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Inter Populum

The Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations

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Arizona State University

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Proxy Battlespaces: A New Perspective on Ukraine's Use of Special Operations Forces in Syria, Sudan, and Mali

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ABSTRACT
This article introduces the concept of proxy battlespaces to explain Ukraine's deployment of Special Operations Forces (SOF) in Sudan, Syria, and Mali. At a time when Ukraine faces immense pressure from Russia's full-scale invasion, committing specialized forces in Africa and the Middle East seems paradoxical. The current literature lacks sufficient explanations to explain this new phenomenon in special operations, and as such, we introduce the concept of "proxy battlespaces" to aid understanding. Proxy battlespaces consist of three key tenets: (1) an area of operations outside the main theatre, (2) special operations characteristics, and (3) support for the main campaign. By analyzing the three cases through this concept, the article demonstrates how Ukraine leverages global Russian vulnerabilities to impose strategic dilemmas, even while under pressure. Finally, the study offers a doctrinal suggestion: adopting the term Out-of-Theatre Operations (OTO) to help planners and practitioners navigate the complex reality of modern warfare.

KEYWORDS
proxy battlespaces; Ukraine; proxy warfare; Wagner Group; Ukraine; Africa

Introduction

"A year ago, I personally openly said that all Russian war criminals who fought, are fighting, or plan to fight against Ukraine will be punished anywhere in the world. As for confirming or denying the information in CNN reports, I have nothing to say here, without comment. Let everyone find answers on their own." So said Kyrylo Budanov, Chief of the Main Intelligence Directorate (HUR) of Ukraine, in September 2023, when addressing recent rumors about Ukrainian Special Operations Forces (SOF) conducting military actions in Sudan."[1]Since then, multiple news outlets—from Ukrainian, Western, and Russian sources alike—have reported on Ukrainian forces aiding in strikes against Russian assets in Mali, Sudan, and Syria.

Despite facing a full-scale invasion from a stronger adversary in Russia, Ukraine continues to target Russian military interests beyond its borders. These actions diverge from traditional

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proxy wars, which typically involve local proxies in third-party states. Instead, it appears that Ukrainian operators are directly involved, creating what resembles a proxy battlespace rather than a proxy war.

Since the full-scale invasion began in February 2022, Ukraine has lost a significant number of soldiers and expended a great deal of materiel, once again highlighting the importance of mass in modern warfare.[2] With this in mind, why does Ukraine deploy its specialized troops for combat outside the main battlespace instead of focusing on targets directly within it? Indeed, it seems paradoxical that a state fighting an existential war against its neighbor would dedicate valuable resources to distant theatres. This article resolves this apparent paradox by providing a novel theoretical perspective on the unexpected benefits of creating proxy battlespaces (i.e., expanding a theatre of operations to a non-contiguous space outside the sovereign territory of the primary combatants).

The war in Ukraine is of broad interest to military thinkers around the world, both scholars and practitioners alike, largely because it showcases the evolution of large-scale warfare.[3] Notably, the Ukrainian conflict challenges current Western doctrine in multiple areas, necessitating not only increased sustainability and mass, but also flexibility and adaptability to new battlefield challenges.[4]

Perhaps most significantly, the deployment of Ukrainian SOF in Sudan, Syria, and Mali demonstrates an approach to the use of special forces that is not aligned with standard Western operations planning doctrine or special forces doctrine, as will be demonstrated in this paper. In current operations planning doctrine, planning occurs within the main theatre, designated as the "Joint Operations Area" (JOA), and the battlespace geometry is defined through an Area of Intelligence Interest (AII) for areas connected to the main theatre of operations.[5] In the case of the ongoing war, this would be limited to the territories of Ukraine and Russia. Over the past decade, there has been a shift in what is tolerated under the label of hybrid warfare and covert activities. The international security environment has become more permissive of such hybrid activities. While illegal under international law, conducting operations outside the primary theatre should still be accounted for for various reasons. While some would argue that feasibility should weigh more heavily than legality when designing such operations—as could be argued in a war of survival, such as Ukraine's—even NATO countries within a powerful alliance will have to assess these developments in warfare and adapt for future survival. While NATO states may not be willing to violate international law, they can nonetheless be transparent about planning processes and acknowledge that certain intelligence interests exist beyond legally defined battlespaces. As such, Western doctrine will need to reflect these developments so that it can serve as a tool for already occurring practices rather than remaining confined to legal debate. We do not seek to pass judgment on the legality of these activities, nor to prove their military effectiveness, but rather to highlight their newly identified existence in order to address potential doctrinal complications and shortcomings in modern operational planning processes.

By attempting to answer these questions, the paper makes two key contributions. First, it builds upon existing literature by developing a new concept—*proxy battlespaces*—drawing on previous academic work, initial reporting, and the identified rationale behind documented strikes. We then apply this concept to three case studies, namely Ukrainian special operations in Syria, Mali, and Sudan, linking these operations to the overall war effort in Ukraine's primary theatre of conflict. Notably, it is not our intention to develop a concept solely for Ukrainian

SOF. While we recognize cultural differences between SOF units across countries, the concept is intended to be applicable to broader and more generalizable tenets of special operations akin to those demonstrated in the cases examined.

The second contribution is to the military literature, as the concept and analysis highlight the absence of an appropriate doctrinal term in current NATO doctrine, particularly within operational planning, to fully capture the phenomenon observed in these cases. As such, the paper advocates for the adoption of a new doctrinal term, *Out-of-Theatre Operations* (OTO), within operations planning doctrine, in order to help NATO planners more effectively navigate the complexities of modern military operations.

Literature Review

This section first examines the literature on theories of proxy and hybrid warfare to demonstrate how existing theoretical frameworks fail to fully explain the unique cases of Ukraine's actions in Sudan, Mali, and Syria. It then reviews the limited literature currently available on these cases.

Multiple opinion pieces and news articles have described these events as a form of "proxy warfare."[6] Proxy warfare as an academic field appears under a variety of guises. As Tyrone Groh notes, the literature is "overused and unspecified, and lacks a sharp definition of what it is, as well as when and how it works."[7] However, synthesizing some of the most influential theories on the topic allows shared characteristics to emerge. Groh defines proxy wars as "directing the use of force by a politically motivated, local actor to influence political affairs in the target state indirectly."[8] This resembles the definition offered by Andrew Mumford, who defines proxy wars as "conflicts in which a third party intervenes indirectly to influence the strategic outcome in favor of its preferred faction." [9] Mumford further explains that proxy wars are used because they are "the logical replacement for states seeking to further their own strategic goals yet at the same time avoid engaging in direct, costly, and bloody warfare."[10]

Both definitions of proxy warfare rely on the use of a local third party as a proxy, enabling plausible deniability and conflict management without direct engagement. However, these definitions do not adequately apply to the Ukraine–Russia context for two reasons. First, Ukraine and Russia are already engaged in direct conflict, rendering escalation management through deniability largely irrelevant. Second, Ukraine is reportedly targeting locations using its own operators rather than relying solely on local proxies.

Another definition comes from Karl Deutsch, who described proxy wars as "an international conflict between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of a third country, disguised as a conflict over an internal issue of that country; and using some of that country's manpower, resources, and territory as a means for achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies."[11] While Deutsch's definition aligns more closely with the surface dynamics of the situations in Syria, Sudan, and Mali, it still fails to fully capture their complexity, as Ukraine is reportedly conducting operations with its own personnel and without extensive concealment.

In parallel, the literature on hybrid warfare has expanded significantly over the past decade, reflecting its growing relevance to international security. Hybrid warfare is characterized by an asymmetrical approach in which aggressors employ a combination of unconventional tactics to exploit the vulnerabilities of stronger opponents.[12] It combines military and non-military means—including cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic pressure—to

achieve strategic objectives without direct military confrontation.[13] Hybrid warfare seeks to degrade an adversary by undermining social cohesion, employing soft power, and strategic organization to shape public perception. Operating within the cognitive domain, this form of social engineering can produce long-term destabilization by reshaping values and meanings within the target population.[14]

The concept of hybrid warfare has received particular attention in relation to Russian military doctrine and strategy. Since 2008, it has functioned as both a theoretical and practical framework shaping Russian academic, political, and military thinking.[15] Russia's annexation of Crimea and its actions in eastern Ukraine exemplify this approach, combining military force with political manipulation and information operations to achieve objectives while limiting international military responses. This model has since informed other malign actors seeking to pursue strategic goals without directly confronting Western military power.[16]

The international community's failure to respond decisively to Russia's annexation—driven largely by fears of escalation—ultimately benefited Russia. Russia committed a clear act of war by invading a sovereign state, in violation of international law and established norms, yet faced no meaningful consequences. This outcome illustrates how hybrid warfare has helped normalize the conventional use of military force within an increasingly permissive international system. In summary, hybrid warfare theory helps explain how this permissive environment emerged, beginning with information and cyber operations that went unpunished under the logic of de-escalation and culminating in overt military action that similarly avoided retaliation. However, hybrid warfare theory has limitations and does not adequately address challenges related to campaign-level doctrine. This paper introduces the concept of proxy battlespaces, recognizing the role of hybrid warfare in creating conditions that necessitate new approaches to operational and campaign planning.

Due to the recency of the cases, the available literature remains limited. Most reporting on the emergence of proxy battlespaces comes from popular media sources—Western, Ukrainian, and Russian alike—which often lack analytical depth. One exception is a March 2024 article by Lovett, Nikolaienko, and Bariyo in *The Wall Street Journal*, which includes interviews with alleged Ukrainian special operators. While not grounded in a specific theoretical framework, the article provides insight into the operators' stated motivations and strategic logic.

In November 2024, Andrew McGregor published an online piece examining targeting in the Sahel, with references to Syria and Sudan. In March 2025, Robert Kremzner wrote in *Small Wars Journal* on the utility of Ukrainian SOF, briefly suggesting that deployments in Mali and Syria should be reduced or eliminated due to perceived ineffectiveness.

On July 2, 2025, David Kirichenko published an article in *Lawfare* analyzing Ukraine's diplomatic and military approaches to challenging Russian influence in Africa and the Middle East through the lens of strategic gain.

James Horncastle has addressed Ukrainian SOF operations on two occasions. In an August 2024 article for *The Conversation*, he highlighted their role in the broader war against Russia and the morale effects of operations in Africa. This analysis was expanded in his July 3, 2025 article, "Seeking Advantages Abroad: Ukrainian SOF in Africa," published in *Comparative Strategy*, where he argues that Ukraine's use of SOF in Africa is intended to generate strategic effects aligned with political objectives, particularly in Mali and Sudan, though not Syria.

The growing number of publications reflects increasing scholarly and policy interest in this topic, particularly the work of Kirichenko and Horncastle, which offers valuable insights into

legal frameworks and the unique historical contexts of these cases. However, much of the existing literature lacks comprehensive case coverage and does not fully articulate the distinct operational value of special operations conducted outside primary theaters of conflict. This gap creates space for a new perspective that explains the commonalities across cases and clarifies the strategic utility of Ukrainian special operations in Africa and the Middle East.

Proxy Battlespaces: A Conceptual Framework

Since the initial observations of Ukrainian military activities in Mali, Sudan, and Syria do not fit existing theoretical frameworks, this section develops a new conceptual framework termed "proxy battlespaces." From the initial observations, at least two common factors emerge across all cases. First, these activities take place outside the main battlespace in Ukraine. Second, both academic literature and popular media characterize them as "special operations." While the first factor may appear self-explanatory—given that the fighting is occurring in Africa and the Middle East rather than Eastern Ukraine—understanding how military operations are shaped and constrained by spatial distinctions requires clarification of what constitutes a "battlespace." Similarly, there must be an understanding of what defines a special operation. Finally, it is necessary to examine a third factor: the shared relationship between these special operations conducted in foreign theaters and the broader war campaign.

Beginning with the term "battlespace," NATO defines it as "the part of the operating environment where actions and activities are planned and conducted" (see Table 2). Within military doctrine, the concept of battlespace encompasses all physical and non-physical domains within the Joint Operations Area (JOA). The JOA is a defined region in which a commander directs military operations and activities to achieve specified missions. For non-military readers, the JOA represents where conventional military operations occur—the main theater of war—where the most intense fighting typically takes place across land, air, and maritime domains. In the case of Ukraine, the JOA encompasses Ukrainian territory and parts of Russia (see Table 2).

Doctrinally, the JOA in a conflict of this nature would not include Africa or Syria; therefore, these regions cannot be considered part of the main battlespace within either the JOA or the Area of Operations (AoO). Nor would they be classified as the "deep area," as they are not geographically proximate to the JOA. Even the operational or extended deep area remains linked to the primary JOA and its associated area of interest (see Table 2).

Understanding the distinction between what constitutes the main battlespace and what does not is critical, as it directly influences the types of operations conducted. Conventional military operations are typically confined to the main battlespace, whereas the deep or extended deep areas are more commonly associated with special operations.

The second factor concerns special operations. According to the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), special operations are "operations requiring unique modes of employment, tactics, techniques, procedures, and equipment. These operations are often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically and diplomatically sensitive environments. They are characterized by one or more of the following: time sensitivity; a clandestine or covert nature; low visibility; collaboration with or support from indigenous forces; a greater need for regional knowledge and cultural expertise; and a higher degree of risk."[17]

While this doctrinal definition clarifies what constitutes a special operation, Tom Searle provides an additional conceptual explanation in his 2017 paper "Outside the Box." Searle

conceptualizes military activity as a circle encompassing a box: the circle represents all military activity, while the box represents conventional operations. Activities outside the box are therefore considered "unconventional" and categorized as special operations.[18] Searle's framework is useful for defining special operations, but it is limited in explaining why a state under pressure—such as Ukraine—would employ special operations outside the main battlespace. This limitation is expected, as the framework was not designed to address this question.

To understand the "why," it is necessary to examine the third factor: the relationship between special operations and the broader military campaign. One way to conceptualize this relationship is through the lens of attritional warfare. During World War II, special operations were generally viewed as supporting the primary campaign. Although these operations often occurred deep within the Joint Operations Area, their purpose was to reinforce the main efforts of conventional forces. Attritional warfare seeks to defeat an adversary by gradually degrading its capabilities and morale through sustained losses, ultimately forcing capitulation or collapse. This framework has been widely used to analyze the evolution of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine.[19]

Special operations can significantly support conventional forces in prolonged campaigns by contributing to attritional effects. Their primary purpose is to enhance overall strategic performance, either directly or indirectly supporting conventional forces. As James Kiras argues, special operations are particularly effective in attritional warfare for several reasons.[20] First, they can increase friction for adversaries by disrupting critical supplies or communications. Second, they can induce shock and moral degradation among enemy forces by creating persistent uncertainty, destroying resources, or fostering fear through raids and targeted actions. Third, they can create strategic freedom of maneuver—and temporary operational breathing space—by disrupting the enemy's initiative and slowing its operational tempo. Ultimately, the use of special operations is intended to support the main campaign by amplifying attrition and friction. In this role, special operations function as a force multiplier for conventional military forces.

Proposed Principles of Proxy Battlespaces

Distilling this down allows us to identify the defining characteristics of a proxy battlespace through three key tenets:

1. A proxy battlespace is a transnational area of operations located outside the main theater of operations.
2. It possesses the characteristics of a special operation.
3. It supports the campaign in the main theater.

First, a proxy battlespace exists in a transnational area of operations that is physically disconnected from the primary theater of operations. Second, it must exhibit the defining characteristics of special operations. For the purposes of later analysis, this article relies on doctrinal definitions to determine whether an activity qualifies as a special operation, including a higher degree of risk, unique modes of employment or tactics, and execution in hostile, denied, and/or politically sensitive environments. Third, a proxy battlespace must support the primary campaign through military activities that either impose attrition or contribute to

achieving the actor's broader military objectives. The underlying motivation is to generate effects and create dilemmas, for example, by inflicting attrition and friction on an adversary or by striking key sources of power, such as economic, diplomatic, or military resources.

The concept of proxy battlespaces is distinct from the literature on proxy wars for two primary reasons. First, it is not a tool of escalation management, nor is attribution ambiguous. In the cases of Ukrainian special operations in Africa and the Middle East, Russia is well aware of who is conducting the strikes, as will be demonstrated in the subsequent analysis. Second, unlike proxy warfare, proxy battlespaces do not rely on proxy actors to generate effects. As the cases discussed later illustrate, Ukraine has employed its own operators to deliver the required capabilities.

At the same time, the concept does not compete with hybrid warfare theory but can instead be understood as an evolution of hybrid modalities. As noted earlier, hybrid warfare theory has well-documented limitations, particularly due to the proliferation of definitions and the expansive literature offering divergent interpretations of what constitutes hybrid warfare.[21] Nevertheless, given the international environments in which these operations occur, proxy battlespaces may be viewed as an evolution of hybrid tools—or even as counter-hybrid measures, particularly in the context of Ukrainian targeting—used to weaken an adversary, potentially in combination with other instruments commonly associated with hybrid campaigns.

The addition of the proxy battlespace concept, therefore, provides analytical value by explaining a distinct set of contemporary special operations. It clearly differentiates this phenomenon from existing bodies of literature that do not fully capture the logic or mechanics underlying these activities. By integrating insights from special operations theory, hybrid warfare scholarship, and broader military literature, this article introduces a novel concept that addresses a specific area of overlap among special operations, hybrid warfare, proxy warfare, and related frameworks. Importantly, this is intended as a generalizable concept and does not focus on the unique historical, cultural, or organizational characteristics of Ukrainian special operations or their personnel.

Finally, the development of the proxy battlespace concept offers practical value by enabling the introduction of a proposed doctrinal term, "Out-of-Theater Operations." This term is intended to support future military planners and analysts by providing a shared vocabulary and conceptual clarity for understanding these types of operations. The need for such a term arises because the cases examined represent a departure from prevailing Western doctrinal assumptions about where and how military operations are conducted.

Doctrinal literature concerning proxy battlespaces

While academic literature on proxy and hybrid warfare cannot fully explain these cases, Western military literature is similarly insufficient. Examining military doctrinal documents directly, the relevant doctrine can be divided into three categories:

1. *Campaign Planning Doctrine:* This includes guidance such as the Comprehensive Operational Planning Directive (COPD) and Allied Joint Publication 5.0. (AJP 5.0).[22]
2. *Targeting Doctrine:* This refers to frameworks such as NATO's Allied Joint Targeting (AJP 3.9) and the U.S. Joint Targeting doctrine (JP 3-60).[23]

3. *Operational Depth:* This encompasses discussions of destroying, suppressing, or disorganizing enemy forces not only at the line of contact but throughout the depth of the theater of operations.[24]

Within campaign planning doctrine, there are no established frameworks for out-of-theater operational planning. Instead, planning is primarily constrained by existing international laws of armed conflict and a generally non-permissive approach to conducting military operations across the borders of sovereign states outside the designated theater of operations. Targeting doctrine operates within the boundaries established by campaign planning doctrine. The primary exceptions are doctrines addressing transnational non-state actors, including transnational violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and terrorist groups, such as the U.S. *Attack the Network* (AtN) doctrine.[25] Even in these cases, transnational operations are expected to comply with international law and respect state sovereignty through cooperation, although this expectation is not always met in practice. Similarly, discussions of operational depth remain constrained by planning doctrine, as they are tied to a defined theater of war.

Taken together, existing doctrine on campaign planning, targeting, and operational depth fails to account for changes in the international security environment that have enabled out-of-theater operations intended to support the main effort within the primary theater. This doctrinal gap is central to this paper, which seeks not only to identify the problem but also to propose a doctrinal solution.

These doctrinal limitations also help explain the uniqueness of the Ukrainian cases from a NATO perspective. Under Western doctrine, these operations cannot be characterized as occurring within "secondary" theaters of war. NATO defines a theater of operations as a "designated area, which may include one or more JOAs," implying geographic adjacency to the primary Joint Operations Area (see Table 2). Historically, secondary theaters—such as Africa, Europe, and the Pacific during World War II—comprised multiple battles and locations that were geographically connected within a broader theater.

If Ukraine had attempted to open a conventional front in another country using large-scale forces, an argument could be made for the existence of a secondary theater. However, available evidence does not suggest this is the case. Instead, the use of special operations forces in non-permissive environments—combined with Ukraine's reluctance to officially acknowledge involvement—indicates that these activities do not constitute a secondary theater. A secondary theater would not require denial of involvement, as it would already be an acknowledged and designated battlespace within the conflict. As such, the concept of secondary theaters is insufficient for describing these cases and necessitates a different conceptual and doctrinal classification.

Methodology

As a reminder to the reader, this study is divided into three distinct sections. The preceding section proposed a concept defining the principles of a proxy battlespace. The following section applies these principles to three case studies of Ukraine's out-of-theater operations—namely, Mali, Sudan, and Syria. The final section concludes the paper by assessing the added value of the proxy battlespace concept for understanding the planning requirements of covert out-of-theater operations, evaluating the findings for their implications for policy and practice, primarily within the context of existing operational planning doctrine.

This study employs a two-phase qualitative methodology to develop and assess a conceptual framework. The first phase consists of a comprehensive qualitative analysis of secondary-source literature focused on distinguishing the proposed concept of proxy battlespaces from existing theories of proxy warfare. To accomplish this, we systematically reviewed relevant studies, articles, and theoretical frameworks. This phase culminated in the development of a preliminary conceptual framework capturing the core tenets of the proposed proxy battlespace concept.

The second phase tests this conceptual framework through three in-depth case studies examining Ukrainian hybrid-kinetic activity conducted outside the main theater of operations in Mali, Sudan, and Syria. This phase relies exclusively on qualitative analysis of primary-source materials. Each case study was selected for its relevance to the proposed concept and draws on archival documents and observational data to provide a contextualized understanding of the operations examined.

Upon completion of the two-phase qualitative analysis, findings from each case study are synthesized to strengthen the validity of the identified tenets, refine the definition of proxy battlespaces, and assess the concept's added value using doctrinal metrics related to battlespace geometry. This dual-phase approach enables both conceptual development and empirical assessment within a qualitative framework.

Regarding research limitations, all three cases are directly connected to the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other conflict contexts. To address this limitation, claims regarding the universality of the proxy battlespace concept are deliberately constrained. Broader applicability should only be asserted once similar operational planning behaviors are observed in other conflicts involving different actors, or once official adaptations appear in operational planning doctrine.

A further self-imposed limitation is the study's focus on lessons relevant to Western militaries. This paper does not provide a comprehensive analysis of Ukrainian military doctrine. While such an examination might yield valuable insights, it falls outside the scope of this research. The primary focus is on how proxy battlespace operations affect NATO planning and how Western military literature should account for this evolution in special operations warfare. Likewise, while recognizing differences between Ukrainian SOF and Western SOF, the paper does not offer a detailed assessment of the unique characteristics of Ukrainian special operations or their influence on these cases; for such analysis, the reader is referred to Horncastle (2025). The aim is not to analyze a specific national SOF culture, but rather to make two broader contributions: first, to identify generalizable characteristics of a novel operational phenomenon through a new conceptual framework; and second, to translate these insights into NATO military literature through proposed updates to doctrinal terminology.

Finally, an additional limitation of the research design stems from the scarcity of reliable information on the operations themselves. Such is the nature of special operations that information in popular media is often put forward by actors seeking to influence public opinion in one way or another. As a consequence, we cannot offer in-depth case studies of each case, but instead assemble snippets of information from different sources to describe the phenomenon, which we encapsulate in a concept to aid understanding. This is a trade-off when studying special operations: one can either rely on historical case studies, which may be based on declassified information but offer only overarching insights into contemporary operations, or study contemporary cases that may help explain current changes in warfare but are

necessarily predicated on incomplete evidence. As such, we are limited to developing a concept based on alleged operations and the fragments of information put forward by the involved parties, each of whom has its own agenda.

Cases of Proxy Battlespaces in the Ukraine-Russia War

At the time of writing, the main theater of operations for Russia and Ukraine includes the territories of both countries, excluding Kaliningrad. The forward line of contact runs approximately from the border of Ukraine's Luhansk Oblast in the north to the southern border of Kherson Oblast, including Crimea.

Map 1. Main Theatre and UKR Area of Operations

However, there are indications that Ukraine is incorporating out-of-theater operations into its overall campaign plans. This requires a military and decision-making process to support each out-of-theater operational line, effectively creating a *de facto* proxy battlespace linked to the main theater of operations. Three such examples have been identified since 2022: Mali, Sudan, and Syria.

Mali

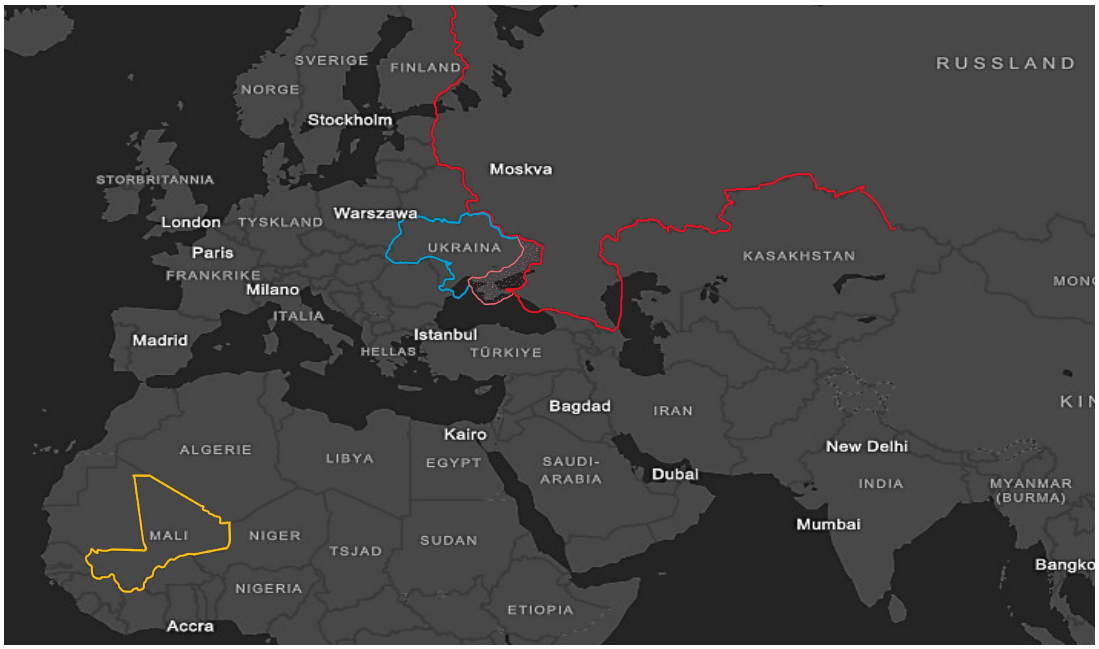
In the summer of 2024, news reports began to circulate about a skirmish near Tinzawaten that resulted in the deaths of several Africa Corps personnel (formerly Wagner Group members) and Malian government troops following clashes with local Tuareg rebels. While the incident itself, given the ongoing civil war, may not be surprising, reports emerged indicating that the rebels had received assistance from the Ukrainian military.

Ukrainian news outlet *Suspilne* reported on the story, including excerpts from an interview with a representative of the Main Intelligence Directorate (HUR) under Ukraine's Ministry of

Defense.[26] The representative stated that Ukraine was assisting the rebels, "not only by providing information," implying support of additional forms. Russian news outlets reacted swiftly. On July 30, TASS reported that Ukrainian personnel were present at the scene and claimed that "terrorists" had employed FPV drones and heavy quadcopters. According to the report, Ukrainian specialists had assisted by teaching the rebels how to operate these systems.[27]

Shortly thereafter, the Malian government responded. On August 4, Mali severed diplomatic ties with Ukraine, reportedly in reaction to comments made by the Ukrainian spokesperson, which Malian authorities interpreted as an admission of Ukrainian involvement in supporting rebel groups.[28] In response, the Ukrainian government issued an official statement through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Notably, the statement did not deny involvement but instead criticized the Malian government's decision while asserting that Russia is directly responsible for numerous war crimes.[29]

Further developments followed in October 2024, when the French newspaper *Le Monde* published an article comparing the drone attacks at the Battle of Tinzawaten with subsequent rebel attacks, arguing that they mirrored Ukrainian operational methods observed in the ongoing war.[30] *Le Monde* had previously reported on the incident, citing statements from *Suspilne* and including claims from a rebel commander that "exchanges" had taken place with Ukrainian intelligence services.[31] This issue was also addressed in an article published by *Contre-Poison*, in which a rebel leader asserted that Ukrainian forces did not assist directly during the Battle of Tinzawaten and that the drones used were procured elsewhere. However, the leader acknowledged cooperation with Ukrainian forces more broadly, citing a shared adversary in Russian mercenary forces.[32]



Map 2. Proxy Battlespace in Mali

To understand why Ukrainian special operations would target Wagner PMC in Mali, it is necessary to consider Russia's interests in the country. First, Russia benefits from Mali's natural resources, particularly gold, as Mali is one of Africa's leading gold producers.[33] While Ukrainian forces are not targeting gold mines directly, they are reportedly targeting mercenaries who are compensated in gold for their services.[34]

Gold has emerged as a strategic resource for Russia since the invasion of Ukraine, as it allows Moscow to circumvent international sanctions and sustain wartime trade relationships, particularly with countries such as China, Turkey, Iran, and the UAE.[35] It has also been revealed that gold-related schemes finance Wagner operations in Africa. In practice, billions of dollars' worth of African gold are laundered through mercenary companies, supporting Russia's broader war effort. This, in turn, increases pressure on Ukraine within the main theater of operations.[36] Reports further indicate that Russian mercenary forces have funneled weapons through Mali—procured via third-party suppliers—to support the main battlefront as well.[37]

Does the concept of proxy battlespaces apply to the case of Mali? Initial indicators suggest either the presence of proxy warfare or the emergence of a proxy battlespace. The proxy battlespace framework identifies three necessary indicators to distinguish this phenomenon from related concepts such as hybrid attacks or proxy wars. First, the operations must take place outside the main theater of war. In the case of Mali, this condition is clearly met. Second, the operations must exhibit characteristics typical of special operations. Based on the U.S. Department of Defense definition discussed earlier, this appears plausible, as the activity occurred in a hostile and politically sensitive environment. This is evident from the diplomatic backlash Ukraine faced following the incident and, if Ukrainian personnel were present, from their reported collaboration with Tuareg rebel forces. Third, a proxy battlespace must support the primary campaign through actions conducted abroad. In this context, targeting mercenary forces and disrupting Russian operations in Mali—where gold revenues contribute to funding the war effort—would support Ukraine's broader campaign. In a war characterized by attrition, Russia would be forced either to reinforce its presence in Mali or to reduce its activities there, both of which could constrain its ability to sustain the main campaign, whether through material resources or income derived from gold.

Overall, the concept of proxy battlespaces appears broadly consistent with the situation in Mali. However, one critical factor remains unresolved. For an area to qualify as a proxy battlespace rather than a proxy war, Ukraine would need to have employed its own personnel directly. On this point, available reporting remains ambiguous. Initial statements from a representative of the Main Intelligence Directorate (HUR) suggested that Ukraine provided more than informational support but did not specify the nature of that assistance, while later statements appeared to deny direct involvement. As a result, the available evidence is insufficient to conclusively classify Mali as a proxy battlespace, although the majority of the concept's defining tenets appear to be present.

Sudan

While the incident in Mali has received the most academic attention, indicators in Sudan represent the earliest reported cases of Ukrainian activity abroad. In August 2023, the Russian outlet *Gazeta* claimed that MI6 was assisting Ukrainian operators from the Main Intelligence Directorate (HUR) and the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) in missions aimed at sabotaging infrastructure and disrupting Russian assets in Africa, identifying Sudan as a key target.[38]

Shortly thereafter, CNN reported that Ukrainian special services were likely responsible for strikes against units of the Wagner-backed Rapid Support Forces (RSF), noting that the attacks occurred just two days after Wagner had helped facilitate a large arms convoy to an RSF garrison.[39] Ukrainian officials neither confirmed nor denied the attacks; however, Kyrylo Budanov, chief of the HUR, reiterated that "Russian war criminals" would be "punished anywhere in the world."[40]

Subsequent reporting strengthened claims of Ukrainian involvement. In October 2023, *Babel* published videos allegedly showing Ukrainian operators employing drones and sniper rifles to strike targets, citing a source within the intelligence community who confirmed the footage's authenticity.[41] These claims were further supported by an open-source intelligence (OSINT) analysis conducted by *Bellingcat*, which geolocated the events to Sudan.[42]

Kyiv Post reported multiple related incidents, beginning in November 2023 with the publication of exclusive video footage depicting operators fighting Wagner personnel in Sudan. The outlet quoted a source stating that these engagements had taken place within two weeks of the article's release.[43] *Le Monde* echoed these accounts, citing its own sources who similarly confirmed the events.[44] In 2024, *Kyiv Post* published two additional exclusives describing a month-long campaign against Russian mercenaries, including video footage showing Ukrainian SOF interrogating Wagner captives.[45]

The most detailed account emerged in March 2024, when *The Wall Street Journal* published an article providing extensive context for the strikes in Sudan (Lovett et al. 2024). Drawing on video evidence and interviews with operators reportedly deployed in Sudan, the article outlines the relationship between Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and President Volodymyr Zelensky and frames Ukraine's deployment to Africa as part of a broader strategy to disrupt Russian economic activity and influence in the region. The reporting describes the scope of the missions, including an initial infiltration in mid-August 2023 involving approximately 100 HUR operators and an early operation to evacuate Burhan from Khartoum, followed by support to government forces in efforts to regain control of the capital. According to the operators interviewed, the primary objective of the Ukrainian mission was to undermine Russian interests in Sudan rather than to target individual Wagner personnel.

Map 3. Proxy Battlespace in Sudan

To understand why these strikes may have an effect on the overall war effort, it is necessary to examine Russian interests in Sudan. Russia has several interests in the country, including economic, military, and diplomatic ones. As in the case of Russian involvement in Mali, Sudan likewise possesses substantial gold resources, ranking among the top five gold producers in Africa.[46] As discussed earlier, gold is a conflict commodity used to finance Russian mercenary operations and to bypass international sanctions, thereby supporting Russia's war effort.[47]

Russia's role in Sudan has been described by Götz and Kaas as "curious," as Russian interests appear to have supported both sides of the conflict. Both Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov and the late Yevgeny Prigozhin reportedly offered to mediate between rival factions.[48] While Russia previously supported the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), recent reporting suggests that Moscow has shifted its support to government forces, which control much of the country's gold production as well as access to the Red Sea via Port Sudan.[49] Earlier this year, an agreement was reportedly reached allowing Russia to establish a naval base in Port Sudan, potentially serving as an important replacement for its recently lost base in Tartus, Syria.[50]

When analyzed through the lens of proxy battlespaces, Ukrainian actions in Sudan exhibit several indicators consistent with the concept. The first indicator is that operations occur outside the main theater of conflict. Given the significant geographic distance between Ukraine and Sudan, this condition is clearly met. Second, the operations must display characteristics of special operations. Based on the definition outlined earlier in this article, these activities take place in a hostile and politically sensitive environment. They occur in a foreign country involving multiple external actors, over which Ukraine has no official jurisdiction, and within the context of an ongoing civil war. The political sensitivity is further heightened by the position of Ukraine's primary supporter, the United States, which has actively urged foreign states not

to intervene militarily in Sudan, warning that such involvement risks exacerbating atrocities and complicating the conflict.[51]

A further important distinction from the Mali case is that multiple reports from Western, Russian, and Ukrainian media indicate that Ukrainian SOF have been present on the ground in Sudan. According to these accounts, Ukrainian operators collaborated with elements of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) while also conducting independent direct-action missions.

Finally, the proxy battlespace concept requires that actions undertaken abroad support the primary campaign. As in Mali, disruptions to Russian operations in Sudan would affect Russia's potential gold revenues derived from mercenary activity and other illicit practices, including arms trafficking. Given Sudan's status as one of Africa's largest gold producers, the financial stakes for Russia are considerable, amplifying the impact of Ukrainian actions. By targeting Russian mercenary forces and affiliated rebel groups, Ukraine places Russia in a strategic dilemma similar to that observed in Mali: Moscow must either accept reduced activity—resulting in lower income and diminished support for its war effort—or reinforce its presence in Sudan by diverting additional troops and resources from the primary theater. In either case, the trade-off imposes costs on Russia's main campaign.

These actions can therefore be understood as directly supporting Ukraine's primary war effort by contributing to attrition in Russian capabilities. Moreover, reporting by *The Wall Street Journal* suggests a degree of cooperation between Ukraine and Sudan regarding weapons transfers. According to the article and its sources, Ukraine supplied FPV drones, Bayraktar drones, and small arms to the SAF, which in turn may have supported Ukraine's efforts through economic means. Unlike the case of Mali, the situation in Sudan appears to satisfy all tenets of the proxy battlespace concept. While Ukraine has not officially confirmed the conduct of special operations, multiple independent media reports place Ukrainian operators on the ground engaging in direct-action missions.

Syria

One of the earliest reports of Ukraine's planned operations outside the main battlespace emerged in April 2023, when *The Washington Post* published an article detailing alleged Ukrainian plans to target Russian forces in Syria.[52] The reporting was based on the so-called "Pentagon Leaks" and featured a photographed one-page document dated January 2023 outlining purported Ukrainian planning. The document included a targeting priority list, potential operational and political constraints, logistical challenges, political risks, a possible modus operandi, and an explanation of why Ukraine might conduct operations abroad. Notably, it suggested that operating in foreign territories could provide deniability, as Ukraine could attribute attacks to non-state groups opposing the Syrian government.

