

IRREGULAR COMPETITION:  
CONTEMPORARY LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

Irregular Competition is defined in this study as “State and non-state actors proactively engaging in activities to influence populations and affect legitimacy during times of peace, competition, and conflict.” The research question asked by this study is “Derived from contemporary case study lessons learned, what are the implications for the future of Irregular Competition in support of greater US national security objectives?” In answering the research question, Hans Morgenthau’s Realist Theory of International Politics was applied, although other aspects of realism and theories of international relations theory were considered. The rationale for this study is that despite a general reprioritization toward conventional concerns espoused in current US national security strategy documents, America’s state and non-state adversaries continue to operate globally with malign intent through unconventional methods. This qualitative, inductive, grounded-theory research centers on the linear-analysis of three cases: US Irregular Competition activities to undermine the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, 1979-1989; US Irregular Competition activities directed toward Iran, 2001-2021; Chinese Irregular Competition against the Philippines, 2012-2021. A summary of case study lessons learned as well as theoretical, practical, and empirical implications for the future are presented. The three primary academic contributions of this research to the body of knowledge on this subject are: (1) A new definition of Irregular Competition is provided along with an explanation for its need (2) Analysis of whether a distinct, Chinese, International Relations (IR) theory exists in the specific context of Irregular Competition (3) A unique theoretical model for conceptualizing whole-of-government Irregular Competition is constructed.

*Keywords:* Irregular Warfare, Gray Zone, Hybrid, Asymmetric, Conflict, Competition

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to the four people who have been most influential in my life. First and foremost, my parents Barbara and Carl. They sacrificed all that they had for me and have been in my corner through every single up and down in life. There is not enough of love or thanks that I can give them in return. Next, my Godfather, Shandaken Chief of Police W. James McGrath. Jimmy is larger than life and has always been there to teach me things, make everyone laugh, and help whenever needed. Finally, Justice Thomas. W. Crucet, US Army Special Forces (Retired). Tom is a genuine family friend and the inspiration for me to become an Eagle Scout and don the Green Beret.

I've never been able to go home and spend as enough time with these four amazing people. I miss their physical presence in my life daily, more than anyone knows.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Al-Qaeda (AQ)

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

Civil-Military Operations (CMO)

Counter-Insurgency (COIN)

Counter-Terrorism (CT)

CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union)

Department of Defense (DOD)

Department of State (DOS)

Diplomatic, Informational, Military, Economic (DIME)

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

Foreign Internal Defense (FID)

Fourth-Generation Warfare (4GW)

Gray Zone (GZ)

Government Accounting Office (GAO)

Great Power Competition (GPC)

Intelligence Community (IC)

Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR)

Inter-agency (IA)

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)

International Relations (IR)

Irregular Warfare (IW)

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

Islamic State (IS)

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

Military Information Support Operations (MISO)

National Defense Strategy (NDS)

National Military Strategy (NMS)

National Security Agency (NSA)

National Security Council (NSC)

National Security Strategy (NSS)

Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD)

People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)

People's Liberation Army (PLA)

People's Republic of China (PRC)

Psychological Operations (PSYOP)

Special Forces (SF)

Special Operations Forces (SOF)

Unconventional Warfare (UW)

United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC)

United States Government (USG)

United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)

Whole-of-Government (WOG)

Whole-of-Society (WOS)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Regardless of whether a war took place twenty-five-hundred years ago or last year, our data indicate that all victories or failures display one common denominator – the winner is the national power, international power bloc, or nonstate political actor that best organized and implemented a combination of multidimensional efforts (Manwaring 2010, 156).

### Overview

Ambiguous conflict often described as *irregular*, *hybrid*, or *gray zone* is referred to in this study as Irregular Competition. It is defined as “State and non-state actors proactively engaging in activities to influence populations and affect legitimacy during times of peace, competition, and conflict.” The research question asked by this study is “Derived from contemporary case study lessons learned, what are the implications for the future of Irregular Competition in support of greater US national security objectives?” The rationale for this study is that despite a general reprioritization toward conventional concerns espoused in current US national security strategy documents, America’s state and non-state adversaries continue to operate globally with malign intent through unconventional methods. While Irregular Competition is admittedly not the top priority for America’s security enterprise today, the limited resources that are directed toward this matter may be better focused and effectively executed by considering the results of this study. Consequently, this study suggests that there is space for the US to more effectively and efficiently implement Irregular Competition strategy informed by lessons learned from contemporary history. Since 1945, the United States has attempted to solidify its global interests by “creating and maintaining international economic institutions,

bilateral and regional security organizations, and liberal political norms; these ordering mechanisms are often collectively referred to as the international order. In recent years, rising powers have begun to challenge aspects of this order” (Mazarr, Priebe, Radin, and Cevallos 2016, iii). As Donald Jensen and Peter Doran wrote in a report produced for the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), “...we in the West—particularly in the United States—have been too predictable, too linear. We would do well to consider ourselves the underdog in this contest and push back in nonlinear ways” (237).

Literature on this subject rests mostly in writing from academia, think-tanks, the military, or elsewhere, but not from the US Government as a whole. Congressional testimony on Irregular Competition activity is abundant as demonstrated in this study’s literature review, but it is mostly exploratory of the threats rather than prescriptive of solutions.

### **Background**

After ten years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, President Barrack Obama’s first *National Security Strategy* was released in 2010. Understandably, it focused predominantly on threats from violent extremist organizations like Al Qaeda, and state sponsors of terrorism like Iran (White House 2010), among other concerns. The 2015 US *National Security Strategy* listed top national security priorities as “Catastrophic attack on the U.S. homeland or critical infrastructure” and “Threats or attacks against U.S. citizens abroad and our allies” (White House 2015, 2). The 2017 National Security Strategy acknowledged that since the 1990s, “the United States displayed a great degree of strategic complacency,” and that after being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, strategic competition returned (ibid.). The 2017 strategy noted that competitor nations were “contesting our geopolitical advantages and trying to change



the international order in their favor” (ibid.). The 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (White House 2021) released by the Biden administration continued and reinforced the Strategic Competition focus found in the 2017 NSS. Most recently, the 2022 *National Security Strategy* stated that “We are now in the early years of a decisive decade for America and the world. The terms of geopolitical competition between the major powers will be set” (White House 2022b).

The primary national security concern in Strategic Competition today is the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but other *revisionist* states like Russia, and *rogue* states like North Korea and Iran, are named as threats to the rules-based order (White House 2021, 7-8, White House 2022b). Current national security documents, such as the 2022 *National Security Strategy*, however, continue to acknowledge non-traditional threats. It refers to issues such as terrorism (White House 2022b, 22-25), weakening and destabilizing sovereign nations and undermining multilateral institutions (26), subverting the global order by weaponizing information to undermine democracies and polarize societies (17), leveraging technology and supply chains for coercion and repression (8), and weaponizing energy for coercion (9). With this evolving global security landscape, the White House declared that “We cannot pretend the world can simply be restored to the way it was 75, 30, or even four years ago. We cannot just return to the way things were before. In foreign policy and national security, just as in domestic policy, we have to chart a new course” (White House 2021, 7).

### **Situation to Self**

The author of this research is a retired US Army Officer currently serving as a Department of Defense civilian Professor of strategic Counterterrorism, Irregular Warfare, and

Special Operations at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS) in Honolulu, Hawaii. With his previous military experience and current academic focus, the subject of Irregular Competition is of great interest and one that he continues to study.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem observed is that the US lacks a foundation of comprehensive, proactive, strategic action involving Irregular Competition in support of greater national security objectives. There are plenty of people and organizations thinking about it, but few taking action. This gap applies specifically to instances where American government initiatives have the potential to influence populations and affect legitimacy with the goal of indirectly confronting and deterring state and non-state adversaries (Troeder 2019, vii).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative, inductive, grounded theory research based on linear analysis of three case studies is to identify lessons learned and - with that information - derive implications for future thinking and application of Irregular Competition.

It must be acknowledged that the effectiveness of employing the recommendations found at the conclusion of this study – which are derived from inductive reasoning - is still only *probable* rather than *certain*, which would be the case in a deductive argument (Martin 1994, 63; Fohr 1979, 5). That said, while effective collaboration in Irregular Competition may not guarantee success in achieving greater national security objectives, as is the case with most anything, “insufficient collaboration can ensure failure” (Doyle 2019, 105).

### **Significance of the Study**

The practical significance of the study is that it provides recommendations for future thinking and policymaking on Irregular Competition. The theoretical significance is the primary academic contribution to the body of knowledge on this subject. This contribution is presented in Chapter 5 in the form of (1) A new definition of Irregular Competition is provided along with an explanation for its need (2) Analysis of whether a distinct, Chinese, International Relations (IR) theory exists in the specific context of Irregular Competition (3) A unique theoretical model for conceptualizing whole-of-government Irregular Competition is constructed.

The primary audiences that will find this study helpful are American NSC-level representatives concerned with indirect state and sub-state competition below the threshold of conventional conflict. In addition, foreign partners and allies - particularly those subjected to Irregular Competition offensives launched by state and non-state actors - will have an interest in this study to inform their own thinking, planning, and policymaking on the subject.

### **Research Question**

The research question is “Derived from contemporary case study lessons learned, what are the implications for the future of Irregular Competition in support of greater US national security objectives?”

### **Definitions**

Irregular, hybrid, gray zone, fourth generation, new generation, asymmetric, compound, political, and unrestricted “warfare” or “conflict” are often used interchangeably. These terms and others have made their way into contemporary security lexicon. Defining the specific *thing*

that this research is about is problematic. Ask anyone in the US national security enterprise if American should have some type of irregular or hybrid warfare capability and the answer will likely be “yes.” Ask someone to define exactly what that means, however, and the answers will be inconsistent. Definitions are important and necessary, but over-analyzing them may be an inhibitor to moving the discussion forward. Debate about which definitions are most accurate is not an objective of this study. This is one reason why a relatively unfamiliar term – *Irregular Competition* – is used to avoid preconceived notions about definitions associated with more commonly used terms.

Irregular Competition is defined in this research as “State and non-state actors proactively engaging in programs to influence populations and affect legitimacy during times of peace, competition, and conflict.” This is the researcher’s definition. Irregular Competition employs diplomatic, informational, military, and economic initiatives by way of indirect approaches. Political, cultural, religious, legal, psychological, historical, and other factors among diverse populations must be considered in this ambiguous environment where cognitive awareness is often more important than military power (Maxwell 2020b; Shinji, Masaaki & Rira 2022, 37-45).

It is likely that some portion of readers will disagree with the terms and definitions used in this study (Starling, Iyer, and Giesler 2022). Additional terms such as political warfare, hybrid warfare, irregular warfare, gray zone, and others, are defined in detail in Chapter 2’s literature review, along with a snapshot of how America’s adversaries define these activities as well. In order to move on to the matter of *researching* “it” rather than *defining* “it,” however, this paper focuses on the overarching *idea* of Irregular Competition rather than concern for any specific doctrine, dogma, definition, or preferred terminology. As Karl von Clausewitz said,

“Again, unfortunately, we are dealing with jargon, which, as usual, bears only a faint resemblance to well defined, specific concepts” (1827, 37).

The terms “friendly and “adversarial” Irregular Competition are used throughout this study. Friendly should be understood to characterize activities undertaken by the United States along with its friends, partners, and allies. Allies are those who the US has formal agreements with. Partnerships are less formal than alliances and help build relationships between nations or organizations, including militaries. Like alliances, partnerships benefit the members but they may be short-term and don't involve a treaty. Adversaries in this research are generally regarded as the “four-plus-one.” Then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2016, Marine Corps Gen. Joseph Dunford, listed the “four” as Russia, China, North Korea and Iran. The “one” is comprised of violent extremist organizations (Dunford 2016). This “four-plus-one” framework is still commonly used and appropriate today.

### **Summary**

Much of what has been discussed to this point is said from the perspective of the United States. The reader should note that the Literature Review found in Chapter 2 highlights Irregular Competition and related topics from the perspective of America’s state and non-state adversaries as well. Chapter 3 focuses on case study selection, procedures, data collection, data interpretation, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents the three case study research results broken down into geopolitical situation, Irregular Competition demonstrated, and case study takeaways. Chapter 5 uses the overarching lessons learned in order to devise theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. Also included in Chapter 5 are delimitations and limitations of the research as well as recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

This chapter first outlines the theoretical framework used for the study followed by a lengthy critique of published literature including studies, books, doctrine, strategy papers, and official documents that touch upon the topic of Irregular Competition. The purpose of the literature review is to provide context for strategic thinking on Irregular Competition, and to demonstrate its importance based on the problem statement described in Chapter 1.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In qualitative methodological terms of approaching the research question, Hans Morgenthau's Realist Theory of International Politics was the lens through which cases were analyzed (Morgenthau, Thompson & Clinton 2006, 3). Considered one of the most influential classical, political (as opposed to theoretical) realists of the post-World War II period, Morgenthau argued against an overreliance on science and technology as the answer to political and social problems. Instead, his theory posits that pure selfishness and power drive political realities and should thus be the focus areas upon which solutions are identified and founded. Morgenthau's theory is captured most succinctly in his "Six Principles of Political Realism" (4). These principles are outlined below with correlation to the concept of Irregular Competition.

Morgenthau's first principle states that politics are governed by objective laws with roots in human nature which are unchanging. Because of this lack of change, it is possible to develop a rational theory that is generalized and reflects objective laws. According to Morgenthau's theory, therefore, any understanding of politics – to include the application of Irregular Competition - should be empirically and logically consistent with the unchanging nature of man.

For this research, human nature as it is understood by Morgenthau means man is driven by selfishness and power. This is evident in the behavior of both friendly and adversarial actors in Irregular Competition. Proof of selfishness and the seeking of power as driving forces can be easily observed around the world, not only in the three case studies observed in this paper but in other state and non-state actor Irregular Competition activities mentioned throughout this study.

The second principle of Morgenthau's theory holds that nations always act to secure their national interest, and that interest is always the pursuit of power: gaining power, wielding power, and doing what is necessary to not lose power (5). This principle is objective and unemotional. It injects rational order into international relations and therefore makes a theoretical understanding of politics possible. Simply put, power is more important than motivation originating from other things like religion, economics, idealism, etc. Applied to this research, this second principle suggests that any strategic thinking on Irregular Competition should be focused on the national interest of pursuing power which is necessary for ensuring the security and survival of the nation.

