

COMMENTARY**Marketplace Unconventional Warfare****Brian Petit**, Garfield Syndicate, LLC, Salida, Colorado, USA**ABSTRACT**

Unconventional warfare is no longer a niche form of conflict practiced primarily by specialized forces, insurgents, and proxies. It is increasingly accessible to states, resistance movements, non-state actors, and ordinary citizens. This article contends that unconventional warfare now behaves like a marketplace: falling barriers to entry, commercial technologies, networked populations, and new sponsor-proxy relationships allow participants to assemble capabilities faster, more cheaply, and in novel combinations. Four developments drive this transformation: 1) widespread citizen resistance, 2) the blending of traditional resistance roles and functions, 3) the commercialization and local production of tools of war, and 4) rapid, networked kill webs. Drawing particularly on Ukraine, the article shows how these trends generate mass, increase adaptability, distribute lethality, and complicate adversary calculations. The result is warfare increasingly governed by market logic: decentralized, relational, innovative, and difficult to suppress.

KEYWORDS

unconventional
warfare; resistance;
proxy warfare;
irregular warfare

Unconventional warfare has become a marketplace. The barriers to entry have fallen dramatically, enabling new combinations of proxy forces, commercial technologies, external sponsors, and resistance actors. Once viewed as a niche form of conflict practiced on the margins of conventional battles, unconventional warfare now provides an expanded spectrum of options—from clandestine operations to sustained resistance campaigns.¹ It is growing as a feature of statecraft and armed politics because the old ways are remarkably durable while the new methods are proving effective.² In essence, unconventional warfare is the rewiring of relationships and the blending of capabilities that produce combinatory power.³

Unconventional warfare, categorized in U.S. doctrine as a subset of irregular warfare, is being waged with atypically ambitious goals.⁴ The pairing of an external sponsor with proxy, local, or resistance forces lowers costs, expands options, and reduces interstate friction. China, Iran, Israel, Russia, and the United States have each employed unconventional warfare in

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different forms for different strategic purposes. Long-running cases exist in Burma, Lebanon, Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen.⁵ Unconventional warfare is increasingly accessible. It appeals to established states, imperialistic superpowers, resistance movements, and non-state disruptors alike.⁶

Like any thriving marketplace, unconventional warfare succeeds because it offers compelling value. It is durable, affordable, and nearly limitless in its combinations. As technological innovations produce new uncertainties about modern warfare, one trend is clear: the marketplace for unconventional warfare is thriving. U.S. policymakers, military leaders, and private enterprises can no longer view unconventional warfare as that thin slice of warfare consigned to special operations, rebels, and irregulars.⁷ For actors of every kind seeking to advance their interests, unconventional warfare is as attractive, available, and malleable as it has ever been.

What is Unconventional Warfare?

Unconventional warfare occurs when an external sponsor, typically a state, supports an armed group that fights an unwanted government, seeks to expel an occupier, or contests an adversary indirectly through third parties.⁸ In October 2001, the U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks was a successful unconventional warfare campaign. U.S. special operations and intelligence operatives inserted into Afghanistan and aligned with a collection of militias, ethnic groups, and political factions known as the Northern Alliance.⁹ Backed by U.S. air power, this sponsor-and-proxy coalition routed the governing Taliban in weeks. This 25-year-old example, a classic of the genre, is now joined by a multitude of new, creative methods.

Four developments have expanded the possibilities of unconventional warfare: 1) widespread citizen resistance; 2) the blending of resistance roles and functions; 3) the commercialization and local production of tools of war; and 4) networked kill webs. Each lowers barriers to entry, expands sponsor options, increases lethality, and enlarges the marketplace. Taken together, these developments are broadening the strategic application of unconventional warfare.

