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Security Nexus Perspectives

GOLDILOCKS POWER AND THE REFORM OF IRREGULAR WARFARE IN A CHANGING WORLD

By Deon Canyon *

The Irregular Warfare (IW) Annex to the 2020 National Defense Strategy defines irregular warfare as “a struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy.” Irregular warfare is called [Hybrid Warfare](#) by NATO, [New Generation Warfare](#) by Russia, and [Unrestricted Warfare](#) by China. All of these terms place an emphasis on influencing populations, primarily using non-military means below the level of conventional war. Although irregular warfare encompasses a range of activities traditionally dominated by special operations forces, such as counter-terrorism, unconventional warfare, counterinsurgency, foreign internal defense and stability operations, this revised definition broadens the concept to include non-violent struggle by any actor. Irregular warfare is thus an integral component of strategic competition below the threshold of war, and demands a whole-of-government approach or even a whole-of-society approach.

The term remains controversial because [“warfare” refers specifically to conflict and violence](#). Viewed through the lens of power, irregular warfare contains elements of aggressive, coercive, hard military power and elements of soft power, which works by attracting and co-opting, often through diplomatic means. However, IW has too strong an association with [gray zone](#) activities to be considered a midway point between those descriptors.

The term [gray zone often includes](#) “hybrid threats, sharp power, political warfare, malign influence, irregular warfare, and modern deterrence.” As such, gray zone activities are a component of IW. IW is multi-dimensional, has many potential stakeholders, and employs any viable methodology to “influence populations and affect legitimacy.” It allows for the use of any type of power. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism Joe Francescon said, “... we’re [mixing the full range of our capabilities](#) in creative, dynamic and unorthodox ways.”

Thus, the idea behind irregular, new generation and unrestricted warfare has more to do with the right entity applying just the right pressure of the right type, at the right spot, and the right time to influence the

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right people and affect the legitimacy or posture of a government or non-state actor. In other words, it's not expressly about conflict (warfare); it's about *Goldilocks Power* and the ability to identify the right approach to achieve a desired outcome, whether it is white, black or gray.

Intent and Approach

Goldilocks Power encompasses the idea of [political warfare](#), which falls well below hard power, but is engaged when soft power fails to achieve desired objectives. Diplomatic efforts by any state department are essentially manifestations of political power that are designed to influence populations and affect legitimacy. As the U.S. Department of Defense says, "Ultimately, IW is a [political struggle with violent and non-violent components](#) ... for control or influence over, and the support of, a relevant population." The following [strategies of subversion](#), indicate the intentions, and to a certain extent, motivations behind irregular attacks.

- Foreign infiltration – E.g., embedding nationals in another nation in influential positions,
- Penetration and infiltration – E.g., of governing bodies of international organizations
- Subversion and defection – E.g., maintaining a benign, but corrupting diplomatic presence, or providing scholarships to indoctrinate the future leaders of developing nations
- Forced disintegration – E.g., supporting radicals to atrophy an existing government
- Use and misuse of information in support of all the above

Some classic irregular warfare [methods and approaches](#) used to achieve these intentions include:

- Insurgency
- Counterinsurgency (COIN)
- Unconventional warfare (UW)
- Terrorism
- Counterterrorism (CT)
- Foreign internal defense (FID)
- Stabilization, security, transition, and reconstruction operations (SSTRO)
- Strategic communications
- Psychological operations (PSYOP)
- Information operations (IO)
- Civil-military operations (CMO)
- Intelligence and counterintelligence activities
- Transnational criminal activities, including narco-trafficking, illicit arms dealing, and illegal financial transactions, that support or sustain IW
- Law enforcement activities focused on countering irregular adversaries

Goldilocks Power also includes the following ways that China has been particularly active, although not always effective. As China seeks to attain its First Island Chain, these practices will naturally expand to undermining U.S. alliances and partnerships, and pushing U.S. military presence further back.

- Influencing and disrupting international regimes – E.g., UN, WTO, WHO
- Shifting international norms on freedom, human rights, and democracy

- Replacing democratic principles with authoritarian ones
- Reducing the voice of strategic competitors and the U.S.
- Co-opting existing international organizations to influence global policies and rule-based order – E.g., WTO, IMF, WB, WHO, UN, ICAO
- Creating new international organizations with a beneficent appearance – e.g., AIIB, NDB
- Building self-centric platforms for international cooperation – e.g., Belt-and-Road
- Extending a helping hand that entraps assisted nations in debt
- Restricting water flow into other nations in exchange for political compromises

[Bill Moore](#), lead strategist and campaign planner for Special Operations Command, Pacific, offered these general approaches to countering *Goldilocks Power*:

- Supporting diplomatic and other initiatives to dominate the information narrative
- Aligning security cooperation efforts to support a range of economic levers
- Developing discrete options that counter malign activities above and below armed conflict
- Deter military aggression by supporting partners and friends to develop creative options
- Gain and maintain supremacy in the information and intelligence domain

Informational Morass

The [global information crisis](#), behaving much like the Covid pandemic, is perhaps at the forefront of irregular activities. Digital viruses infect our technology systems and information viruses infect and influence our populations. Initially, the internet was seen as a tool against oppression for it offered transparency and made information available to previously isolated and uninformed populations. In the beginning, governments used censoring to [block](#) this information flow but quickly realized that not all information is bad. Governments and corporations began to [selectively filter](#) and thus manipulate available content to influence their populations and markets. As the power of increasingly [sophisticated](#) internal and transboundary actions and their ability to [shape narratives](#) during significant geopolitical moments became more apparent, some entities took this further by turning up the volume on certain desired information in a process called [flooding](#). Flooding suppresses facts by crowding out independent voices or expertise and can be exacerbated by using armies of trolls and programs that [automatically generate](#) posts. Positive results encouraged more overt subversion of social media and [co-opting](#) it to enhance the stability of corporations, and both autocratic and democratic regimes.

