp, for instance, the UN attempted 165 humanitarian deliveries between October 6 and December 31, 2024. Of these, 149 were denied, and the remaining 16 faced serious impediments.[77] At the same time, Israel's airstrikes have caused an unprecedented toll on aid

workers: at least 408 have been killed in Gaza since October 7, 2023—including 280 UNRWA staff, 34 from the Palestinian Red Crescent,[78] and seven international employees from World Central Kitchen.[79] The death toll has also impacted journalists. As of May 2, 2025, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that at least 197 journalists and media workers have been killed in Gaza, the West Bank, Israel, and Lebanon since the war began, making it the deadliest period for the press since this organization began collecting such data in 1992.[80]

To date, Israel's war against Hamas has become the deadliest counterterrorism campaign per capita in modern history. This reality raises serious questions about the ethical and legal conduct of the war when examined through the lens of *jus in bello*.

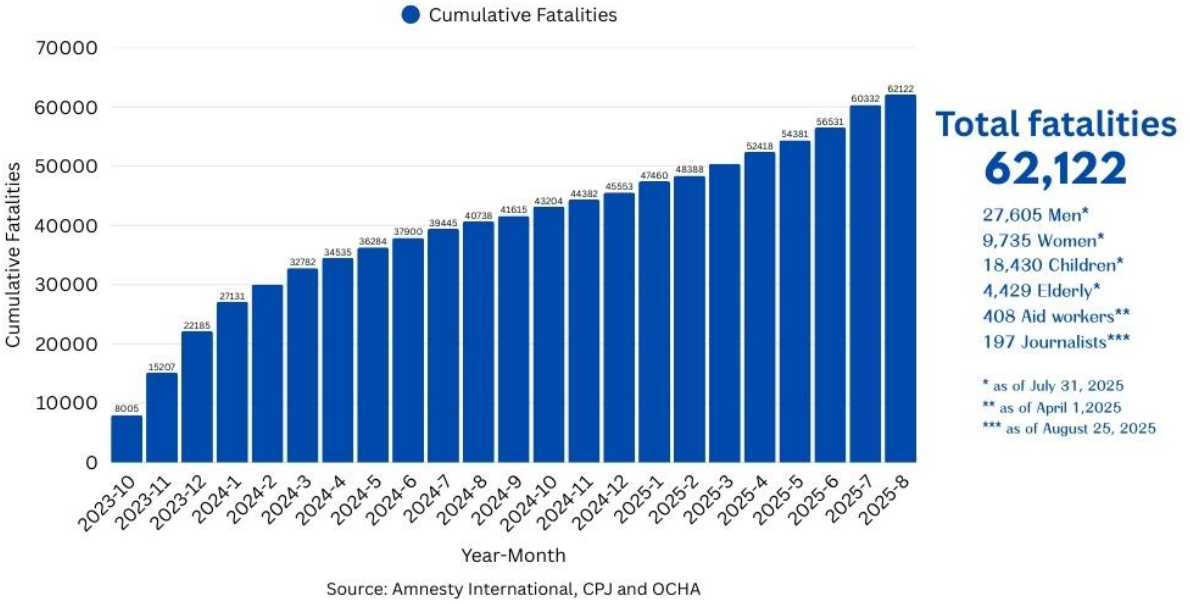

Figure 4. Total Fatalities Inflicted by Israeli Forces in Gaza

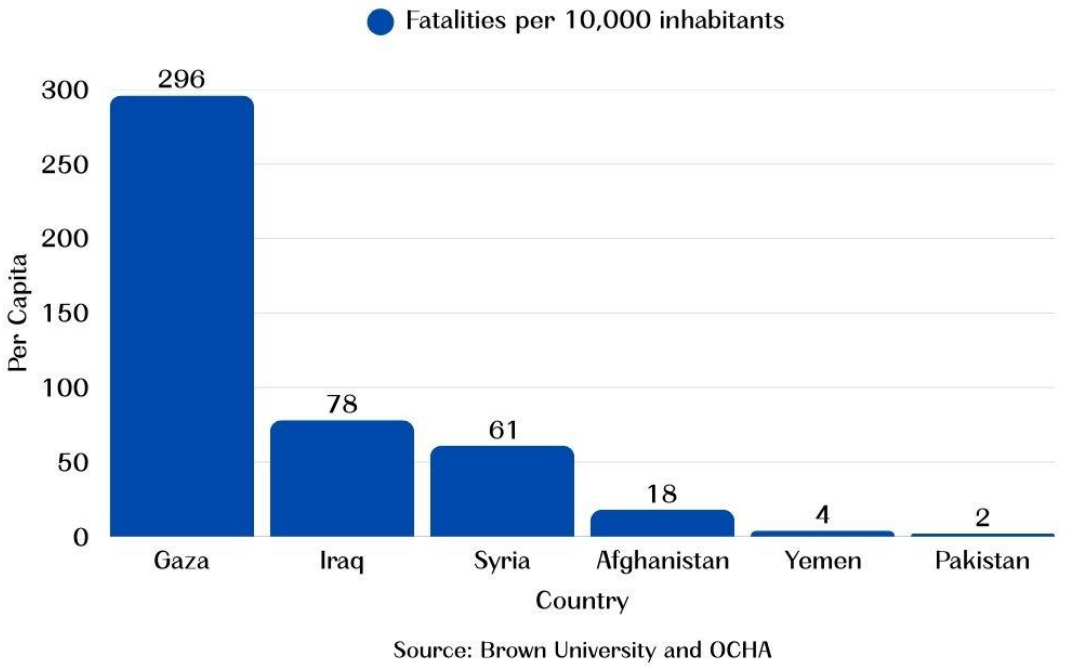

Figure 5. The Deadliest Counterterrorism Campaign Per Capita for Civilians

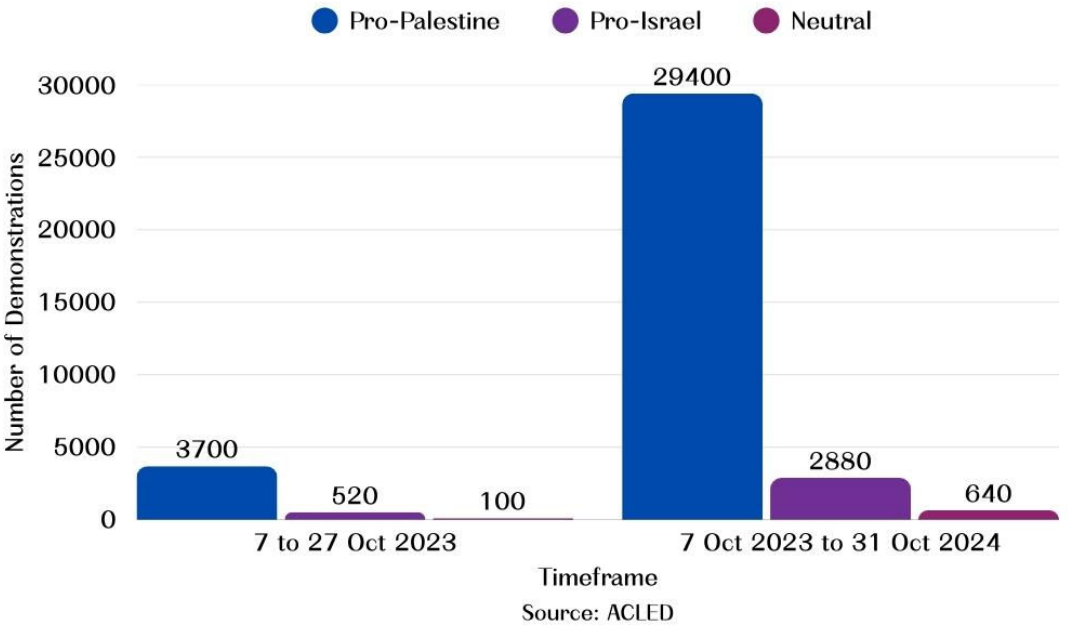

Figure 6. Total of Global Demonstrations in Response to the Israel-Gaza Conflict

Jus post bellum

Jus post bellum refers to the principles that should govern the transition from war to peace, including reconstruction, accountability, and fair treatment of those affected.[81] As Alexander and Norris explain, states involved in a conflict—and those that support them—bear particular responsibility toward civilian populations.[82] In this case, the United States, which provided 69% of Israel's major arms imports between 2019 and 2023, holds a central role.[83] According to National Security Memorandum 20, countries receiving U.S. defense articles must comply with international humanitarian law and must not obstruct humanitarian aid.[84] By continuing to provide military support without clear conditions, the U.S. has not only enabled violations during the war but has also taken on a moral obligation to assist in rebuilding Gazan civil society. Yet, current narratives—such as turning Gaza into a "Riviera in the Middle East" without a clear plan for its people—suggest that such responsibility is being ignored.

Accountability remains highly uncertain. The International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for three senior Hamas figures—Ismail Haniyeh, Yahya Sinwar, and Mohammed Deif—but closed the cases following confirmation of their deaths.[85] It has also charged Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant as co-perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including the use of starvation as a method of warfare, deliberately targeting civilians, and committing acts of persecution and inhumane treatment.[86] Yet despite these charges, Netanyahu has traveled freely to the United States without consequence, setting a troubling precedent that undermines the principle that no one is above the law. Although neither Israel nor the United States is a party to the Rome Statute, Gaza falls under ICC jurisdiction.[87] Meanwhile, Israel's stated focus remains the total destruction of Hamas, not the legal prosecution of its members. Taken together with its conduct under *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, this reality casts serious doubt on the prospects for a just and lawful postwar resolution.

Mass Atrocity Lens

At the 2005 United Nations World Summit, member states committed to the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity—collectively known as mass atrocities.[88] R2P outlines a continuum of obligations for both states and the international community to *prevent* mass atrocities, to *react* when they occur, and to help *rebuild* in their aftermath. Among these, prevention is widely recognized as the most crucial responsibility.[89]

Scholars like Straus have identified key warning signs that often precede mass atrocities, such as political polarization, dehumanization of targeted groups, and militarization, often accompanied by laws enabling state-led violence.[90] However, two conceptual problems hinder timely international responses. First, there is a widespread misconception that mass atrocities exist in a hierarchy, with genocide positioned as the "crime of crimes."[91] While genocide is indeed legally complex, mainly due to the difficulty of proving intent, this perceived hierarchy has led to the mislabeling of other atrocities as genocide to prompt more decisive international action. Second, genocide is too often understood exclusively through the lens of the Holocaust.[92] This framing not only renders other genocides less visible but

also creates a false scale of severity and affects the understanding that genocide is not a singular event, but a process that unfolds over time.[93]

This broader understanding of mass atrocities is particularly relevant in the case of Gaza. In her report *Anatomy of a Genocide*, UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese argues that genocide often begins with systematic dehumanization and the erosion of a group's right to exist.[94] She finds reasonable grounds to believe that Israel is committing genocidal acts in Gaza—through the killing of group members, the infliction of serious bodily and mental harm, and the deliberate imposition of conditions of life calculated to destroy the group in whole or in part.[95] Similarly, the *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel* emphasizes that the October 7 attacks and Israel's subsequent military campaign must be understood in the broader historical context of prolonged occupation, structural violence, and the denial of Palestinian self-determination.[96] Recognizing these patterns not only underscores the urgent need for coordinated responses to all forms of mass atrocity—not just genocide—but also signals the dangers of disproportionate warfare as a potential pathway to genocidal violence.

Hamas's genocidal intent is well documented in its founding charter. However, another key indicator of mass atrocity risk is the absence of moderating leadership on both sides of a conflict.[97] This appears to be the case in Israel, where far-right extremists have gained substantial influence. As U.S. Senator Jack Reed noted, "Netanyahu has made common cause with far-right extremists who pursue their own agendas at the expense of Israel's security and have encouraged his most misguided policies."[98] Genocidal rhetoric from Israeli leaders has further escalated tensions. Prime Minister Netanyahu referred to Palestinians as "Amalek," while the former Defense Minister called them "human animals"—language disturbingly reminiscent of the dehumanization seen in the Rwandan genocide.[99] President Isaac Herzog claimed that "an entire nation is responsible" for the October 7 attacks, and other officials have openly advocated for the destruction of Gaza, including the use of nuclear force.[100] If Israel claims to seek the deradicalization of Gaza, it must begin by deradicalizing its own political discourse and actions.[101]

Evaluating Overlooked Tactics and Their Potential Impact

From Body Counts to Ideological Defeat: The Missing Political Strategy

Israel's counterterrorism strategy in Gaza has prioritized the number of Hamas fighters killed as a measure of success—an approach both misleading and ineffective. Military force is sometimes necessary, especially against core leaders, but as one IDF official remarked, it should be M-16s, not F-16s.[102] Excessive reliance on airstrikes and mass casualty operations fuels further radicalization and alienates the very populations whose disengagement from Hamas is critical to long-term security.

A more effective strategy would focus on eroding Hamas's support base by empowering political alternatives and demonstrating that Gazans have viable, moderate leadership options. Historical evidence supports this approach. Kurth Cronin's analysis of 457 terrorist groups over the past century shows that groups like Hamas end by collapsing internally or losing public support.[103] Before the October 7 attacks, Hamas had already lost much

legitimacy among Palestinians—its approval ratings dropped from 62% in 2007 to just one-third by 2014.[104] But Israel's overwhelming military response reversed this trend, allowing Hamas to regain credibility as a defender of Palestinians.[105]

Rather than isolate Hamas, Israel has at times strengthened it—undermining the Palestinian Authority in an effort to weaken the prospects of a two-state solution.[106] By facilitating Qatari funds to Hamas, Netanyahu's government sidelined moderate actors like Abbas, ensuring internal Palestinian division and providing a pretext to avoid negotiations.[107] This short-term tactic proved disastrous, ultimately contributing to the conditions that enabled the October 7 attacks.

If Israel fails to change course, it risks further strategic losses—particularly with its most important ally. U.S. public support for Israel is in decline, especially among younger Americans, where favorability has fallen by 26 points—from 64% to 38%.[108] Meanwhile, the devastation in Gaza is not only hardening Palestinian attitudes but also forging new alliances among otherwise divided militant groups. Hamas, a Sunni group, is now close with Shiite actors like the Houthis and Hezbollah—groups that would otherwise be in conflict but are united by Israel's actions in Gaza.[109] Without a shift toward political engagement and restraint, Israel may continue to win tactical battles, but at the cost of long-term strategic defeat.

Elevating Diplomacy and Narrative Power in Israel's Counterterrorism Approach

The fact that global outrage has centered more on Israel than on Hamas underscores Israel's failure in the realm of public diplomacy and information warfare. In the immediate aftermath of the October 7 attacks, Israel demanded that countries publicly condemn Hamas. However, in diplomacy, form is substance. Rather than building strategic consensus, Israel's confrontational tone alienated even its closest regional allies. Colombia, once Israel's strongest partner in Latin America, became the third country in the hemisphere to sever diplomatic ties, citing Israel's military offensive in Gaza as genocidal.[110] Belize also severed ties, citing Israel's "obstruction of humanitarian aid", and Bolivia cited "crimes against humanity."[111]

Instead of engaging these governments through dialogue, Israel responded by accusing them of aligning with Hamas and submitting to Iranian influence.[112] Mexico, which maintains a long-standing foreign policy rooted in principles such as non-intervention, self-determination, national sovereignty, legal equality among states, and the peaceful resolution of disputes, was also criticized. An Israeli statement claimed that Mexico's neutral stance amounted to support for terrorism—[113] even though Mexico explicitly condemned the October 7 attacks, during which two of its nationals were taken hostage.[114]

These reactions reflect a misreading of regional political cultures and a failure to adapt public diplomacy efforts strategically. Rather than issuing demands, Israel should have focused on building trust through contextualized outreach and respect for national positions. The assumption that effective policy makes public diplomacy unnecessary is fundamentally flawed.[115] In Israel's case, the absence of a coherent strategy—or worse, the implementation of counterproductive policies—undermined its diplomatic credibility.[116]

Another central challenge in Israel's counterterrorism approach has been its handling of the information environment. Israeli officials view themselves as targets of a broad campaign

of disinformation and propaganda. As Dr. Omer Dostri, spokesperson for the Prime Minister, has claimed, even UN Secretary-General António Guterres has echoed narratives aligned with Israel's adversaries, including those propagated by Hamas since October 7.[117] While Hamas has leveraged digital platforms to legitimize its governance and demonize Israel–its primary targets are their domestic constituents–[118] and Israel's response has leaned heavily on content suppression rather than strategic engagement.

Instead of prioritizing transparency and proactive communication, Israeli authorities have increasingly turned to censorship to counter perceived information threats. On November 14, 2023, Israel's Cyber Unit submitted more than 9,500 takedown requests to social media platforms—60 percent of which were directed to Meta.[119] An Israeli official reported that platforms complied with 94 percent of these requests.[120] Between October and November 2023, Human Rights Watch documented over 1,050 instances of content suppression on Instagram and Facebook, mainly targeting posts by Palestinians and their supporters that documented human rights violations.[121]

This approach, however, risks being counterproductive. Censorship not only undermines democratic norms but also weakens Israel's credibility in the international arena. The most effective way to counter disinformation is not through silencing dissent, but by consistently providing timely, accurate, and transparent information.[122] In the digital age, where perception shapes legitimacy, public trust is earned through openness, not control.

Elevating Women and Strengthening Strategy: Application of the WPS Agenda

Since the October 7 attacks, the visibility of Israeli women in combat has increased significantly, with mixed-gender units and even all-female tank crews deployed to Gaza.[123] Yet, these operational shifts have not translated into structural commitments to integrate the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda (WPS) within Israel's security apparatus. Israel remains one of the states without a National Action Plan (NAP) to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.[124] The resolution calls on states to integrate women into peace and security decision-making at all levels, to prevent conflict and address conflict-related sexual violence, to incorporate gender perspectives into planning, policies, and operations, and to ensure that women's needs and voices are central during relief and recovery efforts.[125]

Although Israel was the first UN member to incorporate elements of Resolution 1325 into national law, implementation has been minimal. The expansion of women's roles within the IDF stands in sharp contrast to the current low point in women's political representation in government, the most far-right in Israel's history.[126] While the number of women in combat roles has increased, the war cabinet assembled after October 7—comprising two former chiefs of staff and a general—does not include any women.[127] The absence of a NAP underscores a contradiction between Israel's tactical reliance on women in wartime and the absence of institutional mechanisms to ensure their meaningful participation in policymaking, raising questions about the normative legitimacy of its security commitments and the long-term effectiveness of its counterterrorism strategy.

UNSCR 2242 (2015) further calls for stronger integration between the WPS and counterterrorism/countering violent extremism (CT/CVE) agendas, including through mainstreaming gender perspectives and ensuring women's participation and that of women's organizations in shaping CT/CVE policies.[128] Yet Israel has missed a crucial opportunity to

advance this agenda. Since the 2000s, civil society organizations such as *Itach-Maaki* and the Center for Women in the Public Sphere (WIPS) have consistently advocated for the adoption of a NAP, but their efforts have not been translated into policy.[129]

Integrating the WPS agenda into the security apparatus is not only a matter of women's rights but also a strategic imperative in counterterrorism. Civil society engagement and gender-inclusive approaches could have provided alternatives to Israel's current overreliance on military solutions in Gaza. Studies consistently show that when women participate in peace processes, the likelihood of the agreement lasting at least two years increases by 20 percent, and the probability of lasting 15 years rises by 35 percent.[130] Failing to capitalize on this evidence-based advantage reflects a missed opportunity to align operational necessity with long-term strategic sustainability.

Conclusion

This research has examined Israel's counterterrorism campaign against Hamas through strategic, ethical, and normative lenses. Hamas's founding ideology—rooted in jihadist violence and the goal of Israel's destruction—has shaped its hybrid strategy of governance, armed struggle, and psychological warfare. The October 7 attacks marked the deadliest escalation in the conflict's history and were designed not only to inflict mass casualties but also to provoke a sweeping Israeli military response.

In examining Israel's counterterrorism doctrine, this paper highlighted the central role of the Dahiya Doctrine, which emphasizes overwhelming force as a deterrent. While such tactics have dealt significant damage to Hamas's operational infrastructure, they have failed to achieve Israel's broader strategic goals, such as rescuing hostages or preventing future radicalization. Instead, the disproportionate application of force has undermined Israel's own ethical standards and contributed to long-term instability.

Strategically, the campaign suffers from incoherence. The lack of a credible "day after" plan for Gaza, the contradiction between military operations and hostage negotiations, and the absence of a political track all point to a disconnect between means and ends. Tactical gains—such as leader assassinations and tunnel destruction—cannot substitute for a political strategy that addresses the ideological roots of Hamas and provides a path toward de-escalation and governance reform.

When evaluated through the lens of Just War Theory, Israel's campaign begins with a clear case for self-defense but quickly falters in its conduct. Violations of proportionality, harm to civilians, obstruction of humanitarian aid, and the use of starvation as a weapon raise serious questions about the moral and legal legitimacy of its operations. The same concerns apply to Israel's responsibilities of jus post bellum, particularly its obligations to rebuild, ensure accountability, and respect civilian dignity.

Through the mass atrocity prevention lens, Israel's actions exhibit troubling parallels with early warning signs of mass violence. The presence of dehumanizing rhetoric, targeting of civilian infrastructure, and consolidation of far-right leadership deepen concerns. While Hamas's genocidal ideology is well-documented, Israel's conduct does not meet its own democratic standards and risks fueling further cycles of radicalization.

More constructive alternatives were available. Rather than measuring success through body counts, Israel could have adopted a strategy centered on weakening Hamas's support

base by empowering moderate Palestinian actors. Evidence shows Hamas's popularity was in decline before October 7. However, Israel's actions have revived its legitimacy and eroded trust among international actors. Israel also missed critical opportunities to leverage diplomacy and public narrative. Confrontational diplomacy alienated some countries, while censorship undermined its credibility in the information space. A strategy rooted in transparency and context-sensitive engagement would have strengthened international support and legitimacy.

Finally, the increased visibility of women in the IDF could have been leveraged to strengthen Israel's commitment to United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 2242 by advancing gender-inclusive leadership and policymaking. Instead, the absence of a National Action Plan and the exclusion of women at the strategic level of decision-making highlight that their participation has remained operational rather than transformative. This gap undermines the long-term effectiveness of Israel's counterterrorism strategy and weakens the prospects for inclusive and sustainable security and peace negotiations.

This research concludes that while Israel has achieved tactical gains in its war against Hamas, the absence of a coherent political track, its failure to confront Hamas as an entrenched ideology, and its disregard for the ethical obligations of Just War Theory and mass atrocity prevention have rendered its campaign both counterproductive and unjustly fought.

As a democracy, Israel bears the responsibility to uphold higher moral standards—not only for ethical reasons, but also for strategic purposes. When the state and its soldiers accept the risks involved in minimizing harm to civilians, the moral blame for civilian casualties should fall on those who violate the rules of war—[131]namely, the terrorist actors who exploit civilian populations as human shields. Ultimately, the elimination of Hamas and the pursuit of lasting peace and security will not be realized through annihilation, but through the deliberate balancing of military force, political vision, and diplomatic engagement.

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COMMENTARY

The SOCOM Rorschach: Identity, Technology, and the Future Hidden in a List

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ABSTRACT

This commentary reads one of U.S. Special Operations Command's current procurement solicitations as a Rorschach test, revealing the command's institutional vision for the future fight. While the Broad Agency Announcement (BAA) for Technology Development and Advanced Technology Development nominally supports a wide range of capabilities, in practice it tilts heavily toward technologies favoring direct action. This emphasis raises concerns about strategic tunnel vision—and about an overreliance on automation, artificial intelligence, and other high-end tools—at the expense of operations grounded in the human domain. This commentary argues that if U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) are serious about staying ahead in the next fight, they should view the BAA not as a shopping list but as a mirror of institutional identity, bias, and habit—one that invites reflection on whether their technological aspirations are building future advantage or merely reinforcing the battles of the past.

KEYWORDS

automation; acquisition; Broad Agency Announcement; Rorschach; F3EAD

If one were to ask a dozen U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) operators from different branches to comment on U.S. Special Operations Command's (SOCOM) solicitation for new and disruptive technologies, each would likely offer a distinct interpretation of the document outlining SOF's future technological capabilities. The Broad Agency Announcement (BAA) for Technology Development and Advanced Technology Development, first published in 2020 and updated seven times since, functions much like a Rorschach test: what one sees in it often reflects one's operational priorities, experiences, and biases.[1] Operators focused on kinetic action may view the BAA as an important endorsement of AI-enabled tools and precision weapons, while those engaged in indirect, relationship-based missions might

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interpret the same document as a troubling indication that the human domain is being eclipsed by machines. Some may even believe that SOCOM's push for technological superiority could sideline their hard-won fieldcraft. The BAA not only reveals SOCOM's strategic direction—it also exposes tensions within the force over what will constitute relevance, value, and readiness in the future operating environment.

The Rorschach test, developed by Swiss physician Hermann Rorschach (1884-1922), is a psychological assessment in which individuals interpret a series of inkblots. Designed to uncover underlying thoughts, emotions, and personality traits, it analyzes the subjective meanings people assign to ambiguous stimuli. Here, the Rorschach framing is useful because it highlights how the BAA can elicit vastly different interpretations among SOCOM personnel. Just as inkblots invite projection, the BAA prompts readers to see their own concerns and aspirations reflected in its language.

This commentary is another Rorschach reading—not of individual SOF, but of SOCOM itself. It rests on the understanding that the BAA is not merely a list of desired technological innovations but also a reflection of how SOCOM envisions the future operating environment and the capabilities it believes will be necessary to maintain relevance and effectiveness. So, what does the wish list indicate to the author?

An Echo of GWOT

During the Global War on Terror (GWOT), the high-volume targeting cycle "Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, Disseminate" (F3EAD)—developed under the leadership of Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in the mid-2000s—made the news and even reached bestseller lists. Roger D. Petersen succinctly sums up the concept:

> Once a target was found, drones helped fix that target's location. Combat teams finished the target (capturing or killing), but now specialists accompanied the combat team and immediately exploited the information found on laptops, flash drives, and cell phones. With ever-expanding data, a rapid analysis of the new information created the ability to immediately seek new targets. The cycle was reduced from days to hours.[2]

During GWOT and beyond, some within the U.S. SOF community voiced concerns about an overreliance on kinetic operations, arguing that the prominence of direct action came at the expense of a balanced integration of non-kinetic capabilities. The BAA validates this concern. At the outset, the procurement document affirms that direct action and counterterrorism are "expected to remain key to SOF operations."[3] Within its Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capability area, the BAA places significant emphasis on technologies designed to locate, identify, and track individuals. This includes stand-off biometrics systems that use multimodal data—such as facial features, iris patterns, gait, and heartbeat—as well as sensor fusion systems capable of covertly recognizing and following individuals or vehicles at long distances (greater than one kilometer).[4] Furthermore, the BAA seeks "tailorable non-lethal and lethal effects to best meet mission objectives."[5] Such capabilities are foundational to "find-fix-finish" missions.

A key lesson from GWOT was the critical importance of integrating intelligence exploitation with rapid information sharing. The BAA reinforces the "exploit-analyze-disseminate" elements by seeking technologies that enable immediate processing and

dissemination of data at the point of action. These include edge analytics, which allows operators to process data directly in the field rather than sending it to a centralized facility—enabling notably faster insights.[6] The BAA also calls for AI-powered decision aids to help operators make more effective choices in complex situations, such as predicting adversary movements or intentions. Augmented reality (AR) displays, likewise highlighted in the BAA, overlay digital information onto a real-world view, providing immediate, relevant insights directly to an operator's vision—while reducing dependence on multiple screens.[7] Collectively, these capabilities embody the high-tempo, information-dominant mindset refined during years of GWOT.

Notably, the BAA positions frontline operators and AI to assume roles once reserved for exploitation specialists, handling the analysis of media devices such as laptops, flash drives, and cell phones directly in the field. Forensic tools outlined in the BAA support this shift by enabling on-site data extraction and rapid target development.[8] This merging of collection, analysis, and action at the tactical edge echoes the F3EAD cycle but compresses it even further—from hours to minutes or less.

All this suggests that in the renewed era of great power competition, SOCOM is leveraging emerging technologies to operationalize certain lessons of the GWOT era. This strategic continuity may prove advantageous for SOF missions in which acting on real-time intelligence with speed and adaptability remains decisive—particularly in high-stakes domains like countering weapons of mass destruction. The urgency is underscored by a thirteen percent rise in global nuclear weapons spending, which reached a record $91.4 billion in 2023.[9] The Arms Control Association warns that "the threat of further escalation, proliferation, and even the use of nuclear weapons or attacks on nuclear installations [is] a real possibility."[10] In this context, SOCOM's tech-enabled direct-action capabilities may not only shape future battlefields—they may help prevent catastrophes.

Harnessing the direct-action experience gained during GWOT and integrating it with emerging technologies is not inherently problematic. However, relying on these technologies out of habit raises concerns. Scholars have argued that the two decades following 9/11 profoundly shaped SOCOM's organizational priorities.[11] According to Cole J. Livieratos, GWOT "helped SOCOM's direct action units lock in leadership positions and sustain institutional arrangements that continued to prioritize the use of force."[12] This mindset has been repeatedly acknowledged and appears to persist beyond the official end of GWOT, suggesting a problematic path dependence within SOCOM. By definition, "[i]nstitutions become path dependent when that path satisfies, or at one point satisfied, the preferences of the most important actors in the institution … once the institution is path dependent, change only succeeds insofar as it keeps the institution on the same path."[13] To avoid this pitfall, SOCOM requires a high degree of institutional self-awareness—including mechanisms for critically reflecting on its own strategic assumptions and leadership dynamics.

One such mechanism lies in how SOCOM personnel engage with the BAA process itself. Rather than treating the BAA merely as a procurement tool for acquiring cutting-edge technologies, targeted interaction with it can be reframed as an opportunity for deliberate strategic introspection. By involving a broader range of operators, planners, and analysts in shaping BAA priorities and evaluating proposals, SOCOM could surface implicit assumptions about its preferred modes of operation and challenge inherited biases. When personnel are encouraged to question not just what technologies are being pursued but why—

and to what end—they contribute to an organizational culture that is more self-aware and adaptive. This reflective approach positions the BAA not only as a vehicle for technical innovation but also as a forum for debating the command's trajectory in light of strategic realities and emerging threats.