These four trends are both creating and benefiting from a marketplace dynamic. Unconventional warfare is less about building bespoke organizations than assembling, modularizing, and exchanging capabilities. Some aspects of unconventional warfare are transactional, but its deeper forms are relational.¹⁰ Like a bazaar, it is where licit and illicit players mingle, where deals are cut, and where supply and demand interact with an expanded range of goods.¹¹ This marketplace framing expands on Alex de Waal's *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War, and the Business of Power* (2015).¹² De Waal studied how political loyalties became transactional. This article examines how changing sponsor-proxy relationships, novel applications of resistance principles, and the commercialization of military technologies are expanding the participants and boundaries of unconventional warfare. In the modern era, this underground bazaar has permanently moved to the main square.¹³ Why? *Fast. Cheap. Good enough.*

How Does Unconventional Warfare Work?

U.S. special operations doctrine provides a clear but clunky definition of unconventional warfare: "activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, or guerrilla force in a denied area."¹⁴ The use of six prepositions in this definition,

while inartful, is intentional: prepositions show relationships.¹⁵ Unconventional warfare draws its power from relationships.¹⁶

Unconventional warfare is distinguished by the types of actors involved.¹⁷ It involves undeclared proxies, non-uniformed contestants, and specialized forces such as saboteurs, special operations forces, and clandestine intelligence networks.¹⁸ The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. Army Special Forces Regiment, commonly called Green Berets, are the main U.S. entities chartered to wage unconventional warfare.¹⁹ These two organizations are the institutional descendants of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a short-lived but important World War II experiment in irregular forms of war.²⁰

Russian unconventional warfare is well known for the use of “little green men” to seize the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.²¹ Undeclared Russian special operators paired with pro-Kremlin irregulars inside Ukraine, then outfoxed and outflanked Ukrainian defenses.²² This was fast, cheap, and effective. Iranian unconventional warfare is best known for the proxy forces it sponsors.²³ Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and numerous Iraqi and Syrian militias are expressions of Iranian power greater than Iran’s conventional forces. For Iran, unconventional warfare is not adjacent to strategy; it has been the centerpiece of its expeditionary strategy.²⁴

Unconventional describes the pairings of sponsors and proxies in a contested environment. Unconventional warfare has a rich history and a never-ending shelf life as a type of war because there are always disgruntled armed groups with dim prospects seeking a powerful sponsor.²⁵ Likewise, great powers are always enticed by spirited movements, *in situ*, that can lead or support a fight against an occupier or political rival.²⁶ Like venture capitalists, sponsors spread modest investments across competing groups. Most fail. Some yield modest returns. A few produce extraordinary returns.

What is the Strategic Value of Unconventional Warfare?

Unconventional warfare is indirect, operates in depth, and manages escalation. Strategists seek varied options, adjustable levels of commitment, off-ramps, and leverage by using force or, even better, the threat of force.²⁷ Unconventional warfare is a grab bag for these goals.²⁸

Classified as an indirect approach, unconventional warfare employs irregulars or proxies to pursue objectives, typically avoiding provocative, state-on-state battles.²⁹ Do not expect firm control and exacting precision. The use of proxies is temperamental and can be sloppy.³⁰ Some combinations are cheap, fast, and lousy.³¹ The benefits include distancing the sponsor from political accountability, achieving mass through inexpensive irregulars, and accessing local points of entry.³² When sponsors enable proxies, disposability is a factor. Successes deliver shared benefits. Significantly, failures are often borne by the proxies alone. The ill-conceived Bay of Pigs operation in 1961 was politically embarrassing for the United States, but it was Cuban exiles who suffered death or capture.³³

Surprisingly, unconventional warfare lies at the heart of strategic depth.³⁴ Classically measured in terms of landmass, interior lines, and arsenal size, strategic depth is also gauged by the participation of people. Accurately measuring the utility of non-uniformed people is an inexact science, and that uncertainty is a feature, not a bug.³⁵ Unconventional warfare can enlist populations on an invisible scale, from guerrilla fighters to observant bystanders. In an era when everything can be measured and valued, and when deep-strike rocketry threatens to erase the very concept of strategic depth, unconventional warfare is a radical variable that muddies calculations. This uncertainty principle is strategic gold if it works for you but is a scattered minefield if turned against you.³⁶

Unconventional warfare is an attractive option to manage escalation. It can limit the contested arena, engage in backstage operations, and obscure the sponsoring hand, if unconvincingly.³⁷ Alternatively, it can expand fronts rapidly and inexpensively, alongside high-intensity, large-force fights.³⁸ Unconventional warfare has one required ingredient: proximal alignment of interests. A tacit or temporary bridge between the sponsor and the proxy force is necessary to bind the two groups and enable them to act in unison.