As governments seek more control over their populations and methods to combat informational *Goldilocks Power* exerted by competing nations, they focus more energy and resources on these methods. The intent behind these actions range from mild, such as distorting the facts of a particular case, or serious, such as damaging an agency, [reducing stability](#) in a nation, and [exploiting social, political, or economic vulnerabilities](#). The internet has become more than a threat; it has become a potent Machiavellian tool for consolidating and legitimizing leaders. In the process, the gap between authoritarian and democratic regimes [has become blurred](#) and the truth has become more difficult to ascertain.

Economic Considerations

The [US IW Annex](#) to the National Defense Strategy says, “Irregular warfare is an enduring, economical contribution to America’s national security.” Under the irregular warfare umbrella, nations or non-state entities employ legal and illegal [economic strategies](#) to improve their own economy and/or negatively impact the economy of a competitor. Damage to opponent resources causes ripple effects that ultimately reduce opponent ability to conduct further operations.

Because most transactions are conducted online, open or covert aggressive economic actions typically take place in [cyber and information operations](#) before, during and after actual conflicts. Some of the [methods used](#) to enact economic power include “blockade, blacklisting, preclusive purchasing, rewards and the capturing or the control of enemy assets or supply lines.” [Further actions](#), such as tariffs, sanctions, aid reduction, asset freezing, limiting capital flows, ceasing investment, and expropriation may be employed to manipulate the economy by a state actor or other entity.

Military Limitations

It has been said that “[population-centric conflicts cannot be fought with military concepts](#) and doctrine designed for the physics of conventional war and instead require approaches that blend anthropology, economics, history, and sociology.” A heavy military focus remains evident in the U.S. [2007 Irregular Warfare, Joint Operation Concept](#) document, in which Figure 3 on page 15 shows relationships between Irregular warfare, major combat operations (MCO), and stabilization, security, transition, and reconstruction operations (SSTR). All IW activities except enabling SSTR, are categorized as “conflict” and there is little recognition that IW may involve a wide array of non-conflict activities.

Unfortunately, “there has never been a deliberate, widely accepted process to [codify the lessons](#) from the United States’ misadventures with irregular warfare and to describe how we ought to organize ourselves and how we ought to plan for this form of warfare.” Even until 2020, the officers responsible for irregular warfare in the U.S. military [were not provided with the education they required to be effective](#) in this new front, and the U.S. remains far behind the curve in *Goldilocks Power* compared to China and Russia. In 2021, it was cogently argued that U.S. military culture “[diametrically opposes divergent thought](#)”, which means that the turn-around will take longer than hoped.

In 2021, calls came from many areas to improve U.S. *Goldilocks Power*. Some have called for a more coherent [understanding of the concept](#). Others have called for the focus on [counter-terrorism to be expanded](#) to include irregular warfare. Positive steps have been taken with the Combating Terrorism Technical Support Office in the Pentagon being transformed into the [Irregular Warfare Technical Support Directorate](#), calls for [Special Forces to focus](#) on CT as well as on irregular warfare, unconventional warfare, and support for political warfare, and recommending a role for [Civil Affairs](#).

Moving Forward

Global disinformation has changed the face of international strategic competition and must be woven into any future effort on irregular warfare preparedness. It is time for piece-meal actions to cease and for a

concerted effort to bring together a cohesive approach to tackle non-traditional geopolitical threats. The personnel and resources assigned to handling irregular warfare simply cannot cope with recent dramatic and massive increases in the global practice of deceit.

In 2019, a [report outlined the depth of the global disinformation crisis](#). Seventy nations used social media to manipulate public opinion and 45 democracies manipulated the media to increase voter support. Authoritarian nations suppressed public opinion and flooded out political dissent. China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela all used social media platforms to conduct foreign influence operations. Corporations are exacerbating the problem by offering computational services to support these activities.

The sooner national security agencies and militaries realize that irregular warfare is much more than conflict, the sooner they will be able to reorganize and deal with the problem in a systemic and systematic, whole-of-government or even whole-of-society manner. As each side in the global struggle for geopolitical and economic ascendance ups the ante, nations are unfortunately being pushed towards Machiavellian thinking to maintain sovereignty. *Goldilocks Power* is ever-present and all-encompassing. It is not phase zero or “left-of-bang.” It is recognizing latent opportunity in a challenging situation and employing any and every tool necessary to bring about a satisfactory conclusion. It needs to be fluid and flexible enough to respond to acute issues requiring rapid responses, but deliberate and forward-looking to appropriately counter slow-burning, creeping crises with slow, long-term persistent engagement and pressure.

Another comment by Francescon that IW does “not require significant new resources to adapt to great power competition” minimizes the issue and detracts from the attention and resources it requires to be effective. Leaving this incredibly broad and multidisciplinary endeavor in the hands of the military can only limit performance and effectiveness. We need to create a new interdisciplinary center that brings together a group of strategists and policymakers from different sectors with a deep appreciation of *Goldilocks Power* and the options it can offer to ensure security dominion in the geopolitical sphere. It cannot be a separate isolated unit. It must be systemically interconnected to all other relevant agencies and play an integral role in all Goldilocks endeavors.

Goldilocks Power is bigger than the Special Operations Forces, bigger than defense, and bigger than the USA. Leaving the military to carry this burden and failing to recognize and respond to all facets of this rapidly growing multidimensional threat will render the military a “Papa Bear” relegated forever to sitting on a hard chair, eating porridge that is too hot and sleeping on an uncomfortable bed.

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