Non-Kinetic Missions

Many of the technologies outlined in the BAA are not inherently tethered to kinetic missions; they may be flexible tools capable of serving a wider array of operational purposes. Autonomous systems originally designed for reconnaissance and targeting in contested environments, for instance, can be repurposed for humanitarian assistance. In such contexts, these systems can monitor affected regions, map infrastructure damage, support logistical coordination, and facilitate the delivery of medical supplies, thereby enhancing SOF's ability to contribute meaningfully to stabilization and resilience-building efforts. This adaptability illustrates how emerging technologies can serve as instruments of soft power, enabling SOF to build trust, forge local partnerships, and influence contested human terrain without the use of force.

Foreign Internal Defense (FID) offers another example of how technologies can extend beyond direct action. The BAA highlights augmented and virtual reality tools that could significantly enhance training and capacity-building with partner nations. A virtual reality platform, for instance, could simulate geographically and culturally specific training environments, allowing SOF teams to rehearse complex operations with foreign counterparts in realistic scenarios before deployment. Moreover, the interpersonal and instructional nature of FID relies heavily on language skills. The BAA includes a real-time translation device designed to aid communication with non-English speakers, which could help advisors liaise more effectively with local troops and officials.[14] Seen in this light, BAA technologies offer more than tactical enhancements; they represent potential enablers for more nuanced forms of engagement that are increasingly vital in today's gray zone and strategic-competition environments. The challenge, then, lies not in the nature of the technologies themselves but in the intent—and, perhaps most importantly, the imagination—with which they are integrated into SOF missions.

MISO – The Outlier

Military Information Support Operations (MISO) is unusual among SOF's indirect missions because the BAA gives it explicit and sustained attention.[15] The 2024 amendment represented a tactical orientation toward MISO, treating it primarily as a battlefield enabler rather than a comprehensive influence capability. The focus centered on portable systems designed to enhance operator effectiveness at the point of contact, emphasizing technologies that would allow personnel to collect local data and dynamically adjust messaging.[16] This approach prioritized operational flexibility and responsiveness.

The 2025 amendment signals a paradigmatic shift toward a more comprehensive, campaign-oriented approach to information operations. Rather than merely enabling tactical responsiveness, the new emphasis on planning tools—such as the capability to "construct comprehensive models of entire societies"—indicates a move toward predictive analysis and strategic planning.[17] This technological evolution allows military planners to simulate

various courses of action within complex social systems before engaging real audiences, potentially reducing the risk of counterproductive messaging while maximizing the strategic impact of influence operations. This transition from battlefield support to campaign-level capability represents a maturation of MISO as a discipline, complete with dedicated resources for systematic analysis, comprehensive planning, and institutional oversight. The shift aligns with SOCOM's broader strategic emphasis on information operations as a core competency, reflecting an understanding that modern conflicts are increasingly shaped in the information domain. [18]

U.S. SOF must now ensure that personnel development, organizational processes, and institutional structures are properly aligned to leverage the sophisticated technological capabilities effectively—and this is likely to pose a challenge because the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) has not conducted a comprehensive capabilities-based assessment of its MISO workforce in over twenty years.[19] This assessment gap represents a significant institutional blind spot that could undermine the effectiveness of even the most advanced technological systems.

Irregular Warfare

The BAA identifies Irregular Warfare (IW)—and its subset, Unconventional Warfare (UW)—as a core SOF mission.[20] While the solicitation does not foreground IW/UW-specific technologies, several listed items hold latent potential for such missions. For instance, low-profile radio technologies could prove vital for secure communications under oppressive surveillance. Similarly, advanced signature management tools could help Special Forces Detachment Alphas (SFODAs) maintain a low profile while operating among partner insurgent forces in denied environments. Advanced data analytics for discerning patterns in ambiguous information environments may also support IW/UW campaigns by enabling SFODAs to identify both emerging threats and opportunities within complex social, political, and cultural landscapes.[21] In such cases, the burden shifts to Special Forces themselves—their hallmark adaptability and mission-driven creativity will be essential in repurposing general-purpose technologies for IW/UW contexts. However, the effectiveness of future IW/UW cannot rest solely on operator ingenuity. If SOCOM seeks to revitalize IW/UW as core missions, some of its technology investments must be shaped with the unique requirements of these missions in mind.

The BAA emphasizes advanced automation, AI, robotics, and networked ISR/communications capabilities. If adopted across the SOF enterprise, these technologies could displace some traditional SOF skills. Take, for example, the previously mentioned translation system. [22] Reliance on automated translators risks further eroding operators' foreign language skills.[23] Likewise, an overreliance on AI-based tools such as sentiment analysis could undermine Special Forces' regional expertise by diminishing the need for nuanced human interpretation of cultural cues and local social dynamics.[24] Reduced ability to independently gauge local populations' true sentiments may foster dependency on such tools—ultimately limiting an operator's capacity to navigate complex environments without technological mediation. A further challenge could be the frequent need to update, recalibrate, or repair sophisticated devices, creating not only maintenance fatigue but also diverting precious training hours away from IW/UW fieldcraft toward software management.

AI-Based Decision Assistants

Potentially more concerning is the BAA's call for extensive automation across the observe–orient–decide–act (OODA) loop.[25] In practice, this could mean AI-enabled systems recommending courses of action or autonomously controlling unmanned platforms in real time. While such capabilities may enhance operational tempo and reduce cognitive load in high-stakes environments, they also carry significant risks. Overreliance on automated decision aids could erode the very traits that have traditionally defined SOF effectiveness: individual initiative, tactical improvisation, and decentralized command. Junior leaders—once trained to operate with autonomy and confidence in ambiguous situations—may come to defer critical decisions to algorithmic outputs, weakening their capacity for independent judgment and reducing their exposure to the trial-and-error experiences that cultivate adaptive leadership. Furthermore, in contested environments where communications may be disrupted or AI systems degraded, the sudden loss of automation could leave units unprepared and vulnerable. Thus, if not carefully integrated, automation may undermine the human agility it is intended to enhance.

SOCOM must therefore tread carefully: the adoption of AI should aim to augment—not replace—the judgment, adaptability, and ingenuity of its operators. One promising example of this principle lies in the potential integration of autonomous systems with brain–machine interfaces (BMIs), a technology explicitly prioritized in the BAA.[26] Since the late 2000s, BMIs have been explored for their ability to monitor and interpret brain activity in real time.[27] If developed to be sufficiently rugged and reliable for operational environments, these systems could serve as cognitive sentinels—detecting signs of temporary neurological impairment, for example, due to information overload or blunt-force trauma. By continuously monitoring neurophysiological indicators, a BMI could trigger pre-programmed thresholds that prompt an autonomous system to assume partial control, stabilize the situation, and alert nearby teammates. In this model, autonomy does not replace human agency it acts as a contingency mechanism designed to extend and protect it under extreme conditions. Such conditional integration of autonomous systems with other emerging technologies may offer a pathway for SOCOM to harness innovation while preserving the core human competencies that lead to SOF success. Currently, BMI-based automation is largely in the research and prototyping phases, moving from feasibility demonstrations to real-world applications in domains such as air traffic control.[28] The DoD has heavily invested in BMI development, and according to a RAND report, the technology is expected to become available to personnel starting 2030.[29] SOCOM may already be engaged in classified prototype testing.

Closing Thoughts

Another important factor the BAA may mirror is the broader compartmentalization within the U.S. defense acquisition ecosystem. Rather than being neglected, some SOF capabilities may be pursued through alternative acquisition pathways better suited to their sensitive, specialized, or cross-agency nature. Cooperative agreements and Other Transaction Authorities (OTAs), for example, allow SOCOM and other DoD components to engage with non-traditional partners that may offer innovative solutions in areas such as information operations, psychological influence, and civil–military engagement but do not typically

participate in competitive defense contracting. Similarly, SOCOM can use awards to fund research in socio-cultural dynamics, behavioral science, or language technologies—fields critical to influence and stability operations. In parallel, some of the most sensitive or strategically ambiguous capabilities, particularly those associated with influence campaigns and support to resistance movements, are likely managed through classified programs or coordinated through interagency partnerships with the Intelligence Community, the Department of State, or specialized Joint Task Forces. These mechanisms provide both operational discretion and flexibility, but they also obscure the full picture of how SOCOM prepares for its broader, less kinetic mission sets. This underscores a key limitation in interpreting SOCOM's strategic intent solely through the BAA—and signals a good moment at which to begin drawing this commentary to a close.

There is a natural human tendency to assume the future will look like "more of what we do best." This tendency is rooted in a cluster of well-documented cognitive and institutional biases, of which path dependence is but one. Projection bias leads individuals and organizations to overestimate the persistence of current preferences, capabilities, and strategies, causing them to believe that what is effective today will remain so tomorrow. Closely related is status quo bias, a preference for maintaining existing practices even in the face of changing conditions, which reinforces institutional comfort zones and discourages critical reassessment. Functional fixedness—treating familiar tools and methods as usable only in their customary ways—narrows the search for alternatives and increases the chance that organizations over-apply existing competencies to new problems. At the organizational level, the availability heuristic amplifies this dynamic by prompting leaders to base decisions on the most vivid examples of success, which are often tied to historical strengths. Together, these interlocking biases can lead even high-performing institutions like SOCOM to unconsciously imagine a future that confirms their current identity rather than one that challenges it.

This commentary has suggested treating the BAA as more than an outline of technological requirements. It has approached it as an artifact of institutional identity, perpetuating strategic assumptions, priorities, and biases. While industry partners may read the BAA as a roadmap, SOCOM itself may benefit from using it as an instrument of critical inquiry—one that highlights misalignments between present assumptions and likely future challenges, reveals blind spots in planning, and helps shape more forward-looking adjustments. One way to treat the BAA as more than a roadmap is to approach it as data. Focus areas could be coded by mission category and technology readiness level, with special attention to how often the language emphasizes "operator-at-the-edge" capabilities versus partner-force or strategic effects. Tracking these weightings across successive amendments would make implicit priorities visible rather than assumed. To complement this, SOCOM could institute a red-team review for each amendment—tasked not with blocking technologies, but with identifying recurring biases and recommending counter-weights in evaluation criteria, such as explicit scoring for partner-force outcomes or human-domain effects. Such steps could help ensure that acquisition documents support a more balanced and future-oriented vision, rather than habitually amplifying historical strengths. This does not mean discarding notably hard-earned lessons of the GWOT era—but rather applying them less broadly and more deliberately in service of national security.

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Securitizing Kinmen: China's Gray Zone Strategy and the Evolution of the Kinmen Model

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolving dynamics of cross-strait relations through the lens of securitization theory, focusing on China's strategic deployment of what it calls the Kinmen Model and its implications for regional security. While existing discourse predominantly concentrates on a potential full-scale invasion of Taiwan, this study shifts attention to the strategic significance of the outlying islands and the nuanced employment of securitization to exert indirect control. Utilizing Vuori's (2008) framework for analyzing securitization in non-democratic contexts, this research conducts a discourse analysis of nineteen Chinese-language media sources to dissect the speech acts employed by Chinese media and their intended political functions. The study identifies a critical gap in the literature regarding a "Fifth Period" of Kinmen's history, characterized by a transition from border infiltration to a more aggressive securitization strategy, contributing to a deeper understanding of China's gray zone tactics and the securitization of territorial claims.

KEYWORDS

Kinmen Model; securitization theory; China; Taiwan; gray zone warfare; cross-strait relations; discourse analysis

Introduction

Kinmen's modern history is marked by a dramatic transformation. Taiwanese scholars identify four distinct periods in its evolution from a heavily fortified battleground to a focal point in cross-strait relations. Once a site of armed confrontation, Kinmen's identity and priorities have been reshaped by economic development and cross-strait management. This paper argues that Chinese media's application of securitization theory to the so-called "Kinmen Model" signals the emergence of a distinct fifth period in Kinmen's modern history.

While existing discourse largely concentrates on a potential full-scale invasion of Taiwan, this study shifts attention to the strategic significance of the outlying islands—particularly Kinmen—and the use of securitization to exert indirect control. It examines the evolving dynamics of cross-strait relations through the lens of securitization theory, focusing

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on China's strategic deployment of the Kinmen Model and its implications for regional security. Utilizing Vuori's 2008 framework for analyzing securitization in non-democratic contexts, this study conducts a discourse analysis of nineteen Chinese-language media sources that reference the Kinmen Model. The analysis aims to dissect the speech acts employed by Chinese media, identifying specific strands of securitization—raising an issue, legitimizing future actions, deterrence, justifying past actions, and control—and their intended political functions.

The paper reviews Kinmen's historical trajectory, highlighting the shift from military confrontation to economic integration and, more recently, intensified gray zone activities. It identifies a gap in the literature regarding the "Fourth Period" of Kinmen's history, characterized by a transition from border infiltration through legitimate interaction to a more aggressive securitization strategy. This research contributes to understanding China's gray zone tactics and the securitization of territorial claims. By analyzing the Kinmen Model, it provides insights into China's strategic goals, the nature of its securitization efforts, and whether these actions warrant recognition of a distinct historical period. Ultimately, the paper aims to bridge the gap in U.S. understanding of the actors, domestic political dynamics, and strategic objectives underlying China's evolving approach to Kinmen and Taiwan.

Kinmen's Modern History

Taiwanese scholars have categorized Kinmen's history into four distinct periods, each marking a significant shift in the island's role and relationship with mainland China: the initial era of intense military confrontation (1949–1958); a period of defensive military posture (1959–1979); a phase of easing cross-strait tensions and economic restrictions (1980–2000); and a more recent stage defined by increased cross-border interaction (2001–2014). Initially a symbol of armed confrontation, Kinmen has undergone gradual economic development and increasing cross-strait management, reshaping its identity and priorities. The following paragraphs examine these four historical periods, highlighting the key events, policies, and socio-economic changes that have driven Kinmen's transformation. This section also introduces how the application of securitization theory to Chinese media coverage of the Kinmen Model signals the emergence of a distinct fifth period in the island's modern history.

In 1949, following a series of defeats in the Chinese Civil War, Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government retreated to Taiwan with two million troops. This pivotal year also marked a turning point in Kinmen's history, as the island came under the control of the relocated Nationalist regime. Situated just six miles (10 km) off the coast of Xiamen in Fujian Province, Kinmen's strategic position at the mouth of Xiamen Bay made it a crucial military stronghold against the Communist People's Liberation Army (PLA).[1] The PLA's failed attempt to seize Kinmen in the Battle of Guningtou in October 1949 underscored the island's importance, solidifying its role as a symbol of cross-strait tensions. In the years that followed, Kinmen endured intense artillery bombardments from the mainland during the First and Second Taiwan Strait Crises in 1954–55 and 1958.

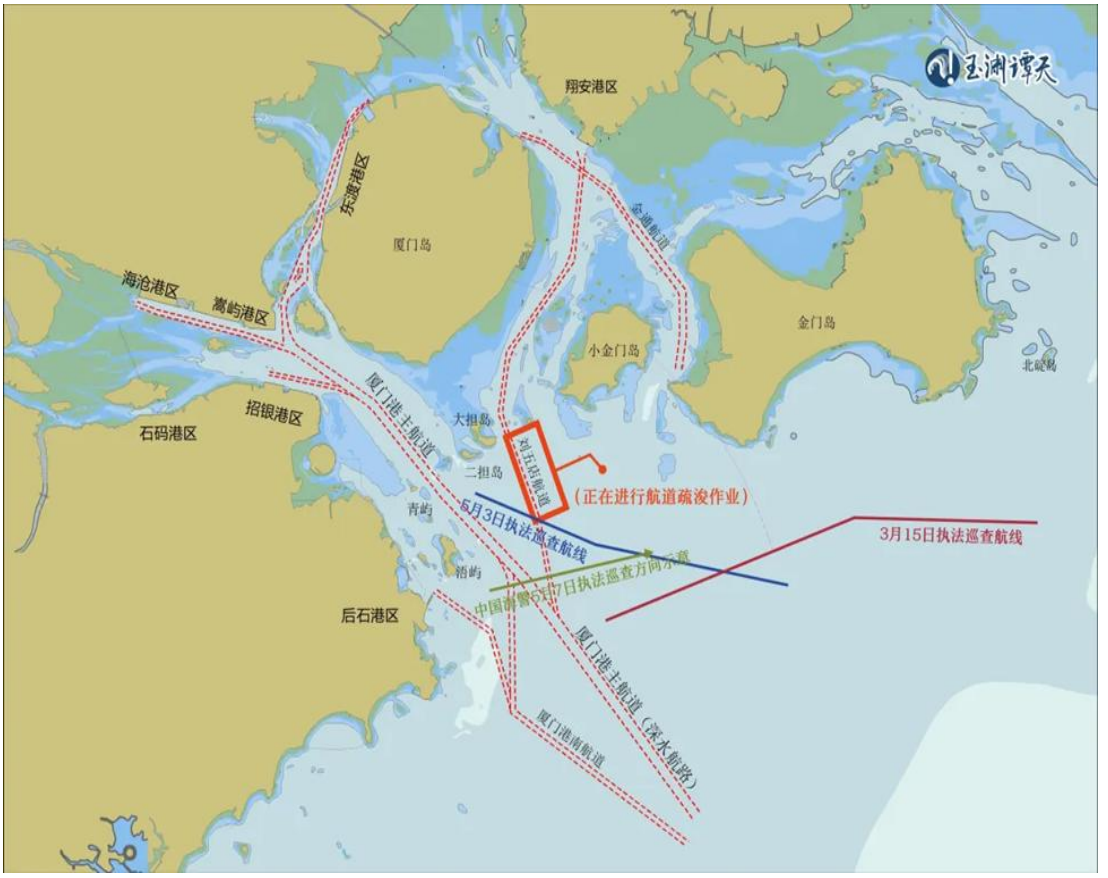

Figure 1. Geographic map depicting the proximity of Kinmen Island (金门岛) and Little Kinmen Island (小金门岛) to Xiamen City (厦门岛) in Fujian Province. This map includes Chinese Coast Guard inspection routes (solid blue and solid red lines), Chinese dredging operations around the Liuwudian Channel (red box and red dot), and the paths of the Xiamen Port Main Channel and the Xiamen Harbor South Channel (dotted red lines).[2]

During the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, Kinmen—along with Matsu—became a primary target of PRC artillery bombardments due to its proximity to the mainland and its role as a Nationalist military outpost. The crisis underscored Kinmen's strategic significance in the cross-strait conflict, prompting increased U.S. involvement and the signing of the U.S.-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty.[3] With the PLA aiming to sever Nationalist resupply lines to the islands, Kinmen again endured intense shelling during the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, with an estimated 440,000 artillery shells fired between August and October 1958.[4] This second crisis further cemented Kinmen's role as a focal point in the Cold War tensions among the PRC, the ROC, and the United States.

Following the intense military confrontations of the first period, Kinmen entered a phase of heavy fortification and defensive preparation from 1959 to 1979. The threat of renewed PLA assaults led to the development of extensive defense infrastructure. A key component

of Nationalist efforts was the construction of underground tunnels designed to shield military personnel and civilians from artillery bombardment and amphibious invasions. These tunnels became a defining feature of Kinmen's landscape and a symbol of the military's pervasive influence on daily life. With state resources and attention focused primarily on defense, this period is characterized by a sustained posture of high military readiness in anticipation of potential PLA attacks.

The third era, spanning 1980 to 2000, marked a gradual transition away from the intense military confrontation that had defined Kinmen for the preceding decades. During this period, Taiwan began to ease its policy of the "three non-links," which restricted direct relations with mainland China.[5] This policy prohibited direct postal service, transportation, and trade with the mainland. A key event signaling this shift was Taiwan's termination of restrictions on tourism to mainland China in 1987. This decision opened the door for increased interaction and exchange across the Taiwan Strait, including tourism and economic activities. In Kinmen, this gradual détente prompted a reassessment of the island's role. While its strategic importance remained a consideration, there was growing recognition of the need to diversify and pursue new economic opportunities. One significant development was the adaptive reuse of select military sites, which were transformed into spaces for public use, such as military history museums, memorial halls, and recreational venues.[6] This repurposing reflected a broader move to integrate the island's military heritage into its cultural and economic development.

Characterized by what could be described as "border infiltration through legitimate interaction," Kinmen's cross-strait engagement evolved significantly during the fourth period (2001–2014). This transformation was largely driven by the implementation of the Mini-Three-Links, initiated by Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council through the *Statute for the Development of Offshore Islands*.[7] Launched in 2001, the initiative fundamentally altered Kinmen's role, shifting it from a heavily fortified military outpost to a burgeoning hub of economic and cultural exchange with mainland China. In this way, policymakers in Taipei used Kinmen as a testing ground for cross-border trade and tourism, laying the groundwork for eventually extending similar exchanges to the rest of Taiwan.[8]

The Mini-Three-Links, comprising direct shipping, trade, and postal services with Fujian Province, were implemented with dual objectives: to stimulate Kinmen's economy and to improve cross-strait relations. Direct shipping and trade, in particular, allowed the island to capitalize on its geographic proximity to the mainland, fostering economic growth through increased tourism, essential goods trade, and reduced transportation costs. This period witnessed a marked surge in economic activity, reshaping not only Kinmen's physical landscape but also the daily lives of its residents.

However, this transition presented new challenges. While the island's military significance diminished, the need to balance economic development with the preservation of Kinmen's unique military heritage became increasingly apparent. Rising land and property values—driven by economic growth and tourism—put pressure on conservation efforts. Moreover, the increased flow of people and goods, while beneficial to the local economy, required careful management to maintain security and stability.[9] The Mini-Three-Links thus became a conduit for both economic prosperity and complex cross-border interactions, providing the PRC with new avenues for influence and control within the region.

While the early 21st century saw Kinmen's development increasingly intertwined with cross-strait tourism and trade, a shift toward heightened tension has emerged in the years following Taiwanese scholars' framing of the fourth period as one of positive economic relations. The prior emphasis on growth and improved cross-strait ties has been complicated by the rise of China's coercive gray zone tactics.

Gray zone tactics refer to assertive actions that fall below the threshold of traditional warfare. These include coercive measures designed to achieve strategic objectives without triggering direct military conflict or full-scale war. This indirect approach diverges from previous attempts to seize Kinmen by force and marks a new phase in cross-strait competition. In 2024, there was a notable surge in Chinese Coast Guard patrols and incursions into Taiwan's restricted waters around Kinmen.[10] The Chinese Coast Guard, while not a conventional military force, plays a key role in enforcing PRC maritime claims and exerting pressure on Taiwan.

This shift introduces a security dimension that contrasts with the prior focus on economic exchange. For example, the increasing frequency of Chinese Coast Guard patrols and PLA military exercises in the area has raised concerns about the potential isolation of Kinmen and other outlying islands, including the threat of severed resupply lines. These assertive actions have coincided with growing attention in Chinese media to the concept of the "Kinmen Model" (金门模式). Often presented as a blueprint for peaceful cross-strait relations centered on economic and cultural integration, the model downplays its political and security implications for Taiwan. However, when analyzed through the lens of securitization theory, Chinese media portrayals of the Kinmen Model reveal a more complex reality. Securitization theory, which examines how issues are framed as existential threats requiring extraordinary measures, offers a useful framework for understanding how Taiwan's control over Kinmen—treated as a non-political fact in earlier periods—is now increasingly constructed by China as a security crisis. This process of securitization, shaped by PRC narratives and actions, signals the emergence of a fifth period in Kinmen's modern history: the era of the contested Kinmen Model.

Theoretical Framework of Securitization

Securitization theory helps us to understand how and why certain issues are perceived as security threats. It allows for a deeper understanding of how security threats are identified and labeled, and how they are dealt with. In a world where security threats are becoming more numerous and diverse, securitization theory provides a useful framework for understanding these changes and their likely outcomes. The development of securitization theory can be traced to the end of the Cold War, when the field of security studies was in flux. The traditional focus on military security and interstate conflict was no longer seen as adequate to address the new and emerging security challenges of the post–Cold War world, such as environmental degradation, economic insecurity, and identity-based conflict.[11]

In response to this changing security landscape, a number of scholars began developing new theoretical frameworks for understanding security—one of which was securitization theory, developed at the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute.[12] Securitization theory argues that security is not an objective condition, but rather a social construction. Security issues are created when political actors frame an issue as an existential threat and that

framing is accepted by a relevant audience. This process of securitization can have a number of important consequences, including the authorization of extraordinary measures, such as the use of military force, and the marginalization of alternative perspectives. Securitization has been influential in the field of security studies since the end of the Cold War, having been used to analyze a wide variety of issues, including terrorism, environmental degradation, and migration. It has also been used to develop policy recommendations.

The Copenhagen School and Paris School are two of the most influential schools of thought in securitization theory. The Copenhagen School views securitization as a speech act, where political actors label an issue as an existential threat to a referent object, such as the state or society.[13] If the audience accepts this designation, then the issue is securitized—or officially labeled as a threat—and extraordinary measures can be used to address it. The Copenhagen School has been influential in shaping the study of security, but it has also been criticized for focusing too narrowly on the role of elites and neglecting the role of non-elite actors in security. David Campbell builds on ideas originating from the Copenhagen School by incorporating the concept of "writing security" into his analysis. Campbell argues that speech acts are not just about speaking, but also about writing. The texts of foreign policy, he suggests, do not merely record the state's security concerns, but also actively construct the state's identity.[14]

The Paris School builds on securitization theory with the view that securitization is a process that unfolds over time through routine, everyday practices. These practices can be both discursive and non-discursive, and they may be carried out by a variety of actors, including security professionals, the media, and the public. The Paris School has been praised for its focus on the everyday production of security, but it has also been criticized for being too broad and for lacking a clear definition of securitization.

A major criticism of traditional securitization theory is that it is not readily applicable to non-democratic countries.[15] In such contexts, the public does not have the same opportunity to participate in the securitization process. Governments may control the media and restrict freedom of speech, making it difficult for the public to challenge official threat narratives. As a result, authorities may be able to securitize an issue without securing public consent.

Framework and Methodology

Vuori's framework for analyzing securitization in non-democratic contexts like China emphasizes that securitization is a political process in which an issue is framed as an existential threat, necessitating emergency measures and often circumventing normal political procedures.[16] While the concept has typically been applied to democratic systems, Vuori argues for its relevance in non-democratic settings as well. The framework highlights that securitization is achieved through speech acts, and that understanding the intended function and effect of these acts is crucial for analyzing their political implications. Additionally, Vuori stresses the importance of adapting the concepts of "audiences" and "special politics" when applying securitization theory to non-democratic contexts. Finally, the framework identifies five distinct "strands" of securitization acts, each serving a different political purpose: raising an issue, legitimizing future actions, deterrence, justifying past actions, and control.

1) **Raising an issue**: Raising an issue refers to the use of security speech to bring an issue to the attention of decision-makers and elevate it on the political agenda. This involves framing the issue as a security threat, emphasizing its urgency and importance, and advocating specific measures to address it. The act is typically performed by those not in formal positions of authority but with sufficient social capital to influence decision-makers. These actors could be scholars, politicians, or journalists, and their audience may include both policymakers and constituencies. The goal is to prompt decision-makers to act on the issue.
2) **Legitimizing future actions**: Legitimizing future actions refers to the use of security speech to justify actions that have not yet been taken. This involves framing potential measures as necessary to address a security threat, even if they may be controversial or require extraordinary steps. Success depends on the audience accepting the securitizing actor's argument and granting legitimacy to the proposed actions. This often involves three sequential speech acts: a claim, warning, and request. A claim asserts that something poses an existential threat to a referent object; warnings emphasize the potential consequences if the threat is not addressed; and requests seek approval for the proposed actions by framing them as essential.
3) **Deterrence**: This strand aims to discourage potential threats through intimidation and the threat of force. It involves framing an issue as a security threat and issuing warnings to dissuade adversaries from acting. This strategy is often used by authorities, such as state leaders, who can leverage their power to deter threats. Vuori notes that deterrence was used by the Chinese government during the Tiananmen protests, framing protesters as a threat to national security and social stability to intimidate participants without immediately resorting to force. While Vuori focuses on domestic use, deterrence can also be applied against international actors.
4) **Justifying past actions**: This refers to the use of security speech to legitimize actions that have already been taken. It can involve framing those actions as necessary responses to a security threat, even if they were controversial or violated established norms. This strand may also be used to maintain an issue's securitized status, ensuring it remains a priority for the regime.
5) **Control**: This strand refers to the use of security speech to achieve obedience and discipline. It involves framing an issue as a security threat to compel specific actions or prevent certain behaviors. Control is often employed by those in formal positions of authority to maintain order over subordinates or the general population. Its success relies on the audience's acceptance of the securitizing actor's authority and the legitimacy of the threat.

This framework is well-suited for analyzing cross-strait securitization due to its applicability to non-democratic contexts. Securitization in such contexts explicitly addresses the limitations of traditional securitization theory, which primarily focuses on democratic systems. It recognizes that securitization can function differently in non-democratic regimes like China, where the government may not need to bypass democratic processes but still relies on legitimacy to maintain power and control. The framework emphasizes the role of speech acts in securitization, which is particularly relevant for analyzing China's approach, as the government depends on official statements, media narratives, and propaganda

campaigns to frame issues as security threats. The use of five distinct strands of securitization acts, each serving a different political function, enables a more nuanced analysis of China's strategy, as the government may employ different strands depending on the specific issue and context.

Clarifying the context through the concepts of "audiences" and "special politics" is crucial for understanding how securitization functions in China. Audiences—defined as the target group the securitizing actor aims to convince—can vary by situation and may include the general public, foreign governments, or internal factions. Special politics refers to the sphere of exceptional political measures, where securitization creates a space for decision-making that bypasses normal political procedures. In non-democratic contexts like China, special politics may involve using security discourse to reproduce political order, renew discipline, and control society. By considering these elements, this framework offers valuable tools for understanding how the Chinese government uses securitization to maintain control, legitimacy, and national unity.

Security in China and Securitization Theory in Non-Democratic Countries

Vuori argues that securitization theory is applicable to non-democratic countries like China because, even though these countries may not have democratic processes, they still rely on legitimacy to maintain power and control. He challenges the notion that non-democratic leaders rule solely by force, arguing that they also need to justify their actions and maintain support from key figures within the system. To be applicable in such contexts, Vuori contends that securitization theory must account for the different ways security speech can be used to reproduce the political order, renew discipline, and control society. He also emphasizes the importance of understanding specific audiences and the dynamics of special politics in non-democratic settings, as these can differ significantly from those in democratic systems.