Russia, China, and Iran have built repeatable systems for generating proxy forces and waging indirect campaigns. The goal is rarely to win outright. Marketplace unconventional warfare is on the rise because of four features that work well in this moment of fragmentation in the global order. First, it straddles the peace-belligerency line; second, it flows easily across state and non-state categories; third, it is disposable, and its failures are recoverable; fourth, it confuses response options. It is little wonder that campaigns designed with these features are becoming one of the dominant forms of warfare.

What is the Structure of Unconventional Warfare?

The host body of unconventional warfare is a resistance. A resistance typically takes the organizational form of *an underground, an auxiliary, an armed component, and a public component*.³⁹ The underground is the brainstem and the nervous system, providing leadership, direction, and organization. The visible outputs of the underground are subversion, sabotage, propaganda, and mobilization. The underground is a skilled class of political and military operatives. The auxiliary is the support base of workaday people who sustain and protect operatives. These are the butchers, bakers, and handheld drone makers, with a predilection for supporting one side against another. The armed component, often composed of guerrillas, provides direct-action violence. The public component provides the narratives and public-facing motives to justify, advertise, and mobilize. The digital era has injected this model with new characteristics, but these four functions are typically present in some form.⁴⁰

Resistance movements are, by nature, contortionists.⁴¹ They acquire a form and function based on strategies, resources, objectives, forces employed, enemy counter-pressure, and, most importantly, survival.⁴² Once under pressure, these four elements become less identifiable as organizations and act more as the necessary functions of an adaptive system. Resistance organizations expand, contract, and shapeshift, but as long as the functions are performed, the resistance movement remains viable. If the pressure is untenable, resistances seek safe haven. Examples of displaced resistances include the Tibetans in India (1959–present); Dutch, Norwegian, Danish, French, Czech, and Polish governments-in-exile in London during World War II (1939–1945); the Provisional Irish Republican Army resettling in the Republic of Ireland (1969–1998); and the Taliban in Pakistan (2001–2021).

Resistances operate at a combat power disadvantage and are generally hunted. Therefore, resistances are not deterministic in form or function. They are responsive and adaptable to the pressure applied against them. Without some form of external support—such as sanctuary, money, weapons, or support from a sponsor—resistances do not prevail over stronger adversaries.⁴³ The Polish Underground State and Home Army (1939–1944) was arguably the largest, best-organized, and most sophisticated resistance of the past century.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, it was crushed in the pincers of two violent occupiers—Nazi Germany and the Soviet Red Army. No one came to help. Occupied Poles fought heroically in August 1944, but they lost decisively and tragically.⁴⁵

Resistances require resources. A sponsor who provides resources prevents them from being steamrolled or slowly strangled by powerful, state militaries or brutal occupiers.⁴⁶ Russia, Iran, and the United States routinely sponsor resistances as a foreign policy tool. U.S. unconventional warfare, a mission of the U.S. Special Operations Command, first assesses resistance potential, then acts to partner with resistance elements based on alignment of interests, perceived capability, and suitability for the political or military task. When the U.S. provided Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to the Afghan Mujahedin in the 1980s, this materiel sponsorship triggered game-changing tactics that led to the Soviet withdrawal and defeat.⁴⁷

What is Marketplace Unconventional Warfare?

Marketplace unconventional warfare is the economic evolution of proxy warfare in which emerging technologies, falling transaction costs, and networked populations have turned a niche capability into something commonplace. Transaction costs include screening partners, negotiating relationships, and solidifying agreements. Market dynamics accelerate the citizen-centric exchanges in which supply and demand interact to create their own ecosystem of exchange, value, and commodification.⁴⁸ For example, marketplace dynamics describe the drone-counter-drone innovations occurring daily on Ukrainian battlefields, where military hardware, human ingenuity, commercial applications, and dogged fighting combine to create a kill-or-be-killed bazaar.