The third principle (10) states that power is a universally valid concept but is neither permanent nor fixed once and for all. Any action taken by a state, for example, depends on the political and cultural context of today. The current environment that drives political action, for example, may be understood as one focused on strategic competition. According to Morgenthau, power is defined here as the control of man over man, not man over government. This principle applies well to Irregular Competition which is defined herein as activity to influence populations and affect legitimacy. Irregular Competition is a people-centric endeavor, aimed at the control of man over man. While America does not intend to literally control every man that exists within an adversarial organization or state, or every man that lives in a friendly nation state, Irregular

Competition seeks to influence the behavior of men in a way that promotes American power and diminishes adversarial power, according to Morgenthau's realist theory.

The fourth principle (12) of Morgenthau's classical political realism is awareness of the moral significance of political action. In emphasizing objectivity and rationalism, Morgenthau does not pretend to ignore the existence of moral principles. The theory understands that moral friction is present but posits that it is the survival and power of the state – not moral authority – that ultimately drives political action. For this research, the application of the fourth principle means that Irregular Competition may be judged as success or failure by the political consequences resulting from its implementation, rather than conformity to moral principles.

The fifth principle (ibid.) of classical political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral principles that govern the universe. In this case, no ideology drives the political action of a nation because doing so would ultimately threaten the security of the state. Instead, justice is served if political action is determined in terms of power. The heart of this principle lies in the idea that a particular ideology cannot be universally applied to the recipient of a state's political action because of the moral excess and political folly that politicians, legislators, leaders, and mankind in general are prone to. In Irregular Competition, this translates into the idea that America must act - and understand the actions of others – based on power rather than any nation's ideological principles. This will ensure US survival and political success.

The sixth and final principle (13) is to maintain the political autonomy of the political sphere. In developing comprehensive, strategic thinking on the subject of Irregular Competition, the architects must ask "How does Irregular Competition affect the power and interests of the nation?" Morgenthau cautions the realist that to be guided by legal or moral convictions, rather



than strictly political considerations, will endanger the nation and its people. Strategic thinking about Irregular Competition must therefore be guided by political analysis, which means an analysis of power. Of course, the “spheres” of economics, and law, and morals, and others exist and cannot be ignored, but the ultimate driver of any Irregular Competition strategy must be American power on the world stage.

**Table 1. Morgenthau’s Six Principles of Classical Political Realism (Morgenthau, Thompson & Clinton 2006)**

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Politics is Governed by Objective Laws</li> <li>2. National Interest Defined in Terms of Power</li> <li>3. Interest Cannot be Fixed for all Times</li> <li>4. Moral Principles cannot be applied to State’s Action</li> <li>5. No Identification between Moral Aspirations of a Nation and Universal Moral Laws</li> <li>6. Political Sphere is Autonomous</li> </ol> |
|---|

While Morgenthau’s theory is the foundation on which this research was conducted, it is helpful to examine related influences from both before and after his theory was developed in order to better understand Morgenthau’s work. Morgenthau was himself influenced by the work of Karl von Clausewitz, who was no doubt influenced by Thucydides’ writing on armed conflict between the Athenians and the Spartans in the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides (471-400 B.C.) is commonly credited with being the first realist writer as well as the “founding father of the international relations discipline” (Viotti and Kauppi 1999, 57). Thucydides’ theory, often referred to as the “Thucydides’ Trap,” describes circumstances that occur when a great power’s position as hegemon is threatened by an emerging power. In this predicament, according to the Athenian who achieved the rank of General, there is a significant likelihood of war between the two states since the threatened state has few other choices to maintain power (Thucydides 1968).

Thucydides' writing, however, was more concerned with the underlying forces at work during the Peloponnesian War than the actions of the participants.

The Italian political philosopher Machiavelli (1469-1527), like Thucydides before him, wrote of power, balance of power, formation of alliances and counter-alliances, and the causes of conflict between different city-states (Viotti and Kauppi 1999, 59). Machiavelli's preoccupation, expressed in his writing through the story of a ruling prince, was the survival of the state. This meant that the prince must successfully navigate internal and external threats to his rule. It is through his work *The Prince* that one comes to understand the analysis as it is focused on gaining, maintaining, and expanding power (Machiavelli 2003). An interesting point of controversy in *The Prince* is the idea that the state is so important that the prince may engage in activities forbidden to other individuals who do not have the tremendous burden of responsibility to ensure the survival of the state. In Irregular Competition, this may be seen when adversarial actors engage in activities that are illegal in their own states, forbidden by international law, or both. Another critical aspect of Machiavelli's work was to view the world as it is, not as it should be. In this regard, ethics and politics are separate from each other.

Englishman and political philosopher Thomas Hobbes' (1588-1679) famous work *Leviathan* (2008) took a generally pessimistic -similar to Machiavelli's- view of human nature. Hobbes was concerned primarily with domestic politics and made the case for power and centralized control over a population. He was of the belief that the state of man was a state of war. As he decreed,

the condition of Man, is a condition of Warre of every one against every one; in which case every one is governed by his own Reason; and there is nothing he can make use of, that may not be a help unto him, in preserving his life against his enemyes; It followeth,

that in such a condition, every man has a Right to every thing; even to one anothers body. And therefore, as long as this naturall Right of every man to every thing endureth, there can be no security to any man...(ibid.).

Interestingly, Hobbes used scientific language in his work, including evidence of the times derived from Sir Isaac Newton and others who were making considerable discoveries about the natural sciences. Because of the constant state of war, according to Hobbes, man may find an escape from it only through placing all power in the hands of a sovereign, or Leviathan. If the authority did not exist to gain such control, the state must create it. Without such authority, whether internal to the state or in the realm of international politics, anarchy can only be rectified through central and superior control. Without such control, Hobbes posited, anarchy would continue and prevail. It was, therefore, the ultimate purpose of government power to protect men from men.

A Dutch contemporary of Hobbes, Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) took a different perspective on realism from that of Hobbes and Machiavelli. Convinced of a state of essential anarchy in international relations, Grotius professed the need for establishing - or at least acknowledging the need for - rules and laws that would be accepted by states as binding (Viotti and Kauppi 1999, 61). The Dutchman was pragmatic in his approach to IR theory, including as it applied to commerce and trade between states, but also in areas of war and national security. In determining what the sources of international law might be, Grotius wrote of the use of reason, natural law, and customary practices as foundations. These principles, according to Grotius, may take the form of international agreements. Admittedly, such agreements may change as circumstances change, but it was essential to consider both power and values in

establishing them in the first place. While Grotius is generally considered a realist, today's pluralists often claim him as one of their own because of his emphasis on values (ibid. 62).

Clausewitz distilled Thucydides' theory down to defining war as an extension of politics used to achieve political ends (1962). While Clausewitz focused his theory primarily on the instrument of war, he never lost sight of the idea that the ultimate objective of military action was something other than military in nature; the goals were always political. Translating Clausewitz's work to Morgenthau's theory, the implementation of the Realist Theory of International Politics may manifest itself as man controlling man (Morgenthau's third principle), for example, but the ultimate objective remains not to control man, but to gain or maintain power. The same truth applies to all of Morgenthau's principles; the goal is always about power.

Interestingly, Clausewitz's war as a continuation of politics by other means "says nothing about what the political ends are. It certainly does not presuppose that power is the ultimate political objective pursued by states in history" (Cozette 2004, 440). Instead, Clausewitz stresses that political ends vary over time. This is where one sees a departure of Morgenthau from Clausewitz since the ultimate goal of international politics, according to Morgenthau, is in fact power, a constant. For Clausewitz, "once war is over, politics returns to the other means it has at its disposal to deal with other states. That is to say that the primary goal of politics can be said to be peace, not power or survival" (ibid.). For Morgenthau, the goal of international relations remains power, regardless of any state of peace or war. It is with this understanding of Morgenthau that his theory is both relevant and appropriate for thinking about Irregular Competition since Irregular Competition itself persists through times of peace, conflict, and war, with power as the end.

Although he was accused of being a relativist by Morgenthau while also serving as a forerunner of the English School of international relations theory, Edward Hallett Carr and his book *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939* (2001) may be considered more realist than some contend. Carr's work is important in helping to understand the underlying causes that lead to WW2 instead of finding blame on leaders for allowing the world to slip into war. Carr wrote of fear as a significant factor leading to WW1, and also noted that the exercise of power always appears to "beget the appetite for more power" (ibid.). Carr referred to Machiavelli and Hobbes on realist thinking, critiqued utopian or idealist thought, but most importantly evaluated extreme versions of realism that separated morality from politics in IR. For him, there were two elements that were forever intertwined: utopia and reality, values and power. Similar to Grotius, Carr appreciated the role of international relations in settling disputes, effecting peaceful change, and international order. Because he evaluated strengths and weaknesses of both utopianism and realism, he may be considered an influence on both realists and non-realists (Viotti and Kauppi 1999, 63).

Another noteworthy political theorist was Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Although considered a democratic realist, Rousseau embraced human imperfection and deliberately avoided any ultimate solution to the human problem in his writing. The focus of his "General Will" theory would be to enable governments to focus entirely on practical matters of governance. Rousseau's theory was not tied to any particular moral or virtuous principles, only to that of what the people felt that they wanted.

Irregular Competition in this study is understood by the researcher in terms of power, conflict, and competition. Classic or traditional political realism is based on such principles, borne out of human nature. There are numerous other, prominent, classical realists whose

writings are in line with those listed above. They include James Fearon (1994), Thomas Schelling (1960), John Mearsheimer (2001), Garret Hardin (1968), Robert Putnam (1988), Sam Huntington (1993), Dale Copeland (2000), and others. These writers are all generally in agreement with the principles espoused by Morgenthau as they would apply to Irregular Competition, albeit with deviations. Sam Huntington, for example, may be described as a conservative realist as he predicted future conflict along civilizational lines. While that is obviously his thesis given the title of his book *Clash of Civilizations* (1993), he admits that states may ally across civilizational lines when necessary. Furthermore, Huntington's notion that civilizations will resist Western civilization's global dominance could arguably be attributed to classical realist balancing by rising powers like China against a global hegemon like the US.

Studying other theories and theorists beyond political realism was conducted to demonstrate to the reader that the researcher embraced a comprehensive understanding of International Relations (IR) theory. Opposing theories that contradict classical realism were analyzed as well to account for counterarguments that might be made against the results of the study. Below is a summary of alternative theories.

Structural realism or neorealism – also called defensive realism – accepts that balancing power is an essential element of International Relations, just as classical realism does. That said, balancing power in Structural Realism is not the ultimate goal but rather a by-product of the international system that forces states to survive in an anarchic system based on self-help. Developed by Kenneth Walz (1959), Structural Realism shuns classical realism's use of essentialist concepts such as “human nature” and instead focuses predominantly on the international system itself as the driver of geopolitical realities (Rehberg 2022). States in this theory remain the principal actors but forces above and below the states – such as the

international order above and populations below – drive the states actions. Walz, for example, might argue that NATO's actions, representing some type of international order, left Russia no choice but to invade Ukraine in 2022 in order to maintain Russia's survival and balance of power. Conversely, the classic political realist view of the situation holds that Vladimir Putin's simple, innate, power-seeking human nature manifested itself in the form of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Walz's theory of neorealism is acknowledged but not accepted by the researcher as a reliable lens through which Irregular Competition realistically occurs. Yes, the international system itself, and populations, are critical components of the system, but the researcher proposes that they are the recipient of state and non-state actors' actions taken in pursuit of power, not vice versa.

There are additional variations of realism that were considered as well in this study. Neoclassical realism argues that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by the country's relative material power (Rehberg 2022). Utilizing neorealism noted above as a point of departure, neoclassical realists like Robert Jervis (1976 and 1978), William Wohlforth (1994), and Gideon Rose (1998) argue that while the state typically responds to the international system, those responses are “shaped by unit-level factors such as state–society relations, the nature of their domestic political regimes, strategic culture, and leader perceptions” (Ripsman 2011). The researcher posits that while unit-level factors such as those listed above may very well influence a state or non-state actor's implementation of Irregular Competition, such factors are not the impetus for engaging in Irregular Competition in the first place. That impetus remains the pursuit of power and security, regardless of state-society relations and the like.

Idealism, or liberalism, or Liberal Wilsonian Idealism, or institutionalism, is theory that typically contrasts realism and rests on the belief that international relations, interdependence, and institutions are capable transforming the global environment into one that is fundamentally more peaceful and just (Nau 2021, 11). Liberal schools generally emphasize morality, values, and hope for a more enlightened world that is internationally minded. According to Liberty University's Dr. Carl Rehberg, there are four major, distinct strands of idealism: liberalism, internationalism, liberal institutionalism, and globalism (2022). While this study will not dissect each, there are some fundamental assumptions that ground this tradition and span all the variations. All strands hold an optimistic perspective about human nature, social & political life, & interstate relations. They hold that international institutions play a significant role in global affairs and contribute decisively to the development of global cooperation and world order. Additionally, idealism emphasizes the role of moral values in developing and implementing foreign policy goals & strategies (Rehberg 2022). While liberal thinkers like Immanuel Kant (2018), John Rawls (1971), Joseph Nye (1971), Francis Fukuyama (1989), and others describe a global order that most anyone would likely want to be a part of, history and current events demonstrate that idealism is unrealistic in describing geopolitical reality. The world that we live in, where Irregular Competition takes place, is full of conflict as state and non-state actors pursue power, control, and security regardless of ethics and moral judgement. This is not to say that leaders are without the types of values that idealism espouses. Instead, idealism fails to explain reality because despite a leader having or not having such values, the state or non-state entity that the leader represents ultimately behaves and makes decisions in pursuit of power – an endeavor that may or may not coincide with the leader's moral and ethical principles.



