



STRATEGY, PLANNING, AND ASSESSMENT IN IRREGULAR WARFARE

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Every irregular warfare (IW) engagement is unique to each situation and requires a unique strategy. Each scenario requires a balance of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments to achieve national objectives. IW strategies should enhance and protect a partner nation (PN) and the US's legitimacy and influence, while eroding an adversary's legitimacy.

The conduct of IW demands a thorough understanding of the operational environment and the human terrain. It is essential to understand the geopolitical environment in the PN and region in question thoroughly. Factors range from basing locations and regional environmental concerns to the political climate of the host nation, PNs, and surrounding states. They also include the influence of the adversary among both the PN government and the local population. Planners should consider the human aspect of military operations.

One of the primary ways to influence a relevant population when supporting a PN is to identify, assess, and resolve underlying grievances. If the PN's government fails to address grievances perceived by the population in a timely manner, the population will continue to be disaffected. Alienated factions within a population erode support for a legitimate government and may become motivated to provide support to an insurgency operating among the general population. An external adversary may attempt to fill the void left by a government that does not adequately address the population's grievances.

Planners should consider the constructive effects that air and space forces enable to contain or prevent irregular challenges. Outright defeat of enemy forces is very difficult in IW. Strategists and planners should use airpower to isolate the adversary from the populace, and enhance the relationship between the friendly partner and the populace.

Finally, any strategy should account for the fact that the population may not be homogeneous in all areas of the PN. Cultural, geographical, religious, and economic differences within a state or region may motivate different parts of the population

differently. Thus, different strategies may be needed within a single operation to achieve US and joint force objectives.

OPERATIONAL DESIGN AND PLANNING

A Whole of Government Effort

IW activities are often part of the Department of Defense's (DOD) contribution to a broad whole-of-government approach in competition short of armed conflict or to assist partner nations in pursuit of the national strategy. Within the [competition continuum](#), many activities will not have the DOD as the lead agency; therefore, IW strategy and planning should complement the whole-of-government effort. Unified action that includes all relevant agencies (US Government, PN, multinational, and nongovernmental) leverages skill sets and capabilities not resident in the armed forces and is essential for successfully dealing with IW challenges. Effective working relationships between the interagency and the military have repeatedly proven key to DOD's success in IW.

Indirect IW activities may include Department of State funded activities administered by the DOD and occurs in close cooperation and coordination with other government agencies. Numerous laws and policies must be adhered to when drafting indirect IW strategy and plans to assist PNs in building capacity and capabilities. For example, many of the congressional authorities tied to relevant funding often have restrictions on both how the funding is used and for how long it can be used. In addition, there are often restrictions on what technology and capabilities can be shared with PNs. In terms of developing a planning timeframe, gaining approval can often take significant time. See JP 3-20, [Security Cooperation](#), for further information.

Long-term, Persistent Political and Military Commitment

The protracted approach that adversaries may use in IW requires a long-term strategy to achieve continuing advantage. Winning a protracted conflict requires winning the struggle of ideas, undermining the legitimacy of a competing ideology, addressing grievances perceived by the population to be valid, reducing an enemy's influence, and depriving the enemy of the support of the people. It requires a "crawl, walk, run" mentality when developing PN infrastructure and security. IW requires patience and adaptation. This has a significant impact on personnel rotations, equipment wear and tear, and the impact on training and education early in the [design](#) process.

Persistence is intrinsic to effective IW strategy, planning, and operations. The joint force should use its long-term regional engagement strategy to shape the operational environment and influence adversaries. Episodic short-duration deployments to at-risk states may be an inadequate operational approach, because the short-term results of these deployments may be overcome by adversary countermeasures and by the inertia

that is common in failed and failing states. Continuity of effort hinges upon the ability of joint force members to establish and maintain long-term interpersonal relationships with their counterparts in US missions and with foreign governments, traditional political authorities, and security forces. The effect of IW strategy and plans may not be readily apparent, requiring years and even decades before tangible results are evident and can be assessed.

Planners should be sensitive to the political, and fiscal realities on both sides that may cause engagement to be episodic. Where appropriate, Airmen should attempt to apply vision and advocacy as a counterforce. Episodic engagement often is insufficient to lead to lasting change or capability development. Individual episodes of capacity building often rapidly decay as individuals leave, focus shifts, authorities expire, or there is a lack of a supporting framework of training and evaluation. Interpersonal trust and cultural, political, and bureaucratic complexities often require significant time to understand to be effective.