A marketplace, like unconventional warfare, is about transactions and relationships.⁴⁹ Marketplaces reliably elevate the most enterprising products and punish inefficiencies. “Challenger brands” that riff off sponsor-proxy relationships wiggle into seams and exploit weaknesses quickly. Novel combinations, or what Maurice DuClos calls the “composite organism,” are difficult to recognize and value.⁵⁰ Market demand is met by innovating and producing rapidly, inexpensively, and at scale.

The four trends of *marketplace unconventional warfare*, taken in aggregate, demonstrate how unconventional warfare is on the rise and why it matters.

Wide-Scale Resistance

The first trend is state-sponsored resistance at scale. Sovereign state “total defense” plans are increasingly augmenting classic war plans with citizen-centric resistance additives.⁵¹ If the defense falters, the promise of resistance against an unwanted occupier is to outwit, exhaust, and stalemate a superior adversary by activating citizens, social networks, home-grown capabilities, and all manner of national resources.⁵² If a state-sponsored resistance achieves scale, then the adversary faces not just a military force—definable, measurable, finite—but also an ill-defined partisan force in all directions. The Kremlin in 2022, like the United States in 2003 during the Iraq invasion, miscalculated the nature and power of citizen resistance. Intent on the destruction of opposing uniformed security forces, both the Russians and the Americans overlooked, miscalculated, or otherwise dismissed citizen resistance potential.

Wide-scale, state-sponsored resistance, as witnessed by Ukraine’s mobilization of its population of over 40 million on February 24, 2022, shows the grand promise of citizen activation.⁵³ A mobilized society with an overmatched but survivable armed force can stave off defeat, achieve a stalemate, and, if conditions permit, win. Ukraine also shows the cost—brutal, sustained, and devastating—for populations that opt to resist *en masse*. Involving citizens in resistance means inviting punishment onto a society. Mobilizing and battering the entirety of a society is a tough sell in peacetime, but it offers a better future than occupation and erasure.

Accordingly, the adoption of this risky measure can be difficult for politicians to sponsor and distasteful for populations to embrace. Taiwan is one nation currently feeling its way through this very proposition.⁵⁴ For these reasons, few states can credibly claim to be ready to fight with their entire population.⁵⁵

Ukraine's pre-war preparations are instructive. In 2020, Ukraine was six years into a partial occupation. It took shock, war, and years of roiling conflict (2014-2021) in the Donbas to muster the will to legislate a plan to activate its population.⁵⁶ Ukraine's National Resistance Law was signed into law in July 2021.⁵⁷ The design was under-resourced and was never rehearsed. Yet the law fortified the "plans of a plan" that became reality in a matter of hours and days when invasion struck. It worked, if just barely. Ukraine contested five Russian axes of advance from air, land, sea, and cyber and in doing so, foiled the Russian plan to win the war in four days. Having a plan backed by law for wide-scale resistance provided enough of a road map to mobilize societal resistance energy.⁵⁸ When the Ukrainians chose fight over flight, they were well-served by a blueprint for mobilization and organization.

NATO countries, many of whom developed resistances under Nazi occupation in World War II, have resurrected the idea of citizen resistance. Roughly half of NATO's 32 nations claim to have some form of wide-scale resistance plan.⁵⁹ The model of augmenting a state's security apparatus (military, border, civil service) with pre-built, distributed partisan forces and strategies is a growing feature of state-based defense strategies.

Neutral countries are the leading lights of citizen and state resistance. Neutral Switzerland, rugged Finland, fastidious Sweden, and poisoned-shrimp Singapore all have credible plans and infrastructure.⁶⁰ They combine reputable conscription militaries and skilled security forces with crack civil emergency mechanisms. Critically, they rehearse, and in doing so, demonstrate the "reveal-conceal" stratagem intended to deter by uncertainty.

