COMMENTARY

Legitimacy Warfare: Defending the Governance Domain in Irregular Conflict

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ABSTRACT

Today's conflicts revolve around legitimacy: who governs, on what authority, and with what degree of public trust. From insurgents and cartels to hybrid authoritarian regimes, adversaries operate in what can be called the governance domain, eroding confidence in democratic institutions while constructing parallel structures of authority. The 2020 *Irregular Warfare Annex* to the National Defense Strategy declared that irregular conflict is a struggle "to influence populations and affect legitimacy," yet U.S. practice continues to underweight the governance tools that generate legitimacy. Drawing on democratic engagements in Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nigeria—and incorporating comparative lessons from Paraguay, Mexico's Chiapas region, El Salvador, Guatemala, Bolivia, Peru, Ghana, Iraq, Sudan, Ukraine, and Yemen—this article proposes a doctrine of legitimacy warfare: an integrated civil-military approach that uses governance, civil society, and media as deliberate instruments of power. Legitimacy warfare offers the United States a scalable alternative to costly troop deployments by strengthening civic resilience, raising the costs of authoritarian consolidation, and shaping outcomes in fragile states without endless war.

KEYWORDS

Legitimacy warfare; irregular warfare; governance; political legitimacy; democratic resilience

Legitimacy as the Center of Gravity in Irregular Warfare

Democratic governance is under sustained attack. Global freedom has deteriorated for nineteen consecutive years, with sixty countries losing ground in political rights and civil liberties in 2024 alone.[1] The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project documents a parallel surge in autocratization, including declines in once-stable democracies.[2]

These trends reflect governance crises more than battlefield defeats. Irregular adversaries increasingly target trust: trust in courts, trust in elections, trust in information, and trust in the state's fairness and responsiveness. The Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) underscores this shift,

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defining irregular warfare as a contest "to influence populations and affect legitimacy."[3] The 2022 National Security Strategy similarly places democratic governance at the heart of U.S. competition with China, Russia, and other authoritarian actors, arguing that corruption, disinformation, and civic repression are core tools in the global contest.[4] Yet despite doctrinal recognition, practical implementation lags. In many cases, U.S. strategy still treats governance as an adjunct to kinetic operations. Civil society, accountability institutions, investigative journalism, local governance, and justice systems are often funded episodically, not strategically, creating gaps that adversaries exploit.

In Afghanistan, Iraq, and other theaters, this pattern has been visible for two decades: security forces receive sustained, large-scale funding, while institutions that adjudicate property disputes, resolve electoral conflicts, or investigate corruption are left fragile and under-resourced. When these institutions fail, citizens often see little difference between predatory state actors and irregular groups. Legitimacy is then contested not only between governments and insurgents but also among multiple weak, distrusted centers of power. A legitimacy warfare lens therefore shifts planning assumptions from "how many forces are needed to clear and hold" to "what mix of institutions is needed to deserve public cooperation in the first place."

Legitimacy warfare responds to this misalignment by treating governance itself as an operational domain. When adversaries weaponize corruption, disinformation, lawfare, and digital surveillance, the appropriate response is not simply more firepower but a synchronized strategy to defend and expand legitimate institutions, coordinated with but distinct from traditional lethal operations.

Recent doctrinal evolution has complicated the role of legitimacy in irregular warfare. While earlier formulations explicitly defined irregular warfare as a struggle over legitimacy, more recent definitions have deemphasized or removed the term in favor of broader language focused on influence, competition, and nontraditional approaches. This shift reflects an effort to expand the concept beyond insurgency and counterinsurgency to encompass a wider range of state and non-state competition.

However, removing explicit reference to legitimacy does not eliminate its underlying importance. Rather, it risks obscuring the mechanism through which irregular actors achieve durable effects: shaping perceptions of authority, credibility, and fairness. Influence without legitimacy may produce temporary compliance, but it rarely generates sustained political order. A legitimacy warfare framework therefore complements current doctrine by restoring analytical clarity and identifying governance outcomes—not simply influence—as the decisive variable in irregular conflict.

From Counterinsurgency to Legitimacy Warfare

Classic counterinsurgency (COIN) theory recognized that the population was the center of gravity, but it often misinterpreted legitimacy as a derivative of short-term stability or security provision. Contemporary research demonstrates that legitimacy is independent of service delivery or temporary tactical success.

