



SUMMARY OF THE  
IRREGULAR WARFARE ANNEX TO THE  
NATIONAL DEFENSE STRATEGY

2020

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# FOREWORD

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Irregular warfare is an enduring, economical contribution to America’s national security, and will remain an essential core competency of the U.S. Department of Defense.

The character and form of war are constantly changing, yet its fundamental nature remains the same. Though Great Power Competition is now our primary national security challenge – a departure from conducting almost two decades of continuous irregular war against violent extremist organizations worldwide – the requirement for mastery of irregular warfare persists. Far from abandoning these critical competencies, we will sharpen these capabilities for application against peer competitor, nation-state adversaries.

This summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy explains that irregular warfare is to be institutionalized as a core competency with sufficient, enduring capabilities to advance national security objectives across the spectrum of competition and conflict, in alignment with the NDS. The Department will employ these concepts and capabilities in a resource-sustainable approach to dictate the terms and tempo of competition to prevail against *all* global adversaries short of war, and build and sustain our global advantage in careful coordination with allies and partners. Should war come, these capabilities will shape the environment to ensure combat dominance and our ability to end any conflict on our terms.

Consequently, the Department of Defense will: (1) make permanent the mindset and capabilities necessary to succeed in its current irregular warfare mission sets; and (2) leverage all irregular capabilities in our arsenal, including the unique abilities of our interagency and foreign partners, to compete against revisionist powers and violent extremist organizations alike. This approach does not require significant new resources to meet our strategic vision; it requires new ideas and new means of employing existing capabilities.

We must not — and *will* not — repeat the “boom and bust” cycle that has left the United States underprepared for irregular warfare in both Great Power Competition and conflict. Americans expect their military to do more than react to crises, they expect us to compete and maintain our advantages.

# STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

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The United States is engaged in global competition to advance U.S. interests and gain enduring strategic advantage. The Department's approach to irregular warfare must evolve to address the full spectrum of competition and conflict against potential state adversaries, while sustaining campaigns against select non-state actors. This summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) provides a plan to institutionalize irregular warfare (IW) as an enduring core competency for the entire Joint Force. This plan is grounded in the lessons of recent conflict.

## Irregular Warfare: An Enduring Mission and Core Competency

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Irregular warfare is a struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy. IW favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will. It includes the specific missions of unconventional warfare (UW), stabilization, foreign internal defense (FID), counterterrorism (CT), and counterinsurgency (COIN). Related activities such as military information support operations, cyberspace operations, countering threat networks, counter-threat finance, civil-military operations, and security cooperation also shape the information environment and other population-focused arenas of competition and conflict.

State adversaries and their proxies increasingly seek to prevail through their own use of irregular warfare, pursuing national objectives in the competitive space deliberately below the threshold likely to provoke a U.S. conventional response. China, Russia, and Iran are willing practitioners of campaigns of disinformation, deception, sabotage, and economic coercion, as well as proxy, guerrilla, and covert operations. This increasingly complex security environment suggests the need for a revised understanding of IW to account for its role as a component of great power competition.

It is in this competitive space that the Department must innovate. We must creatively mix our traditional combat power with proactive, dynamic, and unorthodox approaches to IW that can shape, prevent, and prevail against our nation's adversaries and maintain favorable regional balances of power alongside our key partners and allies.

## Problem Statement

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IW is a persistent and enduring operational reality employed by non-state actors and increasingly by state actors in competition with the United States. Past U.S. approaches to IW have been cyclical and neglected the fact that IW – in addition to nuclear and conventional deterrence – can proactively shape conditions to the United States' advantage in great power competition. This reactive cycle fails to prepare the United States to conduct traditional warfare or irregular warfare effectively. All of these conditions are reversible.