States are treating resistance more as a pillar of defense than a patriotic improvisation. Modern manifestations of this approach, though not fully actualized, are seen in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Taiwan.

Estonia, with a population of 1.37 million, cannot achieve weighted scale even with a full societal mobilization. Over the past ten years, Estonia has crafted a credible *sui generis* porcupine strategy tailored to its threats, its budget, and its population base. Estonia has a three-pronged approach that shores up its weak points: NATO interoperable combat forces achieve *scale*, state-sanctioned citizen volunteer units underpin *resilience*, and the spectral irregular warfare options lying in ambush contain *surprise*.⁶¹ Most of these national resistance enterprises have yet to be realized according to their blueprints and, in fact, may never achieve their ambitions. They do, however, signal a change in the social contract, in which citizens are not objects to be defended; they are agents activated to defend.⁶²

To be effective, preparing for wide-scale citizen resistance requires forethought in laws, intelligence, organization, and triggers for the use of violence.⁶³ It also takes legislative courage. There are huge risks in these approaches: lack of control, misdirected violence, criminality, political alignment, extremism.⁶⁴ But pre-organizing, even a little, reveals the willful intent to resist at scale, a key component of deterrence.

Wide-scale citizen resistance is, in logic and form, a state-run unconventional warfare program.⁶⁵ Credit the *Resistance Operating Concept*, the 2020 publication from U.S., East European, and Northern European allies, with resurrecting these principles in the context of state defense and promoting *scale* as a necessary component of deterrence.⁶⁶ By definition, the state-sponsored resistance model corrupts the typical sponsor-and-proxy boundaries but does not nullify its effect. It situates the state as a type of external supporter to its own population.⁶⁷

The activation of citizens as partisans for the state in a pre-planned or crisis manner, no matter its naming convention or legal strictures, borrows its corporeal form from doctrinal unconventional warfare.⁶⁸ The *Resistance Operating Concept* is an unconventional warfare manual for this narrow and specific political context. If adapted properly, as witnessed in Ukraine, this provides a wicked problem to potential invaders and occupiers.⁶⁹

Blending of Resistance Roles and Functions

The second trendline is the growth of blurred and blended means of resistance. With the power of mobile computing, widespread access to air, land, maritime, and cyber technologies, and the enlistment of citizens both inside and outside occupied areas, the blending of doctrinal resistance functions has become expansive and unpredictable. Line-and-block organizational charts do not work and do not matter if these functions are underway and are interlocking.^{70 71}

Social networks are at the heart of this dynamic.⁷² Social networks have always provided the circulatory strength of unconventional warfare, but their manifestations are ever more agile and flexible.⁷³ Yahya Sinwar, the now-deceased head of Hamas, is a clear example of operating fluidly across this resistance spectrum.⁷⁴ Sinwar built an auxiliary consortium during his 22 years of imprisonment. After his release, he was the public component both as titular and spiritual leader. He directly coordinated Hamas' underground functions while literally operating *under the ground*.⁷⁵ In the end, he died fighting as a rank-and-file guerrilla when Israeli forces killed him on October 16, 2024.⁷⁶

Social networks, past and present, are the rocket fuel of unconventional warfare.⁷⁷ When social bonds are in place and weaponized, they can strike quickly or survive the most pernicious of attacks.⁷⁸ As social media consumes our personal and professional lives and upends too many industries to count, it is also advancing new forms of unconventional warfare.

Ukraine is a stunning example of amalgamated resistance roles and functions from the individual to the highest levels of the state. Trying to replicate the Ukraine model is difficult. Ukraine's blending of resistance roles and functions is one part planning, one part dysfunction, and one part grit.