In his work the *Two Treatises of Government*, John Locke (1632–1704) claimed that men are by nature free and equal against claims that God made them subject to a monarch (Locke 1823). This is significant to IR theory as it applies to this study because Locke was very much concerned about the insecurity and instability of international relations. Locke is a unique case because while he was socially conservative, he discussed many ideas that are today attributed to liberalism. In his second treatise, Locke emphasized the importance of natural rights and laws. He believed that people are born as blank slates, unburdened with preordained ideas or notions. This state, according to Locke, is known as the “State of Nature” (ibid.) because it shows people in their most barbaric form. As these ideas pertain to IR theory generally, and even Irregular Competition specifically, Locke would likely recommend extreme watchfulness in foreign policy which should take precedence over domestic policy. This was necessary, according to Locke, out of concern for issues upon which the survival of the state depended.

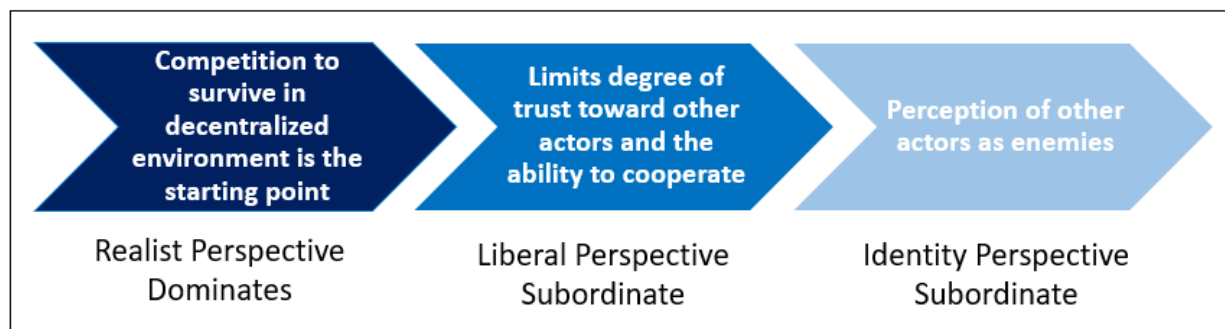
Finally, constructivist IR theory was studied as it might apply to the concept of Irregular Competition. Constructivism holds that international relations are shaped by ideational factors, the most important being collectively held beliefs which construct the interests and identities of the actors involved. This theory is often associated with the end of the Cold War, an event that realism and liberalism arguably failed to account for. Prominent constructivists like Friedrich Kratochwil (1989), Martha Finnemore (1996, 2003), Emmanuel Adler and Mickael Barnett (1998), and Jeffrey Checkel (1998) all argue that essential aspects of international relations are socially constructed and given their form by ongoing processes of social practice and interaction. Martha Finnemore went even further to distinguish behavior based on three types of norms in international relations: regulative norms which order and constrain behavior; constitutive norms which create new actors, interests, or categories of action; and evaluative and

prescriptive norms which have an "oughtness" quality to them (Finnemore 1996, 2003). Constructivists believe that the identities and interests of actors are changeable and should therefore not be assumed. For Alexander Wendt (1999), the idea of "identity" evolved into a central concept of constructivism. According to Wendt, identities are formed in a social context, being constructed based on a self and other relationships (ibid). As a result, constructivism – and identity theory – do not actually make specific predictions about international relations. The constructivist school therefore *studies* international politics but does not necessarily hold any *theory of* international politics. If constructivism were in fact an accurate lens through which to view Irregular Competition, it would prove incredibly challenging since substantive predictions of what an actor may do would only be made after all actors and their interests were accurately mapped, in addition to an understanding of all relevant social structures. The results of this research, however, are not adequately explained by constructivist theory; Ideational factors are not the main drivers of behavior in Irregular Competition, which is evidenced in Chapters 4 and 5.

It is important to highlight that according to realist theory, liberal and constructivist theories are not ignored. Instead, it is held in realism that relative power limits the role of these other perspectives (Nau 2021, 24). Well-known IR author Henry Nau wrote that for the realist, causal arrows going left to right - in an illustration encompassing liberal and identity theory perspectives – goes from [realist] competition for power to survive “in an environment that is decentralized and largely outside the control of the actors, to increasing distrust and inability to cooperate [espoused by liberal theory], to self-images of one another as enemies [which therefore marginalizes identity theory]” (Nau 2021, 29). Political realism’s accounting for liberal and identity theories is graphically demonstrated in Figure 1. Notice that it is possible to reverse the

two subordinate perspectives. For example, competition to survive creates competing identities which leads to distrust (ibid.). Regardless of which subordinate perspective comes first, the realist perspective remains dominant according to realist theory.

**Figure 1. Causal Arrows: The Realist View (Nau 2021, 29)**



Political realism theory as a lens through which this study is conducted thus firmly rests on the acknowledgement that actors in the field of international politics behave in a way aimed at gaining or retaining power and security. While Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Clausewitz are recognized as classic realists, it is Hans Morgenthau who developed political realism into a modern-day, comprehensive, IR theory. This theory, explained most succinctly through Morgenthau's six principals of political realism, provides the lens through which Irregular Competition is studied in this research. The researcher concluded that the realities of Irregular Competition in the world today reinforces realist theory, and a struggle for power, despite liberal and identity theories' attempts to justify otherwise.

As America's top national security challenge clearly stated in all current strategy documents, it is necessary to make special note of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) approach to international relations (IR) theory. IR is a relatively new academic subject in China (Geeraerts and Jing 2001, 251). Attempts by Chinese security policy scholars like Lin Minwang,

Liu Feng, Yang Yuan, and Zuo Xiying to construct a Chinese version of International Relations theory – centered on Chinese characteristics that explain or informs CCP foreign policy – is a relatively new endeavor (Chen 2016). The need for a unique Chinese IR theory - given China’s economic, political, and military growth trajectory – may seem necessary for both China and others. From a *cultural* perspective, China has been shaped by world-renowned thinkers, philosophers, leaders, and strategists for centuries. Confucius and Sun Tzu readily come to mind, among others. It was not until the middle of the 1970s, however, that China began to interpret and reinterpret its self-interest in terms of international relations *theory* (Chai 2003, 164). While most scholars acknowledge the benefits traditional Chinese culture may have on enriching the content of IR theory in China, “they are also aware that learning and understanding Western theoretical systems is paramount. However, as Yuan Ming warns, Western IR theory is to China a kind of external culture” (Geeraets and Jing 2001, 276).

In a 1979 speech, Deng Xiaoping admitted that political science, law, sociology, and world politics had been ignored in past years. It was therefore high time, he said, to make up for the missed lessons (Shoude and Lianqing 1997, 92; Geeraets and Jing 2001, 254). Xiaoping’s theory resulted in such concepts as “one country, two systems,” and emphasized “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” embracing a degree of capitalism in order to get past the “primary stage of socialism” and eventually arrive at true Chinese socialism (Chai 2003, 168). Deng’s theory generally enriched and integrated “the universal principle of Marxism-Leninism with the practice of the Second Chinese Revolution [Mao’s Revolution was considered the first]-economic construction, reform, and opening to the outside” (ibid.). His theory has since been accepted and reinforced by successive CCP leaders and congresses. Political scientists have noted, however, that modern Chinese leaders never strictly adhered to the exact prescriptions laid out by Marx,

Lenin, Mao, or even Deng Xiaoping (Geeraets and Jing 2001, 163). This is evident today as the CCP continues to evolve its understanding of IR theory in a rational manner for Chinese communism to remain relevant, applicable, and grow in today's ever-changing international political space. Following the conclusion of case study research for this paper, the researcher derived several points on the question of whether a unique Chinese form of international relations theory actually exists. These points can be found in Chapter 5 under the "Theoretical Implications" sub-heading.

With the major IR theories outlined so far, and a specific analysis of Chinese theory highlighted above and in Chapter 5, it then becomes necessary to define which level of IR analysis this research will focus on. Regardless of what theory or perspective one holds to, there are generally three levels of analysis that one may focus effort on. Kenneth Waltz in the 1950s identified individual, state and society, and the international system as the three distinct levels to focus one's study of IR theory as it is applied to a given situation (Viotti and Kauppi 1999, 14). These levels are not distinct and unrelated, so the relationships between them are important to identify and appreciate. This research addresses all three of the levels to some degree. For example, influencing populations is often a very personal (the individual level) matter, domestic politics (the state and society level) aimed at affecting legitimacy are critical to success or failure in Irregular Competition, and finally, the relationship between state and non-state actors (the international system level) is one of the primary concerns as well.

IR theory serves as one of many important influences on any analysis of Irregular Competition. For the realist, states are the principal actors on the international stage and represent the primary unit of analysis. Power and national security are paramount for the realist. For the pluralist (outlined above under the liberal framework), states are disaggregated into

component parts which are subjugated to outside elements (Viotti and Kauppi 1999, 21). The globalist, on the other hand, believes that individuals, states, and non-state actors alike are all influenced most by the global structure more than anything else. This research takes all of these theories into consideration but posits that Irregular Competition is affected by much more than just IR theory principles. Other considerations such as organizational designs, psychology, emerging technologies, capabilities and capacities, culture, history, geography, and countless other factors are equally important to the theoretical study of Irregular Competition. That said, Morgenthau's conclusion that selfishness and power drive international politics was the starting point from which this study was conducted. After the research was complete, as the reader will find in Chapter 5, it remained a constant that Morgenthau's theory held true and provided an accurate theoretical framework for understanding behavior in Irregular Competition.

### **Related Literature**

In organizing the literature review below, several sub-headings have been generated to categorize the reviewed works. It should be noted that some literature easily fits into more than one sub-category since the subject matter is cross-cutting and ambiguous. As a result, the reader may rightly believe that a particular work belongs in a different section of this literature review than where it currently resides.

Additionally, while the term "Irregular Competition" is not unique to this research, it is also not commonly used in literature. As a result, the reader will note the use of other more well-known terms like hybrid, asymmetric, irregular, gray zone, and other types of conflict more often than "Irregular Competition" throughout the literature reviewed below.

## Strategic Competition and Great Power Competition

Strategic Competition is defined by the US as “geopolitical rivalry between free and repressive world order visions” (Department of Defense 2019). Great Power Competition is defined as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s). This form is labeled as competition in order to highlight its non-Westphalian context. The strategic point of GPC is to gain or maintain control or influence over, and the support of, a relevant population” (Joint Chiefs of Staff 2013). Strategic Competition will be used wherever possible, except when directly quoting other works, because *Great Power Competition*, by its name alone, inherently marginalizes the role of friends, partners, and allies who may not be considered *great* - a subjective term - yet play a significant role in the outcome of the competition.

In 2018, Hal Brands wrote in “The Lost Art of Long-Term Competition” that in the end, the precise mechanism for engaging strategically may ultimately be less important than the basic commitment to the art of competition: to creating structures and processes within which planning and reassessment regularly occur, to connecting those processes to policy formulation and budgeting in a systematic way, and to making both prospective and retrospective thinking more than an afterthought for harried officials who must deal with short-term crises while still positioning the country for long-term success. This latter statement, and the implications derived from it, are important to consider because policy and budgeting will prove to be important factors in any Irregular Competition strategy, just as they are in more traditional security activity.

In a different but related 2018 work by Brands titled “Democracy vs Authoritarianism: How Ideology Shapes Great Power Conflict,” he explored the extent to which “ideological competition – tensions between the ideas around which societies organize themselves, and

between the forms of government they adopt – is fueling geopolitical competition” (62). This point is important to this research as it touches on the question of whether or not authoritarian systems may be better situated to mobilize whole-of-government, or even whole-of-society action in Irregular Competition endeavors. Authoritarian regimes may control virtually all aspects of the government, in addition to a large portion – or all – of the private sector as well. This applies not just to the CCP, but other rogue and revisionist state actors.

A US Army White Paper titled *Expanding Maneuver in the early 21st Century Security Environment* suggested that the expanding friction between major state powers raises concerning questions about future behaviors of both state and non-state international actors (United States Army Special Operations Command 2017, “Expanding Maneuver). Collectively, these challenges set the security environment on a trajectory of “contested norms” and “persistent disorder” that requires the US to maneuver toward more cognitive objectives (ibid.). The White Paper suggested that the US needs to take operational approaches that recognize not just the physical, but also the moral and cognitive spheres with which revisionist state actors’ motives generate dangerous momentum (ibid.). Along similar lines, the commander of US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) in 2016 suggested that the US - as it engages friends, partners, and allies - take a “people-access approach: being there ahead of time, having relationships there ahead of time, identifying problems before they become crises, developing that partner capacity prior, not after, a response” (Thomas 2016)

It is necessary to address one false assumption that many policy- and decision makers have made since the release of the 2017 NSS. That assumption is that since the US has shifted the focus of its security institutions from terrorists to revisionist states, the lessons and applications of irregular, unconventional, and political warfare are not applicable to Strategic Competition.



Doctors David Ucko and Thomas Marks (2020) illuminate that the two sets of challenges – traditional and non-traditional - share crucial traits. “Both employ diverse lines of attack to undermine resolve and build leverage, often by exploiting vulnerabilities within target societies— economic, social, and/or political. Both weaponize narratives to confuse analysis, co-opt contested audiences, and lower the cost of action. And both revolve around questions of legitimacy, or the right to lead, so as to shape new and long-lasting political realities.”

A March 2022 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report titled “Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress” noted that the term “Great Power Competition” may be going away, at least for the US military. The report cited a Defense Department spokesperson who confirmed that the Pentagon will use the phrase “Strategic Competition” instead to describe its approach toward China— “explicitly moving away from the Trump-era framework” (O’Rourke 2022, 3). “Strategic competition” aligns more closely with the Biden administration’s thinking on China, Lt. Col. Martin Meiners noted in 2022 (ibid.). Meiners further noted how the Biden White House’s *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* specifically refers to “strategic competition with China or any other nation” (ibid.). The CRS report acknowledged that Strategic Competition “as a phrase isn’t new: the Trump administration even used it in its 2018 National Defense Strategy” (ibid.).