Holm's work further supports the applicability of securitization theory to non-democratic regimes by examining Algeria. Holm argues that ongoing violence in Algeria stems from the securitization of a fusion between the concepts of state, nation, and Islam.[17] Any opposition to this fusion is met with state violence, as the regime fears a complete breakdown of this relationship. The nation has also been fused with the state, leading to the exclusion of alternative representations of Algerian history. As a result, the state has securitized the representation of a unified state and nation, using violence to suppress dissent and preserve its official historical narrative. Holm concludes that this dynamic is likely to persist as long as the state continues to securitize the fusion of state, nation, and Islam. In this way, non-democratic states may use securitization to exclude alternative interpretations of the state and reinforce their hold on power. While Holm's work provides a useful understanding of how securitization can function in non-democratic regimes, it does not address what is needed to operationalize securitization theory in such contexts or how the process unfolds specifically in China.

Breslin's examination of human security debates in China delves into the complexities of securitization within a specific non-democratic context. His research explores how human security concerns are framed, articulated, and contested within China's political discourse, highlighting the discursive power dynamics at play.[18] This analysis sheds light on how the Chinese government and other actors navigate the challenges of addressing human security

issues while maintaining political control, offering a nuanced understanding of securitization processes in a distinct political environment. Specifically, the Chinese government's structure allows it to quickly elevate certain issues to strategic priorities—particularly when leaders perceive them as threats to the state or regime survival. In this way, protecting China's interests abroad becomes a means of protecting the regime itself, leading to shifts in government approach.[19] This adaptability connects to China's modification of the human security concept to justify actions aimed at safeguarding overseas interests. As a result, the government can effectively mobilize resources and implement policies abroad, as long as these interests are framed as essential to state and regime survival.

The Chinese government's ability to adapt foreign theories and securitize issues based on regime survival has serious implications for Taiwan. Breslin suggests that China may apply the concept of human security to Taiwan by emphasizing the potential negative consequences of independence for the people of Taiwan. This could involve highlighting potential economic and social disruption resulting from conflict with the mainland, as well as the possible loss of life. By emphasizing these human security risks, China may aim to deter Taiwan from pursuing formal independence and instead maintain the ambiguous status quo.

Research by Ghiselli builds on Breslin's understanding of the Chinese government's securitization of non-traditional security threats by emphasizing the government's expanding definition of security to encompass a broader range of issues. This expanded definition includes non-traditional threats such as terrorism, separatism, and natural disasters, which are now considered alongside traditional military threats.[20] Ghiselli also notes the Chinese government's emphasis on the state as the ultimate guarantor of human security, rather than a potential threat to it. This perspective contrasts with some Western viewpoints, which often regard the state as a possible source of insecurity.

Chinese foreign and security policy has thus undergone significant evolution in response to non-traditional security threats, following a state-centric logic and marked by three key trends: continuity despite leadership changes; the reclassification of non-traditional issues from diplomatic opportunities to concrete security threats; and the increasing militarization of foreign policy.[21] A key factor is the continued expansion of past leaders' policy frameworks, with a particular focus on integrating China more deeply into global affairs—an approach that has elevated the role of the People's Liberation Army as a tool of statecraft. Additionally, the growing number and severity of foreign crises involving Chinese nationals and companies have compelled Chinese leadership to evolve its security policies. While the government initially treated non-traditional security issues as diplomatic opportunities, their increasingly threatening nature led to their redefinition as explicit security threats. This shift prompted a reassessment of the PLA's role in peacetime foreign policy, with greater emphasis on proactively neutralizing these threats and increasing the urgency with which the Chinese government addresses them.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is a qualitative approach based on case studies and discourse analysis. The case study focuses on China's securitization of the Kinmen issue through the Kinmen Model (金门模式). The author translated Mandarin-language sources from mainland Chinese media reports that focus on the Kinmen Model, totaling 19 reports published between May 12, 2024, and September 26, 2024. These reports originate from nine distinct online platforms or websites: three are owned by private companies, three are state-run at the national level, and three are state-run at the regional level.

This dataset excludes non-mainland Chinese sources on the Kinmen Model, such as reports from Singapore's *Lianhe Zaobao*, as they do not offer insights into China's securitization of the Kinmen issue or the political aims of the Chinese Communist Party. However, Hong Kong's *Ta Kung Pao* is included. Despite Hong Kong's separate governance structure under the Basic Law, its media, business, national security, and political sectors have been heavily influenced by the Chinese Communist Party since the 2019 National Security Law effectively ended its political and media independence.[22] Thus, *Ta Kung Pao* contributes relevant information regarding China's approach to Kinmen.

Although these 19 reports from nine distinct sources represent a small sample size, they are considered representative of Chinese government and public media perspectives on the Kinmen issue due to the inclusion of both state-run and privately owned outlets. Additionally, photos, facts, and texts were frequently cross-posted across platforms, creating significant overlap in content between reports. This repetition effectively communicates the same information to different audiences across different platforms, with minimal variation in the messages being conveyed.

Source | # of articles on Kinmen Model	Ownership	English title of the article(s)
Ta Kung Pao, 4 articles	Ta Kung Pao (大公報) is a Hong Kong-based Chinese-language newspaper. It is controlled by the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in Hong Kong. In 2016, it merged with Wen Wei Po to form the Hong Kong Dagong Wenhui Media Group.	1) Fujian Coast Guard conducts regular patrols in the waters near Kinmen to strengthen control measures. 2) Overseas Observing Kinmen/ Mainland Expands 'Kinmen Model' to Protect Fishermen's Rights/ Zhu Suiyi. 3) Using the "Kinmen Model" to Cut Off Taiwan's Military Supplies to Outlying Islands. 4) Naval Maneuvers Around Taiwan: Joint Exercise by Military and Police Forces Breaks Through Taiwan's 'Restricted Waters'.

Toutiao, 4 articles	Toutiao (今日头条) translates to "Today's Headlines," is a popular news platform in China and is a core product of ByteDance.	1) Breaking News! Mainland's regular patrols extend again, multiple departments conduct Strait controls! Unification has become a settled matter. 2) Next Step in the 'Golden Gate' Model Arrives! Exclusive Interpretation of Joint Military-Police Exercise on Wuqiu Islands and Dongyin Island; Decrypting the details of the Taiwan Strait military exercise, the next step of the "Kinmen model" is here! 3) Strait vessels clash at Kinmen, Taiwan media finds something unusual, mainland is doing something big. 4) Kinmen model succeeds, Lai Ching-te senses danger and calls for negotiations with the mainland, a large number of patrol boats also mobilized.
CNHubei.com, 1 article	This is an online platform operated by 湖北荆楚网络科技股份有限公司 (Hubei Jingchu Network Technology Co., Ltd.) and is associated with the Hubei Daily Media Group. It is a state-run media outlet that is under the supervision of the Hubei provincial government.	"Kinmen Model" Extended! Chinese Coast Guard Launches New Enforcement Mode.
South China Sea Net, 1 article	South China Sea Net (南海网) is owned and operated by the Hainan Daily Press Group, a state-owned media conglomerate in Hainan Province.	1) "Kinmen Model" Extended Again! Chinese Coast Guard Implements New Enforcement Mode.
3G 163, 1 article	3G 136 is the mobile portal of NetEase (163.com), a major Chinese internet technology company.	1) People's Liberation Army Surrounds Taiwan Island to Deter for Two Days, What's the Public Opinion on the Island of Taiwan?

Global Times – Huanqiu.com, 1 article	Huanqiu.com (环球网) is a Chinese-language news website that is closely associated with the Global Times (环球时报). Huanqiu.com is the online platform of the Global Times, under the People's Daily, which is the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party.	1) Huge Amount of Information! Insiders Provide Detailed Analysis of Chinese Coast Guard's Law Enforcement Actions around Taiwan's Offshore Islands.
QQ, 4 articles	QQ is a popular web portal owned by Tencent.	1) "Kinmen Model" Expands Again! Chinese Coast Guard Launches New Enforcement Model. 2) "Kinmen Model" Extended Again! China Coast Guard Initiates New Law Enforcement Model. 3) Chinese warships dispatched after US vessel sails through Taiwan Strait. 4) "Kinmen Model" may expand to entire Strait.
CCTV, 2 articles	China Central Television (CCTV) is a state television broadcaster in China. CCTV is a state-run media outlet, and the news is heavily influenced by the Chinese government.	1) Next Step Under 'Jinmen' Mode Has Arrived! Exclusive Analysis of Joint Military and Police Drill on Wuqiu Islet and Dongyin Island. 2) "Kinmen Model" Can Also Apply to the Entire Taiwan Strait.
CQCB, 1 article	This is an online news platform in Chongqing China, named 上游新闻 (Upstream News).	"Kinmen Model" Can Also Be Applied to the Entire Taiwan Strait.

Table 1. Overview of Mainland and Hong Kong Media Sources Referencing the Kinmen Model. *Note: While some news media are owned by private companies, all media in China are subject to strict guidelines and censorship, which introduces pro-government bias in reporting. According to Vuori, the media is a functional actor in the securitization process within China.*[23] *Chinese media is considered a tool of the government, used to disseminate propaganda and educate the masses.*

This research adopts Vuori's (2008) framework for analyzing securitization in non-democratic contexts. Vuori argues that securitization is a political process in which an issue, once framed as an existential threat, requires emergency measures that often circumvent normal political procedures.[24] This framework is appropriate for the present study because it addresses the limitations of traditional securitization theory when applied to non-democratic systems such as the People's Republic of China. In such systems, securitization may not involve bypassing democratic checks but still depends on legitimacy to maintain power and control. This analysis draws on 19 media reports to identify five strands of securitization acts: raising an issue, legitimizing future actions, deterrence, justifying past actions, and control. Examining these strands enables a nuanced understanding of how China uses securitization to frame the Kinmen issue and the intended political functions behind these speech acts.

Analysis of the Five Strands of Securitization in Chinese Media on the Kinmen Model

Chinese media's portrayal of the Kinmen issue is framed around a sequence of key events, beginning with the February 14, 2024 incident in which a collision between a Taiwanese vessel and a Chinese fishing boat resulted in the deaths of two Chinese fishermen. This incident serves as a pivotal point, consistently referenced as the catalyst for increased Chinese maritime law enforcement activities, which then escalate in the form of regular patrols and law enforcement operations in the waters around Kinmen County. Over the subsequent months, the frequency and scope of these patrols expanded to include areas beyond Kinmen, such as Wuzhijiao, Dongyin Island, and Wuqiu Island—territories also controlled by Taiwan.

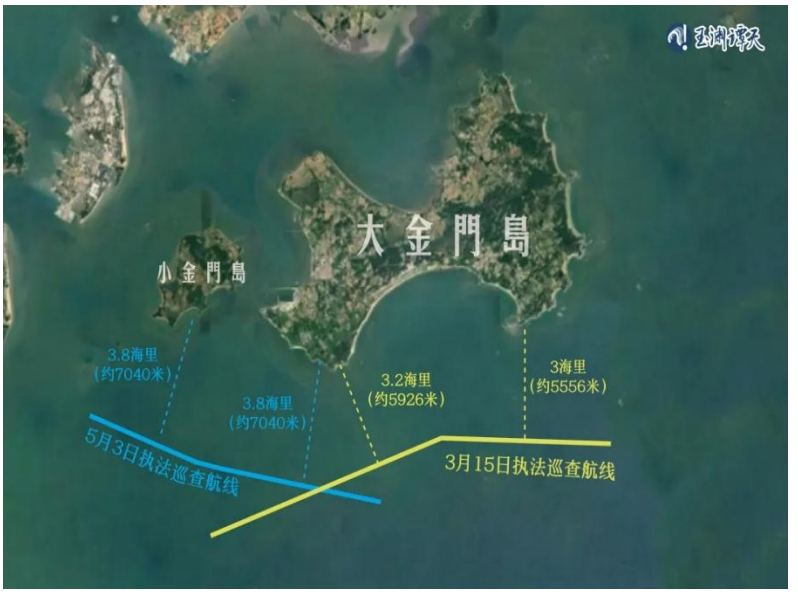

Figure 2. This map depicts the Chinese Coast Guard's inspection route around Kinmen (大金門島) and Little Kinmen Island (小金門島) on March 15 and May 3, 2024. The yellow line depicts the route taken by the Chinese Coast Guard on March 5, which placed it 3.2 nautical miles (approximately 5926 meters) and 3 nautical miles (approximately 5556 meters) away from Kinmen County. The blue line depicts the route taken by the Chinese Coast Guard on May 3, which placed it 3.8 nautical miles (approximately 7040 meters) away from Kinmen County.[25]

This expansion is closely tied to the implementation and promotion of the Kinmen Model in Chinese media, which is characterized by the assertion of the PRC's sovereignty and jurisdictional rights, the emphasis on protecting the livelihoods of Chinese fishermen, the gradual expansion and normalization of maritime control, the integration of civilian and security dimensions, and the framing of these actions as a counter-response to moves by the Taiwan authorities. Military exercises conducted by the PLA in the Taiwan Strait and surrounding areas—sometimes in coordination with Chinese maritime law enforcement—are incorporated into this narrative, serving as a deterrent to Taiwan's independence efforts.

Chinese media coverage consistently emphasizes several key themes: the legitimacy of China's actions, the assertion of sovereignty and jurisdiction, the presentation of the Kinmen Model as a viable solution, the framing of the issue within the broader context of cross-strait unification, and the portrayal of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party as an obstacle to peace. The Kinmen Model represents an integrated strategy to assert PRC sovereignty, normalize control over previously restricted areas, and advance Chinese interests in the broader cross-strait relationship.

Raising an Issue

In the context of the Kinmen issue, Chinese media reports employ the "raising an issue" strand of securitization by emphasizing narratives that portray Taiwan's actions as threats and stress the necessity of a Chinese response. This includes framing Taiwan's military activities, political positions, and international engagements as potential challenges to regional stability and China's sovereignty. Several media reports specifically highlight Taiwan's military buildup as a significant concern. For instance, Taiwan's increased defense spending and procurement of drones are depicted as moves toward militarization and, eventually, a declaration of independence from the PRC. Chinese media frame these actions as the DPP authorities "going further down the path of militarism" and "pushing Taiwan towards a dangerous precipice of war," effectively raising the issue of a growing military threat from Taiwan.

Moreover, Taiwan's political orientation and its interactions with other countries are also presented as security concerns. The media depict Taiwan's pursuit of "independence" and its diplomatic efforts as provocative actions that undermine cross-strait relations and regional stability. President Lai Ching-te's stance on independence and his call for "two-country dialogue" with the mainland are framed as escalatory, necessitating a strong response from China. These narratives serve to amplify the perceived threat from Taiwan, capture the attention of both the Chinese public and policymakers, and create a sense of urgency that may justify subsequent action.

Legitimizing Future Acts

Chinese media sources actively engage in the "legitimizing future actions" strand of securitization by framing potential actions against Taiwan as necessary and justifiable responses to perceived threats. This involves constructing narratives that depict future measures, such as an increased military and Coast Guard presence around Kinmen, and the expansion of the Kinmen Model to encompass all of Kinmen, Matsu, and the Taiwan Strait, as essential for protecting China's interests and preventing Taiwanese secession. These

reports legitimize future actions by emphasizing the need to counter Taiwan's current behavior. In particular, the expansion of Coast Guard patrols and law enforcement activities around Kinmen is portrayed as a justified response to Taiwan's perceived mishandling of maritime incidents, its failure to protect Chinese fishermen, and its mismanagement of rescue efforts. In this way, China's actions are presented not as aggressive or escalatory, but as necessary measures to ensure safety, preserve lives, and maintain order in the region.

Deterrence

The Chinese media sources covered in this paper actively employ the deterrence strand of securitization to dissuade Taiwan from pursuing actions that China perceives as threatening, such as seeking independence or strengthening military ties with other countries. This is achieved through the prominent display of PRC military capabilities and the articulation of the potential consequences of defying Beijing's warnings.

Central to this strategy is the emphasis on PLA military exercises. These drills are not portrayed as routine activities but as demonstrations of China's power and its readiness to use force against a Taiwanese government that seeks independence. For instance, the Joint Sword-2024A exercises were explicitly described as a "powerful deterrent against separatist forces in Taiwan seeking independence and a serious warning against external forces interfering and provoking".[26] Media coverage of these exercises often includes details about the forces involved, the scope of operations, and their proximity to Taiwan, thereby amplifying the sense of threat and reinforcing the credibility of China's deterrence.

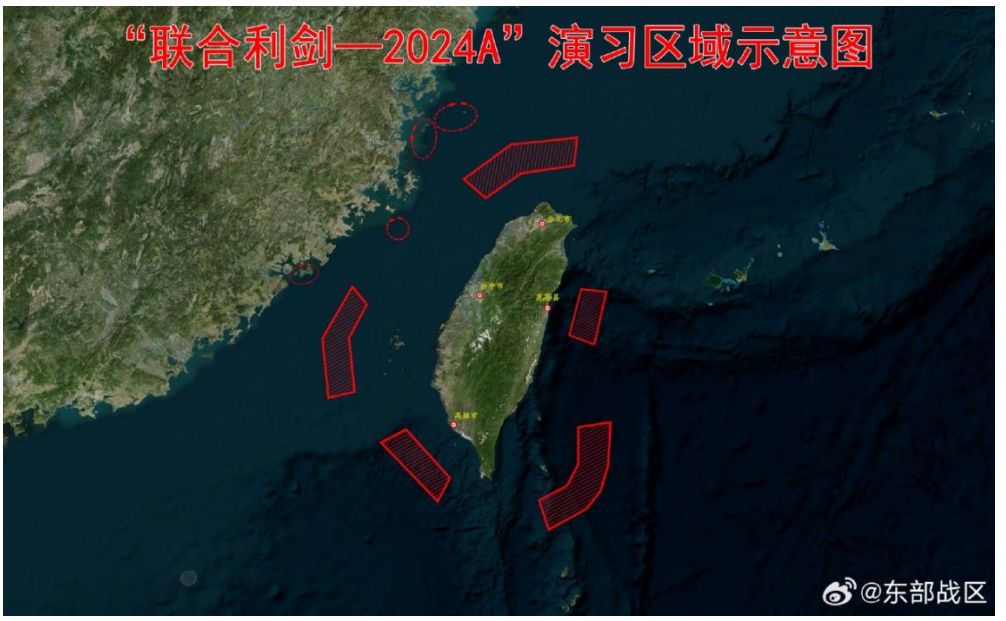

Figure 3. "Schematic diagram of the 'Joint Sword-2024A'" exercise area." This schematic depicts the areas in which the Chinese PLA conducted its joint exercises from May 23-24, 2024.[27]

Additionally, the media employs strong rhetoric to reinforce the deterrence message. Statements from military officials and experts warn Taiwan against underestimating China's resolve and capabilities, stressing that any attempts at independence are "doomed" or that "those who commit injustices will surely perish".[28] The language used is often forceful and unequivocal, leaving little room for ambiguity about China's likely response to a sufficiently provocative action by Taiwan. In this way, Chinese media constructs a narrative in which the threat of military action is always present, aimed at influencing Taiwan's decision-making and preventing it from crossing what China defines as its red lines.

Justifying Past Acts

Both the justification of past acts and the legitimization of future acts in Chinese media rely on the construction of a security threat, in which the core argument centers on a threat to a referent object such as national sovereignty, regional stability, or the well-being of the Chinese people. These two strands of securitization are fundamentally concerned with legitimacy, as the media aims to present actions—whether past or future—as justified and necessary, while countering potential criticism. This involves a combination of assertions and narrative construction, where the media affirms the existence of threats, the necessity of certain actions, and the justifiability of China's stance in order to shape public opinion. However, a key difference between the two lies in their temporal focus.

When justifying past acts, the action is a *fait accompli*, and the media's role is to provide a rationale that renders it acceptable. In contrast, legitimizing future acts concerns actions that have not yet occurred, with the media working to generate acceptance or support in advance. As such, justifying past acts tends to involve more explanatory and defensive rhetoric, including detailed accounts of events, the decision-making process, and the constraints under which controversial decisions were made.

In the sources selected for this analysis, Chinese media frames past actions as necessary and reasonable responses to perceived security threats. For example, increased Coast Guard patrols and maritime activity following the February 14 collision incident are justified as a required response to Taiwan's alleged lack of cooperation and transparency during the investigation. The media emphasizes the PRC's obligation to protect the safety of Chinese fishermen, casting these actions as legitimate efforts to uphold national interests and seek justice for the victims.[29] By carefully constructing narratives that link past actions to immediate security concerns, Chinese media seeks to legitimize these actions both domestically and internationally, while reinforcing China's growing authority in the region.

Control

The control strand of securitization, as it relates to media, is fundamentally tied to achieving obedience to the directives of the securitizing actor.[30] In service of this goal, media can be expected to emphasize the authority of the securitizing actor—highlighting their position, power, or legitimacy to issue directives. Building on this, the media will likely promote compliance with these directives by explaining required or prohibited actions and stressing the importance of adherence. To reinforce this message, dissenting voices or alternative viewpoints may be downplayed or omitted, creating an impression of consensus or the futility of resistance. The framing of security threats often underscores the necessity of

control, suggesting that only strict adherence to state directives can effectively address the issue.

In the context of the Kinmen issue, Chinese media invoke the control strand of securitization by using security narratives to assert authority, enforce compliance, and shape discourse in ways that support China's objectives. A common theme across all PRC sources covering the Kinmen Model is China's growing military dominance in the region and the framing of its actions as compelling adherence to Beijing's directives. A key element of this is the portrayal of China's increased maritime activities as a demonstration of its strengthened control over the waters surrounding Kinmen. Media reports emphasize the normalization and expansion of enforcement efforts, rejecting the idea that Taiwan can "restrict" these waters to Chinese vessels, and instead suggesting that China is establishing continuous jurisdiction.[31] For example, coverage highlights the shift toward "24-hour" law enforcement and the extension of patrol zones, indicating that China's presence is becoming inescapable. The media frequently frames these actions as measures to counter or constrain Taiwan's activities. Narratives portray Taiwan's Coast Guard as deterred or unable to respond effectively to China's assertive enforcement, thereby undermining Taiwan's authority and reinforcing China's dominance in the maritime domain. These portrayals suggest that China's actions are the primary driver of operational dynamics in the struggle for control over Kinmen.

Furthermore, the use of legal and regulatory language also plays a role in asserting control. By framing its actions within the context of maritime law and regulations, China positions itself as the legitimate enforcer in the region. This legal framing, combined with the demonstration of actual control, reinforces the idea that China's actions are not only justifiable but also authoritative. Perhaps most concerning to the author is how Chinese media consistently portray Kinmen fishermen as part of the broader Chinese community. By referring to Kinmen fishermen as "Chinese fishermen," the media reinforces not only China's claim over the waters near Kinmen but also its claim over the lives of Taiwanese citizens.[32] Framing Kinmen fishermen as part of the Chinese community helps to promote the idea of cross-strait integration, made easier by emphasizing that the people of Kinmen share a common identity and interest with those in neighboring Fujian Province.

Strand of Securitization	Description	Example from the Sources
Raising an Issue	Aims to bring a specific concern to the forefront of political or public attention.	Media emphasizing the threat of Taiwan's military activities.
Legitimizing Future Acts	Involves justifying potential actions by framing them as necessary responses to a security threat.	Justifying increased patrols as necessary to protect fishermen and maintain stability.
Deterrence	Seeks to discourage certain actions by signaling the potential consequences.	Media showcasing PRC military exercises to deter Taiwanese intervention.
Justifying Past Acts	The act of framing past actions as reasonable or essential, often to maintain the status quo or political legitimacy.	Portraying patrols as a legitimate response to the February 14th incident.
Control	Exerting influence or dominance over a situation or group through security-related rhetoric.	Asserting China's control over the waters near Kinmen through increased patrols.

Table 2. Strands of securitization in PRC media narratives on Taiwan and Kinmen.

Conclusion

The analysis of the five strands of securitization within Chinese media reveals a deliberate strategy employed by the PRC to challenge Taiwan's control over Kinmen County. This strategy seeks to legitimize PRC actions, exert control, and shape the narrative surrounding cross-strait relations. The findings of this research support the argument for a distinct fifth period in Kinmen's modern history. While the fourth period was characterized by increased cross-strait interaction and economic exchange through the Mini-Three-Links, the current era is fundamentally differentiated by China's assertive securitization of Kinmen and its newly justified gray zone tactics. This period is marked by framing Taiwan's actions as existential threats, the normalization of Chinese maritime control, and an overt challenge to Taiwan's sovereignty in the region.

This securitization has broader implications beyond the Kinmen issue. The Kinmen Model serves as a case study for understanding the evolving nature of gray zone warfare, where coercion and control are exerted through non-traditional, non-military means. It also

highlights the critical role of media in shaping perceptions, constructing threats, and legitimizing political actions in international conflicts. The PRC's securitization and gray zone activities challenge the principle of territorial integrity and the existing status quo in the Taiwan Strait, with potential ramifications for other regions facing similar geopolitical tensions.

The Chinese media's securitization strategy surrounding the Kinmen Model offers significant insights into modern irregular warfare frameworks, particularly within the Indo-Pacific. PRC actions around Kinmen demonstrate how gray zone tactics can operate below the threshold of traditional armed conflict while still advancing strategic objectives. This approach—marked by assertive and coercive activities—illustrates a shift from conventional military confrontation to indirect control. The contested Kinmen Model exemplifies a sophisticated blend of economic integration, cultural exchange, and securitized narratives to advance PRC territorial claims and reshape regional dynamics without triggering full-scale war. Such a model poses challenges for traditional deterrence strategies, which often focus on preventing conventional military aggression. Actions like the PRC's deployment of the Coast Guard and the normalization of maritime patrols in previously restricted waters are difficult to counter through traditional military means alone. This reality necessitates a re-evaluation of deterrence frameworks, including approaches that deny the strategic benefits of gray zone actions or impose costs on aggressors through non-military instruments.

This research underscores the importance of narrative competition and pre-conflict shaping operations. Chinese media actively constructs narratives that legitimize PRC actions while portraying Taiwan's responses as escalatory or destabilizing. By framing Taiwan's control over Kinmen as a "security crisis," Beijing seeks to justify its heightened presence and shift the regional narrative. This underscores the need for other Indo-Pacific actors to build robust counter-narratives and proactively shape the information environment to prevent the normalization of coercive behavior and preserve regional stability. The Kinmen Model deepens our understanding of how states can strategically employ information and non-military tools within the evolving landscape of irregular warfare.

It is important to acknowledge that this study focuses primarily on Chinese media sources. While these sources provide valuable insights into the PRC's securitization strategy, incorporating alternative perspectives would offer a more comprehensive view of the Kinmen issue. Taiwanese interpretations of the Kinmen Model and international assessments of PRC actions would provide valuable counter-narratives and a more nuanced understanding of cross-strait dynamics. This analysis is also limited by its focus on a specific selection of Chinese-language media reports within a defined timeframe. Although the sources represent both state-run and privately owned media in China, a broader sample and longitudinal analysis could further enrich the findings. Despite these limitations, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how the PRC uses securitization in the context of Kinmen and its broader implications for regional and international security.

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Unconquerable by Force Alone: Ottoman Campaigns in the Highlands of Yemen, 1569-71

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Abstract

The character of warfare is ever-changing, while terrain remains static. Nowhere is this more evident than in the unforgiving mountains of Yemen's highlands. The Ottoman armies of the sixteenth century were among the strongest in the world, yet they failed to decisively defeat the Zaydis—a small band of loosely affiliated tribal fighters united through a branch of Shi'a Islam rooted in those highlands. This study employs descriptive inquiry to analyze primary source materials from participants in the battles, along with writings by other observers in Yemen during the campaigns. Secondary sources include histories by Arab authors writing at the time. Difficult terrain, ardent tribal solidarity, and mismatched tactics ultimately enabled Zaydi forces to seriously challenge the Ottoman army. This study addresses a gap in modern historical and military scholarship on irregular mountain warfare. The lessons of this understudied case remain instructive.

KEYWORDS

Yemen; Ottoman Empire; Zaydi Islam; irregular warfare

Yemen's highlands are a sea of jagged rocks, rising thousands of feet into the sky from the flat coastal plain known as *Tihama*. Mountain fortresses dot the dramatic landscape, with near-vertical escarpments forming barriers between the deep, cool wadis below and the more than three dozen fortified strongholds above.[1] Against this backdrop, a tribal force in Yemen successfully fought a rebellion to resist the hegemony of a regional power. The uprising ended with a truce that virtually ceded control to the Yemeni highland tribe—a truce agreed to after the regional power suffered massive losses in men, money, and materiel. Meanwhile, a rising foreign fleet threatened sea lines of communication between the Pacific, Indian, and Mediterranean Oceans, seeking to change the status quo of lucrative trade between India, China, and Europe, with a key axis centered on the Red Sea coast beside Yemen. Although such a backdrop could have been drawn from current events, this was instead the situation for the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century, as the Sublime Porte sought to suppress a Zaydi rebellion in Yemen while trying unsuccessfully to disrupt the expansion of Portuguese maritime control in the Indian Ocean.[2]

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The Ottomans were one of the three so-called "gunpowder empires," pioneering the use of heavy weapons ahead of their European adversaries, ushering in combined arms, and reshaping battlefield geometry in ways that transformed how states waged war.[3] However, the Ottomans would find through experience that the demands of mountain warfare in the Yemeni highlands made the region unconquerable by force alone. Among the cliffs and rugged highlands, their man-portable cannons, long muskets, and massive *darbuzan* siege cannons proved to be problematic hindrances rather than the decisive battlefield weapons they were in Anatolia and North Africa.