Stathis Kalyvas found that violence, even when targeted, can delegitimize the state if it is perceived as unjust.[5] David Kilcullen chronicled how excessive or poorly sequenced kinetic operations radicalized populations in Iraq and Afghanistan.[6] Their work converges on a simple insight: the way state actors wield force may be more important than how much force they apply.

Authoritarian regimes learned to manipulate institutions while maintaining democratic facades. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way documented how competitive authoritarian

governments survive through selective repression, manipulated elections, state media dominance, and captured courts.[7] In such systems, the key battle is not over the existence of elections but over whether citizens regard those elections, courts, and media as credible.

Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan showed that nonviolent movements are more than twice as likely to succeed as violent uprisings, largely because they attract broader public support and create conditions for legitimate political transitions.[8] Steven Feldstein demonstrated how digitized surveillance, internet shutdowns, spyware, and troll farms give modern authoritarians powerful new tools to preempt mobilization.[9]

Violence and political action are not opposing logics but interacting instruments in irregular conflict. State and non-state actors routinely combine coercion with governance strategies to shape political outcomes. The question is not whether force is used, but how it is applied and how it is perceived. Violence that is viewed as arbitrary, predatory, or unjust can rapidly erode authority, while force that is seen as lawful, restrained, and protective may reinforce it.

Legitimacy warfare synthesizes these insights by treating the rule of law, civic inclusion, human rights protection, independent media, and anticorruption not as soft programs but as critical force multipliers in irregular conflict. It also reframes how the traditional DIME framework should be understood. Legitimacy warfare effectively overlays a governance lens on diplomatic, informational, military, and economic tools, making clear that diplomacy without credibility, information without trust, military force without restraint, and economic resources without transparency will not produce durable security. Legitimacy is not a separate instrument of power; it is the condition that makes all the other instruments politically sustainable.

This reinforces the need to move beyond binary distinctions between violent and nonviolent strategies. Coercion, elite bargaining, service provision, and political mobilization operate simultaneously, often reinforcing one another. Legitimacy warfare therefore focuses not on minimizing or eliminating force but on aligning the use of force with governance outcomes that sustain authority over time.

Legitimacy in the Irregular Warfare Debate

A substantial body of irregular warfare scholarship has emphasized the centrality of politics and legitimacy in determining conflict outcomes. David Ucko and Thomas Marks argue that irregular warfare is fundamentally a political struggle in which military force is subordinate to the objective of shaping governance and authority relationships. In their formulation, the decisive arena is not the battlefield alone but the broader contest over political order, in which legitimacy plays a critical role in mobilizing or denying public support.[10]

At the same time, other scholars have challenged the primacy of legitimacy as an explanatory variable. Jacqueline Hazelton argues that regimes often prevail not because they are viewed as legitimate, but because they successfully deploy coercion and co-opt elites. In this view, political order is sustained through a combination of repression, patronage, and elite bargains rather than broad-based public consent.[11]

Rather than displacing legitimacy, however, these perspectives suggest the need to refine how it is understood. Coercion and elite accommodation operate within legitimacy structures rather than outside them. Regimes that rely on coercion must still maintain a perception of inevitability, control, or lack of viable alternatives. Elite bargains depend on credibility, expectations of stability, and the belief that authority will endure. In this sense, legitimacy may

be positive—grounded in trust and consent—or negative—rooted in fear, resignation, or the absence of credible alternatives.

Legitimacy warfare builds on this synthesis. It does not assume that legitimacy is always the primary driver of outcomes, but rather that it defines the environment in which coercion, bargaining, and political action take place. The central question is not whether legitimacy matters in isolation, but how it is constructed, contested, and eroded alongside other instruments of power over time.

Legitimacy warfare is not a substitute for political will. Where governing elites benefit from corruption, repression, or instability, external support for governance reforms will face structural limits. Nor does legitimacy guarantee immediate success; in many cases, it may delay rather than prevent authoritarian consolidation. Its value lies in shaping long-term trajectories, preserving institutional capacity, and increasing the cost of coercive rule. This framework does not assume that legitimacy alone determines outcomes, but rather that it shapes the conditions under which coercion, elite bargaining, and political control become sustainable.