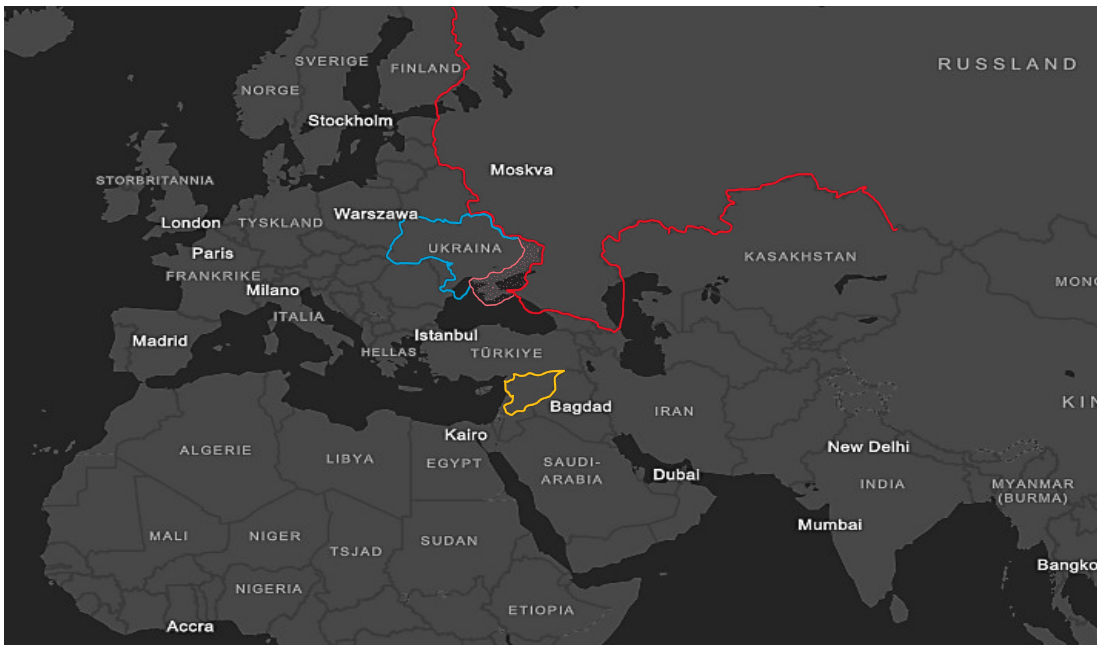
Following this report, mainstream media coverage was largely quiet for some time, with no major outlets reporting confirmed Ukrainian special operations in Syria. This changed in early summer 2024, when *Kyiv Post* published several articles in June, July, and September featuring exclusive videos allegedly showing Ukrainian SOF from the Main Intelligence Directorate (HUR) targeting Russian and Syrian facilities.

The first article, published on June 3, included video footage reportedly showing HUR operators collaborating with Syrian rebel forces to attack Russian mercenaries and Assad-aligned forces in the Golan Heights.[53] The article further cited a source within HUR who stated that Russian facilities in the region had been targeted since early 2024. Shortly thereafter, *Kyiv*

Post released another exclusive on July 31, accompanied by video footage and additional reporting. This article claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted strikes against the Kuweires Air Base east of Aleppo, which Russian forces reportedly used for military purposes, including training and transporting foreign mercenaries to support operations in Ukraine.[54]

On September 16, *Kyiv Post* published a third exclusive, detailing an alleged operation in which HUR SOF targeted a Russian drone base in Syria. The accompanying video purportedly showed Ukrainian operators causing an explosion inside a building displaying Russian flags.[55] Russian media also reported on these incidents. Articles published by *Gazeta* and *Izvestia* in September 2024 alleged a partnership between HUR and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), claiming that militants were exchanged for drone supplies. [56]These reports were later reinforced by statements from Russian officials asserting that Ukrainian forces were operating in Syria.[57]

Alleged collaboration with HTS gained broader Western media attention when the group participated in the coalition that ultimately toppled the Syrian government. Beginning in late November 2024 and continuing through December 8, rebel forces advanced rapidly across Syria, culminating in an offensive on Damascus that led to the collapse of the Assad regime. During this period, *Kyiv Post* reported that HUR operators may have assisted some of the rebel groups involved in the assault on Aleppo, though the outlet explicitly noted that it lacked independent verification or sourcing for these claims.[58] By contrast, *The Washington Post* published an article citing unnamed "knowledgeable sources" who claimed that Ukrainian intelligence had sent approximately 20 experienced drone operators and around 150 FPV drones to HTS headquarters in Idlib roughly four weeks prior to the offensive in order to support the rebellion.[59]



Map 4. Proxy Battlespace in Syria

When considering why Ukraine would target Russia in Syria, it is important to note that Russia has long-standing and substantial interests in the country, as well as a well-documented relationship with the former Syrian leader, Bashar al-Assad. This relationship was underscored by Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2015, during which Moscow deployed fighter jets, helicopters, air-defense systems, and mercenary forces to support government troops against rebel groups.[60] In return, Syria became Russia's primary foothold in the Middle East, underpinned by agreements involving weapons transfers, military training, energy trade, and diplomatic support.[61] Moreover, Russia maintained control over multiple military installations, including airfields near Kuweires and, most notably, the naval base at Tartus—the only Russian naval facility of strategic significance in the Mediterranean. Before the fall of the Assad regime, these bases were slated for expansion and intended for both military and economic use.[62]

Russia's war effort in Ukraine has also benefited from Syrian support. Multiple reports indicate that both volunteers and government forces from Syria were recruited to reinforce Russian ranks in Ukraine, with some estimates suggesting as many as 16,000 volunteers in the early stages of the war in March 2022. Other reporting indicates that training for these recruits took place at bases near Aleppo.[63] In this context, alleged Ukrainian strikes near Kuweires Air Base and other locations around Aleppo, as well as reports that rebel groups were assisted during the takeover of the city, may suggest that Ukrainian targets were deliberately selected to disrupt Russian recruitment efforts in the region. Notably, even while under significant pressure in the primary battlespace, Russia reportedly pledged to send reinforcements to Syria during the rebel offensive in late November 2024 to support the Assad regime, further underscoring Syria's importance to Russian strategic interests.[64]

As in the Sudan case, there are clear indicators supporting the use of the proxy battlespace concept to describe Ukrainian actions in Syria. The first tenet—operations conducted outside the main area of operations—is clearly met. Second, the actions attributed to HUR in Syria display characteristics consistent with special operations. These activities occurred in a hostile and politically sensitive environment, taking place in a foreign country and targeting foreign actors while undermining an established government amid an ongoing civil war. As suggested by the Pentagon leaks, additional political sensitivities were involved, particularly with respect to Turkey and the United States, both of which had to consider potential Russian retaliation against key regional assets, adding further complexity to the operational environment. Similar to the situation in Sudan, reporting suggests that Ukrainian operators were present on the ground conducting strikes against Russian assets. Given the volume of reporting, including video evidence of raids and drone strikes and indications of coordination with local forces, it is reasonable to characterize these activities as special operations.

The third tenet of a proxy battlespace is support for the primary campaign. The former Syrian regime maintained a long-standing relationship with Russia that encompassed trade in oil and gas, security cooperation, and military equipment. Strikes against Russian facilities would therefore disrupt economic activity and place Russia in a strategic dilemma: either address these challenges directly or accept a reduction in services and influence, with corresponding financial consequences. In addition, Russia's recruitment of Syrian personnel for the war in Ukraine represents another vulnerability, one that Ukraine may have sought to exploit by targeting training camps and logistical routes linked to Kuweires Air Base.

The fall of the Assad regime is likely to have significant consequences for Russia. This is reflected in Moscow's willingness to deploy forces on short notice despite ongoing pressure in

Ukraine. Russia's diplomatic position in the region has weakened, while the new Syrian government appears more receptive to Ukraine. Ukrainian officials met with representatives of the new Syrian government in late December 2024, stating that the two countries shared similar views regarding Russian military presence in Syria.[65] As a result, Russia has lost access to the naval base at Tartus, a development of strategic importance that will limit Russia's ability to project power in the Middle East and Africa until a comparable port facility can be secured elsewhere.[66]

As in the Sudan case, Ukraine's actions in Syria do not fully align with classical definitions of proxy warfare or hybrid warfare. However, the key characteristics of a proxy battlespace are present, with the important caveat that Ukraine has not officially confirmed its involvement in these operations.

Summary of Cases

In Mali, Sudan, and Syria, Ukraine appears to have targeted Russian interests and mercenary forces. Although each case has unique characteristics, they share notable commonalities in both the actions undertaken by Ukraine and the potential reasoning behind them, suggesting a coherent pattern. Ukrainian forces from the Main Intelligence Directorate (HUR) appear to have struck Russian assets as part of a broader strategy to support the primary war effort in Ukraine. When comparing the cases, a consistent pattern emerges that lends support to the concept of proxy battlespaces.

Proxy Battlespace:	Out of Theatre	Special Operation	Supporting Main Campaign
Mali	Yes	N/A	Yes
Sudan	Yes	Yes	Yes
Syria	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 1. Proxy Battlespaces applied to the cases

First, all cases occurred outside the main theater of war, thereby meeting the first criterion of the proxy battlespace concept. Second, at least two of the cases can be clearly characterized as special operations. All operations took place in hostile and politically or diplomatically sensitive environments. Reporting from Western, Ukrainian, and Russian media indicates that Ukrainian operators were present on the ground in both Syria and Sudan, conducting military actions. Mali serves as an outlier, as available accounts and reporting are contradictory, and therefore, sufficient information is lacking to conclusively assess this criterion. Third, in all three cases, Russia maintained interests that directly supported its war effort in Ukraine. In Mali and Sudan, gold extraction plays a central role. Russia exploits gold reserves to bypass Western sanctions and sustain its war economy, primarily through the use of mercenary forces. In Syria, Russian interests were rooted in long-standing ties to the Assad regime, which granted favorable economic arrangements, military basing rights, and access to the Mediterranean. Russian air bases and naval facilities in Syria functioned as key logistical hubs and recruitment centers for fighters deployed to Ukraine, making the fall of the Assad regime a significant setback to Russian influence in the region and to its broader war effort.

Across all three cases, Ukrainian targeting focused on degrading Russian military and economic assets abroad that were linked to the war in Ukraine. In Mali and Sudan, strikes against mercenary forces and support to rebel groups undermined Russian operations, limiting both influence and revenue derived from gold. In Syria, operations sought to constrain Russian presence in the country and disrupt facilities used for recruiting personnel for deployment to Ukraine. In each case, Russia was confronted with a strategic dilemma: either reallocate scarce resources to defend overseas interests—resources that could otherwise support operations in Ukraine—or accept a reduction in services rendered abroad, resulting in diminished income and influence.

Unlike traditional theories of proxy warfare or hybrid warfare, the concept of proxy battlespaces accounts for special operations conducted in foreign theaters that are intended to support the main theater of war. As such, the proxy battlespace framework offers a compelling lens for understanding the logic behind Ukraine's special operations abroad. More importantly, the cases examined strongly suggest that Ukraine has, in all likelihood, conducted military actions in Syria, Sudan, and Mali in pursuit of this broader strategic objective.

Implications for Policy and Doctrine

As demonstrated by the case studies, proxy battlespaces provide a comprehensive understanding of how transnational operations are related to a main theatre of operations. To integrate the conceptual aspects of proxy battlespaces into existing doctrinal frameworks, we construct a representative term: Out-of-Theatre Operations (OTO). This term can be compared to existing terminology related to battlespace geometry, as indicated by the tables below.

Doctrinal Term		Doctrine	Sources
---	**Battlespace**	The part of the operating environment where actions and activities are planned and conducted.	AAP-06; AAP-39
---	**Sequel**	A future operation that anticipates the possible outcome - success, failure, or stalemate - of the current operation.	AAP-3
AOO	**Area of Operations**	An operational area defined by a joint commander for land or maritime forces to conduct military activities. Normally, an area of operations does not encompass the entire joint operations area of the joint commander, but is sufficient in size for the joint force component commander to accomplish assigned missions and protect forces	AAP-06; AAP-15; AAP-39; ISRI WG Glossary (AEDP-2, Vol. 4)

AOI	**Area of Operational Interest**	In air defense, an area in which automatic cross-telling of tracks of interest is provided to an adjacent site based on established criteria, such as identity and location.	AAP-06; AAP-39
AOR	**Area of Responsibility**	In naval operations, a predefined area of enemy terrain for which supporting ships are responsible for covering by fire on known targets or targets of opportunity, and by observation	AAP-06; AAP-15; AAP-39; ISRI WG Glossary (AEDP-2, Vol. 4)
AII	**Area of Intelligence Interest**	A geographical area for which commanders require intelligence on the factors and developments that may affect the outcome of operations.	AAP-06; AAP-15; AAP-39
AIR	**Area of Intelligence Responsibility**	A geographical area allocated to a commander, in which the commander is responsible for the provision of intelligence	AAP-06; AAP-15; AAP-39
JIPOE	**Joint Intelligence Preparation of The Operating Environment**	The analytical process used to produce intelligence estimates and other intelligence products in support of the commanders' decision-making and operations planning.	AAP-06; AAP-15
JOA	**Joint Operations Area**	A temporary area defined by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, in which a designated joint commander plans and executes a specific mission at the operational level of war. A joint operations area and its defining parameters, such as time, scope of the mission and geographical area, are contingency- or mission specific and are normally associated with combined joint task force operations	AAP-06; AAP-15; AAP-39
LoO	**Line of Operation**	A path linking decisive conditions to achieve an objective.	AAP-06; AAP-15; AAP-39

NAI	**Named Area of Interest**	A defined geographical area where data and information are gathered to satisfy specific intelligence requirements.	AAP-06; AAP-15
TAI	**Target Area of Interest**	The geographical area where high-value targets can be acquired and engaged by friendly forces.	AAP-15; AJP-2;JP2-01.3
TOO	**Theatre of Operations**	A designated area, which may include one or more joint operations areas. A theatre of operations may include land, air, space, and sea outside a joint operations area.	AAP-06; AAP-15
OTO	**Out-of-Theatre Operation**	A designated area, separated transnationally from the Theatre of Operations, where special operations are conducted to support the campaign plan of the Theatre of Operations.	**Proposed**

Table 2. Doctrinal Baseline

Metrics	Assessment Statement
OTO vs. Battlespace	Complementary. An OTO can be considered a battlespace and vice versa for planning purposes.
OTO vs. Sequel	Complementary. An OTO can be planned as a sequel.
OTO vs. AOO	Complementary. An OTO can be considered an AOO that belongs to the Theatre Commander. AOOs are not doctrinally restricted geographically to the Theatre but to the Command of the Theatre.
OTO vs. AOI	Complementary. An OTO can start as an AOI or include AOIs within the geographical area of the OTO.
OTO vs. AOR	Complementary. An OTO can have specific AORs designated within its geographical boundaries for planning purposes.
OTO vs. AII	Complementary. For planning purposes, an OTO can begin as an AII or have AIIs associated with it outside its geographical designation.

OTO vs. AIR	Complementary. An OTO can have its own AIRs for planning purposes.
OTO vs. JIPOE	Complementary. An OTO geographic designation can be part of the Theatre JIPOE.
OTO vs. JOA	Complementary. An OTO already belongs to a designated JOA or Theatre.
OTO vs. LoO	Complementary. An OTO can be represented by a LoO in a Theatre OPLAN and can have its own LoOs in the operational planning for its designated geographical area.
OTO vs. NAI	Complementary. An OTO can designate its own NAIs as part of the operational planning for its geographical area.
OTO vs. TAI	Complementary. An OTO can designate its own TAIs as part of the operational planning for its geographical area.
OTO vs. TOO	Complementary. OTO identifies transnational AOOs that are essential for planning purposes within the main theatre.

Table 3. Doctrinal Assessment

The significant implications for policy and doctrine can be summarized in two main points. First, policymakers must acknowledge that the international environment has become noticeably more conducive to conducting transnational hybrid operations. This recognition should be incorporated into a broader security policy. In addition, the military implications of this shift must be taken into account. It is essential to include critical requirements for military operational planning that reflect this new reality, as well as the need for armed forces capable of contributing to the transnational aspects of hybrid warfare where appropriate. This study does not seek to prove the effectiveness of proxy battlespaces, but rather to demonstrate their existence, even when states themselves deny such activities. This has important ramifications: as the cases suggest, the phenomenon exists, and doctrine should reflect this reality. Even if Western nations are unwilling to engage in such activities due to legal constraints, doctrine should at a minimum account for adversary capabilities so that militaries possess doctrinal tools to address the threat posed by proxy battlespaces.

Second, as a direct consequence of this more permissive environment for hybrid operations, the use of hybrid warfare between belligerents in more open wars or conflicts is likely to increase where capabilities allow. From a defense policy perspective, this requires military organizations to prepare for the integration of hybrid warfare into their broader warfighting strategies. Doing so, in turn, necessitates a planning doctrine that accounts for both kinetic and non-kinetic hybrid operations. A less visible implication for both policy and doctrine concerns the concept of "plausible deniability," which may need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Such assessments depend on the capabilities of the actors involved and their perceptions of escalation management and international law. Put simply, the more powerful a state is, the lower the threshold for what constitutes "plausible deniability" may become.

Conclusion

In the quote presented at the beginning of this article, Kyrylo Budanov stated that people should "find the answers on their own" when asked whether Ukrainian SOF had conducted military operations in foreign countries. These actions present a paradox: in the midst of a full-scale invasion by Russian forces, Ukraine appears to have committed troops outside its own borders to conduct military operations in Syria, Sudan, and Mali.

This article addresses that paradox, contributing to an emerging but still nascent body of academic literature. As argued here, existing theories of hybrid warfare, proxy wars, and military operations fail to fully capture and explain the contemporary phenomenon of employing SOF to strike targets in foreign theaters while under severe pressure in the main battlespace, as is the case for Ukraine. To address this gap, the article proposes a new conceptual framework—*proxy battlespaces*—alongside a corresponding doctrinal term, *Out-of-Theater Operations*.

Building on existing literature, the article identifies three defining factors of a proxy battlespace. First, such operations occur during an ongoing conflict and take place in transnational locations outside the main theater of battle. Second, they must exhibit the characteristics of special operations. Third, they must support the primary campaign being fought in the main battlespace.

When applying this concept to Ukraine's use of SOF in Mali, Sudan, and Syria, a clear pattern emerges. First, all cases involved operations conducted outside Ukraine. Second, the cases of Sudan and Syria clearly exhibited the characteristics of special operations, particularly due to their execution in hostile and politically sensitive environments and their conduct by specialized units from Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate. Third, in all three cases, the actions appear to support Ukraine's primary campaign against Russian forces by targeting key enablers of Russia's war effort—such as recruitment networks in Syria and mercenary forces linked to illicit gold transactions in Mali and Sudan. Moreover, these operations impose a strategic dilemma on Russia: either accept losses among deployed forces, with corresponding reductions in income and services rendered, or redirect additional resources away from the main battlespace, thereby weakening its core war effort.

The article concludes by advocating, on descriptive rather than prescriptive grounds, for the formal recognition of the proxy battlespace concept within military doctrine. Existing terminology does not adequately capture the logic or operational dynamics of these activities, despite their apparent occurrence. As hybrid warfare becomes more prevalent during phases of competition and crisis, operations conducted in proxy battlespaces are likely to feature more prominently in contemporary conflict. Ukraine's approach to employing special operations forces in foreign theaters, therefore, warrants closer study and recognition in both military planning and broader security policy.

As a final note, this article closes by highlighting the significant legal and ethical questions raised by the exploitation of Out-of-Theater Operations. While a full examination of these issues lies beyond the scope of this study, scholars and practitioners alike should consider how existing interpretations of the Law of Armed Conflict and International Humanitarian Law, including the Geneva Conventions, may be strained by the increasing use of OTO in future conflicts.

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COMMENTARY

The Institutional Battlefield: Why Irregular Warfare Must Contemplate Path Dependence

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ABSTRACT

This commentary argues that the field of irregular warfare must expand its focus beyond operational and tactical dimensions to include the institutional battlefield. The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war serves as a case study in which Russia has systematically imposed new governance, economic, and educational institutions in the occupied Donbas region. This institutional imposition is not a byproduct of occupation, but a calculated strategy designed to create a new long-term reality by permanently altering the adversary's political and social equilibrium. Drawing on the concept of path dependence from economic development, this analysis demonstrates how deliberate institutional changes—such as forced passportization and Russification—produce a new equilibrium from which there is no return, regardless of the military outcome of the war. This commentary urges the irregular warfare community to integrate the study of institutional path dependence into its analysis to better understand how states use institutions as instruments of irregular warfare in modern conflict.

KEYWORDS

path dependence; institutional warfare; Russo-Ukrainian War; Russia; Ukraine; political geography

A Conceptual Blind Spot: Institutions in Irregular Warfare

Discourse on irregular warfare often focuses on its operational and tactical dimensions—guerrilla tactics, insurgency and counterinsurgency, plausible deniability, and even the will to fight. This is understandable, as these aspects have defined much of the discourse since the days of Mao and T. E. Lawrence. However, this focus has created a conceptual blind spot: the role of institutions in long-term irregular conflicts. This article argues that institutions are not merely an afterthought in irregular warfare but a fundamental domain of it, serving as a battlefield in their own right. From governance to education, economic systems, and infrastructure, the

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deliberate manipulation and imposition of new institutions can serve as a tool states use to alter an adversary's political and social equilibrium, creating new realities that persist long after kinetic fighting has ceased. The field of irregular warfare, therefore, would benefit from a more systematic study of how states shape societies and warfare through institutions and their long-term, path-dependent effects.

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war offers a contemporary case study of institutions being used as a method of irregular warfare. While the world's attention has been captivated by shifting front lines and the introduction of new technologies and tactics, a subtler—yet perhaps more permanent—struggle has been waged in the Russian-occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Here, Russia has systematically imposed new governance structures, currency, educational curricula, and citizenship requirements. This institutional imposition is not a random byproduct of occupation; it is a calculated form of irregular warfare designed to sever these regions from Ukraine and absorb them into a Russian sphere of control. Even in a scenario where Ukraine reclaims military control of these regions, it will face long-term, potentially irreversible consequences stemming from these institutions. Regardless of military victory, Ukraine will have to confront the enduring outcomes of an irregular war fought not with bullets, but with bureaucracy. This commentary seeks to stimulate debate on this crucial yet underexamined aspect of irregular warfare, urging the IW community to integrate the study of institutional path dependence into its thinking and future analysis.

A Deep-Seated Culture of Control: Russia's Imperial Continuity

The current actions undertaken by the Russian Federation in occupied Ukrainian territories—specifically Donetsk and Luhansk—represent not a spontaneous geopolitical maneuver but the modern execution of a deep-seated Russian imperial culture of control. At several points in history, leaders of the Russian core have embraced Russification campaigns through linguistic and educational suppression, deportations, and other forms of social and territorial engineering. Even a brief examination of just one of these historical parallels—linguistic and educational suppression—provides important context for understanding how Russia's current institutional imposition in the Donbas reflects a long-standing historical pattern rather than a novel approach.

The institutional strategy of Russification—through linguistic and educational suppression—was refined during the Tsarist and Soviet eras to prioritize state control and the suppression of distinct national identities through targeted administrative, linguistic, and demographic coercion.[1] This historical pattern illustrates how post-Soviet Russia's difficulty in establishing a stable post-imperial identity has shaped its institutional behavior toward a pattern of "reimperialization": an attempt to reassert influence and control over former domains through increasingly coercive cultural and military means.[2]

The suppression of Ukrainian identity was institutionally formalized in the Russian Empire well over a century ago. The Valuev Circular of 1863 serves as a foundational example of targeted linguistic policy aimed at institutional suppression rather than simple censorship. Based on the opinion of the Kyiv Censorship Committee, the Circular institutionalized the claim that "a separate Little Russian language never existed, does not exist, and shall not exist."[3] Instead, the Circular framed support for Ukrainian national identity as the work of "enemies of both Russia and Ukraine."[4][5] This claim is crucial. By officially denying the

ontological existence of the Ukrainian language, the state justified subsequent policies aimed at dismantling the structures necessary for Ukrainian national development.

The Circular ordered censorship committees to ban the publication of religious, educational, and beginner-level books in Ukrainian, thereby preventing its standardization and dissemination as a modern language.[6] The significance of this Tsarist policy lies in its establishment of a doctrine of institutionalized identity denial: first negating the existence of an identity and then systematically dismantling the educational, religious, and publishing institutions required to sustain it. This Tsarist precedent is directly mirrored in modern Russian rhetoric concerning the existence of Ukrainian statehood. While the Russian Empire often lacked the centralized resources and consistent political will to carry out comprehensive programs of national assimilation,[7] the Soviet project of Sovietization was far more systematic. Sovietization aimed ambitiously at a "total transformation of human existence" and the extension of state control over a diverse population.[8]

A key institutional innovation of the Soviet era was the masking of its assimilation policy. Unlike the overt legal prohibitions of the Tsarist period, Soviet leadership rarely openly advocated Russification, especially after the Stalin era.[9] Instead, the policy was concealed beneath euphemisms such as "international politics" or the "internationalization of public relations." This framing allowed the state to promote Russian as the primary all-Union language, linking its adoption to expected "modern" lifestyles that drew on idealized Russian cultural models.[10] This shift from straightforward prohibition to sophisticated ideological masking and administrative incentivization made the assimilation process appear voluntary—or an inevitable function of modernization—thereby providing a complex template for contemporary cultural subjugation.

This institutional subtlety was evident in education policy, known as de-Ukrainization, during the 1960s and 1970s. The 1959 Law on Strengthening the Connection Between School and Life, while granting parents a nominal right to choose the language of instruction, became a "powerful tool of purposeful Russification."[11] The policy ranged from encouraging Russian-language learning to the outright substitution of Ukrainian with Russian in educational institutions. This process increased the number of Russian-language schools, imposed requirements to conduct examinations and dissertation defenses in Russian, and expanded mandatory instructional time for Russian within school curricula.[12]

The intellectual foundation for the invasion and subsequent annexation policies is contained in President Vladimir Putin's 2021 essay, *"On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians."*[13] Though widely recognized as propaganda and pseudohistory, the essay asserts that Russians and Ukrainians are fundamentally "one people," united by spiritual and civilizational ties, with Putin directly insisting that:

> "I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. Our spiritual, human and civilizational ties formed for centuries and have their origins in the same sources, they have been hardened by common trials, achievements and victories. Our kinship has been transmitted from generation to generation. It is in the hearts and the memory of people living in modern Russia and Ukraine, in the blood ties that unite millions of our families. Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people."[14]

This rhetoric of conditional statehood is a direct ideological continuation of the Tsarist policy established by the Valuev Circular, elevated from the denial of a language to the denial of the state itself. By openly questioning Ukraine's borders and legitimacy, and by claiming that Russia was "robbed" of historical Russian lands, the essay provides justification for subsequent military and administrative actions.[15] This shift marks the transition into a phase of "militarized reimperialization" in post-imperial conflict, following the failure of softer diplomatic and cultural outreach.[16]

Forced Assimilation in Contemporary Donbas: Weaponizing Education and Ideology

In addition to Putin's essay, Russian governance in eastern Ukraine is underpinned by a powerful ideological narrative intended to legitimize its actions. Russian state propaganda repeatedly claims that it is "liberating" the Donbas region and protecting "Russian speakers" from an alleged "genocide."[17] This narrative is used to justify both the invasion and the subsequent suppression of Ukrainian culture. The rhetoric aligns with long-standing Russian chauvinist concepts, including the idea of a "Russian World" (русский мир, *Russkiy Mir*) and the historical notion of "New Russia" (Новороссия, *Novorossiya*), which once referred to regions of modern-day southern and eastern Ukraine under Russian imperial control.[18] These ideas are deployed to articulate Russia's ambitions and justify its actions in countries such as Ukraine.

The concept of the Russian World refers to a transnational community united by Russian language, culture, and Orthodox Christian faith, often extending beyond the borders of the Russian Federation itself. In the context of the conflict in Ukraine, the Donbas region is considered "critical to fulfilling the vision of the 'Russkiy Mir' that Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin is trying to create."[19] This vision implies a sphere of influence and control in which Russian identity and interests are paramount. The term *Novorossiya* is a historical concept that was "rescued from the imperial past" by Vladimir Putin, referring to an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century designation for southeastern regions of contemporary Ukraine.[20] Within this framework, the Donbas is cast as a prized objective at the heart of Putin's vision for Russia's future. Complete control over this industrial belt would represent a major strategic victory for Russia and pose a risk of further expansion toward Kyiv and other European states with significant Russian ethnic populations.

The Russian state's claim of "protecting" the Donbas population is sharply contradicted by realities on the ground. The post-2022 full-scale invasion has led to a catastrophic population decline, with barely half of the approximately six million people living in eastern Ukraine in 2022 remaining—either killed or displaced in the wake of the supposed "liberation."[21] This profound discrepancy between stated motives and lived experience highlights a cold, transactional logic: the so-called "people of Donbas" are not treated as a population to be defended, but as a strategic resource to be exploited in service of Russia's military and geopolitical ambitions.

A central pillar of Russian governance in the occupied territories is the forced "passportization" of the local population, a process that coerces Ukrainian citizens into accepting Russian citizenship. This policy functions as a powerful tool of control and assimilation. Those who refuse to take a Russian passport face severe penalties, including denial of access to essential services such as healthcare, employment, and social security benefits. A decree signed by Vladimir Putin in April 2023 further threatened individuals who

refuse Russian citizenship with deportation if deemed to pose a national security risk. This policy also carries direct military implications. By coercing residents into Russian citizenship, the state can legally conscript men into the Russian armed forces, forcing them to fight against their home country. This practice reveals a calculated strategy to extract military manpower from the local population, directly contradicting the narrative of "liberating" a "brotherly people." In the initial stages of Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine, Russia imposed L/DPR passports (from the so-called "Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics," Russia-financed and supported terrorist organizations) rather than Russian passports, as was the case in Russian-occupied Crimea. This distinction served to portray Crimea as part of Russia proper while framing eastern Ukraine as a breakaway region embroiled in a civil war.

In addition to forced passportization of the Ukrainian population already under its control, Russian authorities are engaged in a systematic campaign to suppress Ukrainian culture and language. Ukrainian-language education has been effectively banned and replaced with a Russian curriculum, a move the Kremlin justifies as reflecting "changes in the geopolitical situation."[22] Schools in the occupied territories are now forced to use Russian textbooks that present a pro-Kremlin narrative of history and legitimize the invasion. Perhaps most alarming is the militarization of the education system. Schools are being repurposed as instruments of war, with a focus on "military-patriotic education." In 2022, local education systems in these occupied areas were forcibly integrated into the Russian system, with textbooks shipped directly from the Russian Federation.[23] Political indoctrination targeting the younger generation is widespread. Donetsk and Luhansk have established militarized youth organizations for this purpose. Educational institutions, along with local media and other public services, are dominated by Putin loyalists, leaving no space for independent political activity.

Alongside forced passportization and military education, Russia has taken steps to integrate the Donbas economy into its own. The Russian ruble has been established as the de facto circulating currency in both Donetsk and Luhansk.[24] In an effort to further sever ties with Ukraine and consolidate control, telecommunications systems have been integrated into Russia's network, and the regions now operate under the Russian telephone numbering plan (+7). In Donetsk Oblast, the telecommunications numbering plan switched to +7(949), and in Luhansk Oblast, the numbering plan switched to +7(959).[25]

These policies of passportization, economic integration, and educational Russification are not isolated actions but interconnected elements of a broader, long-term plan for demographic and cultural absorption. The objective is to create a new generation that is ideologically loyal to Moscow, thereby extinguishing Ukrainian identity and ensuring that a future return to Ukrainian rule is not only politically difficult but culturally unimaginable.

The Myth of Russian Reconstruction in the Donbas: Industrial Colonialism

The Donbas region has historically been a key industrial center and economic powerhouse for Ukraine. Before the war, its metallurgy and mining industries were a significant driver of Ukraine's economy.[26] On the eve of World War I, this region was producing a large percentage of the Russian Empire's coal, iron ore, cast iron, steel, and electricity, indicating its industrial importance to Eastern Europe.[27] The agricultural sector in Ukraine previously contributed 10 percent of the nation's GDP and accounted for over 40 percent of exports.[28] However, the Donbas's economic output has been decimated by the war. The conflict has ruined the area's economy and industries. For example, the coal industry in the Donbas experienced a production

drop of over 22 percent in 2014 alone.[29] In cities like Mariupol, factories are now rubble, and job opportunities are limited to small shops and construction, often focused on restoring facades rather than complete interior and structural work.

Publicly, Vladimir Putin has pledged to rebuild destroyed cities, residential buildings, schools, and industrial enterprises in the occupied territories. He stated that Russia would "restore and develop industrial enterprises, factories, infrastructure, as well as the social security, pension, and healthcare and education systems."[30] Despite these promises coming from the man who started this war, there is evidence suggesting a profound discrepancy between grand pledges and actual reconstruction efforts. Ukrainian experts and regional analysts dismiss the narrative of reconstruction as Kremlin propaganda designed to project legitimacy over occupied territories and distract local populations with "grandiose promises."[31] Projects such as multi-story hospitals, industrial parks, and recreational facilities have been presented to support these claims of reconstruction, but few of these plans have made tangible progress.

This gap between Russia's rhetoric and its actions indicates that the primary objective is not to restore the Donbas for its people, but to extract its strategic military and economic value for Russia. Reports suggest that reconstruction efforts are slow, superficial, and reliant on exploitative labor practices. Russian companies, including military-industrial firms, have been establishing a presence in the region, with some reports indicating the construction of new production facilities. This economic strategy constitutes a form of industrial colonialism, mirroring historical patterns of Russian economic control over Ukraine and other former Soviet territories as sources of raw materials and labor. By creating a dependent workforce and integrating the region's infrastructure into Russia's own systems, these so-called "reconstruction" efforts further entrench Russian control without genuinely rebuilding the region for the people they claim to protect.

The History Versus Geography Debate

To fully understand the future of the Donbas region, it is essential to understand the mechanisms by which the influences of man-made historical events or God-given geography shape long-term development. The "history versus geography" debate in economic development explores whether a country's long-term prosperity is primarily determined by static, unchanging geographic factors or by the legacy of historical events. On one side of this debate, scholars such as Jeffrey Sachs have argued for the primacy of geography, suggesting that factors such as climate, natural resources, or disease environments directly influence a nation's wealth today. In contrast, there is a growing body of evidence contending that historical events are the key determinants of long-term prosperity. Researchers such as Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson argue that historical events shape a society's institutions and cultural norms, which then persist over centuries to influence economic outcomes.[32] However, Nathan Nunn provides a framework that encourages a more nuanced, interactive understanding of societal development. His framework identifies three primary channels of causality: institutions, culture, and path dependence leading to multiple equilibria. Rather than viewing history and geography as binary determinants of a society's future, it is through history that we can better understand geography—and thus better predict the future.

For instance, the Donbas's geography—its location and industrial, coal-rich landscape, combined with a sizable pre-war ethnic Russian population—is not a static determinant of its

current condition. Instead, this geography heavily influenced the historical events that began unfolding in 2014.[33] When considering the value of resources the Donetsk region provides to a potential invader, alongside Russia's narrative that the ethnic Russian population was being unduly suppressed, the Donbas's geographical conditions alone did not make invasion particularly compelling. Vlad Mykhnenko notes that the Donbas was "neither outstandingly prosperous nor excessively economically depressed—relative to the rest of Ukraine—to warrant an armed uprising of its own volition."[34] On their own, the Donbas's resource endowments and demographic makeup held little meaning until Russia initiated its hybrid warfare campaign in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 with the goal of shifting the regional equilibrium.

The Russian occupation and administration of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts provide a clear illustration of Nunn's argument that geography most strongly affects economic development through its influence on history.[35] The Donbas's developmental trajectory is not a simple product of geography, but rather the result of geography operating through history. The region's historical ties, industrial base, and demographic composition—shaped in large part by earlier Russian settlement and industrial policy—became the tinder for Russian annexation efforts, which evolved from covert gray-zone operations in 2014 to the full-scale invasion in 2022 and the subsequent imposition of institutions. The resulting developmental schism is therefore the product of the interaction between historical forces and geography, not a simple reflection of the innate, unchanging geographic characteristics of Eastern Ukraine.

The Role of Institutions in Path Dependence

The concept of institutions as a primary channel is central to Nunn's discussion of development, which highlights the work of Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson on the persistence of colonial institutions.[36] Their research found that colonies with high European mortality rates—and thus low settlement—had extractive, rent-seeking institutions imposed upon them, which persisted long after independence and had a strong negative effect on per capita income.[37] A similar dynamic is unfolding in the Donbas. The Russian-imposed governance structures, characterized by a lack of political pluralism and an opaque economic system, are not an accident; they are a deliberate imposition of an extractive institutional model. The Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics were never genuinely sovereign entities, despite their constitutions' outward appearance of democracy and human rights, and despite militia commander Alexander Zakharchenko's calls for a cease-fire to allow humanitarian aid to enter Eastern Ukraine.[38] Instead, they were designed as transitional mechanisms for institutional absorption, with local political parties and leaders eventually absorbed into Russia's ruling United Russia Party. This systematic co-optation of political institutions under Moscow's centralized control stands in direct opposition to the democratic reforms and property rights protections Ukraine has been pursuing.

The long-term effects of such institutional imposition are demonstrated by Melissa Dell's research on the colonial *mita* labor system in Peru and Bolivia.[39] Dell's study found that the negative legacy of the *mita* system—which was implemented by the Spanish in 1573 and abolished in 1812—continues to be felt today, resulting in stunted growth, lower household consumption, and a less developed road network. The channels for this persistence were traced to impacts on landownership and the ability to procure public goods.[40] In the Donbas, institutional changes have produced a non-competitive, closed economic system designed to

benefit Moscow rather than the local population. For example, local metal and coal are sold at steep discounts to Russia, while Moscow provides subsidies to keep the region afloat.[41] This extractive model stifles local economic growth and independent market activity. It is also structurally designed to perpetuate underdevelopment—a pattern likely to persist long after any "peace" agreement.