In the 1560s, the Ottomans were quickly approaching the maximum extent of their physical empire, with costly defeats over a relatively short period solidifying their borders with neighboring European powers. Just two years before the rebellion in Yemen, the Ottoman army had barely survived an embarrassing engagement against a few hundred Knights of Saint John at Malta in May 1565.[4] In that engagement, the Ottoman land force commander quarreled with the Ottoman naval force commander over who had strategic priority, which, along with tactical and operational miscalculations, contributed to a seventy-five-percent casualty rate for the Ottoman force at Malta. At the same time, the Ottoman economy was rocked by runaway inflation starting around 1565, increasing unabated until 1625.[5] The Sublime Porte could not afford to lose access to the lucrative customs duties levied on spices heading westward past Yemen, destined for distribution from Ottoman ports in Egypt gained after the Mamluk collapse in 1517.[6] The ports in Yemen were critical stopover points on this journey, as mariners sailing between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea via Egypt required about six days each way.[7] The Ottomans had to seize and hold Yemen if their economic position was to remain favorable, while also deterring the Portuguese from contesting their sea lines of communication and key ports of entry.

To that end, the Ottomans began expeditions in 1538 to unseat the Portuguese from ports in India that were increasingly falling under the Kingdom of Portugal's control.[8] The Portuguese were also supporting local rulers with supplies and military advisors as far afield as Ethiopia, Tunisia, and India.[9] Closer to Istanbul, the Portuguese India Armada had also begun taking key ports around the Arabian Peninsula, especially those of Hormuz and Aden, threatening Ottoman control of waterways traditionally under Muslim control.[10] In 1551, the Ottomans tried to unseat the Portuguese from Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, but instead only succeeded in temporarily recapturing nearby Muscat.[11] By then, Ottoman power in the Indian Ocean was effectively limited to the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa, and parts of the western and southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Yemen, therefore, was critically important for keeping a toehold along a key maritime line of communication that was fast drying up for the Ottomans.

Amid this competition between empires, the capable Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent died. The new Sultan Selim II was untested, and local factions in peripheral governorates like Yemen began testing the new power arrangements brought about by this change. It was during this period of uncertainty that the Zaydi imam al-Mutahhar bin Sharaf al-Din decided to rebel against Ottoman control over the mountainous part of Yemen that had been split off from the lowlands and deserts in December 1565 by Ridwan Pasha, the Ottoman governor of the province.[12] In 1564, the governor imposed an exorbitant new tax on both the Ismailis and the Zaydis east of Sanaa. He then refused to affirm a peace treaty between the Ottomans and Zaydis that had held for the previous 14 years. These twin acts served as the sparks igniting the Zaydi

rebellion against the Ottoman Empire, beginning with Mutahhar's successful capture of Sanaa from the Ottomans in June 1567.[13]

Three key problems beset the Ottomans as they embarked on their campaign against the Zaydi rebellion in Yemen's mountainous highland province in 1569. First, basic logistics were impeded by extreme terrain features, both in elevation and in variation between low and high ground in relatively short spans. The Ottoman campaign failed to achieve its strategic objectives, as planners lacked appreciation for the different demands of the *Tihama* coastal plain and the surrounding mountains. Second, local support for the Ottomans was tenuous due to poor political leadership from the previous two Ottoman governors. An early failure to exploit the lack of social cohesion between the tribes—especially between the Zaydis and Ismailis—considerably slowed the Ottoman advance into the mountains. Third, the decentralized Zaydi tribal forces employed tactics with which the Ottomans were unaccustomed. The Ottomans refused to adopt modified tactics and continued to expect the Zaydis to agree to pitched battle on open ground throughout the campaign, something the Zaydis never did.

In the end, the plain remained under the control of a faction comprising Ottomans and local Ismailis, while the mountains around the main fortresses remained under the control of the defending Zaydis. Zaydi resistance in the mountains pushed Ottoman sovereignty down to lower elevations, where it remained for the rest of the empire's existence. The Zaydi-Ismaili rivalry, though initially ignored by the Ottomans, resolved itself along the contours of this same variation in physical geography. Although the Ottoman expeditionary commander was eventually able to make peace terms with the Zaydi forces in 1570, the Ottomans suffered throughout the campaign due to poor understanding of the mountainous terrain in Yemen, lack of engagement with local tribal elements, and refusal to employ strategies and tactics necessary for decisive outcomes.

Literature Review

Although studies of the Ottoman Empire abound, relatively few describe the conflict in Yemen in the sixteenth century. Even fewer devote more than a few pages to the campaign. The most updated survey of the empire is found in Caroline Finkel's *Osman's Dream*, while *The Ottoman Centuries* by Lord Kinross remains a stalwart study of the topic, despite not being updated for five decades. Finkel briefly noted the Zaydi rebellion, but Kinross did not. While Finkel omitted much detail, she helped contextualize Ottoman attitudes toward Yemen along with the regional consequences of their inability to fully subdue the highlands. J. Richard Blackburn, a contemporary of Kinross, wrote the first modern study of conditions leading up to the Zaydi rebellion against the Ottomans, albeit from a political rather than military perspective. Blackburn stopped one year short of the Ottoman campaign to suppress Mutahhar's rebellion in 1569.[14] Indeed, his stated purpose in that study was to examine the events presaging the campaign rather than to analyze its conduct. No academic source covers the campaign against the Zaydis in this period, leaving primary sources as the sole resource upon which to rely.

Primary sources related to the events of 1567-70 are found in both Arabic and Turkish firsthand accounts. Some works produced shortly after the campaign, following interviews with participants, also contribute to this body of written sources. Although no account from Mutahhar's side exists in any language, the Turkish and Arabic sources shed enough light on events to allow for objective analysis from otherwise subjective writings. The best primary source in Arabic is *al-Barq al-Yamani fi al-Fath al-'Uthmani* (*Lightning over Yemen by the*

Ottoman Conqueror) by the Mecca-based Islamic qadi Qutb al-Din al-Nahrawali al-Makki. Nahrawali based his account on interviews with several commanders and participants in the conflict, while the Ottoman force was resting in Mecca to complete the hajj before returning to Istanbul just a few months after the campaign ended. The account is strongly biased in favor of the Ottomans, with supplications and obeisance paid to the Ottoman commander Sinan Pasha throughout the narrative. Nahrawali went to great lengths to minimize the successes of the Zaydis in combat against the Ottomans, though the numbers of forces, Ottoman losses, and economic troubles he lists tell a more balanced story than his prose.

The long history of Yemen in general, and the Zaydis in particular, is represented to a degree in the primary literature, though only a few of these sources are easily accessible. Despite this challenge, primary sources dealing with Zaydi beliefs, culture, and history are exemplified by *Ghayat al-Amani fi Akhbar al-Qutr al-Yamani*, a history of Yemen written in Arabic one century after the events of 1569-70 and containing earlier accounts, including those written during the period in question.[15] Other primary sources concerning the highland physical geography, Zaydi religion, maritime concerns, and economy at the time include *Kitab al-Fihrist* (*The Book Catalogue*) by Abu al-Faraj Muhammad bin Ishaq al-Nadim and *al-Muqaddimah* (*The Prologue*) by Ibn Khaldun. Most of the Turkish written records from the Ottoman campaign itself are locked away in Istanbul and are unavailable to the public

The paucity of primary and secondary sources necessitates a qualitative approach. With too few sources for quantitative analysis, this study draws on qualitative methods, relying most closely on descriptive inference as applied in the evaluation of rational choice theory.[16] Further, the battle analysis method developed at West Point is also useful as a background tool when analyzing the specific tactical engagements listed throughout the primary sources, especially those found in Nahrawali's record noted above.[17] Variations of battlefield analysis as a qualitative method abound in professional military education institutions. A few steps are combined to analyze mountain warfare during the 1569-70 Ottoman campaign in Yemen.[18] Notably, the qualitative approach, focused through battlefield analysis, reveals that the combined characteristics of the specific terrain, tribes, and tactics in the campaign exerted significant influence on the outcome. More revealing, however, is the analysis of this conflict using the model of sovereign dysfunction derived from irregular war theory.[19]

The campaign is a pre-modern example of the irregular war conditions arising when the independent variable of sovereign dysfunction interacts with the dependent variable of sovereign territory. The recognized sovereign in these places was the Zaydi imam Mutahhar rather than the Ottoman sultan Selim II. This Zaydi sovereignty was derived not only from opposition to the poor Ottoman governance of the area over the previous decade, but also from the cultural and religious aspects of the Zaydi faith, a sect the Hanafi Ottomans viewed as heretical. Viewing the conflict from this framework allows the contours of the problem to be more apparent, while setting the boundaries of inquiry around the three dimensions of terrain, tribes, and tactics in Yemen's mountainous highlands.

An Examination of Terrain, Tribes, and Tactics

Although mountain warfare in the sixteenth century was significantly different from today, there is still much to learn from the Ottoman experience. The campaign of 1569-70 provides three key lessons. First, difficult terrain can serve as an equalizer between unbalanced forces. Second, gaining support from indigenous groups is critical, especially in areas where geography

fosters cultural isolation. Third, tactics must be adapted to defeat an adversary despite the pull of tradition. Combined, these elements contribute to an irregular war condition that emerges from the interaction of sovereign dysfunction over sovereign territory—an enduring condition in Yemen's highlands that persists to the present.[20] That dependent variable of sovereign territory was strongly shaped by the independent variable of sovereign dysfunction under Ottoman governance of the southern Arabian Peninsula in the sixteenth century. It is in this context, and with these variables, that the underlying causal factors can be examined as they relate to the Ottoman military's lessons from its mountain warfare campaign.

Lesson One: Terrain

The geography of Yemen was well known to Ottoman military planners. A tenth-century manuscript, the *Iklil* by al-Hassan al-Hamadani, described Yemen's geography in detail and was prized for its accuracy. The *Iklil* remained an influential reference for Ottoman forces stationed in Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula at the time of the campaign.[21] Additionally, many soldiers in the force had prior experience either in Yemen or in the mountainous areas around the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. Despite this knowledge, the Ottomans failed to adequately plan their marches, rarely used advance reconnaissance, and poorly adapted their logistics trains to the demands of extreme elevations, dramatic altitude changes, and sheer cliff faces characterizing Yemen's highlands. Their initial plans resembled those used on plains, valleys, and open desert rather than in the mountains they faced.

Meanwhile, intense rivalry between the incoming and outgoing Ottoman governors of Yemen led to a political division that further contributed to the isolation of the highlands. In December 1565, the province was divided into two parts purely along physical geography rather than cultural or religious lines. The dramatic mountainous highlands, called *al-jabal*, were split from the relatively flat coastal plain known as *Tihama*. The highland tribes included not only the Zaydis but also their arch-rivals, the Ismailis. When the Ismailis were cut off from the sea and dispossessed of their immense wealth, their leader chose to ally with the Zaydis against the Ottomans. By dividing the province this way, the Ottomans lost their most important ally in the highlands at the outset of the campaign—and the Zaydis gained one, albeit temporarily.

At the local level, the Ottomans focused on highly fortified mountain strongholds that were nearly inaccessible even with ropes and ladders, rather than pursuing more creative or dynamic approaches. This was partly due to Ottoman value judgments shaped by campaigns in flatter regions, such as Eastern Europe and Lower Egypt, where fortress seizure had strategic importance. In Yemen, the fortresses at places like Kawkaban, Thula, al-Zabir, and Habb al-Arus—sited more than 9,000 feet above sea level—were not captured through Ottoman offensive action. Instead, they were either ceded through diplomatic exchanges that benefited the Zaydis or temporarily abandoned by the Zaydis amidst carefully planned guerrilla actions.[22] These actions led to significant Ottoman casualties, as the Zaydis exploited the rough terrain and high altitude to wear down the unacclimatized Ottoman army, destroy morale, and harass supply lines for over a year until the Ottomans lost the initiative and sought peace terms.

A comparison of Ottoman manpower at the beginning and end of the campaign paints a stark picture. At the outset, the main army from Egypt had about 3,000 to 5,500 cavalrymen, 10,000 camels, and thousands of additional troops from Syria and elsewhere around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. [23] Over the summer, Ottoman expeditionary forces numbered about 8,000, not counting troops already in Yemen when the rebellion began.[24] By February 1570,

less than a year into the campaign, the Ottoman force had dwindled to just 1,200 men.[25] Although many were killed in battle with the Zaydis, a significantly higher number succumbed to disease and exposure in Yemen's harsh mountain climate—terrain they knew of, but did not truly understand.[26]

Lesson Two: Tribes

The Yemeni people had a long history of interactions with many cultures. For centuries, various Yemeni factions controlled maritime trade between what is now Indonesia, Madagascar, northeast Africa, and the Red Sea. These long-established trade routes likely even facilitated the spread of Islam to Indonesia in the fourteenth century.[27] In the tenth-century survey of Islamic culture known as *Kitab al-Fihrist*, the Zaydis were already viewed within the Muslim world as a distinct sect of Shi'a Islam and a key political player in Yemen's highlands.[28] Although the Zaydis were among the most important tribes in the area, they were not alone. The al-Nazari and Ismaili factions would prove critical to the outcome of the campaign.

The late Ottoman governor of the province, Mahmud Bey, had allowed his greed to overtake him upon entering the Arabian Peninsula. During his seven-year rule over Yemen, he dispossessed the al-Nazari family, the wealthiest in the highlands.[29] The al-Nazaris, a Sunni family, had long held good relations with the Ottoman central government in Istanbul. With that act of dispossession, the Ottomans immediately lost their most capable and well-funded local ally in the fight against Mutahhar's forces. Additionally, Ridwan Pasha, Mahmud Bey's successor as governor, began taxing non-Zaydi tribes that had traditionally been exempt from Ottoman levies starting in the 1560s. This dysfunctional governance pushed more forces into Mutahhar's camp, including their arch-rivals, the Ismailis.[30] But the alliance between Zaydis and Ismailis—rooted in shared contempt for the Ottoman governor—began to fracture when Sinan Pasha took steps to reconcile the economic and political issues that had fueled Ismaili resentment toward the Sublime Porte. After these changes took effect, those Ismailis who had initially sided with the Zaydis switched back to supporting the Ottomans, granting access to a key mountain pass and providing otherwise unobtainable information about the terrain.[31] Their leader acted as a military and cultural advisor to Sinan Pasha. Ultimately, this local Ismaili force facilitated peace negotiations between the Ottomans and Mutahhar.

The Ottomans were not the only participants struggling to maintain cohesion among the tribes. Some of Mutahhar's most capable lieutenants—including Da'i al-Salah and Da'i 'Abdullah—switched to the Ottoman side, primarily to strengthen their own political bases in the areas they controlled. The Ottomans relied heavily on indigenous forces like those under Da'i al-Salah, not only for advanced reconnaissance but also as conventional augments to the main force.[32] Indicating just how important this indigenous support was, an eyewitness to the campaign noted that Da'i al-Salah "invaded [Wadi Bawn] where he knew every village and farm. Every nook and cranny was known to him, and he had no fear of trouble from its people."[33] From late August to early September 1569, Da'i 'Abdullah played a pivotal role in convincing eight tribes to join the Ottoman side, sparing Sinan Pasha from having to confront them on the battlefield on his way to face Mutahhar. Additionally, the Ottomans relied on a force of Arabs called *shafalit* (sing. *shaflut*) to manage base camp operations, assist along the march, and supplement raiding parties.

The Zaydis faced further challenges in maintaining the foreign support that had initially bolstered their position at lower elevations. A major Ottoman concern in 1569 was that Aden

would fall into Portuguese hands, jeopardizing Ottoman control of ships using key ports in India that stopped in the Arabian Peninsula en route to Egypt.[34] This was no idle concern, especially in light of the Zaydi rebellion. In Aden, Mutahhar had 400 soldiers and 600 musketeers working with about 20 Portuguese military advisors in May that year.[35] The Portuguese soon abandoned the Zaydis, departing for Goa with 20 ships. Shortly after, on 14 May 1569, the Ottomans recaptured the city using scaling ladders—a portent of the tactics that would prove necessary in the campaign to come.[36]

Lesson Three: Tactics

Terrain dictates how tactics can be employed on the battlefield. Yemen's highland province, with its jagged cliffs, rocky escarpments, and narrow valleys, required a tailored set of tactics unnecessary on the plains. The Ottomans were accustomed to the latter, and throughout the campaign, they refused to employ the strategies and tactics necessary for decisive outcomes against the Zaydis. They were also at a disadvantage in conducting intelligence operations. In one case, Sinan Pasha planned to reduce the six-day march from Dhamar to Sanaa to a single day to take Mutahhar's forces by surprise.[37] But Mutahhar had infiltrated Sinan's planning area with a spy, allowing him to evacuate to the mountain fortress at Thula before Sinan could strike. The Ottomans repeatedly missed opportunities to improvise, outwit their opponents, and use withdrawal, delay, or deception, even as casualties mounted. Part of this resistance to change was due to the complexity of the battlespace, but perhaps more was tied to Ottoman adherence to tradition, pomp, and display—all to their detriment.

In contrast, the Zaydis understood that their weapons were too weak and their manpower too small to stand against the Ottomans in open combat, whether on the plateaus of the highlands or the lower plains near the coast. Mutahhar's force never exceeded 1,000 men during the rebellion, and rarely did more than a few hundred ever take to the field to confront the Ottoman army.[38] The Zaydis were unafraid to try new tactics, even when the Ottomans were not. Indeed, a fuse was attached to a cat that was sent to ignite a massive gunpowder store in 1569—the first recorded use of an improvised explosive device.[39] The Zaydis also understood the importance of messaging, something the Ottomans did not. They mounted a deliberate religious propaganda campaign to shape the narrative about the Turks at the local level and increase resistance.[40] This contributed to the Ismailis and other tribes joining Mutahhar's forces, as noted above. Further, the Ottomans never properly evaluated their victory and defeat conditions, measuring success by whether the Zaydis fled during skirmishes or whether towns were empty upon their arrival. Both conditions were planned in advance by the Zaydis and employed to great effect in thwarting the superior Ottoman force.

The cases of Jizan and Ta'izz illustrate these Ottoman miscalculations. Sinan Pasha arrived in Jizan in February 1569, taking the city without resistance.[41] The lower-altitude cities and villages continued to vacate ahead of his arrival throughout the campaign, which the Ottomans mistakenly counted as victories. In reality, the Zaydis simply moved to higher ground, occupying fortresses beyond the Ottomans' reach and using them as bases for guerrilla attacks. This became clear during the second planned tactical operation of the campaign on 29 April 1569. As the Ottomans approached, Zaydi forces abandoned Ta'izz, retreating to al-Qahirah, a fortress inaccessible to Ottoman forces.[42] However, on 3 May 1569, al-Qahirah was surrendered by Da'i al-Salah, a local Zaydi leader aligned with Mutahhar but more interested in increasing his own power.[43] Da'i al-Salah betrayed Mutahhar in exchange for joining the

Ottoman army, having his life spared, and—perhaps most enticing—receiving uncontested control of Ta'izz from Sinan Pasha. As a result, Ta'izz passed into the Ottoman sphere of influence without a fight. Three months into the campaign, the Ottomans had yet to face Zaydi forces on the battlefield.

The Ottomans encountered a pattern en route to their first military objective of seizing Ta'izz that they would come to experience on a regular basis throughout the campaign.[44] The Zaydis vacated the lowland urban areas nestled in the cool, well-irrigated wadi as soon as the Ottoman forces came near.[45] From their positions in the mountains, the Zaydis lit signal fires to alert those already sheltered in citadels such as al-Qahirah, Thula, and Kawkaban. Meanwhile, Zaydi raiders harassed the Ottoman supply lines and placed rubble obstacles to block the best marching routes, forcing the Ottomans into channelized crevices that led to even more supply line harassment and casualties from the march itself.

After taking Ta'izz, the Ottomans proceeded toward al-Takar. However, the Zaydis broke down dams and flooded the primary routes with diverted water, forcing the Ottomans to take the longest and most difficult route along a path called Wadi Maytam.[46] On 4 June 1569, Zaydi forces ambushed part of the Ottoman column—500 horsemen and 200 marching cavalry.[47] After a day of fighting, the Zaydis retreated to the high ground. The Ottomans considered this a victory because the Zaydis would not fight on flat ground. This harassment tactic would become a common Zaydi method, requiring them to fight only for a short time before making a planned exit—though not without damaging goods, making off with raided supplies, and injuring or killing the isolated Ottomans.[48] Similarly, at 'Izz, despite heavy losses on the Ottoman side, the Ottomans declared a "blessed conquest" after the Zaydis fought throughout the day on 25 June 1569 before completely evacuating to a fortified position.[49] Two days later, on 27 June 1569, the Zaydis carried out two such attacks successfully: first at Mount Ba'dan and then at al-Shamahi.[50]

On 8 October 1569, Sinan Pasha launched his long-awaited assault on Kawkaban. The Ottomans attempted to scale the sheer cliffs at Bayt 'Izz, a necessary intermediate point to access Kawkaban, but the men were forced to use ropes rather than moving on foot.[51] Many fell to their deaths or suffered serious injuries in the attempt. The Ottomans carried muskets, cannons, and *darbuzan* on their backs up the near-vertical cliff faces, all while the Zaydi above hurled stones downhill onto the Ottomans, imposing heavy casualties. The Ottomans abandoned the assault and settled for a protracted siege. This stand at Kawkaban ultimately led the Ottomans to abandon the campaign and reach a peace agreement with Mutahhar, ceding most of the original Zaydi territory back to him.

Conclusion

The sixteenth century marked the Golden Age of the Ottoman Empire, despite the sultanate being beset with near-constant military challenges all around the periphery of the state.[52] With important exceptions, the Ottoman military held a competitive edge over European military forces, especially after the capture of Constantinople in 1453, which ended the Eastern Roman Empire. Ottoman holdings expanded further with the conquest of North Africa following the fall of the Mamluks in 1517.[53] At the same time, however, the Ottomans suffered key defeats—ranging from minor tactical failures to massive, irreversible losses—in North Africa and the Indian Ocean. Yemen was the scene of a series of such setbacks.

The Turks were expelled permanently from Yemen's highlands in 1635 and would not return until the nineteenth century. The Ottoman army under Sinan Pasha learned its lessons about terrain, tribes, and tactics at immense cost, reduced in size and capability for years to come.[54] The conflict ended with a negotiated settlement—no small feat for a tiny tribal force fighting under the shadow of one of the strongest empires in the world.[55] A preliminary peace agreement was signed on 18 April 1570 between Mutahhar's nephew, Shams al-Din, and Sinan Pasha.[56] This was followed by Mutahhar's overarching peace agreement with Sinan Pasha on 21 May 1570, effectively ending the rebellion on favorable terms for Mutahhar and restoring his control over much of the territory contested during the campaign, all at great loss in blood and treasure for the Ottomans.[57] Indeed, this was the third such case of Mutahhar obtaining a favorable outcome against superior Ottoman forces in as many decades.[58]

But Mutahhar's story is just a single chapter in a long history of Zaydi resistance to foreign powers. Resistance from the highlands predates even the Zaydi sect: seventh-century Arab conquerors struggled to subdue Yemen's pre-Islamic tribes in the mountains. Later, the Mamluks abandoned their futile attempts to govern Yemen before their own demise in 1517. It took the Ottomans two centuries to bring Yemen reliably into their provincial system, finally establishing a modicum of control only in 1872 at the nadir of their empire. The British Empire faced similar difficulties after taking over from the collapsed Ottoman Empire in 1918. In the twentieth century, Yemen again split into two parts: one centered on the highlands, the other on the *Tihama* coastal plain and desert, not reunited until 1990. Just two decades later, amid the 2011 Arab Spring, Yemen descended into civil war with the Zaydi once again contesting the highlands against a Sunni regime. Backing that regime, Saudi Arabia invaded Yemen in 2015, ostensibly to quash what it advertised as an Iranian proxy war between the Zaydis and the Yemeni government. Yet history reveals that Yemen's dramatic mountain landscape makes conflict far more complex than that. For every valley and lofty fortress, the highlands tell a multitude of stories. The Ottoman campaign of 1569–70 is but one. Whatever shape the next conflict takes, the same mountains will remain.

Endnotes

[1] These fortresses include al-'Arida, al-Ha'it, al-Mawhit, al-Munaqqab, al-Qahira, al-Rujum, al-Ta'kar, al-Tawila, al-Zafir, 'Amran, Bayt 'Izz, Barash, Bukur, Hababa, Habb, Habb al-'Arus, Hadur al-Shaykh, Hajar al-Rakanin, Husn al-Ahjir, 'Izzan, Kawkaban, Khadid, Lubakhah, Sanaa, Shamahi, Shamat, Shibam, Ta'izz, Thula, and Turyada.

[2] For a detailed history of the origins of Zaydi religious and cultural identity that began in 897 CE and lasts into the present, see A.B.D.R. Eagle, *Ghayat al-Amani and the Life and Times of al-Hadi Yahya b. al-Husayn: An Introduction, Newly Edited Text and Translation with Detailed Annotation* (master's thesis, Durham University, 1990), 45. The early years of the Arab conquests in the middle of the seventh century saw Yemenis distinguishing themselves in battle against the Byzantine Empire, with Yemenis making up most of the combat forces taking Egypt in the 640s. In 740, the son of the last Rashidun caliph, Zayd bin 'Ali, led an uprising against the Umayyad caliph. Although this attempt failed, his followers founded the Zaydi school of jurisprudence, or *fiqh*, based around the Banu Hamdan tribal area of northern Yemen. They traced their imams to the Prophet Muhammad through Zayd bin 'Ali, hence the name Zaydi. The proper name of the Zaydi belief system is *maddhab ahl al-bayt*, or "school of the people of the house," or, alternatively, "the school of the family of the Prophet Muhammad." Today's "Houthis" are Zaydis. The term "Houthi" comes from a later leader named Hussein al-Houthi (d. 2004), himself named after the al-Houth clan of the Banu Hamdan tribe.

[3] For the seminal study of how the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires earned the title "gunpowder empires," see William McNeill, "The Age of Gunpowder Empires, 1450–1800," in *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order*, ed. Michael Adas (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 200.

[4] John Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1977), 250.

[5] Resat Kasaba, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy: The Nineteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 12. Locally in Yemen, a major contributor to this inflation was Mahmud Bey, the Ottoman beylerbey from 1560 until his assassination in 1567. Mahmud Bey devalued the *uthmani* currency with copper, bringing its value down from 60 to 1000 in exchange for the Ottoman gold dinar in just a few years. See J. Richard Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen, 968/1560–976/1568," *Die Welt des Islams* 19, no. 1/4 (1979): 125.

[6] Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire 1300–1923* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 155. The economic importance of securing trade routes through Yemen cannot be understated: total revenue after the war increased to 200,000 gold dinars annually, up from 50,000 in 1569 amid the Zaydi uprising. See Qutb al-Din al-Makki al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani fi al-Fath al-'Uthmani* [*Lightning over Yemen by the Ottoman Conqueror*], ed. Hamad Al-Jasir, trans. Clive Smith (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 61. Fully twenty nine percent of the Ottoman budget for Yemen in 1599 came from port dues collected on the coast, while fifty percent was paid by the *kharaj*, or land tax. These numbers far exceeded most other parts of the Ottoman Empire and were reflective of revenues from the spice trade generated via Yemen.

[7] Ibn Khaldun provides this estimate from about a century earlier. See Ibn Khaldun, *Al-Muqaddimah* [*The Prologue: An Introduction to History*], trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 51.

[8] Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 119.

[9] Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries,* 243-55.

[10] Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries,* 243.

[11] Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries,* 245.

[12] Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 155. This partition was Mahmud Pasha's idea but was not executed until Ridwan Pasha's tenure. See Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 137.
[13] Qutb al-Din al-Makki al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 215; Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 133. The Ismailis and Zaydis were traditional enemies despite both belonging to Shi'a minority sects. The tax imposed by the Ottomans was so unbearable that the two groups put their differences aside and joined forces by 1565. For the particulars of the 1552 treaty, see Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 135, 140. At least two other local tribal leaders rose against Ottoman dysfunction in Yemen: 'Isa bin al-Mahdi took up arms from Jazan in 1567, and Ahmad bin Abu Bakr al-Yafi'i in May of that year. See Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 150.
[14] Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen."
[15] For the definitive translation and exposition of this primary source, see A.B.D.R. Eagle, *Ghayat al-Amani*.
[16] For a detailed description of this method, see Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), chap. 4. See also Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).
[17] Randall Bowdish, *Campaign, Operation, and Battle Analysis* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University, 2006). According to this method, the four steps of evaluating the strategic situation are (1) review tactical setting, (2) list other factors affecting the event, (3) state historical lessons, and (4) assess significance of the event.
[18] Bowdish, *Campaign, Operation, and Battle Analysis*, 2. Additionally, a methodology referred to as "threads of continuity" is sometimes used at West Point. This approach considers context surrounding a case holistically, drawing out broader implications.
[19] For the theory undergirding sovereign dysfunction in irregular wars, see Jonathan Hackett, *Theory of Irregular War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2023).
[20] Hackett, *Theory of Irregular War*.
[21] Qutb al-Din al-Makki al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*.
[22] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 84. Kawkaban fortress is 9,616 feet above sea level. Thula is 9,655 feet, al-Zabir is 10,070 feet, and Habb al-Arus is 9,511 feet.
[23] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 16.
[24] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 142. By June 1569, only 33 percent of Uthman Pasha's men had survived, and only 10 percent were capable of fighting. See also Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 195 n. 23; Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 170.
[25] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 123.
[26] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 142.
[27] Ismail Goksoy, "Ottoman-Aceh Relations According to the Turkish Sources" (paper presented at the First International Conference of Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies, 2007), 1–25.
[28] Abu al-Faraj Muhammad bin Ishaq al-Nadim, *Kitab al-Fihrist*, 436–45.
[29] Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 129.
[30] Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 133.
[31] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 9.
[32] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 74. The title *da'i* means "missionary," but has been used by Shi'a in Yemen for the title of a venerated religious and political leader.
[33] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 75.
[34] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 30.
[35] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 41.
[36] al-Nahrawali (2002, 41-2).
[37] al-Nahrawali (2002, 65).

[38] al-Nahrawali (2002, 123).
[39] al-Nahrawali (2002, 10).
[40] al-Nahrawali (2002, 9).
[41] al-Nahrawali (2002, 20).
[42] al-Nahrawali (2002, 22).
[43] al-Nahrawali (2002, 28-9).
[44] al-Nahrawali (2002, 20).
[45] al-Nahrawali (2002, 21-2).
[46] al-Nahrawali (2002, 49).
[47] al-Nahrawali (2002, 50).
[48] al-Nahrawali (2002, 51).
[49] al-Nahrawali (2002, 58).
[50] al-Nahrawali (2002, 60).
[51] al-Nahrawali (2002, 88).
[52] Kasaba, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy*, 11.
[53] Kasaba, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy*, 15; Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 213.
[54] Yemen was "regained for the Turks only at terrific cost in manpower, weapons, and funds," a somber admission in an otherwise strongly biased account favoring the Ottomans. Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 12.
[55] Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 155.
[56] The agreement entered into force on 16 May 1570 due to the time it took for the paper to be transported and verified. Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 163.
[57] Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 121.
[58] First, Mutahhar obtained a favorable peace treaty and *sancakbey* status in 1552, then won peace with Ridwan Pasha at immense loss to the Ottomans, and finally dictated the peace of 1570 discussed here. For the two earlier treaties, see Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 147; for the third, see Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*.

