



CURTIS E. LEMAY CENTER FOR DOCTRINE DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION



ANNEX 3-2 IRREGULAR WARFARE

STRATEGY, PLANNING, AND ASSESSMENT IN IRREGULAR WARFARE

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It is important to emphasize that while irregular warfare (IW) engagements tend to have similar characteristics, each IW engagement is unique and each situation should be analyzed independently before developing a strategy. Each situation will have a different balance of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments that might be used to promote a nation's interest or secure a state from IW adversaries.

The center of gravity (COG) in IW is the partner nation's (PN's) population as opposed to fielded forces and command and control (C2), as in most traditional conflicts. To exploit a COG in IW, strategies should be developed with the goal of enhancing PN or IW partner legitimacy and influence, while eroding an adversary's power, influence, and will, and protecting one's own COG.

One of the primary ways to influence this COG is to identify, assess, and resolve underlying grievances within the population. If the PN's government fails to address grievances perceived by the population to be valid in a timely manner, the population will continue to be disaffected. Such a disaffected population could stop supporting the legitimate government or be motivated to provide direct or indirect support to an insurgency operating among the general population. An adversary may attempt to fill the void left by a government that does not adequately address these grievances.

Identifying, finding, and separating individual adversaries and networks from the general population are difficult. In addition, depending on the location of the target, the effects desired are often "soft" and may require nonkinetic means. Targeting opportunities, when they emerge, may be time sensitive, and collateral damage restrictions can be challenging. As a result, it is essential to thoroughly understand the geopolitical environment in the PN and region in question. These factors range from basing locations and the 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.

When planning IW operations, planners should consider the human aspects of military operations. To be successful, Airmen should be trained on the necessary approaches and capabilities to understand, anticipate, and influence the decisions and associated

behavior of relevant groups, individuals and populations. The goal is to ensure stability, prevent and mitigate conflict, and when necessary fight and defeat adversaries. An example includes medical engagements that enhance access and expand the PN's sphere of influence within its borders. Addressing a PN's medical capacity and capability to respond and take care of its citizens builds the government's and institution's legitimacy. Foremost in the mind of a planner should be the application of the constructive effects of airpower to contain or prevent irregular challenges, and constant attention not to be lured into seeing the conflict as programming fires. Outright defeat of enemy forces is very difficult in IW. The strategists and campaign designers employing airpower should seek to use airpower to isolate the adversary from the populace, and enhance the relationship between the friendly partner and the populace. Constructive effects of airpower can also include infrastructure construction by Air Force civil engineer teams that enable essential services and corresponding jobs for a population. Food, water, shelter, medical, justice, and policing capabilities enhance legitimacy. Airmen 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.

Finally, strategy should account for the fact that the population may not be homogenous 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 need to be employed within one engagement to achieve desired effects.

Focus on Stability

Where traditional warfare focuses more on conducting combat operations against adversary forces, IW focuses largely on achieving and maintaining 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.

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 [operational 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.



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 the local population use 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

A Whole of Government Effort

The military is only a part of IW strategy and planning, and should not be a sole course of action in itself, but rather should seek to establish favorable conditions for the other instruments of national power to operate within. In the context of IW, many campaigns and operations may not be led by the military. Unified action that includes all relevant agencies (US government, PN, multinational, and nongovernmental) is essential for successfully dealing with IW challenges. A US whole-of-government approach leverages skill sets and capabilities that do not traditionally reside within the armed forces, but have direct application to IW. Effective working relationships between people and organizations have repeatedly proven key to success in IW.

The IW Plan

IW falls near the middle of the range of military operations, with peacetime and steady-state on one end and traditional warfare on the other. This presents a challenge to the IW planner because the current DOD operations planning construct has significant differences on either end of this spectrum. For steady-state operations, the planning construct at the operational level of war includes campaign plans and subordinate posture plans, regional plans, and individual country plans. For contingency planning, the construct includes operation orders, operation plans, 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. In addition, 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.

If the combatant commander uses a campaign plan to address IW activities, the Air Force forces (AFFOR) staff (typically the A5) leads component planning in the form of a commander, Air Force forces' (COMAFFOR's) 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 in the form of an 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.