Nunn's framework also emphasizes that historical events can permanently alter a society's cultural norms and behavior.[42] In the Donbas, Russia has actively weaponized education and media to engineer a profound cultural shift that did not previously exist in the region. Russia's forced Russification policies are not merely temporary wartime measures, but a systematic effort to alter deep-seated cultural norms and collective identity.[43] The deliberate falsification of history, the suppression of the Ukrainian language, and the militarization of youth through state-mandated propaganda and organizations such as "Yunarmia" (Юнармия, "Young Army")[44] are all part of a long-term strategy to ensure that the "history" of Russian rule creates a permanent schism in cultural norms and collective memory.

This process is a deliberate and central component of institutional imposition. The contrast between this top-down cultural engineering and the evolution of cultural norms examined in Nunn's work—such as the Protestant work ethic or the persistence of a culture of honor in the American South—is striking.[45] Whereas Nunn's examples describe organic, historically evolving cultural traits, the situation in the Donbas involves a coercive, state-directed campaign to replace one national identity with another. The long-term result is likely to be a generation shaped by a fundamentally different worldview and value system from their peers in the rest of Ukraine, rendering future social and political reintegration nearly impossible.

Multiple Equilibria and Path Dependence

The final channel of causality—multiple equilibria and path dependence—is the most powerful in predicting the long-term fate of the Donbas. As Nunn notes, in models with multiple equilibria, a temporary shock can cause a permanent shift from one equilibrium to another.[46] The German airport study by Redding, Sturm, and Wolf provides a concrete example. They found that the temporary shock of Germany's division after World War II caused the country's air hub to permanently shift from Berlin to Frankfurt, creating a new equilibrium from which it did not return even after reunification.[47]

The ongoing conflict and institutional imposition have already acted as a massive shock that has shifted the Donbas to a new equilibrium. The sunk costs and path dependence created by the conflict are so significant—including destroyed infrastructure, forced migration, and the widespread cultural indoctrination of a generation—that a return to the pre-2014 equilibrium is no longer feasible, even if politically desired. This renders divergence a self-reinforcing and permanent condition, in which any future peace will merely institutionalize the schism rather than bridge it.

Conclusion

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war is more than a conventional war fought with military force; it is a case of irregular warfare waged through the deliberate manipulation of institutions. By systematically imposing new governance structures, currency, educational curricula, and citizenship requirements, Russia has created a new reality in the occupied territories of Donetsk

and Luhansk oblasts. This strategy is not a temporary byproduct of the invasion, but a calculated effort to sever these regions from Ukraine and absorb them into a Russian sphere of control.

Irregular warfare analysis must expand beyond tactics and operations to account for the long-term, path-dependent effects of institutional imposition. Russia's actions in the Donbas—including passportization, the suppression of Ukrainian culture and language, and economic integration—are interconnected elements of a broader strategy of demographic and cultural absorption. The objective is to create a new generation loyal to Moscow and a cohort of future fighters prepared to carry out the Kremlin's bidding, rendering any future return to Ukrainian rule culturally unimaginable.

Drawing on frameworks from economic development, we can see how this form of institutional warfare is shifting the Donbas toward a new and permanent equilibrium. The immense sunk costs created by the conflict make a return to the pre-2014 state of affairs no longer feasible, even if politically desirable. The imposed institutions, characterized by opaque and extractive models, will continue to stifle local growth and perpetuate underdevelopment long after any potential peace agreement.

Ultimately, regardless of the military outcome, Ukraine will be left to confront the enduring consequences of a war fought not with bullets, but with bureaucracy. The developmental schism between the occupied territories and the rest of Ukraine is becoming a self-reinforcing, permanent condition. This analysis urges the irregular warfare community to integrate the study of institutional path dependence into future analysis, as it remains a crucial yet underexamined aspect of modern conflict.

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Proxy Warfare: The Missing Facet of Australian Defence Policy

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ABSTRACT

Australia is engaged in strategic competition with autocratic regimes, yet its defense policy remains disproportionately oriented toward conventional conflict. This paper argues that proxy warfare—state support to non-state actors as an instrument of competition—constitutes a missing facet of Australian strategic policy. Drawing on Australia's historical experience from World War II through the Cold War, it demonstrates that Canberra once possessed a sophisticated understanding of subversion, political warfare, and proxy dynamics, particularly in Southeast Asia. That understanding has since atrophied, leaving a policy gap evident in contemporary defense documents. As major powers increasingly employ gray zone tactics, frozen conflicts, and externally supported insurgencies, Australia risks strategic surprise by neglecting proxy competition as a central feature of modern statecraft. The paper concludes by outlining implications for deterrence, alliance coordination, and resistance strategy, arguing that renewed conceptual clarity on proxy warfare is essential to Australia's ability to compete below the threshold of armed conflict.

KEYWORDS

proxy warfare; gray-zone competition; Australian defense policy; resistance strategy; special operations

Australia and its Western allies and partners are in a state of competition with several autocratic regimes, the most prominent being the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Despite recognition of this fact in national security documents, policy statements, and defense preparedness tasks, the conduct of strategic competition and experience from previous competitions receive little attention.

Thus, the dominant narrative of defense is to prepare for conflict. Despite the implicit recognition that all parties wish to avoid the costly environment of conflict by remaining in competition, guidance as to the necessary investment in competing to avoid conflict is unclear in Australian policy. A recurrent lesson drawn from previous strategic competitions in history is that states compete, in the gray zone and in peripheral "gray areas,"[1] to prevent adversarial

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faits accomplis and to avoid conflict. The gap is that focused attention is needed to understand how to compete, drawing upon the lessons of previous competitions.

Australia has been in competition with the CCP before. This competition began with Australia's commitment to the Korean War, was sharpened through the experience of Communist "gray zone" activities in Malaya, the Philippines, and Indonesia, and intensified in response to Chinese proxy warfare in Laos, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, and South Vietnam in the 1960s. As alliance partners, it is imperative for British and American audiences to understand how Australian policy lags in its understanding of competition and proxy warfare compared to the much richer history of covert action undertaken in competition by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), U.S. Special Forces, and other arms of the American and British governments.

The defense challenges faced by Australia today are similar to those of earlier competitions. Communist subversive methods seek to carve out a small sector of a country, from which there is a general weakening of the whole, as recognized in reporting from Australia's Moscow Embassy in 1975:

> One feature of their tactics in various countries will be what was done in Laos and also in another way in Cambodia and Vietnam, namely to bring under insurgent control a small part of a country which can then be used either to establish an alternative government or to provide a base from which to demand a coalition.[2]

Today's understanding of Russia's instigation of "frozen conflicts" in Transnistria (on the Moldova–Ukraine border), Abkhazia (western Georgia), South Ossetia (northern Georgia), and the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (eastern Ukraine), and the way in which such frozen conflicts have been leveraged by Russia (in 2008, 2014, and 2022–23), can benefit from this historical context. Renewed CCP competition similarly uses proxies in the form of state-owned enterprises, its maritime militia, and disgruntled ethnic populations in places like Myanmar, all with the aim of weakening target countries to advance national interests below the threshold of armed conflict. Akin to Russian statecraft, through the mechanism of Chinese support to the United Wa State Army (UWSA), a "proto-state" the size of Belgium has been carved out of Myanmar.[3]

This paper responds to this threat by illuminating Australia's gap in proxy warfare policy, recognition, and scholarly debate.[4] In Part 1, I illuminate the proxy warfare policy gap in Australia. Part 2 outlines the historical record of Australian policy relating to proxy warfare to demonstrate the context within which policy choices were made. Part 3 considers implications for today's security environment, both regarding Australia's dangerous conflict-centric national security dialogue and for allies seeking to coordinate collective security efforts with Australia.

Part 1: The Australian Proxy Warfare Literature Gap

There has been no recent open-source discussion regarding proxy warfare from an Australian Department of Defense and national security perspective prior to 2025. This is despite Australia's employment of proxies in times of conflict, such as the work of Special Operations Australia (SOA) in Timor throughout 1941–42 and Borneo during 1944–45, and the employment of Australian advisers to Montagnard tribesmen in South Vietnam during the 1960s.[5] Australia's experience, similar to that of other states, is that proxy warfare thrives in

competition but continues in conflict.[6] These historical foundations, sharpened by the proximate experience of the Indonesian Confrontation, did, however, influence national security thinking up until the 1970s under the terminology of "special operations." It must be noted that this term, in the thinking of the time, may include:

> (a) The raising, directing, and support, at least in the initial stages, of indigenous guerrilla movements.
> (b) The support of underground resistance movements in enemy-held territory.
> (c) Sabotage and small-party operations.
> (d) The covert dissemination of propaganda.
> (e) The clandestine aspects of escape and evasion, i.e., the organization of indigenous clandestine networks whereby Allied personnel, such as escaped prisoners of war or crashed aircrews, can be passed through enemy-held territory to a suitable point for exfiltration to a friendly base.
> (f) Assistance in the escape of political detainees. [7]

After 1975, there is little in Australian proxy war policy and literature to point to. This gap remains evident today.[8] This gap exists despite the proxy wars in Afghanistan, Iraq/Syria, Libya, Sudan, and the Donbas (among others) that have characterized the contemporary security environment of the past decade. More poignantly, this gap exists in the context of the recently revealed Iranian coordination of arson attacks against the Australian Jewish community in Melbourne and Sydney.[9] In other words, Australian defense policy lacks clarity on the nature of the threat presently faced in strategic competition.

A measure of the Australian policy gap is a review of the primary national security document—the Defence White Paper—over the past 45 years. A broader gap is patently evident in the absence of analysis of non-state actors, captured in the terminology of "irregular" or "unconventional."[10] Where such terminology exists, it is presented in a threat-centric sense, with no explanation of why adversaries might be pursuing a strategy that employs such means. This evidence is presented in Table 1, below.

Here, I use the term "proxy warfare" to denote external support from a state to enable a non-state actor to engage in violence. With the term "subversion," I mean a very similar phenomenon—external support from a state to enable a non-state actor that does not use violence.[11] The two terms are thus complementary, both involving efforts to weaken an adversary and being phenomena associated with strategic competition. The plausible deniability or covert nature of such support relationships is what makes them "gray zone" actions that occur beneath the threshold that might warrant a conventional military response.

Australia's policy gap regarding such terms, particularly proxy warfare, became especially telling in the context of Australia's Defence Strategic Review (DSR 2023), which framed Australia as facing increasing competition, "the intensity of which should be seen as the defining feature of our region and time."[12] Yet clarity as to how states are competing was oddly absent. The terms "gray zone," "subversion," "unconventional warfare," and "proxy warfare" were all absent from this analysis. The DSR 2023 was followed by the Australian National Defence Strategy (NDS 2024), which began to respond to the environment of competition and the threat posed by economic coercion as an element of statecraft. While the NDS began to close the gap highlighted by this paper, it nonetheless also emphasized the challenge of potential conflict, missing the point that competition will continue in conflict.

In 2025, the policy gap relating to proxy warfare was abruptly highlighted when the Director-General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), Mike Burgess, spoke to the threat of "state-sponsored or state-supported terrorism [proxy conflict] or criminal proxies being used to conduct sabotage."[13] While relatable to the Russian-orchestrated sabotage campaign across Europe from 2022 onward, Burgess' comments took concrete form on 26 August 2025, when the extraordinary step of expelling the Iranian ambassador was undertaken by the Australian government.[14] The Director-General of the Office of National Assessments, Andrew Shearer, amplified this present threat of proxies in comments made on 6 October 2025.[15] In short, Australia is ill-prepared with publicly available policy that recognizes the threat posed by proxies in strategic competition. This undermines unity of effort in an alliance sense and therefore matters to the United States and the United Kingdom in particular.

Defence Strategic Guidance	"Proxy"	"Irregular"	"Unconventional"
2024	One mention[16]	-	One mention[17]
2023[18]	-	-.	One mention[19]
2020[20]	-	One mention	-
2016	-	-	-
2013	-	-	-
2009	-	One mention[21]	Twice mentioned[22]
2000	-	One mention[23]	-
1994	-	-	-
1987	-	-	One mention

Table 1: Summary of keyword searches of Australian Defence White Papers / Defence Strategies.

The last recognized understanding of the use of proxies as a form of competitive statecraft in Australian policy was in 1976. The 1976 Defence White Paper addressed proxy warfare indirectly as follows:'

> Chinese support for insurgencies in South-East Asia appears now to be at a lower level than for many years. The various domestic insurgencies continue, but appear unlikely to be able to organise major challenge as in the past … It remains true that external powers have ample resources to directly support insurgent groups … and continuing political tensions in the region could provide them with opportunity.[24]

It must also be noted that the 1976 Defence White Paper articulates that "the threat of mutual destruction has led the two superpowers to seek ways of relaxing tension and avoiding military conflict … they show understanding of the need to avoid confrontations that could face them with a crucial choice between military conflict or strategic concession."[25] Such nuanced

appreciation of the nature of strategic competition from the Cold War era has seemingly been lost to policymakers today.

Today's National Defence Strategy (NDS 2024) advocates for a strategy of deterrence by denial, a strategy that aims to reduce "the perceived benefits an action is expected to provide an adversary … [it] deters through fear of failure."[26] A policy gap is thus evident when one appreciates how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is competing.

Ironically, Beijing is competing in ways similar to how it previously competed during earlier periods of strategic competition. At present, the CCP competes for increasing influence via "gray zone" activities of subversion, primarily through proxies. [27]Australia's response is not matched to this threat but is instead focused on deterring conflict or, in the event of a failure in deterrence, responding to conflict. There are thus limited policy aspects in the NDS that would lead PRC leadership to believe that a strategy of ongoing subversion—and thus winning without fighting—is likely to fail. In short, Australia's challenge is that its defense response does not actually compete with the present threat. Australia's policy gap lies first in understanding the nature of the threat and second in providing options to shape the international environment using methods short of direct conflict.

Australia once had a robust strategic and policy understanding of the CCP's subversive and proxy activities, due to its military commitments in Malaya and South Vietnam, and responded accordingly. This understanding was evidenced by the 1976 Defence White Paper and the broad literature on "Communist Revolutionary Warfare."[28]

This is a policy, military strategy, and operational planning challenge that is not unique to Australia. There is no mention of proxy warfare or its related terms as a threat or opportunity in recent partner strategy documents, such as the New Zealand Strategic Defence Policy Statement (2018), the Canadian Defence Policy (2021), or the American Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (2019).[29]

By contrast, an equivalent UK policy document, *Defence in a Competitive Age* (2021), specifically identifies adversarial employment of proxy warfare on multiple occasions.[30] The UK recognition of this threat was undoubtedly influenced by its exposure to Russian competitive statecraft in subverting Ukraine, NATO, and Western institutions more broadly. These policy gaps matter if the Five Eyes nations in particular, and Western nations in general, are to be capable of competing as a coalition. American and British partners are cognitively and doctrinally prepared to face a broad range of adversarial threats; other partners are not.

The next section examines Australian policy history pertaining to violent competition in the form of subversion, political warfare, and proxy warfare from World War II (WWII) to today. This history is organized into differing competitions prior to and during WWII, over the Cold War period, and in the post–Cold War period. In so doing, it elaborates upon Australia's understanding of the state of competition at particular times, its policy responses to such competition, and the logic that guided changes to policy.

Part 2: Proxy Warfare from an Australian Perspective

Pre-World War II Competition

The emergence of conflict with World War II (WWII) did not mean the cessation of nonviolent methods of competition.[31] Indeed, competitive institutions flourished. Australia's special operations capability, here simply termed Special Operations Australia (SOA) for simplicity,

was raised as a counter-subversive organization in response to Japanese fifth-column activities leveraging nationalist movements. Thus, guerrilla campaigns were waged during WWII in Timor, Borneo, Malaya, and Burma, unilaterally and in concert with allies.

As early as 1937, Australia felt threatened by Japanese fishing vessels that encroached upon Australia's territorial waters while engaged in apparent intelligence collection activities.[32] Japanese enterprises invested in Portuguese Timor (oil, pearling, and coffee) and French New Caledonia (nickel).[33] Australian politicians expressed concern that economic dependence in these primary export categories might provide Japan political leverage for concessions—a concern that today might be termed "export market coercion" or "debt-trap diplomacy."[34]

The Japanese economic front invested in dual-use infrastructure of value to the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) in times of conflict. The South Seas Development Company (Nanyo Kohatsu Kabushiki Kaisha) built port facilities in the then-Japanese Palau in May 1939, including two oil tank installations with a capacity of 10,000 tons.[35] The Japanese government pursued oil, mining, shipping lines, and airfield concessions in Portuguese Timor. These activities triggered an alarm in Canberra and initiated Australian and British competition to secure these concessions at Japan's expense.[36] Eventually, Japan resorted to aggressive diplomacy in 1939: "in return for Japan's guaranteeing Macao, the Portuguese would adhere to the Anti-Comintern Pact, recognise [Japanese-controlled] Manchukuo, and grant Japan [an] air base in Timor."[37] In 1940, Japan bluntly warned that it would foment trouble in Macao unless Japanese concessions in Timor were satisfied—an attempt at coercion using proxy warfare.[38]

Japanese infrastructure and economic investment were understood as posing a threat, but the Portuguese prime minister did not see such engagement as dangerous, thus opening a schism with the Portuguese minister for colonies and creating political friction within Portugal.[39] The British consul-general in Batavia reported on these issues to the UK Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Anthony Eden, in July 1937:

> If Japan puts into impecunious Portuguese Timor the capital suggested, harbour, godown and other improvements are likely to follow, and she might even, before long, obtain a permanent hold on that colony analogous to the position she has achieved at Davao, in Mindanao … It must, too, be borne in mind that Timor would make an admirable base for those Japanese fishery activities [including poaching in Australian waters] which have so greatly increased in the last year or two and have become so embarrassing to the Governments both of Australia and of the Netherlands East Indies.[40]

The Japanese thus leveraged commercial fronts for political and intelligence purposes and had been doing so since at least the Mukden Incident of 1931. The Japanese government used journalists as part-time intelligence agents[41] and, from at least 1937, equipped fishing fleets with wireless radios to report from the Persian Gulf to New Zealand to the Japanese Admiralty.[42]

Japanese military planning included the use of "fifth columnist" or subversive activities in Southeast Asia, termed *Kame* or "Tortoise," which was:

> [I]ntended to combine local organisations which had subversive aims or tendencies with a superior organisation whose task it would be to coordinate their activities throughout the whole area of operations… In their plan of expansion in G.E.A. [Greater

> East Asia], the Japanese fully realised the great tactical value of this doctrine "Asia for the Asiatics" and the whole forces of their propaganda was turned to the fullest exploitation of this doctrine among the peoples of this area.[43]

This subversive threat was recognized. Given the concurrence of conflict in Europe, new organizations and methods were required to counter this threat, manifesting in the raising of Special Operations Australia (SOA) and the British Political Warfare Executive (PWE).[44] SOA was raised as a "fourth fighting force" to "undertake subversive operations, intelligence gathering, and the training of underground native armies."[45] That policymakers used such terminology, including that of fomenting "fifth-column activity" behind expanding Japanese lines, is instructive. This was an organizational adaptation to the "gray zone" methods the Axis had so successfully employed in their offensive strategies.

The PWE coordinated propaganda within Southeast Asia, and SOA undertook a broad range of intelligence-gathering, direct action, and support to resistance activities throughout the war, their stories having been admirably told elsewhere.[46]

The Early Cold War Period

New competitions emerged from the rubble of WWII, primarily that between the superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union. The emergence of the CCP as the dominant threat to Australian security interests replaced that of Japan upon the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War in 1949. The rise of this state-based threat occurred in parallel with nationalist uprisings throughout Southeast Asia, several of which enjoyed ideological support from Moscow and, subsequently, Beijing.

During the first period of the Cold War, circa 1945 through 1954, the United States felt itself at a marked disadvantage to Soviet methods of subversion and coercive control over its newfound vassal states of Eastern Europe. This sense of sub-threshold competition, or 'gray zone' challenges, was articulated in policy documents that ultimately led to the expansion of U.S. covert capabilities, including the creation of the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) in 1948 as the U.S. government's covert-action arm operating within the recently established Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). For example:

> We have been handicapped however by a popular attachment to the concept of a basic difference between peace and war, by a tendency to view war as a sort of sporting context outside of all political context, by a national tendency to seek for a political cure-all, and by a reluctance to reorganise the realities of international relations – the perpetual rhythm of [struggle, in and out of war].[47]

Despite this concern about Soviet methods of competition, the Korean War dominated policy discussion and scholarly analysis of conflict. Stalin prudently limited Soviet support while the United States held a nuclear and national power advantage. The need for alliance frameworks to contain communism was realized to varying degrees.

Australian concern regarding growing nationalist movements was acute in 1947. This sense of threat was "accelerated by the war of 1939–45" and exacerbated by the presence of Chinese diasporas that "honeycomb" Southeast Asia as potential fifth columnists.[48] This perception of threat saw the United States' commitment to the Marshall Plan in 1948, the establishment of the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) in 1948 as the CIA's covert action arm, and the

deployment of Military Advisory and Assistance Groups (MAAGs) to counter Soviet subversion in Greece, Iran, Nationalist China (now Taiwan), Indochina, South Korea, and Japan. [49] This sense of threat and the resultant policy recommendations were well captured by George Kennan, who argued for "liberation committees," "underground activities behind the Iron Curtain," "support of indigenous anti-Communist elements in threatened countries," and "a Directorate of Political Warfare Operations."[50]

An Australian WWII leader, Field Marshal Blamey, argued in March 1949 that "Communist advance parties are already here, in Australia, and their tactics are the same as those of the fifth columnists in the last war."[51] Policy continuities thus existed between the experience of competition during WWII and that which was now experienced in the new competition of the Cold War. By 1950, Australian policy recognized that the USSR "will first try to gain her objectives by subversive methods," with clearly stated strategic aims of cost imposition on the West.[52] It was further recognized among Western nations that such subversive methods were often disproportionate to the strength of the proxy.[53] Despite this recognition, Australian appreciation of such subversive methods being employed in Korea was (and still is) strangely absent.[54]

Nonetheless, American policy influenced Australian thinking; the "loss of China" and fears of a surging Communist force gave rise to the Australia–New Zealand–United States (ANZUS) Treaty in 1951.[55] Alliance efforts also sought to better understand Communist methods and develop effective counter-guerrilla doctrine.[56]

American military strategic thinking was anchored in the policy of Massive Retaliation, a policy that envisaged nuclear strikes as the first response. Massive Retaliation soon faltered in the face of events that demonstrated the "stability–instability" paradox, as explained by Major General (ret.) John Singlaub:

> Almost as soon as the massive retaliation doctrine was accepted, however, its shortcomings became obvious. The Soviet Union was constrained from a conventional assault on Western Europe for fear of nuclear retaliation … But fear of American's nuclear arsenal did not stop either the Chinese or the Soviets from supporting (and in some cases actually sponsoring) the so-called wars of national liberation that became one of the major military aspects of the Cold War.[57]

Australian policymakers approached proxy warfare similarly to the British during the early Cold War period through a constrained "pinprick" strategy that eschewed overt proxy warfare. This pinprick strategy was developed by the Official Committee on Communism (Overseas), the AC(O), or Jebb Committee, which was charged with "stimulating, coordinating, and initiating the UK's anti-Communist activities overseas."[58] What was innovative about the pinprick approach was that it would seek to "chip away at Soviet control by exploiting political weaknesses, targeting economic vulnerabilities, promoting dissension and spreading distrust."[59] While this approach is better described as subversion, the intention to enable a proxy warfare strategy was a clear policy objective. This subversive intent is evident in an AC(O) recommendation to spread dissension in the Austrian Communist Party in 1950 through real or notional dissident groups.[60]

The British applied a cautious and incremental approach that sought to reduce the "risk of provocation, escalation, and retaliation"[61] and expressly aimed to minimize the risk of reprisals against the local population.[62] Australian adoption of language similar to that of the British,

namely structures like the "Information Research Department," is telling. An Information Research Department (IRD) was proposed within the British Foreign Office in 1947 as a department to launch an "ideological offensive against Stalinism."[63] By 1953, the IRD was actively pushing back against the "enormous flood of hostile propaganda directed from Moscow" and functioning as a "shadow department" for a renewed Political Warfare Executive "if war appears imminent."[64]

The language of "shadow department" evokes a specific lesson learned from the history of the Political Warfare Executive, namely that "Britain should therefore be prepared to carry out Political Warfare before or immediately on the outbreak of another war and not have to build up an organisation for it after war has begun … There should therefore be at least a shadow department of Political Warfare in existence which should deal with social, diplomatic and political trends."[65] Language similar to that of the British was later used in Australian policy documents.[66] A common theme in Western policy was to minimize the risk of vertical escalation while concurrently creating fractures in the Soviet–Chinese alliance and competing for the influence of local populations in Soviet "satellite countries."[67]

The Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) was established on 13 May 1952, following the establishment of the CIA in 1947 and occurring in parallel with a British revival of special forces capabilities in 1952. The British revival of special warfare capability was led by Fitzroy Maclean, who argued for the need for special forces capabilities—by which he meant a similar model to that of the WWII Special Operations Executive (SOE), i.e., support to resistance movements capable of waging guerrilla warfare in occupied areas behind Soviet lines in Europe.[68]

The policy guidance behind the Australian decision to raise ASIS was the intent to "contain" communism and Communist parties and/or agencies.[69] This guidance came in concert with a Cabinet position that the development of NATO had led the Soviet Union to "direct its main cold war efforts towards the Far East and South-East Asia" and was thus "fostering subversive activities throughout the world."[70] This Cabinet guidance likely informed a decision for ASIS to focus on subversion, thereby responding to the threat of communism advancing as "an international conspiracy" that needed to be met "on equal ground or to lose by default."[71] British influence over the raising of ASIS was demonstrated by terms like "Special Political Action" being used in Australian policy—emulating terminology used by the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, also known as MI6).[72]

Following the British model, ASIS was raised with a mandate for "Special Operations" (what is described herein as proxy warfare) in the event of war. ASIS, like SIS, adopted a "Special Political Action" capability, presumably due to logic similar to that of British and American policy derived from the wartime experience of organizations such as the SOE and the OSS. The British evolved the idea of "Special Political Action," a less muscular or less violent form of special operations, as a result of the dawn of the nuclear age and the need for sub-threshold or "gray zone" options, which they termed the "pinprick approach."[73] Further logic in this approach was to "drive a wedge between communist parties and those most likely to support them."[74]

In 1956, the awkward term "Quasi-Overt Military Action" was introduced in Australian defense policy and was defined as: "Armed action, under conditions which do not permit it to be identified as overt aggression, by organised bands or groups responsive in varying degrees to foreign control or direction." This befuddling definition aligns with what is meant by the

term proxy warfare, and in 1956 it was regarded as "the main threat to South-East Asia," alongside subversion.[75]

The concept can be understood in the context of the era, as Western policymakers faced Communist expansion across Asia, which was particularly acute for Canberra with regard to the increasing influence of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, or PKI) in Indonesian politics. Political warfare efforts by the CIA in 1955 sought to check this march through support to the Muslim-oriented, anti-Communist Masyumi Party in the national elections, to the detriment of leftist parties. Instead, the PKI surged, winning 18 percent of the total vote.[76] On 23 September 1956, President Eisenhower authorized Project Haik, whose aim was to hold Sukarno's "feet to the fire" by encouraging separatist elements in the Indonesian archipelago, namely in Sumatra, Aceh, and Sulawesi.[77]

The dissidents formed the Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia (Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia, or PRRI), who viewed Sukarno as being too tolerant of the Communist presence in the country. The United States made grossly over-optimistic assessments of PRRI capability, setting conditions for the debacle that followed.[78] Such assessments remained unchallenged as they coalesced around an ambitious policy articulated in 1957 by the Deputy Director of the Office of Southwest Pacific Affairs, Gordon Mein:

> U.S. objectives could be furthered most effectively by discouraging the dissipation of anti-communist strength in the outer islands in quixotic regional rebellions, by encouraging anti-communist elements in these areas to lend their support to their colleagues and co-religionist [sic] on Java within the framework of a single nation state, and by encouraging and assisting the central government to satisfy legitimate regional demands.[79]

The first contact between the CIA and the rebels occurred in early April 1957, aligned with the policy position quoted above.[80] Arms shipments from Taiwan, airdrops from CIA aircraft (via the front organization Civil Air Transport, CAT), and a Taiwanese advisory group were sent to the rebels following the formal emergence of the PRRI.[81]

The situation evolved into a crisis in Sumatra in January 1958, at which time American advisers deployed forward to remediate a badly deteriorating situation.[82] The problem was that local issues were overriding the ambitions and requirements of the PRRI, reflective of a somewhat parochial organizational structure.[83] Anti-Communist propaganda had not resonated with the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI—Indonesian Army) units on Java, and the movement faltered.[84]

On 7 April 1958, "domino theory" fears emerged in the language of the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Twining, who stated:

> Defeat of the dissidents would almost certainly lead to Communist domination of Indonesia. Such a turn of events would cause serious reaction in Malaya and Thailand, probably trouble in Laos and possible trouble in Cambodia … if Communist domination of Indonesia is to be prevented, action must be taken, including overt measures as required, to insure either the success of the dissidents or the suppression of the pro-Communist elements of the Sukarno government.[85]

As the rebellion petered out into guerrilla warfare in Sumatra, Jakarta was able to pivot resources against the Sulawesi rebels (Permesta).[86] There, in late 1958, the rebels reverted to guerrilla warfare because of TNI pressure.[87] The PRRI devolved into a "mafiosi" organization, using copra smuggling to fund its operations.[88] By April 1961, the PRRI was negotiating a ceasefire.[89]

During the Sumatran crisis, the Australian government purportedly made Christmas Island available as a forward base for American submarines engaged in supporting the rebels, positioned naval vessels off Sumatra to provide medical support if required, and attempted to mobilize SEATO on the rebels' behalf via the minister of external affairs.[90] Australian interests were displayed in the language of Foreign Minister Casey to Prime Minister Menzies on March 11, 1958: "it is essential in the interests of the UK Government and the West that the dissidents in Sumatra should at the worst be able to make a draw of it" and that "this means considerable support for the dissidents from the West."[91] While not directly engaged in proxy warfare, Australia was certainly attuned to and willing to support American efforts in this regard.

Australian policy accurately assessed that the primary targets of Communist subversion would be South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, due to their relative instability.[92] There was recognized nuance in this subversion: that the CCP would use pressure and inducement (including blackmail where necessary) to seek the loyalty of compatriots but would not prejudice the relationships it sought to cultivate with governments in the area.[93] In other words, the Chinese sought to avoid confrontation—an unsurprising outcome given the costs of the Korean War.

Australian defense policy evolved over this first decade of the Cold War through the experience of the Korean War, the Viet Minh defeat of the French in Indochina, the Malayan Emergency, and ongoing regional tensions regarding Communist influence in Japan, Burma, Indonesia, and the Philippines. This decade concluded with a relatively mature understanding of Communist revolutionary war theory, overlaid by the stark Soviet demonstration of power during the 1956 Hungarian insurrection. Australian and Western governments, in general, were aligning to the new era of "limited wars" dictated by fears of unrestricted nuclear warfare and the proliferation of "brushfire wars" of anti-colonialism.

The Mid-Cold War Period

The second period of Cold War competition, 1954 through 1968, was marked by President John F. Kennedy's assumption of office and an American pivot from "Massive Retaliation" to "Flexible Response" as a relative nuclear and power balance was established.[94] This period saw the emergence of the stability–instability paradox that manifested through Khrushchev's support to "National Liberation Movements," and Kennedy's support for the creation of military forces oriented to engage in proxy wars—the U.S. Special Forces[95]—and the use of these forces to contest Communist subversion and proxy warfare, primarily in Southeast Asia but also at a global scale.

Australian policy in the mid-1950s had recognized that "it is probable that China will encourage war by proxy," with a resultant requirement for "a blending of requirements to meet cold, limited, and global war situations and enable Australia to fulfill its strategic role in each."[96] Australian policy began to channel President Kennedy's drive for "flexible response" options nuanced to the nature of the challenge posed by the Communists.

SEATO had been established on 8 September 1954, following the French collapse in

Indochina.[97] An acute sense of threat can be inferred from the recognition that weak Southeast Asian nations could offer little resistance to Vietnamese Communists—particularly South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—who were protected by SEATO's collective defense clauses. For Australia, Communist influence in Indonesia heightened this threat (at least until the violent purge of Indonesian Communists in September 1965). Thus, the mid–Cold War period began for Australia with a polarized security environment that drove commitments to contain Communist expansion in Southeast Asia.

Australian strategic understanding of a proxy warfare threat further matured in 1959 with the terminology of "Communist Insurgency," which was defined at the time as: "Armed action against the established government of a country by organised bands or groups, responsive in varying degrees to covert foreign control, direction or support, under conditions which do not permit such action to be identified as external aggression."[98] This definition points toward an emphasis on the manner in which external parties exploit insurrections. This view is amplified by the 1962 policy articulation of Soviet, Chinese, and North Vietnamese influence being exerted across Southeast Asia and Indonesia.[99] Policy written in 1964 expressly called out the threat posed by Chinese proxy support:

> Despite some significant weaknesses, the armed forces of North Vietnam backed by Communist China pose a serious direct threat to South Vietnam and Laos and a potential one to Cambodia and Thailand.[100]

Australia's understanding was matched by that of SEATO, which understood that a three-phase, Maoist approach was the most likely way in which Communist aggression would develop. This would begin with subversion and fermenting internal disorder, the gradual development of infiltration to the point which requires assistance from SEATO, and either an overt intervention of Chinese forces or a SEATO action that risked prompting an overt Chinese intervention.[101] From this simplified pattern, a more detailed understanding was that Communist techniques would include:

> (i) "Legal" political activity;
> (ii) Intensified activity in the international economic field (trade, aid, etc.);
> (iii) Penetration and subversion of non-Communist organizations;
> (iv) The exploitation of dissident elements and overseas Chinese;
> (v) Pro-Communist propaganda;
> (vi) Cultural exchanges;
> (vii) The increased use of international "front" organizations.[102]

Australian and SEATO partners demonstrated a sound military understanding of Communist-inspired revolution, which offered a doctrinal means to orchestrate tactical through to strategic defense actions.[103] Indeed, a particularly insightful understanding was attained by U.S. military analysts at Fort Bragg, NC:

> The communists have been averse to becoming embroiled in war unless actually attacked. They preferred to rely upon indirect political methods of achieving their foreign policy objectives … They carry on conflict by proxy, for they realise that the West can become very excited about overt aggression. They work through national

> communist parties, satellite governments, front organisations, 'volunteers', disaffected ethnic minorities and indigenous guerrilla movements within the territory controlled by the West. In this way, they can subvert the status quo, outflank the Western nations, weaken their position and drain their resources without ever presenting the clear-cut *casus belli* for which the West is psychologically braced.[104]

In response to this threat, Australian policy documents recognized the need to counter Communist insurgency in Laos, to develop defense against Viet Minh aggression, and to prepare the SEATO area for defense against both Viet Minh and Chinese aggression.[105] The greatest threat in 1961 was seen to be Thailand, where SEATO counter-subversion efforts were accordingly prioritized.[106] Yet wider responses were also recognized as needed to what the Australian Joint Intelligence Committee identified as the threat in Vietnam:

> Communist North Vietnam aims at achieving "national" reunification by bringing South Vietnam under its control. The other Communist powers, especially Communist China, have the general objectives of eliminating Western influence in mainland South-East Asia … At the same time, they apparently *do not wish to risk a direct military confrontation with the United States* in South-East Asia because of the consequent risk of escalation of hostilities, and because they believe that communism can make gains without open military intervention.[107]

SEATO thus recognized that there was a need to "improve their capacity to identify, prevent and resist Communist subversion and insurgency."[108] Within Australian policy deliberations, in 1962, it was resoundingly accepted that Australia needed to participate in countering such Communist activity in Southeast Asia.[109]

These policies were tested by Konfrontasi (the Malaysia–Indonesia confrontation) from 1963 to 1966, and Indonesian support for the Brunei Revolt (December 1962). Tellingly, one British assessment identified that Sukarno was not likely to risk open war, but instead that he would undertake "a 'war of nerves' to weaken Malaysian morale and the will to resist," channeling British experience from WWII.[110]

Konfrontasi

Malaysia's declaration of independence in September 1963 was a natural progression from British colonial rule. The Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) had, by this time, been defeated by adroit counterinsurgency from 1948–1960. Following the 1954 Geneva Conference, Chinese and Soviet officials directed the CPM to cease its guerrilla operations, likely to reduce the likelihood of American intervention in Southeast Asia.[111]

Beginning in July 1961, however, Beijing sought to reinvigorate the CPM, in the context of spurning the Soviet line of "peaceful coexistence" and choosing to compete in Indochina more broadly.[112] Cadres were duly dispatched from CPM sanctuaries in Thailand, and "The Voice of the Malayan Revolution" began broadcasting from southern China.[113] This reinvigoration lacked popular support, as grievances had largely been addressed by successful counterinsurgency practices undertaken the decade before, and the CPM remained in a latent or incipient stage on the Malayan–Thai border.