Frogmen and Fast Boats: The Future of Irregular Warfare in the Maritime Domain

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ABSTRACT
This article examines how irregular warfare in the maritime domain (IW-M) can strengthen national defense strategies for smaller states confronting more powerful naval adversaries. It argues that integrating special operations forces (SOF) into IW-M efforts provides a cost-effective, adaptable approach to defending littoral spaces, imposing costs, and enhancing deterrence. Drawing on historical examples and contemporary force design, this article identifies key conditions for success: strategic purpose, political backing, feasible objectives, and SOF-as-integrators. It offers practical insights for defense planners on how purpose-built SOF can reduce gaps in conventional naval posture and enable partners through training, exercises, and low-cost technological adaptation. As great power competition intensifies, IW-M provides a scalable, flexible framework to counter aggression, defend sovereignty, and build regional resilience when conventional options are limited, unaffordable, or politically constrained.

KEYWORDS
irregular warfare, maritime security, special operations, littoral defense, great power competition

In an era of renewed strategic rivalry, the maritime domain has become a central arena for irregular threats—coercive but deniable, asymmetric yet strategically consequential. Adversaries such as China, Iran, Russia, and North Korea increasingly employ maritime militias, legal warfare, cyber-enabled coercion, and proxies to exert influence and challenge the international order below the threshold of conventional war. Their actions not only pressure larger maritime powers but also demonstrate to smaller maritime nations, including U.S. allies, how irregular methods can be leveraged to offset conventional disadvantages.[1]

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However, irregular warfare (IW) capabilities, commitments, investments, and scholarship remain predominantly land-centric, leaving maritime irregular warfare under-articulated as a distinct strategic approach. U.S. maritime strategy continues to emphasize large ships and visible operations.[2] Analysts and practitioners have identified functional gaps in naval special warfare,[3] maritime domain awareness,[4] waterborne assault,[5] riverine warfare,[6] sea-based unconventional warfare,[7] operational tempo,[8] and the use of unmanned systems at sea.[9] Historical cases—from Burma in the Second World War[10] to the Bangladesh War of Liberation[11]—demonstrate how irregular maritime tactical and operational approaches can yield outsized strategic effects,[12] including in deterring or countering Chinese and Russian influence.[13] Taken together, these dynamics support the article's core claim: *IW-M is a strategic necessity, rather than a derivative of land-centric IW, and therefore requires distinct development, analysis, and authorities*.[14]

The Department of Defense (DOD) defines irregular warfare 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, either as the primary approach or in concert with conventional warfare."[15] While deliberately broad, this definition underscores the need to specify how irregular approaches function in domain-unique environments to apply force without escalating to full-scale war.[16] The United States and its partners have refined these approaches on land, but their maritime application remains conceptually limited, constrained by land-centric paradigms, legal ambiguities, and complex littoral geography.

This underdevelopment carries strategic risks. Maritime chokepoints, port infrastructure, and vast littoral regions constitute critical vulnerabilities for both state and non-state actors. These spaces are not only economically vital—rich in fisheries, energy reserves, and trade routes—but also difficult to surveil, defend, or control through conventional means.[17] Adversaries exploit these challenges through incremental encroachment, gray zone operations, and the use of proxies. These actions are designed to be deniable and are both practically and politically difficult to counter with traditional naval power. Recent operations conducted by Ukrainian special forces in the Black Sea and by Houthi groups in the Red Sea highlight the significant influence that smaller actors—whether state or non-state—can exert by employing irregular warfare techniques and developing cost-effective maritime capabilities to challenge conventionally oriented adversaries.[18]

Reducing this gap requires a deliberate effort to conceptualize and operationalize irregular approaches at sea. It also requires understanding how SOF can be employed at multiple levels of warfare to achieve effects through persistent, accumulative tactical actions and operational campaigning in the maritime space. While IW-M will necessarily require integration with conventional naval forces, SOF bring unique capabilities—small-footprint, low-visibility presence, maritime insertion expertise, partner force development, and persistent situational awareness—that make them indispensable for campaigning below the threshold of armed conflict. Importantly, SOF can serve as a bridge across the Diplomatic, Informational, Military, Economic, Financial, Intelligence, and Law Enforcement (DIME-FIL) instruments of power for effective campaigning in the gray zone.[1920] Maritime SOF can generate access and persistent situational awareness; enable partner capacity where naval and coastal forces are thin; and synchronize low-visibility activities with informational, economic, legal, and law-enforcement levers. In contested littorals, this integration supports deterrence by denial while managing escalation through calibrated, reversible actions.[21] Framed this way, SOF are not a *substitute*

for conventional sea power but the *integrator* of domain-specific irregular effects that make IW-M strategically indispensable.

To remain competitive, the United States and its allies must professionalize and institutionalize IW-M capabilities and strategies. The necessary tactics already exist within the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), but to be effective, IW-M must be incorporated into strategic planning and joint force design. This requires a mindset that recognizes the distinct dynamics of irregular conflict in the maritime domain and the enduring value of SOF. The United States should serve as an example for partners and allies by adopting an IW-M mindset, particularly as warfare trends toward low-cost, adaptable, concealable, and rapidly deployable systems and units. This approach involves policymakers and military personnel working to broaden the SOF maritime mission scope, inform senior leaders about the objectives and methods of IW-M, and reconsider IW-M's role within or alongside a conventional maritime posture in contested littoral regions. Additionally, it requires evaluating the risks and advantages associated with irregular approaches and conducting impartial reviews of current IW-M resources to identify and address gaps before offering tailored support to partners.[22] Wars may be decided on land, but they can be shaped—or lost—at sea.

This article proceeds in five parts. It begins by identifying the distinctive characteristics of irregular warfare in the maritime domain and then offers a historical overview of IW-M, drawing on past examples to illuminate enduring principles. Next, it examines the rising demand for IW-M amid strategic competition. It then presents a framework for organizing effective IW-M campaigns that positions SOF as the integrator of domain-specific irregular effects rather than a stand-alone solution. The conclusion assesses the future trajectory of IW-M and outlines implications for policy, force development, and research.

Defining and Operationalizing Irregular Warfare in the Maritime Domain

Irregular warfare aims to shape the strategic environment by deterring or preempting conflict while setting conditions for success in large-scale combat operations (LSCO). In practice, IW demands agility, creativity, and sustained partnerships to develop resilience, institutional capacity, and operational effectiveness. These efforts often unfold in politically sensitive environments and under ambiguous conditions, where attribution is difficult and overt force may be counterproductive. Consequently, IW practitioners must balance responsiveness and discretion, often conducting missions that are high-risk, low-visibility, and diplomatically delicate.

Irregular Warfare–Maritime: Definition and Strategic Logic

Extending from the Department of Defense definition, Irregular Warfare–Maritime is defined here as a form of maritime conflict in which state and non-state actors pursue indirect, asymmetric, or non-attributable means to influence, coerce, or degrade the capabilities of other maritime stakeholders. These actions may be pursued independently or alongside conventional naval operations. Whereas land-based IW may be localized, IW-M inherently operates across national boundaries and global systems due to the interconnected nature of sea lines of communication (SLOCs), maritime trade, and international legal frameworks.

In contrast to traditional naval warfare, which often supports land-based campaigns, IW-M may serve as *an end in itself.* Controlling key maritime terrain, disrupting commerce, or

signaling political resolve through indirect action allows even weaker maritime actors to exert disproportionate strategic leverage without escalating to open war.

Actors, Asymmetries, and the Character of IW-M

The character of IW-M reflects a dynamic interplay between stronger and weaker naval actors. States with limited naval capabilities may employ asymmetric maritime strategies to counterbalance the overwhelming force of major powers. For example, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) has developed tactics—such as swarm attacks, maritime sabotage, and strategic mining—to complicate U.S. and allied operations in the Persian Gulf.[23] Conversely, dominant naval powers—including the United States, China, and Russia—may also leverage IW-M capabilities through special operations, proxies, or law-enforcement surrogates to project influence and maintain maritime order while avoiding large-scale commitments.[24]

Non-state actors, including pirates, insurgent groups, and private maritime security companies, may also engage in IW-M.[25] Their operations typically seek financial gain, political recognition, or strategic disruption. Legal ambiguity and uneven enforcement make it difficult to differentiate between criminal activity and political violence, complicating state responses and raising legal and operational challenges.

A Spectrum of Irregular Maritime Activities

Irregular warfare at sea can be understood along a spectrum of operational intensity. While not exhaustive and often overlapping, this framework highlights three primary modalities: (1) decentralized disruption, (2) coordinated asymmetric action, and (3) commerce raiding.

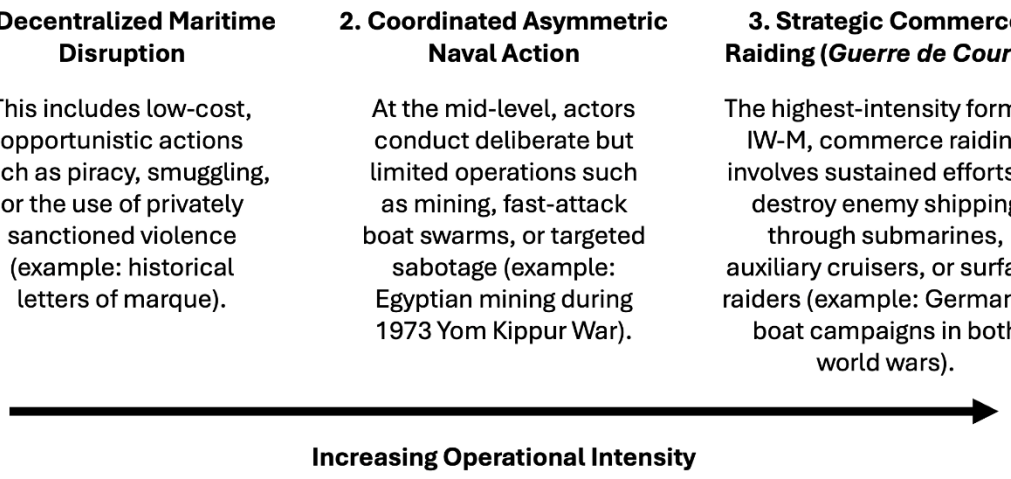

Figure 1. A Spectrum of Irregular Maritime Activities

At the low end, such operations require minimal resources but can significantly affect maritime commerce and coastal stability. At the mid-level, they rely on centralized control and are often calibrated to avoid full-scale escalation. At the high end, commerce raiding—although classically viewed as an alternative to decisive battle (à la Mahan)—remains beyond the immediate focus of this article due to its proximity to conventional warfare. This spectrum

helps clarify how IW-M functions as both a substitute for and a complement to traditional naval power. It also illustrates how actors calibrate their activities based on political objectives, resource availability, and the strategic environment.

Special Operations Forces and IW-M Activities

An effective IW-M strategy draws heavily from the doctrinal competencies of SOF as outlined by USSOCOM.[26] These core activities include direct action, special reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, civil affairs operations, counterterrorism, military information support operations (MISO), counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, security force assistance, counterinsurgency, hostage rescue and recovery, and foreign humanitarian assistance.[27]

While these capabilities were developed with land-centric operations in mind, they are increasingly relevant to maritime contexts. For instance:

- **Special reconnaissance** supports persistent situational awareness of maritime chokepoints.
- **MISO campaigns** influence coastal populations or maritime labor forces.
- **Foreign internal defense** and **security force assistance** strengthen partner maritime forces in littoral regions vulnerable to insurgency, piracy, or foreign interference.
- **Unconventional warfare** provides options for maritime sabotage.

Table 1 provides a conceptual mapping of SOF core activities onto potential IW-M applications. This framework demonstrates how these doctrinal tools can be adapted for joint, interagency, and multinational use in maritime campaigns. As regional powers and partners seek to bolster their IW-M competencies, this model offers a practical guide for capability development and operational integration. On their own, however, these actions and activities are unlikely to achieve significant strategic results unless they are integrated within a broader, coordinated strategy.

SOF Core Activity	IW-M Application	Example
Direct Action	Fast inshore attack craft and swarm tactics can be employed to strike high-value maritime targets, support littoral denial operations, or neutralize enemy presence in contested waters.	The IRGC Navy routinely deploys fast attack craft in swarm formations to patrol and defend Iran's littoral zones, using direct-action tactics to deter or harass adversaries.[28]
Special Reconnaissance	Maritime SOF units can conduct special reconnaissance missions on the peripheries of contested littorals to enhance early warning and maritime domain awareness.	During the 1971 Bangladesh War of Liberation, the Mukti Bahini "Water Rats" executed clandestine reconnaissance missions that provided critical intelligence on enemy naval and ground forces.[29]

Unconventional Warfare	Maritime SOF units can execute sabotage operations against enemy naval assets, ports, or maritime infrastructure to degrade power projection and disrupt economic and logistical networks.	Russia employs undersea sabotage and seabed warfare tactics as part of a broader IW-M strategy targeting critical European infrastructure.[30]
Foreign Internal Defense	Integrating SOF into partner or ally littoral defense efforts builds local capacity to secure territorial waters and resist external maritime coercion.	U.S. maritime SOF elements have helped equip and train partner and allied maritime forces in Southeast Asia and the Baltics to harden them against aggression from China and Russia, respectively.[31]
Civil Affairs Operations	SOF CA elements can liaise with commercial maritime actors and civil authorities to increase resilience and integrate civil-military planning into IW-M campaigns.	U.S. civil affairs teams work with East Asian and European nations to bolster pre-conflict resilience and address vulnerabilities in maritime sectors.[32] The Chinese Communist Party built the Damerjog multipurpose port and expanded Doraleh Port in Djibouti as an alternative to the U.S. presence in the region.[33]
Counterterrorism	Maritime CT operations can serve as an entry point for partner or ally training programs while developing SOF TTPs and capabilities for maritime environments.	Countries such as India and South Korea have developed maritime SOF with specialized CT units using rigid-hull inflatable boats, mini-submarines, and swimmer delivery vehicles.[34]
Military Information Support Operations	IW-M messaging campaigns can counter adversary narratives, protect maritime claims, and shape public perceptions related to sovereignty and maritime security.	U.S. ARSOF contributes to NATO partner resilience by developing maritime information campaigns that counter Russian influence and hybrid warfare.[35]
Counter-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction	IW-M strategy can incorporate SOF-led interdiction operations, boarding (VBSS), and partner capacity-building to deny WMD proliferation in maritime spaces.	NATO's Operation Sea Guardian provides a model for maritime interdiction, CT operations, and WMD counterproliferation through SOF-coordinated maritime security operations.[36]

Security Force Assistance	SOF can enhance partner interoperability and IW-M proficiency through targeted training and operational mentorship, increasing force employment options.	U.S. NSW has trained Indonesia's KOPASKA in combat diving and small-boat tactics; U.S. MARSOC has assisted in coastal defense and maritime sensing initiatives.[37]
Counterinsurgency	IW-M strategies can help stabilize littoral zones affected by insurgency, enabling states to shift focus toward external maritime threats.	Maritime special operations in Africa trace back to the U.S. Navy's Barbary Wars and have reemerged as vital tools for coastal security. Today, nations such as Nigeria are developing maritime SOF to counter insurgencies and violent threats extending into their littoral zones.[38]
Hostage Rescue and Recovery	Quick-reaction maritime SOF elements are critical for addressing kidnappings and piracy in littoral zones or commercial shipping corridors.	Several Sub-Saharan African countries have sought increased maritime SOF capacity for high-speed interdiction and hostage-recovery operations in piracy-prone waters. [39]
Foreign Humanitarian Assistance	Integrating FHA into IW-M broadens SOF legitimacy, enables civil-military cooperation, and enhances force acceptance by local populations.	U.S. SOF have worked with Colombia and other South American partners to strengthen maritime humanitarian response capabilities while reinforcing defense cooperation.[40]

Acronyms: *ARSOF – U.S. Army Special Operations Forces; CA – Civil Affairs; CAO – Civil Affairs Operations; COIN – Counterinsurgency; CP-WMD – Counterproliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction; CT – Counterterrorism; FID – Foreign Internal Defense; FHA – Foreign Humanitarian Assistance; HRR – Hostage Rescue and Recovery; KOPASKA – Indonesian Navy Frogman Forces; MARSOC – Marine Forces Special Operations Command; MISO – Military Information Support Operations; NSW – Naval Special Warfare; SFA – Security Force Assistance; SOF – Special Operations Forces; TTPs – Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures; USSOCOM – U.S. Special Operations Command; VBSS – Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure; WMD – Weapons of Mass Destruction.*

Table 1. USSOCOM Core Activities and IW-M Application.

A Brief History of Irregular Warfare in the Maritime Domain

Over the past seventy years, a wide range of states have employed maritime SOF as force multipliers to expand operational reach, provide economy of force, and serve as laboratories for new technologies and tactics.[41] When unified naval strategy or senior support was lacking, the impact was diminished.[42] Across time, these examples reflect the evolving strategic utility of maritime SOF—from sabotage-heavy operations in World War II to today's deterrence-oriented postures.

World War II: Foundations of Irregular Maritime Warfare

During World War II, major powers experimented with maritime special operations—typically small, elite units tasked with sabotage, reconnaissance, and direct action. The goal of these special mission units was to create strategic effects disproportionate to their size. Though often poorly integrated, they pioneered methods that prefigured modern IW-M principles.

The United Kingdom embraced asymmetric littoral warfare as early as 1940, when Major Roger Courtney envisioned amphibious raids using folding canoes ("folboats").[43] In mid-1940, his unit successfully sabotaged an Italian railway and escaped by canoe,[44] prompting the formal creation of the Special Boat Section (later Service) in March 1943.

Figure 2. Cockle Mark II Canoe. Operation Frankton during attack on the Port of Bordeaux (1942)[45]

With backing from Prime Minister Churchill, the Admiralty pursued additional asymmetric options. In 1942's Saint Nazaire raid ("Operation Chariot"), British commandos used eighteen modified vessels to destroy a key German drydock. In another act of sabotage, mini-submarines were deployed into Norwegian fjords to disable the German battleship *Tirpitz*—a mission so secret that many operatives did not know the target.[46] These operations reduced the German naval threat in the North Atlantic and improved convoy security, allowing the Allies to focus their attention elsewhere.[47]

Similarly, Italy's Decima Flottiglia MAS (X MAS), established in 1939, used manned torpedoes, mini-submarines, and fast attack boats to sabotage Allied naval infrastructure. Despite Italy's broader military collapse, X MAS conducted several successful covert attacks that contested British sea control in the Mediterranean.[48] The Italian navy had begun

experimenting after World War I and resumed development in 1936 at La Spezia, where personnel trained for undersea missions.[49]

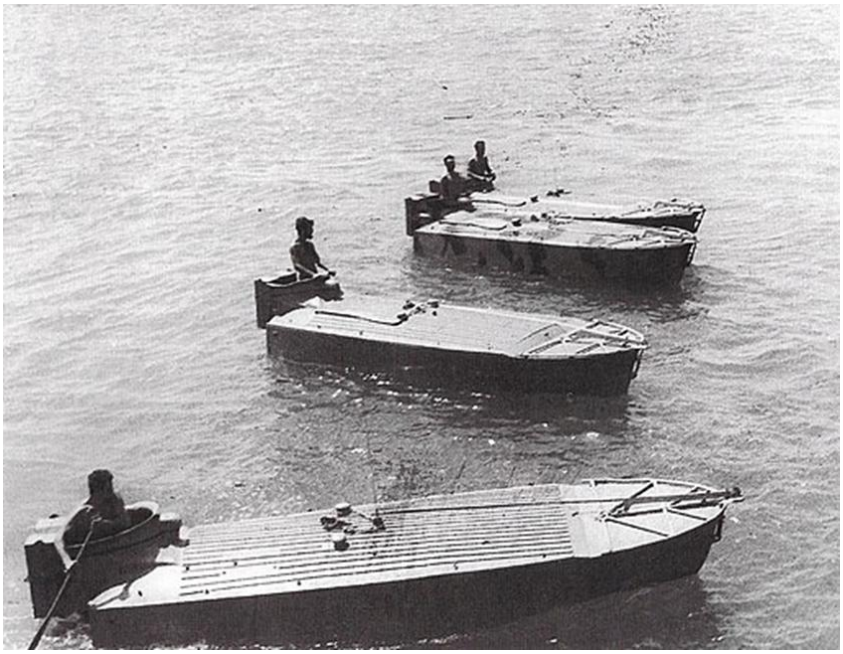

Figure 3. Motoscafo turismo modificato (MTM) or barchini (little boats) of X MAS.[50]

By 1940, Italy had developed human torpedoes (SLCs), mini-submarines, underwater breathing apparatus, and various underwater explosive devices and survival gear.[51] X MAS members operationalized these technologies with remarkable skill. Their most notable achievement was the destruction of two British battleships and several auxiliary vessels in the Port of Alexandria in December 1941, which provided the Axis fleet with unimpeded flow to troops in North Africa.[52]

Other powers also attempted to develop maritime irregulars, including the U.S. Scouts and Raiders, Navy Underwater Demolition Teams, and the Japanese Special Attack Units. Taken as a whole, the maritime commando operations of WWII demonstrated the scope and value of irregular tactics at sea. After the war, maritime SOF were swept up in postwar demobilization. Lacking senior advocates and overshadowed by nuclear deterrence, these units were sidelined. Yet with the onset of the Cold War, enough military leaders remained in uniform to preserve the lessons of WWII. In retrospect, the return of irregular warfare was unsurprising—Mao Zedong's success in China quickly demonstrated the potency of asymmetric tactics in the nuclear age. By the 1950s and 1960s, special operations forces were reestablished to meet the evolving strategic demand.

Cold War: Asymmetric Naval Innovation Under Strategic Constraints

During the Cold War, IW-M shifted from asymmetric kinetic operations to irregular warfare as it is currently recognized—that is, campaigning to extend influence, contest or defend littoral regions, and support allies and partners without escalating to high-intensity conflict. This shift reflected both weaker states seeking to offset superior navies and stronger powers' reluctance to enter large-scale conflict. In response, nations increasingly turned to special forces, proxies, and alliances to assert maritime interests without escalating to war.

During the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, Brigade 2506—a CIA-trained amphibious unit—attempted to invade Cuba but was compromised and destroyed in detail by Castro's militia.[53] In response, the United States built a professional maritime special operations capability, establishing the Navy Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) Teams in 1962. Designed for deniable, precision missions, SEALs became central to irregular warfare doctrine, particularly in riverine and littoral operations in Vietnam, Panama, and beyond. By the late 1980s, the U.S. established USSOCOM to provide unified command and control of sensitive and irregular missions.

Figure 4. Brown-Water Mobile Riverine Force patrolling the Mekong River Delta, Vietnam[54]

In 1987, shortly after SOCOM was established, the Reagan administration approved *Operation Earnest Will*—commonly known as the "Tanker War"—to provide U.S. protection to Kuwaiti tankers from Iranian anti-ship missiles, naval mines, and flotilla craft.[55] The fifteen-month campaign marked USSOCOM's first contribution of a joint SOF task force to a named operation.[56] During the conflict, SOF units captured an Iranian minelayer, repelled small-boat attacks, and collected intelligence on Iranian naval operations.[57] For its part, the IRGCN refined its own asymmetric tactics, including small-boat swarm raids, clandestine

mine-laying, and direct-action missions against coastal infrastructure, demonstrating the dynamic interplay between regional powers during an irregular maritime encounter.[58]

The effective use of IW-M during the Tanker War—contrasted with the Bay of Pigs failure—illustrates the value of irregular maritime tactics as a strategic alternative to conventional naval operations. Although Army doctrine still referred to "small wars," and naval doctrine continued to prioritize fleet engagements, the creation of USSOCOM and the collapse of the Soviet Union pushed Western militaries to consider IW-M's potential strategic utility.

Post-Cold War to Present: IW-M as Strategic Force Design

Since the Cold War's end, IW-M has become a more deliberate component of national defense planning, adopted by both global powers and smaller states. While the threat of large-scale naval combat persists, most naval operations since the Soviet collapse have centered on irregular and hybrid maritime missions.

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), established in 1982 and entering into force in 1994, marked a significant milestone, codifying the maritime rights and responsibilities of nations and establishing a framework for governing the seas.[59] These legal standards transformed naval priorities by reinforcing freedom of navigation, stabilizing territorial disputes, and facilitating greater predictability in maritime governance.[60] Navies increasingly shifted from deterrence toward law-enforcement and crisis-response roles.[61]

Alongside UNCLOS, international agreements reshaped naval operations. NATO expanded into peacetime security, sanctions enforcement, and counter-piracy roles. ASEAN states—though not formally allied—also deepened cooperation, often with U.S. support. These efforts emphasized interoperability, domain awareness, and joint patrols in contested waters like the South China Sea or the Gulf of Aden.[62] As evidenced by Hon. Lawrence Garrett's (then Secretary of the Navy) 1992 posture statement, "that [Soviet] focus is gone, and the new landscape is characterized by much more diverse concerns," requiring a dramatic shift from Cold War force-on-force postures to constabulary operations such as maintaining freedom of navigation, enforcing maritime law, and adapting to complex geopolitical conditions.[63] These missions required presence and diplomatic agility more than kinetic power.

Figure 5. Philippine Coast Guard approaching Maritime Militia vessels during the Whitsun Reef incident, April 13, 2021[64]

Today's maritime environment has driven major adaptations, particularly in the U.S. Navy. Piracy off the Horn of Africa and Southeast Asia spurred multinational task forces such as Combined Task Force 151.[65] Facing dispersed threats, navies decentralized into smaller task groups capable of operating independently over vast areas.[66]

At the same time, the emergence of gray-zone tactics—such as illegal fishing and cyberattacks on maritime infrastructure—complicates legal and strategic responses.[67] Navies must deter or respond to aggressive behavior without provoking open conflict or violating international law. This has led to a dual emphasis on signaling and adaptability: forces must be visible but non-provocative, capable but not escalatory, and integrated with allies while still preserving operational autonomy. Success now requires not just technological superiority, but agility, clarity of purpose, and an understanding of legal and diplomatic constraints.

Considerations for a Coherent IW-M Strategy

In the contemporary era of aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered submarines wielding strategic nuclear missiles, navies have become so capable of mutual destruction that fleet-on-fleet combat is now difficult to imagine.[68] Capital ships demand immense investment and are often deemed too valuable to risk in direct combat—creating a strategic standoff among fleets-in-being. It follows that contemporary regular naval interactions increasingly fall under the IW-M umbrella.

Still, conventional navies have long struggled to counter agile and elusive irregular maritime threats. From Sir Francis Drake's commerce raiding[69] and 19th-century corsairs[70] to 21st-century piracy off East Africa,[71] capital ships have proven poorly suited to suppressing asymmetric actors.[72] Unlike on land, the absence of enduring sovereign control beyond territorial waters and the norm of "freedom of the seas" complicate responses to irregular maritime threats.[73]

To address these challenges, naval powers have historically secured chokepoints or escorted shipping, as seen in the Battle of the Atlantic[74] or the 1987–88 Tanker War.[75] Yet these approaches are logistically and financially costly, requiring forward-deployed bases, replenishment, and diplomatic access to third-party ports. IW-M actors, by contrast, operate with minimal infrastructure at significantly lower cost. Navies also require a global sustainment network, an asymmetry that hinders persistent presence.

IW-M exploits three enduring vulnerabilities: the difficulty of securing the open sea, the dependence on port or at-sea resupply, and the high cost—both financial and temporal—of building and maintaining warships and skilled crews (see Table 2). Commerce disruption magnifies these weaknesses because global commerce depends on uninterrupted maritime transit; even limited disruption can produce disproportionate effects.

This logic departs from Alfred Thayer Mahan's vision of decisive naval battles and instead reflects a modern cost-imposing approach to maritime competition that blends elements of Mahan's economic "logic" of maritime power with Mao's "grammar" to create a framework for sea-based guerrilla warfare.[76]

Objective	Conventional Approach	IW-M Approach
Sea Control	• Modern version of a decisive Mahanian battle. • Missile-salvo exchanges; air-to-air combat. • Requires commitment to large-scale combat operations, with potential for global war and escalation to nuclear conflict. • Expensive and manpower-intensive; favors large industrial powers.	• Deny strategic regions rather than seek total sea control. • Conduct harassing actions with flotillas of small vessels to damage, disable, or sink capital ships. • Repurpose civilian vessels to supplement limited warships and offset shortcomings in maritime domain awareness.
Guerre de Course/Port	• Submarines armed with nuclear weapons. • Large-scale exercises to demonstrate capability. • Frequent coastal patrols and effective policing of sovereign waters. • Overt forward presence and power projection.	• Fouling or obstructing critical shipping lanes. • Mining maritime choke points. • Maritime interdiction operations by small boarding teams using fast-attack craft and/or helicopters. • Coastal defense missiles—even in limited numbers—provide strong deterrent effects at low cost.
Impose Costs	• Blockade. • Enforce sanctions with overt naval presence. • Attack an opponent's fleet to force investment in a larger navy.	• Coordinated commerce raiding with SOF or small-boat flotillas. • Rocket or unmanned-system attacks from shore. • Clandestine sabotage operations against naval infrastructure and navigation aids.

Table 2. Conventional and Irregular Approaches to Warfare at Sea

For countries with extensive coastlines or contested maritime zones but limited naval capacity, IW-M provides a scalable and adaptive defense strategy.[77] Rather than emulate high-end fleets, they can develop asymmetric capabilities to deny access, disrupt operations, and impose costs. Integrated into broader defense strategies, IW-M enhances deterrence through defense-in-depth and persistent maritime domain awareness.

