

GNSI DECISION BRIEF



Creating Sun Tsu: Instituting a Master's Degree in Irregular Warfare

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Introduction

In the words of Sun Tsu, arguably the father of irregular warfare, war is like water, and water has no constant form, and there are no constant conditions in war.ⁱ Nowhere in the history of U.S. military doctrine has conflict been described in this theoretical and inclusive way. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the U.S.’s preference for technological solutions, increased firepower, and lethality on the battlefield neglects to account for leveraging irregular and asymmetric forms of conflict to advance its interests and counter its adversaries. The Consortium to Study Irregular Warfare Act of 2021 addressed the gap in irregular warfare doctrine with the requirement to professionalize irregular warfare education in the Department of Defense (DoD).ⁱⁱ Currently, such education mostly comprises electives at Service Colleges, which already have far too many Congressional and Service-mandated requirements to implement irregular warfare education to the degree required to create a modern-day Sun Tsu. Instead, the DoD should institute a master’s degree in irregular warfare to fill critical billets in the Joint Force.

Historical Context

In WW2, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was able to bridge the gap between conventional military operations and the need for unorthodox, irregular, and unconventional operations. These operations targeted overt enemies amongst foreign populations to enable resilience and resistance of threatened and occupied societies. The OSS conducted what could today be described as full-spectrum irregular activities and operations, encompassing (a) intelligence, (b) statesmanship and diplomacy, (c) special operations, (d) partnerships, (e) equipment specifically procured for irregular warfare, and (f) research into irregular warfare theory, science, and technology. Post-war, the United States allocated these activities between the DoD and CIA. In the Cold War period, this division of labor generally succeeded in supporting the ultimate defeat of Soviet global aspirations. The divided responsibilities for irregular competition and warfare have created disjointed efforts and confused execution.

What is Irregular Warfare?

Congress and the DoD have made the term “irregular warfare” far too puzzling. Each defines irregular warfare a bit differently, but both imply that irregular warfare is anything utilizing DoD capabilities outside of conventional war. While the DoD has recently specified that irregular warfare does not require violence, Congress defines the term as not involving armed conflict whatsoever (e.g. JP 1 Vol 1 / NDAA24)ⁱⁱⁱ These definitions of a term

that utilizes the word “warfare” create unnecessary confusion both in the U.S. government and, more importantly, abroad. Further, policy and doctrine should recognize that the DoD performs most of its activities outside of both conventional and irregular war. In other words, the two bins remain overly simplified.

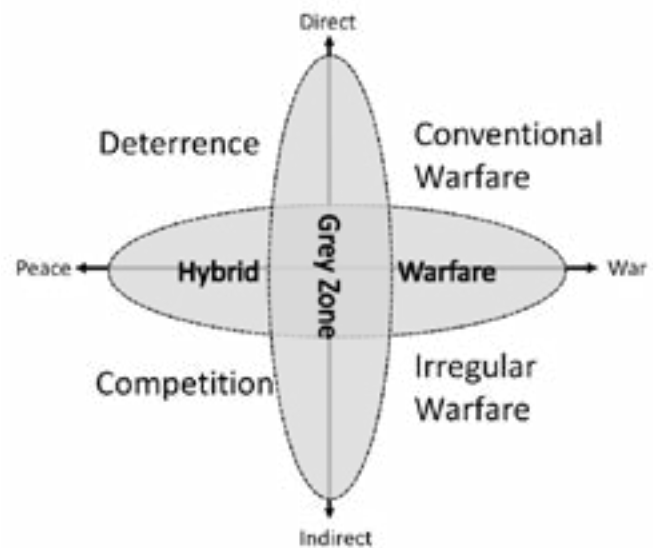


Figure 2: A Full Spectrum of Conflict Design^{iv}

In reality, the Department of Defense operates across a continuum of competition, crisis, and conflict while building, enabling, and leveraging cooperation with a variety of U.S. and foreign, military and non-military, state and non-state, allies and partners to prevent, prepare and prevail across the continuum. Within this model, DoD deters and enables deterrence beyond aggression and conflict and, more broadly, against adversary coercion, subversion, and aggression. At the same time, it competes persistently in a civil-military context and, more importantly, in support of other elements of national power. It also conducts irregular activities that generally support and enable others to share advantages across the continuum. When necessary, it conducts conventional warfare, often integrated with elements of irregular warfare, in what many have labeled hybrid or compound warfare.