Malaysia's declaration of independence included the British colonies of Sarawak and North Borneo, which sparked outrage from Indonesian President Sukarno, who had hoped to unite all

the Borneo territories within Indonesia.[114] Indonesia prosecuted Konfrontasi in resistance to the Federation of Malaysia. Indonesia initiated this policy through support to the Brunei Revolt (December 1962), using "economic actions, international diplomacy, terrorism, subversion, propaganda, and low-level military operations."[115] British policy was nuanced over the period, seeking to reconcile the need to defeat Indonesian attempts to disrupt the new state of Malaysia while concurrently seeking to draw Indonesia into an anti-Communist bloc.[116]

The Brunei Revolt of 1962 was Sukarno's first gambit during the Indonesian confrontation.[117] The revolt was launched by the leftist Brunei People's Party (BPP), which opposed the Bruneian monarchy and its intention to join the emergent Federation of Malaysia.

British secret reporting identified early Indonesian commitments to train and equip a 1,200-man army, the Tentera Nasional Kalimantan Utara (TNKU), or the North Kalimantan National Army, which was the armed wing of the BPP. Indonesia supported its leader, Sheikh Azahari bin Sheikh Mahmud, despite public statements of non-involvement from Jakarta.[118] Indeed, Sukarno is reported to have stated that "anyone who does not support the Brunei rebels is a traitor to Indonesia."[119] It appears, however, that Indonesian control over Bruneian rebels was incomplete and that the revolt occurred prior to Indonesian readiness.[120] The British expected that Brunei could serve as a wedge from which subversive efforts into Sabah and Sarawak could be more effectively orchestrated.[121]

Ethnic Chinese communities in Sabah and Sarawak were leveraged by the Indonesians. Approximately 30 percent of Sarawak's then-818,000 population and 23 percent of Sabah's then-507,000 population were ethnically Chinese.[122] Following the Brunei revolt, approximately 800 ethnic Chinese fled Brunei to Indonesia.[123] From this refugee community, an initial cadre was trained by the Indonesian Central Intelligence Agency (Badan Pusat Intelijen, BPI) to become the nucleus of the Sarawak People's Guerrilla Force (Pasukan Gerilya Rakyat Sarawak, PGRS).[124]

In Sarawak, the underground Communist organization decided to side with the Indonesians, and over time some 1,000 Sarawakian Chinese received training in guerrilla warfare at camps in Indonesian Borneo.[125] Armed incursions were conducted sporadically into the westernmost part of Sarawak from approximately June 1963 to early 1966.[126] The British and Malaysians reciprocated in kind, covertly aiding rebels in Indonesian Borneo, coming to this decision in September 1963 (after eight months of confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia).[127] The aim of such operations was expressly to "pin down the maximum number of Indonesian soldiers."[128]

British strategy recognized that support to separatist movements within Indonesian territory would be unlikely to challenge the Sukarno regime but nonetheless worked with Malaysia to encourage such dissidents.[129] The timing of this policy is notable, as it did not align with CIA support to Indonesian dissidents; rather, Permesta had reverted to a latent or incipient movement at this time. British policy was therefore attempting to resurrect a seemingly defunct rebel movement in broader Indonesia, in addition to supporting Borneo-based rebels, while seeking to prevent "escalation to outright war."[130] Deniable cross-border operations (termed CLARET) were also briefed at this time, with the importance of discretion and deniability expressly noted by Australian Prime Minister Menzies[131] It was believed that risk in covert action had to be borne, lest Sukarno erode the Commonwealth position and a situation arise in which overt military action would be required.[132] In other words, Commonwealth decision-

makers sought to impose costs while minimizing the risk of escalation and were willing to accept risk in doing so—risks that Australian military units also bore.[133]

With risk also comes reward in the form of intelligence that can inform policy options. Participant-observer Lieutenant Colonel Brian Avery offers tangible evidence of Indonesian intentions and support mechanisms via captured prisoners and documents that showed:

> Indonesian [advisers] were from a party of 16 soldiers of the RPKAD who, with two Chinese guides, formed a 'volunteer' group called Manjar 2 [which crossed the border 4 June 1965]. Their task was to penetrate into the Chinese area and link up with the Clandestine Communist Organisation, probably to continue a campaign of subversion once Confrontation was officially ended. A special force of 'volunteers', comprising Indonesian regulars, mainly RPKAD, members of the TNKU and Sarawak Chinese, had been raised in Indonesia in June. Called Pasandha ('Secret War Team'), the force was to train local cells to carry on operations against the Sarawak government during the peace talks and after a peace treaty was signed.[134]

A low-level proxy war on Borneo thus existed in parallel with direct Commonwealth intervention (January 1963 – August 1966) and, from the Soviet perspective, as a peripheral case of proxy warfare given its support to the nascent and contested state of Indonesia.[135] Sub-competitions were also present; the nascent state of Malaysia gave aid to rebel groups in Sumatra and Sulawesi, highlighting that even minor powers engage in proxy warfare upon achieving statehood.[136] Further, the PKI benefited from confrontation with Malaysia by providing an opportunity to foment anti-Western sentiment, with military expenses likely exacerbating the domestic economic crisis and thereby affecting its strength on Java.[137]

The irony of long-term American efforts to subvert Communist influence is that covert action validated the Communist narrative, and that when such external subversion abated, Indonesian politics rejected the PKI of its own accord.[138] Massive, overt American military aid to the TNI, beginning in August 1958, began to win over influential military leadership.[139]

On 30 September 1965, the PKI attempted a coup in which several TNI generals were murdered. The backlash led to a PKI purge, with between 500,000 and one million people murdered by right-wing militias, and Sukarno being replaced by Suharto. On the island of Bali alone, some 80,000 people were murdered (approximately 5 percent of the population). The purge of 1965 was seemingly coordinated. For example, violence on Bali markedly began in December 1965, with the landing of units from the East Java–based Brawijaya Division. Nationwide, a vigorous anti-Communist propaganda effort encouraged violence against PKI members through vigilante means—a form of state-sponsored internal proxy war.[140]

A second-order effect of the purge of Indonesian Communists and Jakarta's decisive shift to the right was that its erstwhile Sarawak Communist proxies in training camps in West Kalimantan became a liability. In the late 1960s, the TNI began a concerted operation to clear out its former clients from Indonesian territory.[141]

Despite these regional concerns and evolving operational practices, Australian defense policy continued to follow the British example of the 1950s and drifted away from understanding proxy warfare capabilities developed during its WWII experience, due to concerns about the risk of inadvertent escalation and the recent failures of proxy warfare efforts in the Baltics, Albania, Ukraine, and Korea.

Vietnam

It was in the context of a matured competition with Communist states that ASIS demurred from involvement in the Vietnam War. Australia's involvement in Vietnam was based upon a fear of China, a fear articulated "most passionately and forcefully by Paul Hasluck," as minister for external affairs.[142] Intervention was triggered by recognition that Southeast Asian Communist insurgency movements operated as proxies of an expansionist Chinese policy.[143]

The result of the military commitment to Vietnam was the opening of a mandate gap, within which Australian Army personnel, through the Australian Army Training Team–Vietnam (AATTV), undertook secondments into CIA-sponsored proxy warfare programs.[144] From this time onward, Australian abstention from proxy warfare capability seemingly emerges due to the departmental, legal, and funding divisions between intelligence agencies and military operations.[145]

By 1968, Australian policy exhibited an understanding of the operational challenges being experienced in South Vietnam. While threat descriptions retained a focus on Communist subversion and support to insurgencies, policy began to recognize the operational challenges faced where "governments are politically weak, administratively incompetent and unable to attract loyalties" from the population.[146]

Policy further sharpened in 1968 with the Strategic Basis Paper. This identified "Communist China as the greatest threat to Australia's long-term strategic interests," a threat that included "insurrection abroad supported by Beijing and Hanoi."[147] Australia was embroiled in the tactical challenges of this externally supported insurgency on the ground in Phuoc Tuy province and thus well understood the challenges posed by Communist revolutionary warfare. Australia, like the United States, found it extremely difficult to break the links between the guerrillas and the local population.[148] Contrary to the popular narrative, pacification failed to defeat the NLF in Phuoc Tuy. It was, as historian Thomas Richardson recognizes, "as if we were never there."[149] This was a cautionary note as to the implications of failing to truly grapple with irregular threats in the form of subversive shadow governance. As late as February 1971, Australian military contingents still attempted to hunt Communist main force units, emulating the flaws in American conventional military culture.

Notably, the AATTV also provided training support to the Cambodian Army, an intervention that similarly failed against Communist methods.[150] Australian military culture proved resistant to change and averse to responding appropriately to subversive tactics.[151] This was despite Australia possessing sound doctrine for the prosecution of counterinsurgency, itself based upon a robust understanding of Maoism and Communist revolutionary warfare doctrine. Richardson continues that it was striking how "Australian commanders continued to have substantially different ideas on how best to prosecute the war in Phuoc Tuy."[152]

Australia's 1968 policy demonstrated the culmination of Australia's strategic understanding of proxy warfare dynamics. This was despite concurrent American National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) recognition that "terrorism, guerrilla warfare, banditry and counterinsurgency, often supported from without, will be more common than open military confrontations between national forces."[153] From 1968 onward, Australian policy took the opposite line to that of the NIE quoted above. Atrophy in policy guidance was evident in 1971 as the adverse Australian public reaction to counterinsurgency in South Vietnam began to influence the political context for defense strategy.[154] In other words, from the policy level through to the tactical level, Australia made tentative steps in responding to competition, but

defense did not culturally adjust to the realities and requirements of externally sponsored insurgencies that formed the primary means of competing.

The result was a tension between the recognized primary threat posed by Communist regimes employing subversion and proxy warfare and Australian public opinion. This tension has thereafter been captured by describing Vietnam (and others) as "wars of choice." This tension ultimately led to the creation of an Australian policy gap relating to proxy war.

Late Cold War Era

The third period of Cold War competition, from 1968 through 1989, saw the Soviet Union enjoying a favorable balance of power and an unsettled United States, bruised by the stigma of Vietnam. The Soviets channeled their confidence into support to proxies from Angola to Afghanistan. "The world was going our way," as KGB historian Vasili Mitrokhin described.[155]

This period, while marked by the avoidance of direct conflict between superpowers, saw numerous conventional conflicts between middle powers, including China–Vietnam, Pakistan–India, Iran–Iraq, and the Arab states–Israel. Geographically, competitions "pushed" to the periphery and into the seams, as the superpowers sought advantage in southern Africa, the Horn of Africa, Central America, and Central Asia. This period can also be characterized by the calcification of zero-sum perspectives in international affairs, where one superpower's gain meant the other superpower's loss.

From the American perspective, Vietnam cast a shadow over Western defense bureaucracies, including Australia's, that impacted covert action capabilities writ large and proxy and political warfare in particular. The Watergate and Church inquiries in the United States further exacerbated this angst within the defense establishment. This caution in foreign affairs was overcome by the coincident challenges of "the collapse of the Shah's regime in Iran, the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan."[156] Late 1979 was, for American foreign policy, certainly 40 days that shook the world.[157]

Despite being rattled into action, the CIA had nonetheless learned from the tortured experience of the mid–Cold War period. Its approach going forward was to ensure that its proposals would be more tightly focused than activities conducted in the 1950s and '60s, "designed to support clearly defined policy objectives, and not [be] employed as a substitute for policy."[158]

In 1971–72, an Information Research Department (IRD) to combat globalized Communist subversion was established within Australia's then–Department of Foreign Affairs (today, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, DFAT), with the aim of developing an "all-purpose unattributable information arm."[159] The use of such terminology by Australia emulates British policy language for a "shadow department" to conduct political warfare in times of crisis. Australian records are, however, yet to be declassified to confirm the intentions of such policy.

By 1973, Australian policy continued to distance itself from the counterinsurgency conflict in South Vietnam, having now seen the resolution of Indonesia's Konfrontasi.[160] While policy documents from 1973–76 recognized proxy activities on a global scale beyond Southeast Asia, broader atrophy in proxy warfare understanding is evident as Australia began to view itself as "one of the more secure countries in the world."[161]

The 1973 Whitlam Government imposed restrictions upon ASIS covert action capabilities that would eventually be formalized by 1985.[162] They would also be codified in the Intelligence Services Act 2001, which precludes ASIS from undertaking paramilitary activities.[163] This

curtailment within the Australian intelligence community seemingly resulted in the expansion of the Australian policy gap pertaining to proxy warfare. As ASIS authorities were curtailed, little adaptation occurred within the Department of Defense to fill the resultant gap.

Australia faced another policy challenge following the collapse of the Portuguese government in the Carnation Revolution of 1974. An Indonesian plan to exploit Portuguese turmoil and secure Timorese accession through proxies was evidently understood by Australian Ambassador Woolcott: "The OPSUS plan is now being implemented … They will replace some of the refugees forced across the border … with well-armed 'volunteers' who will provide the backbone for UDT and other anti-Fretilin groups."[164] Australian embassy reporting recognized the fiction of "partisan" mobilization, quoting an Australian embassy official who visited the border area in April 1975: "It is difficult to avoid the conclusion … that Indonesia is not involved in any way, or wished to become involved, in the military training of Portuguese Timorese."[165] In June 1975, it was recognized that "there is a distinct possibility that Indonesia will adopt the course of inspiring an insurrection."[166]

The explicit recommendation to overlook the tension between what was believed to be Communist influence and the Timorese right to self-determination was made by Ambassador Woolcott by at least 3 September 1975.[167] This recommendation demonstrates the depth to which fear of Communist influence manifested in Canberra. The narrative of Communist influence over Timorese nationalism is attributable to the Indonesian media, but it is unclear whether such narratives were deliberate disinformation, misinformation, or borne of ignorance.[168] A key lesson is that risk is associated with a failure to accurately understand the existence or extent of patron-client influence in the context of competition.

Australia, and the West writ large, had pivoted from a state of confronting Indonesia during Konfrontasi to one of cooperation during the 1970s. Jakarta and Canberra feared Communist extension of support to a fledgling East Timor in the wake of the collapse in South Vietnam. This fear caused Australian diplomats to overlook the thorny issue of self-determination, perhaps much to Australia's regret following the Timorese referendum of 1999.[169]

The march of Soviet subversion reached a critical point in 1979, when the Soviet Union's failing relationship with the Hafizullah Amin government of Afghanistan resulted in the decision to invade Afghanistan. The Soviet military thereby threatened continued expansion to establish a warm-water port on the Indian Ocean and therefore posed a threat to Australian interests. When briefed by the British prime minister on British proxy strategy in Afghanistan, Australian Prime Minister Fraser observed: "Whether the immediate challenge was subversive or military … the West's failure to respond would lead the states in the Middle East to regard the West as a spent force."[170]

A "war of choice" versus "war of necessity" was thus, to Fraser's mind, a somewhat false dichotomy. British policy at this time, February 1980, was to "impose certain penalties" on the Soviet Union to create "a situation in which the Soviet Union concludes that it has much to lose from further adventures."[171] Proxy warfare was thus communicative and contributed to the deterrence calculus. The British therefore supported "patriots inside Afghanistan through the covert supply of arms and training" and encouraged "the Islamic countries to support a united 'Afghan Liberation Organisation.'"[172]

In the late 1970s, the Australian open-source policy trail begins to go cold, as a paucity of declassified reports introduces an element of ambiguity into the analysis. From 1976 onward, Australian policy instead followed the United States' lead in avoiding the "lessons of Vietnam."

The Western military proclivity toward "the allure of battle"[173] led to a focus on "AirLand Battle" concepts of conventional warfare, to the exclusion of alternate means of political violence across the spectrum of escalation. In Australian policy, this cultural orientation most tangibly manifested in the isolationist "Defense of Australia" doctrine of 1987.[174]

Nonetheless, the second-order effects of proxy conflict continued to engage Australian interests. During the late 1970s into the 1980s, a gradual expansion in the Soviet use of proxy warfare was undertaken to advance its strategic interests, particularly in the Middle East and Africa. The Vietnamese overthrow of Pol Pot's regime led to a break in Sino-Vietnamese relations stemming from the Third Indochina War of 1979, which resulted in Chinese arms, ammunition, and other supplies being transported via Thailand—along the "Deng Xiaoping Trail," no less—to arm three Khmer resistance groups (including the Khmer Rouge).[175] Similarly, the CCP "poured" resources into the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) during the period 1968–1978.[176] An apparent torpedo to Beijing's policy struck with a mutiny in the BCP in 1989, yet Beijing adroitly maintained a client in the new form of the United Wa State Army (UWSA). Today, the UWSA controls the largest area in Southeast Asia governed by a non-state actor. These mechanisms of generating influence within strategic competition were seemingly advanced in the margins of 1980s Australian foreign policy.

Part 3: Today's Challenges?

Australia's recent contributions to the Combined Maritime Task Force securing the Red Sea once again engage a threat posed by a proxy support relationship, this time in the form of Iranian patronage of Ansar Allah (the Houthis). The threat posed by this non-state actor to international shipping lanes, critical to Australian economic prosperity, shows that despite rhetoric describing military commitments to the Middle East as a "distraction," the threat of irregular or non-state actors persists against Australia's global interests. Indeed, the Western world came exceedingly close to a major regional conflict in the Middle East in April 2024 and again in August 2024, as Iranian-sponsored proxies operated in concert with the Iranian regime to punish Israel. The absence of even the term "proxy war" in Australia's defense policy documents looks naïve at best in the face of such consequential events and their attendant economic, humanitarian, and political ramifications.

In Australia's region, non-state actors may similarly be externally supported as a form of competition between major powers to achieve geostrategic advantage. Given the history of CCP proxy warfare during the Cold War, it is entirely conceivable that secessionist influences in Bougainville, Aceh, New Caledonia, or the New People's Army in the Philippines might be covertly supported by Beijing. Such support would pose a significant policy challenge if Beijing were to effect "elite capture" in the Solomon Islands and thus provide a secure training and logistics sanctuary that could be exploited by Bougainvillean secessionists.

There are similar risks that the chaos of the civil war in Myanmar might be leveraged to advance Beijing's interests, particularly if the junta becomes desperate for external military assistance against the democratic resistance (the National Unity Government). Indeed, the aforementioned Chinese support to the United Wa State Army has created a de facto government, or "proto-state," in eastern Myanmar adjacent to the Golden Triangle. Beijing thus maintains a "spoiler" option in any potential resolution to the civil war in Myanmar.

Contemporary Australian Strategic Policy[177]

A geographic reality for Australian sovereignty is that almost all physical threats would first need to compromise the sovereignty of one or more of our northern neighbors. The sovereignty of our northern neighbors—and indeed Australia's sovereignty—is daily subjected to "gray zone" subversive activities, yet the instigators of such actions presently do not seek to provoke confrontation, crisis, and then conflict. Thus, a key theme of this paper is emphasized: states compete in ways that deliberately seek to avoid escalation into conflict. Australia's commitment to a global rules-based order and its need to use "asymmetry" to "deter by denial" align with the strategic logic of defensive proxy war—support to resistance—as NATO and the United States implemented from 2015–2022 in Ukraine. What distinguishes a resistance strategy is an "outsourcing" of functions of national security to citizens (i.e., irregular warfare waged physically and/or in cyberspace). This strategy was proven to be a viable component of national security strategy when Russia failed to achieve its desired *coup de main* in Kyiv in February 2022.

The strategic option of support to resistance counters subversion, proxy warfare, and conventional invasion. If communicated effectively, it might deter by denying an aggressor the quick fait accompli seizure it desires of a targeted region or country. An aggressor would know that a resistance movement has been established, capable of waging a prolonged insurgency; that the armed forces of a targeted country will receive training and materiel assistance to sustain the fight for their homeland; and that targeted political leadership will be aided in maintaining a government-in-exile that denies a quisling government legitimacy internationally and domestically. If communicated effectively, the potential aggressor will know that the invaded country will receive support from Australia and other like-minded nations to fight back and endure.

Proxy warfare has carried a pejorative meaning for Western audiences. When instead framed as support for the legitimate resistance of a democratic government against an autocratic aggressor's seizure of territory through armed force, this pejorative meaning no longer holds. A commitment to support resistance is instead a positive pronouncement, as it reinforces the global rules-based order and the United Nations Charter by dissuading acts of military aggression. If enacted, Australia might then benefit from cumulative strategic depth in defense. An irony is, of course, that Australia has already unconsciously adopted such a "support to resistance" strategy through its military support to Ukraine. Australia signaled that it will not abide by the aggressive actions of nations that erode the rules-based order.

An Australian support-to-regional-resistance strategy might learn from the recent exercise of Western "superpower" coordination in Ukraine—a "democratic internationale" that could deter autocratic regimes elsewhere. This idea relies upon irregular forces such as mobilized citizens in an occupied country, volunteers, cyber militias, and the support of companies for logistics, information systems, and boycotts. As Australia evolves its National Security Strategy, such lessons from proxy warfare activities in periods of competition, as charted throughout this paper, are prescient considerations for policymakers, military practitioners, and security scholars today.

Conclusion

Australia has shown an enduring strategic concern that the neighborhood might succumb to the

influence of an inimical foreign power.[178] This is a psychological concern that wields a disproportionate effect on policy. Surprisingly, then, today's limited awareness of proxy threats and appropriate policy guidance should be of concern to the Australian national security community, yet the term is absent from our discourse. Proxy warfare is also a policy challenge relevant to a broader range of Western nations; Australia's position is applicable to several countries that have similarly suffered from strategic amnesia regarding the nature of autocratic regimes and the tools they wield.

It has seemingly been forgotten that the primary threat faced by Australia in the region is the Chinese Communist Party, an organization with which Australia has competed before. Certain subversive, proxy, and autocratic methods remain part of the DNA of the Chinese ruling elite. Australia once had a sound understanding of this threat and the methods it employed. The modeling of such methods using Maoist protracted warfare theory, with its three phases of contestation for power, remains useful today. There are thus lessons that might be drawn from continuities in Australia's foreign policy history from earlier competitions that inform today's competition.

Within the Australian national security community, the need for close attention to this question is underscored by this paper, particularly in the fields of political warfare, proxy warfare, information warfare, and resistance warfare concepts. Gaps across these thematic areas emerge from the Australian strategic policy analysis detailed above. An example of such a gap is that, unlike the United States, the Australian Department of Defense does not include senior public servants and staff oriented to organizationally support special operations/low-intensity conflict.[179] This is despite recognition of this need in times of previous competition:

> Australia has a direct and critical interest in insurgency. First, indirect aggression by the promotion of instability and insurgency is a matter of concern to every nation state that depends largely on international stability for its development and security. Second, indirect aggression by insurgency places pressure on the balance of power and could jeopardise Australia's strategic interests… Third, to protect its interests in the security and stability of the states of South-East Asia, Australia and its allies could be … directly involved in difficult and protracted counter-insurgency operations.[180]

The Western historical record in general, and the Australian record in particular, contain lamentable examples of ignorance of irregular warfare and the proxy support relationships that entwine these non-state actors in a broader strategic context. We seemingly forget that such relationships were created with an eye toward subverting a competitor or empowering a third party in a competition. Such policy options exist to constrain and avoid conflict. Indeed, few Australian policymakers today would be familiar with the recognized importance of insurgency to Australian strategic policy, articulated in 1968 as per the quotation above. In today's competition between democracies and autocracies, the future is fraught with the potential for mistakes to be remade due to such ignorance of past competitions.

Endnotes

[1] Henry Kissinger, 'Military Policy and Defense of the "Grey Areas"', *Foreign Affairs*, 33:3 (April 1955), pp. 416-28.
[2] Outlook for South-East Asia', Cable from Australian Embassy, Moscow (16 June 1975), in *Documents on Australian Defence and Foreign Policy (DAFP), 1968-1975*, (J.R. Walsh and G.J. Munster publishers, 1980), p. 153.
[3] Tom Kramer, *The United Wa State Party: Narco-Army or Ethnic Nationalist Party?,* Policy Studies 38 (Southeast Asia), Washington: East-West Center, 2007, p. xv; Bertil Lintner, *The United Wa State Army and Burma's Peace Process*, Report No. 147, Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace (April 2019), p. 2; Dominique Dillabough-Lefebvre, 'The Wa Art of No Being Governed: The Wa Are Keen to Shed Their Image as Myanmar's Drug Lords or China's Proxies', *The Diplomat* (28 May 2019), available at: https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/the-wa-art-of-not-being-governed/.
[4] This paper leverages my recently published book *Riding Tigers: The Strategic Logic of Proxy Warfare* (London: Hurst Publishers, June 2026), which examines the broad security studies history of proxy warfare in competition and conflict.
[5] Paul Cleary, *The Men Who Came Out of the Ground* (Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2010); Bob Long, '*Z' Special Unit's Secret War: Operation Semut I* (Hornsby: Transpareon Press, 1989); Ian McNeill, *The Team: Australian Army Advisers in Vietnam 1962-1972* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1984).
[6] This is a major finding and theme across case studies in Andrew Maher, *Riding Tigers: The Strategic Logic of Proxy Warfare* (London: Hurst, 2026).
[7] Brian Toohey and William Pinwill, *Oyster: The Story of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service* (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1989), quoting the 1974 definition for 'special operations' proposed by Rear Admiral Anthony Synnot and Brigadier Alan Stretton, that today would be analogous with the concept of proxy warfare.
[8] An indicator of the paucity of proxy warfare awareness in the contemporary Australian military debate, education, and policy, can be identified with a review of the past ten years of the *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies* (previously the *ADF Journal).* Of 265 papers, twelve papers engaged the topic of irregular warfare, of which the majority engaged tangentially (and hence, unhelpfully) through the terminology of 'hybrid warfare', 'grey zone', or 'terrorism'; none engaged with proxy warfare directly. At: https://www.defence.gov.au/ADC/Publications/AJDSS/ and https://www.defence.gov.au/ADC/ADFJ/.
[9] Andrew Maher, 'Iranian Subversion: A systemic Strategy that has Extended to Australia', *Small Wars Journal* (30 Sep 2025), available at: https:/smallwarsjournal.com/2025/09/30/iranian-subversion-australia/
[10] One notable exception is Army Headquarters, *The Phantom Army* (Provisional), Canberra, (1961) that presents a compound doctrine of Communist Asian forces, blending 'revolutionary, insurgent or guerrilla forces and formal, conventional military forces'. (p. viii).
[11] From a formal policy position, subversion is defined by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) as: '(a) activities that involve, will involve or lead to, or are intended or likely ultimately to involve or lead to, the use of force or violence or other unlawful acts for the purpose of overthrowing or destroying the constitutional governments of the Commonwealth, states or territories. (b) activities directed to obstructing, hindering or interfering with the performance by the Defence Force of its functions or the carrying out of other activities by or for the Commonwealth for the purposes of security or the defence of the Commonwealth, or (c) activities directed to promoting violence or hostility between different groups of people in the Australian community so as to endanger

the peace, order or good government of the Commonwealth'. David Horner, *The Official History of ASIO: Volume 1: The Spy Catchers, 1949-1963* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2015), p. xxiii.
[12] Department of Defence, *Defence Strategic Review*, Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia (2023), available at: https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review. [accessed 24 April 2023], p. 17.
[13] Mike Burgess, *Director-General's Annual Threat Assessment 2025*, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (19 February 2025), available at: https://www.asio.gov.au/director-generals-annual-threat-assessment-2025.
[14] Tom Crowley, 'ASIO says Iran behind Australian antisemitic attacks, diplomatic ties cut', ABC News (26 August 2025), available at: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-08-26/iran-behind-antisemitic-attacks-asio-says/105697762.
[15] 'Remarks by the Director-General of National Intelligence, Andrew Shearer, at the 62nd Annual Australia-Japan Joint Business Conference', (6 October 2025), available at: https://www.oni.gov.au/news/australia-japan-business-co-operation-committee.
[16] Identifies Iran's support to Hamas and 'other proxies' as a component to its strategy. Department of Defence, *National Defence Strategy*, Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia (2024), p. 6.
[17] Only mentioned in a descriptive sense. Ibid., p. 64.
[18] Department of Defence, *Defence Strategic Review*, Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia (2023), available at: https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review, [accessed 24 April 2023].
[19] The term 'unconventional' was used only once as a synonym for 'asymmetric warfare'.
[20] Department of Defence, *Defence Strategic Update 2020*, Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia (2020), available at: https://www.defence.gov.au/strategicupdate-2020/, accessed 7 Nov 2020.
[21] The term 'Irregular' was used in the context of 'the ability of irregular opponents such as insurgents and terrorists to exploit new technologies means that, in relatively low-risk and effective ways.' Department of Defence, *Defending Australia In the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, Para. 2.25.
[22] Used in a literal sense. Ibid.., Para 4.16.
[23] 'The boundary between a benign situation and open conflict, either against local irregulars or more capable armed forces, can become blurred.' Department of Defence, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2000, Para 2.10.
[24] Department of Defence, *Australian Defence*, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1976, chapter 2, paras 29-31.
[25] Ibid., Chapter 2, para 2.
[26] Department of Defence, *Defence Strategic Review*, (2023) p. 49; Alex Wilner and Andreas Wenger, 'Introduction: Deterrence by Denial', in *Deterrence by Denial: Theory and Practice,* Alex S. Wilner and Andreas Wegner (eds) (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2021), p. 7.
[27] Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books, 2018).
[28] For example: Geoffrey Fairbairn, *Revolutionary Warfare and Communist Strategy: The Threat to South-East Asia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968); Lt. Col. John J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War: The Strategy of Counter-insurgency* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966); Australian Military Forces, *The Division in Battle, Pamphlet No 11: Counter Revolutionary Warfare* (Canberra: Army Headquarters, 1966); Army Headquarters, *The Phantom Army (Provisional),* (Canberra, ACT: Department of Defence, 1961).
[29] Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Defence Policy Statement 2018*, New Zealand Government (July 2018). Interestingly, this document does recognise that 'the pursuit of spheres of influence' is a force

pressuring the international order. It does not, however, examine the ways in which influence is pursued in any meaningful manner. Canadian Government, *Canada's Defence Policy: Strong, Secure, Engaged*, Canadian Armed Forces, (last updated 10 Jun 2021), available at: https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/policies-standards/canada-defence-policy.html, accessed 7 Jul 2021. Canadian policy, like Australia's, engages with the topic of 'hybrid warfare' and 'grey zone,' but offers little clarification as to what is meant with this terminology. United States Government, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, (1 June 2019).

[30] Ministry of Defence, *Defence in a competitive age*, CP411 (March 2021).

[31] This section on Japanese proxy warfare in WWII draws upon Andrew Maher, *Riding Tigers: The Strategic Logic of Proxy Warfare* (London: Hurst, 2025) and Andrew Maher, 'Special Operations Developments in the Pacific: Back to the Future?', *Into the Void: Special Operations Forces after the War on Terror* (London: Hurst, 2024).

[32] 'Cabinet Minute: Yampi Sound Iron Deposits', Minute 1368, (9 March 1937), in R.G. Neale (ed.), *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy (DAFP), 1937-49: Volume I: 1937-38* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1975), p. 40.

[33] The following documents chart consideration of 'economic warfare' to counter Japanese influence in the Australian economy: 'Cabinet Minute: Yampi Sound Iron Deposits', Minute 1368, (9 March 1937), in R.G. Neale (ed.), *DAFP, 1937-49: Volume I: 1937-38* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1975), p. 40; 'Mr F.G. Shedden, Secretary of Department of Defence, to Lt Col W.R. Hodgson, Secretary of Department of External Affairs', Melbourne (6 December 1937), in R.G. Neale (ed.), *DAFP, 1937-49: Volume I: 1937-38* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1975), p. 239; 'Memorandum by Lt Col W.R. Hodgson, Secretary of Department of External affairs, for Mr R.G. Casey, Minister in Charge of Development', (13 December 1937), in R.G. Neale (ed.), *DAFP, 1937-49: Volume I: 1937-38*, (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1975), p. 240; 'Mr J.A. Lyons, Prime Minister, to Mr Torao Wakamatsu, Japanese Consul-General in Sydney,' (17 May 1938), in R.G. Neale (ed.), *DAFP, 1937-49: Volume I: 1937-38*, (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1975), p. 342; 'Mr H. Fitzmaurice, UK Consul-General in Batavia, to Mr A. Eden, UK Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs', (received in Canberra 21 July 1937), in R.G. Neale (ed.), *DAFP, 1937-49: Volume I: 1937-38*, (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1975), pp. 175-7. 'Mr A.T. Stirling, External Affairs Officer in London, to Department of External Affairs', London, (20 March 1939), in R.G. Neale (ed.), *DAFP, 1937-49: Volume II: 1939*, (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1975), p. 74. 'Commonwealth Government to Lord Caldecote, U.K. Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs', (12 July 1940), in W.J. Hudson & H.J.W. Stokes (eds.), *DAFP, 1937-49: Volume IV: July 1940 – June 1941* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1980), p. 36.

[34] David Lee, 'Australia's Embargo of the Export of Iron Ore: A Reconsideration', *Journal of Australasian Mining History,* Vol. 18 (October 2020) argues convincingly that it was not a vested interest from a mining company nor was it direct national security interests per se, that was behind this decision. Indeed, it is interesting to note the recognition at the time that the sale of iron ore to Japan would increase Australia's (and the Commonwealth's) leverage over Japan should hostilities commence (p. 105); The primary concern regarding Timor was that the Australian government had recognised by this time (1937) that Japanese 'colonialism' was being affected through companies pursuing ostensibly 'unpromising concessions' that were serving to 'extend their sphere of activities'. 'Cabinet Submission by Mr H.V.C. Thorby, Minister for Civil Aviation,' (14 March 1939) in R.G. Neale (ed.), *DAFP, 1937-49: Volume II: 1939* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1975), pp. 61-3.

[35] Japanese Security Services', 30 Jun 1945, AWM Barcode 8729774, p. 21. Of note, Palau was sovereign Japanese territory following seizure from Germany in 1914.
[36] 'Cabinet Submission by Mr H.V.C. Thorby, Minister for Civil Aviation', (14 March 1939), in R.G. Neale (ed.), *DAFP, 1937-49: Volume II: 1939*, (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1975), pp. 61-4; 'Mr. R.G. Casey, Minister to the United States, to Department of External Affairs', Washington, (received 2 April 1940), in H. Kenway, H.J. Stokes & P.G. Edwards (eds.), *DAFP, 1937-49: Volume III: January-June 1940* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1979), p. 173.
[37] 'Mr A.T. Stirling, External Affairs Officer in London, to Department of External Affairs', London, (20 March 1939), in R.G. Neale (ed.), *DAFP, 1937-49: Volume II: 1939* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1975), p. 74.
[38] 'Mr S. M. Bruce, High Commissioner in London, to Mr. R.G. Menzies, Prime Minister', London (received 6 April 1940), in H. Kenway, H.J. Stokes & P.G. Edwards (eds.), *DAFP, 1937-49: Volume III: January-June 1940*, (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1979), p. 178.
[39] 'Memorandum by Mr. T. Elink Schuurman, Netherlands Consul-General in Australia,' (2 April 1940), in H. Kenway, H.J. Stokes & P.G. Edwards (eds.), *DAFP, 1937-49: Volume III: January-June 1940* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1979), p. 174.
[40] 'Mr H. Fitzmaurice, UK Consul-General in Batavia, to Mr A. Eden, UK Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs,' (received in Canberra 21 July 1937), in R.G. Neale (ed.), *DAFP, 1937-49: Volume I: 1937-38* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1975), p. 176.
[41] Brian Martin, 'Shield of Collaboration: The Wang Jingwei regime's security service, 1939-1945', *Intelligence and National Security*, 16:4 (2001), p. 91; To provide a sense of the level of Japanese intelligence effort, Michael Burleigh, *Small Wars, Faraway Places: Global insurrection and the making of the modern world, 1945-1965* (New York, NY: Viking, 2013), notes that 'even the official photographer inside Singapore's Naval Base was a covert Japanese intelligence officer' (p. 13).
[42] 'Minutes of Fourth Meeting of Principal Delegates to Imperial Conference', London, (22 May 1937), in R.G. Neale (ed.), *DAFP, 1937-49: Volume I: 1937-38* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1975), p. 82.
[43] Japanese Security Services', 30 Jun 1945, AWM Barcode 8729774, p. 25.
[44] A broad range of terminology was applied to these organisations, which also changed over time with the progress of the war. For simplicity's sake, terminology of "Special Operations Australia" and "Political Warfare Executive" is used due the nature of tasks such organisations undertook.
[45] Will Davies, *Secret & Special: The untold story of Z Special Unit in the Second World War* (Australia: Vintage Books, 2021), p. 5.
[46] Exemplar sources include: Davies, *Secret & Special*; Christine Helliwell, *Semut: The untold story of a secret Australian Operations in WWII Borneo* (Penguin Random House Australia, 2021); and Bernard Callinan, *Independent Company: The Australian Army in Portuguese Timor 1941-43* (Richmond, VIC: William Heinemann Australia, 1953).
[47] 'The Inauguration of Organised Political Warfare', Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment, Document 269, *FRUS*, (4 May 1948).
[48] *An Appreciation of the Strategical Position of Australia (September 1947)*, endorsed by the Chiefs of Staff Committee on 28 October 1947, reproduced in *A History of Australian Strategic Policy Since 1945*, Stephan Frühling (ed.), Commonwealth of Australia (Canberra, ACT: Department of Defence, 2009).
[49] The Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), a predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency, was directed to undertake 'covert activities related to: propaganda; economic warfare, preventative direct action, including sabotage, anti-sabotage, demolition and evacuation measures; subversion against hostile states, including assistance to underground resistance movements, guerrillas and refugee

liberation groups, and support of indigenous anti-communist elements in threatened countries of the free world'. Stephen J.K. Long, 'Strategic Disorder, the Office of Policy Coordination and the Inauguration of US Political Warfare against the Soviet Bloc, 1948-50', *Intelligence and National Security,* 27:4 (2012), pp. 459-60; Kurtz-Phelan, *The China Mission*, p. 141; Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, p. 18; The scale of military assistance was directed by NSC 68, which was 'designed to foster cooperative efforts' within the framework of the policy of 'containment.' NSC 68, 'A Report to the National Security Council – NSC 68', President's Secretary's File, Truman Papers (12 April 1950), p. 57.