On planning, Ukraine structured its citizen resistance plan around territorial defense units.⁷⁹ These reservist-manned units were to be bolstered by the professional, uniformed security services: military, law enforcement, border, intelligence. Ukrainian special operations forces and security services were legislatively authorized (effective 31 January 2022) to operate within these territorial defense forces, creating a legal basis to activate an auxiliary, armed component, and underground, if warranted.⁸⁰ When war came to all Ukrainian citizens on February 24, 2022, the marketplace revealed itself. Ukrainian planning was insufficient to build proper territorial defense capability; time was too short. But Ukrainian planning etched out the template for crisis response, which proved to be "good enough" of an organizing principle to capture the initiative, pluck, and courage of citizens under assault.⁸¹

Dysfunction helped here. Ukraine's federated system loosely followed rules and laws, while a historical lack of trust in government institutions' ability to respond effectively fed a bottom-up mentality.⁸² Ukraine had sufficient top-down structure, and invasion day triggered a visible, unified response from President Zelensky. This top-down guidance was enough to orient the lowest lieutenant, the self-organizing neighborhood-watch groups, and multitudes of infuriated citizens. Thus, a *sua sponte* spirit took shape from the bottom-up.

A prior failure spirited Ukrainian success. Ukraine's inability to act in a timely manner to the Russian snatching of Crimea in late February 2014 was a failure that was pathologically

embedded into the security services and the citizenry.⁸³ When invasion came again in 2022, first-mover initiative combined with deft government direction resulted in blended citizen-military “mesh” networks. Instead of Russia seizing the “market square,” as it did in February–March 2014, the invasion ignited the Ukrainian marketplace mentality. Alarm signals were sent to the entrepreneurial base with a bias toward action: evacuate if required, defend if possible, strike back if capable. This time, Ukrainian partisans were the so-called little green men, achieving surprise.⁸⁴

The third component, grit, is a deserved accolade for a Ukrainian society that not only staved off a vicious *coup de main* invading force but has since fought the Russian military to a standstill for over four years. Grit alone is insufficient to make resistance work. Grit requires an organizing idea, a legal basis, and community cooperation. Any evaluation of Ukrainian resistance must account for the resolve and mettle of its citizens, some approaching retirement age, in trenches, hospitals, and bunkers.

Commercialization and Home-Grown Tools of War

The third trend is the commercialization and do-it-yourself nature of war. If whole-of-society defense is the philosophical goal, it is whole-of-innovation followed by whole-of-manufacturing that is the tactile output.

Ukraine has grown a drone and missile manufacturing industry while fighting the largest land invasion in Europe since World War II. Ukraine has assembled a technical industry within a society with rich intellectual, technological, and manufacturing capabilities.⁸⁵ External support, to be sure, sustained Ukrainian ingenuity and has bolstered its output. But a decisive factor has been Ukraine’s ability to construct a domestic flying-munitions industry, an underwater attack vehicle arm, and a growing unmanned ground capability.⁸⁶

A similar do-it-yourself dynamic within a war is the competition in Myanmar between the government “junta” military and the collection of Burmese resistances producing drones, at scale.^{87 88} As in Ukraine, under-gunned resisters can employ drones as a surrogate for infantry, for surprise, deep strikes, and simple reconnaissance.⁸⁹ Even under attack, this distributed dynamic operates more like a food truck consortium than a Lockheed Martin factory. This advantages the resistance by confusing the Clausewitzian “center of gravity” proposition, whereby a well-placed single blow can, at once, cripple an adversary.⁹⁰ When markets take hits, they disperse, regroup, and recover, often in new forms and places.

This trend is infusing unconventional warfare with new, localized resource mechanisms. This has three implications. First, it can complicate the sponsor-proxy relationship by reducing the leverage of the sponsor.⁹¹ This gives proxies more freedom to exercise their own operational art.⁹² Second, with new weapons and munitions manufacturing methods at their disposal, there is more violent machinery at play. Indeed, 3D printing and local manufacturing have delivered a fast, cheap, and good-enough arms industry to the people. Third, blended roles make detection more difficult. Who, exactly, is a drone hobbyist, and who is a manufacturer of lethal weapons?