IW Planning Process

IW is conducted throughout the competition continuum. This presents a challenge to the IW planner because the joint planning process has significant differences on either end of this continuum. For steady-state operations, the planning construct at the [operational level](#) includes campaign plans and subordinate posture plans, regional plans, and individual country plans. For contingency planning, the construct includes operation plans and orders, concept plans, base plans, and commander's estimates. Within the Air Force component, the IW planner should mirror the planning construct used by the respective combatant command, either steady-state or contingency. It is imperative that the IW planner is represented in the combatant command's strategy development and planning processes, ensuring Air Force capabilities are incorporated into the joint plan from the initial stages.

Air and Space Force forces should be prepared to conduct irregular and traditional warfare operations simultaneously. The nature of a single conflict can easily shift between types of warfare. Failure to understand or anticipate shifts often leads to fighting the wrong type of conflict, or focusing on the wrong effects for a given conflict. IW and traditional warfare are not mutually exclusive, and both are often present in the same conflict. Service forces designed for conventional combat have the added advantage of creating theater deterrence effects when used in IW roles. While these assets may often have capabilities in excess of the specific requirements for IW, they can limit the nature and amount of third party interference with the IW partner. Finding a critical balance in capabilities is essential to overall success in both types of conflicts.

If the combatant commander uses a campaign plan to address IW activities, the [Air Force forces \(AFFOR\) staff](#) (typically the A5) leads component planning that results in a component campaign support plan and individual country plans. The [air operations center](#) (AOC) should support the AFFOR staff in this effort. If the combatant commander uses a contingency planning construct, the AOC (typically the strategy division) normally leads component planning that results in a joint air operations plan. The AFFOR staff supports this planning effort, as only the AFFOR staff can complete the plan with respect to administrative control and Service-unique responsibilities.

Long-Term Political and Military Commitments

Long-term commitments often consist of efforts to increase partnership capacity by building or rebuilding infrastructure. Airmen can positively affect construction and reconstruction efforts, create government legitimacy, and reinforce citizenship principles by involving the local population during all aspects of the building or rebuilding process. It is important that construction efforts intended for use by the local population are planned, designed, and constructed by local nationals. Regional building standards should be accompanied by long-term maintenance plans that do not include external financial or technical aid for maintenance or operations.



- Infrastructure Training & Advisory Team, Southern Afghanistan

Command and Control (C2) Relationships

It is important for the air component commander and staff to understand some unique considerations in the conduct of IW. Application of the airpower tenet of [centralized control and decentralized execution](#) is accomplished at subordinate levels to support decentralized execution. It is vital to engage with the PN population; therefore, several small forward operating locations may be required. It is common for many of these bases to be operated by other Services with collocated Air Force elements. In such situations, the air component commander should take special care to ensure proper [administrative control](#) support for Airmen attached to, or collocated with, non-Air Force organizations.

IW Mission Analysis Considerations

Many planning considerations in IW are the same as those associated with traditional warfare. Some considerations, though not unique to IW, have a greater impact during IW activities. As operations in IW are very population-centric, planners should consider objectives through the lens of the PN and the adversary, not only that of the US. Mirror imaging, i.e., projecting one's own attitudes, beliefs, cultural mores, and ideologies on the adversary and local populace, is a common mistake in planning. Mirror-imaging and "templating" ignore the fact that actions based on Western ideologies may have dramatically different results than are intended when employed among non-Western populations. An example might also include superimposing doctrinal models while building partner military capabilities. Hierarchy and communication structures may not apply to different cultures.

Experience in one location cannot be assumed to apply to the environment of another. Over-emphasis on experience gained in a particular operation and environment can lead to inaccurate conclusions about the requirements and capabilities needed elsewhere, and could result in conceptual inflexibility in both hardware and general support.

—Air Force Manual 2-5, *Special Air Warfare*, 10 March 1967

During planning, consider that tactical actions and decisions may have strategic consequences in IW scenarios even more than in traditional war. For example, civilian casualties caused by air attack often garner more media attention than do equivalent casualties caused by ground weapons (like small arms and mortars). Since the relevant populations are normally a center of gravity in IW operations, such collateral casualties may reduce US influence and legitimacy among relevant populations, thus impeding rather than aiding achievement of desired end states. This result is contrary to most desired objectives in IW, and should be avoided if possible. Robust and integrated information operations (IO) are essential to mitigate these pitfalls. Poorly executed IO can exacerbate the situation.