Congressional and Office of the Secretary of Defense Considerations

There are numerous laws and policies that must be adhered to when drafting IW strategy and plans to assist PNs build 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 they 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 time and must be taken into consideration.

Strike Planning

Strike planning includes the full spectrum of capabilities that can be brought to bear to precisely achieve effects in support of the desired end state. Since IW is a struggle for the population's allegiance, the effect of any engagement operation on the population should be carefully considered. In determining the appropriate capability to achieve the desired effect, planners should look at effect, duration, and consequences to ensure direct and longer term indirect effects are anticipated.

Strike planning has unique considerations in IW scenarios. A primary objective for the US and PN during counterinsurgency (COIN), for example, is to restore the rule of law. A second-order effect of executing strike operations is that they remind the population that this objective has not been achieved. There is potential for collateral damage from any weapon. If US forces conduct the strike, there may be the perception that the PN government is dependent for its survival on foreign forces. Combined, these may have the indirect effect of delegitimizing the PN government in the public's perception. Nevertheless, strike operations have a place in COIN, since the ability to hold targets at risk throughout the operational area helps the US and PN set the tempo of operations and seize the initiative from insurgent forces. The precision and lethality of airpower often provide the most discriminating application of firepower to COIN forces.

Strike planning should be designed to employ PN airpower resources to the greatest extent possible. Properly trained and structured teams of Air Force experts, ranging from planning liaison to tactical operations personnel, offer potential for PN unilateral and US/PN combined actions against high-value targets. Use of these options serves to enhance the legitimacy of the PN government while achieving important US security objectives. Just as in traditional warfare, attacks on key nodes usually reap greater benefits than attacks on dispersed individual targets. For this reason, effective strike operations are inextricably tied to the availability of persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), and are the result of detailed target systems analysis that identifies and fully characterizes the targets of interest (networks, people, objects, and entities). Persistence in IW is critical since there is little to no notice for target opportunities. IW planners may want to consider more use of airborne alert than they would during traditional operations.

Non-Cooperative Governments

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 may be more common in the future. 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 ever-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 Undergoverned 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 Force capabilities may be critical to support US efforts to secure or eliminate 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. Given these issues, US personnel may be responsible for their own security, communications, and well-being. In such scenarios, the US may be the primary actor and be responsible for both military and political actions. Thus, a large force may be necessary to bring security to such regions.

Pitfalls Within IW

Many pitfalls in IW are the same as those associated with traditional warfare—overreach, poor planning, inadequate strategy, improper resource allocation, etc. Some pitfalls, though not unique to IW, have a greater impact during IW activities. As operations in IW are very population-centric, planners should remember to look at objectives through the lens of the PN and the adversary, not only that of the United States. This pitfall is called mirror imaging, i.e., projecting one's own attitudes, beliefs, cultural mores, and ideologies on the adversary and local populace. For example, actions based on Western ideologies may have dramatically different results than were intended when they are executed among non-Western populations. Also, it is important for planners to avoid “templating”—assuming experiences and lessons learned in one location will automatically apply to another location. An

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**

example would also include superimposing doctrinal models while building IW partner military capabilities. Hierarchy and communication structures may not apply to different cultures.

Another significant pitfall occurs because seemingly tactical actions and decisions may have strategic consequences in IW scenarios even more than in traditional war. For example, indigenous 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 indigenous populations are normally a center of gravity in IW operations, such collateral damage 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 at all possible. Robust and integrated information operations (IO) are essential to mitigate these pitfalls. A poorly executed IO campaign can exacerbate the situation.

Airpower's Ability to Overcome Physical Considerations

Airpower's speed and flexibility allow US forces to surmount geographic hurdles more rapidly than ground forces. However, in IW, proper operating locations are paramount to enable the reach and capacity in order to achieve the objectives and present the COMAFFOR with the best access and engagement opportunities. The decentralized nature of ongoing operations is particularly challenging as the COMAFFOR provides critical support to both air and surface forces throughout the theater. For example, air mobility and combat support may enable sister components to maintain and sustain their [forward operating bases](#) when overland resupply is not practical due to geographic constraints or enemy surface threats.