This approach aligns with the special operations concept of relative superiority—gaining the tactical advantage at decisive moments through initiative, deception, and asymmetry.[78] Strategic planning allows smaller powers to start from favorable positions, complicating adversary calculations. China's near-seas "active defense" strategy[79] and Iran's layered maritime denial posture exemplify how tailored IW-M strategies can offset naval inferiority and secure core interests without matching conventional strength.[80]

Limitations of IW-M

IW-M is not a panacea. While it offers cost-efficient and asymmetric tools for states with limited naval capabilities, IW-M also presents serious legal, political, and institutional limits. Planners risk strategic irrelevance if they focus too narrowly on IW-M's tactical methods while neglecting to define clear strategic objectives. The advantages of IW-M at the tactical level may be lost when planners confuse immediate outcomes with broader strategic impacts, losing sight of long-term goals. To be effective, IW-M must link tactics with well-defined strategic aims, emphasizing persistent efforts rather than simply adopting new techniques. This requires leveraging a variety of approaches within the IW-M domain and maintaining a comprehensive maritime defense strategy. Crucially, those employing IW-M must have a precise grasp of the strategic effects they aim to achieve.

A central obstacle is the legal ambiguity surrounding the use of force at sea. Unlike land-based IW, IW-M often unfolds in contested waters with unclear sovereignty and jurisdiction. Legitimacy is further complicated by disputed governance, political sensitivities, and a complex and often unenforceable legal regime.

UNCLOS provides a framework for governance, but enforcement remains difficult and uneven. States pursuing IW-M to assert claims over resources or historically symbolic waters risk international backlash unless such actions are carefully justified and supported by coordinated diplomatic and informational campaigns. Effective IW-M also requires whole-of-government efforts and multinational coordination. This introduces additional legal and operational burdens, especially where partners may hold divergent interpretations of international law or lack the legal and technical capacity to enforce it.

Institutionally, IW-M demands significant adaptation. Success depends on purpose-built forces that are specially trained and equipped for irregular maritime operations—often with doctrines, platforms, and operating concepts distinct from those associated with traditional blue-water navies. Building such capabilities requires shifting resources and overcoming entrenched preferences. Resistance among senior decision-makers—particularly in peacetime—can stall innovation and inhibit the agility needed to field effective IW-M capabilities at scale.

Designing Asymmetric Maritime Resistance

"Every strategy has an ideal counterstrategy."[81] This maxim captures the essence of IW-M, where weaker powers employ indirect, asymmetric approaches to undermine the direct, costly approaches favored by stronger adversaries.[82] For a small navy, the objective is not decisive victory but imposing sustained costs that degrade an adversary's resolve and capacity. History has shown that when superior navies fail to adapt to irregular tactics, the strategic mismatch benefits the weaker force, echoing Ivan Arreguín-Toft's theory of asymmetric conflict.[83]

Strategic flexibility among more conventionally minded navies would allow them to maintain relative superiority against a smaller, "flea-like" foe. When smaller navies adopt

asymmetric approaches but confront conventional actors willing to integrate irregular tools—such as China's gray-zone tactics or Russia's unconventional undersea warfare—their survival depends on adapting and innovating faster and exploiting adversary vulnerabilities.[84]

Effective IW-M strategies rest on realistic assessments of asymmetric advantage. Success depends on diverging from conventional theory and adopting what Sandor Fabian describes as "total defense," a layered approach that integrates civilian-supported denial tactics with irregular combat forces.[85] This requires purposeful investments in force design, capability development, and strategic mindset. Rather than chase parity through capital ships, states develop "purpose-built" forces optimized for coastal defense, mobility, concealment, and non-attributable action.

Operationally, IW-M blends conventional and unconventional elements. Artillery or missile systems can be hidden in littoral terrain or dispersed among civilian infrastructure, gaining effect through surprise and ambiguity. Irregular forces and civilian auxiliaries contribute intelligence, logistics, and political signaling. Maritime SOF are especially valuable in this context, providing flexible tools for disruption, denial, and informational effects in contested environments.

Ultimately, successful IW-M campaigns depend as much on leadership creativity and institutional adaptability as on force composition. States must learn to fight differently, using fewer resources to extract greater effect—i.e., "doing more—and differently—with less."[86] Iran's littoral missile deployments and China's coastal defense architecture illustrate how IW-M logics can be integrated into broader national defense strategies aimed at denying foreign aggression in one's near waters.[87]

The Strategic Utility of Special Operations Forces in Irregular Maritime Warfare

SOF are the preferred forces for operationalizing IW-M strategies, offering asymmetric, cost-imposing options for states lacking conventional naval superiority. Designed for politically sensitive, denied, or hostile environments, SOF leverage specialized tactics, techniques, and technologies to generate outsized effects across domains.[88] For countries with large littoral zones but limited blue-water capabilities, SOF provide a scalable economy-of-force solution, enabling denial, disruption, and strategic dilemmas for more powerful adversaries.

SOF generate strategic value when aligned with a clearly defined purpose set by senior political and military leadership.[89] Without such guidance, SOF risk being overused, misapplied, or sidelined. A coherent IW-M strategy enables SOF to act not merely as tactical adjuncts but as integrated instruments within broader national defense planning—particularly for countries seeking deterrence and denial against stronger adversaries.

Colin Gray's key conditions for SOF effectiveness also provide a useful framework for IW-M.[90] These include: a clear maritime policy demand; political leadership that embraces irregular warfare; feasible, domain-appropriate objectives; and a coherent strategy that gives SOF action purpose beyond the tactical level.

Decision-makers must be imaginative and flexible, particularly when conventional alternatives are unavailable or inadequate. SOF must be equipped to exploit adversary vulnerabilities with maritime-tailored platforms and tactics. Tactical and operational excellence—shaped by rigorous training and tailored selection—remains essential. A cultivated reputation for precision, risk tolerance, and effectiveness enhances SOF's deterrent value.

Historical memory and strategic narrative also matter. Nations that draw from past maritime conflicts often craft more resilient doctrine and public support for SOF roles.

Several states have adopted this approach. Norway and Denmark have invested in maritime SOF as part of their deterrence posture against Russia.[91] In Southeast Asia, Indonesia integrates SOF into its global maritime fulcrum doctrine,[92] while Singapore prioritizes SOF and stealth technologies to safeguard maritime sovereignty.[93] In the Middle East and Indo-Pacific, Iran and China employ layered SOF-centric denial strategies to frustrate superior naval fleets.[94]

Building effective maritime SOF requires more than adapting ground-based units. Mission selection, force design, and training must align with specific IW-M tasks—such as combat diving, small-boat tactics, underwater demolitions, and clandestine reconnaissance.[95] Maritime SOF must also be proficient in intelligence collection, civil affairs, and psychological operations to contribute to cross-domain effects.

Technology further expands SOF's reach. In denied or congested littorals, commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) systems—drones, mini-submersibles, or stealth boats—offer scalable, cost-effective platforms for surveillance, sabotage, and strike. Some scholars emphasize the importance of maritime deception and concealment in defeating modern surveillance-strike systems, while others advocate for new operational concepts in mine warfare adapted to IW-M needs.[96] Coupled with SOF's inherent adaptability and survivability, these technologies can shift local balances of power at relatively low cost.

As depicted in Table 3, SOF provide flexible force-employment options, delivering lethal and non-lethal effects across visibility and posture spectrums. Efforts to adopt these tactical actions in mutually reinforcing ways—effectively layering them within a larger campaign—increase the strategic utility of an IW-M approach. Their versatility makes them indispensable in IW-M campaigns designed to exploit friction, ambiguity, and the fog of war.[97]

	High Visibility		**Low Visibility**	
	Offensive	**Defensive**	**Offensive**	**Defensive**
Kinetic	Fast attack craft and mobile rocket systems for rapid strike missions against enemy vessels.	Small boat teams for interdiction patrols and deterrence missions in territorial waters.	"Shoot and scoot" teams with anti-ship or SAM systems; SOF raids on enemy maritime infrastructure.	SOF-enabled naval mine placement to deter or prevent seaborne incursion.
Non-Kinetic	Electronic and cyber warfare demonstrations to complicate adversary command and control.[98]	SOF engineering teams to construct coastal defenses, including ports and chokepoints.[99]	Special reconnaissance in complex littoral terrain; information operations exposing adversary activity.[100]	SOF teams install maritime sensors for early warning and domain awareness.[101]

Table 3. SOF Flexibility in Capabilities, Postures, and Employment to IW-M Strategies[102]

Conditions for SOF Success in IW-M Campaigns

The strategic value of SOF in IW-M depends not only on tactical skill but also on leadership, organizational adaptability, and strategic clarity. Colin Gray identifies several conditions for SOF success—including high command understanding, appropriate mission alignment, and strategic patience—that are especially critical in the maritime domain, where effects must be cumulative and long-term.[103] His framework offers a useful lens for assessing when and how SOF can generate meaningful strategic outcomes.

When properly resourced and integrated, SOF enable states to impose outsized costs through focused, limited operations. They are particularly effective in helping smaller states achieve *relative superiority*—gaining and holding local advantage in time and space against a superior force.[104] This posture, exemplified in China's "active defense" and Iran's layered denial strategy, depends on early positioning, strategic concealment, and synchronized joint planning.[105] It is not the platform but the concept and coordination that determine SOF's effectiveness.

Even countries without high-end fleets can bolster their maritime posture by partnering with advanced SOF nations. U.S. and allied naval SOF can help build partner capacity through training, joint exercises, and experimentation with emerging COTS and unmanned systems.[106] However, without a coherent IW-M strategy, SOF risk is strategically irrelevant or misused.[107]

"A Handful of Cockleshell Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When Do Special Operations Succeed in Irregular Maritime Warfare?" by Colin S. Gray

In his 1999 *Parameters* article, *"Handful of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When Do Special Operations Succeed?"* Gray outlines a compelling framework for assessing the strategic utility of SOF. He identifies eleven conditions that, when met individually or in concert, increase the likelihood of operational and strategic success. These conditions are interdependent, often context-specific, and shaped by historical circumstance, policy need, and the nature of the adversary.

1. Policy Demand - SOF are most effective when employed in response to clearly defined maritime policy gaps—such as defending littoral sovereignty, denying enemy access to vital waterways, or disrupting sea lines of communication. In environments where conventional naval options are unavailable or insufficient, SOF offer scalable, asymmetric alternatives tailored to political and strategic necessity.

2. Political Support - Permissive political conditions are essential. SOF operations—especially covert or clandestine ones—require decision-makers who understand the strategic logic of irregular warfare and are willing to accept the associated risks. Political-military alignment is key to sustaining maritime SOF employment over time.

3. Feasible Objectives - SOF succeed when tasked with achievable, clearly defined goals—whether independent or complementary to conventional efforts. In IW-M, this means identifying objectives grounded in operational timing (e.g., exploiting relative superiority), physical terrain (such as archipelagic chokepoints), and force capabilities.

4. Strategy - SOF require integration within a coherent maritime strategy—one that links tactical action to strategic effect. Maritime SOF cannot succeed through ad hoc missions alone. Their operations must be conceptually anchored in broader denial, deterrence, or cost-imposition campaigns.

5. Flexibility of Mind - Strategic success depends on imagination. Military and civilian leaders must possess the mental agility to conceptualize SOF's value beyond traditional ground paradigms. They must also be prepared to adapt quickly as maritime IW environments evolve.

6. Absence of Alternatives - SOF are often most valuable when other tools are unavailable, inappropriate, or ineffective. In maritime IW contexts—especially in denied areas or gray zone confrontations—SOF can deliver results that conventional naval forces cannot, precisely because of their stealth, speed, and flexibility.

7. Enemy Vulnerabilities - Successful IW-M campaigns exploit adversary blind spots. SOF can target vulnerable logistics hubs, under-defended islands, or coastal infrastructure. They can also exploit doctrinal rigidity or overconfidence in conventional force posture.

8. Technological Assistance - Technology amplifies SOF advantage in the maritime domain. Subsurface delivery platforms, unmanned systems, miniaturized sensors, and electronic warfare capabilities allow SOF to operate effectively across sea, surface, and air layers, mitigating conventional disadvantages.

9. Tactical Competence - Maritime SOF require rigorous selection, elite training, and domain-specific expertise. Operational success hinges on both individual skill and team cohesion. Tactical proficiency enables operators to perform complex missions under extreme conditions in contested littoral zones.

10. Reputation - Reputation matters. When adversaries perceive maritime SOF as highly capable and willing to act boldly, their deterrent effect increases. A reputation for innovation, stealth, and risk tolerance magnifies both the psychological and strategic value of IW-M operations.

11. History - SOF must understand—and embrace—their maritime legacy. Nations with rich histories of littoral defense, asymmetric naval warfare, or maritime raiding can draw from that past to inform doctrine, inspire personnel, and shape national narratives of defense and sovereignty.

Implications

For smaller countries confronting coercion by major powers like China and Russia, integrating special operations forces within broader irregular maritime warfare strategies presents a viable

path to strengthening maritime defense. With tailored support from Western allies—through training, exercises, and capacity building—SOF development can enhance deterrence, bolster sovereignty, and improve interoperability.

Western allies must integrate IW-M approaches into their own joint strategies even as they train others, recognizing the paradox that some partners—already adept in irregular maritime tactics—may possess more practical experience than their instructors. Addressing U.S. shortfalls while supporting others demands a two-way exchange: providing resources and expertise while absorbing lessons from partners who have refined IW-M through active competition. Assistance between providers and recipients can be reciprocal—advanced partners offer resources, technology, training space, and expertise, while gaining insights from those actively employing IW-M systems and TTPs in competition and conflict.

Effective IW-M also requires recognition that the sea is inherently multi-domain and increasingly vulnerable to gray-zone aggression. Defense planning must address vulnerabilities and integrate responses across sea, air, land, space, and subsurface environments, especially where conventional forces are insufficient or unavailable. Under these conditions, SOF provide a logical tool for force modernization, risk mitigation, and strategic flexibility.

Countries that embed SOF within IW-M strategies, alongside or in support of conventional forces, are more likely to accelerate military modernization, close capability gaps, and improve joint force employment. This integration increases operational versatility and strengthens partnerships.

Examples from Iran, the Nordic-Baltic region, and Singapore illustrate the strategic dividends of IW-M when anchored by competent and well-integrated SOF. Iran's capacity to harass and challenge U.S. forces, Scandinavian and Baltic deterrence postures, and Singapore's investment in SOF highlight how IW-M can defend sovereignty and impose costs on adversaries.

As states transition SOF roles from heavy investment in counterterrorism toward foreign internal defense (FID), partner capacity building, and irregular warfare planning, allied SOF assistance becomes critical. U.S. and Western SOF are well-positioned to mentor partner nations in these transitions, helping them embed SOF more strategically within IW-M frameworks.

Conclusion

Since 9/11, the U.S. Joint Force has refined irregular warfare—particularly COIN and CT—primarily in land-centric contexts. These competencies should now be systematically adapted to the maritime domain. IW-M is a strategic necessity for states confronting formidable naval adversaries; it provides a viable, cost-imposing, dilemma-creating set of options below the threshold of open war. A purpose-built IW-M playbook offers scalable tools for partners and allies—particularly in regions such as the Taiwan Strait—before escalation pressures narrow policy options.

Yet the 2022 U.S. National Defense Strategy deemphasizes irregular warfare, overlooking IW's relevance in confronting adversaries such as China and Russia. This shift misses the enduring value of SOF core missions, not only for counterterrorism but also for enhancing domain awareness, deterring aggression, and enabling partner resilience in contested maritime environments.

IW-M demands more than doctrinal rhetoric. It requires multi-domain planning, adaptable force design, and interagency coordination. States that fail to distinguish maritime from land-based irregular threats may suffer operational failure—or strategic collapse. Conversely, those that tailor their defense concepts around IW-M as a unique form of warfare can exploit adversary vulnerabilities, offset naval asymmetries, and enhance deterrence. It also requires a high level of self-awareness among both partners and providers. Potential assistance providers, including the United States, should demonstrate relevant experience, expertise, and established policy in IW-M to establish credibility with their partners.

Although this article focuses largely on the military instrument of power, irregular warfare at sea does not hinge on the use of force alone. An effective IW-M framework aligns the broader DIMEFIL toolkit to create cumulative advantage without inviting open conflict: informational tools shape narratives and attribution while preserving deniability; economic and financial measures raise the operating costs of gray-zone activity by targeting maritime revenue streams and logistics; and legal and law-enforcement mechanisms translate maritime law into practical friction for malign actors, signaling coalition resolve short of force. Future research should clarify the mechanisms and authorities by which SOF integrate non-military instruments, develop sequencing methods for operations and measures, and establish metrics for effectiveness and escalation management in IW-M campaigns.

At its core, IW-M is about tailored force employment. Purpose-built SOF—trained for both kinetic and non-kinetic operations—act as qualitative force multipliers and integrators, protecting sea lines and infrastructure, patrolling littorals, enabling unconventional denial strategies, and connecting military activities to informational, economic, and legal levers through access, partner development, and releasable intelligence. Conventional forces can likewise be adapted to irregular purposes (e.g., dispersing artillery or anti-ship missiles along contested shorelines).

Ultimately, IW-M is not a substitute for naval parity—it is a strategy of tailored resistance. When enabled by SOF, supported by allies, and nested within national security objectives and complementary instruments of power, it offers smaller powers the means to hold the line at sea, impose costs on adversaries, and defend their sovereignty with agility and credibility.

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COMMENTARY

Crisis Response as Deterrence: Strategizing the Use of Elite Capabilities to Deter Adversary Aggression

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ABSTRACT

This commentary argues that crisis response (CR)—an irregular warfare specialization executed by elite forces—can function as a strategic instrument of deterrence. Drawing on the logic of coercion and deterrence (Clausewitz; Schelling), it examines how rapid, precise operations shape adversary perceptions by exposing vulnerabilities and signaling credible, repeatable capability without provoking escalation. Hostage rescue in denied areas illustrates CR's fungibility: the same intelligence, access, and precision required for recovery can generate wider strategic effects. Applied to the PRC–Taiwan scenario, CR complements forward posture and allied integration by imposing uncertainty on Beijing's timelines, resources, and domestic stability. The result is a scalable framework in which crisis response extends deterrence through agility, adaptability, and cognitive advantage short of war.

KEYWORDS

Crisis response (CR); strategic deterrence; irregular warfare; cognitive effects; People's Republic of China (PRC)

The potential People's Republic of China (PRC) takeover of Taiwan includes a full spectrum of military and non-military options. Yet the capabilities to do so are secondary to the will of China's Communist leaders to accomplish it. Given the tyranny of distance that limits U.S. and partner access and resupply, the timing of crises inside the first island chain remains decidedly in Beijing's sphere of influence. To counter China's preponderance of initiative and momentum emanating from the mainland, the United States and its partners have been expanding resources and operational applications to slow, if not deny, a hostile takeover. The goal is to influence adversary decision-making before needing to defeat adversary forces through combat.

Foremost have been service-specific approaches supporting the theater commander, ranging from shipbuilding and expanded air and maritime freedom-of-navigation operations[1] to offensive space and cyber capabilities.[2] Irregular warfare activities are also increasing to

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build and sustain resistance in the area[3] and to expose and exploit adversary vulnerabilities.[4] All told, Joint Force efforts to increase multi-domain capabilities have the potential to counter the growing threat from China. However, applying that capability within the adversary's decision space requires more than manpower and materiel; it requires intellectual overmatch to defeat the adversary's strategy. The Joint Force can draw on a wealth of lessons learned from the Cold War and twenty years of counterterrorism (CT) and counterinsurgency (COIN)—to say nothing of the growing evidence from the large-scale "battle lab" in Ukraine. Yet little research has examined the potential for crisis response (CR), as an irregular-warfare specialization, to support strategic-deterrence efforts.

Crisis response spans both military and non-military actions. In the broadest sense, it entails the management of unexpected or intense events that threaten to overwhelm the normal functions of the system facing the crisis. State and societal responses depend as much on resilience built prior to crisis as they do on adaptability to respond decisively during it. This requires the ability to understand conditions accurately enough to apply processes previously proven effective under similar circumstances. For this capability to extend beyond the limits of the crisis itself, response thinking must also be strategic—able to see through the crisis to the core interests at stake. Employing a crisis response to communicate a threat to an adversary elevates it to the level of strategic coercion—the most complex and difficult of statecraft endeavors.

To lay out a possible pathway for crisis response to serve as a strategic force multiplier, this article focuses on the core logic of strategic coercion, of which deterrence is one element. It then analyzes CR as a means of supporting strategy before addressing the potential for applying elite military crisis-response capabilities to deterring China's aggression against Taiwan.

Deterrence Is More Difficult Than It Appears

Carl von Clausewitz, the high priest of Western warfare, understood that power and initiative shape comparative advantage.[5] To weaken an adversary's relative strengths, indirect measures can succeed so long as they do not disproportionately decrease one's own. As a result, finding asymmetries that gain more in success than they cost in failure remains a hallmark of effective statecraft before, during, and after conflict. Those responsible for identifying and exploiting such advantages must retain boldness, both as a personal trait and as a product of education that cultivates critical and creative thinking under duress.[6] Under clandestine conditions, elite military units can afford to risk more for higher-payoff targets given the advantages of speed, surprise, and violence of action.[7]

For these small-scale operations to achieve coercive influence, they must carry over into the cognitive dimension of adversary decision-making and thus verge into strategic thinking as much as operations to shape it.[8] Deterrence, as a form of coercion, hinges on understanding adversary decision processes, which in turn relies on deep knowledge of the values and behavioral norms shaping their interests, actions, and reactions. As a central element of decision-making, risk propensity defines the willingness to endure costs for favorable benefits. Outside actors can force what would otherwise be undesirable actions more easily in areas of asymmetry, since these carry lower risks with larger margins of error that do not threaten core capabilities.[9] However, adversaries can also maintain and actively work toward generating alternatives that either balance coercive threats or supplant them through other means.

As Freedman points out, adversaries therefore possess agency within limitations—what they intend to do runs up against what they can do, both of which are influenced by their opponents.[10] The shared dynamic of inescapable constraints persists until one side can no longer participate, either through defeat or capitulation. The key to winning is to make the adversary think that victory is not possible, even if it may still be possible in reality.

Consequently, strategy becomes the exercise of coercion and counter-coercion played out across time and space with resources that are both critical for one's side and vulnerable to the other's predations. Influencing these kinds of relational opportunities and constraints defines coercion, which Schelling prioritized as some combination of "hurting" and "bargaining."[11] At the core lies the anticipation of pain, which can motivate the other side to seek redress while it still retains the choice to avoid more undesirable consequences. Strength to resist can thus still be found at the bargaining table, even as it can conversely be lost through fighting what becomes a lost cause. Key to successful coercion is the ability to marry active violence to the potential for future violence should the opponent fail to relent. Recognizing that participants in conflict play multiple "variable-sum games"—such that they do not have singular, homogenized interests, preferences, or values[12]—coercion spans the power to hurt as a direct incentive and the power to deny as an indirect incentive to yield.

Throughout this strategic dialogue, successful coercion is fraught with dangers of escalation that each side seeks to manage. As the space for anticipated victory shrinks, either due to adversary actions or weakness within one's side, the incentives to escalate increase. Kahn identifies principal ways this can compound actions and targets, widen areas under threat, and/or increase the intensity of language, actions, and actors.[13] Accordingly, a threatening act—either direct or implied—that is limited, isolated, or discrete can increase the likelihood of coercion working, because it leaves room for the adversary to offer a modicum of capitulation without fully surrendering existential interests.[14]

Herein lies the essential role of crisis response in supporting deterrence. By revealing a capability that can impose greater pain on the adversary than the isolated action itself, it can increase coercive effects with an ability that can be applied to other areas of greater significance. While the selection of targets remains concealed, the potential pain of CR activities is fungible. This expands the types and relative weight of signaling to threaten and, if needed, force the adversary into more painful circumstances. As per Clausewitz, given their limited, isolated, and discrete nature, CR capabilities threaten horizontal escalation across comparable vulnerabilities while avoiding the vertical risk so often associated with nuclear deterrence that threatens core interests. CR threatens the adversary indirectly because it does not require a specific demand; instead, it exposes a weakness that the action exploits to achieve its operational goals. By doing so, CR reinforces its coercive potential by incentivizing the adversary to react in a limited way rather than ratcheting the conflict. Thus, by raising the risks on other types of vulnerabilities rather than just a single set of targets, CR activities present a dilemma that forces the adversary into reactive decision-making, thereby taking away the initiative as a key source of power.

However, to maximize that coercive potential, crisis response must first connect what is inherently indirect to direct strategic messaging. This requires the adversary to perceive accurately and understand the leap from the crisis response itself to something more significant threatened by the capabilities being applied elsewhere. One particular activity that utilizes elite military crisis response in such a fungible way is hostage rescue in a denied area.

Hostage Rescue as Strategic Crisis Response

Operational environments directly affect the warfighting functions used during a hostage-rescue mission. Key functions include intelligence, communications, movement, and maneuver. Permissive locations offer numerous open sources to build a common intelligence picture; they also provide accessible ingress and egress options, and secure transmission of information while maneuvering onto and off the target. Operational dominance in these environments supports the protection function by closing knowledge gaps about enemy capabilities and force disposition. Diplomatic approvals, based on prior or immediate access, basing, and overflight permissions, also play a central role in enabling those advantages.

At the other end of the spectrum, denied areas undermine many of the support capabilities that units assume upon during planning and training. Terms such as "disrupted or denied comms" and "austere medicine" illustrate the constraints units must work around in the most challenging conditions, often forcing adaptations in tactics, techniques, and procedures. Between those endpoints, semi-permissive and semi-denied areas combine elements of freedom to operate with constraints on action.

Adversary strengths directly shape the operational environment. Against symmetric opponents, the United States and its partners have needed to identify "two-fors"—operations that maximize output while limiting input for activities and investments. The imperative to do more with fewer resources becomes more acute as budget pressures force the Joint Force, writ large, to do better with less. Central to those adaptations is identifying lightly protected adversary vulnerabilities that can cascade into threats against higher-priority interests. Finding gaps in defense systems at the periphery, or in similar systems used by commercial or proxy forces, can reveal edge weaknesses that point to core vulnerabilities. In that regard, hostage-rescue capabilities can produce ripple effects beyond the immediate operational area because the skills and resources employed in one context can transfer to similar conditions elsewhere—regardless of the target.

Given the political pressures and compressed timelines of hostage scenarios, rescue missions often require elite military units capable of executing Special Operations under the toughest conditions. These missions can target traditional hostage-takers—terrorist and criminal groups—as well as proxies of state adversaries. (Direct state-to-state hostage taking remains rare, given alternative avenues for coercion.) Central to rescue operations is the Special Operations targeting model: find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate (F3EAD). F3EAD moves quickly onto and off the target to match the short time frames of the operational context. Whether focused on high-priority site seizure, personnel recovery, or sensitive-material collection, Special Operations crisis response typically trades breadth of scope for speed of results.

Developed and refined through CT and COIN missions over the past two decades, F3EAD relies on a Joint Force–interagency–international network for intelligence assessments to find and fix targets. Partner contributions to target acquisition can increase accuracy even when constrained by classification restrictions. Given the heightened political priority of many hostage scenarios, CR may also benefit from expedited review and approval processes.

The finish phase depends on the exceptional expertise of assigned forces. Oversight and support before and during operations allow CR to be nested within larger strategic processes and to operate inside "right and left" limits that manage escalation risk. The final phases—exploit, analyze, and disseminate—extend learning across the enterprise. Passing lessons learned into other tactical and operational areas expands CR's potential for strategic coercion.

Foremost, successful CR can undermine enemy capabilities and expose vulnerabilities through mission success against a single objective, which can then be leveraged for strategic effects in that location or elsewhere. Even while concealing the precise capabilities used in a rescue, revealing the success, and affirming the ability to do it again, shapes adversary calculations about strengths, weaknesses, and likely risks. After a rescue, an adversary must account for both the vulnerability exposed and its exploitation, which changes the calculus of relative strengths and weaknesses in future conflicts. Closing previously unknown or underprioritized gaps, restoring leaders' confidence in rebuilt defenses, and punishing those responsible for the "embarrassment" all require time and resources. Those demands can, in turn, disrupt timelines and budgets for future hostile activity against the U.S. and its partners.

Crisis Response Support to Deterrence over Taiwan

The current and foreseeable force posture in the Indo-Pacific presents clear advantages to China. Proximity for lines of communication and control inherently privileges Beijing in its strategic calculus. By comparison, U.S. interests are more limited—focused on partnerships and commerce within a broader global footprint. Even as specific countries and industries feature prominently in U.S. strategies, the tyranny of distance and competing priorities constrain both available capabilities and future commitments. Wherever the United States postures its forces, much of the operational impact occurs through strategic signaling to assure partners and deter China, rather than through direct defense across the entire region. With the goal of preventing conflict, deterrence remains paramount, even as warfighting capabilities underpin its potential effectiveness.

In response to U.S. deterrent messages and the "muscle" necessary to back them, China's military forces and civilian industries have developed multi-layered capabilities to defend the mainland while supporting offensive action against Taiwan. Caverley's review of China's "kill web" illustrates the challenge U.S. deterrence faces when seeking to impose costs inside the First Island Chain.[15] Notable features include:

1. overlapping and redundant anti-access/area-denial and space systems;
2. extensive global resource procurement to sustain war production and economic activity; and
3. pervasive cyber capabilities that can both attack and defend in support of military operations.

Combined with "One China" nationalism as an element of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) control, the deck is not only stacked in Beijing's favor—Beijing also holds many of the cards. How, then, can U.S. crisis-response capabilities influence Chinese decision-making if these systems already appear robust against U.S. interference?

The first step is understanding the adversary's intrinsic vulnerabilities. The CCP governs a vast domestic empire akin to historic European dominions, characterized by diverse topography, languages, and regional identities. The weight of history has long threatened to pull China apart; the legacy of past imperial collapse still shapes CCP decision-making. This domestic fragility demands rigid control to prevent chaos, but that same control limits the social innovation needed for adaptive thinking during crisis or conflict. Sawyer highlights a stark contrast between classical Chinese strategic wisdom and Beijing's current rigidity.[16] Across dynasties, Chinese strategists warned that political control could stifle the creative adaptation required to defeat an enemy, lessons the CCP appears to have forgotten.