Case I: Nicaragua – Contesting Legitimacy after Revolution

Nicaragua provides one of the Western Hemisphere's richest long-term datasets for legitimacy-focused engagement. After the fall of the Somoza dictatorship, the Sandinista Front built dense parallel institutions: neighborhood committees, women's groups, youth structures, labor unions, and a party-aligned media ecosystem. These organizations, rooted in social identity and revolutionary legitimacy, became political bulwarks long after the war.

During the 1980s, U.S. engagement was dominated by military support to the Contras—highly costly and with limited effect on institutional legitimacy. By contrast, in the 1990s and 2000s, a governance-centered approach emerged: building independent municipal governments, strengthening electoral authorities, expanding investigative journalism, and supporting legal reform.

This strategy is documented extensively in *The New Nicaragua*, which traces the evolution of civic watchdogs, municipal reformers, Indigenous authorities, and independent journalists.[12] The reforms were granular rather than dramatic: cadastral modernization to clarify property rights, training for municipal councils in participatory budgeting, support for local radio that could question power in vernacular languages, and legal-aid centers that brought the justice system closer to poor communities. Each intervention was modest in budget terms, but together they strengthened the expectation that authority should be exercised according to rules, not merely party fiat.

Although Daniel Ortega eventually captured institutions and dismantled term limits, governance-oriented engagement delayed the consolidation of one-party rule, forced elites to contest elections and courts for more than a decade, professionalized watchdog journalism, trained hundreds of local reformers, and generated international networks that still pressure the regime today.

When repression surged in 2018–2022, the regime was forced to dismantle institutions Nicaraguans had experienced as legitimate. This increased domestic backlash, documented in surveys following the protests, and attracted broad international condemnation.[13] Even in exile, Nicaragua's civil society, including journalists, local officials, lawyers, and human rights defenders, continues to document abuses and sustain alternative narratives of legitimacy. Over time, these actors have formed a kind of shadow governance community, operating from Costa Rica, the United States, and Europe but maintaining dense ties to communities inside Nicaragua through secure digital channels and diaspora networks. Their capacity to track human rights

violations, monitor economic developments, and engage multilateral organizations depends directly on the institutional experience built during earlier phases of assistance. Even in a closed environment, legitimacy warfare has created an organized democratic counterweight, ready to reengage if political space opens in the future. Nicaragua demonstrates that legitimacy warfare may not prevent authoritarian resurgence, but it can shape the political terrain, raise the cost of repression, and preserve the foundations of future democratic transitions.

Case II: Venezuela – Civil Resistance under Digital Repression

Venezuela exemplifies legitimacy warfare in a digitally repressive environment. Despite economic collapse and global isolation, Nicolás Maduro remains in power largely through the strategic use of state-embedded legitimacy tools: captured courts, manipulated elections, targeted repression, and information dominance.

Civil society mobilization has been intense and sustained: national strikes, student mobilizations, diaspora-supported journalism, and mass protests. The nonviolent resistance literature shows that such movements have long "half-lives." Even when they do not topple regimes immediately, they accumulate capacity, create future openings, and shape long-term trajectories.[14]

Feldstein's research shows Venezuela to be a global case study in digital authoritarianism, with real-time telecommunications monitoring, targeted spyware, coordinated troll farms, online harassment and doxxing, and periodic social-media blackouts deployed to keep the opposition off balance.[15] These tactics blunt civil resistance, increase the cost of mobilization, and distort perceived public opinion.

International recognition of María Corina Machado—including her receipt of the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize—illustrates a form of positive legitimacy warfare. It signals to domestic actors that democratic alternatives remain viable, delegitimizes the regime's narrative of total control, maintains international pressure and coalition cohesion, and strengthens the democratic opposition's credibility abroad. Symbolic acts do not overthrow regimes, but they shift the legitimacy balance and create future openings.

Venezuela also underscores the time horizon required for legitimacy warfare. International actors often evaluate "success" in terms of regime change within electoral cycles; authoritarian incumbents measure success in decades. The Venezuelan opposition's ability to preserve networks, keep a coherent narrative, and maintain international recognition over time suggests that legitimacy warfare may be less about sudden breakthroughs than about preventing a descent into normalized authoritarianism. The alternative—a Venezuela with no independent media, no recognized opposition, and no international solidarity—would present a far more intractable security challenge for the hemisphere.