## **NSC-68**

The relevance of a Cold War era initiative to today’s Irregular Competition thinking must be noted. In 1950, a then-Top Secret National Security Council Paper NSC-68 titled “United States Objectives and Programs for National Security” enacted a massive buildup of the US military in conjunction with other instruments of power within the US Government. The

discussion surrounding this pivotal event occurred as leaders in the US Government concluded that the Soviet threat would soon be greatly augmented by the addition of more weapons, including nuclear weapons (National Security Council 1950; Department of State n.d.1.). In response, the National Security Council at the time outlined four possible courses of action that the US might take. Option A was a continuation of current policies, with current and currently projected programs for carrying out these policies. Option B was isolation. Option C was war. Option D was “a more rapid building up of the political, economic, and military strength of the free world than provided under A, with the purpose of reaching, if possible, a tolerable state of order among nations without war and of preparing to defend ourselves in the event that the free world is attacked” (National Security Council 1950, 54).

George Kennan among others at the time argued that the US already had a substantial military advantage over the Soviet Union. Kennan, in particular, disagreed with assertions that the Soviet Union was bent on achieving domination through force of arms, “and argued that the United States could contain the Soviet Union through political and economic measures, rather than purely military ones” (Department of State n.d.1.). Kennan was ultimately overruled following the invasion of South Korea by Soviet and Chinese-backed North Korean forces in June 1950, which led to an immediate buildup to avoid being soft on Communism (Department of State n.d.1).

The decision to buildup was not entirely military, however. The final course of action decided upon as a result of NSC-68 was that the US must, “by means of a rapid and sustained build-up of the political, economic, and military strength of the free world, and by means of an affirmative program intended to wrest the initiative from the Soviet Union, confront it with convincing evidence of the determination and ability of the free world to frustrate the Kremlin

design of a world dominated by its will. Such evidence is the only means short of war which eventually may force the Kremlin to abandon its present course of action and to negotiate acceptable agreements on issues of major importance” (National Security Council 1950, 64-5).

NSC-68 today remains a useful reference for the subject of Irregular Competition. It helps demonstrate that in theory, should DIME instruments be effectively employed, it is possible that outright military conflict – such as the invasion of South Korea in 1950 or the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – could be avoided. Furthermore, the authors of NSC-68 believed that “changes in the balance of power could occur not only as the result of economic maneuvers or military action, but from intimidation, humiliation, or even loss of credibility” (Gaddis 2005, 90). Another sea change that occurred with the writing of NSC-68 involved the importance of perceptions.

The implications were startling. World order, and with it American security, had come to depend as much on perceptions of the balance of power as on what that balance actually was. And the perceptions involved were not just those of statesmen customarily charged with making policy; they also reflected mass opinion, foreign as well as domestic, informed as well as uninformed, rational as well as irrational. Before such an audience even the appearance of a shift in power relationships could have unnerving consequences. Judgments based on such traditional criteria as geography, economic capacity, or military potential now had to be balanced against considerations of image, prestige, and credibility. (ibid.)

One of the key concerns with NSC-68 was “selling” it to the American public. “Cohesion in our democracy is basic to U.S. security,” insisted one consultant regarding NSC-68, “and the government was going to need assistance in getting public support for the national

effort which would be called for” (Casey 2005, 655). As has been mentioned earlier in this study, and a topic that is studied further throughout this research, public support for action such as NSC-68 may pose a greater challenge in a democratic society than in other political models. The absence of such challenges may be a luxury authoritarian states do not have to contend with. If true, the authoritarian state may enjoy an advantage over its adversaries in this regard. “America’s democratic process—the very thing that set it apart from its enemies—was also a potential weakness” (ibid.). In contemplating NSC-68’s implementation, Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, Edward R. Barrett, lamented, “I fear that the U.S. public would rapidly tire of such effort...In the absence of real and continuing crises, a dictatorship can unquestionably outlast a democracy in a conventional armament race” (ibid.).

An authoritarian state which controls all or most aspects of society, including the private sector, may have an advantage in mustering all elements of society beyond just the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments of power. On the other hand, the liberal democratic system that the US embraces limits the extent to which the government may employ Irregular Competition practices.

[The US relies] on traditional and legitimate forms of influence and competition, but our adversaries are applying more ambiguous, illegitimate, and nontraditional instruments of statecraft consistent with their culture and previous practices, going back almost a century with respect to Russia. Such autocratic states have far more options than democracies. Mr. [George] Kennan, the architect of containment who knew something about the Russians, noted decades ago that ‘The varieties of skullduggery which make up the repertoire of totalitarian governments, are just about as unlimited as human ingenuity itself and just about as unpleasant.’ (Hoffman 2017, 2)

These observations are not meant to suggest that the US and its allies should lessen their commitment to the rules-based-order for the sake of increased control of Irregular Competition instruments. Instead, this point is made to remind the reader of the differences between free and open societies compared to authoritarian regimes. These differences must be considered when it comes to the ability of the US Government and its partners to mobilize resources in the pursuit of Irregular Competition objectives.

### **Current US Security Strategy Thinking**

Bringing the strategy document study into the modern day, the 2017 National Security Strategy drafted by the Trump administration deserves attention since it was pivotal in the shift away from asymmetric threats toward Strategic Competition (Sevastopulo 2017). Per the 2017 NSS (White House 2017) followed by the 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance document* (White House 2021), the 2022 *National Security Strategy* (White House 2022b), and the 2022 National Defense Strategy (Department of Defense 2022), the America's Strategic Competition efforts refocused on a revisionist China.

There are considerable obstacles to the implementation of the America's NSS Strategic Competition objectives. Some of the more significant constraints, limitations, and obstacles include: US (and Chinese) desire to avoid direct military confrontation; Globalized economies that are interdependent and reliant on each other for stability, and are at risk should traditional military conflict occur; Partners, friends, and allies which cannot easily choose between America and China as they are "caught in between," influenced, and reliant on both; The CCP's ability to mobilize private and public resources to influence outcomes; The CCP's ease of strategic

messaging / information operations which appear to be less than transparent at times, and do not undergo the same level of scrutiny as in America.

The 2017 NSS illuminated the implications of the emerging Strategic Competition dynamic for the US, its partners and allies. It stated that “geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place” (45). The NSS went on to declare that efforts to build and militarize outposts in the South China Sea endanger the free flow of trade, threaten the sovereignty of other nations, and undermine regional stability. China has mounted a rapid military modernization campaign designed to limit US access to the Indo-Pacific region and provide China a freer hand there. While China presents its ambitions as mutually beneficial, Chinese dominance in reality risks diminishing the sovereignty of many states. This applies not only to the Indo-Pacific, but in Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere as China seeks to solidify its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As this occurs, sustained US leadership with like-minded partners working toward a collective response that upholds a rules-based order respectful of sovereignty and independence is needed. Finally, the 2017 NSS posited that US allies are critical to responding to the mutual threats outlined above.

The *2017 Defense Posture Statement* released by then-Secretary of Defense Ash Carter made clear that, “The United States wants every nation to have an opportunity to rise, because it’s good for the [Indo-Pacific] region and good for our collective interests. That includes China” (Department of Defense and Carter, A. 2016). According to the 2017 NSS, the US will redouble its commitment to established alliances and partnerships, while expanding and deepening relationships with new partners that share respect for sovereign, fair and reciprocal trade, and the rule of law. Furthermore, the US will reinforce its commitment to freedom of the seas and the peaceful resolution of territorial and maritime disputes in accordance with international law.

Finally with regard to politics and economics outlined in the 2017 NSS, the US will encourage regional cooperation to maintain free and open seaways, transparent infrastructure financing practices, unimpeded commerce, and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

The 2017 NSS declared priority actions from a “military and security” lens. According to the strategy, the US will: Maintain a forward military presence capable of deterring and, if necessary, defeating any adversary; Strengthen long-standing military relationships and encourage the development of a strong defense network with our allies and partners by way of improving improve law enforcement, defense, and intelligence cooperation with partners to address a growing terrorist threat.

As the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) stated, the primary area of concern for US Strategic Competition is China and, more specifically, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (White House 2017). The US, most Western nations, and those nations around the world whose sovereignty is being threatened perceive the CCP’s aggressive actions as revisionist and not in keeping with rules-based, internationally-accepted standards, laws, and norms. These norms have been the guiding principles for stability, prosperity, and peace for decades and in some cases, centuries. As former Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel wrote, “The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) correctly reoriented our focus on great-power competition. However, security policy and planning are an iterative process; yesterday’s products are perishable, becoming stale amidst shifting world dynamics. China, specifically, is aggressively moving to gain global influence through misinformation, disinformation, infrastructure investments, coercion, and other nefarious activity. Though the DOD must still acknowledge the threat posed by Russia and others, it is correct to prioritize its efforts to compete with and deter Chinese aggression” (Starling, Wetzel, and Trotti 2021, 16).

The US Department of Defense's *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* provided a description of the overall direction and objectives that the military establishment intends to take in order to fulfill its role as a key supporting element in the accomplishment of larger *National Security Strategy* objectives. This document provided the Secretary of Defense's strategic framework for DOD to build on military advantages and maintain important regional balances of power.

The *Description of the National Military Strategy of the United States of America* (Joint Chiefs of Staff 2018) provided the then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's strategic framework to inform the prioritization of force employment, force development, and force design for the Joint Force in support of larger *National Defense Strategy* and *National Security Strategy*. This document was helpful for this research in that it highlighted how each of the military services should support larger national security objectives.

In 2018 the White House released its *National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America*. In it, the government illuminated the full range of terrorist threats that the United States confronts within and beyond its borders and emphasized the use of all instruments of national power to combat terrorism and terrorist ideologies. The document emphasized targeting terrorist networks that threaten the US and its allies, and on disrupting and denying their ability to mobilize, finance, travel, communicate, and inspire new followers. The strategy document is most relevant to this research not because of the focus on Counter-Terrorism (CT) objectives, but more so because it highlights the need for partners, friends, and allies in achieving them (1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 11, 13-17, 23-24).

The Defense Department alone does not align itself against state and non-state adversaries in the irregular operating environment. The US Treasury Department's Office of



Terrorism and Financial Intelligence (OTFI), for example, marshal's the department's "intelligence and enforcement functions with the twin aims of safeguarding the financial system against illicit use and combating rogue nations, terrorist facilitators, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferators, money launderers, drug kingpins, and other national security threats" (Department of the Treasury n.d.). In its Fiscal Year 2023 "Congressional Budget Justification and Annual Performance Plan and Report," the OTFI noted that it works closely with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), FATF-Style Regional Bodies, finance ministries, and other international partners to "identify and close vulnerabilities within the international financial system that make it susceptible to terrorist financing and other illicit financial activity" (Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence 2022, 6).

The State Department's Bureau of Counter-Terrorism promotes U.S. national security by "developing coordinated strategies and approaches to defeat terrorism abroad, primary by securing the counterterrorism cooperation of international partners" (Department of State n.d.2.). Within the Department of Energy, the National Nuclear Security Administration's (NNSA) Office of Counterterrorism and Counter proliferation (CTCP) focuses on a layered defense against nuclear terrorism and nuclear proliferation. It accomplishes this by providing early threat indications, securing nuclear material, locating and defeating nuclear devices, and mitigating the effects of radiological incidents around the globe. The intent of this "defense-in-depth" strategy is to require adversaries to defeat multiple layers of security to obtain and detonate a nuclear device (Department of Energy n.d.). In its 2021 publication focused on reducing global nuclear threats, the NNSA described the current global environment as one characterized by "the persistent threat of state and non-state actors seeking to obtain nuclear and radioactive materials for malign purposes" (National Nuclear Security Administration 2021).

In 2022, a new *National Security Strategy* was released by the Biden Administration. In it, Strategic Competition – particularly with China – remained the priority security focus. However, non-traditional threats along the lines of Irregular Competition were addressed throughout the document. It referred to issues such as terrorism (White House 2022b, 22-25), weakening and destabilizing sovereign nations and undermining multilateral institutions (26), subverting the global order by weaponizing information to undermine democracies and polarize societies (17), leveraging technology and supply chains for coercion and repression (8), and weaponizing energy for coercion (9). A new *National Defense Strategy* was released in late 2022 with emphasis on integrated deterrence (Department of Defense 2022). The term is meant to entail “working seamlessly across warfighting domains, theaters, and the spectrum of conflict, all instruments of U.S. national power, and our network of Alliances and partnerships. Tailored to specific circumstances, it applies a coordinated, multifaceted approach to reducing competitors’ perceptions of the net benefits of aggression relative to restraint” (1). While the NDS is intended to provide a vision, not an operational plan on how DOD will support the NSS, what seems to be missing from this critical document is an explanation of how the military will be expected to achieve the lofty objectives stated in the NDS and the NSS.

The 2022 NDS noted that America would accept risk but also remain vigilant against persistent threats including those posed by North Korea, Iran, and violent extremist organizations (VEOs)” (2). Regarding the “Gray Zone” (6) as it is implied in the 2022 NDS, Gray Zone activities are those used by America’s adversaries but not by the US itself. This NDS noted that China uses Gray Zone to execute economic coercion, Russia uses it for disinformation and proxy forces, and North Korea and Iran use it similarly (ibid.). Furthermore, “competitors increasingly engage in gray zone operations at odds with international norms and below the threshold of a

credible military response” (12). As a result, “the Department will be judicious in its use of defense resources and efforts to counter competitors’ coercive behaviors in gray zone operations, as traditional military tools may not always be the most appropriate response” (ibid.). Note in the previous sentence that gray zone is something that must be *responded to*, but not something that the US itself will engage in *proactively*. The document reinforces concepts of defense and reaction against adversarial activity by stating that through campaigning with partners and allies, America will oppose select, acute forms of coercion carried out by competitors (12). Other literature, including Congressional testimony cited here in Chapter 2, similarly paints a picture of Gray Zone as activities that adversaries partake in and that the US must react to. This specific point about the Gray Zone in the 2022 NDS is perhaps the most relevant part of the strategy as it pertains to this research.

### **The Current Global Security Operating Environment**

In a 2016 speech to students at the National Defense University, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine Corps Gen. Joseph Dunford, discussed the Department of Defense’s “four-plus-one” model as it looked to develop future capabilities. The “four” were Russia, China, North Korea and Iran. The “one” was violent extremist organizations. The Chairman said the model provided a “useful framework to inform our planning, our capability development and our assessment of operational and strategic risk” (Dunford 2016). This model is still applicable today as the United States thinks about state and non-state actors, and devises ways to confront them. This construct provides a simple way to conceptualize the competitor or adversarial landscape, but it does not address the strategy needed to indirectly confront those threats with the power and synchronization of the entire US Government working in unison.