This maze of environments, conditions in those environments, and the current definitions and descriptions of irregular warfare demonstrate that while it ‘can be’ warfare, it is often something short of warfare and conflict that DoD does persistently. The gray zone – that area of ambiguity between regular, legal, and persistent competition and something more malign, aggressive, and

often lacking solid attribution, can and does occur throughout this environment model, not exclusively in crisis or conflict but more often in competition. Accordingly, while the term irregular warfare remains valid for the name of a master's degree, the content for study must address all types of irregular threats and irregular approaches in competition, deterrence, and war.

An Occupational Specialty

The DoD does not represent the demographic, academic, or experimental diversity in America or the diversity of the multitude of operating environments the U.S. is involved in abroad. Instead, it offers a cookie-cutter approach to recruiting and making Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines who have been conditioned to think, act, and perform similarly. That model works well in preparing for conventional warfare but not for imparting an irregular mindset that often requires short-of-conflict contrast. The OSS recruited, trained, and employed far more diverse talent during WW2 than the DoD does today, including people with disabilities, professional athletes, multiple genders, a variety of ethnic-linguistic expertise, and those with interdisciplinary education and even questionable backgrounds. Famous OSS agent Virginia Hall, with a prosthetic leg, would not make the cut in today's DoD. Irregular expertise can be found in many professions, and the DoD offers only a small portion of the candidates required. Irregular warfare equally needs seasoned diplomats as part of that broader diversity and enable broader ideas for action, short of and potentially including violence. Selection, training, and retention need to break current DoD barriers to entry.



Figure 3: Virginia Hall of Special Operations Branch receiving the Distinguished Service Cross^v

Simultaneously, the DoD needs to better identify those with irregular training, education, aptitude, and experience. An example might be an occupational specialty and/or designator for irregular warfare experts. As an analogy, we encourage every American to visit a U.S. aircraft carrier if they can and to be prepared for the most inspirational and patriotic moment of their lives as they watch young sailors and junior officers conduct the most complex and sophisticated operations in the world. While those

same sailors cannot also be experts in irregular warfare. It would be like asking an NFL football team to also win the next Rugby championship. Both are sports requiring skill, strength, and stamina, but both require specialization and focus, which are very different. There are only so many hours in the day to dedicate to one standard of excellence. Irregular warfare professionals must familiarize themselves with conventional warfare and vice versa, but very few can expect to be experts at both simultaneously.

The Services need a joint military occupational specialty specifically for irregular warfare planners. While this may seem like 'entering from the middle,' this 'missing middle' is critical to DoD success in an increasingly uncertain, unstable, and arguably irregular future of global, strategic competition, crisis, and conflict. These billets should be in combatant commands, major subordinate commands, and possibly the interagency. The need for fully qualified irregular warfare planners will drive the need for their selection and education. Once irregular warfare planners fill these ranks, they will greatly impact the DoD's ability to design approaches to deterrence, competition, and irregular war – throughout the conflict continuum.

Constellation of Partners

Institutions must break away from the standardized education utilized by U.S. conventional forces. Instead, education must include diverse perspectives with contrarian viewpoints - including instruction that imbues empathy with competitors for a greater understanding of how to 'prevent, prepare, and prevail' across the competition continuum by leveraging irregular activities. Expertise should include political science, international relations, military science, law, engineering, and other disciplines – far too many to exist at any one institution. As a starting point, a constellation of partners could include allied militaries, intergovernmental practitioners, and civilian academics. One such constellation would have U.S. Special Operations Commands, DoD Colleges and Universities, British, Australian, Canadian, and New Zealand schools, and the Pentagon and think tanks in Washington, D.C.



Figure 4: Notional Constellation of Partners^{vi}

While a constellation of experts can facilitate irregular warfare education, accreditation for this degree will need to fall on the shoulders of only one of them. This could be a DoD partner like the National Defense University or a civilian institution like the University of South Florida. Which institution is less important

than ensuring collaboration between the best and most knowledgeable experts?