Case III: Nigeria – Governance Gaps and Violent Extremism

Nigeria's confrontation with Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province is frequently framed as a counterterrorism problem, but governance weaknesses lie at its core. Analysts have linked the insurgency to chronic corruption, youth unemployment, abusive security forces, and the collapse of basic services across northern Nigeria.[16]

Research from the Carnegie Endowment has emphasized that local-level stabilization in northeast Nigeria has struggled because of weak political commitment, limited state capacity, and poor coordination among civilian and security institutions.[17] U.S. and international assistance has supported community-based policing, civilian-led security platforms, and

reintegration programs for former fighters, yet these efforts often collide with entrenched patronage networks and heavy-handed military responses. Reports from Amnesty International and others have documented extrajudicial killings, mass detentions, and torture by security forces, further eroding trust.[18]

Nigeria underlines several elements of legitimacy warfare. State behavior matters as much as insurgent brutality; when security forces act with impunity, they validate insurgent narratives about state injustice. Civilian institutions, including local government and courts, can either reinforce or undercut security gains depending on whether they are perceived as fair or predatory. Regional governance is critical because Boko Haram and ISWAP exploit the porous Lake Chad Basin, where coordination among Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon is inconsistent.[19] Despite massive expenditures and sustained foreign support, Nigeria remains locked in a protracted conflict. This should not be read as proof that governance-oriented approaches do not work, but as evidence that legitimacy warfare depends on sustained political commitment at the national level. When national elites profit from insecurity or are unwilling to reform corrupt systems, even well-designed programs will have limited reach.

Comparative Lessons Beyond the Core Cases

The following cases illustrate how legitimacy operates as a decisive variable across diverse political and conflict environments. Drawing on field experience, the discussion demonstrates how legitimacy, once eroded, shapes whether societies spiral into conflict or stabilize after a crisis.

Paraguay's 2012 impeachment crisis illustrates how procedural legality without perceived fairness can generate legitimacy shocks. The rapid impeachment process, widely viewed as lacking due process, exposed vulnerabilities in constitutional design that elites were able to exploit. Civil society monitoring and international pressure helped prevent escalation, but the episode revealed how legal ambiguity can be weaponized in political competition. This demonstrates that legitimacy can be undermined not only by illegal actions but also by formal legal processes that lack perceived fairness.[20]

The Zapatista uprising in Chiapas demonstrates how legitimacy can be constructed through governance rather than force. In regions where the Mexican state failed to provide basic services, dispute resolution, and land security, EZLN structures gained authority by filling those gaps with local governance, health care, and justice mechanisms. The movement's legitimacy was reinforced by its ability to represent Indigenous identity and articulate grievances in both domestic and international arenas. This demonstrates that where state institutions fail to deliver credible governance, non-state actors can establish durable legitimacy through service provision and representation rather than sustained violence.[21]

El Salvador's post-conflict trajectory illustrates how unresolved accountability can erode legitimacy over time. While the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords successfully demobilized combatants and restructured security institutions, subsequent amnesty provisions shielded perpetrators of wartime abuses. This impunity weakened public trust in the justice system and contributed to the emergence of gangs as alternative providers of order and protection in marginalized communities. This demonstrates that legitimacy requires sustained accountability, and that failure to address past abuses can undermine even well-designed institutional reforms.[22]

Guatemala highlights the central role of accountability institutions in sustaining legitimacy. The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), backed by the United

Nations, successfully dismantled criminal networks and prosecuted high-level corruption, earning broad public trust in the process. Its eventual expulsion by political elites reversed these gains and triggered a sharp decline in confidence in the rule of law. This demonstrates that legitimacy depends not only on institutional design but also on the political protection of accountability mechanisms from elite backlash.[23]

Bolivia's 2019 political crisis illustrates how competing narratives can fracture legitimacy even when formal institutions remain in place. Disputes over electoral integrity, combined with military pressure and mass mobilization, produced parallel claims to authority that were reinforced by domestic and international actors. The subsequent 2020 elections restored formal democratic continuity but did not resolve underlying divisions over institutional credibility. This demonstrates that legitimacy is not determined solely by formal procedures, but by the ability of institutions to command shared belief across political and social groups.[24]

Peru demonstrates how institutional instability can erode legitimacy even in the absence of armed conflict. Repeated presidential impeachments, corruption scandals, and weak political parties have transformed constitutional mechanisms into routine tools of political contestation. Investigative journalism, particularly surrounding the Lava Jato scandal, has exposed systemic corruption but has also reinforced public perceptions of pervasive institutional failure. This demonstrates that legitimacy can deteriorate through legal but destabilizing political practices when institutions lack coherence, credibility, and programmatic identity.[25]