A study from the US Army War College outlined how China, Russia, and Iran “have outmaneuvered their seemingly less nimble US competitor” (Freier 2016). Dr. David C. Walton from the National Defense University similarly pointed out that America took its eye off of the biggest threats in favor of the closest threats. It’s not really a matter of blame, Walton wrote, and this certainly isn’t a DOD-exclusive issue, but this is something that needs to be acknowledged and managed (Walton 2017, 43-6). The author continued his description of Great Power Competition follies as follows:

China’s Belt and Road Initiative is proving to be the Trojan horse of injecting suffocating control and exploitation under the guise of development and cooperation. And Russia, who many dismissed as drunken oligarchs and failed authoritarians, has been building a resume of Irregular Warfare victories that shows that while we declared victory at the end of the 4th Quarter of the Cold War, they simply went on playing the game while we were in the locker rooms of the Global War on Terror. While not technically peers, Iran uses its terror proxies to inflict the death of a thousand cuts and North Korea is as unstable and dangerous as ever. Nobody is going to wait for us to catch our breath.

Despite a focus on Strategic Competition and more conventional matters, irregular threats are nevertheless an important part of the global security environment of today. Nathan Freier’s “Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone” (2016) describes how U.S. competitors pursuing meaningful revision or rejection of the current U.S.-led status quo are employing a host of irregular methods to advance and secure interests that are in many cases contrary to those of the United States. These challengers employ unique combinations of influence, intimidation, coercion, and aggression to incrementally crowd out effective resistance, establish local or regional advantages, and manipulate risk perceptions in their favor. This

environment of undeclared military operations offers opportunities for ‘frenemies’ as well, not just outright adversaries. For example,

During recent NATO operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan was simultaneously supporting Operation Enduring Freedom by providing access to convoys and intelligence cooperation and staging military operations against militants in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while covertly aiding the Taliban against the International Security Assistance Force and Afghan government forces.<sup>80</sup> In their occupation of territory on the Syrian frontier in October 2019, Turkish forces used their own proxies to attack the United States’ Kurdish allies and on one occasion bracketed a US military base with artillery fire.<sup>81</sup> Thus, supposed allies of the West as well as adversaries may employ grey-zone operations. These may prove even harder for the West to navigate. (Hughes 2020, 147)

In an opening statement to the House Armed Services Committee in 2017, Committee Chairman, the Honorable William M. “Mac” Thornberry, stated that,

Americans are used to thinking of a binary state of either war or peace. That is the way our organizations, doctrine, and approaches are geared. Other countries, including Russia, China, and Iran, use a wider array of centrally controlled, or at least centrally directed, instruments of national power and influence to achieve their objectives. Whether it is contributing to foreign political parties, targeted assassinations of opponents, infiltrating non-uniformed personnel such as the little green men, traditional media and social media, influence operations, or cyber-connected activity, all of these tactics and more are used to advance their national interests and most often to damage American national interests. These tactics are not new. Indeed, as Professor Williamson Murray has written, the historical records suggest that hybrid warfare in one form or another may well be the

norm for human conflict, rather than the exception. And this committee has examined these issues previously, despite the fact that some of these tactics are much in the news these days. But I believe these tactics pose a particular challenge for us and our system. (Thornberry 2017)

The 2020 book *The Dragons and the Snakes* written by David Kilcullen outlines how the “dragons” (nation states such as China) and the “snakes” (such as terrorist organizations like ISIS) have outmaneuvered America. The thesis is that these two adversaries are taking advantage of the new nature of conflict while the US remains stuck in old physical and cognitive paradigms. As this applies to this research, this work highlights the danger of focusing solely on Strategic Competition. There is a need to remain agile and flexible, and to not make a “fool’s choice” in choosing between traditional and non-traditional threats. On the contrary, the new nature of conflict today witnesses competitors that are imitating each other in a self-perpetuating, “convergent evolution” which requires constant re-evaluation and new thought. This paradigm is of course critical to any Irregular Competition initiative, particularly because it reminds all involved that reassessing the environment is essential to maintaining relevant strategies.

## **China**

While China is not the only state threat to the US, it is the number one security priority in the present era of Strategic Competition. As the 2021 Strategic Competition Act (US Congress 2021a, Section 5(10)) states, “The United States must ensure that all Federal departments and agencies are organized to reflect the fact that strategic competition with the PRC is the United States top foreign policy priority, including through the assigned missions and location of United States Government personnel.”

Throughout Asia, where most of the friction between the US and China exists, the history of the Chinese and its pervasiveness throughout the continent and its surrounding waters has been well documented since 1000 BC. Relics of the Sa Huynh Culture can be found from the Philippines to Taiwan (Fontaine 1980). As a result, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does not see their current actions as revisionist, but rather a return to normalcy that prevailed a thousand years ago. This view of course ignores the most recent several hundred years of geopolitical conflict, change, and progress.

An official US government document addressing both conventional and unconventional concerns with specific regard to the CCP can be found in the US Department of Defense's *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (2019). This report affirms the enduring U.S. commitment to stability and prosperity in the region through the pursuit of preparedness, partnerships, and the promotion of a networked region, which are all critical elements of an Irregular Competition strategy. When considering diplomatic, information, military, and economic (DIME) instruments of national power, this document does well at identifying elements other than just the military (the "M") in confronting the CCP.

Security concerns involving China should be understood as specific to the *Chinese Communist Party*, not the entire country of *China*, nor the *Chinese people* in general. While the words "China" or "Chinese" are used throughout this research project, they should be understood to mean the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), America's primary state competitor according to all recent NSS, NDS, and NMS documents. This sentiment regarding the threat emanating from the CCP and not China in general has been echoed by other US Government agencies as well (Wray 2020b).

The US, most Western nations, and those Asian nations whose sovereignty is being violated see the CCP's current aggressive actions as revisionist and not in keeping with modern-day, internationally accepted standards, laws, norms, and boundaries which have been in effect for decades, if not centuries. The list of CCP violations include, but are not limited to the "9-dash line" claim, building and militarizing artificial islands, ignoring the 2016 UNCLOS arbitral tribunal verdict with the Philippines (UN Permanent Court of Arbitration), or interfering with a "free and open Indo-Pacific" (Department of Defense 2019, "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report), The CCP's actions in the South China Sea (SCS) alone have antagonized competing claimants Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

The disputes with the CCP are not only about the South China Sea. The CCPs theft of intellectual property, violations of UN sanctions enabling North Korea (a state sponsor of terrorism), predatory economic manipulation, debt-diplomacy, and subversion of governments have demonstrated the CCP's lack of transparency and its intent to unfairly maneuver itself into a position of unchecked global interference. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's report titled "China's Non-Traditional Espionage Against the United States: The Threat and Potential Policy Responses" (Priestap 2018) spotlights FBI testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee which establishes China as an authoritarian, one-party state where the Chinese Communist Party reigns supreme. At the Chinese Communist Party's direction, the Chinese government dominates every facet of Chinese life, through actions such as central economic planning, internet and media censorship, and leveraging intrusive technologies.

As Dr. Alexander Vuving from the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS) in Hawaii has noted, the CCP today can overwhelm neighbors in many domains – economics, military, maritime, cyber, and discourse. It is different from British, US,



and even Chinese hegemony of the past. The CCP wants to “control everything/everyone and is ready to weaponize everything/everyone under its control: PRC entities, firms and citizens; Chinese diaspora; Foreign entities and citizens with ties to PRC; other countries’ media; everybody’s thoughts” (Vuving 2020).

In February 2019, Commissioner of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Michael R. Wessel, testified before the Senate Commerce, Science & Transportation Committee that US “Tier 1 telecom providers were counseled by officials of the U.S. government that utilization of Huawei equipment could create significant cybersecurity concerns and might jeopardize contracts with the U.S. government. Subsequently, each company reportedly decided not to procure equipment from the company for utilization on their networks... China’s Huawei has been aggressive in trying to counter claims that it is a security risk. It claims that it is a private, employee-owned company and that we shouldn’t worry... No Chinese commercial entity can refuse to cooperate with China’s security services (Wessel 2019).

In early 2022, the Biden White House released the *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (White House, 2022a). The document built upon many of the principles outlined in the Defense Department’s 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (2019). The 2022 document highlighted the US as an Indo-Pacific nation, acknowledged previous impressions of the US withdrawing from the region, and emphasized the need for collective efforts. Somewhat new in the 2022 document is the assertion that “for centuries, the United States and much of the world have viewed Asia too narrowly--as an arena of geopolitical competition” (7). In response, the strategy proposes aligning efforts more closely with the objectives of our partners in the region. Furthermore, because “allies and partners outside of the region are increasingly committing new attention to the Indo-Pacific,

particularly the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)...we will harness this opportunity to align our approaches” (10). The strategy document highlights the PRC’s coercion and aggression tactics which span the globe but are “most acute in the Indo-Pacific” (5).

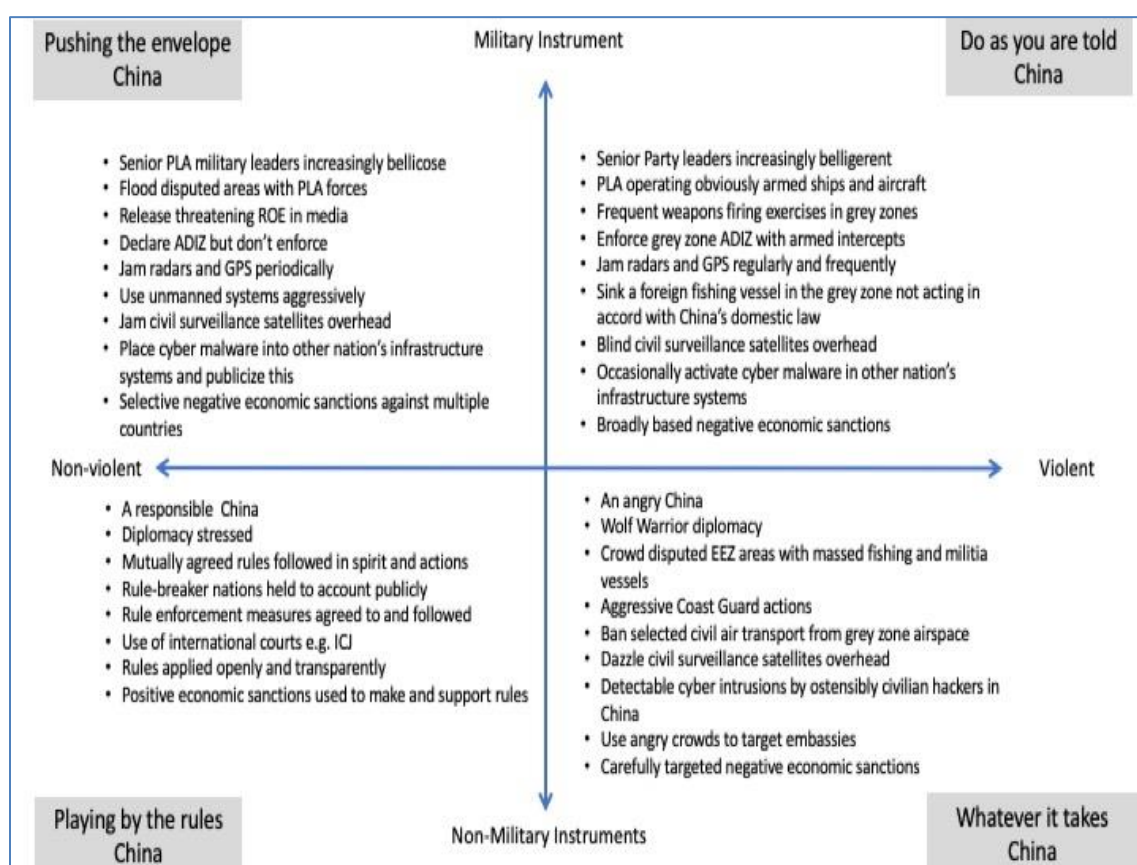
Coercion is mentioned seven times in the strategy. The closest thing to Irregular Competition-type activity on the part of the US is found in the statement that, “Consistent with our broader strategic approach, we will prioritize our single greatest asymmetric strength: our network of security alliances and partnerships” (12). Unfortunately, there is no expansion of this thought toward asymmetry. Subsequent writing instead returns to matters of advanced warfighting capabilities, modernizing technology, defending Taiwan, confronting North Korea and China, increasing Coast Guard presence, climate change, etc.

With specific regard to Irregular Competition and an eye toward China, a 2022 RAND report (Lin et al.) highlighted several key observations. Among them, the idea that China tailors its gray zone activity to specific targets, and that “Beijing layers different types of tactics to pressure targets via multiple dimensions. As a result, Beijing may not need to engage in significant escalation in any one specific domain” (v). Furthermore, the authors of the report concluded that since the mid-2010s, “China has continued to rely on military tactics, exercised caution in using high-profile tactics, wielded more influence in international institutions or via third party actors, and expanded its grassroots activities via local proxies or influence operations” (ibid.). With respect to non-military activities, China has emphasized geopolitical and bilateral tactics. On the military side, China has relied heavily on air- and maritime-domain tactics, which can be seen in the South China Sea and across the Taiwan Strait.

In its 2023 Defense Authorization Act report, the House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services (2022) recognized that “through disinformation and other malign influence

campaigns executed through state linked actors, China and Russia are creating an asymmetric race for authority and are hindering the fight against terrorist activities on the continent” (269). Looking to the future, Peter Layton (2021) - using the term Gray Zone to describe the threat - laid out what Chinese activities may look like. These activities are outlined in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Possible Chinese Gray Zone Futures (Layton 2021, 54)**



One important way to understand adversarial Irregular Competition is by looking at the situation through their own lenses. For the CCP, their own words can be analyzed, primarily in three seminal documents. The first document is the CCP's "Three Warfares" which consists of public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare (Kania 2016; Shinji, Masaaki &

Rira 2022). Employed in the South China Sea, for example, the “Three Warfares” strategy is intended to “control the prevailing discourse and influence perceptions in a way that advances China’s interests, while compromising the capability of opponents to respond” (ibid.).