## Central Idea

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The Department must institutionalize irregular warfare as a core competency for both conventional and special operations forces, sustaining the ability to impose costs and create dilemmas for our adversaries across the full spectrum of competition and conflict. To accomplish this vision, the Department will:

- › Break the reactive cycle of investment in IW capabilities by institutionalizing lessons learned from past conflicts, and preserving a baseline of IW-focused expertise and capabilities;
- › Sustain IW as a core competency for the entire Joint Force, not just Special Operations Forces;
- › Ensure widespread understanding and sufficient expertise in IW;
- › Ensure its approach to IW becomes more agile and cost-informed by developing and employing resource-sustainable IW capabilities;
- › Seize the initiative and use IW capabilities proactively to expand the competitive space, defeat our adversaries' competitive strategies, and prepare for an escalation to conflict, if required; and
- › Organize to foster and sustain unified action in IW with interagency partners as well as key allies and partners.

# RECENT LESSONS GUIDE OUR APPROACH

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The United States has deep experience conducting irregular warfare, beginning with the first major American overseas expedition against the Barbary Pirates in the early 1800s, and continuing through the campaign to degrade the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. We have generated countless lessons from our history of irregular war. However, we often struggle to consolidate our tactical successes and military gains into enduring strategic outcomes and adapt our capabilities for great power competition. In periods of emphasis on great power competition, we must not discard the ability to employ our IW capabilities and mindset proactively against irregular threats from state and non-state actors.

## We Remain Underprepared for Irregular War

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Our adversaries seek to undercut our global influence, degrade our relationships with key allies and partners, and shape the global environment to their advantage without provoking a U.S. conventional response. As we reorient the Department towards great power competition, we do not have the luxury of discarding our well-honed ability to wage irregular war as we have done in the past. For example, the United States entered irregular wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq unprepared to conduct the major counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns and counterterrorism campaigns that followed.

## Most Military Capabilities Can Be Applied in an Irregular Context

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Successful military contributions to irregular warfare require a deliberate and sustained integration of conventional and special operations capabilities. Our experience in the Cold War suggests that longstanding traditional military activities—force movements, partner engagements, public affairs, partner logistical support, security force assistance, intelligence and counterintelligence activities, and training—complement and mutually support irregular mission objectives such as competing for influence and legitimacy, the foreign internal defense of allied states, and preparations for unconventional warfare.

Conventional forces have executed, can execute, and even lead most IW missions. Conventional forces have supported or led counterinsurgency campaigns in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan; stabilization missions in Bosnia and Somalia; and other irregular campaigns. Even when special operations forces (SOF) have taken the lead in unconventional warfare, counterterrorism, and foreign internal defense missions, they are heavily enabled by conventional forces. As we shift towards great power competition, our conventional forces must not lose the ability to wage irregular war.

**Myth: IW is CT – CT is SOF – SOF is IW**

*Reality: Conventional forces have, and always will have, a role in IW across a variety of missions, and a range of military activities.*

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## Conventional Overmatch Encourages Adversaries to Pursue Indirect Approaches

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As we seek to rebuild our own lethality in traditional warfare, our adversaries will become more likely to emphasize irregular approaches in their competitive strategies to negate our advantages and exploit our disadvantages. Their intent will be to achieve their objectives without resorting to direct armed conflict against the United States, or buy time until they are better postured to challenge us directly. The purpose of

competition is not only to gain military advantages, but also to defeat adversaries' strategies, shape their perceptions, and deny their strategic objectives in the pursuit of national interests.

## **Irregular War Requires Unified Action**

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The successful conduct of IW relies upon unified action with our U.S. interagency and multinational partners. Our competitors have operationalized clandestine criminal activity and predatory economic behavior as components of their own approach to irregular warfare. However, structural divisions limit our ability to respond to non-military aspects of adversarial competition. No single U.S. Government department or agency has primacy in the prosecution of irregular conflict or adversarial competition. We cannot assume unified action will occur on its own. We must pursue it deliberately.

## **Recent Operations Set a Standard for an Enduring Approach**

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Recent experience suggests there are more effective and less costly ways to achieve strategic success in IW. Since 2014, conventional and special operations forces have worked closely together in Iraq and Syria to improve the longstanding “by, with, and through” approach to IW. These operations have proven to be more cost-effective than doing it ourselves. We have a model, but institutionalization of these lessons requires an enduring, whole-of-Department approach.



# IRREGULAR WARFARE STRATEGIC APPROACH

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The Department will embrace IW as an enduring and fundamental form of warfare. To institutionalize our approach to IW and preserve a baseline of IW capabilities and expertise, we must address IW in force development and design in our approach to human capital. We must also build an agile, cost-informed, and resource-sustainable approach to IW.