Ghana provides a counterexample in which legitimacy has been reinforced through consistent institutional performance. Its electoral commission has maintained credibility across multiple peaceful transfers of power, while an independent judiciary and vibrant media environment have strengthened public confidence in governance. External support has complemented, rather than substituted for, domestic institutional capacity. This demonstrates that legitimacy warfare is winnable when institutions deliver predictable, transparent, and accountable governance over time.[26]

Iraq illustrates how corruption can become the primary driver of legitimacy erosion in post-conflict environments. Despite extensive international investment in security forces and formal institutions, systemic corruption undermined public trust and weakened state authority. Popular protests in 2019–2020 reflected widespread frustration with corruption, unemployment, and the failure of governing institutions to deliver basic services.[27] This demonstrates that legitimacy warfare requires confronting entrenched patronage networks, as institutional capacity without accountability does not produce durable authority. [28]

Yemen represents a case of legitimacy collapse in which no actor has been able to establish credible authority. Fragmentation among rival governments, armed groups, and external actors has produced a governance vacuum in which citizens often view all parties as self-interested and unaccountable. Corruption and institutional breakdown have compounded the humanitarian crisis. This demonstrates that when legitimacy collapses entirely, irregular conflict shifts from competition over authority to the absence of authority itself. [29]

Sudan's failed transition underscores the fragility of legitimacy in post-authoritarian contexts. Despite strong popular mobilization in favor of civilian rule, competition between military factions undermined the transition and prevented the consolidation of democratic institutions. External actors further complicated the process by pursuing competing interests. This demonstrates that legitimacy requires not only public support but also coherence within the security sector and alignment among domestic and international stakeholders.[30]

Governance as the Operational Domain

Legitimacy warfare recognizes governance not as an afterthought but as the primary operating environment in irregular conflict. In every case discussed—Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nigeria, Paraguay, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Bolivia, Peru, Ghana, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan—the decisive terrain was neither jungles nor deserts nor urban slums. It was the governance domain: who controls credible information, who delivers justice, who can adjudicate disputes without coercion, who can mobilize trust instead of fear, and which actors, state or non-state, appear fair, competent, and accountable.

Irregular adversaries understand this. They do not try to outgun national militaries; they try to delegitimize them. They rely on narratives rooted in grievance, identity, corruption, exclusion, or state abuses. When states respond primarily with force rather than with credible governance reforms, they reinforce the adversary's message. When they demonstrate fairness, responsiveness, and lawful behavior, they strip insurgents and corrupt networks of their rhetorical oxygen. A legitimacy warfare framework therefore aligns U.S. strategic interests with empirical evidence: sustainable security rests on institutions, not firepower alone.

A Legitimacy Warfare Doctrine

A practical legitimacy warfare doctrine would put governance at the center of planning and operations. Governance is the true center of gravity in irregular conflict. Legitimacy, rather than firepower, is the currency that determines which actors can mobilize compliance without constant coercion. Diagnosing governance weaknesses alongside security threats, mapping institutions vulnerable to co-optation, identifying alternative authority structures such as religious networks, Indigenous institutions, labor unions, and professional associations, and prioritizing investments that increase institutional trust rather than capacity alone become core tasks.

Democratic resilience must be treated as a security objective. The 2022 National Security Strategy emphasizes defending democratic norms as a national security imperative. Legitimacy warfare operationalizes this by making oversight bodies, independent media, civic platforms, electoral credibility, judicial independence, and protections for civil society activists part of the same mission set as deterrence and defense.[31] Electoral audits, domestic observation, and cybersecurity protections for election management bodies are not technical side projects; they are strategic investments in the credibility of the state.

Security forces must be understood as legitimacy actors. Heavy-handed responses, corruption, extrajudicial killings, and abuse are strategically catastrophic because they validate adversary narratives and push communities toward insurgents, cartels, or extremist groups. Integrating human rights training and accountability into security sector assistance, conditioning support on transparency, civilian oversight, and verifiable reforms, and supporting community policing models that reduce corruption vulnerabilities are therefore essential components of a legitimacy-centered approach, not optional human rights add-ons.