*Unrestricted Warfare*, written by two PLA Colonels in 1999, was a pivotal moment in CCP history and provides unique insight into China’s thinking about Irregular Competition. In it, the authors proclaim that “The new principles of war are no longer ‘using armed forces to compel the enemy to submit to one’s will,’ but rather are ‘using all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one’s interests” (Liang and Xiangsui 1999, 7; Norris 2020).

The third critical document in understanding CCP Irregular Competition is the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) book titled *Science of Military Strategy* (China Aerospace Studies Institute 2021). Going beyond “Three Warfares” and “Unrestricted Warfare,” this work details Non-War Military Activities (NWMA) by way of a “menu of options to pursue CCP political objectives in the gray zone” (Bilms 2022). As Kevin Bilms from the US Office of the Secretary of Defense writes, NWMA “allows the PLA to do what Peter Layton described as steadily changing the status quo through competitive campaigns. Put another way, NWMA enables the PLA to find ways to victory without fighting and avoid an unambiguous, head-on challenge preferable for Western military planners” (ibid. Layton 2021, 2). In fact, the PLA “believes that hybrid warfare is just the way that states, particularly great powers, now engage in conflict,” and also that “the PLA regards the PRC’s capability to defend itself from hybrid threats as inadequate” (Solen 2022, 1).

## **Russia**

The Wagner Group is a Russian state-linked proxy organization operating with the consent, control, or direction of Russian political leadership. The committee understands that the Wagner Group enjoys the active support of the Russian Ministry of Defence, including but not limited to transportation, supply, and communications. The committee understands that Wagner Group forces are active in multiple countries in Africa, including the Central African Republic, Libya, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, and Sudan. The committee is aware of allegations of intentional spreading of disinformation, targeting of civilians, mass summary executions, and the denial of human rights across Africa by Wagner Group members. The committee is concerned that the conduct, structure, and questionable security operations performance of the Wagner Group in Africa worsens the security environment in already fragile African states and regions. (House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services 2022, 266)

Proxy conflict surfaces often in the study of Irregular Competition. According to Australian Army Officer Major Andrew Maher, “proxy conflict is defined as conflict which is perpetrated by others—either knowingly or unknowingly—on behalf of a third party to promote its own interests” (2019). Maher continues that this type of activity typically manifests as a major power working through a lesser power. This is not to include “remotely-controlled machines—a consideration which is included within the term ‘surrogate warfare’” (ibid.). Proxy warfare is also unlike the types of military warfare discussed earlier in that proxy conflict excludes overt capacity-building efforts routinely undertaken through international engagement activities. In general, Maher explains that proxy warfare obscures and separates the patron from the client, and thereby limits attribution of the effects generated. “For propaganda purposes, the inverse may

also occur. The patron, as a component of strategic signaling, overtly claims the actions by the client.” (ibid.).

Proxy war is routinely used by Russia as seen in the employment of the Wagner Group (Rácz 2021), the Night Wolves Motorcycle Gang (Harris 2018; Harris 2021; Lauder 2018, 5-16), and other non-uniformed proxies in Syria, Ukraine, Georgia, Estonia and elsewhere to everything from information operations to military operations. In “Twenty-First Century Proxy Warfare,” researchers Candace Rondeaux and David Sterman (2018) describe how, “in the Greater Middle East and its Eurasian periphery, proxy warfare is back with a vengeance, rivaling and, perhaps, exceeding the threat it posed during the late Cold War” (ibid.). The question of how America should deal with proxies in Irregular Competition. Author Amos Fox argues that America is wholly unprepared to deal with proxies. In “Conflict and the Need for a Theory of Proxy Warfare” (2020), the author states that,

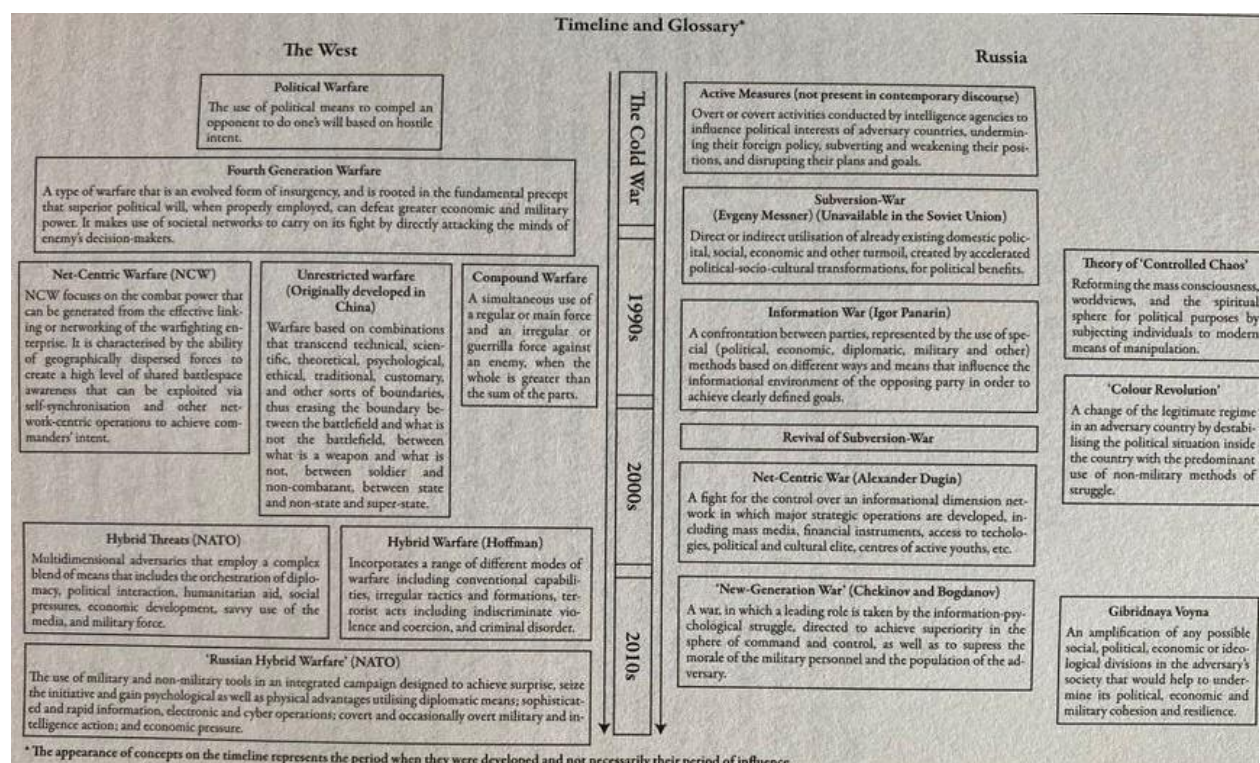
The [US] military fails to account for this type of environment. Instead, it speaks euphemistically by using phrases like, *By, With, and Through* to articulate the complexities of proxy environments. In doing so, it falls short in understanding the dynamics at work between actors in a proxy relationship, which has resulted in it doing poorly in modern proxy wars.

Therefore, the United States military should embrace proxy warfare from a theoretical standpoint and develop a resultant proxy warfare doctrine.

While the Fox’s premise may very well be true, the issue with this and other literature is that the onus is placed on “the military” – rather than the government as a whole - to contend with the problem of proxy warfare. By not eliciting the momentum of a whole-of-government (defined later in this Chapter) approach, confronting proxies may result in less-than-optimal outcomes.

Turning to Russia's view of itself, Ofer Fridman's book *Russian Hybrid Warfare: Resurgence and Politicisation* (2018) provides a timeline and glossary comparing The West and Russia's experience with hybrid warfare, as demonstrated in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Timeline and Glossary of Russian Hybrid Warfare (Fridman 2018)**



This book analyzed an interesting and alternative take on the subject of hybrid warfare, with particular emphasis in Russia. In it, political observers and strategists contend that it is actually the West that has been waging Hybrid War, or *Gibridnaya Voyna*, against Russia since the end of the Cold War. It also asks why Western observers claim that the Kremlin engages in Hybrid Warfare? These questions are answered by explaining the different perceptions and understanding of hybrid warfare, and what it means to different populations. *Gibridnaya Voyna* is understood as entirely non-military means used to politically subvert an adversary without

conventional force, which Russia believes the US and the West have been exercising for decades to destroy Russia (139). As a result, Russia, according to the authors, has been responding both militarily and through its own forms of hybrid warfare in response to this Western attack. This perspective is extremely helpful to this research because it reminds all that this vague, confusing subject is open to extreme variations in interpretation.

As Starling, Iyer, and Giesler (2022) wrote:

Both China and Russia have actually accused the United States of engaging in gray-zone activities (while doing so themselves), e.g. engaging surrogates such as contractors in a conflict or instigating the “color” revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. In fact, they have gone to great measures to harden their national interests against postulated US gray-zone interference to an unprecedented degree. For example, they have refined their ability to shape domestic perceptions through social-media manipulation, censorship, and absolute control of popular media.

In 2018, Jensen and Doran produced a Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) report titled “Chaos as a Strategy: Putin’s “Promethean” Gamble.” In summary, the authors conclude that despite Russia’s weaknesses as a Great Power, “the Kremlin increasingly is willing to take risks—sometimes recklessly—to balance its disadvantages against the relative power of Western competitors like the United States” (1). The outcome of this phenomenon is that Russian leaders and strategists have developed a set of methods aimed at “spreading disorder beyond their borders for strategic effect. Their goal is to create an environment in which the side that copes best with chaos wins” (4).

Building on the 2018 CEPA report found immediately above, Polyakova et al. wrote “The Evolution of Russian Hybrid Warfare” (2021) which explores the evolution and adaptations



of Russian hybrid warfare against four target countries and institutions — Ukraine, Estonia, the UK, and institutions like the EU and NATO. The conclusion is that Russia employs a “chaos strategy,” and tactical use of hybrid warfare, which is borne out of the perception among the Russian leadership that “Russia is locked in a form of great power competition with the United States and Europe, as well as increasingly with China. The stakes are high: ultimately, it is about the survival of the current Russian regime” (3). The problem for Russia is that it remains in a position where it cannot compete in a direct contest of national power, so it must resort to hybrid methods. The authors conclude that an effective strategy for deterring Russia in this environment is to expose, attribute, and discredit Russian hybrid warfare operations (47). Since the writing of the 2018 CEPA report, given the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, it must be acknowledged that the conflict has since devolved into primarily kinetic, conventional warfare.

### **China-Focused Traditional Military Theory**

Elbridge A Colby was the lead architect behind the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, the unclassified summary of which is available to the public online (Department of Defense 2018). Colby’s highly-acclaimed 2021 book, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, outlines traditional military theory on how America should align its military priorities, with special emphasis on China. The heart of the work centers around the theory that the US should focus its military strategy on an opponent’s “best” strategies when deriving national security policy. In the case of China, America’s number one security threat, Colby states that US goals should be limited to preventing the CCP from achieving regional hegemony in Asia since this would imperil America’s critical interests (Colby 2021, 97). The US must establish and hold a line “behind which enough states can gather to outweigh China and

whatever confederates it might rally to help Beijing achieve hegemony in Asia” (ibid.). In order to adopt an appropriate military strategy, Colby wrote, the US must first develop some estimation of how China might act. This prediction is, of course, easier said than done.

The United States’ core concern is not to fully understand China or predict its every move – it is to keep Beijing from doing things that run contrary to important American interests. Washington’s core interest is thus fundamentally defensive: it wants to deny any other state hegemony over a key region of the world. America’s concern, in essence, is whether China jeopardizes this interest. (100)

Colby qualifies an adversary’s “best” strategy as one that (a) rationally advance the adversary’s interests. In this case a strategy that would result in gains that outweigh costs. In addition, the best strategy would (b) advance the adversary’s goal – China’s in this case – of regional hegemony (101). If regional hegemony is in fact the goal, China must become more powerful than the US and its partners in the region, “meaning that it must be able to defeat them in a systemic regional war” (ibid.). How the US prepares its military strategy to defeat China’s involves several options, Colby wrote. First is to prepare for any eventuality, but in doing this the US would spread scarce resources thin and make the US vulnerable to the CCP’s strategies that matter most. Second is to focus on the most likely scenarios, such as China’s continued “Gray Zone” activities (104). “Adherents of this approach argue that US defense planning should focus on presence activities, nonmilitary missions, and flexibility rather than on preparing for major war” (ibid.). Colby counters that common events such as continued gray zone activities are “not always or even normally the most consequential, and consequential events are what the United States should particularly care about. Common but insignificant events require some attention, but it is significant events that demand special focus” (ibid.). Colby posits that

the most likely focus areas - such as gray zone - can be managed with smaller and less demanding steps. This is simply because a major war between the US and China would “almost certainly have much greater significance for Asian geopolitics than anything that happens in the gray zone, which is, after all, a euphemism for actions that do not cross the threshold of major significance” (105). China may be able to use gray zone tactics to assert control over small, peripheral portions of territory, but it is highly unlikely to assert domineering influence, a prerequisite for achieving regional hegemony without escalating above the gray zone, the author wrote.

Beijing can therefore achieve its goals of regional hegemony by threatening war, or actually precipitating or winning it. This strategy requires continued CCP growth to achieve the power needed to overwhelm any realistic coalition that could form to check its ambitions. During this period of growth, the CCP must discourage nations from joining or remaining in such an anti-hegemonic coalition (112). Discouragement is empowered by diplomatic, economic, and other nonmilitary instruments of national power to fashion penalties. Penalties, Colby wrote, must include the possibility of the use of the CCP’s core military component, and all stakeholders must be aware of this capability (112).

Based on realist theory, Colby concludes that “denial defense” is the only acceptable approach which will allow the US to “effectively defend its allies in the anti-hegemonic coalition against a very powerful China and its limited war strategy” (150). Rather than seeking regional dominance itself, denial defense focuses on denying China the ability to attain regional hegemony. “As long as the defense is strong enough to keep the ally on side and affiliated with the coalition, then it is succeeding in its core strategic purpose” (151). Denial option one involves denying the attacker the ability to seize key territory (153) while option two prevents

the attacker's ability to hold seized territory (161). After an effective denial defense, Colby predicts that China would then engage in a limited war to "escalate horizontally, vertically, or both in an attempt to alter the war's boundaries" (171).