[50] George F. Kennan, 'The Inauguration of Organised Political Warfare [Redacted Version]', April 30, 1948, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archives.

[51] Quoted in David Horner, *The Official History of ASIO: Volume 1: The Spy Catchers, 1949-1963* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2015), p. 52.

[52] *A Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy, February 1953*, endorsed by the Defence Committee on 8 January 1953, reproduced in Frühling (ed.), *A History of Australian Strategic Policy Since 1945*.

[53] 'Political Propaganda', TNA CAB21/2750, AC(O) 636/14/4/51 (13 April 1950), p. 1.

[54] Robert O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War 1950-53: Volume I Strategy and Diplomacy* (Canberra: The Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service, 1981) and Robert J. O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War 1950-53: Volume II Combat Operations* (Canberra: The Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service, 1985), contain almost no mention of Communist subversion pre-war and then the employment of proxies by both parties on the periphery of conflict. A recent Australian account of the Korean War, John Blaxland, Michael Kelly and Liam Brewin Higgins (eds.), *In From the Cold: Reflections on Australia's Korean War* (Australian National University, Canberra: ANU Press, 2020), likewise overlooks these facets of the conflict.

[55] Office of the Historian, 'The Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty (ANZUS Treaty), 1951', Department of State, available at: https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/anzus [accessed 19 Nov 2023].

[56] 'Memorandum for the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary (Lay)', NSC 90, *FRUS* (23 May 1951). This memorandum called for collaboration with friendly government to respond to the recognised threat – That 'Communist-controlled guerrilla warfare represents one of the most potent instrumentalities in the arsenal of communist aggression on a world-wide basis' (p. 84).

[57] Singlaub, *Hazardous Duty*, p. 228.

[58] Rory Cormac, 'The Pinprick Approach: Whitehall's Top-Secret Anti-Communist Committee and the Evolution of British Covert Action Strategy', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 16:3 (Summer 2014), p. 11.

[59] Cormac, 'The Pinprick Approach', quoting: AC(O) Minutes, 15 February 1950, in TNA, CAB 134/4, AC(O) (50) 4th Meeting; "The Work of the Official Committee on Communism (Overseas)", 23 June 1951, in TNA, CAB 134/2, AC(M) (51)4.

[60] 'Proposed Activities behind the Iron Curtain' (Third Revise), AC(O) (50)52, CAB21/2750, (November 1950), p. 4.

[61] Cormac, 'The Pinprick Approach', p. 13, quoting AC(O) Minutes, 9 March 1950, in TNA CAB 134/4. AC(O) (50) 7th Meeting.

[62] Ibid., p. 14, quoting 'Proposed Activities behind the Iron Curtain' (Third Revise), (November 1950), and AC(O) Minutes, 1 March 1950, TNA CAB 134/4, AC(O) (50) 6th Meeting.

[63] Brian Crozier, *Free Agent: The Unseen War 1941-1991* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), p. 6.

[64] Crozier, *Free Agent*, p. 6; D.D. Brown, 'Regarding David Garnett's History of PWE', TNA FO 1110/533, PR 102/17G (9 April 1953).

[65] David Garnett, 'The Political Warfare Executive', Secret, TNA CAB 102/610, (London: Cabinet Office. February 1947), p. ii; The IRD was ultimately closed by Labour Foreign Secretary, David

Owen in 1977 due to right-wing contacts that were attacking the Labour Party. In other words, the IRD became, or was perceived to have become, politicised. Jonathan Walker, *Aden Insurgency: The Savage War in South Arabia 1962-67* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2005), p. 136.
[66] 'Mr Wilson: Dept of Foreign Affairs to visit IRO', TNA FCO 168/4481 'Information Research Department', 1971; J.G. McMinnies, 'Australian IRD Visit', OH 3611/2/71, (19 November 1971), in TNA FCO 168/4481 'Information Research Department,' 1971; K.C. Crook, 'Michael Wilson's Visit to IRD', OH 3611/2/71, (25 February 1971), in TNA FCO 168/4481 'Information Research Department', 1971.
[67] Cabinet Official Committee on Communism Overseas (AC(O): 'Proposed Activities behind the Iron Curtain' (Third Revise), TNA CAB21/2750, AC(O) (50)52 (November 1950), pp. 2-3; NSC 48/5, 'United States Objectives, Policies, and Courses of action in Asia', *FRUS*, Vol VI, Part I (17 May 1951).
[68] Fitzroy Maclean to Secretary War Office (copied Minister of Defence), 'RE: Irregular Warfare', TNA PREM 11/47 (25 Aug 1952); Fitzroy Maclean to Prime Minister W.L.S. Churchill, 'Irregular Warfare', TNA PREM 11/47 (5 August 1952).
[69] 'The "Cold War" in the Far East', TNA CAB21/2750, AC(O) (50)31 (19 July 1950); NSC 48/5, 'United States Objectives, Policies, and Courses of action in Asia', *FRUS*, Vol VI, Part I (17 May 1951); NSC 68 'A Report to the National Security Council – NSC 68', President's Secretary's File, Truman Papers (12 April 1950) advocated for an 'intensification of affirmative and timely measures and operations by covert means in the fields of economic warfare and political and psychological warfare with a view to fomenting and supporting unrest and revolt in selected strategic satellite countries' (p. 57).
[70] David Horner, *The Official History of ASIO: Volume 1: The Spy Catchers, 1949-1963* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2015), p. 183.
[71] Brian Toohey and William Pinwill, *Oyster: The Story of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service* (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1989), pp. 8-9, quoting a report by then Director Alfred Brooke dated 14 March 1955. The charter of 13 May 1952 issued by Prime Minister Menzies focused upon two key themes: 'subversion' and 'a special relationship with the British' (p. 30). This language is emulated in Department of Defence reports during this era as discussed subsequently in this chapter.
[72] Toohey and Pinwill, *Oyster*. This term, 'Special Political Action' meant 'organising coups, secret radio stations and propaganda campaigns, wrecking international conferences and influencing elections'. SPA was essentially 'a less muscular form of Special Operations (SO)' (p. 60).
[73] Rory Cormac, 'The Pinprick Approach: Whitehall's Top-Secret Anti-Communist Committee and the Evolution of British Covert Action Strategy', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 16:3 (Summer 2014), pp. 5-28.
[74] J. H. Peck, 'Draft Brief on Political Warfare for the discussion with Mr Dulles and Mr Stassen', (28 January 1953), TNA FO 1110/533, PR102/8, p. 1.
[75] *The Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy, October 1956*, endorsed by the Defence Committee on 11 October 1956, reproduced in Frühling (ed.), *A History of Australian Strategic Policy Since 1945*, pp. 203-6; In the SEATO area, subversion was seen to be the greatest threat. Joint Intelligence Staff (Melbourne), 'The Overall Overt Communist Threat to the Treaty Area', (May 1956), SEATO Sub-Committees - Ad-hoc Staff Planners and Intelligence (Threat Evaluation) Sub-Committee', NAA: A1838/269, TS688/18 Pt 3, p. 2.
[76] Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *Feet to the Fire: CIA Covert Operations in Indonesia, 1957-1958*, Naval Institute Special Warfare Series, (Annapolis, MY: Naval institute Press, 1999), p. 12.
[77] Conboy and Morrison, *Feet to the Fire*, 1999, p. 17 & 32. This policy had been intimated by President Eisenhower in 1953 when he suggested "geographic units" of Indonesia could be used as a

"fulcrum" to help eliminate communism from the island chain (p. 16); A common sentiment toward regional segregation was revealed by the saying: "Gone is Dutch colonialism, coming is Javanese colonialism". Quoted in Audrey R. Kahin and George McT. Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy: The Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1995, 1997), p. 47.
[78] Conboy and Morrison, *Feet to the Fire*, 1999, pp. 36-38; John Kenneth Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War: America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 1999), p. 139.
[79] Kahin and Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy*, 1997), p. 89.
[80] Kahin and Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy*, p. 102.
[81] Conboy and Morrison, *Feet to the Fire*, pp. 44, 56, & 61. Commanding the Taiwanese group was Col. Loh Tsu-sin, an ROC army officer; Kahin and Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy*, p. 120.
[82] Conboy and Morrison, *Feet to the Fire*, 1999, pp. 79-80.
[83] Ibid., p. 82.
[84] Ibid., p. 144.
[85] Quoted in Kahin and Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy*, p. 161.
[86] Conboy and Morrison, *Feet to the Fire*, p. 112; Kahin and Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy*, p. 166.
[87] Conboy and Morrison, *Feet to the Fire*, p. 156.
[88] Ibid., pp. 159-60.
[89] Ibid., p. 160.
[90] Kahin and Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy*, 1997, p. 134.
[91] Kahin and Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy*, 1997, pp. 155-6.
[92] Joint Intelligence Staff (Melbourne), 'The Overall Overt Communist Threat to the Treaty Area', (May 1956), SEATO Sub-Committees - Ad-hoc Staff Planners and Intelligence (Threat Evaluation) Sub-Committee', NAA: A1838/269, TS688/18 Pt 3, p. 5.
[93] 'Recent Chinese Communist Activities Among Overseas Chinese in South-East Asia', Counter Subversion Activities Overseas, (15 Nov 1957), NAA: A1838, 2470/7, pp. 1-3.
[94] General Maxwell D. Taylor (Ret), *The Uncertain Trumpet* (New York, NY, Harper & Brothers, 1959).
[95] Alfred H. Paddock Jr., *US Army Special Warfare: Its Origins* (National Defense University, NDU Press: Fort Lesley McNair, Washington D.C., 1982); and National Security Action Memoranda (NSAM) 2, "Development of Counter-Guerrilla Forces", to the Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library – JFKNSF-328-003, (23 February 1961, declassified 30 August 1977), directed the addition of 3,000 men and $19 million budget augmentation to develop 'counter-guerrilla capability'.
[96] *Strategic Review, Annex to Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy, October 1956*, endorsed by the Defence Committee on 11 October 1956, reproduced in Stephan Frühling (ed), *A History of Australian Strategic Policy Since 1945* (Canberra, ACT: Department of Defence, 2009), p. 223.
[97] Office of Joint History, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and The First Indochina War 1947-1954* (Washington D.C.: Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2004), p. 215.
[98] *The Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy, January 1959*, endorsed by the Defence Committee on 12 January 1959, reproduced in Frühling (ed.), *A History of Australian Strategic Policy Since 1945*, p. 251.
[99] *The Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy, January 1962*, endorsed by the Defence Committee on 25 January 1962, reproduced in reproduced in Frühling (ed.), *A History of Australian Strategic Policy Since 1945*.
[100] *The Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy, October 1964*, endorsed by the Defence Committee on 15 October 1964, reproduced in reproduced in Frühling (ed.), *A History of Australian*

Strategic Policy Since 1945, p. 315; Army Headquarters, *The Phantom Army (Provisional)* (Canberra, ACT: Department of Defence 1961).
[101] 'Study of Requirements for Logistic Support of Chinese Communist Force envisaged in SEATO Intelligence Estimates for an attack against Indo-China and Thailand, and their capability to move and support this force in the face of SEATO air attack', Australian Joint Intelligence Committee, 2/58 (Final), NAA: A1838/269, 654/8/14/16/5, p. 1.
[102] 'Appreciation No 20/1956,' Australian Joint Intelligence Committee, (April 1956), NAA: A1838/269, TS688/18 Part 2, p. 6.
[103] Army Headquarters, *The Phantom Army (Provisional)* (Canberra, ACT: Department of Defence 1961).
[104] 'Communist Ideology, Strategy and Tactics', Counterinsurgency Department, Fort Bragg, NC: U.S. Army Special Warfare School (February 1962), AWM 7787, p. 44.
[105] 'Priorities for the development of SEATO Plans,' minute, Australian Defence Committee, (14 September 1961), NAA: A1209/134, 61/1097, p. 3.
[106] 'Counter Subversion Study Group commences 3rd October', Cablegram (5 October 1961), NAA: A1209, 1961/1299.
[107] Joint Intelligence Committee (Australia), 'The Outlook for Mainland South-East Asia', JIC(AUST) (63) 70, AWM 122, 3/5 Part 13 (February 1963), p. 1, emphasis added.
[108] 'Improvement of the Capacity of Member Governments to Identify and to deal with Communist Insurgency and Subversion,' SEATO Council Representatives, SCR/61/D-134, (1961), NAA: A1838/2, 189/9/5 Part 1, pp. 1-2.
[109] 'Australian Participation in Counter-Communist Activity in South-East Asia,' Cabinet Minute, Decision No. 188, (30 April 1962), NAA: A5819/2, C4642, p. 1; 'SEATO Military Plan 7 – To Counter Communist Insurgency in South Vietnam,' Athol Townley, Australian Minister of Defence, to Cabinet, 26 April 1962, NAA: A5819/2, Volume 5/Agendum 170. This so-called "planning" was wafer-thin on detail about the nature and requirements of the threat to instead focus upon the potential impacts of identified force commitment options for deployment.
[110] 'Prime Minister Personal Telegram: High Commissioner for Australia', No. 1610, PRO DEFE 13/632, (31 July 1964), p. 1.
[111] Yang Kuisong, *Changes in Mao Zedong's Attitude toward the Indochina War, 1949-1973*, Oiang Zhai (trans.), Working Paper No. 34, Cold War International History Project: Washington D.C. (February 2002), p. 14.
[112] Chin Peng was summoned to Beijing and promised Chinese support if he came out of revolutionary retirement. Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2020), pp. 104-5.
[113] National Intelligence Estimate 54-1-76, *FRUS* (1 April 1976), pp. 8-9.
[114] Christopher Tuck, ''Shaping hearts and minds: claret operations in Borneo, 1965-1966', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, (2023), p. 2; David Easter, ''Keep the Indonesian Pot Boiling', (2005), p. 55; Gregg A. Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry During the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), p. 203.
[115] Tuck, ''Shaping hearts and minds: claret operations in Borneo, 1965-1966', (2023), p. 3; Early Indonesian operations included interference with Malayan fishing and a seemingly blind-eye to piracy and kidnapping in the Malacca Straits. Joint Intelligence Committee, 'Possible Indonesian Activities Against Malaya and Singapore During the Next Three Months', 23 Aug 1963, JIC(63)71, CAB158/50, p. 2.
[116] Tuck, ''Shaping hearts and minds: claret operations in Borneo, 1965-1966', (2023), p. 3.
[117] Brian Avery, *Our Secret War: Defending Malaysia Against Indonesian Confrontation, 1965-1967* (McRae, Australia: Slouch Hat Publications, 2001), p. 13. Lieutenant Colonel Avery was a participant in Confrontation, having served with 4RAR.

[118] 'From Singapore to Foreign Office', No. 375, DEFE 11/391 (20 Dec 1962); Outward Telegram from Commonwealth Relations Office, 'Brunei Revolt – Indonesia', No. 723, 48/C/29, DEFE 11/391 (21 December 1962). Evidence held by the British at that time suggested that the Bruneian rebels had received training in Indonesian Borneo prior to the revolt.
[119] 'From Singapore to Foreign Office', No. 375, DEFE 11/391, (20 Dec 1962).
[120] Ibid..
[121] Ministry of Defence Situation Report No 11., 'Situation as at 1200 hours 27th December 1962, 48/C/29, DEFE 11/391, reports that despite an initial estimate of 2,250 rebels under arms on 8 Dec 1962, that the rebels in Brunei and North Sarawak were suffering from low morale and therefore would be unlikely to 'resort to a guerrilla campaign'. 'From Djakarta (Sir. L Fry) to Foreign Office', 'Brunei', 48/C/29, DEFE 11/391 (25 December 1962).
[122] Ken Conboy, *Intel: Inside Indonesia's Intelligence Service* (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing (Asia), 2004), p. 36.
[123] Ibid., p. 36.
[124] Ibid., p. 36.
[125] Douglas Hyde, *The Roots of Guerrilla Warfare* (London: The Bodley Head, 1968), p. 81; The British estimated that the Indonesians had approximately 3,500 Sarawak communists mobilised. Joint Intelligence Committee, 'The Military Threat from Indonesia to the Malaysia Area up to March 1964', 16 Oct 1963, JIC(63)82, CAB158/50, p. 1; Interestingly, the ethnic Chinese in Sarawak were lent little fraternal support from the PRC (as was the case with other conflicts at the time – 1965), including Somaliland, Kenya, Kashmir, and Burma. Peter Van Ness, *Revolution and Chinese Foreign Policy: Peking's Support for Wars of National Liberation* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1970), p. 95.
[126] Conboy, *Intel*, p. 36.
[127] Rory Cormac*, Disrupt and Deny: Spies, Special Forces, and the Secret Pursuit of British Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 159-60; David Easter, 'British and Malaysian Covert Support for Rebel Movements in Indonesia during the 'Confrontation', 1963-66', in *The Clandestine Cold War in Asia, 1945-65: Western Intelligence, Propaganda and Special Operations,* Richard J. Aldrich, Gary D. Rawnsley & Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley (eds.), (London & Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2000), p. 197.
[128] David Easter, 'British and Malaysian Covert Support for Rebel Movements in Indonesia during the 'Confrontation', 2000, p. 197.
[129] 'Brief for discussions with Sir Robert Menzies', PRO DEFE 13/632 (6 July 1964)
[130] Ibid.., p. 2; David Easter, 'British and Malaysian Covert Support for Rebel Movements in Indonesia during the 'Confrontation', (2000), p. 200; 'Indonesian Confrontation of Malaysia', Extract of Note of a Meeting held on 14th July at 9am, PRO DEFE 25/158 (22 July 1964).
[131] 'Indonesian Confrontation of Malaysia', Extract of Note of a Meeting held on 14th July at 9am, PRO DEFE 25/158 (22 July 1964), p. 2.
[132] 'Operations Across the Indonesian Border', Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, DP 87/64 (Final), PRO DEFE 25/158, (1 Sep 1964), p. 1.
[133] Brian Avery, *Our Secret War: Defending Malaysia Against Indonesian Confrontation, 1965-1967* (McRae, Australia: Slouch Hat Publications, 2001).
[134] Avery, *Our Secret War*, p. 154.
[135] By 1965, possession of modern Soviet weapons made Indonesian 'one of the best-equipped military forces in South-East Asia', thereby empowering Jakarta to confront Malaysia. National Foreign Assessment Centre, *Communist Aid Activities in Non-Communist Less Developed Countries 1979 and 1954-79: A Research Paper*, CIA Special Collections: ER 80-10318U, declassified in 2000, (October 1980), p. 44; Wynfred Joshua and Stephen P. Gibert, *Arms for the Third World: Soviet Military Aid*

Diplomacy (Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), p. 1, note that $US 1 billion (1969 dollars, approximately $US 8 billion in 2023) in Soviet weapons were provided to strengthen Indonesia's armed forces in confrontations with the Netherlands (1949) and Malaysia.
[136] David Easter, ''Keep the Indonesian Pot Boiling': Western Covert Intervention in Indonesia, October 1965-March 1966', *Cold War History*, 5:1 (2005), p. 57.
[137] Joshua and Gibert, *Arms for the Third World*, p. 65.
[138] The issue of American intervention supporting the PKI narrative was identified by Kahin and Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy*, p. 194.
[139] Kahin and Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy*, p. 207. The Americans outspent the Soviet bloc by mid-1959.
[140] Geoffrey Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise: Political Violence in Bali* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 1, 181, 273, 281, & 295.
[141] Ken Conboy, *Divine Spears: Operations of Indonesia's Special Forces in East Timor, 1975-77* (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing (Asia) Pty. Ltd., 2018), p. 46.
[142] Alan Dupont, *Australia's Threat Perceptions: A Search for Identity*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 82, Canberra: Australian National University (1991), p. 58.
[143] Dupont, *Australia's Threat Perceptions,* pp 59-60.
[144] Ian McNeill, *The Team: Australian Army Advisers in Vietnam, 1962-1972* (Canberra, ACT: Australian War Memorial, 1984). An example was Captain Ian Teague (1 Cdo Regt) who in early 1965, raised People's Action Teams (PATs), *Biet-Chinh Nhan-Dan;* A second example of Captain Barry Petersen is pertinent in this context. Petersen was seconded to the CIA to supervise and develop *Montagnard* paramilitary groups in the central highlands, who was able to raise, train and lead a force of over 1000 *Montagnards*. Frank Walker, *The Tiger Man of Vietnam* (Hachette Publishing Australia, 2010).
[145] Brian Toohey and William Pinwill, *Oyster: The Story of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service* (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1989), p. 87.
[146] *The Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy, August 1968,* endorsed by the Defence Committee on 19 August 1968, reproduced in Frühling (ed.), *A History of Australian Strategic Policy Since 1945*, p. 345.
[147] Dupont, *Australia's Threat Perceptions,* p. 64.
[148] Thomas Richardson, *As if we were never there? Pacification in Phuoc Tuy province, Republic of Vietnam, 1966-1972*, PhD Thesis, UNSW Canberra (July 2014), p. 296; Interestingly, Australian commitment to this province was in an effort to ensure a strong American military presence in South-East Asia and that it 'show a readiness to assist the United States to achieve her aims in South Vietnam'. Government of Australia, 'Australia's Military Commitment to Vietnam', Tabled in the House of Representatives (13 May 1975), p. 16.
[149] Richardson, *As if we were never there?* (July 2014), p. 293. This was despite Australia possessing sound doctrine for the prosecution of counter-insurgency, based itself upon a robust understanding of Maoism or Communist Revolutionary Warfare doctrine. Richardson continues that it was striking how 'Australian commanders continued to have substantially different ideas on how best to prosecute the war in Phuoc Tuy' (p. 246).
[150] Terry Smith, *Training the Bodes: Australian Army advisers training Cambodian infantry battalions – A postscript to the Vietnam War* (Newport: Big Sky Publishing, 2011).
[151] Richardson provides the example of Brigadier Pearson's handover in September 1969 to Brigadier Weir who abandoned pacification. Weir's successor, Brigadier Henderson, pivoted back to pacification and demonstrated unprecedented success. When Brigadier McDonald succeeded Henderson, the focus again shifted to hunting main force units. Richardson, *As if we were never there?*, p. 213; Sir Robert Thompson succinctly points to the problem – an understanding of 'pacification': 'Pacification is,

therefore, *an offensive campaign* designed to restore the government's authority by a sustained advance in accordance with national priority areas and, at the same time, to protect the individual against a selective reprisal attack so that he can safely play his part within the community, in co-operation with the government, against the Vietcong'. Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam*, p. 151 (emphasis added).
[152] Ibid., p. 245-6.
[153] 'National Intelligence Estimate, 1-68: World Trends and Contingencies Affecting U.S. Interests', Director of Central Intelligence (6 June 1968), p. 20. This particularly telling passage continues: 'Advice, training, and logistical support by foreign military or clandestine services will be more common than the open operations of foreign military units'. This intelligence report came to this conclusion as a result of recognising that 'conflicts or rebellions in one area encourage dissidents in others' (p. 1).
[154] *The Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy, March 1971*, endorsed by the Defence Committee on 5 March 1971, reproduced in Frühling (ed.), *A History of Australian Strategic Policy Since 1945*.
[155] Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2005).
[156] Central Intelligence Agency, 'CIA Long-Range Planning for 1985-1990', CIA-RDP89-0111R000300040021-7 (5 May 1982), declassified 15 Aug 2005, p. 2.
[157] This forty-day period involved the collapse of the 'twin-pillars' U.S. strategy in the Middle East due to the Iranian Revolution, the Siege of Mecca, the overrunning and burning of the US Embassy in Islamabad, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.
[158] CIA, 'CIA Long-Range Planning for 1985-1990', CIA-RDP89-0111R000300040021-7 (5 May 1982), declassified 15 Aug 2005, p. 3.
[159] 'Mr Wilson: Dept of Foreign Affairs to visit IRO', FCO 168/4481, 'Information Research Department, 1971; and J.G. McMinnies, 'Australian IRD Visit', OH 3611/2/71, (19 November 1971), in FCO 168/4481 'Information Research Department', 1971. These files suggest that despite a secretive approach to British engagement in establishing an Australian IRD, that the initiative had bi-partisan support. K.C. Crook, 'Michael Wilson's Visit to IRD', OH 3611/2/71 (25 February 1971), in FCO 168/4481, 'Information Research Department', 1971. This engagement was amicable as British retrenchment with the 'East of Suez' policy held potential for East and South-East Asian British IRD personnel to transfer into the new Australian department. K.C. Crook, 'Michael Wilson's Visit to IRD', OH 3611/2/71 (25 February 1971), in FCO 168/4481 'Information Research Department', 1971.
[160] *The Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy, June 1973*, endorsed by the Defence Committee on 1 June 1973, reproduced in Stephan Frühling (ed.), *A History of Australian Strategic Policy Since 1945*, Commonwealth of Australia (Canberra, ACT: Department of Defence, 2009).
[161] *The Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy, June 1973*, endorsed by the Defence Committee on 1 June 1973, reproduced in in Ibid.., p. 439.
[162] Brian Toohey and William Pinwill, *Oyster: The Story of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service* (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1989), p. 147. This timeframe aligns with Department of Defence efforts to assume a policy lead for proxy warfare capabilities (p. 148).
[163] Subsection 6(4), *Intelligence Services Act 2001*, No. 152, (2001), available at: https://www.legislation.gov.au/Series/C2004A00928, accessed [20 January 2024].
[164] Cablegram to Canberra, 6 September 1975, Document 217 in Wendy Way (ed.), *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy (DAFP): Australia and the Indonesian Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974-1976* (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2000), p. 392.
[165] Cablegram to Canberra, 15 April 1975, Document 126, in *DAFP: Australia and the Indonesian Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974-1976*, p. 252.
[166] Dispatch to Wilesee, 2 June 1975, Document 137, in *DAFP: Australia and the Indonesian Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974-1976*, p. 267; Efforts were made to mask Indonesian

mobilisation using 'volunteers'. Cablegram to Jakarta, 15 October 1975, Document 265 in *DAFP: Australia and the Indonesian Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974-1976*, p. 473.
[167] Quoting Woolcott: 'We should not lose sight of the fact that there is now very little likelihood of a proper act of self-determination taking place in Portuguese Timor and that Australia's best long-term interests … are likely to be served by the incorporation of Portuguese Timor into Indonesia'. Cablegram to Canberra, 3 September 1975, Document 210 in *DAFP: Australia and the Indonesian Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974-1976*, p. 379.
[168] Conboy, *Divine Spears*, p. 19.
[169] The emphasis upon fear is due to the recognition that FRETILIN was not a Communist party. Discussed in Documents 137, p. 266, Document 149, p. 282 and Document 217, p. 393, in *DAFP: Australia and the Indonesian Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974-1976*; Conboy, *Divine Spears*, p. 19.
[170] 'Record of a conversation between the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr. Malcolm Fraser, at No. 10 Downing Street on 4 February, 1980, at 12 noon', TNA PREM 19-136 (4 Feb 1980), p. 3. In the context of the Soviet threat in Afghanistan, Mr Fraser viewed America's defence assurances to the Persian Gulf as untenable. He thus sought to expand Australia's training for members of ASEAN and to 'breathe life into the Five Power Defence Arrangements', indicating a certain understanding of the global nature of Soviet expansive interests (p. 5).
[171] These 'penalties' would be imposed via widespread condemnation and to 'support the countries of South West Asia and the Middle East against further Soviet attempts to secure advantage by subversion, if not by force'. 'Prime Minister, Afghanistan: The Next Steps', TNA PREM 19-136, PM/80/8 (1 Feb 1980), p. 1.
[172] Ibid.., p. 2.
[173] Cathal J. Nolan, *The Allure of Battle: A History of How Wars Have Been Won and Lost* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[174] Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia* (Canberra: Commonwealth Government, 1987).
[175] Melissa Lee, *Crippling Leviathan: How Foreign Subversion Weakens the State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), p. 159.
[176] Bertil Lintner, *The Golden Land Ablaze: Coups, Insurgents and the State in Myanmar* (London: Hurst, 2024), p. 60.
[177] This section draws upon and expands work published elsewhere as Andrew Maher, 'A 'Plan B' for the ADF: Supporting Resistance as a Strategy', *The Strategist*, ASPI (21 July 2023), available at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/a-plan-b-for-the-adf-supporting-resistance-as-a-strategy/.
[178] Bob Breen, *The Good Neighbour: Australian peace support operations in the Pacific Islands, 1980-2006*, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 3.
[179] Vide https://policy.defense.gov/OUSDP-Offices/ASD-for-Special-Operations-Low-Intensity-Conflict/, [accessed 25 October 2023].
[180] Department of Defence, 'The Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy', (1968), in *Documents on Australian Defence and Foreign Policy, 1968-1975*, (J.R. Walsh and G.J. Munster publishers, 1980), p. 13.

Special Air Operations During the Great War: The Mindset and Legacy

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ABSTRACT

Special air operations trace their origins to the special-duties units of the First World War—an often overlooked aspect of the Great War. At the dawn of military aviation, special operations airmen developed the mindset that now defines what it means to be a special operator: seeing possibilities in complex challenges where conventional airmen see only obstacles. Like other successful special operators, they were unconventional in their thinking, creative in their approaches to problem-solving, and flexible in their application of airpower. Subsequent generations of special operations airmen have evolved their tactics, training, and equipment to meet the continual changes in the character of air warfare, while preserving that core mindset of unconventionality, creativity, and flexibility—always employing the aircraft available to them in ways their adversaries do not expect.

KEYWORDS

Special air operations; First World War; unconventional warfare; special operations mindset

Introduction

Conventional wisdom holds that special air operations began with the British special duties squadrons of the Second World War. Nearly three decades earlier, however—when military aviation was still in its infancy—the predecessors of those 1940s units were already developing unique tactics and adapting hand-me-down aircraft in an effort to exploit the emerging advantages of airpower for special operations.[1] Few have heard of the First World War's special-duties airmen; their work was deliberately kept secret at the time, and their contributions did little to advance the case for an independent air service alongside armies and navies.

In 1941, the Royal Air Force (RAF) formed its first special-duties squadron, 138 Squadron, and a year later reactivated 161 Squadron at Newmarket as a second. Additional RAF squadrons followed in the Mediterranean and China-Burma-India theatres. In 1943, the United States added the 492nd Bombardment Group's "Carpetbagger" squadrons to support special operations in Europe, and in 1944, created the 1st Air Commando Group to support Brigadier Orde Wingate's Second Chindit Operation in Burma. It is no exaggeration to say that what special operations airmen in these storied units accomplished was remarkable—adapting

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equipment and developing procedures for long-range, low-level, night operations deep into enemy airspace, all without the night-vision and electronic-warfare capabilities that define modern special air operations. Their achievements continue to inspire special operations airmen in the United States and Europe today.[2]

This article aims to show that, twenty-five years before the RAF and U.S. Army Air Forces formed their special-duties squadrons, British, French, and German airmen with a special operations mindset—marked by courage, flexibility, and the willingness to see opportunity where others saw obstacles—were already confronting and overcoming the challenges before them. In doing so, they planted the seeds of the special air operations ethos. These early pioneers ignored bureaucratic constraints and circumvented the artificial limits of conventional thinking to unleash the full potential of their crews and their aircraft. Using unconventional tactics and inventive adaptations of what were often obsolete aircraft,[3] special operations airmen developed the earliest tactics and procedures for inserting, resupplying, and extracting agents who were collecting intelligence and conducting sabotage behind enemy lines. Special air operations did not begin in the United Kingdom in 1941, but rather had their roots on the Western Front in 1914.

Special Operations Mindset

Then, as now, special operations airmen often did not conform to conventional air force norms. While the popular myth of aviation casts airmen as heroic "knights of the air"—dashing, bold, and pursuing glory in individual combat—the reality is that conventional airpower's strength lies in discipline and mass: multi-aircraft fighter sweeps, bombers maintaining defensive formations, and long-range fighters flying bomber escort missions. First World War airmen quickly learned that teamwork, not individual heroics, wins conventional air battles. Those who did not fit these norms—mavericks in both attitude and call sign—were typically marginalized by conventional air forces, a pattern that persists today. Yet such outsiders have long thrived in special air operations, where courage, flexibility, and unconventional thinking are valued precisely because they yield innovative solutions to complex tactical problems. The most successful special operations airmen balance that unconventional spirit with disciplined preparation, commitment to the mission, and a healthy respect for the skills of their crews.

In the evolution of special air operations from the Second World War special-duties squadrons, modern special air operations typically involve single aircraft flying at night and at low level to provide the air mobility necessary to insert teams and supplies deep behind enemy lines, and then landing specialized aircraft in remote and austere locations to retrieve those teams and other high-value cargo. During the Second World War, excellence in these primary missions often led special-duties airmen to provide training, leadership, and influence for other, non-special-duties squadrons tasked with unconventional or strategically sensitive missions—thus imparting the special operations mindset to select units of the conventional force. For example, Group Captain P. C. "Pick" Pickard, who had flown Lysanders with 138 Squadron and later commanded 161 Squadron, was given command of 140 Wing in 1943. Guy Gibson claimed to have sought out Pickard's counsel during the planning for Operation Chastise, the RAF's Dambusters Raid.[4] Pickard instilled a sense of dogged commitment to excellence and courage among his aircrews. In early 1944, he trained and led a wing of three Mosquito squadrons on Operation Jericho, the mission to bomb the prison at Amiens intended to free members of the French Resistance. Using a scale model of the prison, Pickard's airmen planned

and practiced their attack profiles until they knew them by heart. Pickard was shot down and killed during Operation Jericho, but the wing he trained, led, and influenced continued his legacy by flying other successful special operations, such as the October 1944 raid to destroy Gestapo headquarters in Aarhus, Denmark, and Operation Carthage to destroy Gestapo headquarters in Copenhagen in March 1945.

Special Air Operations During the Great War

When the First World War began, it had only been five years since Orville and Wilbur Wright sold the first Wright Military Flyer—a two-seat observation aircraft—to the U.S. Army. At the start of the Great War, every major European power was using airplanes to extend their armies' ability to see farther. Aerial reconnaissance and surveillance soon evolved into bombing troops and assembly areas from the air, and aerial fighting developed as commanders sought to deny their adversaries the ability to see and to bomb. The state of aviation technology early in the war limited nearly all flying to daylight. It took airmen with exceptional flying skills, courage, and willpower to embrace the extreme risks (at the time) inherent in nighttime air operations.

The British

The earliest British attempt to insert an agent behind enemy lines by aircraft appears to have occurred in September 1915, shortly before the Battle of Loos. In August, Brigadier-General H. M. Trenchard, then commanding the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) in France, asked his wing commanders to find a way to insert an agent near Courtrai. He noted, "The French have already done this sort of thing twenty-eight times—twenty-seven times successfully."[5] The pilot chosen, Captain T. W. Mulcahy-Morgan of No. 6 Squadron, had earned a reputation for skillful flying, coolness under stress, and resourcefulness. He had force-landed multiple times without breaking the airplane, made quick repairs to his machine, and taken off again.

Just before dawn on 13 September, in poor light, Mulcahy-Morgan crashed his BE-2c into a tree while delivering a Belgian agent into a landing field that was too small and too rough. One of the wings broke off, and the agent broke both legs and suffered internal injuries. The pilot broke his jaw, but the pigeons survived. The Germans captured both the pilot and the agent. Two years later, Mulcahy-Morgan escaped and made his way back to England.[6] The lesson taken from that episode was that outstanding flying skills, while essential for special air operations, needed to be complemented by careful preparation and mission-specific training.

Lieutenant J. W. "Jack" Woodhouse was assigned to No. 4 Squadron, flying BE-2c aircraft on reconnaissance, artillery spotting, and bombing sorties. When approached by his commanding officer about attempting the mission, Woodhouse agreed that it could be done with proper preparation and training. The squadron's BE-2c aircraft were the perfect choice for the job at the time because of their inherently stable flight characteristics and low landing speed—especially valuable when landing on unsurveyed open fields at night using only the moon for illumination.

In the weeks before this first mission, Woodhouse flew a series of reconnaissance sorties in the region where the clandestine landing was planned. To conceal the intent of his reconnaissances, his flights were often conducted as part of other squadron formations on bombing missions. The survey flights were typically flown at dusk to simulate the conditions he expected to encounter and to allow Woodhouse to memorize key landmarks, especially those that would stand out in bad weather and low light.

Photograph 1. J.W. Woodhouse, RAeC Certificate 1028. Used with permission of Great War Aviation Society.

On 28 September, Woodhouse and the French agent took off in a BE-2c that had had its guns and all unnecessary equipment removed. This lightened the airframe to give it better climbing performance. The fuel tanks were also only half full to save weight. The agent and two baskets of homing pigeons were stuffed into the front cockpit of the biplane. Climbing to 7,000 feet, Woodhouse circled over friendly territory until dusk. Then, with the engine throttled back to reduce the noise signature, he began a long, slow descent toward the landing site on the German side of the trenches. At about 1,000 feet, they heard rifle fire. Woodhouse opened the throttle and climbed out of danger.