Focus on Stability

A key aspect of earning legitimacy from the population is the ability of a PN to achieve and maintain stability. The legitimate local government, the US Government, and international agencies, as well as nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations cannot effectively work in an area until it is secure. If a national government is weak, corrupt, or incompetent, or if the governing authority is absent, a triggering shock can exacerbate an already difficult situation. This shock can produce widespread suffering, grow popular dissatisfaction, and result in civil unrest—all of which can be intensified by several interrelated factors. The absence of key government

functions, competing ideologies, widespread lawlessness, poor economic performance, pronounced economic disparities, and in some cases, a serious external threat, all influence the strategic context of any operation. In the specific case of unconventional warfare (UW), the external supporters of insurgent forces may create or leverage instability as a means to delegitimize and demoralize a government or occupying power with a goal of disrupting, defeating, or overthrowing it.

Unconventional Warfare

Most IW from the US perspective is conducted in support of a PN against common IW adversaries such as insurgents or terrorists operating within that nation. However, sometimes IW is conducted against or within a non-cooperative state. Traditionally, this has been accomplished with [special operations forces](#) (SOF) conducting UW to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow the non-cooperative state through or with an underground auxiliary, or a guerilla force in a denied area. While UW has been a traditional core mission of SOF, the use of conventional forces in UW is possible. This will require extensive coordination between SOF and conventional forces. In addition, UW has traditionally confined itself to operations against a single hostile state or occupying power. Many of the activities take place either within the hostile or occupied state or in neighboring countries that either directly or tacitly supported efforts against the hostile state. This construct is changing as non-cooperative states have increasing global connections and interests. The increasingly trans-regional nature of IW may require joint forces to act against an adversary's vital interests that may reside outside traditional borders.

Failed or Under-Governed States

Conducting IW against non-state adversaries operating within failed states poses several unique challenges. Denied or non-governed areas may provide potential sanctuary for transnational terrorist networks and other non-state adversaries. These areas may be under the direct control of insurgents. If the failed state has a nuclear weapon or other [chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear](#) program, Air and Space Force capabilities may be critical to support US efforts to control, defeat, disable, or dispose of the program. In some cases, US personnel may find themselves in austere locations in underdeveloped countries. Furthermore, the locations from which they will work and live may not provide adequate security, health standards, and communication infrastructure. There may be a degree of lawlessness and disorder.

Partner Nation Fragmentation

Nations susceptible to [subversion](#), lawlessness, [insurgency](#), [terrorism](#),⁷ and other threats to their security may be characterized by various forms of social, economic, and political fragmentation and by a lack of a unifying national identity within population

⁷ Common access card required.

groups who resist or are denied integration into the national community. Some factors which contribute to this fragmentation include religion, political and ethnic alienation, separatism, lack of accessibility to government resources by certain groups, poor income distribution among social classes, poor economic opportunities, and disenfranchisement or lack of other political rights. Situations most likely to involve Air Force IW activities are prevalent in developing nations where public services, industrial infrastructures, and aviation infrastructure are relatively undeveloped by Western standards. For additional information, see AFDP 3-22, [Foreign Internal Defense](#).

Operational Capabilities

Operating From Remote Locations

Airpower's speed and flexibility allow US forces to surmount many geographic hurdles. However, in IW, proper operating locations are paramount to enable the reach and capacity in order to achieve the objectives and present the air component commander with the best access and engagement opportunities. The decentralized nature of operations is particularly challenging as the air component commander provides critical support to both air and surface forces throughout the theater. For example, air mobility and combat support may enable the joint force to maintain and sustain their forward operating sites when overland resupply is not practical due to geographic constraints or enemy surface threats.

In IW, employment of small units from remote locations may become more prevalent. This is especially true when conducting early shaping and deterring operations. Operating in remote areas has numerous implications. It may increase requirements to live off the local economy or incur greater reliance on satellite communications due to lack of secure landlines.

Major environmental factors affecting planning and execution include physical and psychological pressures from hostile elements, exposure to extensive human suffering, social fragmentation, political instability, and economic impoverishment. Difficult terrain, physical isolation of population groups, and poorly developed infrastructures often impede counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations.

Given such environmental features as poor infrastructure, limited reachback, and increased risk, it is essential that personnel operating from forward locations, such as combat aviation advisors, embedded trainers, and advisors for either UW or [foreign internal defense](#), are organized, trained, and equipped to operate for extended periods of time independent of traditional support structures. Experience indicates that personal safety and performance are maximized when personnel are organized into teams with mutually supporting, interdependent skill sets. These teams should be capable of operating autonomously with maximum self-sufficiency, which in turn supports reduced presence and logistics signature while deployed. However, the potential for larger scale

operations in IW may arise. Commanders may still need to support and provide for forces operating from multiple areas. The requirements for support may be drastically different for each operational area. This may create increased demand for [airlift](#) throughout the theater. Austere operations require clearly stated command relationships and chains of command.