Continuous Cycle of Knowledge

The generation of tactical, operational, and strategic experts in irregular warfare should embrace a continuous cycle of excellence, beginning with early and continuous education and culminating in the creation of approved DoD warfighting plans. Step (1) consists of education. Selectees, normally mid-career officers, would be nominated and selected to attend one year of study under the tutelage of three recognized experts, with at least one practitioner in the field. In Step (2), the culmination of the officer's education results in a written thesis regarding resilience-and-resistance-centric studies. Following graduation in Step (3), the Services employ the officers in designated irregular warfare planning billets throughout the DoD. During the standard three-year employment period following a DoD graduate school program, the graduates work on and develop long-term campaign plans and irregular warfare contingency plans as indicated by Step (4). In Step (5), the culmination of a graduate's work then resides in campaign and contingency plans published by the DoD in their prescribed five-year process. To continue the cycle, graduates who have completed their tours of duty as irregular warfare practitioners will be encouraged to serve on thesis committees of the younger generations of officers.

Conclusion

Preparation for large-scale combat operations against a near-peer foe remains essential. However, creating a master's degree program in irregular warfare and identifying coded personnel positions for that specialty within the DoD can potentially facilitate increased success for the United States during nonstandard and more prevalent periods of conflict. Such education must maintain empathy and understanding for adversaries, as well as embrace diverse ideas and non-doctrinal approaches to conflict. The DoD cannot fix previous missteps (like those experienced during the Second Indochina War or the Long War), but it can better prepare for future periods of competition, deterrence, and irregular warfare. Indeed, in so doing, future wars might be won without fighting at all.



Figure 5: Cycle of Generating New Knowledge^{vii}

Leverage the Virtual Space

The brick-and-mortar method of education will be necessary in certain aspects of irregular warfare education, but focusing exclusively on this method fails to deliver the best, most holistic education today. Via elements of virtual execution, the DoD can pool its sparse irregular competition and irregular warfare academic experts into enhanced collaboration. Additionally, leveraging virtual space allows the participation of academic experts and practitioners from across the globe. The virtual space facilitates the comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach to education required in creating Sun Tsu.

Decision Points

- Should the DoD create a military occupational specialty for irregular warfare planners?
- Should the DoD create a master's degree program to train such planners?
- Which institution best serves to coordinate and accredit a master's degree program for the DoD?
- How can the DoD best leverage academic expertise and professors of practice from around the globe to enable professional education regarding irregular forms of conflict?
- Which Joint Force billets should be coded for irregular warfare?

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ⁱ Sun Tsu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 101.

ⁱⁱ Consortium to Study Irregular Warfare Act of 2021, H.R. 5130, 117th Cong. (2021).

ⁱⁱⁱ Joint Publication 1, Volume 1, *Joint Warfighting*, (Washington D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 27 August 2023), and House Resolution 2670, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024*, 118th Congress, 14 July 2023.

^{iv} See Robert S. Burrell, "A Full Spectrum of Conflict Design: How Doctrine Should Embrace Irregular Warfare," *Irregular Warfare Initiative*, 14 March 2023. <https://irregularwarfare.org/articles/a-full-spectrum-of-conflict-design-how-doctrine-should-embrace-irregular-warfare/>

^v Photo of Virginia Hall receiving the Distinguished Service Cross from General Donovan in September 1945. Found on Wiki commons. This work is in the public domain in the United States because it is a work prepared by an officer or employee of the United States Government as part of that person's official duties under the terms of Title 17, Chapter 1, Section 105 of the US Code.

^{vi} Illustration by authors.

^{vii} Illustration by authors.

Goldwater-Nichols required Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) to improve joint interoperability and EO13434 required "the national strategy shall set forth a framework that will provide security professionals access to integrated education, training, and professional experience and thereby improve their capability to safeguard the security of the Nation." In both instances, policymakers were trying to adapt education to better prepare practitioners for the strategic environment.

^{vi} Department of Defense, Joint Publication 5-0: Joint Planning, (Washington, DC: Pentagon, December 2020), xiii and IV-1. JP 5-0 lists "Adaptive and Flexible" as one of the "principles of planning" and states that "Planning is an adaptive process that occurs in a networked, collaborative environment." JP 5-0 also acknowledges the importance of broad perspectives to gain a fuller appreciation and the necessity of collaboration to achieve it.

^{vii} "Want 'Strategically Minded Warfighters?' Then Make 'Intellectualism' a Military Value" (co-authored with Mike Obadal), *InterPopulum: Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations*. Pending.

^{viii} The Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War: The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management*, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/jcs_pme_tm_vision.pdf?ver=2020-05-15-102429-817 (accessed November 10, 2022).