To operationalize our approach to IW, we must establish a proactive approach to control the tempo of adversarial competition and adopt a resource-sustainable approach to counter violent extremist organizations. Additionally, we will seek to improve our understanding of the multi-domain environment, and foster unified action with interagency partners as well as our network of allies and partners.

## Institutionalizing Irregular Warfare

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We will incorporate IW into our Department's policies, strategies, plans, and institutional processes to break the reactive cycle of investment in IW capabilities. We will train, educate, and develop our people to ensure sufficient expertise in IW as part of our operational culture. Our personnel will learn to embrace the mindset necessary to succeed in irregular warfare missions and compete more effectively against all adversaries. We will also retain and improve upon our concepts, tactics, and capabilities for IW. Together, these steps will enable the Department to gain and maintain the advantage in adversarial competition and ensure readiness for ongoing and future irregular warfare.

The persistent and enduring character of IW requires the Department to institutionalize IW as an efficient and effective part of force development and design. Breaking our reactive cycle of investment in IW requires preserving a baseline of IW-focused and IW-capable expertise and tools sufficient to allow Combatant Commanders to perform IW tasks necessary to achieve their campaign objectives.

We will prioritize investments in human capital as the primary competitive advantage in IW over our adversaries. Military officers, enlisted personnel, and civilians must receive continuous access to IW-related training, doctrine, and education in order to build shared understanding.

We will ensure the Department's approach to IW becomes more agile, efficient, and effective by developing resource-sustainable capabilities and harnessing commercial technological advances. Advances in artificial intelligence and quantum computing hold significant potential to transform how we process information, understand trends, and disseminate actionable intelligence to decision-makers and warfighters. We must aggressively pursue these innovations in order to defeat the multi-domain, stealthy irregular warfare campaigns conducted by our adversaries. We will also invest in and employ our capabilities in a more cost-informed and resource-sustainable manner to manage risk effectively.

## Operationalizing Irregular Warfare

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Our Department's shift towards great power competition does not signal an abandonment of the critical competencies we have developed to prosecute irregular warfare. Instead, this shift gives us a vital opportunity to update our approach to irregular warfare and meet the full range of challenges posed by our adversaries and competitors today. This vision requires rethinking how the Joint Force will operationalize forces that are currently employed in disconnected ways to achieve a concerted deterrent and shaping effect through IW.

We will seize the initiative and execute *proactive, enduring* campaigns employing IW capabilities to expand the competitive space, shape the environment, and prepare for escalation to conflict, if required. To control the tempo of adversarial competition, the Department must manage escalation dynamics and dictate the character, scope, intensity, and terms of this competition to our adversaries. We will apply IW to shape our adversaries' behavior to our advantage, increase the cost of hostile action against the United States and its allies, and pursue innovative ways to disrupt, counter, and preempt coercion and subversion.

While the Department shifts towards great power competition, violent extremist organizations still represent a persistent threat to U.S. national interests. We will adopt an efficient and effective, resource-sustainable approach to countering VEOs and consolidating gains optimized to the enduring nature of these threats. Specifically, we will degrade and, on order, defeat designated priority VEOs; build, lead, and sustain a military network to share the burden with willing and capable partners; and deny VEOs key technological and military capabilities.

We will foster and sustain unified action in IW. The Department will adapt organizational structures, authorities, and practices to collaborate with interagency partners from the outset to formulate assessments, plans, and conduct operations in an integrated manner. We will use our strengths to enable and incentivize interagency action where necessary, and proactively fill any resulting gaps with our own capabilities.

We will adopt a coordinated approach to advance our national interests by, with, and through our network of allies and partners. The Department must emphasize its natural strengths relative to the predatory behavior of our adversaries, increase the ability and willingness of our allies and partners to defend their sovereignty and contribute to multinational coalitions, and continually demonstrate that we are the preferred partner of choice. Operations conducted with our allies and partners have the added benefit of creating a strong deterrent effect. Investing in and maintaining these relationships will bolster partner countries' commitments to common security objectives and yield significant long-term benefit to the United States.

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