In summary, Colby posited that America must change its military calculation, focus on the CCP's "best strategy," and prioritize the goal of denial defense over less important interests. In most concrete terms, Colby states that the US should focus first on an effective defense of Taiwan, "the natural first target of China's focused and sequential strategy" (237). Following Taiwan, defense of the Philippines should be priority two (ibid.). Thirdly, accepting that denial defense may fail, the US should make provision for integrated denial defense-cum-binding strategy (ibid.). In this scenario, should Taiwan and the Philippines fall, China would be forced to broaden and intensify a war in ways that would "catalyze the resolve that the United States and other potentially engaged members of the anti-hegemonic coalition need to prevail, either through an expanded denial campaign or, if that fails or is judged infeasible, a recapture approach (238).

As traditional military theory involving China is explained by works like Colby's, it is worth acknowledging where Irregular Competition may still prove useful, assuming Colby's theory is correct. As Colby noted, China is not yet the regional hegemon in Asia. The CCP requires time to build military capability, economic infrastructure, and international diplomatic capacity to achieve such a goal. As editors Andrew Erickson and Ryan Martinson laid out in a series of works combined under the title of *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations* (2019), China is currently buying the time and space needed to grow through their activities in the Gray Zone – the term preferred by the editors. Erickson and Martinson's anthology reminds us that the naval battle with China already is underway, "and that it is about more than big ships,

aircraft, and submarines. The PLA Navy, which certainly likes to show off its new fleet, also relies on a coast guard, fishing boats, and maritime militia, which are perfectly suited for a gray-zone space of neither war nor peace” (Horner 2019).

This is not decisive battle per se, whether at sea or on land. “Still, Mao’s dicta echo: a struggle is 10 percent military / 90 percent political; avoid the decisive encounter until the very last moment; and, above all, protract, to enable one to build from weakness to strength” (ibid.). In a private meeting in 2013, Xi Jinping told his comrades that China would remain weaker than the West “for some time. China’s naval operations in the maritime gray zone—patient, purposeful, relentless—embody Maoist patience, buying time to maneuver from a position of relative weakness to one of strength” (ibid.).

This time and space of military, economic, and diplomatic growth is afforded to the CCP through its gray zone activities (Erickson and Martinson 2019). China requires this growth to ultimately assert itself as the regional hegemon described by Colby (2021). It is in this gap - where China uses the gray zone to buy time and space to grow - that the US may employ Irregular Competition to prevent the CCP from achieving its ultimate strategic objective of being the regional hegemon that Colby discussed.

The above scenario assumes that Colby is correct. It assumes that China’s goal is to be the regional hegemon in Asia, that it has not yet achieved that goal, and - most importantly - that it can only achieve its goal primarily through military power. In that scenario the researcher proposes that Irregular Competition still has a place for employment between now and if/when China achieves regional hegemony.

## **Non-State Actors**

For non-state actors, whether terrorists, transnational organized criminals, political extremists, or others, their reliance on Irregular Competition activities is more often out of necessity imposed upon them by a lack of resources needed to confront adversaries symmetrically. It would be irresponsible, however, to make too many generalizations about non-state actors. Pro-Iranian fundamentalist terrorists believe, for example, that acts of Irregular Competition are ordained by God and that martyrdom in the course of the struggle against the infidel leads to Paradise – which of course presents a very potent threat to adversaries (Wilkinson 1997) Those non-state actors obviously think differently about themselves and their use of Irregular Competition compared to, say, Sinn Fein in Ireland, which sought international recognition of Ireland as an independent Irish republic, free to choose its own form of government. Without analyzing the use of Irregular Competition for each “type” of non-state actor, it seems reasonable to claim that non-state actors usually “present themselves as noble Robin Hoods, champions of the oppressed and downtrodden” (Wilkinson 1997, 60). This generalization in turn provides justification for the use of Irregular Competition with malign intent.

In *Gangs, pseudo-militaries, and other modern mercenaries: New dynamics in uncomfortable wars*, author Max Manwaring notes that many state- and nonstate-associated gangs – popular militias, youth leagues, criminal gangs (bandas criminales), “and other loosely organized networks of propaganda-agitator” (political criminal) gangs – are operating as state and nonstate surrogates in the contemporary asymmetric and irregular security arena” (2010, xv). Manwaring focuses on the political vision of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin “within which many nonstate and nation-state political actors now operate” (xvi). Lenin argued that “anyone wishing to force radical political-economic-social change or compel an adversary to accede to one’s will must

organize, train, and employ a body of political agitator groups” (ibid.). If these “instruments of statecraft succeeded in helping to tear apart the fabric on which a targeted society rests, the instability and violence they create can serve as the ‘midwife of a new social order’” (ibid.).

Regarding non-state actor financing, the House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services (2022) noted in its 2023 Defense Authorization Act report that that “one of the major challenges to countering violent extremist organizations (VEOs) is the ability to track international financial transactions in real time” (268). The committee also recognized that that central to the counter VEO mission “is the ability to deny resources and capabilities to VEOs so they are unable to conduct operations targeting the United States and its allies, partners or interests” (ibid.).

As for the future of non-state actors, David Ucko’s 2022 book titled *The Insurgent’s Dilemma: A Struggle to Prevail*, the author describes three paradigms moving forward. While the focus is primarily on insurgents within a state, focused on affecting change in that state, the ideas shared by Ucko may be applied to other non-state actors such as global terrorist organizations. The first two paradigms Ucko outlines will be quite familiar to the reader. Number one involves localized insurgency. In this space, non-state actors target a geographic section of territory to control rather than trying to govern an entire state. The battle for Marawi in the Southern Philippines would be a good example of this (Franco 2017). The Number two scenario for the non-state actor is infiltrative insurgency. This entails subversion of a state’s government through legal channels as a road to power, followed by turning institutions against the state. The Maoist takeover of the Nepalese Government follows this model. Ucko’s third paradigm is described as ideational insurgency. Embracing the dilemma that many non-state actors have – that is not being able to confront a state head on without facing a coercive response

– the insurgency “moves its organization to the virtual plane, using social media and internet communications” (113). Emphasis in this emerging operating environment is online as opposed to “on-the-ground,” generating alternative realities that extend in-group loyalty even in the absence of in-person contact (113-4). “The result is a de-territorialized movement whose members exist at once within a digital counter-state and also within the state itself, each world operating by very different norms” (114)

### **Gray Zone**

For the next several sub-sections of this literature review, key definitions of common terms related to Irregular Competition will be defined. Various definitions for different terms will be provided, along with designation and explanation for which particular definition was used in this study. The conversation starts first with *The Gray Zone*.

In “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges,” Dr. Frank Hoffman contends that the US must abandon a binary peace/war distinction (2018). Instead, a continuum is more suitable for understanding the nature of conflict as it may depict the following:

A range of different modes of conflict arrayed by increasing levels of violence, from measures short of armed conflict, to large-scale conventional wars, utilizing modality and scale of violence as distinguishing factors. A continuum is not a rigid tool, but rather an intellectual construct that opens our cognitive lens to the full-range of challenges we must understand, and will bring analytic coherence to both the complex array of contemporary security problems as well as the range of the military professional’s domain within the national security arena. (32)



Hoffman shares several definitions of “gray zone” as it is understood by others, but then presents his own definition as follows:

Those covert or illegal activities of non- traditional statecraft that are below the threshold of armed organized violence; including disruption of order, political subversion of government or non-governmental organizations, psychological operations, abuse of legal processes, and financial corruption as part of an integrated design to achieve strategic advantage. (36)

Theodore Jensen (2019) posits that the term “Gray Zone” is a common place holder in the English language to position a confusing or ill-understood concept” (iii). Once the concept at hand becomes understood, the term “Gray Zone” is usually no longer used but is replaced instead with a more apt term. Jensen observes that “This has not been the case when it comes to Gray Zone conflict, the term persists and acts as a boundary to responsive policies and a barrier to making substantive strategic discussions” Jensen contends that,

A more useful term is Restricted Hybrid Warfare, the ambiguous and aggressive application of combined national power to revise geopolitical realities or loosen international restrictions in favor of a specific nation state or non-state actor. This term recognizes the hybrid nature of the Gray Zone phenomenon but moves it out of the murky no-mans-land that keeps the term from being useful to strategists and policy makers as well as effectively educating the American public (iv).

Author David Lemont’s 2019 thesis titled “Narrowing the Grey Zone Conflict Margin” attempts to narrow the definition and understanding of Gray Zone. In attempting to do so, the author highlights a plethora of issues that one may include in a discussion of Gray Zone, including drone strikes, airport security, election hacking, homeland defense, military training,

low-intensity conflicts, cyber-attacks, land occupation, hostages, biological and chemical agents, terrorists, multi-agency responses, etc. These topics are as important as they are all-encompassing. The take-away from this work is that the topic at hand is difficult to narrow down to a useable definition, which was precisely the aim of the writing, per the title itself of the thesis. Furthermore, Lemont focuses *mostly* on tactical-type responses to the problem of Gray Zone conflict, like common communication systems and military training (44). While such concerns are important, they do not address the larger strategic ideas surrounding Irregular Competition that this research proposes are necessary to indirectly compete and deter adversaries.

In its Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment, “Gray Zone Effort Update,” the US Defense Department provided the following definition of Gray Zone:

A conceptual space between peace and war, occurring when actors purposefully use multiple instruments of power to achieve political-security objectives with activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict, and threaten US and allied interests by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws.” (Koven 2016, 3)

A component of the Defense Department, US Special Operations Command (2015) defined Gray Zone simply as “competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality.” This research , however, will use a definition of Gray Zone found in H.R. 6452, a document that required the Director of National Intelligence to produce a National Intelligence Estimate on escalation and de-escalation of gray

zone activities in great power competition (US Congress 2022, 9). In it, Congress defined Gray Zone as:

activity to advance the national interests of a State that— (i) falls between ordinary statecraft and open warfare; (ii) is carried out with an intent to maximize the advancement of interests of the state without provoking a kinetic military response by the United States; and (iii) falls on a spectrum that ranges from covert adversary operations, to detectible covert adversary operations, to un-attributable adversary operations, to deniable adversary operations, to open adversary operations. (ibid.)

Defense Department and Congressional definitions both hold that Gray Zone activities constitute something conducted by adversaries. They are a thing that must therefore be identified, prevented, countered, or mitigated. Irregular Competition, on the other hand, is something that the US and its adversaries may *both* engage in to confront or deter each other. Furthermore, unlike Gray Zone activities that take place between “open statecraft and open warfare,” (ibid.), Irregular Competition continues whether conflict is present or not.

## **Hybrid Warfare**

Williamson Murray and Peter Mansoor wrote in *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*, that hybrid warfare can be defined as “conflict involving a combination of conventional military forces and irregulars, which could include both state and non-state actors, aimed at achieving a common political purpose” (2012). It is equally helpful to take guidance from Weichong Ong’s “The Rise of Hybrid Actors in the Asia-Pacific,” and accept that “hybrid” conflict is simply complex and multi-dimensional, rather than linear (2018, 740-61).

Weichong Ong's "The Rise of Hybrid Actors in the Asia-Pacific" (2018) examines the manifestation and trends of hybrid warfare in the Asia-Pacific region through the lenses of the following three key hybrid actors: China, North Korea and ISIS affiliates in Southeast Asia. This is helpful to any study of Irregular Competition in that it explains why the hybrid approach can be such an attractive, strategic option for both state and non-state actors who may not be capable of engaging the US in traditional conflict. This work also addresses the impact of how the constant pushing of boundaries in hybrid warfare can lead to unintended consequences, up to and including conventional war.

Dr. Frank Hoffman provided the following definition of *hybrid warfare*: "the purposeful and tailored violent application of advanced conventional military capabilities with irregular tactics, with terrorism and criminal activities, or combination of regular and irregular forces, operating as part of a common design in the same battlespace" (Hoffman 2018, 40). *This is the definition of hybrid warfare that is accepted for this research study.* The primary distinction between Hybrid Warfare and Irregular Competition is that Hybrid Warfare requires the use of violence in some form, applied through military capabilities, whereas Irregular Competition may not involve either.

Going further, Hoffman offers the following definition of "hybrid warfare:"

The purposeful and tailored violent application of advanced conventional military capabilities with irregular tactics, with terrorism and criminal activities, or combination of regular and irregular forces, operating as part of a common design in the same battlespace. (40)

In 2015, Hoffman wrote "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War," in which he lamented that:

The conflict spectrum includes a range of activities to which students and practitioners of war refer when attempting to characterize a given conflict by participants, methods, level of effort, types of forces, levels of organization or sophistication, etc. As should be expected in any attempt to define aspects of something as complex as war, there is ample debate over characterizations and definitions, whether one form of war is more or less complex than any other, or whether war can be so neatly categorized as to subdivide it along a spectrum in the first place. Debates over supposedly “new” and generational wars are common today in academic circles, and the prevalence of irregular wars is increasingly recognized. (Hoffman 2015a)

Hoffman’s writing most relevant to this research, however, is his depiction of the “forms of statecraft and influence,” represented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Forms of Statecraft and Influence (Hoffman 2018, 35)**

| Traditional/Legitimate   | Non-traditional/Illegitimate                                     |
|--|--|
| Security cooperation and foreign military sales                | Political subversion by penetration or false-front organizations |
| Economic sanctions   | Economic corruption  |
| Public diplomacy and support for IGO/NGO                       | Propaganda/psychological operations/disinformation               |
| Military presence/engagements/exercises                        | Cyber intrusions/cyber corruption/disruption                     |
| Foreign internal defense                                       | Sponsored criminal activity                                      |
| Freedom of navigation exercise (maritime or aerospace domains) | Electoral interference   |

In considering whether to execute or engage in the types of activities found in Table 2, Hoffman posits that it is the character of tools listed that distinguishes the United States from other powers. “Some of the tools used by others are more ambiguous and nontraditional instruments of statecraft and, may be of nefarious or of questionable legitimacy. The salient

questions are - are we doing the right things? Are we doing enough? Are the right agencies doing it?" (35). The "so what?" in Hoffman's writing is that, understanding future security challenges for the US first requires that "we reflect and interpret the past, understand the present, and think rigorously about what lies over the horizon in order to adapt to the changing character of conflict" (42). In order to do this, according to the author, one must be able to articulate 21<sup>st</sup> century conflict with appropriate mental models and frameworks. The reader is encouraged to reference lessons learned in Chapter 4 to better understand the utility of employing different irregular approaches.