IW Airpower Operations across the Competition Continuum

Airpower in IW can leverage effects outside of combat operations. Effects of airpower can include infrastructure construction that enable essential services and corresponding jobs for a population. Food, water, shelter, medical, justice, and policing capabilities enhance legitimacy. Personnel should proactively advocate and highlight airpower's contribution to these goals early in operational design and joint planning. Humanitarian aspects of military operations can also be important in any operation; they form an essential and sometimes primary arsenal of airpower effects in IW. For example, medical engagements may enhance access and expand the PN government's sphere of influence within its borders. Addressing a PN's medical capacity and capability to respond and take care of its citizen builds the government's and institution's legitimacy.

Adversaries conducting IW may realize they cannot achieve their desired ideological or political objectives through conventional force and seek to achieve public support for their cause (or at minimum acquiescence to their presence) by creating instability that can be blamed on the government. [Disinformation and propaganda](#) campaigns targeting the populace are very effective means of achieving these goals, especially when tribal, ethnic, and religious differences can be leveraged or played against each other.

All operations should be integrated to promote governmental legitimacy. Most actions regardless of the actor have an impact on the information environment, therefore a whole-of-government approach is essential. This ensures that the cumulative psychological effect of operations works towards defeating the ideologies of a government's opponents and does not send conflicting messages to the populace or fuel the adversary's disinformation and propaganda operations.

Aviation Enterprise Development

Assisting partner nations in building capability and capacity can achieve operational and tactical success. However, developing the aviation enterprise of partner nations can be significant from a strategic perspective.

While the Services do not lead US Government efforts and decisions concerning global aviation enterprise development, they do have a stake in them. The Services help enable PNs to effectively address mutual national interests as well as gain access to capabilities needed to conduct operations in support of US national interests. Service aid also helps shape the global environment into the future. Therefore, when personnel

plan and execute strategy and operations related to IW, they should keep these strategic viewpoints in mind and advocate this perspective to ensure:

- ✦ PNs have the aviation resources to achieve internal security and to contribute to regional stability.
- ✦ The international community can effectively respond to crises anywhere in the world.
- ✦ The global aviation enterprise is safely operated, secure, and well-supported.
- ✦ The US becomes the aviation security partner of choice to nations with emerging aviation enterprises whose stability against irregular threats supports US national security interests.

IW Assessment

Assessment involves evaluating the integrated effects of the IW operation, the impact on various adversaries, the requirements for subsequent operations, and the influence IW activities are having on relevant populations. These tasks include collecting information and conducting assessment of operational effectiveness to update situational understanding and adjust future planning activities. The desired objective is to be able to measure progress toward mission accomplishment and use the results to adjust actions accordingly.

Local commanders within the operational area should continually assess employment and support activities to determine the effects and implications of their actions while nesting within the JFC's overall intent. The ambiguities resident within IW require frequent adjustment of operational plans to ensure desired effects are achieved while avoiding specifically designated or unintended negative consequences.

Continuous operational assessment and adjustment are best achieved at the lowest appropriate operational level. Operations should be flexible and integrate both civil and military activities, to include the supported government and coalition partners. Significant C2 interoperability challenges in joint, interagency, and multinational operations typically involve incompatible equipment and standards, language barriers, differing C2 procedures, lack of PN experience, and inadequate PN logistics infrastructures to maintain modern communications equipment. Commanders consider these limitations and structure processes for transmitting information and orders appropriately.

In most forms of IW, operational assessment will be more subjective than in traditional warfare. When there is not a large enemy fielded force and clear supporting infrastructure, there may be far fewer metrics available that can be easily quantified. Since a large part of the desired effects deal with feelings and perceptions among the local civilian populace, rather than with more conventional measures such as percentage reduction in combat power, operational assessment personnel should train

to deal with less tangible metrics. Likewise, commanders should be ready to make decisions based on inputs from their assessment teams that may be subjective and incomplete. The US should not impose its own views on the PN population. Rather, it should take PN perspectives into account and emphasize the importance of the PN taking the lead.

Lessons learned have proven operational effectiveness can be very difficult to measure; thus, feedback through a strong operations assessment and [lessons learned](#)⁸ process is essential to strategic success. Complex localized conditions and issues require an adaptive strategy and assessment process. Measuring lethal and non-lethal effects in an operation is challenging. Determining which operations are effective and modifying those that are not is critical to adjusting strategy. As part of the assessment process, Airmen and other US military members should bear in mind the long-term implications of their experiences. They should document and share significant lessons and best practices that could be useful to future planners, operators, and decision makers (for example, using tools such as the Global Theater Security Cooperation Management System and [Joint Lessons Learned Information System](#)⁹).

^{8,9} Common access card required.