After discussing the situation with the agent, the pilot chose an alternate landing site south of Cambrai. Arriving overhead, Woodhouse shut down the engine and silently glided to a landing. After wishing the agent good luck, he was able to restart his engine, take off, and fly safely back to his aerodrome in the dark. While crossing the trenches south of Albert, he was shot at again—without knowing whether it was the Germans or the British. Over the next few weeks, Woodhouse flew additional sorties, landing multiple times behind German lines to bring the French agent supplies, money, and additional homing pigeons.[7]

In 1916, Woodhouse—now a captain—returned to France after a stint in a night defense squadron in England and was tasked with forming a special duties flight in No. 9 Wing. Their mission was to drop agents behind German lines using "Guardian Angel" parachutes developed by British engineer R. E. Calthrop.[8] It should be remembered that at this stage of the war very few pilots wore parachutes because of their bulk and unreliability. This was not true for observation balloon crews; those airmen regularly wore parachutes so they could escape when enemy fighters attacked their hydrogen-filled balloons with incendiary ammunition.[9] Woodhouse's special duties flight flew BE-12a aircraft, a single-seat version of the BE-2c, with a long-range fuel tank in place of the forward cockpit. The agent would lie flat on the lower wing. The parachute was attached to the underside of the airplane, and the agent's harness was linked to the parachute. When the agent jumped, his weight pulled the parachute from its case, where it opened and carried him safely to the ground. In May 1917, the special duties flight inserted three agents by landing, and then flew three to four special-air-mission sorties each in July and August, though with mixed success.[10] In between these missions, the flight also conducted nighttime bombing of sensitive targets.[11]

In early 1916, as requests for more agent insertions increased, Captain Guy L. Cruikshank was tasked with forming a special duties flight in No. 27 Squadron, then commanded by Major A. E. Borton. Using modified BE-2c aircraft, agents were strapped to the lower wing and shielded from the wind blast by a strip of plywood. Adapting Woodhouse's nighttime experiences, 27 Squadron preferred early-morning insertions, taking off before dawn and using morning mist to conceal the landings. When one of 27 Squadron's special duties sorties failed to return, Cruikshank suspected a double agent. Flying the next sortie himself, he shot the deceitful agent when the man turned to kill him. Cruikshank was wounded in the arm during

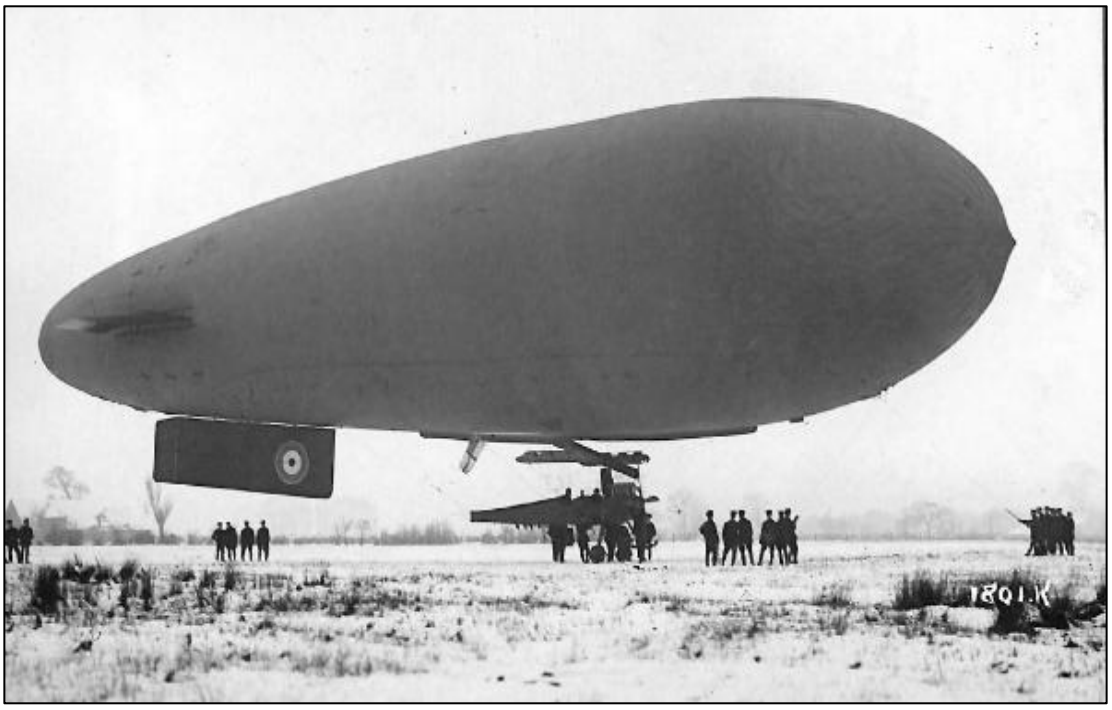
the encounter but managed to fly the aircraft home.[12] He was killed that September while serving as a flight commander with No. 70 Squadron.

No. 58 Squadron moved to France in January 1918, flying obsolete FE-2b pushers in a night-bombing role. The squadron's expertise in night operations made it well suited for stealthy agent-dropping missions. Flying from Fauquembergues, about 20 km south of St. Omer, the squadron's I-Flight (Intelligence Flight) often flew 50 miles or more behind German lines to land and insert, extract, or resupply intelligence agents. As in other special duties resupply missions, the cargo they delivered included food, money, and homing pigeons.[13]

To the south, in July 1916, the RFC's No. 17 Squadron moved from Egypt to support operations in Salonika, Greece. That December, BE-2c pilot Lieutenant W. S. Scott used darkness and low mist to conceal his landing while inserting an agent near the German aerodrome at Drama. Three weeks later, in January 1917, Lieutenant Scott successfully flew a second clandestine mission to insert another Greek agent.[14]

On the Italian front, British pilots worked with the Italians to develop alternative techniques for inserting agents by parachute. The Italians had developed a parachute that differed from the British "Guardian Angel" model and overcame many of the challenges associated with reliability, tangling, and drift. Instead of riding on the wing of a single-engine fighter-bomber, the agent was dropped from a twin-engine bomber via a trap door in the floor. On 9 August 1918, Captain William Barker, a Canadian, and Captain William Wedgwood Benn of No. 139 Squadron took off from Villaverla to insert an Italian agent into Vittorio in Austrian-held territory. Following a pre-planned path to avoid enemy searchlights and flying low to minimize noise exposure, the crew dropped the agent and returned home. They had no idea whether he survived. Weeks later, they were informed that the agent had fallen through the trap door, the parachute had inflated, and it had worked "as advertised." The landing was hard but successful. Later flights airdropped parcels of food and homing pigeons to support him and for two months he passed information on Austrian troop movements and defenses.[15]

The RFC was not the only British air service to attempt special duties flights. In 1916, Trenchard asked the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) to provide an airship to insert, extract, and resupply enemy agents behind German lines at night.[16] The plan was to modify a Submarine Scout (SS) lighter-than-air, non-rigid airship, a blimp, painted flat black for invisibility at night and with the engine silenced to reduce noise signature. The SS airships used a wingless Armstrong Whitworth F.K.4, similar to a BE-2c, fuselage for a gondola. The plan was to have the two-seat airship silently drift over German territory to insert and support agents.[17]



Photograph 2. SS-40, the Black Ship. Used with permission of Great War Aviation Society.

In June, the RNAS crew successfully tested SS-40 in front of senior officers from the War Office, and on 2 July the "Black Ship," her crew, supplies, and equipment arrived in Boubers-sur-Canche, France. This was Day Two of the Battle of the Somme. The next day, the two pilots, Flight Sub-Lieutenants Billy Chambers and Victor Goddard, reported to Major-General Trenchard for duty. After learning that they needed to be above 10,000 feet when crossing friendly lines to avoid being shot at—and that they also required the ability to fly for more than four hours—the pilots concluded that their airship needed modifications. Goddard flew SS-40 back to England, where Royal Navy engineers added an extra gore to the gas bag, increasing the hydrogen capacity to 80,000 cubic feet—more than enough to climb above 10,000 feet.

Over the summer and into the fall, SS-40's crew practiced extensively for their mission by conducting night reconnaissances over German lines. They were not allowed to fly on moonlit nights because they did not want German searchlights to locate the Black Ship. As a result, what the crew could actually see and report was negligible. Landing the blimp without a ground crew, however, proved more difficult than anticipated, and no air landings behind German lines were attempted. In August, RFC Lieutenant C. R. Robbins and a basket of homing pigeons safely parachuted from SS-40. According to Goddard, French and Belgian agents were reluctant to fly in the Black Ship, and thus the RNAS crew never had the opportunity to use their training and preparations to land agents behind enemy lines.[18] In October, SS-40 and her crew returned to England and were assigned to other duties.

The French

Trenchard was correct in September 1915 when he told the assembled wing commanders that the French had been successfully inserting, extracting, and resupplying agents behind enemy lines for months. As early as November 1914, Lieutenant Armand Pinsard of No. 23 Squadron had demonstrated the ability to insert an agent behind German lines by air.[19] By 1915, French customs officers—who before the war had patrolled and controlled the border—were recruited to serve as agents monitoring German troop movements in their former departments. The agents were taught to estimate unit size and the composition of support trains, care for the pigeons that would carry messages back to friendly lines, and help pilots turn the aircraft into the wind and start the propeller.[20]

The agents were "armed" with a basket of pigeons, a load of food and supplies, and one or two waterproof boxes containing explosives, detonators, fuses, and tools for sabotaging railways, bridges, and canal locks. With such a load, exiting a two-seat airplane that was not designed for passenger or cargo operations was not easy. Typically, the pilot would land and shut down the engine, then help the agent move his gear into a hiding place. Once that was done, the pilot and the agent would reposition the aircraft for takeoff, and the agent would then "swing" the propeller to restart the engine.

Through the spring and summer of 1915, French pilots René Bodin, William Hostein, and Jean Navarre of No. 12 Squadron, Jules Védrines of No. 3 Squadron, and others flew dozens of successful special air missions into occupied France.[21] Bodin had received his pilot's license only in January 1915 and had not yet established himself as a strong pilot in the squadron after hitting a pylon during a turn and making a poor landing in a damaged aircraft. He begged his commander to allow him to fly one of the special missions to insert an agent in Champagne. That successful operation redeemed his reputation, and he continued flying special missions thereafter.[22]

When the war broke out, Védrines was already an accomplished aviator, having won the 1911 Paris-to-Madrid race and becoming the first pilot to exceed 100 mph in 1912. In 1913, he became the first pilot to fly overland from France to Egypt. When France issued its call for volunteers, Védrines was among the first to join the Aviation Militaire. At 33 years old, he was considered too old for front-line service. Undeterred, his expertise in night flying, outstanding navigational skills, and disdain for aerial combat led him to become France's premier special duties pilot.[23] The Blériot aircraft company delivered two experimental Type XXXVIbis monoplanes to the Aviation Militaire in the fall of 1914; one was assigned to Védrines.

The Blériot XXXVIbis was a rather ungainly two-seat airplane with a bulbous forward fuselage housing a Gnome rotary engine, tapering toward the empennage. One unique feature of the XXXVIbis was the 3 mm armor plating protecting the cockpits and engine. A second peculiarity was the set of doors on the fuselage under each wing that, when opened in flight, allowed the observer to fire a machine gun at targets on the ground. While not originally designed for special air operations, these doors significantly eased the challenge of unloading an agent and his cargo—especially when time on the ground was limited.

Beginning in March 1915, Védrines flew seven night insertions of agents, though in a Morane Parasol rather than La Vache.[24] According to his obituary, in early 1918 he landed near a bridge crossing the Saar River, dismounted, placed explosives to destroy the bridge, and successfully flew away after lighting the fuse.[25]

Photograph 3. Jules Védrines and his Bleriot XXXVIbis, La Vache. Source: Bibliothèque National Francaise (Public Domain).

In June, Védrines taught Georges Guynemer how to fly special air operations. The trick, according to Védrines, was to "quell the desire to turn tail and run." The tactic was to fly to the landing area at normal altitudes while looking for a secluded place to land, preferably near a wood to conceal the aircraft and give the agent a place to take cover. On 23 September, Guynemer flew one of twelve coordinated sorties to insert eleven agents in the Champagne region. All twelve aircraft returned safely to base. Guynemer, however, swore he would never fly special missions again, calling them "a filthy job."[26]

Védrines, while not an ace in the traditional sense of shooting down five enemy aircraft, became known as the "ace of special missions," having flown more such operations than any other French pilot. After the war, he remarked: "Our work, as aviators, was very pale in comparison to theirs [the customs officers/agents] and the amount of courage and willpower they had to display to succeed…. The customs officers were marvelous and often gave us examples of heroism and stoicism that can never be overemphasized."[27]

The value of these special air missions was highlighted by General Joseph Joffre, the commander-in-chief of French armies on the Western Front between 1914 and 1916. In September 1915, General Joffre decided to launch a grand offensive in the Champagne region.

On 16 September he directed General Jonchery to support the infiltration of saboteurs by air behind German lines to disrupt German resupply and reinforcement. Between 23 and 25 September, twelve special air missions were flown to achieve Joffre's objectives. Of the twelve, eight were successful. Despite the success of the special operations, Joffre's Champagne Offensive failed.

Farther south, the French also flew a small number of special air operations on the Salonika front. In 1916, Sous-Lieutenant (Second Lieutenant) Cornemont was assigned to Escadrille 391 at Topsin. He volunteered to fly a special mission to insert a Serbian agent with homing pigeons 300 miles behind Bulgarian lines at night. After weeks of planning and preparation, Cornemont flew the mission using only a compass and altimeter for instruments and navigating by flickering village lights and moonlit reflections on roads, rivers, and lakes. The mission was a complete success.[28]

The Germans

The Germans also conducted special air operations during the First World War, but they appear to have confined their efforts to the Eastern Front and Palestine. In early October 1916, Oberleutnant (First Lieutenant) Maximilian von Cossel was inserted by air behind Russian lines with a rucksack full of explosives. Flying a Roland *Walfisch*, the pilot, Vice Sergeant-Major Rudolf Windisch, made a night landing in a clearing about 50 miles behind the front. While on the ground, von Cossel destroyed several sections of the Rovno–Brody railway line to disrupt the Russians' planned offensive. The next night, Windisch flew a second mission to retrieve von Cossel from their preplanned extraction point.[29]

In April and May 1917, Oberleutnants Gerhard Felmy of Flieger-Abteilung (Squadron) 300 and Richard Falke flew from their aerodrome at Ramleh to Bir Salmana in northern Sinai to destroy British water pipelines supplying Allenby's troops, the telegraph lines he needed for communications, and the reservoirs the British had constructed to ensure a continuous water supply. While pipelines and telegraph lines were easily repaired, a successful attack on the reservoirs could have halted the British advance into Palestine.[30] During their reconnaissance sorties over Allenby's forces, Felmy and Falke noticed that the railway line and accompanying water pipeline crossing the Sinai were protected by blockhouses spaced about twelve miles apart. They reasoned that if they could find a spot midway between blockhouses where the pipeline and railway lay close together—and where a landing area allowed takeoff in any direction—they could effectively disrupt British logistics.

They identified three suitable sites and decided to make their final choice on the day of the mission, depending on rail traffic, roving patrols, or passing caravans that might compromise them. At 07:00 on 19 April they took off toward the target area. They avoided the first location because of British activity. At the second, seeing no sign of human presence, they decided to land. Hearing a train in the distance, they estimated they had half an hour to place their charges. It took twenty-five minutes to emplace explosives under the railway, pipeline, and telegraph poles. Using cigars to light the fuses, they sprinted back to their aircraft. After the explosions, they discovered that the railway charges had failed to detonate and the pipeline was undamaged. Their spirits sank.

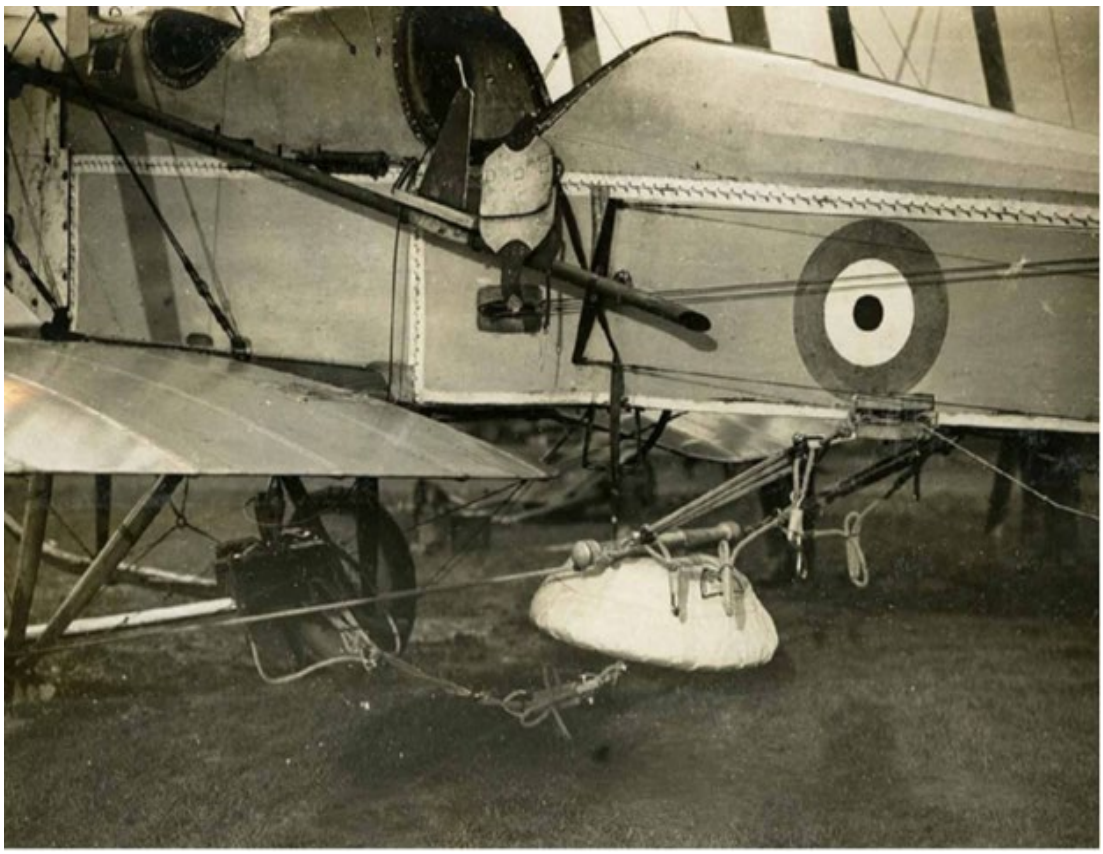
With no British patrols in sight, they decided to try again, using the unexploded railway charges. They moved the explosives to the pipeline and detonated them, assuming that loss of water would have a greater impact on British operations than a severed rail line. This time the charges worked. The two airmen raced for their aircraft as a newly arrived trainload of soldiers chased them.[31]

Photograph 4. FA 300 at Ramleh. Richard Falke is center left in white jacket and dark cap. Gerhard Felmy is center right in white jacket and dark cap. Used with permission of Tobias Buddecke Collection.

On 24 May, Felmy and Falke attempted to repeat their earlier success and volunteered for another special air operation. Landing near Kantara on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal, their goal was to cut the vital railway line from Cairo and the nearby water pipeline. It took just seven minutes to emplace charges on the railway and telegraph poles and set the fuses. As they were working on the pipeline charges, however, they were discovered by a British patrol. After hurriedly setting the last charges, they ran for their aircraft as bullets whizzed past. Felmy began to taxi while Falke turned his Maxim gun on the patrol. As they lifted off, they heard three explosions. Looking back, Felmy and Falke saw that they had successfully blown up the railway line, cut the pipeline, and toppled the telegraph lines.[32] This was the last German special air operation of the campaign.[33]

Parachuting—A Different Way to Insert Agents

Everard Calthrop was a British railway engineer who was good friends with Charles Rolls, an aviation pioneer and co-founder of Rolls-Royce. After Calthrop witnessed Rolls's death in an aviation accident in 1910, he explored ways of using parachutes to save pilots' lives. He patented his first parachute in 1913. In 1915, the Royal Aircraft Factory at Farnborough successfully tested Calthrop's parachute, the Guardian Angel, but the Royal Flying Corps refused to issue parachutes to pilots. Calthrop was pressured to keep silent about the tests. In 1917, however, he broke his silence and described the successful trials in several aeronautical journals. Still, British pilots were not allowed to fly with parachutes, even if self-funded. According to an unpublished report, the Air Board believed that a parachute "might impair the fighting spirit of pilots and cause them to abandon machines which might otherwise be capable of returning to base for repair." [34] They did, however, agree to explore the use of parachutes for dropping agents behind enemy lines.[35]



Photograph 5. Calthrop parachute installed under a BE-2c. Used with permission of Great War Aviation Society.

Major-General Trenchard, in 1917 commanding the RFC in France, requested twenty Calthrop parachutes for testing by his pilots. The Air Board refused his request. Later, when he requested the same twenty parachutes for dropping enemy agents behind the lines, the parachutes were furnished. That said, there is no evidence that Trenchard sponsored clandestine trials with his pilots behind the Air Board's back. By September 1918, the newly created Royal Air Force relented and ordered all single- and two-seat aircraft to be fitted with parachutes.[36] Unfortunately for aircrews, the Armistice was signed before testing, adaptation, and logistical procedures were complete.

During the fall of 1918, Trenchard remained open to parachuting agents into German rear areas, preferring this to night landings. In a series of letters with George S. Clive, Head of the British Mission to French Army Headquarters, Trenchard noted that since the war began, "dropping by parachute from an airplane has become comparatively safe, whereas landing on unknown ground at night is no better than it was four years ago." He estimated that a night landing behind the lines carried an 80 percent chance of injury or capture, while a parachute landing had a 60 percent chance of success.[37]

In October, Trenchard agreed to attempt parachuting an agent from an airplane, provided he could get a suitably equipped DH-4 or DH-9 and three parachutes before the upcoming November moon cycle. The Air Ministry agreed to send a DH-4 with Major Orde Lees to demonstrate parachuting from an aircraft, while the DH-9 was modified to accept the Calthrop parachute for the agent and a Mears parachute for the pilot. The Mears parachute was a compact system that could be rolled and worn across the shoulders.[38] Both parachutes used a static line for deployment. The earliest the Air Ministry could deliver the aircraft, parachutes, and Major Orde Lees—who had worked closely with Calthrop—was 20 November. On 10 November, with the Armistice all but signed, Trenchard cabled Clive: "Owing to change in situation, I propose to stop all arrangements with regard to special work…."[39]

Conclusion

Special operations airmen during the Great War established the mindset that continues to define special air operations over a century later: unconventionality, creativity, courage, and flexibility. Flying fragile, sometimes unreliable, and often outdated airplanes, colorful characters such as Jules Védrines, Georges Guynemer, Jack Woodhouse, Hellmuth Felmy, and their special operations brethren flew missions that were considered too dangerous for otherwise competent pilots in their squadrons. Unlike other night missions during the First World War, the special operations airmen overcame the physical, technical, and moral challenges of night air operations into hostile territory to successfully insert, resupply, and extract intelligence agents and saboteurs. It was their ability to successfully do what was considered too dangerous or too difficult for normal pilots that made these airmen "special."

Equally important to their success, though, was that they were supported by commanders who recognized the potential contributions air power could make to intelligence gathering and sabotage operations. Together, these early special operations airmen and their commanders created a legacy that is older than most air power historians and practitioners realize. The Great War special operations airmen on both sides developed and refined training programs and unconventional tactics to overcome the very real limitations of First World War equipment, primarily related to night flying and navigation. More importantly, though, they created the mindset, the ethos, of a special operations airman that survives to this day.

This mindset for addressing and overcoming complex aviation challenges—despite technical limitations of equipment and administrative constraints imposed by risk-averse leaders—was first forged during the Great War, but it retains an important place in today's special operations kit bag. Seeing possibilities where conventional airmen see only obstacles now defines what it means to be a special operations airman. The pantheon of "special" airmen that popularly includes Hugh Verity, Jim Wallwork, Guy Gibson, Jimmy Doolittle, Phil Cochran, Herb Kalen, and Jim Kyle—all of whom embraced the special air operations mindset—should rightly include Woodhouse, Cruikshank, Védrines, Bodin, Gerhard Felmy, and Falke. Up to today, and into future generations, special operations airmen have continued to evolve tactics, training, and equipment to meet changes in the character of air warfare, while maintaining a mindset that values courage, unconventionality, creativity, and flexibility, ensuring that the aircraft they employ are used in ways completely unexpected by the adversary.

Endnotes

[1] America's late entry into the First World War, in 1917, and the unprepared state of its military aviation, means they are not part of this story.
[2] Case studies such as the Germans' special air operation at Ft Eben Emael, the British Dambusters raid, and the Doolittle Raiders' attack on Tokyo are still taught on both sides of the Atlantic.
[3] During the First World War aeronautical technology was transforming at a breakneck pace, sometimes changing tactics and capabilities within months. https://airandspace.si.edu/explore/stories/world-war-i-laboratory-air. The older, less maneuverable aircraft were often good enough for special air operations.
[4] Guy Gibson, *Enemy Coast Ahead*, (London: RAF Museum, 1986), p. 222.
[5] Ralph Barker, A Brief History of the Royal Flying Corps in World War I, (London: Robinson, 2002), p. 128.
[6] Barker, pp. 129 – 30.
[7] J.W. Woodhouse, *Cross & Cockade*, vol. 2, no. 2, (Winter 1971), pp. 60 – 61.
[8] TNA AIR 1/2215/209/30/11, *War Diary of 9 Wing, RFC*, 3 Aug 1917.
[9] Paul R. Hare, "Did the RFC Refuse to Let Pilots Use Parachutes During WWI?," Great War Aviation Society, October 17, 2023, accessed at https://greatwaraviation.org/did-the-rfc-refuse-to-let-pilots-use-parachutes-during-ww1/.
[10] E.R. Hooton, War Over the Trenches: Air Power and the Western Front Campaigns, 1916 – 1918, (Hersham, UK: Midland, 2010), p. 75.
[11] Woodhouse, pp. 61 – 62.
[12] Ralph Barker, A Brief History of the Royal Flying Corps in World War I, (London: Robinson, 2002), p.134.
[13] "Secret Agents and Special Duties," *Great War Forum*, https://www.greatwarforum.org/topic/224852-secret-agents-and-special-duties/.
[14] H.A. Jones, The War in the Air: The Part Played in the Great War by the Royal Air Force, vol. 5, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1935), p. 342.
[15] William Wedgewood-Benn, *In the Side Shows*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), pp. 298 – 310.
[16] Victor Goddard, "The Black Ship," *Cross & Cockade*, vol. 12, no. 4, (Winter 1981).
[17] A 1918 film showing the testing of Calthrop parachutes includes footage showing the configuration of the DH-4 fuselage with three cockpits and parachutists testing exits from SS blimps. *Calthrop's Patent "Safety Guardian Angel" Parachute Tests and Demonstrations* (1918), British Film Institute, https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/ watch-er-calthrops-patent-safety-guardian-angel-parachute-tests-and-dem-1918-online.
[18] C.G. Jefford, Observers and Navigators, and other non-pilot aircrew in the RFC, RNAS, and RAF, (London: Grub Street, 2014), p. 80.
[19] Maud Jarry, "Les Missions Secrètes de la Première Guerre Mondial, » *Le Fana de l'Aviation*, no. 360, (Nov 1999), p. 13.
[20] Claude Pélerin, "1915 – Airmen and Customs Officers on Special Missions," *Histoire de la Douane*, July 25, 2018, https://histoire-de-la-douane.org/1915-aviateurs-et-douaniers-en-missions-speciales/.
[21] Hooton, p. 74 ; Jarry, p. 14-15.
[22] Pèlerin.
[23] Maud, p. 21.
[24]"WWI: Behind Enemy Lines by Aircraft (I)," *WarHistory.org*, https://warhistory.org/@msw/article/wwi-behind-enemy-lines-by-aircraft-i.
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Changing Partners' Military Norms to Build Capacity

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ABSTRACT

This paper posits that norm entrepreneurship is a critical component of building partner capacity in fragile states because, without the adoption of U.S. military norms, recipient security sectors remain unable or unwilling to break with corrupt practices that hinder battlefield effectiveness. This paper proceeds to analyze seven U.S. capacity-building efforts to determine whether recipient security sectors adopted U.S. military norms and whether they were successful in countering the threat the security partnership was meant to address. Three cases were identified as successful (norms adopted, threat countered), and commonalities included the presence of "early adopters" of U.S. norms and complementary civil reforms. These findings support anti-corruption literature suggesting that local agents are crucial for aligning anti-corruption norms with existing cultural precepts to facilitate wider norm diffusion, and that individuals' perceptions of corruption's frequency affect their likelihood of tolerating and engaging in corruption.

KEYWORDS

corruption; security cooperation; partner capacity; civil-military relations; security sector reform (SSR)

Introduction

Capacity-building missions in fragile states are risky investments because these states' capacity to provide security and rule of law within their territories is undermined by corruption, a less visible yet more corrosive issue than training or equipment shortfalls.[1] However, U.S. capacity-building efforts have tended to focus on improving tactical proficiency without considering how corruption undermines recipients' ability and incentives to provide security.[2] This results in U.S. personnel attempting to build effective security sectors on compromised foundations.

To address corruption, U.S. advisors and trainers must not only develop recipients' capacity (ability to conduct operations), but also their professionalism (how they conduct operations).[3] This requires U.S. personnel to act as norm entrepreneurs within recipient security sectors, purposefully imparting U.S. norms of political professionalism and deference to civilian authority that strengthen institutions and foster stability in the long run.[4] Only once these norms are internalized by the members of recipient security sectors will their organizational cultures begin to complement, rather than hinder, U.S. training and material support.[5]

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This is not an easy process because norms are rooted in deeply held worldviews and are shaped by various factors, only some of which can be leveraged by U.S. personnel involved in capacity-building missions.[6] By analyzing the dynamics and outcomes of Cold War and Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) capacity-building missions, this article attempts to derive insights on norm entrepreneurship applicable to current and future partnerships. If policymakers and practitioners fail to learn from these past successes and failures, their efforts will remain vulnerable to the pitfalls of corruption, increasing the likelihood that U.S. investments of blood and treasure will be squandered.

Corruption's Corrosiveness

Norm entrepreneurship is only one variable in a complex geopolitical environment. The outcome of any capacity-building mission, and by extension the fate of a recipient state, is influenced by the foreign policies and domestic politics of the U.S., partners and allies, adversaries, and even third parties, in ways that are not easily discernible to policymakers, practitioners, or outside observers. Complexity notwithstanding, corruption's deleterious effects cross the boundaries that separate foreign policy from domestic politics, and civilian affairs from military operations.

Corruption encourages the inefficient allocation of resources by diverting money meant for public goods to private pockets.[7] It hinders political development, since respect for laws and institutions is undermined when people know they can be circumvented for the right price.[8] Corruption discourages external investment, depriving developing states of the economic growth that could fund and strengthen their governments.[9]

For states facing existential threats, corruption is especially self-defeating. Strong and efficient administration is needed to manage their conflicts, but corruption prevents that administration from emerging.[10] More often than not, rampant corruption has metastasized domestic discontent into the conflicts that the U.S. is assisting recipient states with in the first place.[11] Conflict locks these states into a vicious cycle, as their ability to regulate corruption is further decreased, making corruption more widespread and entrenched.[12] The spread of corruption further undermines societal trust in the state and prompts citizens to align with competing sources of power that contribute to the further fragmentation of society.[13]

At the tactical level, corruption degrades recipient forces' operational readiness due to mismanagement of funds and assets and undermines public trust in them.[14] U.S.-recipient rapport is also compromised because corruption conditions organizations to operate in secrecy and obfuscate their true intentions.[15] If practices that reinforce perceptions of corruption are not reformed, it is unlikely that recipient security sectors will earn the trust of their populations. Instead, they will continue exacerbating the grievances that fuel the conflicts the U.S. is attempting to quell through capacity-building efforts.

Security sector corruption is rarely an isolated issue and tends to be self-sustaining. In some cases, civilian governments politicize security sectors by dispensing economic rents.[16] In other cases, civilian authority is so weak that security officials can extort benefices from their erstwhile overseers.[17] Institutional reform is stymied by buying off or intimidating reformers, rewarding loyalists, and punishing waverers.[18] Each individual act of corruption cultivates a critical mass of loyalists with a vested interest in the status quo.[19]

Path to Reform

Reforms can take place at several levels, including operational, addressing how recipient security sectors carry out day-to-day duties; structural, addressing weak internal governance through new disciplinary regimes, oversight mechanisms, and promotion practices; and external oversight, where civilian officials or entities are given explicit authority to manage certain aspects of a security sector.[20] Within the Department of Defense's (DoD) terminology regarding security partnerships, these reform activities are classified as Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Defense Institution Building (DIB).[21] SSR involves "transforming the security sector…which includes all the actors, their roles, responsibilities, and actions so that they…operate... in a manner that is more consistent with…sound principles of good governance."[22] Policing activities are also included in the purview of SSR, which is relevant to conflicts within fragile states since the duties of external security actors (military) and internal security actors (police) become blurred.[23] SSR primarily occurs at the operational and structural levels. DIB occurs at the structural and external oversight levels, focusing on making national-level institutions "effective, transparent, and responsive," as well as "improving civilian control of the military, building respect for the rule of law, and improving military professionalism."[24]

By integrating SSR and DIB into capacity-building efforts, the U.S. would "enhance the ability of security forces to uphold state authority and provide justice and security to citizens," which is a necessary condition for good governance and long-term development.[25] These activities require U.S. personnel to play the part of norm entrepreneurs, in addition to their roles as advisors and trainers. Norm entrepreneurship would facilitate organizational culture changes from old norms that permitted corrupt and predatory practices to norms that are conducive to "civilian control, accountability, transparency, and rule of law."[26] Norm entrepreneurship is most often discussed in research concerning political corruption, but the field's insights and considerations can be applied to U.S. capacity-building efforts. This compatibility is due to recurrent findings that political corruption adversely impacts recipient security sectors' capacity to secure their territory and populations. Additionally, recommendations to counter corruption's influence on recipient security sectors mirror the logic of norm entrepreneurship practices.

Norm Entrepreneurship

Fragile states are undergoing what could be described as a process of "modernization," at least in the political sense, since more often than not they are also located in developing regions of the world like Africa and Latin America.[27] For these states' security sectors, capacity-building missions serve as a form of modernization; therefore, U.S. personnel involved in the effort need to be cognizant of how modernization enables corruption. To start, "modernization involves a change in the basic values of the society," which includes redefining what counts as acceptable behavior and redefining the difference between public welfare and private interest.[28] During this period of flux, both old and new norms lack legitimacy, giving individuals moral license to violate both sets of norms when it suits their self-interest.[29]

The transition between old and new norms can be further complicated if a state's population is ethnically heterogeneous, since new norms will have to contend with a fragmented landscape of traditional norms where "grease money" may already be commonly employed to address ethnic frictions.[30] A related consideration is whether the U.S. is the recipient state's sole partner.

If multiple external actors are aiding a state, then the security sector will be influenced by other sets of military norms besides the U.S.'s, which makes the transition from old norms and operational doctrines more difficult. The last consideration regarding the transition between old and new norms is that although a society may accept a new set of norms, its tolerance for corruption may remain higher than U.S. standards.[31]

Modernization increases corruption by introducing new laws, regulations, and oversight mechanisms, which certain actors will attempt to avoid, circumvent, or distort for private or personal gain.[32] In addition to 'creating' new corruption by redrawing the boundaries of acceptable and legal behavior, increased transparency exposes previously hidden corruption, creating an impression that corruption is on the rise.[33] The perception of increased corruption, whether reflective of reality or not, is important to keep in mind since societies' equilibrium between norms and corruption shifts depending on individuals' perceptions of corruption's frequency.[34] In fact, studies exploring the relationship between individuals' perceptions and tolerances of corruption have repeatedly found that people are more likely to tolerate corruption if they believe it is widespread, irrespective of their personal ethics and experiences.[35]

While modernization inevitably creates new sources of corruption, which may never be eradicated, once the new set of norms has been internalized, the "modernized" society should settle into a corruption equilibrium that is hopefully lower than the previous one and exerts a less damaging effect on the development of the state and its security sector. However, this is not a quick process, since individuals within a society adopt new norms at an uneven pace and with varying levels of enthusiasm.[36] The norm diffusion process is best understood as an "S-curve" that begins slowly with a small number of early adopters, gains momentum after a "tipping point" is reached and the majority adopts the new norm, and then decelerates as holdouts adopt the new norm.[37] Although norms are rooted in deeply held worldviews, they are still influenced by "cultural structure" and agentic factors.[38] In theory, by working within the boundaries of a recipient's cultural structure and wisely employing their leverage over military aid, the U.S. can improve the likelihood of recipient security sectors adopting U.S. military norms. The resulting organizational culture change will make them more effective at employing the tactical capabilities provided by the U.S., ideally in support of U.S. objectives.

Making Norms Stick

Assuming that norm diffusion in a security-partnership context follows the "slow-quick-slow" tempo described in corruption literature, there will not be an immediate "mass conversion" to U.S. military norms.[39] Because the new norms prescribe behavior that is opposed to their self-interests, most leaders within a recipient security sector will attempt to obstruct, if not reverse, this process. These attempts will have the greatest probability of success during the initial slow growth phase, when only a small cadre of early adopters champion the new norms. By mobilizing larger networks and superior resources, obstructionists can sideline or buy off early adopters, conveying to waverers the perils and benefits of pushing for reform or toeing the line, respectively.

The challenge for U.S. personnel is to use whatever leverage they have at their disposal to shield early adopters from obstructionist backlash long enough for adopters to achieve successes that can be clearly attributed to U.S. training, equipment, and norms, piquing waverers' interest and calling old practices into question. Success must then be leveraged to get early adopters rewarded and promoted, while obstructionists are sidelined, signaling to

waverers that the cost-benefit calculus has shifted in favor of reform. While the U.S. will never have complete leverage over recipient states, or their security sectors, the conduct and outcomes of seven capacity building efforts (Republic of Korea ["South Korea"], Philippines, Republic of Vietnam ["South Vietnam"], El Salvador, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Mali) provide useful insights into what factors could promote the diffusion of U.S. military norms to a recipient security sector. These factors are the presence of early adopters, comprehensiveness of U.S. oversight, conditionality, time/continuity, and concurrent civilian government reform.