Anticorruption must be treated as an operational line of effort in its own right. Corruption is a weapon system in irregular conflict. Criminal mafias, cartels, insurgents, and political patrons use corrupt networks to seize institutions, eliminate rivals, and control communities. Integrating anticorruption analysis into planning cycles, supporting independent auditors, ombudsmen, financial intelligence units, and investigative journalists, increasing transparency in procurement and service delivery, and providing sustained legal and forensic assistance for

corruption prosecutions help sever the financial lifelines of irregular actors and restore public confidence.

The information environment must be treated as a managed battlespace anchored in truth, not manipulation. Democratic actors cannot out-propagandize authoritarian systems, but they can outcompete them on credibility. Supporting media outlets that adhere to professional standards, defending journalists against digital harassment, legal intimidation, and economic coercion, building fact-checking ecosystems and local-language misinformation monitoring, and expanding cyber assistance to protect civil society and electoral bodies from intrusion all strengthen the informational foundations of legitimacy.[32]

Civil resistance and nonviolent action should be integrated into security thinking. The evidence that nonviolent campaigns are more effective than violent ones and more likely to yield stable democracies is robust. Training relevant U.S. personnel on the dynamics of civil resistance, coordinating diplomatic pressure with domestic nonviolent campaigns seeking reforms, and ensuring that security assistance does not inadvertently undermine peaceful movements help align U.S. support with the most promising pathways to legitimate political change.

Local governance and service delivery are strategic assets. Municipal governments, traditional authorities, and local judicial actors shape how people experience the state. Supporting systems that improve budgeting, procurement, land governance, and dispute resolution, strengthening citizen feedback mechanisms and public financial transparency, and linking local reforms to national anticorruption and decentralization agendas create tangible evidence that institutions can work.

Where requested by national stakeholders, transitional justice can reinforce legitimacy by acknowledging victims, sanctioning abuses, and reforming institutions, provided processes are locally grounded and survivor-centered.[33] Premature or externally imposed models, by contrast, risk being seen as foreign impositions and can compound distrust.

Finally, legitimacy warfare requires multi-decade commitment and political will. It is slow by design because building trust in institutions takes time and consistent behavior. That is precisely where current U.S. capacity is weakest. The dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development has sharply reduced the ability of the United States to field experienced civilian governance advisers at scale.[34] Rebuilding that civilian capacity, stabilizing long-term field presence, institutionalizing governance lines of effort in combatant commands and embassies, and shielding democracy support from partisan swings are essential if legitimacy warfare is to move from concept to practice.

Conclusion: Competing for the Governance Domain

Irregular warfare has become a defining feature of contemporary global competition. Authoritarian powers, insurgent groups, cartels, and digital actors are converging in the governance domain, not through tanks or missiles, but through institutional capture, disinformation, corruption, cyber manipulation, identity mobilization, service provision, and narrative dominance. Legitimacy warfare offers the United States a means to compete effectively without repeating the errors of large-scale interventionism. It aligns with U.S. values, mitigates strategic risk, and strengthens the democratic institutions that anchor global stability.

The cases reviewed—Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nigeria, Paraguay, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Bolivia, Peru, Ghana, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan—illustrate both the challenge and the

opportunity. Where legitimacy erodes, violence follows; where institutions and civic space are protected, democratic resilience endures. Even when outcomes fall short of liberal democratic ideals, legitimacy warfare can delay authoritarian consolidation, raise the cost of repression, and preserve institutional and human capital for future openings.

Legitimacy warfare is not confined to internal conflicts between states and irregular actors; it is increasingly central to state-on-state competition. Russia's actions in Ukraine, China's promotion of governance models emphasizing stability and economic performance, and the global use of disinformation campaigns all reflect efforts to shape perceptions of which systems are credible, effective, and enduring. In this context, legitimacy becomes a strategic asset that extends beyond borders, influencing alliances, partnerships, and the broader international order.

The dismantling of USAID and the hollowing out of other civilian institutions pose an additional strategic challenge: the tools best suited for legitimacy warfare are precisely those now being weakened.[35] If the United States is serious about competing in the governance domain, it must rebuild its civilian capacity to support justice systems, electoral commissions, local governments, and independent media at scale, and embed that capacity in an interagency framework that treats governance as the center of gravity in irregular conflict. Legitimacy does not eliminate conflict, but it shapes whether conflict produces durable political order or sustained instability. In an era of irregular competition, legitimacy is the decisive advantage of democratic systems, if they choose to defend it. Legitimacy warfare is how they do so if they choose to act.

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