China's monolithic system may appear resilient, and its mass and geography may favor endurance, yet assumptions of U.S. weakness pose a deeper problem for Beijing than ignorance of U.S. capabilities. This leads to a second core vulnerability: the regime's inability to understand its adversaries. Wu Ch'i, later known as Wu Tzu, argued in the fourth century BC that without genuine knowledge of the enemy, deception only compounds ignorance and brings ruin to even the best-planned strategy. Modern China's insistence that others understand it—without reciprocating—has produced a trail of disillusioned partners. While some states still accept short-term gains from engagement, that pool is neither limitless nor uncontested. These flaws expose a key vulnerability for U.S. crisis-response strategy to exploit: Beijing's tendency to overstep rather than merely overreach.

China's defensive advantages on the mainland do not easily translate into offensive success. If the United States and its partners pre-position forces on and around Taiwan, defensive advantages shift toward the allies.[17] The extent of that advantage depends on their timing, duration, and intensity, but the potential to rebalance remains fluid. Moreover, while Beijing would seek rapid territorial gains, the likelihood of a prolonged regional conflict grows as U.S. policy continues to frame the CCP as a "pacing threat." As Sun Tzu warned, stalemates offer no advantage.[18] Over time, mounting losses—economic and military—would turn such a conflict into a costly stalemate for Beijing.

China's economic health increasingly depends on foreign-sourced materials. Globalization and market integration have eroded the CCP's ability to insulate itself from external influence. Despite tools of control such as the "Great Firewall," "Great Cannon," and "social credit" system, the scale of dependence on global resources exposes vulnerabilities far beyond the loss of export markets. Damage to the defense industrial base would further compound these problems.[19]

As a result, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) would need to seize Taiwan quickly to avoid prolonged economic and political shock. The CCP's domestic legitimacy, fragile since Tiananmen, depends on maintaining prosperity and stability. As seen during the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing property-market crisis, Beijing walks a far narrower line with its populace than official narratives suggest. If a Taiwan conflict leads to sustained economic pain and mounting casualties, internal unrest could threaten the regime more than losses on the battlefield. The larger and more interconnected China's economy becomes, the greater the number of pressure points that U.S. and partner actions can exploit to deter escalation.

Crisis-response capabilities directly address these vulnerabilities. First, by demonstrating the U.S. ability to act when and where it chooses, CR exposes a wide range of targets Beijing would prefer to remain untouched. Using the warfighting functions as a guide, U.S. CR operations can threaten the facilities, routes, and systems that underpin China's global reach. Unless the CCP develops isolated "China-only" versions of these assets, its vulnerabilities will multiply over time. In that sense, CR's greatest effect is deterrent: like the sword of Damocles, the potential for CR-enabled precision strikes to disrupt essential networks heightens Beijing's internal frictions by targeting economic pressure points. Amplifying those domestic strains—historically the CCP's greatest fear—positions CR as a valuable tool of strategic-escalation management.

Second, the integration across U.S. and allied networks required for effective crisis response also strengthens large-scale combat readiness. CR planning and resources can extend the duration and scope of a fight to halt Chinese aggression, leveraging a multi-layered coalition.

While Beijing may blunt some of these capabilities, it cannot easily account for the resilience and adaptability of U.S. partnerships. From the global war on terror to Ukraine, allied cooperation has repeatedly demonstrated endurance under pressure. Recent advances with Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Australia point to a widening regional coalition to counter PRC aggression. Beyond the Indo-Pacific, growing European recognition of China's threat adds depth to the Western response.

Finally, successful crisis-response operations demand an exquisite combination of skills, tools, and resources applied consistently across diverse environments. Few militaries can perform at that level worldwide. U.S. Special Operations Forces, however, have more than three decades of experience demonstrating such capabilities for strategic effect—from the adaptations of Operation Gothic Serpent in Mogadishu to the rapid mass evacuations under Operation Allies Refuge in Kabul. Given China's overextended economic footprint and limited ability to defend critical nodes, lines of communication, and global supply routes, the United States and its partners face a "target-rich environment" should deterrence fail and conflict emerge. The United States would do well to publicize its crisis response successes to maximize their strategic impact on adversary decision-making. More importantly, Beijing's leaders would do well to heed the lessons before they experience the consequences of those same capabilities in ways they can ill afford.

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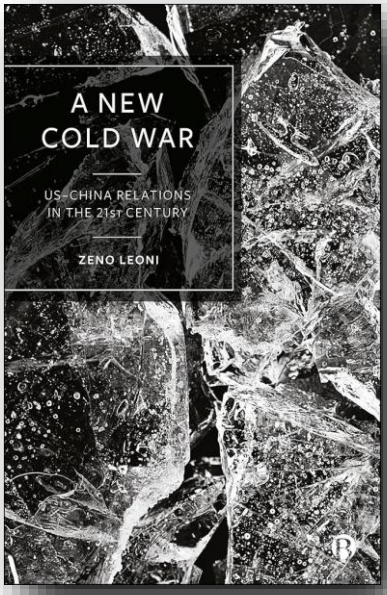
BOOK REVIEW

A New Cold War: U.S.-China Relations in the 21st Century by Zeno Leoni

ISBN: 978-1529227543, Bristol University Press, August 2024, 204 pages, $89.06 (hardcover)

Reviewed by: **Nancy Ramirez**, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA



A New Cold War by Zeno Leoni examines the evolving rivalry between the United States and China by analyzing the political and strategic foundations shaping each country's approach to global power. Leoni highlights how the U.S.–China dynamic has resulted in "coopetition," a term he uses to describe the uneasy blend of cooperation, restraint, and competition. He argues that the relationship has shifted from a "marriage of convenience" to a "new type of cold war." Unlike the Cold War of the 20th century, this new iteration is defined less by direct military confrontation and more by unconventional forms of competition and deterrence, hinting at the potential re-emergence of bloc politics.

The book explores issues such as economic interdependence and its potential to fuel bloc alignments. Leoni's central thesis is that U.S.–China relations have transitioned into a "new type of Cold War," characterized not by open military conflict but by deep economic ties, ideological clashes, and power imbalances.

Leoni begins by deconstructing the notion and historical significance of the Cold War, challenging traditional interpretations. He argues that while certain Cold War features are unique, others are more universal and adaptable to different contexts. This reinterpretation provides a framework for understanding how U.S.–China relations mirror Cold War–style competition without escalating into armed conflict, while still incorporating cooperation and restraint.

By grounding his analysis in international relations theory, Leoni identifies tools for examining a relationship marked by both diplomatic and military tensions. He suggests that under "new type of cold war" conditions, spheres of influence remain highly relevant. Great powers like the U.S. and China attempt to manage contradictions within the liberal international order (LIO) by reshaping the global environment through foreign policy, military strategy, and economic influence—especially as the LIO no longer fully satisfies either side.

Since the end of WWII, the U.S. has been the dominant superpower in what Leoni calls a "global sphere of influence." China's pursuit of modernization dates back to the Opium Wars

but accelerated with Deng Xiaoping's reforms, which eased its integration into the liberal order—though not without compromises to national political structures. Despite significant differences, both superpowers share parallels: each underwent developmental periods marked by internal adjustment while expanding its global reach. The 1972 rapprochement marked a turning point, initiating their "marriage of convenience." Economic interests sustained this arrangement despite deep political suspicions. Yet by the early 21st century, the foundations of this partnership began to erode.

Leoni's research goes beyond economic interdependence, addressing both nations' efforts to reduce it. He notes that Washington's primary aim is safeguarding its economy, but interdependence carries risks for national security, technology, and resource access. While decoupling has become a policy goal, Leoni argues it is unlikely in the near term, reinforcing his thesis of a reluctant but enduring partnership. Doubts about the effectiveness of U.S. initiatives like the Quad and AUKUS further keep the conflict "cold."

Leoni analyzes both powers' push toward decoupling and the risks of separation, while also exploring broader global consequences. He contends that the new Cold War is asymmetric, given China's weaker military power and limited force-projection capabilities compared to the U.S., alongside uncertainties in American alliances.

In the concluding chapter, Leoni forecasts that the U.S.–China "marriage of convenience" may soon collapse into stalemate. He notes that although the Cold War is often said to have ended in 1989, Russia and China's alliances with each other—and ongoing U.S. conflicts with both—suggest continuity rather than closure. Leoni argues that "coopetition" with Russia shows the Cold War never truly ended, and that current tensions with China reflect a continuation of 20th-century rivalries in a new form. He further observes that the global system is shifting away from unipolarity toward a complex mix of bipolar and multipolar dynamics, signaling the possible return of bloc politics.

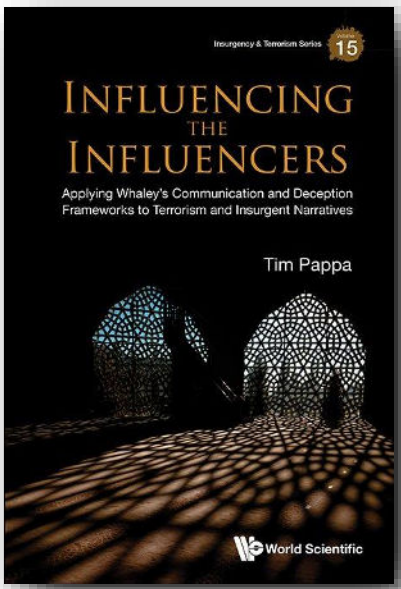
A New Cold War is a necessary read for those seeking to understand the complexities of U.S.–China relations across decades. The book sheds light on the factors and consequences shaping their rivalry within the broader global environment. Leoni contributes meaningfully to the literature by offering a fresh perspective on Cold War dynamics. While the work may be challenging for new readers, seasoned scholars and curious learners alike will find it a valuable addition to their shelves.

BOOK REVIEW

Influencing the Influencers: Applying Whaley's Communication and Deception Frameworks to Terrorism and Insurgent Narratives by Tim Pappa

ISBN: 978-9819811960, World Scientific Publishing, July 2025, 261 pages, $98.00 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by: **Joe Cheravitch**, Verizon – Cyber Threats Intelligence, Alexandria, Virginia, USA



Former FBI officer Tim Pappa's upcoming book, *Influencing the Influencers: Applying Whaley's Deception and Communication Frameworks to Terrorism and Insurgent Narratives*, offers a unique perspective on cross-cultural communication, its relevance to international security, and the legacy of Barton Whaley, a Cold War–era scholar focused on denial and deception. Much of Whaley's research featured in *Influencing the Influencers* was unearthed by Pappa, including materials drawn from restricted archives. Yet the framework guiding this book extends well beyond Whaley, incorporating a multidisciplinary collection of research from anthropology, communications, psychology, and related fields. Pappa applies this framework to his regional and temporal focus: religious educational institutions in Java, Indonesia, in the early to mid-2000s.

As an undergraduate student dissatisfied with widespread mischaracterizations of Islam after September 11, 2001, Pappa traveled to Java to observe religious education and its connections to both progressive and traditional movements. His book is enriched by these personal experiences, which distinguish his work as "autoethnographic." Especially important is the mutual admiration between Pappa and Maman Imamulhaq Faqieh, a progressive leader of a Javanese pesantren. This relationship shapes their cultural perceptions of one another, with Pappa increasingly mirroring Maman's speech and behavior. A memorable anecdote describes visiting a rural home adorned with posters of Osama bin Laden. Far from honoring him, the posters' placement on bathroom doors signaled contempt. Conversely, Pappa recounts encountering a kiosk owner at a Central Java book fair who displayed videos of insurgents killing U.S. soldiers in Iraq—an awkward exchange that left both men "strangely embarrassed" and profoundly affected the author. These experiences sharply contrasted with the typically

isolated presence of U.S. officials in Indonesia, whom Pappa describes as living "in a barbed wire building."

The methodological hybridity of *Influencing the Influencers* is as comprehensive as it is innovative. Pappa rejects the conventional separation of observer and subject in ethnographic fieldwork, retroactively describing his approach as "action ethnography." His aim was not only to debunk misconceptions about Islam but also to ensure his research had practical relevance for U.S. intelligence studies. By openly acknowledging that his field notes were partly shaped with an eye toward intelligence utility, Pappa challenges assumptions about researcher neutrality and embraces a candid, self-aware style of ethnography.

This reflexivity is grounded in a strong command of existing literature. He draws, for example, on anthropologist Barbara Tedlock to illustrate anthropology's broader shift toward recognizing how research experiences affect the researcher—a form of "observation of participation."[1] Similarly, he cites Martyn Hammersley's 2018 argument that shorter, focused studies were increasingly replacing the intensive, years-long ethnographic tradition.[1]

Returning to Whaley, Pappa applies the latter's concept of "key communicators" to Javanese religious education. Both Whaley's research and Pappa's fieldwork underscore the effectiveness of face-to-face engagement over mass media in communities where literacy levels vary and trusted interlocutors remain the most credible source of information. Drawing from one of Whaley's unpublished manuscripts, Pappa also highlights "unexpected players"—third parties with ambiguous or undefined roles—as significant influences on pesantren dynamics. For example, Pappa notes that his public presence alongside Maman may have lent the latter an added measure of authority. He then inductively connects this personal experience as an "unexpected player" to broader questions of public diplomacy and strategic influence.

Influencing the Influencers recalls David B. Edwards' *Caravan of Martyrs* (2017), which examined suicide bombing in Afghanistan through anthropological and socio-cultural lenses. While Edwards explored the role of poetry in Afghan traditions of martyrdom, Pappa focuses on the sermons and lectures delivered by spiritual leaders, or *kyai*, such as Maman. Both works highlight the importance of local cultural expression in shaping extremist and counter-extremist narratives, underscoring the need for more literature employing similar methods in regional security contexts.

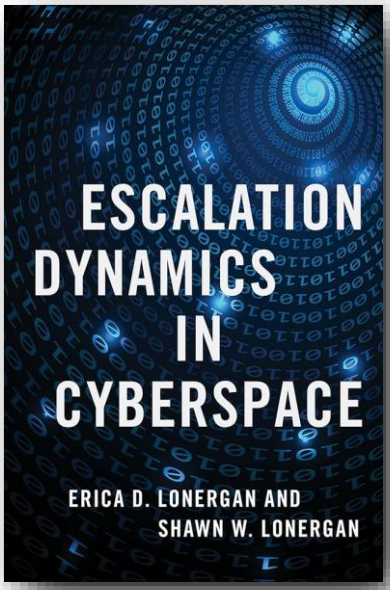
Pappa's book is ambitious in its disciplinary scope, personal engagement, and application of Whaley's frameworks. Its title perhaps understates the breadth of material covered, which ranges from an Indonesian terrorist's online manifesto to observations of pesantren architecture and its influence on openness to outsiders. This integrative quality reflects the author's diverse professional and academic background. While essential reading for specialists on Indonesia, *Influencing the Influencers* has broader relevance for ethnography, political science, and intelligence studies. Even readers with deep experience in cross-cultural engagement will find Pappa's work both valuable and rewarding.

BOOK REVIEW

Escalation Dynamics in Cyberspace by Erica D. Lonergan and Shawn W. Lonergan

ISBN: 978-0197550892, Oxford University Press, 2023, 272 pages, $99.75 (Hardcover), $19.99 (Kindle)

Reviewed by: **Isabelle Hoare**, Northrup Gruman, Melbourne, Florida, USA



Erica D. Lonergan and Shawn W. Lonergan's *Escalation Dynamics in Cyberspace* is a pleasantly digestible work of cyber strategy analysis. At a time when fears of a catastrophic "Cyber 9/11" or "Cyber Pearl Harbor" continue to dominate policy rhetoric and public discourse, the Lonergans offer a refreshing perspective. Their central thesis—that cyber operations rarely lead to escalation—is supported by a robust theoretical framework and extensive case analysis.

Rather than treating cyberspace as a uniquely escalatory domain, the authors demonstrate that cyber operations are often used for signaling, espionage, and crisis management. In fact, they suggest that the very characteristics that limit cyber's strategic impact—such as plausible deniability, technical complexity, and limited destructive potential—also make it a useful tool for de-escalation. This nuanced and data-driven approach makes *Escalation Dynamics in Cyberspace* a critical resource in discussions of cyber conflict and national cyber strategy. The book is not only a must-read for policymakers, scholars, and military professionals, but it also serves as a grounding tool for the cyber alarmist.

The Lonergans' work is distinguished by its clarity and relevance. In contrast to cyber literature that leans on speculative "what if" scenarios, this book anchors its conclusions in extensive empirical data and rigorous case selection. Drawing from hundreds of cyber incidents and 18 geopolitical crises, the authors find consistent evidence that cyber operations between rival states tend to follow a tit-for-tat pattern rather than escalating into open conflict.

At the heart of their argument are four characteristics of cyber operations: their dependence on secrecy and plausible deniability; the technical difficulty of executing strategic-level attacks; the limited and often reversible effects these attacks generate; and the dual-use nature of cyber tools for both espionage and warfare. These features collectively undermine the assumption that cyberspace favors the offense. On the contrary, the authors convincingly show that cyber's strategic logic is defined more by caution and calibration than by risk and aggression.

Perhaps the most compelling contribution of the book is its treatment of cyber operations as instruments of accommodative signaling. In times of crisis, states often face domestic or strategic pressure to do something tangible in response to provocation. Cyber operations—because they can be calibrated, deniable, and non-lethal—offer a uniquely valuable tool to signal resolve without inviting military retaliation. This insight reframes cyberspace not as a destabilizing force but as a pressure valve during international crises.

That is not to say the authors ignore escalation risks. Indeed, one of the strongest sections of the book is its exploration of possible escalation scenarios. The Lonergans are careful to identify rare but dangerous situations, particularly those involving operations targeting military or nuclear command-and-control infrastructure, where cyber actions could cross domains and provoke kinetic conflict. However, even these edge cases are shown to be bounded by significant organizational, strategic, and perceptual constraints. In short, escalation is not impossible, but it is exceptional—and that distinction is critical in understanding conflict in cyberspace.

Another strength of the book lies in its policy relevance. The authors critically engage with U.S. Cyber Command's "defend forward" strategy, raising important questions about the risks of persistent engagement and pre-positioning in adversary networks. Their warning is not alarmist but pragmatic: policymakers must recognize the limits of cyber coercion and invest more in resilience, defense, and clarity in signaling. These recommendations are especially timely given the increasing normalization and integration of offensive cyber operations in national defense strategies.

What sets this book apart is its balance between theory and practice, skepticism and optimism, factual depth and conceptual clarity. The Lonergans are not cyber utopians; they recognize the dangers that cyberspace presents as a new domain of war and conflict. But they refuse to indulge in strategic fatalism. Their central message is that if we better understand the actual dynamics of cyber interaction, we can design smarter, safer strategies for the digital age.

Escalation Dynamics in Cyberspace is an influential work that challenges and refines our understanding of cyber conflict. It systematically dismantles the myth of inevitable escalation and replaces it with a more accurate, more applicable, and more understandable framework for interpreting cyber operations. Some readers may find themselves needing to reread sections to fully appreciate the depth of the argument, especially if they are not well-versed in international security policy. Despite the complexity of some topics, the authors illustrate their perspective eloquently, painting a rich, accessible picture of how cyber operations occur within broader strategic and political contexts.

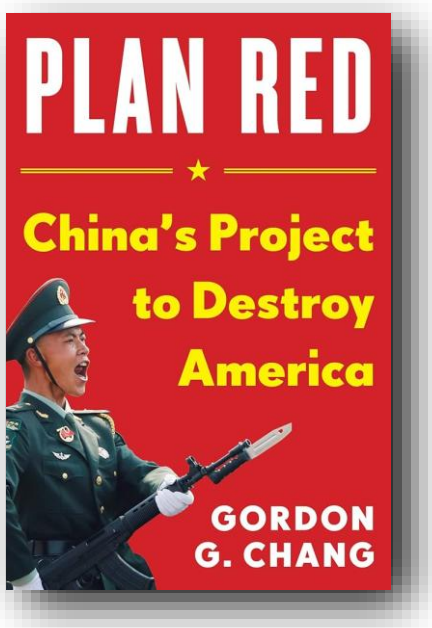
Whether you are a cyber operator, policy analyst, military strategist, academic, or simply interested in cyberspace dynamics, this book will shift the way you think about cyberspace—not as a ticking time bomb, but as a domain of calculated restraint and quiet competition. This text belongs not only on the syllabus of every serious course on cyber strategy and the desks of those shaping tomorrow's doctrine, but also on the shelves of every cyber alarmist who needs a dose of empirically grounded analysis to dial back the panic.

BOOK REVIEW

Plan Red: China's Project to Destroy America by Gordon Chang

ISBN: 978 1630062804, Humanix Books, October 2024, 160 pages, $22.13 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by: **Kevin Johnston**, Old Dominion University, Arlington, VA, US



Gordon Chang's recent book *Plan Red: China's Project to Destroy America* is a call to action for American policymakers to strike the People's Republic of China (PRC) before it can defeat the United States in a military conflict. Chang is a noted scholar of the PRC, with several books and numerous academic articles on the threats China poses to the United States. His writing draws on two decades spent living in mainland China and Hong Kong, where he worked as a lawyer for Baker & McKenzie.

Throughout this short book, Chang outlines the dangers posed by the PRC, how it is already working to undermine American sovereignty and infrastructure, and how these activities could escalate into full-scale war. He concludes with a call for the current administration "to sever virtually all points of contact to the regime" and advocates a strategy of aggressive diplomatic and economic measures to deter PRC aggression.

The book begins by surveying the current threat environment under Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party. Chang highlights how the PRC quietly influences world events—such as the war in Ukraine and Iran's destabilizing actions in the Middle East—and argues that these are not isolated episodes but intersecting operations coordinated by Beijing. China, he claims, acts as "first among equals" within an emerging anti-American bloc. As the foreword states (and correctly spelled "foreword," not "forward"): "There is no such thing as a 'regional' conflict. Because superpower China is fighting either directly or indirectly around the world, every conflict has global implications."

In later chapters, Chang argues that the PRC is eroding American democratic norms by fomenting social-media discord and harming civilians through disease and drugs. By allowing COVID-19 to spread and facilitating the sale of fentanyl in the United States, the PRC is attacking without declaring war or risking its personnel. These actions, he contends, are essential preludes to China's final objective: total war.

The keystone of *Plan Red* is the PRC's alleged desire to launch a war against the United States. Once America is weakened—overextended abroad, destabilized by social-media operations, and harmed through indirect attacks on civilians—the PRC will initiate a full-scale

conflict designed to reorder global power. If these steps unfold as Chang envisions, Chinese victory is all but assured.

Chang's proposed solution is for the United States to recognize the PRC as an immediate threat and pivot its foreign policy accordingly. He advocates a whole-of-nation response that includes expelling Chinese nationals, rejecting Chinese refugees, and severing trade ties with the PRC to undermine its economy. It is an extreme prescription for an extreme problem, but one Chang argues could succeed. Drawing inspiration from the Reagan administration's approach toward the Soviet Union, he claims these policies—combined with the PRC's internal weaknesses—would cause China to collapse from within.

Despite its strong warnings, *Plan Red* overlooks several key PRC vulnerabilities that the United States could exploit in a future conflict. Wide disparities in energy security, alliance structures, and naval power illustrate how uneven the competition between the two countries remains. The PRC imports most of its energy, including large quantities of Australian coal and Middle Eastern petroleum, the latter of which must transit the vulnerable Strait of Hormuz. In wartime, the United States could blockade key chokepoints—such as the Strait of Malacca—cutting China off from critical supplies. By contrast, the United States is a fuel exporter capable of sustaining itself without contested imports.

Chang also neglects the imbalance in alliances. Any future conflict would almost certainly involve partners on both sides. The United States benefits from longstanding alliances through NATO, AUKUS, and its partnerships with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. It is also plausible that unaligned states, including India, would support the United States against an aggressive PRC. By contrast, China's core partners—Russia, North Korea, and Iran—are considerably weaker. Russia is mired in a multi-year war, North Korea's military relies on outdated equipment, and Iran's proxy networks have suffered significant setbacks. While China participates in BRICS, it is a commercial grouping, not a defense alliance.

Chang further overlooks the decisive gap in naval capabilities. The U.S. Navy is a global (blue-water) force capable of projecting power worldwide; its nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and long-range capabilities would give it a substantial edge in open-ocean conflict. China's navy, despite rapid growth, remains largely a coastal (green-water) force with limited ability to threaten the continental United States. If U.S. and allied navies blockaded China's energy lifelines, the PRC would struggle to break the blockade, especially with minimal support from its partners.

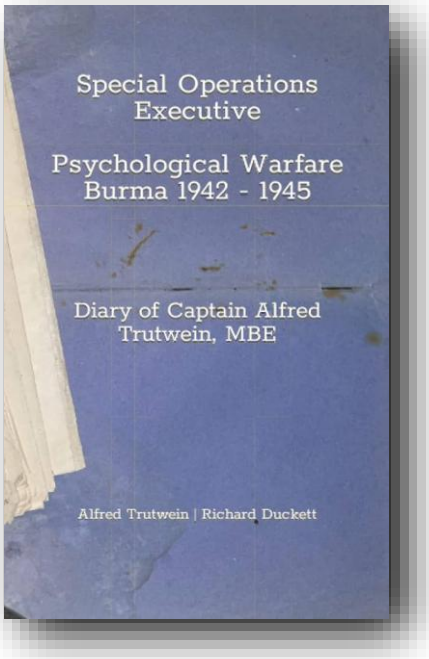
Gordon Chang has written a forceful book highlighting the threats the PRC poses to the United States. Readers seeking to understand the stakes in the Sino-American relationship may find his warnings instructive. He rightly emphasizes China's ambitions and its desire to reshape the global order. But by omitting key Chinese vulnerabilities, *Plan Red* offers an incomplete assessment. A realistic appraisal of the PRC's ability to threaten the United States must consider energy security, alliances, and naval strength. When these factors are weighed, the Chinese threat appears more constrained than Chang suggests. While vigilance toward the PRC is essential, accurate assessments must incorporate these strategic asymmetries.

BOOK REVIEW

Special Operations Executive: Psychological Warfare Burma 1942-1945 by Alfred Trutwein and Richard Duckett

ISBN: 979-8411286298, Self-Published, February 2022, 225 pages, $17.16 (Paperback)

Reviewed by: **Tim Pappa,** Federal Bureau of Investigation (former), Washington, D.C., USA



This rare diary of a psychological warfare officer in World War II conducting influence operations against the Japanese military is an important historical account; however, the lack of firsthand descriptions of how this officer designed psychological warfare campaigns and narrative content is disappointing.

There are some valuable contributions for practitioners, however, such as the work's commentary on leadership personalities and operational constraints throughout the war—factors that may have been the greatest challenge to effective psychological warfare. These lessons are relevant in today's operational and organizational environments.

Richard Duckett, a Burma specialist known for his prior work on the British military intelligence Special Operations Executive (SOE) during World War II in Southeast Asia, provides commentary throughout the independently published diary of Captain Alfred Trutwein. Trutwein was a psychological warfare officer in the SOE who organized influence operations against the Japanese military in Burma and across the region during World War II. Trutwein's grandson began reading through the diary after his grandfather's death, having heard some of the same stories growing up from his father. He never met Trutwein in person and only spoke with him once on the phone as a child. He later connected with Duckett online based on Duckett's research in this same area and their shared family background of fighting in Burma during World War II. Duckett wrote in the preface that he considers this diary important because it establishes the role of the SOE in several conflicts in Burma that have not been previously highlighted in official records or histories of that campaign. Trutwein's unit participated in the Battle of Imphal—considered a turning point in the fighting against the Japanese in Burma—but the unit appears to have been overlooked in official records. Duckett also noted that this diary challenges some of the established narratives of the Japanese fighting in Burma:

Trutwein's unique firsthand experiences highlight how Japanese soldiers were influenced by his unit's propaganda in several instances. Most historical accounts suggest otherwise.

Duckett provides much of the institutional background from referenced military records, such as the development and testing of the newly formed Indian Field Broadcasting Units (IFBU) during early SOE campaigns in Southeast Asia, and Trutwein's initial involvement with these units in combat operations. Duckett noted in the first section that a review of experimental IFBU operations in Burma included the use of loudspeakers to broadcast to Japanese soldiers from approximately 50 to 400 yards. News was broadcast in Urdu and English to Allied military personnel to boost morale. Leaflets were also distributed in Japanese and local Burmese dialects, and markets opened for selling salt and oil to "win over the local population" (p. 57). Duckett added that the military records noted there was "no way of knowing the impact of this work as there were no surrenders or prisoners captured, but neither had there been any military success for the Allies in the offensive," which might have resulted in surrenders or prisoners. Duckett's commentary is useful background information, but practitioners would have benefited more from any explanation by Trutwein of how these broadcasting and leaflet campaigns were designed or what kinds of narratives were crafted into the leaflets distributed to Japanese soldiers. Despite this shortcoming, Duckett does reference a detailed firsthand account of psychological warfare targeting Japanese soldiers—particularly describing how narratives are designed—in *OSS Operational Black Mail: One Woman's Covert War Against the Imperial Japanese Army*.

Not until more than halfway through this work are there any general references to themes or narratives used in the content created, broadcast, or distributed by Trutwein's units. Again, these references are derived from military records that Duckett included in his commentary to contextualize Trutwein's diary notes. Duckett cited a report that highlighted examples of Japanese narrative "impossibles," claims designed to undermine morale, such as broadcasts stating that the Japanese military could not take Burma because Japanese soldiers had failed even to take a small city (p. 142). Historical records also note other broadcast tactics, including highlighting local weather conditions such as coming monsoons and mentioning Western military customs of taking prisoners who want to surrender. These efforts appear to reflect attempts to craft narratives that would resonate with Japanese soldiers fighting there. The tactics also suggest attention to countering Japanese narratives that depicted Western soldiers as cruel and unwilling to take prisoners alive. This same military record noted that when Japanese soldiers at one point did raise a white flag near a bunker, Allied soldiers shot up the flag—an example of the real-world challenges common during combat.

In this same section, a historical military record describes the units placing speakers within 80 yards of a Japanese light machine gun post (p. 143). A Japanese prisoner was given a microphone and encouraged his peers to surrender, including through nostalgic references and assurances that they would not be fired on. These insights are valuable for current practitioners. They demonstrate the use of influence techniques such as scarcity and social proof, incorporate emotional appeals through shared nostalgic memories, and strategically select both the messenger—a fellow Japanese soldier—and the proximity of the broadcast location. This case

serves as a strong example of persuasive communication in a fluid, high-stakes environment. While few such examples exist today, the underlying approach remains effective in online settings as well. Unfortunately, this work does not explicitly provide any of this kind of analysis, and only rare references to this perspective appear in Trutwein's actual diary content.