Early Adopters

Although not a sufficient condition, the presence of early adopters is a necessary condition for U.S. military norms to be diffused to a recipient security sector. While U.S. personnel may act as examples and conduits of U.S. military norms at the start of a capacity-building effort, local reformers are better suited to anchoring the norms within the recipient state's cultural precepts, making the norms more acceptable to the rest of the security sector.[40] After the new norms are accepted, these early adopters will also be essential to fostering a sense of local ownership so that reforms are properly implemented and sustained.[41]

Among the seven analyzed efforts, only three had a high-profile local leader who adopted U.S. military norms and acted as a rallying point for other reformers: South Korea, the Philippines, and El Salvador. Prior to the Korean War, President Syngman Rhee created a politicized officer corps whose loyalty he maintained through dispensing economic rents.[42] After the Republic of Korea's Army (ROKA)'s disastrous performance in the first year of the war, U.S. advisors took over personnel policy, identifying and promoting promising officers who adopted U.S. military norms.[43] The most high-profile early adopter was Paek Sun Yup, who started the Korean War as a colonel and eventually became the first four-star general in the Korean Army.[44] His meteoric rise was due in no small part to the support of U.S. advisors, since Paek was regarded with suspicion by President Rhee and his loyalists.[45]

In the Philippines, the Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group (JUSMAG) supported the installation of reformer Ramon Magsaysay as Secretary of National Defense, and he improved the performance of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) by dismissing corrupt officers, streamlining chains of command, and increasing soldiers' pay to disincentivize looting.[46] JUSMAG and the U.S. embassy prevented obstructionists from undermining Magsaysay's authority or removing him from office, which bought time for the reformed AFP to gain the initiative and contain the Huk insurgency.[47]

Similarly, in El Salvador, the U.S. took advantage of a stand-off between reformist and right-wing factions in the Salvadoran Army to install the reformist Colonel Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova as Defense Minister.[48] Vides Casanova ousted his predecessor's loyalists, chose replacements based on merit instead of personal connections, streamlined chains of command, and condemned right-wing extremism within the officer corps.[49] Although his retirement resulted in a temporary right-wing resurgence, his tenure set conditions for reformist sentiment to spread within the officer corps and signaled the end of the "code of silence" around human rights violations.[50]

On the other hand, U.S. advisors in South Vietnam never found officers who would support reform, since they all shared the same religion, partisan affiliation, and regional ties as President Diem, and this loyalty system continued under President Thieu.[51] In Iraq, accession into the officer corps was based on sectarian loyalties, and as the U.S. footprint shrank, the Iraqi

government sidelined apolitical officers, preventing early adopters from rising to prominence.[52] In Mali, early adopters never rose to prominence because the armed forces were polarized between supporters and opponents of the 2012 coup, with the opposing factions murdering and torturing each other's partisans.[53] Meanwhile, the international community's long-time cultivation of corrupt Afghan powerbrokers through direct monetary payments ensured that a desire for reform never manifested among the country's senior leadership.[54]

U.S. Oversight

By monitoring a recipient security sector, the U.S. can coerce recipients to conform to U.S. norms, in theory. However, oversight incurs differing costs and benefits depending on its comprehensiveness. Findings from previous SSR efforts suggest that at the beginning of a partnership, "highly interventionist" tactics are necessary, as more aspects of a recipient security sector are identified as deficient, which increases the breadth of oversight needed to ensure recipients adhere to reforms.[55] Increased depth of oversight may also be required in decentralized bureaucracies where every level extracts bribes or diverts funds.[56] However, comprehensive oversight requires a larger U.S. presence, which contradicts the capacity-building mantra of "small footprints," and may offend recipient states' sense of sovereignty.[57]

Both South Korea and South Vietnam are classified as partnerships with a "high" level of oversight. After 1950, the Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG) assumed command of all ROKA forces and managed their budgets, expenditures, and personnel policy.[58] In South Vietnam, the ratio of advisors to Vietnamese soldiers decreased from 1:202 in 1957 to 1:12 in 1963, with each battalion receiving two advisors, in addition to intelligence and development specialists being deployed to rural areas.[59]

U.S. partnerships with El Salvador and Iraq are classified as having a "medium" level of oversight. In El Salvador, the advisor ratio was maintained around 1:300, with advisors deployed at the brigade level even after the Salvadoran Army doubled in size.[60] A limiting factor was the prohibition on U.S. advisors accompanying Salvadoran units on patrol, but news media and NGOs filled the blind spot by reporting on human rights violations.[61] Military Transition Teams (MTTs) in Iraq were composed of 11 soldiers and embedded at the battalion level, achieving a 1:50 ratio on paper.[62] However, MTTs only visited their assigned units once or twice a week, and the Iraqi government prohibited them from partnering with politically sensitive units.[63]

The Philippines, Mali, and Afghanistan are considered cases of "low" oversight. Due to the doubling of the AFP's size, the advisor ratio in the Philippines also doubled from 1:431 to 1:875 from 1947 to 1952.[64] In Mali, advisors focused on training select counterterrorism units before the 2012 coup, and this occurred only on an episodic basis. [65] After the return of democratic rule, the U.S. opted to delegate the training of Malian troops to France, the European Union, and the United Nations.[66] Findings from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction found that the U.S. military command in Afghanistan's oversight capacity was so limited that it could not even validate Afghan units' personnel rosters.[67]

Conditionality

Related to the concept of oversight is conditionality. This describes a "carrot and stick" approach where aid is provided after reforms are implemented and sustained, or withheld if recipients continue engaging in corruption and resist reforms.[68] Conditionality is crucial during

the norm diffusion process because failure to punish corruption cements the perception that corruption can be committed with impunity, making it less likely that reforms will be implemented or respected.[69] One drawback to conditionality is that it can undermine recipients' confidence in U.S. commitments, making them less willing to implement reforms that could threaten their hold on power.[70] However, ironclad commitments on the U.S.'s part can invite moral hazard and undermine the credibility of threats to withhold aid if recipients do not conform to expected behaviors.[71]

South Korea, the Philippines, and Mali can be considered cases where conditionality was applied. Once it became clear that South Korea was utterly reliant on U.S. aid to prevent a North Korean takeover, the South Korean government assented to the professionalization of ROKA units under threat of U.S. advisors withholding equipment and training.[72] JUSMAG repeatedly delayed aid to force the Filipino government to authorize joint U.S.-AFP planning, reorganize the AFP, enact economic reforms, and prevent the ouster of reformers in the security sector.[73] After a military coup overthrew President Touré in 2012, the U.S. suspended all military aid to Mali.[74] When aid resumed two years later, it was severely restricted, with the U.S. preferring to work with neighboring countries instead.[75]

El Salvador is the only "mixed" case, with the U.S. alternating between unconditional support and enforcing conditionality. When the Carter, Reagan, and Bush administrations pursued conditional strategies, they were successful in changing the Salvadoran government and armed forces' (ESAF) behavior in regard to human rights and democratic reform.[76] Conversely, unconditional aid resulted in the Salvadoran government reneging on reform agreements or declining to punish ESAF human rights violations.[77]

South Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan are examples of the U.S. providing unconditional support. Despite 44 percent of South Vietnam's GDP consisting of U.S. aid, conditions were rarely imposed, and even then, never on military aid.[78] This unwillingness to impose conditions was due to conflicting recommendations from U.S. embassy personnel and military advisors to cut or continue aid, respectively, when the Diem regime refused to enact reforms, as well as U.S. presidents' public commitments to South Vietnam.[79] Besides selectively withholding logistical support to Iraqi National Police (INP) units to force the replacement of uncooperative INP commanders, the Iraq effort was characterized by a lack of conditionality.[80] Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, prior to 2014, the U.S. military headquarters, Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A), provided funds to the Afghan defense and interior ministries with no conditions on how they should be used.[81]

Time/Continuity

Anti-corruption researchers have suggested that it takes around 25 years for societal norms to conform to anti-corruption legislation. SSR researchers also found that longer-duration reform initiatives were more likely to have domestic elites take ownership of the process.[82] The lengths of the analyzed case studies are as follows: South Korea, 4 years (1949–1953); Philippines, 6 years (1947–1953); Vietnam, 17 years (1957–1973); El Salvador, 14 years (1979–1992); Iraq, 12 years (2003–2014); Mali, 18 years (2001–2012; 2014–2020); Afghanistan, 20 years (2001–2021). One caveat to this list is that the Philippines was a U.S. colonial possession dating back to the Spanish-American War and was granted independence in 1946, making its U.S. tutelage almost five decades long before the Huk rebellion started.[83] Another consideration is the continuity of U.S. mentorship. Turnover may weaken oversight while newly arrived U.S.

personnel become familiar with processes, procedures, and personalities. A metric that can provide some insight into continuity is tour length, since the more time an individual advisor or trainer spends with recipients, the more opportunities they have to influence recipients to adopt and adhere to U.S. norms, and for advisors to become knowledgeable about local corruption dynamics.

There is limited information on JUSMAG's personnel turnover during the Huk Rebellion, but one of the key U.S. advisors who championed reformers like Ramon Magsaysay was Colonel Edward Lansdale, who was assigned to a three-year tour on the eve of the Huk rebellion.[84] Korean advisor tour lengths were 18 months unaccompanied or 24 months with family, although this changed to a points system during the Korean War, with frontline service garnering more points.[85] In Vietnam, tours were 12 months, but most advisors only served 11 months and typically only spent six months with a combat unit, while the remainder was spent on staff.[86] At first El Salvador tours were 89 or 179 days in length, but were eventually lengthened to 1 year.[87] At the start of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), tours to Iraq and Afghanistan could last up to 15 months, but toward the end, deployments were around 6–9 months, depending on the branch of service.[88] Whatever the length of the tours, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction found that turnover among advisors "impaired the training mission's institutional memory and hindered the relationship building required in Security Sector Reform missions," an insight that may also be applicable to Iraq.[89] U.S. special operations forces (SOF) filled the advisor role to Malian forces, but their contact was episodic, and then nonexistent after training was delegated to France, the EU, and the UN.[90]

Civilian Reform

Usually, a state is beset with internal conflict because its government is flawed in some regard, such as rampant corruption.[91] This means that in addition to improving the capacity of recipient security sectors, the U.S. must also encourage civilian governments to enact reforms that address the grievances of the population. However, some governments will resist reform because it threatens elites' political and economic prerogatives.[92] Civilian governments' continued corruption can delay the norm diffusion "tipping point" by contributing to perceptions that corruption remains widespread and incentivizing security sectors to also resist reform.[93]

Only the South Korea, Philippines, and El Salvador cases included civilian reform. While the South Korean government under Syngman Rhee remained highly corrupt during and after the Korean War, it continued the U.S. military government's land reform program to address peasant grievances and gradually increased the proportion of civil servants who were selected through the civil service examination.[94] The Quirino administration and its Liberal Party supermajority in the Filipino Congress opposed and delayed U.S. reform proposals but were eventually pressured into passing legislation that raised corporate income taxes and the minimum wage.[95] When the Quirino administration attempted to interfere with the 1953 presidential election, the U.S. again threatened to suspend aid, ensuring a relatively free and fair election that swept reformer Ramon Magsaysay into office.[96] In El Salvador, the far-right ARENA party was taken over by more moderate leadership and won the presidency on a platform of economic reform and a negotiated peace with the FMLN.[97] The Cristiani administration followed through on its promised economic reforms, negotiated a peace deal with the FMLN that integrated them into the political system, and then overhauled the ESAF

by disbanding services associated with human rights violations and bringing other services under civilian control.[98]

In South Vietnam, the Diem regime never enacted meaningful political or economic reforms to shore up its popular support. [99] This failure to reform could be attributed to the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations' failure to condition military aid, which was the only support Diem considered necessary for his regime's survival.[100] Contrary to U.S. expectations, elections in Iraq were distorted by sectarian tensions, with Iraq's first two prime ministers sponsoring sectarian militias and politicizing the Iraqi officer corps to ensure their grip on power.[101] The U.S.-Mali security partnership was narrowly focused on improving Malian forces' tactical proficiency, with no attention paid to Malian institutions' weaknesses despite widespread knowledge of the civilian government's corruption.[102] Ironically, to advance their own political interests, Malian elites had purposefully sown division and discord among the armed forces, undermining their cohesion and capacity.[103] U.S. officials purposefully turned a blind eye to Afghan government corruption, believing that security had to take precedence before corrupt actors could be held to account.[104] Additionally, Afghan civil servants obstructed and derailed U.S.-proposed economic reforms to preserve their rents.[105]

Analysis/Discussion

Table 1 below summarizes the outcomes of the seven analyzed cases and the factors that contributed to or detracted from recipients adopting U.S. military norms. For the purposes of this analysis, South Korea, the Philippines, and El Salvador are considered "successful" cases because their security sectors adopted U.S. military norms and effectively countered the threats that U.S. advisors had been deployed to assist with. The ROKA was professionalized, and its combat performance continually improved until the 1953 armistice.[106] The AFP improved its tactical proficiency and reformed its abusive behavior toward civilians, undercutting support for the Huk insurgency until its leaders surrendered in 1953.[107] The ESAF repeatedly relapsed to its old norms whenever the U.S. did not condition aid, but advances were made in breaking the "code of silence" surrounding human rights violations, and the ESAF managed to stave off FMLN advances until a negotiated settlement was reached.[108]

Recipient	Early Adopters?	Oversight	Conditionality	Time (Years)	Civilian Reform?	Outcome
South Korea (1949-1953)	Yes	High	Conditional	4	Yes	Success
Philippines (1946-1953)	Yes	Low	Conditional	6*	Yes	Success
South Vietnam (1957-1973)	No	High	Unconditional	17	No	Failure
El Salvador (1979-1992)	Yes	Medium	Mixed	14	Yes	Success
Iraq (2003-2014)	No	Medium	Unconditional	11	No	Failure
Mali (2001-2020)	No	Low	Conditional	18**	No	Failure

Afghanistan (2001-2021)	No	Low	Unconditional	20	No	Failure
*Under U.S. control from 1898-1946; **2001-2011; 2014-2020.						

Table 1: U.S. Norm Entrepreneurship – Factors & Outcomes

Conversely, unsuccessful outcomes entail a continuation of corrupt practices and a failure to defeat the threat U.S. military aid was meant to address. The South Vietnamese Army remained mired in corruption, and two years after U.S. forces withdrew, North Vietnam conquered South Vietnam in 1975.[109] In 2014, the politicized Iraqi officer corps could not stop their units from dissolving when confronted by numerically inferior ISIS forces, necessitating the reentry of U.S. forces into Iraq.[110] Mali's forces have continued their human rights violations, only to see Islamist groups gain territory and bring the state to the verge of collapse.[111] Rampant corruption left Afghan security forces under-equipped and undermanned, and without U.S. assistance, the state fell to the Taliban in a matter of weeks.[112]

While each case has a unique combination of factors, all successful cases contained early adopters and civilian reform; unsuccessful cases contained neither. This suggests that there may be merit to the supposition that early adopters are needed to anchor U.S. military norms in their states' cultural precepts before others accept the norms.[113] The correlation of civilian reform with case success gives weight to the theory that if the civilian government is reforming, the security sector is more likely to follow suit, since corruption will be perceived to be in decline.[114] Conditionality was also present in successful cases, although El Salvador was labeled "mixed" due to the U.S.'s inconsistent enforcement. However, Mali also featured conditionality, the only unsuccessful case to do so. This conditionality was imposed in 2012 to comply with Section 7008 of U.S. foreign aid appropriations legislation, which restricts aid to states whose democratically elected governments are overthrown by a military coup.[115] Although Section 7008 can be waived for national security issues, the conditionality exercised in Mali's case did not contain the same level of flexibility as the conditionality U.S. personnel leveraged in the three successful cases.[116]

Conclusion

The historic record suggests that security partnerships are not a surefire way to achieve U.S. objectives with minimal effort. Often, the U.S. finds itself partnered with corrupt governments whose security sectors are also corrupt and ineffective.[117] Although reforms are required, the will to reform is often lacking.[118] The desire to reform must be cultivated by diffusing U.S. military norms to recipients. Yet U.S. personnel are not best suited to effect this change. Instead, they should identify and empower early adopters to take local ownership of the process.

Additionally, the correlation of successful capacity building with civilian reform suggests that military norm entrepreneurship is more likely to succeed as part of a larger, whole-of-government norm entrepreneurship effort. It is reasonable to posit that a state is more likely to survive if its civilian officials are more focused on wielding their non-military elements of national power to advance the public welfare, rather than enriching themselves. The question of which U.S. agencies are best suited to act as norm entrepreneurs for recipient states' civilian governments merits further exploration. What is clear from this analysis is that SSR and capacity building, more generally, cannot, and do not, occur in a vacuum.

Conditionality may also be required to change recipients' incentive structures, since adoption of new norms is unlikely without an extrinsic motivator (aid, operational success, etc.) to entice the wavering majority. However, two issues affect the U.S.'s ability to employ conditionality in support of norm entrepreneurship. First, U.S. military doctrine emphasizes "rapport building and persuasion," which encourages advisors to self-limit their range of options when dealing with intransigent recipients.[119] Second, legislation such as Section 7008 and Leahy vetting affects the conditionality that on-the-ground U.S. personnel can exercise in response to recipient violations.[120] Further study is needed to assess how current legislation affects the U.S.'s ability to elicit recipients' compliance before recommendations can be made to pass a corruption-centric version of Section 7008 or the Leahy Amendment.

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COMMENTARY

Adaptive Analysis for Uncertain Environments: A Case for Inductive Thinking in Irregular War

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that persistent analytic failure in U.S. irregular warfare stems less from poor execution of deductive frameworks than from their dominance over analytic practice. Doctrinal tools such as PMESII-PT, DOTMLPF-P, and JIPOE provide structure and comparability but impose linear assumptions on environments defined by political fragmentation, contested authority, and rapid adaptation. Drawing on cases from Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Somalia, the paper shows how deductive analysis distorts understanding through oversimplification, misattributed causation, cognitive bias, and method bias. Inductive analysis offers a corrective by grounding assessment in observation, contextual immersion, and iterative learning. Rather than rejecting deductive tools, the paper argues that they remain useful only when subordinated to inductive insight. Rebalancing analysis in this way improves analytic fidelity and adaptive learning in irregular warfare contexts and carries important implications for how analysis is taught within professional military education and civilian academic partnerships.

KEYWORDS

operational analysis; deductive analysis; inductive analysis; PMESII-PT; Bias; Irregular War; SOF; JIPOE

"They try so hard to make their systems coherent and complete that they are stuffed with common-places, truisms and nonsense of every kind."

Carl Von Clausewitz[1]

Introduction

Irregular warfare (IW) demands an analytic approach fundamentally different from the linear, deductive models that dominate U.S. Department of Defense planning. Frameworks such as

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PMESII-PT, DOTMLPF-P, and JIPOE were built to support conventional maneuver warfare: environments where variables are stable, adversaries are structured, and effects can be sequenced. In IW, these assumptions collapse. Political authority, which is the objective, is fragmented; causation is diffuse; and actors adapt faster than these models can predict. Systems analysis that begins with predefined categories often obscures what matters most in irregular conflict. Issues like legitimacy, informal authority, social networks, tribal dynamics, grievances, and the political economy of violence are difficult to measure and simplify for charts and PowerPoint decks.

Deductive analysis refers to reasoning that applies a top-down process in which analysts apply predefined categories or models to explain or predict phenomena.[2] Many defense experts defend deductive logic as the foundation of effective military analysis. Clark observes an "ongoing commitment to a deductive approach for analytical problem solving" in Army doctrine, tracing it through decades of planning manuals that codify decision-making as sequential reasoning from premises to outcomes.[3] Eikmeier reinforces this logic through a structured, top-down "ends, ways, and means" framework for identifying centers of gravity, a disciplined process that is meant to bring order to operational design.[4] In the Department of Defense, this logic underpins frameworks like PMESII-PT and DOTMLPF-P, all of which impose structured, universal bins on complex environments in an effort to produce coherence and comparability. Razma extends the argument, noting that models like PMESII-PT remain "reliable interpretations" for describing essential defense functions.[5] Likewise, Ross's Capability Package Planning Model emphasizes structured frameworks such as DOTMLPF-P to shape thinking and ensure coherence in security cooperation planning.[6] These scholars support a mechanistic, positivist approach to understanding the environment.

Inductive analysis, by contrast, builds upward from local, boots-on-the-ground observation. Analysts begin with variables like behaviors, relationships, informal authority, and grievances, then allow patterns and causal mechanisms to emerge from the data itself. This bottom-up logic echoes classical warnings from Clausewitz and Trotsky, who argued that any theory of war must remain grounded in lived experience and adapt to historical context rather than be confined within closed analytical systems.[7] More recent scholarship in complexity theory reinforces this same point. In nonlinear conflict ecosystems, small shifts in social relationships or incentives can produce disproportionate strategic effects that rigid deductive models fail to anticipate.[8] Likewise, interpretivist IR scholars demonstrate that meaning, identity, and legitimacy, which are key drivers of behavior in IW, cannot be captured through deductive, variable-based models alone.[9]

Together, these traditions establish why IW environments require analytic approaches grounded first in observation and context, not abstraction. This is not a SOF argument dressed up as theory. This inductive orientation aligns with a broader tradition in political science that treats context not as analytical noise but as constitutive of political processes. As Goodin and Tilly argue, valid explanations in complex political environments "depend triply on context": on the analyst's interpretive position, on the evidence available, and on the actual operation of the processes under study.[10] Against law-seeking approaches that abstract too early, contextual analysis emphasizes mechanism-based explanation grounded in observation and interaction rather than invariant variables. From this perspective, inductive reasoning is not a rejection of rigor but a prerequisite for it, ensuring that analytic structure follows lived political reality rather than distorting it through premature abstraction.

This paper argues that IW analysis can invert DoD's dominant logic. Irregular warfare practitioners, from SOF detachments to interagency teams, rarely encounter the world implied by doctrinal models. Instead, they navigate fluid local realities in which power is contested at the village level and where tactical behaviors cannot be inferred from national-level indicators. Historically, U.S. programs in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Somalia, and the Sahel have shown that deductive, top-down assessments frequently misread conditions, leading to poor anticipation and brittle campaign designs. Inductive reasoning, which is grounded in field immersion, iterative learning, and contextual sensitivity, captures causal mechanisms that rigid deductive frameworks miss. Programs such as the Combined Action Program in Vietnam and Village Stability Operations in Afghanistan demonstrated that proximity to the population uncovers how authority, legitimacy, and social incentives actually function. When analysis starts this way, rather than from abstract diagrams, planners can identify constraints and limitations and support partner forces in ways that align with the human terrain rather than institutional templates.

Deductive analysis, the top-down method, suffers from recurring limitations that reduce its effectiveness in security cooperation planning. Challenges arising from oversimplification, dynamism, causation, cognitive bias, and method bias can distort assessments and misalign interventions. As Clausewitz and Trotsky warned, systems that promise coherence often mistake their internal logic for reality itself. Analysts feel pressure to look for evidence that supports those deductive frameworks. By rebalancing deduction with inductive discipline, IW analysts gain a more accurate, adaptive, and politically attuned understanding of conflict ecosystems. This approach does not reject structured analysis; it ensures that structure serves the operational problem rather than distorting it. The examples used in this paper are not intended as full campaign histories. They are used as focused examples to illustrate specific analytic problems and practices. Each case supports a particular claim, either a limitation of deductive analysis or a strength of inductive reasoning, but not both at the same time. In several instances, the same theater appears in different sections to highlight different analytic dynamics rather than to make a single judgment about the conflict as a whole. The purpose is not to relitigate wars, but to show how different analytic approaches shape what planners see, miss, and ultimately do.

The remainder of the paper examines the analytic pitfalls of deductive reasoning and demonstrates how inductive approaches strengthen planning, M&E, and partner-force development in irregular warfare contexts.

Oversimplification

To make systems manageable, analysts often simplify complex realities by reducing variables or ignoring external influences.[11] This can lead to models that do not reflect the full scope of real-world dynamics.[12] In many cases, particularly in security or humanitarian contexts, reliable data may be incomplete or unavailable. These data limitations make modeling partner sentiment accurately very difficult. This drives a tendency to focus on variables that can be measured easily, called quantification bias, while ignoring intangible factors like political will, morale, or cultural context, which can be critically important in national security.[13] Assumption sensitivity hardens the more readily available preferred information is to gather.[14] When deductive assumptions fail, systems optimized for those scenarios may underperform or create strategic risk.

The Strategic Hamlet Program in South Vietnam illustrates this problem vividly. The program relied on modernization theory and assumptions that centralized state-building would yield stability.[15] The program treated security and legitimacy as outputs of institutional design rather than as socially contingent processes. Analysts privileged formal administrative structures and population control metrics over village-level authority, informal power networks, and local grievance patterns. Top-down models oversimplified the fragmented political landscape, assuming coherence where none existed. Analysts privileged formal institutions over village-level legitimacy and informal power structures, leading to interventions misaligned with local realities. The Strategic Hamlet Program thus became a case of the very "doctrinairism" Clausewitz and Trotsky derided. The result was an intervention that appeared analytically tidy but was detached from the lived realities it sought to manage.

Dynamism

Security systems are not static, but are dynamic, evolving over time and influenced by feedback loops, delays, and nonlinear behavior.[16] In such systems, goal ambiguity is a real concern. As stakeholders often disagree on objectives or priorities, analysis slows down as the independent variable disappears in squabbles and bureaucratic politicking. Analysts attempting to model system dynamics can fall prey to these boundary discreteness issues, since a model requires variables that are well defined, controlled, and accounted for in the system.[17] This makes model boundary selection critical, as what is included or excluded shapes conclusions. Dominating feedback loops, like powerful staffers, can determine the trajectory of analysis.[18] For instance, changes in a variable like foreign aid might have unintended, time-lagged effects on governance, security, or public perception, out of sync with timelines for funding or activity approval. These second- and third-order effects are notoriously hard to capture. Ignoring them is easy and compounds oversimplification.

The Strategic Hamlet Program also illustrates how deductive analysis struggled to account for dynamism in irregular warfare environments. Designed around linear assumptions that pacification could be sequenced through clear, hold, and build phases, the program relied on static indicators such as the number of fortified hamlets or populations relocated. These metrics treated social stability and legitimacy as fixed inputs rather than as variables shaped by continuous interaction and adaptation. As local actors responded to resettlement, coercion, and shifting security conditions, feedback loops emerged that the analytic model could not absorb. Villages classified as "secure" one quarter often collapsed the next, as coercive resettlement inflamed resentment and insurgents adapted their tactics. [19] This was due less to improper execution than to the system itself evolving faster than the deductive framework could keep pace with.

Causation

Clausewitz condemned the belief that war, or analysis of war, can be captured in a closed system: causation, the perfidious princess of analysis, was his muse. In analysis, causation goes beyond a connection between two variables. It attempts to understand the activities behind the connection.[20] In simple terms, causation means that one thing makes another thing happen.

Unlike correlation, which only indicates a relationship between two variables (they move together), causality refers to the process of explaining why events unfold as they do,

recognizing multiple interacting influences rather than linear cause–effect chains. Explanation is about constructing meaning by identifying patterns of influence and interaction that make sense of outcomes, rather than proving singular deterministic causes.[21] For example, a country receiving extensive DoD security assistance might show declining levels of violence. However, this does not necessarily mean the assistance caused the reduction. Both may be correlated because a third factor, like political settlement or improved governance, has created conditions favorable for peace and also made the country a more attractive candidate for more assistance. Mistaking correlation for causation could lead to overestimating the impact of security programs. The principle of non-spuriousness—that the relationship between two variables is not due to some other variable—is a measurement precision issue.[22] Analysis takes multiple iterations with the subject over time. Isolating variables in security cooperation is often impossible, making determinations of non-interference questionable at best.

In practice, especially in complex systems like national security or public policy, causation is rarely simple or singular. Multiple interacting causes often lead to an outcome, and feedback loops can further complicate the causal chain. For example, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) illustrates how deductive analysis can misattribute causation in complex security environments. Strategic assumptions held that degrading al-Shabaab kinetically would erode its legitimacy and that standardized training inputs would translate into improved force cohesion and governance outcomes.[23] These assumptions reflected a linear causal logic that treated correlation as causation. In practice, observed changes in security conditions often were more influenced by clan realignments, localized political bargains, or external financial flows that were independent of formal assistance efforts. By privileging program inputs and output metrics over underlying political processes, deductive analysis overstated the causal impact of training and operations while obscuring the mechanisms that actually shaped outcomes. But AMISOM lacked a mechanism to systematize these insights into mission-wide planning, revealing a disconnect between operational feedback and strategic adaptation.[24]

Cognitive Bias

Cognitive biases are systematic errors arising from mental shortcuts that are used when the analyst has limited resources to process large amounts of data.[25] This bounded rationality is shaped by real-world environments, motivations, and task demands. Biases are evolved strategies to enhance efficiency over strict accuracy, especially in situations with uncertain or asymmetric outcomes.[26] These patterns, like structured SOPs and regulations, can be maladapted for modern environments.

This leads to confirmation bias, a major source of analytic problems. Confirmation bias is when analysts favor information that supports their preexisting beliefs or supervisors' preferences while downplaying contradictory evidence.[27] This tendency to favor believable conclusions intensifies with problem complexity.[28] As logical tasks become harder, people rely more on intuitive judgments than formal logic. These 'dual process' cognitive limits lead individuals to favor belief-based reasoning under increased cognitive load.[29] In deductive analysis, the oversaturation of variables leads analysts to choose simpler courses of action.

The U.S. experience in Afghanistan illustrates how cognitive bias can shape analysis within deductive planning systems. Early assessments of partner force development and governance capacity were strongly influenced by anchoring and confirmation bias, as analysts interpreted field reporting through prior assumptions about institutional progress and absorptive capacity.[30]

Indicators that aligned with expectations, such as force size, training throughput, or formal organizational charts, were privileged, while contradictory signals related to patronage networks, corruption, and political fragmentation were discounted or explained away. Error-management bias further reinforced these tendencies, as planners often favored optimistic assessments to avoid the perceived costs of withholding assistance or revising strategy.[31] When false positives and false negatives carry asymmetric costs, evolution favors biases that err toward the less costly mistake. U.S. assistance planners may err on the side of caution by assuming a partner force is less prone to corruption or collapse than evidence supports. As a result, deductive frameworks did not simply misread conditions; they systematically filtered evidence in ways that sustained analytically comfortable but increasingly fragile conclusions.

Another issue in analysis is error management bias, which refers to systematic cognitive tendencies that evolved to minimize the costliest type of error in uncertain situations. Anchoring bias returns us to the initial problem, where too much emphasis is placed on initial estimates or assumptions also distorts judgment, particularly in time-sensitive or uncertain environments.[32] Organizational and institutional anchors can arise when agencies filter findings to conform with leadership expectations or prevailing policy agendas.[33] Analysts may unconsciously align conclusions with what is seen as acceptable or career-safe.

Method Bias

Bias in analysis refers to systematic distortions in how information is gathered, interpreted, or presented, leading to inaccurate or misleading conclusions.[34] Bias can enter the analytical process at any stage: data selection, framing of questions, modeling, or interpretation, and often occurs without the analyst's conscious intent. Method bias happens when models or data are selected based on convenience or when complex qualitative variables like morale, leadership, or legitimacy are excluded because they are hard to quantify.[35] Quantification bias is also common. Analysts may prioritize logistics metrics or weapons system performance while underweighting harder-to-measure variables like host-nation support or civil-military relations.[36] Turning back to the AMISOM mission, we see an illustration of how method bias can distort analysis through the choice of measurement and reporting tools. Assessments prioritized quantifiable outputs such as training completion rates, unit certifications, and equipment delivery. Harder-to-measure variables like clan loyalties and unit morale were ignored.[37] These choices in method produced reporting that appeared coherent and positive but was poorly aligned with the underlying political and social realities shaping force behavior. By privileging what could easily be counted over what actually structured performance, deductive assessment systems generated an illusion of progress that masked persistent fragility within Somali security forces. Method bias also multiplies misperception, as systems designed to verify progress end up validating their own assumptions, thus starting the next cycle even further from reality.

Rethinking the Analytic Approach

Deductive analysis offers structure, consistency, and comparability, but its assumptions often distort reality in fragile or politically complex environments. Inductive reasoning, by contrast, grounds analysis in lived experience and emergent dynamics. This is what SOF does. Inductive reasoning embodies the methodological humility Clausewitz and Trotsky demanded: plans

must follow careful collection, not dictate it. In qualitative research parlance, SOF empirically grounds direct observation of behaviors, actors, and contexts rather than the imposition of an a priori top-down framework.[38] The Marines in the Combined Action Program in Vietnam did the same. Small units of U.S. Marines lived and operated full-time alongside local Popular Forces, engaging daily with village populations. Through sustained proximity, these teams learned how legitimacy, morale, informal authority, and local grievance patterns actually functioned at the village level.

Inductive approaches emphasize contextual sensitivity, which is cultural and political embeddedness, treating context as constitutive of outcomes rather than as background noise.[39] Field immersion enables analysts to recognize how clan structures, neopatrimonial exchange, or kinship networks shape partner performance. These insights are often invisible to top-down assessments. The AMISOM experience, for instance, demonstrated that training metrics obscured the centrality of clan cohesion and local legitimacy.

Induction fosters adaptive learning via iterative adjustments. Because it prioritizes observation and feedback, it allows analysts to refine programs as realities evolve.[40] Village Stability Operations in Afghanistan displayed this strength: Special Forces teams learned through continuous engagement, modifying security arrangements in response to shifting tribal alliances and grievances rather than adhering to rigid, state-centric templates. Continuous field observation mitigates bias, as emerging evidence disrupts analytic path dependency.[41] Inductive processes reduce confirmation and quantification bias by confronting planners with disconfirming data. Instead of validating assumptions through outputs, analysts reinterpret frameworks through ground truth and structured reflection.

Finally, induction enhances local ownership and long-term resilience. Programs co-produced with partners and communities resonate with indigenous norms of authority and reciprocity, producing greater durability than externally imposed designs. By anchoring analysis in observation, context, and feedback, inductive reasoning transforms planning into an adaptive, learning-oriented process that keeps security cooperation aligned with political and human realities.[42] This method privileges responsiveness, adaptability, and empirical grounding. The CAP in Vietnam highlighted induction's strength in capturing causal mechanisms overlooked by deductive models. By embedding Marines in villages, Marines lived among the population, conducted joint patrols, and helped administer civic action programs tailored to each village's specific context, building legitimacy, morale, and trust, rather than abstract force ratios.[43]

The Village Stability Operations (VSO) program in Afghanistan also demonstrated how inductive reasoning can manage dynamism more effectively.[44] Early U.S. efforts had applied deductive, state-building models that assumed centralized coherence and institutions would reduce corruption and increase absorptive capacity. VSO reversed this logic. Special Forces teams embedded in villages, observed local politics, and co-developed solutions tailored to each community. By privileging continuous observation and feedback, VSO adapted to evolving tribal grievances and power dynamics. The program's inductive design recognized that stability emerged from relationships and legitimacy, not from static institutional templates. Though difficult to scale and causally ambiguous, VSO exemplified how inductive analysis can address the dynamism that deductive frameworks often miss.

In Vietnam, the Combined Action Program helps illustrate how inductive practice can mitigate such distortions.[45] CAP teams grounded their analysis in lived experience rather than

inherited assumptions, learning directly from population behavior. By privileging observed reality over formal logic, Marines reduced confirmation bias and uncovered causal mechanisms—like community legitimacy and morale—that top-down models had missed. This example demonstrates that proximity to context and iterative feedback can counter cognitive blind spots inherent in distant, deductive systems.

Implications for the IW Nomos

The implications for irregular warfare planning and execution are threefold. First, deductive planning tends to validate its own assumptions rather than interrogate them, reinforcing and building what might be called pseudo-U.S. capabilities. Frameworks such as PMESII-PT and JIPOE impose the appearance of coherence and rigor, but their internal logic rewards alignment with American institutional preferences rather than with local effectiveness. These systems measure the degree to which partner programs conform to U.S. categories of performance, not whether they function within indigenous political economies. The result is an analytic echo chamber in which models confirm their own premises: success is defined as consistency with the plan rather than adaptation to reality. True capability development demands that analysis test, not simply affirm, the assumptions embedded in American doctrine and planning culture.

Second, inductive reasoning should anchor the analytic cycle by institutionalizing observation, feedback, and adaptation at every stage of design and implementation. This is a key strength of SOF. Field immersion and iterative learning are not ad hoc supplements to planning but essential sources of evidence for how irregular war actually unfolds. Without this emphasis, as Trotsky warned, theory "easily outlives its day, because it continues unchanged, while circumstances imperceptibly undergo complete change."[46] Instead of forcing partners to conform to pre-set templates, planners would let context and evidence reshape frameworks in real time. Deductive models would still provide discipline by establishing comparability across commands and programs, but their role would shift from prescribing to testing emergent understanding. Just as important, analysis itself must be taught from first principles, beginning with the basic logic of observation, pattern recognition, and iterative inference.

Third, by teaching analysis as an adaptive craft rather than a fixed system, training programs would cultivate judgment about when deductive tools enhance, and when they distort, reality. The dialogue between field observation and structured analysis allows planners to detect disconfirming evidence early, recalibrate assumptions, and sustain responsiveness in complex or unstable environments.[47] In this sense, induction is not the opposite of deduction but its corrective: it ensures that structure serves learning rather than constraining it. Embedding such feedback ensures that theory remains the servant of experience, the relationship Trotsky insisted must guide all military study.