IW-Unique Planning Considerations

When conducting IW activities, it is important for the COMAFFOR and staff to understand some IW-unique considerations. Application of the airpower tenet of [centralized control and decentralized execution](#) is accomplished at subordinate levels to support decentralized execution. ISR operations in IW may differ from those in traditional warfare. In IW, ISR often seeks small, dispersed, concealed targets versus large targets in the open. Successful prosecution of such targets, as well as self-defense and force protection, is significantly improved through the application of advanced ISR technologies. ISR also relies heavily on human intelligence (HUMINT) as PN personnel can more readily engage the population, survey and help to shape the human terrain, and collect information about the adversary. Air Force HUMINT personnel or linguists with the appropriate language abilities may be available for use, however, the COMAFFOR should employ PN assets first. Other Service/agencies may have available HUMINT elements as well. Because it is vital to engage with the PN population, several small forward operating locations may be required. It is not uncommon for many of these bases to be operated by other Services with small, collocated Air Force elements. In such situations, the COMAFFOR should take special

care to ensure proper [administrative control](#) support for Airmen attached to, or collocated with, non-Air Force organizations.

Operating From Remote Locations

In IW, small unit employment of forces 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 land lines.

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 Air Force personnel operating from forward locations 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 Air Force 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. All of these factors emphasize the importance of clearly stated command relationships and chain of command.

Strategic Communications and Information Operations

Adversaries employing IW 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 problems and 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. As no single component has a monopoly on the information environment, a joint approach integrated with governmental and civilian efforts 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 insurgents' disinformation and propaganda campaigns.

Partner Nation Fragmentation

Nations susceptible to [subversion](#), lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, 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 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 primitive by Western standards. For additional information, see Annex 3-22, [Foreign Internal Defense](#).

IW Technology and Capabilities

IW is about "right-tech," not about high or low-tech. Both high and low technology assets have applicability in IW. Commanders should understand the appropriate technology to apply to the specific operational or tactical problem. Designers of IW operations should carefully examine the attributes that best match challenges and seek appropriate airpower tools. Airpower tools adapted to work in austere environments with minimal logistical support to be operated by, with, and through PNs, and require significant persistence with very low operating costs may suggest a custom force structure. Planners should balance the utility of custom force structure adapted to IW with force structure designed for and survivable in traditional conflict, but be able to operate in an IW conflict. A key consideration in this balance is cost of operations over the significant time periods typical of IW.

Mixing Hybrid and IW

The Air Force should be prepared to simultaneously conduct irregular and traditional warfare operations. 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. Air 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.

Persistent Versus Episodic Engagement in IW

Planners should be sensitive to the political, bureaucratic, 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 Assessment

[Assessment](#) involves evaluating the integrated effects of the IW operation, the impact on various adversaries, the requirements for subsequent operations, and the influence of IW activities. These tasks include collecting information and conducting an assessment of operational effectiveness to update situational understanding and adjust future planning activities. The desired objective is the ability to measure progress toward mission accomplishment and use the results to adjust actions accordingly.

During IW operations Airmen should outthink, outperform, and adapt faster than the adversary locally, regionally, and globally in order to deny them the ability to set conditions favorable to their goals. Local commanders within the operational area should continually assess employment and support activities to determine the effects and implications of their actions while following 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 should be fully cognizant of 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 more intangible 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.

In recent years, established best practices and lessons learned have proven operational effectiveness can be very difficult to measure; thus, feedback through a strong operations assessment and [lessons learned](#) 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 are 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 and document/share those significant lessons learned and best practices which could be useful to future planners, operators, and decision makers (e.g., using tools such as the Global Theater Security Cooperation Management System and [Joint Lessons Learned Information System](#)).

Aviation Enterprise Development

While assisting partner nations build the capability and capacity to address shared IW challenges can achieve operational and tactical success, it is also important to emphasize how important developing the aviation enterprise of partner nations is from a strategic perspective.

While the US Air Force does not lead US Government efforts and decisions concerning global aviation enterprise development, it has a huge stake in those decisions, especially in terms of both enabling PNs to effectively address mutual national interests, but also in gaining access vital to conduct operations in support of US national interests, and help continue to shape the the global air domain in the future. Therefore, when Airmen 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 United States becomes the aviation security partner of choice to nations with emerging aviation enterprises whose stability against irregular threats supports US national security interests.
-