Democratizing technologies distribute new advantages to low-level players.⁹³ Resistances in Burma and Ukraine are demonstrating bottom-up arms and munitions prowess. With access to tools of war, disadvantaged groups now have better options to escalate and to protract. Taiwan stands to benefit from this trend. With a highly educated population, technical mastery, and industrial capability, it is conceivable that Taiwan could rapidly transform industrial factories into munitions assembly lines and create an unaccounted-for warfighting advantage.

Rapid, Networked Kill Webs

The final trend is rapid, networked kill webs. Kill webs are an evolution of the kill chain, whereby a sensor communicates with a shooter and transmits the technical and verifiable data that validates—then strikes—a target.⁹⁴ Kill webs are not a unique feature of unconventional warfare. Kill webs, by design and by opportunity, aggregate sensors.⁹⁵ Unconventional warfare—by, with, and through a population—offers new relationships and marketplace dynamics on which kill webs feast. Consequently, unconventional warfare modes, with their citizen-rich networks and malleable modes, have expanded kill webs.⁹⁶ Importantly, these modes can recognize and operate more effectively within local political dynamics; this is one nagging blind spot of kill webs. Too often, exquisitely delivered violent effects lack understanding of local dynamics.⁹⁷ Brilliant strikes then work counter to strategic objectives.

Rapid communication between sensors and shooters, once a feature of high-end militaries, is increasingly a feature of war among the people. There is an unsettling twist to this evolution. Unconventional warfare is activating non-military sensors that are already in place, technologically independent, and capable of providing tipping, locating, or second-source verification in real time. Irregular armed groups have always attracted the obvious social groups with a predilection for violence: isolated rebels, angry patriots, criminal organizations. Now add to this any number of witting and unwitting social clusters: pensioners, taxi drivers, backcountry hikers, children, prisoners, veterans, gamers. Orientation is often immaterial. The signal will make its utility clear, whether for collection, targeting, movement, or other potentialities. In effect, everyone is a potential proxy.

Ukrainian strikes on Russian targets demonstrate citizen-sensor networks.⁹⁸ On New Year's Day, 2023, 89 Russian conscripts were killed by a Ukrainian artillery strike outside their barracks in Russian-held Ukrainian territory.⁹⁹ When this gaggle of Russian trainees all checked their social media accounts in the early morning hours, they turned themselves into sensors for their enemy.

Some sensors are monocular, operating at vast ranges with high clarity. Other sensors are thousands of tiny lenses with superb motion detection and 360-degree vision. Historically, these domains operated on separate planes: high-tech militaries with deep vision and long strike capability and citizen resistances with a full-spectrum view, but with limited means to strike. Now, these capabilities are readily connected and can be connected using commonplace technology and less curated expertise.

Marketplace unconventional warfare creates an ecosystem that promotes useful bits of information in this sensor-rich environment.¹⁰⁰ Kill webs can simply scrape this data, but unconventional partners scattered in the web can improve select communications, conduct data calls to willing citizenry, hide signals in the noise, or task sensors that are willing and capable. This is not a new technique, but the tools required are no longer reserved for spies or well-made operatives. During WWII, French resisters, impressed Polish workers, and underground Filipino networks all conducted these activities while under occupation. In the modern era, the sensors are already in place; they just need activation, manipulation, and most critically, protection. They also need the confidence that their signals, often sent at great risk, will be received and acted upon.

Conclusion

The unconventional warfare marketplace is wide open. Unconventional warfare derives its power not primarily from weapons but from relationships. As those relationships have become

cheaper, faster, and easier to build, this form of warfare increasingly follows the logic of the markets. Citizen resistance creates mass (cheap). Democratized technologies accelerate innovation cycles (fast). Networked kill webs expand lethality (good). Resistance roles and functions blur the categorical distinction between guerrilla and auxiliary (adaptive, efficient). States and non-state actors can participate in it, regulate it, exploit it, or ignore it. But they can no longer consign this to a lesser or localized form of warfare subordinate to larger and more recognizable forms of conflict. Recognizing that the economics of unconventional warfare have changed is the first step toward understanding—and successfully competing in—modern wars.

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