Inductive analysis can be most effectively taught at the intersection of civilian academic institutions and professional military education (PME), where methodological rigor and operational experience reinforce one another. Civilian universities, particularly graduate programs in political science, sociology, anthropology, public policy, and evaluation, are well-positioned to teach inductive reasoning as a formal analytic skill. These institutions emphasize observation, qualitative methods, process tracing, ethnography, and theory building from empirical evidence, providing students with disciplined tools for pattern recognition and causal inference grounded in context. When partnered with PME institutions, this methodological foundation can be translated directly into operational relevance.

PME environments, by contrast, offer the applied setting necessary to stress-test inductive thinking against real strategic problems. Staff colleges, war colleges, and functional schools expose practitioners to complex, ambiguous environments where predefined models routinely break down. Integrating inductive analysis into PME curricula through case-based learning, field reporting exercises, red-team observation, and adaptive assessment would teach officers, and particularly intel warrants and NCOs, how to begin with ground truth before imposing structure. Crucially, inductive reasoning must be taught explicitly, not assumed as an informal skill acquired through experience alone. A joint civilian–PME partnership would create the strongest learning environment: civilian scholars contribute methodological discipline, while military institutions supply contextual realism and decision constraints. Together, they cultivate analysts capable of recognizing when deductive frameworks illuminate reality and when they obscure it, which is an essential competence for irregular warfare.

Conclusion

Irregular warfare exposes the limits of deductive analysis more sharply than any other operational domain. As Clausewitz and Trotsky warned, theory must never become so coherent that it outlives the reality it seeks to explain; when doctrine hardens faster than circumstances evolve, analysis loses its anchor in experience. Historical examples such as the Combined Action Program in Vietnam and Village Stability Operations in Afghanistan demonstrate the power of inductive practice to detect adaptation early and adjust accordingly. Deductive approaches do not fail because of their inelasticity. Indeed, many of the deductive approaches the U.S. military uses have built-in correction mechanisms meant to fix the very issues identified in this paper. Instead, they fail because of intent. In the DoD, top-down followership is valued more than bottom-up discovery. For IW analysts, the task is not to discard deduction but to subordinate it. When planning begins inductively, with observation before abstraction, deductive tools become more accurate, more adaptive, and more strategically meaningful.

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BOOK REVIEW

AI, Automation, and War: The Rise of a Military-Tech Complex by Anthony King

ISBN: 9780691265148, Princeton University Press, 2025, 240 pages, $32.00 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by: **Kennedy Lyon-Lindersmith**, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Daytona Beach, Florida, United States

In *AI, Automation, and War: The Rise of a Military-Tech Complex*, Anthony King analyzes current artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities and how AI might impact war. King, a sociologist, has written several books and dozens of research articles on war, has taught war studies courses at the University of Exeter and the University of Warwick, and currently serves as Chair of War Studies at the University of Warwick. The author makes clear in the preface and throughout the book that this work is a dynamic investigation of the integration of AI into the armed forces, with the goal of explaining the role of AI in automation, the role of AI in war, and the possibility of the automation of war. As technology continues to change and militaries continue to adapt, this integration may evolve and different predictions may emerge. Therefore, this book should be used to understand AI, the armed forces, and the relationship between them as it currently stands.

To investigate future possibilities for AI, automation, and war, King introduces the book with various predictions about the automation of war and an explanation of the present-day uses and capabilities of AI before describing his conception of the military-tech complex. King also states throughout the book that making uneducated speculation about future plans or AI capabilities is dangerous, and he therefore provides evidence and caution for all his views.

The basics of artificial intelligence are introduced quickly and concisely. King simplifies information about the various types of AI so that readers do not need a technical background to understand what AI can do. These early chapters provide an important foundation for King's later explanations and predictions regarding military applications of AI. King's brief chapter on AI (Chapter 2, "What AI Can Do") would be valuable to anyone interested in a concise history of AI and a description of its current capabilities, even readers not specifically interested in military applications.

After outlining the basics of AI and its current capabilities, King examines how these technologies have been adopted by both technology companies and armed forces. His descriptions of individual capabilities and military cases remain largely surface-level, which helps make the book accessible to readers without prior knowledge of military AI applications. For readers already familiar with AI capabilities and military operations, however, the discussion may become repetitive. The relationship between technology companies and the armed forces is what King defines as the "military-tech complex," for which he provides substantial evidence. AI sits at the center of this relationship because it is a technology developed within an industrial context. For militaries to employ AI effectively and remain at the forefront of technological change, King argues, partnerships between the civilian and military sectors are essential.

King situates this argument within the historical context of Silicon Valley, highlighting recent companies and controversies, including employee protests at Google and Microsoft over their involvement in military projects. Despite this history of resistance, the tech sector has experienced a noticeable shift from an independent orientation toward a national security perspective. King examines the roles of Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, Eric Schmidt, Alex Karp, Palmer Luckey, and their associated companies in this realignment toward closer collaboration with the armed forces. During this period, several countries published defense strategies that emphasized AI and automation. King discusses the United States' Third Offset Strategy and the United Kingdom's Digital Strategy for Defence, explaining how these strategies underscore the need for partnerships with the tech sector. This emerging alignment is described by King as the military-tech complex.

In the latter portion of the book, King examines specific military functions, including planning, targeting, and cyber operations. The chapter on AI-enabled planning highlights U.S. and UK military structures that support planning functions, as well as software systems already in use, including Torch (an AI-enabled battle-management system), Delta (another battle-management system), and Lattice (Anduril's open software platform). A subsequent chapter focuses on AI in targeting, with examples such as Project Maven, mass COVID testing in the United Kingdom, and the Israel Defense Forces' use of an AI system known as *The Gospel*. King also devotes a chapter to AI in cyber operations, describing cyber tactics employed by Ukraine, Russia, and China. This chapter emphasizes the need for militaries to adopt AI capabilities to defend against adversaries already enabled by AI.

King concludes the book by addressing the appropriate relationship between humans and AI in warfare. He rejects the notion that humans and machines form a "team," arguing that this framing incorrectly attributes agency to machines. AI does not understand the context of war, nor does it possess independent decision-making capabilities. King maintains that while AI should be integrated into military operations to provide scale, speed, and information, humans must remain commanders and decision-makers. He cautions against placing excessive trust in AI systems.

Overall, *AI, Automation, and War* argues convincingly that AI has already been used—and will continue to be used—to automate certain military functions, while stopping short of fully replacing human decision-makers. King contends that AI is not automating war in the dystopian manner often feared and supports this claim with real-world examples. His accessible writing style makes the book particularly useful for general readers without prior knowledge of AI, the technology sector, military operations, or defense strategy. Readers with greater familiarity in

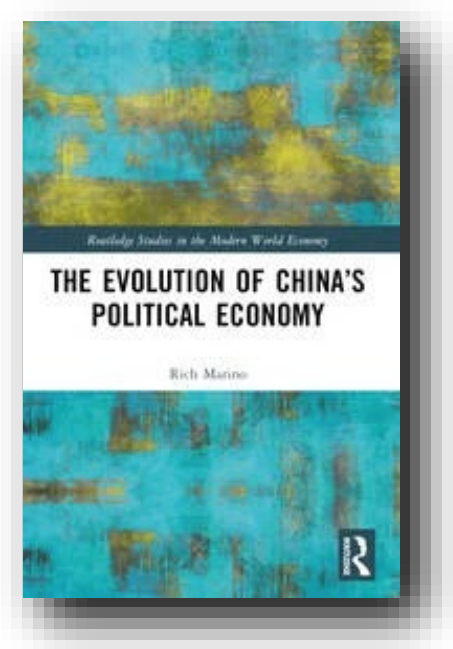
these areas may find some sections repetitive, but King's perspective and case studies nonetheless provide a clear understanding of the issues at stake and a grounded analysis that helps address prevailing concerns about the military use of AI.

BOOK REVIEW

The Evolution of China's Political Economy by Rich Marino

ISBN: 978-1032373706, Routledge, November 2024, 282 pages, $43.99 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by: **Ian Murphy**, SECURIFENSE, INC., Hendersonville, North Carolina, USA



As global powers contend with Russian military might and Chinese economic might, Rich Marino's *The Evolution of China's Political Economy* offers an insightful analysis of China's decades-long economic transformation, arguing that the distinctive structure of its economic system inherently dictates its geoeconomic behavior. The book provides a timely and necessary intervention into the literature on U.S.-China strategic competition, establishing the immediate relevance of China's internal economic architecture to the contest for global political power. The book's analysis tracks the evolution of China's economic model from the death of Mao in 1976 through the reforms of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, culminating in the current political structure under Xi Jinping.

Marino's central thesis posits that China's economic vitality and global success are derived from a unique hybrid structure of a "quasi-capitalist system working in concert with its quasi-socialist system." Managed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), this system provides China with an unusual competitive advantage over global capitalist competitors, primarily the United States and the European Union. Marino argues that this framework must be understood by academics, students, and professionals interested in the three core elements of China's political economy: global trade, political power, and China's international image.

The contribution this book makes is its direct critique of the foundational miscalculations made by Western policymakers, which are rooted in liberal institutionalist expectations. The United States and its allies, when facilitating China's integration into the global economic structure, operated under the "mistaken impression" that economic success would automatically foster political liberalization and convergence toward an open, democratic society. The book contends that this Western logic resulted from a failure to recognize the deliberate choice by the CCP to use market access to fund and reinforce an authoritarian, non-market power structure.

Marino establishes that the prevailing geoeconomic friction is not merely an accident of recent geopolitical dynamics, but rather the inevitable long-term consequence of China's successful strategic exploitation of the liberal international order. Economic achievements,

rather than leading to a democratic pivot, served exclusively to strengthen CCP authority, leading to the competitive and deteriorating relations observed today.

Centralized Power, Strategic Coercion, and Internal Fragility

The Evolution of China's Political Economy presents China's hybrid economy as one fundamentally structured for strategic political control over pure economic efficiency, granting the Chinese Communist Party unmatched capability to weaponize the country's economic assets. This system, characterized as "Party-State Capitalism," institutionalized under Xi Jinping's centralized leadership, marks a shift away from earlier and more separate administrative models. The centralization involves strengthening the Party's role in the country's economic functions and directly expanding CCP authority into corporate governance while leveraging state-led finance. This integration demands political fealty from key actors, deliberately blurring the lines between state and private capital, which enhances the state's capacity for rapid mobilization and coercive diplomacy.

The internal political architecture of the country directly informs China's external strategy, rooted in "Party-State Realism," where the core national interest is securing the CCP's supremacy. Consequently, the book argues that dealings with the PRC are, in essence, dealings with the Party, rendering conventional dispute resolution mechanisms, such as the World Trade Organization, insufficient against this systemic non-market political control.

A key element of this geoeconomic strategy is the targeted approach to technology acquisition and development. The book highlights China's rapid modernization, which accelerated after the government recognized the benefits of technology duplication and the fragility of international patent law, allowing the economy to rapidly catch up to developed nations. While formal technology transfer is internationally prohibited, China institutionalized coercive informal mechanisms. These practices, including demanding joint ventures with majority Chinese stakes and utilizing complex administrative reviews, effectively compel foreign firms to surrender technology and intellectual property rights in exchange for market access.

This strategy relies on systematic favoritism toward China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and national champions such as Huawei and Alibaba. These firms receive state support and preferential rules, positioning them as instruments for achieving national goals, such as those laid out in the *Made in China 2025* industrial policy. This institutionalized exploitation has necessitated a defensive geoeconomic response from the West, as exemplified by intensified investment screening and pressure to decouple from China in sensitive technology sectors.

Finally, the book reveals that China's external assertiveness is frequently driven by profound domestic structural fragilities. Analysis of the *Quantitative China* section highlights ongoing challenges, including a weak banking system, reliance on fixed investment over consumer demand, corruption, and, most crucially, capital misallocation. Overwhelming government support favors inefficient SOEs, leading to massive debt accumulation and the crowding out of more productive private enterprises. This institutional distortion contributes to a slowdown in economic momentum and a decline in total factor productivity, signaling the limits of the old growth model.

Contribution for Irregular Warfare and Geoeconomics

Marino's *The Evolution of China's Political Economy* provides a significant contribution by shifting the focus of geoeconomic debate beyond superficial discussions of trade imbalances or cyclical downturns toward a deep-seated analysis of China's systemic political-economic architecture. The book's central utility for the irregular warfare community lies in its definitive confirmation that China's economic instruments are functionally inseparable from its power-political objectives.

The established concept of strategic non-convergence is key: China's economic ascent was deliberately managed to strengthen, rather than liberalize, the authoritarian Party-State. This hybrid quasi-socialist/quasi-capitalist system institutionalized unfair competitive advantages, which should be understood as a form of geoeconomic irregular warfare targeting the stability and technological superiority of liberal market democracies. The practices detailed in the book are effectively non-kinetic, state-level competitive strategies. For policymakers concerned with irregular warfare, this analysis confirms that technology and economic competition are primary battlegrounds, demanding a response that views China's SOEs and national champions as instruments of the state rather than as commercial actors.

The political centralization under Xi Jinping provides the capacity for the seamless mobilization of economic tools for strategic ends, granting the CCP an unmatched capability to weaponize the country's economic assets. This framework necessitates that irregular warfare scholars and practitioners recognize that dealings with the PRC are, in essence, dealings with the Party, and that there are real limits to what democracies can achieve through multilateral institutions in changing China's behavior.

The quantitative sections reveal the paradox of power: that China's external economic assertiveness is often a necessary consequence of managing profound internal structural pressures related to inefficient SOEs, massive debt, and declining total factor productivity. The book is exceptionally timely, directly addressing the core mechanisms driving the shift from interdependence to insecurity in international affairs.

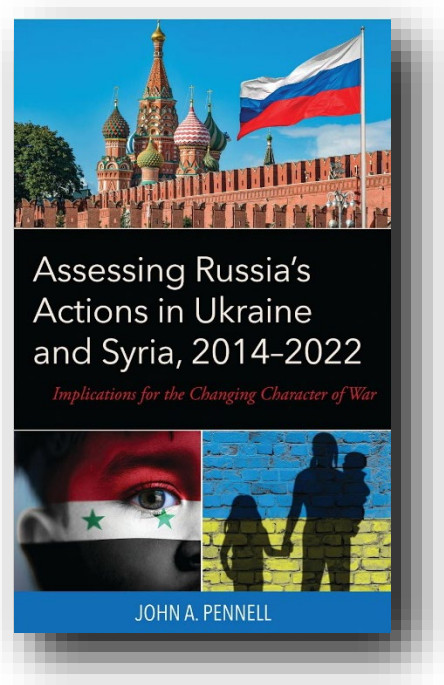
For scholars and analysts seeking to understand the complexity of geoeconomic competition, Marino's work serves as a resource that definitively confirms that China's economic instruments are functionally inseparable from its power-political objectives. This understanding calls for a systemic, coordinated, and defensive response from advanced liberal market democracies. The current global friction, therefore, is not a failure of diplomacy, but the inevitable structural conflict arising when a non-convergent, technologically capable authoritarian state utilizes market mechanisms exclusively for political gain.

BOOK REVIEW

Assessing Russia's Actions in Ukraine and Syria, 2014–2022: Implications for the Changing Character of War by John A. Pennell

ISBN: 978-1666962239, Lexington Books, October 2024, 336 pages, $123.99 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by: **Arman Mahmoudian**, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida, United States



John A. Pennell's *Assessing Russia's Actions in Ukraine and Syria, 2014–2022* is, at its core, a book about what really has and has not changed in the way wars are fought. Pennell is a retired U.S. senior Foreign Service officer (Minister-Counselor rank) with more than two decades of executive-level experience overseeing U.S. cooperation programs across Africa, Eurasia, the Indo-Pacific, Latin America, and the Middle East, with a career-long focus on strategic competition, irregular warfare, and information operations. Using Russia's interventions in Ukraine and Syria as his main cases, Pennell tries to answer a deceptively simple question: are we witnessing a new kind of warfare, or an old logic dressed in modern clothes?

His answer leans firmly toward continuity. Pennell pushes back against the now-standard Western habit of treating Russian "hybrid warfare" as something radically unprecedented. He shows that Russian theorists themselves often reserve the term "hybrid" for what they see as Western campaigns against Russia, not for their own conduct. Rather than accept the buzzword at face value, Pennell reaches for concepts like "new-generation warfare," "political warfare," and "full-spectrum conflict" to capture what Moscow is doing. Those labels matter, and they place his analysis inside the broader scholarly debate on the "changing character of war," where the key tension is between enduring political violence on the one hand and shifting methods and technologies on the other.

The book's key claim is that the nature of war—violence, friction, political purpose—has not fundamentally changed, but its character has. New digital tools and transnational information flows create fresh ways to pursue old goals, and Pennell is careful not to mistake those means for a new kind of war altogether. Eastern Ukraine crystallizes this point: a landscape of trenches and massed artillery that could have come from World War I, overlaid with cyberattacks on infrastructure and the use of drones—the very old and the very new operating side by side.

One of the book's major strengths is how systematically it fills gaps in the existing literature. Instead of looking at Ukraine and Syria separately, or focusing only on spectacular episodes, Pennell insists on examining the totality of Russia's actions across both theaters. This dual-case approach lets him trace how tools and habits travel from one conflict to another. It also brings into view a range of underreported instruments of Russian statecraft that rarely get serious treatment in more conventional military studies: information operations, economic leverage, religious and cultural influence, and other non-kinetic tactics that sit uncomfortably at the edge of what many analysts still think of as "war."

The Ukraine chapters show just how much of Russia's behavior rests on long-standing patterns. Despite all the talk of novelty, the Kremlin's playbook in Crimea and Donbas looks very familiar when laid against Soviet and even pre-Soviet practices. Moscow blends conventional and unconventional methods, but the mix is not accidental. Local proxies, covert special forces, the "little green men," heavy propaganda, and intense political pressure all echo the repertoire Russia has historically used to shape its "near abroad." Pennell underlines that regular military force is only one element of the campaign. It is important, sometimes decisive, but it is tightly integrated with a wider ecosystem of influence.

He walks the reader through concrete examples: separatist militias in Donbas cultivated as proxy forces; cyber operations targeting Ukrainian infrastructure; disinformation designed to undermine Kyiv's legitimacy and sow doubt abroad all wrapped in layers of plausible deniability. What emerges is a picture of a state that prefers to operate in the gray zone between peace and war, where it can achieve real political effects while complicating any straightforward Western response.

A particularly valuable part of Pennell's treatment of Ukraine is his attention to Russian threat perceptions. He makes clear that, in the Kremlin's own narrative, these campaigns are not framed as aggression but as defensive countermeasures against a West allegedly bent on orchestrating uprisings and conflicts along Russia's borders. Whether or not one finds that credible, Pennell treats it seriously as a driving mindset. That focus on great-power insecurity and strategic status quo bias complicates simple stories about pure expansionism and helps explain some of the risk-acceptant behavior we see on the ground.

Syria, in his account, plays a different but complementary role. There, Russia is not intervening on its doorstep but projecting power into the Middle East to keep the Assad regime afloat. Pennell argues that this intervention served as a testing ground for capabilities that were then adapted and redeployed elsewhere. In Syria, the Russian armed forces introduced and refined more advanced weapons systems and modern combat aircraft, employed precision-guided munitions, and experimented with "operational innovations" in combat. They assessed the impact of drones and electronic warfare and paired intensive information campaigns with air and artillery strikes.

Crucially, Syria gave the Russian military an avenue to try out not just new hardware but new ways of fighting: integrating airpower with local ground partners, coordinating with non-state actors, and waging a global media campaign to shape perceptions of the intervention. Pennell suggests that lessons from this theater about how to support proxies, how to pace strikes, and how to manage international messaging later fed back into Russia's approach during later phases of the Ukraine conflict. At the same time, he is careful not to romanticize Russian performance: some of these innovations produced mixed results, and several initiatives faltered despite their high-tech sheen.

By setting Ukraine and Syria side by side, Pennell shows how Russia's toolkit in the 2010s layers "new and old tools" in a cumulative way: enduring strategic aims and an authoritarian playbook carried forward, now executed through cyber operations, higher-precision weapons, drones, and more sophisticated propaganda. That comparison grounds his larger theoretical point about continuity and change in war. The strategic and technological environment has undeniably shifted, especially in the information domain and in the use of non-state actors, but for him, these shifts mark an evolution in how wars are fought, not a transformation of what war is.

On the level of craft, the book is a serious piece of work. It is empirically dense, drawing on Russian language military writings, Ukrainian accounts, and on-the-ground reporting. The inclusion of field interviews with participants and experts adds a layer of evidence that most academic treatments simply do not have. Pennell does not confine himself to Western secondary sources; he engages directly with Russian military thinkers and dedicates a chapter to "Russian perspectives," trying to reconstruct how they themselves conceptualize modern conflict. He then sets that against Ukrainian perspectives and field knowledge so that Ukrainian experiences are not reduced to mere data points in someone else's story. That plurality of viewpoints gives the book a grounded, almost three-dimensional feel.

Stylistically, the book manages a tricky balance. The argument is clearly structured and theoretically informed, and the writing remains readable. Pennell has a knack for tying concrete episodes back to his broader framework without getting lost in jargon, and for most of the way he avoids the formulaic tone that often weighs down works on "hybrid war." The price of this ambition is that it is not a quick or light read; the reader is asked to stay with a comparative, theory-heavy narrative that spans nearly a decade and two very different theaters. But for those willing to do that, the payoff is substantial.

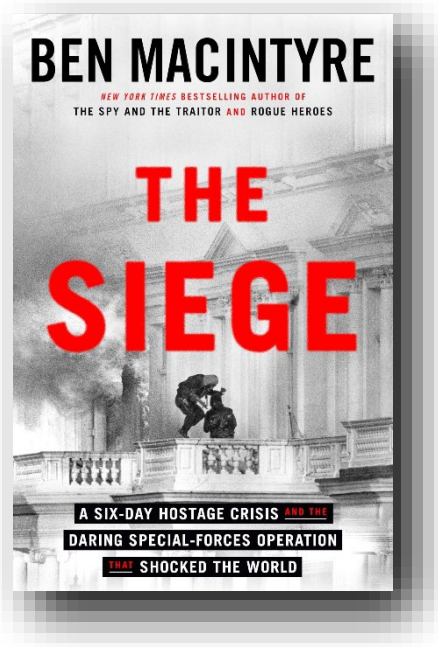
Taken together, Pennell's main argument—that Russia's recent wars represent an evolutionary continuum of conflict rather than a clean break—comes across as well substantiated and genuinely thought-provoking. The study feels both like a reference work and like an original contribution to how we think about Russia's way of war. It will be most useful to readers in security studies, policy analysis, and military planning who want to move beyond slogans and understand how Moscow blends old reflexes with new tools. For anyone trying to make sense of what Russia has been doing in Ukraine and Syria, and what that says about war in the 21st century, this book is a demanding but very rewarding guide.

BOOK REVIEW

The Siege: A Six-Day Hostage Crisis and the Daring Special Forces Operation that Shocked the World by Ben Macintyre

ISBN: 978-0593728093, Crown, September 2024, 400 pages, $22.35 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by: **Scott E. McIntosh**, Newman University, Wichita, Kansas, United States



It is hard to overestimate the importance of 1979. The Soviets had invaded Afghanistan in response to a perceived threat to a neighboring socialist regime; militants had taken over the holiest site in Islam—the Grand Mosque in Mecca; a mob of students had seized the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan; and, in November, another student-led swarm had rolled over the walls at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and seized 66 American hostages. There appeared to be a large number of angry people in the Islamic world, and they were increasingly attacking institutions in which security was assumed under the aegis of sovereignty and the international rule set. It was an exciting time to be a 15–30-year-old male with few opportunities and therefore little to lose if someone with an agenda put an automatic rifle in your hands and a cause in your heart.

The same year, however, in May, Margaret Thatcher moved into Number 10 Downing Street and, as Ben Macintyre describes in his latest book *The Siege*, this rising trend toward terror and grievance soon collided with her government in London. Macintyre, a columnist at *The Times* and award-winning author of 15 books, has had several of them adapted into BBC documentaries and cinematic films. Taken in aggregate, his works are well received not only by historians—especially those who emphasize military and intelligence events—but they have also served to flesh out some of the more blurred events of the twentieth century. His research and reporting on the 1980 Iranian embassy siege are therefore most welcome.

The people who seized Iran's London embassy were not the same militants who deposed the Shah, and in fact, they employed their terror in opposition to the Ayatollah's regime. The situation was far more complicated than the simple adage "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Before rolling into the whole-of-government effort, the British security apparatus kicked off to cope with it, and Macintyre does the due diligence of attempting to explain it. To sum up, a minority of Arabistan separatists from Iran's province of Khuzestan, trained and supported by Saddam Hussein's intelligence enterprise, sought to wrench their Arab minority population out from under the new theocratic regime in Tehran; taking over that regime's

embassy inside a sophisticated Western nation was their communication channel to the rest of the world.

Indeed, as the book points out, the location for this attack seemed ideal:

> Many Iranian Arabs held Britain responsible for their plight: the British government had supported the semi-independent sheikhdom of Arabistan before switching allegiance to Reza Shah in 1925. The group would pass unnoticed among London's large Middle Eastern population … [And] London was packed with journalists and other members of media organizations, domestic and international, who were not controlled by the government (p. 33).

And, on 30 April, six of them took the Iranian embassy and 26 hostages; they demanded the release of political prisoners in their home province and safe passage to a more hospitable location in the Islamic world.

British intelligence and law enforcement had for years studied the lessons learned from the 1972 Olympic Village attack in Munich and "had drawn up contingency plans for a similar event in the UK, along with a set of basic principles: terrorism should be treated as a crime and prosecuted in Britain; police would handle tactics during any hostage-taking incident, but the controlling strategic role would be exercised by the government, through the home secretary. If all else failed, the incident might be terminated with an assault by an armed force, trained and equipped specifically for the purpose: the SAS" (p. 41).

One of Macintyre's most famous books is 2016's *Rogue Heroes*, in which he narrated the origins and early history of the Special Air Service, a notoriously tight-lipped community, so one would assume he began culling some of his previous sources in the community to produce his rigorous analysis of their performance in the 1980 siege. His other histories, concentrated on British intelligence episodes, are equally interesting and readable—particularly those on Kim Philby, *A Spy Among Friends* (2015), and Macintyre's 2013 account of the Allied Double Cross deception operation that fooled the Nazis into putting more defensive assets into Calais than Normandy before the invasion.

While the SAS accounts in *The Siege* grab the reader's attention, especially when the narrative shifts from anxious waiting to rappelling into the embassy and clearing rooms, his descriptions of the UK's planning, intelligence collection, logistics, and information aspects of the operation are no less poignant and interesting. The negotiation and media relations tasks—not to mention clearing protesters out of the neighborhood—were no less important than inserting acoustic listening devices or blowing out walls to lob gas and flash-bangs into the building. Most readers know how this event played out—five terrorists killed, one in prison for 27 years afterward, and two hostages lost—but Macintyre is still able to amp up the tension as he describes the hostages' conversations, the deliberations of the Thatcher government, and its interactions with the diplomatic corps in working toward a hopefully bloodless outcome.

The book, by necessity, tightens the aperture around the six days—and it reads like a true crime account as the minutes tick away toward the SAS assault. There is such a volume of good material here that Macintyre likely was advised to cut quite a bit to keep the work within 365 pages. National security and law enforcement professionals, though, would doubtless prefer to see more on the peripheral events both upstream and downstream of these six days. The period from the 1960s to the 1980s experienced multiple terror and hostage events. Within the parameters of unclassified documents, what lessons learned and best practices from previous

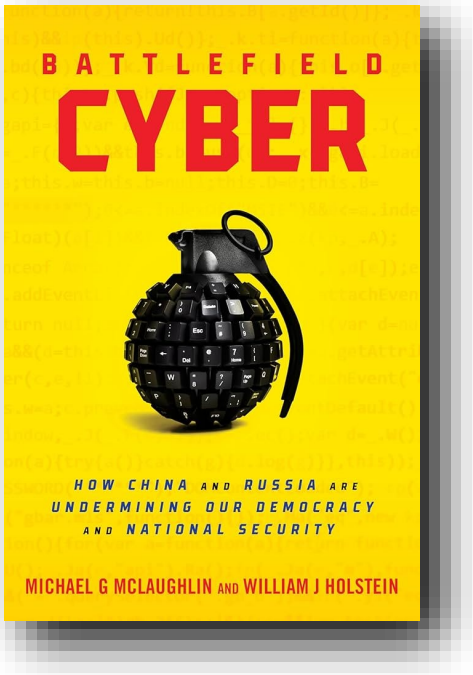
events most influenced the Thatcher government in this case? What gems lay in the after-action reports from *The Siege*—the takeaways—that influenced later responses to similar events? If a reader's biggest gripe, though, is that they want more, I would consider this work a success.

BOOK REVIEW

Battlefield Cyber: How China and Russia are Undermining Our Democracy and National Security by William J. Holstein

ISBN: 978-1633889019, Prometheus Books, August 2023, 300 pages, $26.95 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by: **Jean-Michel Newberg**, Independent Scholar, Florida, United States



Michael G. McLaughlin and William J. Holstein's *Battlefield Cyber* is a necessary and thoughtful book on the cyber domain regarding U.S. national security and its two largest opponents: Russia and China. McLaughlin is a cybersecurity attorney and policy advisor based in Washington, D.C., and Holstein has been covering U.S.–China relations, specifically in technology, for more than 40 years. Previous books by McLaughlin include *The New Art of War: China's Deep Strategy Inside the United States.*

Through the course of the book, McLaughlin and Holstein examine the historical record of cyber warfare to reveal how China and Russia repeatedly exploit and attack the United States across avenues such as critical infrastructure intrusions, social media manipulation, cyber espionage, and political campaign undermining. The authors also dive deep into inherent weaknesses in the United States with regard to cybersecurity that allow China and Russia to continue their persistent campaigns to undermine United States national security.

The authors separate the book into two halves. The first half of the book, "Part I: We Are at War," consists of eight chapters that are thematically engineered to explain how Russia and China have already been incredibly successful in their cyber warfare efforts. The second half, "The Response: What Must Be Done," makes recommendations for U.S. policy stakeholders to deter and combat the efforts of America's enemies. All chapters consist of reference notes that can be examined in the "Notes" section for further education.

Battlefield Cyber also consists of an introductory chapter that serves as an "appetizer" for the whole book, with brief introductions to historical evidence such as espionage, network penetration, and criminal gains. The introduction also defines the term "cyber warfare" that the authors use throughout the book and explains why they make recommendations in the second half. Finally, the book ends with a concluding chapter that briefly touches on artificial intelligence and virtual reality and their effects on young people, the need to reestablish a functioning education system, and the need to recenter our overall political compass.

The greatest strength of *Battlefield Cyber* is the authors' ability to examine the history of cyber events attributed to Russia or China and how those events and outcomes echo in the present. For example, the story of Chinese espionage targeting Nortel Tech in the late 1990s is included in the third chapter, along with the results and aftermath. Such espionage attacks and failures to respond have allowed China to significantly enhance its technological advancements on the industrious back of Western countries. The authors, after telling the story, then pivot to more recent events, up to 2022, and show how America's adversaries are still utilizing the same tactics to achieve their goals.

The second greatest strength lies in the layout of *Battlefield Cyber*. The authors delve into their recommendations in the latter half of the book based on the historical and more recent events connected to Russia and China. Once the reader advances to the latter half of the book, they are prepared with an understanding of cyber warfare and cyber espionage and can better appreciate what the authors recommend to combat United States adversaries. For example, chapters six and seven showcase issues with inherent trust and cloud computing. These issues are then brought up again in chapters eleven and twelve, where the authors recommend what the private and public sectors should do to alleviate these issues and stop China and Russia from using the same vehicles for exploitation.

That said, the book does have some small faults. First, the book has an imbalance of content between Russia and China. More of the book focuses on China than it does on Russia, with two chapters devoted to Chinese events and Russia having no dedicated chapters. It could also have benefited from better sub-thematic implementation. Even though the book is separated into two halves, reorganizing the chapters based on a subtheme, such as "espionage," "social media," or "cyber policy," and including content from both Russia and China in each subtheme chapter would allow quick referencing by security practitioners into the subject they wish to learn more about. This would enhance the book as a long-term resource.

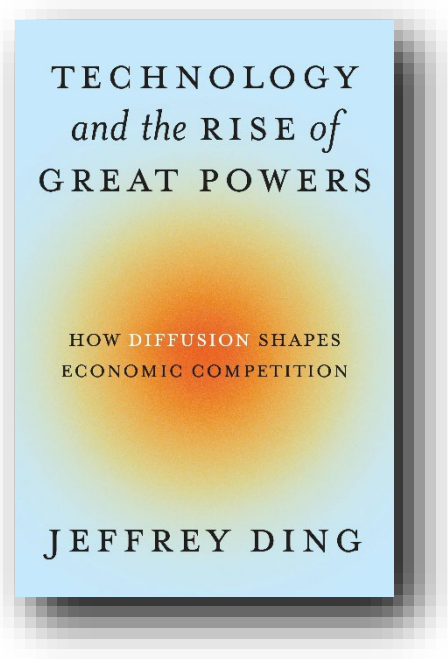
Battlefield Cyber is a must-read and must-have choice for people interested in cyber warfare and espionage. The book gives the reader a solid understanding of the history of cybersecurity, focusing on Russian and Chinese state-based threats against United States national security. It makes reasonable and necessary recommendations for U.S. policy stakeholders to change how America manages security engineering, education, social media, and national and international policy to prevent further intrusions and incidents from America's adversaries. If you are a student or a practitioner in cybersecurity, international security, cyber law, or foreign relations, *Battlefield Cyber* will augment your understanding of United States national security.

BOOK REVIEW

Technology and the Rise of Great Powers How Diffusion Shapes Economic Competition by Jeffrey Ding

ISBN: 978-0691260341, Princeton University Press, 2024, 280 pages, $29.95 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by: **Anthony Canevello**, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Daytona Beach, Florida, United States



In *Technology and the Rise of Great Powers*, Jeffrey Ding argues that a nation's rise during technological revolutions depends less on inventing new technologies and more on its ability to diffuse general-purpose technologies (GPTs) throughout its economy and institutions. Using historical analysis of the British, American, and Japanese experiences across the first three industrial revolutions, as well as statistical models of technology diffusion, Ding demonstrates that the widespread adoption of GPTs is more strongly correlated with economic leadership than dominance in specific leading sectors. Extending this framework to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, he predicts that U.S.-China competition in artificial intelligence will hinge on each state's capacity to embed AI across industrial sectors.

The book's depth and rigor of analysis, along with its integration of historical and contemporary evidence, make it an important text for scholars of international political economy and technology policy. Jeffrey Ding, an Assistant Professor of Political Science at George Washington University's Columbian College of Arts & Sciences, researches emerging technologies and international politics. This background gives him a distinctive vantage point from which to examine the topic, offering readers a rigorous and nuanced analysis that weaves together historical and contemporary evidence. While the depth of his analysis and the rigor of his methods suggest that the book is primarily intended for academic audiences, it remains an essential work for scholars of international political economy and technology policy.

In his book, Ding presents a novel theory on the drivers of global economic power transitions during industrial revolutions. Using statistical analysis and historical case studies, he demonstrates that technological diffusion—rather than initial invention or even dominance in a given sector—is the key determinant of which states emerge dominant after periods of technological upheaval. The book tests the plausibility of Ding's General-Purpose Technology (GPT) model and compares its explanatory power to that of the more traditional Leading Sector (LS) model. The LS model assumes that the state which first innovates within a leading

industrial sector gains a relative advantage. In contrast, the GPT model shifts the emphasis from invention to implementation. Ding theorizes that it is a state's success in diffusing GPTs—foundational technologies with wide applicability across many sectors—that enables it to achieve and maintain dominance after a period of industrial revolution. He then extends this analysis to predict outcomes for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR-4), centered on U.S.-China competition in artificial intelligence (AI).

Ding begins with the First Industrial Revolution (IR-1), comparing Britain, France, and the Netherlands through both LS and GPT lenses. While the LS model attributes Britain's rise to dominance in cotton textiles, iron, and steam engines, Ding demonstrates that the timeline of Britain's productivity growth aligns more closely with the diffusion of GPTs such as the factory system, mechanization, and steam power. For the Second Industrial Revolution (IR-2), Ding evaluates the United States, Germany, and Great Britain. While the LS model would predict German dominance based on its strength in steel, chemicals, and electrical equipment, the GPT model better explains the U.S. rise. The United States broadly applied GPTs such as interchangeable manufacturing, electrification, and chemicalization across multiple industrial sectors and invested heavily in mechanical engineering education, enabling widespread diffusion.

The Third Industrial Revolution (IR-3) provides a partial anomaly for the LS model. Although the United States pioneered the leading sectors of computing, consumer electronics, and semiconductors, Japan temporarily overtook it in productivity. However, Ding demonstrates that the United States retained overall dominance because it more effectively embraced the GPT of computerization. He supports this claim through quantitative analysis of diffusion patterns and the development of software engineering infrastructure. Finally, Ding applies the GPT framework to IR-4, suggesting that U.S.-China competition in artificial intelligence will mirror earlier patterns. While China has made significant progress in AI research, the United States retains a comparative advantage due to its higher ratio of AI practitioners, institutional capacity for technological diffusion, and historically greater success in embedding GPTs into diverse industrial sectors.

Ding's work offers a refreshing and empirically grounded reinterpretation of how technology drives shifts in global power. His diffusion-based framework challenges the long-standing emphasis on invention and industrial leadership while providing a more nuanced understanding of why some states sustain technological leadership over time. The historical case studies are meticulously researched and well integrated with quantitative evidence. However, the book's dense theoretical structure and methodological detail make it more suitable for scholars than general readers. For policymakers, Ding's insights into institutional capacity and skill diffusion offer valuable implications, though the presentation assumes some familiarity with international political economy and innovation theory. Overall, the book represents a significant scholarly contribution to the study of technology, power transitions, and international competition.