In the final section of the book, Trutwein provides thorough diary entries related to an operation along a river in Burma that he largely commanded, establishing pop-up markets in more remote but significant regions to sell locals rare goods (p. 149). While this operation was not focused on communication or narrative design, he highlighted how effective providing these services to locals was in generating support for the Allies and in gathering information. This example is important to highlight. Psychological operations should involve more than leaflets and narrative content. In this case, the dynamic approach demonstrates that building goodwill in remote communities can result in increased information collection and actionable intelligence, and may prompt more positive responses from locals when Allied soldiers needed assistance. This is also arguably the most detailed chapter in the work, as Trutwein played a major role in planning and managing the operation.

There are limited works on psychological warfare and influence operations in World War II in South and Southeast Asia, in contrast to better-known British and American military intelligence and deception operations in the European theater. This work contributes to that limited collection, despite offering limited insight into the design and creation of narratives used in broadcasts and leaflets. Few people will have access to the military records Duckett included, and there is limited broader commentary on the actions of these psychological warfare units. The work certainly provides a fuller historical account. However, it would have been improved with Trutwein's commentary on how he responded or adapted to the challenges he faced, but it appears much of his diary focused on personal experiences and sketches of moments during combat and throughout the war. Trutwein also may have kept details limited out of concern that his diary might fall into Japanese hands during the conflict.

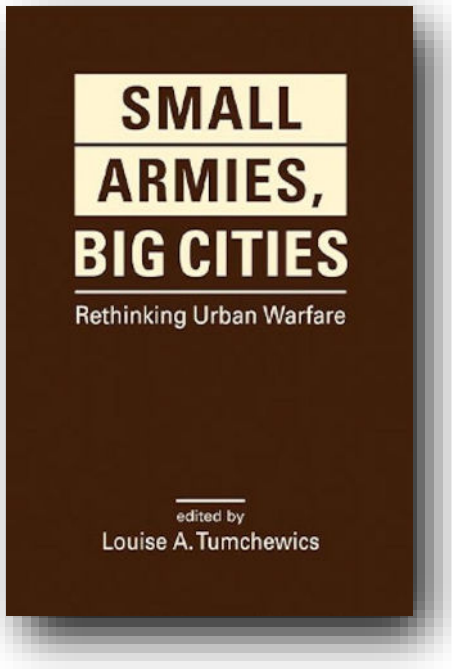
Today's psychological warfare and influence operations practitioners could have benefited from more detailed accounts in Trutwein's diary of how these units designed their narratives and content, rather than the shorthand battle notes that dominate the book. At times these accounts appeared stream-of-consciousness, and the sequence of deploying leaflets seemed to be simply noted rather than explained in terms of behavioral effects on Japanese target audiences. That said, I would recommend this work. There is still value in understanding these historical psychological warfare campaigns—campaigns we are generally less familiar with—and the administrative and personality challenges Trutwein faced in attempting to develop and manage these influence efforts.

BOOK REVIEW

Small Armies, Big Cities: Rethinking Urban Warfare by Louise A. Tumchewics (Ed.)

ISBN: 978-1955055307, Lynne Rienner Publishers, September 2022, 329 pages, $98.50 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by: Dr. José de Arimatéia da Cruz, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, United States



The current conflict between Russia and Ukraine illustrates the likely future of war. Future conflicts are expected to occur in highly urbanized centers—the epicenters of a country's economic and political power—and will involve a combination of symmetric and asymmetric forces seeking to subdue the enemy and destroy its will to fight. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, has stated, "If war is about politics, it is going to be fought where people live. It will be fought, in my opinion, in urban areas."

Louise A. Tumchewicz, in her book *Small Armies, Big Cities: Rethinking Urban Warfare*, examines many issues that future warfighters must consider when operating in big cities with small armies, including drone warfare, surrogate warfare, mass and maneuver, influence operations, and civil-military relations. Tumchewicz, a senior research fellow at the British Army's Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research, aims to illustrate for future warfighters the myriad challenges inherent in urban operations. As she explains, the book's "aim is to inform and stimulate thinking on how small armies have fought in cities, reflecting on the enduring nature and changing character of urban conflict through several case studies."

Tumchewicz agrees with General Milley's assessment that "future conflicts, whether counterinsurgencies, peer confrontations, or near-peer confrontations, are likely to incorporate an urban element." Before proceeding to the book's overall argument, a few operational definitions are in order. First, what constitutes *small*? While the term can mean different things to different people, Tumchewicz operationalizes *small* as both "a division of 10,000 or less" and, more broadly, in terms of an army's "range of capabilities and budget." *Army*, she argues, refers to "an organization armed and trained for war on land, though not specifically the armed force of a nation-state or political party," which allows the book to include experiences of non-state armed groups. Tumchewicz does not fully explain how she arrived at this definition, beyond noting that "small is a relative term, particularly when it comes to armed forces."

Another key characterization of future conflicts is the possibility that they "may not even exist geographically, in deserts, on plains or under jungle canopies, but instead, perhaps, in cyberspace, where its protagonists may not be soldiers but programmers, their weapons viruses and computer code." As Tumchewicz notes, future conflicts will take place primarily within the world's urbanized areas and reflect what Mary Kaldor referred to as "new wars," in which "both conventional forces and irregular combatants, including militias, private security contractors, terrorists, paramilitary groups, warlords, and criminal gangs," operate, and the urban space itself becomes a tool of war. As the urban terrain becomes the dominant battlespace, conflicts in cities increasingly result in *urbicide*—the deliberate and premeditated destruction of an urban area. Its purpose is often to eliminate the vestiges of an ethnic group or to symbolically attack a population's identity. Tumchewicz highlights numerous examples across the 20th and 21st centuries, such as Russia's destruction of Grozny and its ongoing missile and drone attacks against Kyiv.

The implosion of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991, marked not the "end of history" but rather the beginning of a new era in international relations. Tumchewicz argues that the post–Cold War experience demonstrates that urban warfare continues to be shaped by a mixture of historically enduring dynamics and new features driven by technological, political, and social change. The conflict over Donetsk Airport exemplifies this evolving character. While the airport held little strategic value, its symbolism made it worth fighting for. It was "the most important gate into the city," and it was defended by Ukrainian soldiers known as "cyborgs," who became national symbols of resistance. The Ukrainian government later cemented this symbolism by declaring January 16 "Cyborg Commemoration Day" and issuing a commemorative stamp bearing the motto, "They [Cyborgs] withstood, the concrete didn't."

Another important element of future conflict, as illustrated in *Small Armies, Big Cities*, is the necessity of environmental intelligence. Sun Tzu's dictum in *The Art of War*—"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles"—remains relevant. In the Battle of Marawi in the Philippines, Tumchewicz shows how the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) used influence operations to shape public opinion and persuade the local population of the legitimacy of their cause. "Shaping popular perceptions was key to winning the long-term battle for popular support and changing the political will of the larger population." To win the "hearts and minds" of civilians, the AFP had to understand the roots of the conflict and portray the military as "more humane" than the insurgents. Cultural intelligence was therefore a decisive factor.

Marawi also illustrated a grim reality: in future mega-urban battles, the destruction of a city may become imperative to save it. "Destroying a city to save it" may be the new normal of 21st-century conflict. Social media now plays an essential role in legitimizing state violence—or delegitimizing it. Insurgents can weaponize online platforms to portray governments as oppressors. As Steve Tatham argues in Chapter 8, social media should be regarded "primarily as a media channel, as a way of communicating within an already established network or networks… and as a way of encouraging and deepening behaviors and attitudes that are already established."

Small Armies, Big Cities also examines how drones have become integral to future conflict. In Chapter 10, Paul Lushenko and John Hardy address the still-unresolved question of how scholars and practitioners should understand the purpose and disadvantages of urban warfare. The utility of drones as substitutes for military personnel has become the norm among advanced

forces as their troop numbers shrink and they rely increasingly on special operations forces. Lushenko and Hardy define drone warfare as "the use of armed drones in concert with expeditionary forces to achieve military and/or political objectives… across the continuum of competition and conflict."

While drones are not a panacea for future conflicts, they are undeniable force multipliers, especially given the "tyranny of distance" inherent in many theaters. The Russia–Ukraine war illustrates this clearly. When Russian forces suffered heavy casualties in Kyiv, the military turned to drones manufactured in Iran. Scholars have even argued that we are experiencing a revolution in warfare known as "drone-a-rama."

Lushenko and Hardy further show how transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) are adopting drones for illicit purposes, using them to monitor police activities and protect clandestine networks. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, TCOs employ drones to surveil police movements approaching operations in the city's favelas.

In conclusion, *Small Armies, Big Cities* is a vital book that deserves a place on the shelf of every scholar and practitioner of military science, as well as anyone interested in the future of armed conflict. It provides readers—experts and novices alike—with a wealth of insight. Most importantly, the contributing authors recognize that "winning in the cities" is "operational vital ground" and foundational to the nuanced tactical actions required to address local threat environments, urban dynamics, and population perceptions.

The current conflict between Russia and Ukraine illustrates the future of war. Future conflicts are likely to occur in highly urbanized centers, which are the epicenter of a country's economic and political power. It will also be a combination of symmetric and asymmetric forces to subdue the enemy and destroy its will to fight. Former Joint Chief of Staff, General Mark Milley has stated that, "If war is about politics, it is going to be fought where people live. It will be fought in my opinion in urban areas." Louise A. Tumchewics, in her book *Small Armies, Big Cities: Rethinking Urban Warfare,* examines many issues that future warfighters will have to consider when battling in big cities with small armies, such as drone warfare, surrogate warfare, mass and maneuvers, influence operations, and civil-military relations, to name a few. Tumchewics is a senior research fellow at the British Army's Center for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research. Tumchewics' goal with the publication of *Small Armies, Big Cities* is to illustrate to future warfighters the myriad challenges while operating in an urban environment. As Tumchewics explains, the book's "aim is to inform and stimulate thinking on how small armies have fought in cities, reflecting on the enduring nature and changing character of urban conflict through several case studies."

Tumchewics agrees with General Milley's assessment that "future conflicts, whether counterinsurgencies, peer confrontations, or near-peer confrontations, are likely to incorporate an urban element." Before proceeding to discuss the book's overall argument, a few operational definitions are in order. First, what is the definition of small? While small can mean different things to different people, Tumchewics operationalizes small as both "a division of 10,000 or less" and in terms of the army's "range of capabilities and budget." Army, argues Tumchewics, refers to both "an organization armed and trained for war on land, though not specifically the armed force of a nation-state or political party, thus allowing us to explore the experiences of non-state actor groups." Tumchewics does not explain how she arrived at that operational definitino of "small," other than to state that "small is a relative term, particularly when it comes

to armed forces." One characterization of future conflicts is the fact that perhaps "future conflicts may not even exist geographically, in deserts, on plains or under jungle canopies, but instead, perhaps, in cyberspace, where its protagonists may not be soldiers but programmers, their weapons viruses and computer code."[1]

As Tumchewicz points out, future conflicts, which will take place primarily within urbanized areas of the world, are part of what Mary Kaldor referred to as "New Wars." Kaldor and Sassen referred to as the "new wars," where "both conventional forces and irregular combatants, including militias, private security contractors, terrorists, paramilitary groups, warlords, and criminal gangs" strive, and the urban space becomes a new tool in their arsenal for war."[1] As the urban terrain becomes the new war environment, conflicts in the city will lead to urbicide. Urbicide is the deliberate attempt by an enemy armed force to purposefully and premeditatedly destroy an urban area or city. The objective of such an action is the destruction of vestiges of an ethnic group within a geographic location. As Tumchewics points out, urbicide is increasingly identified as a strategy for the political aims of urban wars. In other words, the city is seen as a symbol, and its destruction represents the decline of that symbol. There are numerous examples of urbicide throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. For example, Russia's destruction of Chechnya's capital, Grozny. Or the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces and its continued military and drone attacks against Ukraine's capital, Kyiv.

The implosion of the Union Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) on December 25, 1991, marked not the "end of history," but rather the beginning of a new phenomenon in the history of international relations. Tumchewics argues that the post-Cold War experience demonstrates that urban warfare will continue to be shaped by a mixture of elements that both reflect historical continuity and incorporate new features driven by its dynamics and ever-changing character. The conflict over Donetsk Airport exemplifies the ever-changing nature of conflict characterization in the post-Cold War era. While the airport had no strategic value from a military's objectives, its symbolism was worth fighting for. The airport was "the most important gate into the city," and it was defended by courageous soldiers known as "cyborgs." The "cyborgs" became a national symbol of resistance against the invaders. The conflict over the control of Donetsk Airport was further established as a symbol of the national party by the Ukrainian government on January 16 as "Cyborg Commemoration Day" and the release by the Ukraine Post Office of a collaborative stamp with the motto "They [Cyborgs] withstood, the concrete didn't."

Another important characterization of conflict in the future, illustrated by *Small Armies, Big Cities*, will be the necessity for environmental intelligence writ large. Sun Tzu in his masterpiece *The Art of War* argued that "if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle." In the Battle of Marawi, Philippines, Tumchewics examines how the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) employed influence operations to shape public opinion and persuade the local population of the righteousness of their respective causes. "Shaping popular perceptions was key to winning the long-term battle for popular support and changing the political will of the larger population." To win the "hearts and minds" of the population, the AFP had to understand the underlying causes of the conflict and portray the military as "more humane" than the insurgents. Cultural intelligence was a deciding factor in the AFP's victory over the rebel forces. In addition to cultural intelligence, the Battle of Marawi also established

an unavoidable dictum: to save a city, in future battles of big cities or megacities, the destruction of it must be imperative first. "Destroying a city to save it" is the new normal in the 21st Century. Furthermore, in the conflicts of the 21st Century, social media will play an important role in legitimizing a state's use of force, particularly in the brutality of war, or as an asset to insurgents who will portray the government as the enemy of the people, thus questioning the utility of force. Social media is the key to future influence. In chapter 8 "Influence Operations," Steve Tatham argues that "social media should be regarded primarily as a media channel, as a way of communicating within an already established network or networks, as a near real-time sensor-to-sensor network, and as a way to encouraging and deepening behaviors and attitudes that are already established."

Tumchewics' *Small Armies, Big Cities* also addresses how drones have become an integral part of future conflicts. In Chapter 10, Paul Lushenko and John Hardy address the still-unsolved question of how scholars and practitioners should best understand the purpose of urban warfare and its disadvantages. The utility of drones as a surrogate for the use of military personnel has become the norm among advanced military forces as armed forces worldwide shrink in size and rely heavily on special operation forces. Lushenko and Herdy operationalize drone warfare as "the use of armed drones in concern with expeditionary forces to achieve military and/or political objectives, limited or maximal, across the continuum of competition and in conflict." While the utility of drones as a weapon of choice in small wars, big cities is not a panacea to future conflicts; it will certainly be a force multiplier given the "tyranny of distance" involved in many conflicts. Again, the Russian-Ukraine conflict clearly illustrates the utility of drones as a force multiplier. When the Russian army forces began to suffer significant casualties in the conflict in Kyiv, the Russian military began to deploy drones manufactured in Iran. The use of drones as an alternative to the use of military personnel has led scholars to claim that we are experiencing a revolution in military known as "drone-a-rama." Lushenko and Hardy also illustrated how transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) are also using drones in their nefarious activities, including clandestine networks relying on social networks to manage their security-to-efficiency trade off, which is essential to avoid operation detection or monitoring by the police.[1] TCOs in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, are using drones to monitor police activities as they approach areas of operation in Rio's notorious shantytowns.[1]

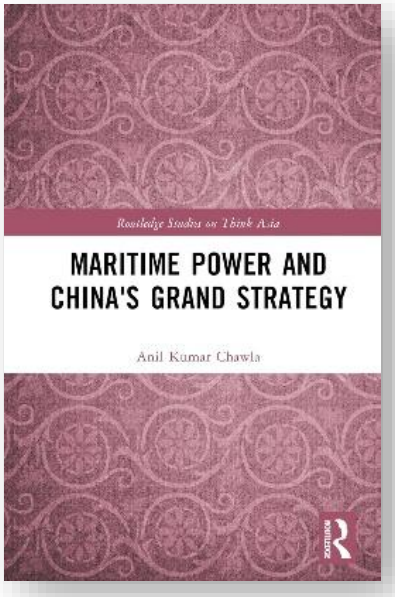
In conclusion, *Small Armies, Big Cities* is a vital book that should be on the bookshelf of every scholar or practitioner of military science, as well as anyone with an interest in the future of armed conflicts. The book provides both experts and novices in the field with an abundance of information. But most importantly, the contributing authors of this anthology recognize that "winning in the cities" is "operational vital ground and sets the conditions for a range of nuanced tactical military actions suited to the local threat situation, urban environment and population dynamics, aspirations, and perceptions."

BOOK REVIEW

Maritime Power and China's Grand Strategy by Anil Kumar Chawla

ISBN: 9781003497875, Routledge, 2024, 216 pages, $170.00

Reviewed by: Chase L. Plante, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA



Maritime Power and China's Grand Strategy traces the historical development of Chinese grand strategy and discusses its various present-day aspects, especially pertaining to maritime power. Its author, Vice Admiral Anil Kumar Chawla, is a retired officer of the Indian Navy, which shapes the form and direction of the book; its prose is straightforward, direct, and concise, and it assumes that China's grand strategy is to become the world hegemon, presenting a strategic threat. The book's central thesis is that maritime power plays into this grand strategy. The utility of the book is less its core thesis and more its analysis of how and why China is using maritime power in its grand strategy.

Chawla begins the book with an overview of Chinese maritime history. He describes how historically China has largely been a continental land empire. However, conquerors of China (including Chinese ones) often developed navies to assist with their conquest and then ended the navies after their accession. Otherwise, China has historically largely avoided direct naval and maritime engagement, a tendency Chawla attributes to Confucian philosophy, which encouraged leaders to focus inward. Effectively, the modern Chinese naval tradition is quite young. The historical Chinese focus on land over sea ultimately proved to be an Achilles' heel for China from the Opium War onwards. Perhaps unwittingly following in the footsteps of prior Chinese conquerors, Western powers and Japan were able to consistently exploit China's lack of naval power, contributing to what became known as the "Century of Humiliation."

The book describes how the trauma of China's Century of Humiliation has deeply affected Chinese leaders, who have realized China's maritime vulnerability while also witnessing the naval hegemonies of Britain and the United States. China has thus learned that it needs maritime power to both ensure its national security and to realize its goal of global hegemony. In the wake of this understanding, China has embarked on a quest to build a powerful, globally competitive navy, which plays a key role in its grand strategy.

Indeed, Chawla notes that China's use of maritime power in its grand strategy bears striking similarities to that of the British Empire, likely learned from historical reflection although adapted to modern contexts. For example, like the British Empire of yore, China has used its influence (notably via the Belt and Road Initiative and debt financing) to acquire considerable

power over ports "located in strategic proximity to vital sea lanes and maritime chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific [that] do not appear to be driven by commercial logic" (195).

This is a remarkable observation that opens an important avenue for future research on Chinese strategy. By examining the British Empire's maritime strategy, such as how it strategically acquired port control, scholars may gain insight into China's current behavior and anticipate its future actions. Historical parallels can help identify patterns in China's approach to grand strategy.

The book goes on to describe the evolution of Chinese maritime and grand strategy generally from a variety of angles, such as "Defence White Papers," "informationised warfare," and the famed Belt and Road Initiative. It discusses how maritime power integrates with China's grand strategy, such as in the maintenance of overseas military bases, which China has been recently developing as it seeks to take a more central role in world politics. While the book formally focuses on Chinese maritime power, even in chapters ostensibly about maritime elements, it generally serves as a strong overview of Chinese grand strategy.

The book's methodology utilizes general historical research to trace the Chinese narrative. Its construction of Chinese grand strategy derives from various political and military documents from the Chinese government, including Defence White Papers, Party Congress Reports, and proclamations about the Chinese Dream. Chawla uses specific case studies, including China's recent rise in the South China Sea and the Belt and Road Initiative, to explore how maritime power has integrated with Chinese grand strategy as well as Chinese governmental investment in its maritime sector, such as rising naval shipbuilding.

While Chawla's monograph is overall a solid description of how maritime power integrates with Chinese grand strategy, the book does have several weaknesses, some of which seem to reflect his orientation as an Indian military officer. To begin, Chawla summarizes Chinese grand strategy, but he does not critically appraise it. Its strengths and weaknesses remain mysterious to an uninformed reader. There is, perhaps, the implication that because Chinese grand strategy has been effective thus far in achieving China's rise, it will continue to be. This is uncertain, however, and Chawla does not discuss this. Although Chawla, as a member of the Indian military, appears opposed to China's rise, he nonetheless assumes that China is capable of achieving its strategic goals.

The book also suffers from numerous presumptions. To begin, Chawla writes in the preface that "China has a master plan to dominate the world" (vi), which he associates with the idea of the "Chinese Dream." While he describes this dream as global hegemony by 2049, scholars dispute its exact concepts beyond it being a national "rejuvenation." While scholars have debated China's global ambitions, Chawla expresses a very singular understanding, and his book does not offer discussion of ambiguity.

Similarly, Chawla seems to take the United States' decline and departure from global leadership as a foregone conclusion. For example, he cites the policies of American President Donald Trump as evidence of the United States lacking "the political will to retain global leadership" (175). However, Trump is an extremely controversial figure within domestic American politics and thus can hardly be stated to be representative of American political will generally.

Additionally, Chawla generally treats states as unitary actors. China appears in the book as scarily coordinated: it simply creates grand plans and then realizes them over decades with total efficiency. This deserves scrutiny, as it ignores internal divisions within China and Chinese

leadership, as well as the flaws and weaknesses in the processes of these plans. While the book's scope must be manageable, a counter–grand strategy would surely wish to know these divisions and flaws.

This sort of simplistic approach also pervades Chawla's discussion of the peculiarities of Chinese approaches to international politics. Chawla describes the core of the Chinese style of international relations as deriving from Confucianism. He repeatedly references it as a major explanatory variable. For example, he describes imperial China's continual relinquishment of its navy after a new conquering accession as resulting from the "inward" focus of Confucian philosophy. While this is culturally simplistic and questionable, it is also curious. The first Chinese imperial dynasty, the Qin, was far more influenced by Chinese Legalism than Confucianism, and Legalism remained an influential political philosophy throughout imperial Chinese history—something he acknowledges but does not fully incorporate. Chawla, in fact, ascribes far more influence to Confucianism than Legalism. Additionally, a traditional structural realist approach can easily provide an explanation for the example of relinquishing the navy: if there are no maritime threats, then it is a waste of resources to maintain a navy. Those resources could be better allocated elsewhere to ensure military success and state survival. China's alleged historical "inward-looking" attitude could also be explained by factors like geography, rather than the influence of a particular philosophy. Using such an incomplete cultural argument here seems strange.

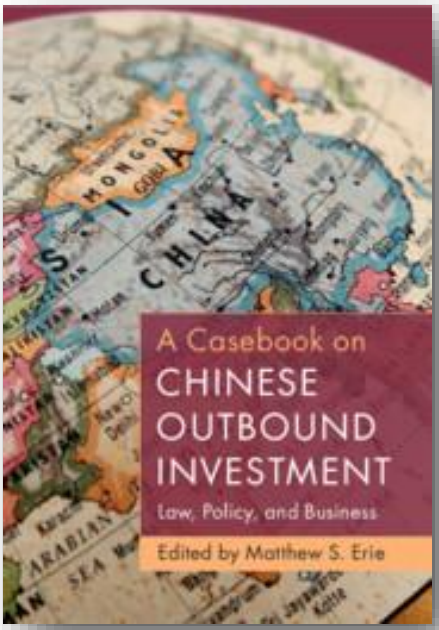
While I present numerous critiques of Chawla's work, his book does well what it primarily sets out to do. It successfully describes Chinese grand strategy and maritime strategy, and it successfully describes how they integrate. While it does not provide revolutionary insights, it is a very useful and practical guide for students of China and international relations.

BOOK REVIEW

A Casebook on Chinese Outbound Investment: Law, Policy, and Business edited by Matthew S. Erie

ISBN: 978-1009457811, Cambridge University Press, March 2025, 356 pages, $35.99 (Paperback)

Reviewed by: **Ian Murphy,** SecuriFense Inc., Hendersonville, Tennessee, USA



The release of Matthew S. Erie's edited volume, *A Casebook on Chinese Outbound Investment: Law, Policy, and Business*, coincides with the wider debate on the security challenges and economic opportunities posed by Chinese investment abroad. Published by Cambridge University Press in 2025, this collection of fifteen meticulously researched case studies offers a fact-based examination of Chinese overseas direct investment, filling a critical knowledge gap in accessible, reliable information on Chinese investment strategies. For scholars, policymakers, and practitioners engaged in irregular warfare and special operations, the book provides vital insights into the nature of China's global economic footprint, revealing its strategic implications beyond traditional commercial analyses.

Dr. Matthew Erie is an associate professor at the University of Oxford with a background in law and anthropology, and with extensive experience living and teaching abroad. His volume on Chinese outbound investment (ODI) directly confronts the "paucity of reliable sources" on Chinese corporate decision-making and the socioeconomic effects of its projects abroad. The case studies, predominantly authored by experts with firsthand knowledge and often from the host states themselves, are grounded in primary source material, largely stemming from transactional documents, stakeholder interviews, laws and regulations, and case decisions. This methodological rigor ensures a fact-based and neutral perspective, which provides readers with a refreshing account of Chinese investment in contrast to the often ideologically charged narratives surrounding China's global involvement.

The book is structured into six thematic sections—Corporations, Compliance, Infrastructure, Labor, Finance, and Disputing—collectively tracing the "lifespan of Chinese ODI, from market entry to resolving disputes." Erie's comprehensive introduction effectively frames the complex landscape of Chinese ODI, addressing fundamental questions: the nature of Chinese companies (private vs. state-owned enterprises), China's international investment

strategies (including the "going out" policy and the Belt and Road Initiative), trends in Chinese ODI, the relationship between Chinese ODI and the Party-State, and the diverse effects of Chinese investment in host states.

One of the book's most significant contributions lies in its nuanced deconstruction of the "China Inc." phenomenon. While acknowledging the pervasive influence of the Party-State, the case studies consistently demonstrate that the relationship between Chinese firms and the Chinese Communist Party is complicated and ad hoc, varying significantly based on the transaction, firm type, investment size, destination, industry, and bilateral relations. This disaggregation is crucial for understanding that Chinese firms are not monolithic instruments of statecraft but rather adaptive entities navigating diverse and often challenging regulatory environments. For instance, the book highlights how even state-owned enterprises, traditionally seen as direct extensions of state policy, can exhibit "creativity between Chinese representatives and local counterparties on the ground," as seen in AVIC INTL's innovative corporate social responsibility initiatives in Kenya.

A Casebook on Chinese Outbound Investment is highly relevant for those concerned with irregular warfare and special operations. Chinese ODI, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative, often involves critical infrastructure projects that can reshape regional power dynamics, influence local governance, and create dependencies. The case studies illustrate these subtle yet impactful shifts. For example, the Colombo Port City Project in Sri Lanka (Case Study 3.1) underscores the "geopolitics of the day and dynamics between transnational discourse on human rights and investment." It reveals how a Belt and Road project can become deeply entangled with a host state's domestic politics, constitutional governance, and even national security concerns, particularly when regulatory carve-outs or opaque contractual terms are involved. Such projects, while ostensibly commercial, can have profound strategic implications, affecting maritime access, economic leverage, and regional alignment.

Furthermore, the book offers insights into the social and labor dimensions of Chinese ODI, which are often overlooked in high-level strategic assessments. The case studies on forced labor at the Imperial Pacific Casino Project in Saipan (Case Study 4.1) and labor disputes in Kyrgyzstan's gold mining sector (Case Study 4.2) expose the darker side of China's global expansion. These accounts, drawing on direct legal representation and on-the-ground interviews, reveal patterns of non-compliance with local labor laws, non-transparent hiring practices, and the vulnerability of migrant workers in Chinese ODI projects. Understanding these local grievances and the civil society responses they provoke is essential for anticipating potential flashpoints and assessing the true human terrain of Chinese influence. The book demonstrates how local resistance, media attention, and legal actions can exert significant pressure on Chinese firms and even influence home- and host-state policies.

The section on finance is equally relevant, particularly the examination of foreign debt restructuring in Zambia (Case Study 5.1). As China has emerged as the world's largest creditor, its lending practices and approach to debt renegotiation have become subjects of intense international debate, including allegations of "debt-trap diplomacy." The case study, drawing on data from the Paris Club, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund, provides an assessment of China's bilateral approach to debt restructuring and contrasts it with multilateral frameworks. This analysis is crucial for understanding the financial leverage that China can exert and the potential for economic instability in debtor nations, which can, in turn, create environments ripe for various forms of irregular activity.

Finally, the "Disputing" section offers a unique look into how conflicts arising from Chinese ODI are resolved. The case of *Zhongshan Fucheng Industrial Investment Co. Ltd. v. Federal Republic of Nigeria* (Case Study 6.3) is the first investment treaty arbitration won by a mainland Chinese investor against an African state. This case highlights the increasing willingness of Chinese firms to utilize international legal mechanisms to protect their interests. This signals a growing sophistication in Chinese corporate engagement abroad and underscores the importance of understanding the international legal architecture governing these investments. The Micron versus UMC and Fujian Jinhua case (Case Study 6.2) further illustrates the complexity of intellectual property disputes in critical technology sectors, revealing the relationship between state-directed industrial goals, commercial norms, and national security.

A Casebook on Chinese Outbound Investment is more than an academic text; rather, it is a vital intelligence brief for anyone seeking to comprehend how Chinese economic power is shaping the international system. Its rigorous methodology, diverse case studies, and emphasis on both macro-level trends and micro-level realities on the ground make it an invaluable resource. For the *Inter Populum* readership, the book offers a compelling argument that understanding China's ODI is not merely an economic exercise but a critical dimension of contemporary irregular warfare, demanding a holistic appreciation of legal, policy, business, and social dynamics. It equips readers to better understand China's global reach and its implications for international security.