In employing what Bhattacharya (2022) describes as hybrid power tools, the author wrote that the use of multiple power tools on horizontal and vertical axes can synchronize strategic tools according to the requirement of implementation. It has been observed, however, that the horizontal synchronization of power tools is more impactful as it includes a wider scope of effect. The essential clue here is to understand that these strategic power tools are employed in multiple capacities and on vivid levels concurrently in synchronized pattern (ibid.). This organization of hybrid warfare by way of a schematic approach thus results "in formation of synchronized attack packages (SAPs) customized by combination for use in specific vulnerable targets by the actors" (ibid.). This idea is depicted graphically in Table 3.

**Table 3. Integration of Multiple Power Tools in Hybrid Warfare (Bhattacharya 2022)**

| Hybrid warfare verticals<br>Kinetic and non-kinetic                       | Methods employed                             | Outcome                                       |
|---|--|---|
| Economic: loans, trade dependency   | Loans, and dollar diplomacy                  | Economic dependency, weak economy             |
| Political: ethnic cleavages, proxy population, religious and sectarianism | Exploitation based on ethnicity and religion | Instability and division in society           |
| Cyber warfare: theft, hacking   | Data stealing/sabotaging                     | Info-infrastructure crash/espionage           |
| Cognizant: disinformation, incitement, social media/provocateurs          | Social media, print media, literatures       | Propaganda/public incitement/unrest           |
| Non-state actors, criminal organizations                                  | Sabotage/suicide attack/violence             | Terror/civil war/unrest/capturing territories |
| Private military corporations (PMC), mercenaries                          | Violence/killings                            | Killings/espionage                            |
| Military: conventional, guerrilla, nuclear                                | Force-to-force attack                        | Killing/annihilation/capturing territories    |

## Political Warfare

In his book *On Political War* (1989), author Paul Smith defined Political Warfare as the use of political means to compel an opponent to do one's will, based on hostile intent. In this sense one may understand it as the calculated interaction between a government and a target audience. That audience may include another state's government, military, and/or general population (ibid). *For the purposes of this research, however, George Kennan's definition of Political Warfare below will be used.* Kennan – an American diplomat and key figure in the development of US Cold War policy, often referred to as the "father of containment," introduced and defined as follows the term "political warfare" in 1948 as he provided guidance to a newly founded CIA:

Political warfare is the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in time of peace. In the broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt

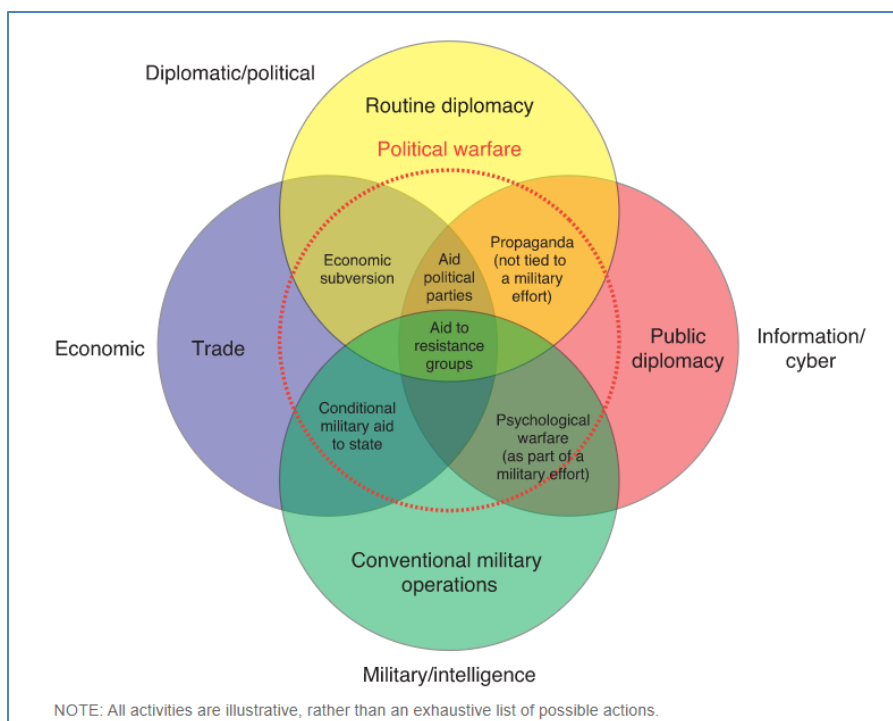
and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures, and "white" propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of "friendly" foreign elements, "black" psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states. (Kennan 1948)

In a piece titled "New Paradigms for 21st-Century Conflict" (2007), author David Kilcullen provides a detailed description of the 21st century environment, including that of political warfare. He outlines how the era of political warfare has changed since the days of George Kennan, including by way of globalization and technological advances. This supports this research as it provides insight into how the phenomenon of political warfare has evolved and reminds the reader that the state of Irregular Competition is forever in flux.

A 2019 RAND report authored by Robinson et al. scoped the definition of Political Warfare in an attempt to clarify the types of activities it comprises, as distinguished from normal practices of statecraft (Robinson et al. 2019). The authors stated that the boundaries of Political Warfare "are likely to remain fuzzy because views differ about what constitutes normal statecraft. Political Warfare consists of the intentional use of one or more of the implements of power — diplomatic/political, information/cyber, military/intelligence, and economic — to affect the political composition or decision-making in a state" (2). This construct is illustrated in Figure 4, demonstrating where Political Warfare fits among what the authors describe as the "implements of power" (ibid.).

**Figure 4. Where Political Warfare Fits Within the Implements of Power (Robinson et al. 2019)**





Authors Max Boot and Michael Scott Doran wrote in the Council on Foreign Relations’ “Policy Innovation Memorandum No. 33, Political Warfare,” that the United States lacks the tools to contest a struggle for influence, or “hearts and minds” (2013). The country is facing state and non-state competitors that have their own differences but may be united in promoting visions of society that are at odds with American interests and ideals. Boot and Doran contend that the US does not have a political strategy to capitalize on any short-term gains it might achieve through its current activities. They note that,

It is time to develop such a strategy and to call it by its rightful but long-neglected name: political warfare. The problem is that the government has gotten out of the habit of waging political warfare since the end of the Cold War. Instead, the US government focuses on public diplomacy aimed at “telling America’s story”—the mandate of the State Department’s Office of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. But selling the virtues of the United States—the central concern of public diplomacy—was far more important

in the Cold War than it is today...This is a multifaceted struggle over identity, power, and authority...The United States has the potential to influence such struggles in a positive direction, but it is not skilled at doing so. (2013)

Boot and Doran highlight the need for a return to political warfare, which they argue the US has lost the knack for. This is useful in understanding Irregular Competition because, according to Boot, the United States does not have a political strategy to capitalize on short-term gains achieved around the world. One false correlation to be wary of, however, is that who a particular country and/or organization sides with may not always be the result of Political Warfare efforts but may instead be the result of other factors, including internal instability.

In a RAND Corporation report titled “An American Way of Political Warfare” (2018), authors Cleveland, Crocker, Egel, Liepman, and David Maxwell make the case that,

It is time for the United States to seriously consider developing a capability to orchestrate all relevant elements of US national power in response to these nonconventional threats. An effective response is necessarily a whole-of-government effort and would augment the US Department of Defense (DoD) irregular warfare capability, with vital roles for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), US Department of State (DoS), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and other interagency partners. And such a capability must be able to operate in both war and in peace, with the lead agency dictated by the context. We propose the establishment of an American political warfare capability, with the authorities and knowledge to synchronize all elements of national power in contests with and without armed conflict... We anticipate that an effective political warfare capability would require developing and synchronizing three core types of functional activities: Irregular warfare...expeditionary diplomacy...[and] covert political

action...[Finally,] the Need for a National Political Warfare Center [NPWC] alongside the requirement for a political warfare capability is critical.

This study is helpful in that it touches on whole-of-government solutions, which is rare in most writing on the subject at hand.

In 2010 the US Department of State & USAID first produced “Leading through Civilian Power: The First Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review,” and the two organizations continue to update similar documents annually. While there are many newer QDDRs, the 2010 version is particularly important because it provides a blueprint for elevating American "civilian power" to better advance national interests and to be a better partner to DOD and other agencies. The document proclaims that leading through civilian power means directing and coordinating the resources of all America's civilian agencies to prevent and resolve conflicts; help countries lift themselves out of poverty into prosperous, stable, and democratic states; and build global coalitions to address global problems. Civilian leadership remains a cornerstone of any American security agenda, which would extend to Irregular Competition activities.

Loch Johnson’s *American Foreign Policy and the Challenges of World Leadership: Power, Principle, and the Constitution* (2015) focuses on the fundamentals of foreign policy, including theory, historical evolution, institutions, and instruments. The work also offers an in-depth look at the tools that the U.S. uses to defend and advance its interests abroad, including diplomacy, trade, aid, war-making, moral suasion, spying, and covert action. The research methodology used in this work is primarily academic in nature as the book serves as an advanced education tool for students as well as practitioners of foreign diplomacy and national security matters. This work is helpful to Irregular Competition analysis in that it provides an overarching look at American diplomatic efforts and interests, and the instruments used to

promote them.

Writing for the United States Air Force's China Aerospace Studies Institute, author Derek Solen (2022), while studying China's strategic aspirations toward Taiwan as well as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, provided one view on the difference between political warfare and hybrid warfare:

In common usage hybrid warfare has become synonymous with political warfare. The confusion of hybrid and political warfare was likely facilitated by their similar emphases on information and narrative, but the two concepts were different. First, their purposes were different: hybrid warfare was thought to be a way that weaker actors would more effectively confront stronger adversaries in war, not as a way that one state could influence or subvert another in peacetime. Moreover, while hybrid warfare was distinguished by the combination of methods by which it is waged, political warfare is distinguished not by nonmilitary means or nonviolent methods but by its limiting principle that actions not exceed the threshold of war. Therefore, violent action by armed forces is theoretically possible in political warfare, and such could be said to occur in a gray zone between peace and interstate war. Incidentally, "gray zone operations" subsumes political warfare into a concept that better conveys political warfare's scope of action and its limiting principle, but gray zone operations are not exclusively concerned with influencing or subverting a state. (Solen 2022)

This work is helpful in reminding all that political warfare is not necessarily limited to non-violent methods, but instead by the notion that it generally does not exceed the threshold of war. While considering both hybrid warfare, political warfare, and China's contemplation of an invasion of Taiwan, Solen contends that it is imperative that Washington clarify what it is

determined to fight for, and under what conditions, in East Asia in order to prevent such an eventuality. “It is also crucial for Washington make the case to the American people for defending those interests and be honest with the people about the potential costs of doing so” (16). This point is fundamental to the definition of Irregular Competition, as it is defined in this research, regarding influencing populations and affecting legitimacy.

As for the US defense department, it is stated clearly that Political Warfare is by no means the preserve of the US military to lead such efforts. In a 2015 white paper, the US Army wrote that, given its diplomatic and economic content and its focus on achieving political ends, political warfare is likely best led by agencies beyond DOD (United States S Army Special Operations Command 2015).

### **Irregular Warfare**

Irregular *Warfare* – something different than Irregular *Competition* - is defined in this research as “military activities to support state and non-state actors in their attempts to influence populations and affect legitimacy.” While other definitions and discussion on the subject of Irregular Warfare can be found below, this is the definition that is accepted for the purposes of this research paper. The United States Department of Defense’s (DOD) defines Irregular Warfare similar to the way this research paper does (2020, 2), but DOD does *not* stipulate that Irregular Warfare is limited to action taken by the military alone. This research paper narrows Irregular Warfare to an activity undertaken by the military.

Despite the US Defense Department’s vision of Irregular Warfare as something more expansive than just a military endeavor, the doctrine on the subject is heavily focused on what the military can and should do, often in support of other agencies (Department of Defense

2020a). According to American military doctrine, Irregular Warfare includes five core activities including Unconventional Warfare (enabling resistance movements), Foreign Internal Defense (supporting another country's security programs), Counter-Terrorism, stability operations, and Counter-Insurgency (Department of Defense 2017; United States Army Special Operations Command 2016, 4). Defense Department documents on Irregular Warfare "also describe six enabling activities for population-focused arenas including military information support operations, cyberspace operations, counter-threat networks, counter-threat finance, civil-military operations, and security cooperation" (Bilms 2021b). The activities listed above clearly indicate that Irregular Warfare itself is very much a military endeavor. Military support to other agencies is still a military endeavor. The State Department, the Department of Energy, and the Treasury, for example, do not publish guidance or doctrine on how they will conduct Irregular Warfare, per published organizational missions and visions. As Kevin Bilms (2021b) with the US Defense Department wrote,

Several of these [Irregular Warfare] terms are reactive, potentially redundant, or vague and opaque to a non-practitioner... The prevalence of "counter" implies tactical reactions to adversarial provocations or actions, while other terms fail to describe their substance and value proposition to broader strategy. Observers have noted the rhetorical challenge facing irregular warfare in contrast to traditional warfare, which places its activities at a disadvantage with unfamiliar audiences more used to the military role in wartime operations. Additionally, terms such as "military information support operations," "cyberspace operations," "civil-military operations," and "security cooperation" do little more than assert that the military should operate in information, cyberspace, civil-military matters, and ... security.

American General (Retired) Charles Cleveland in 2020 wrote an analytical memoir titled “The American Way of Irregular Warfare.” He posited that American irregular warfare “is the United States’ unique, and in recent times troubled, approach to conflict in which armed civilian or paramilitary forces, and not regular armies, are the primary combatants. In most forms, it emphasizes the importance of local partnerships and gaining legitimacy and influence among targeted populations. It is thus a critical capability in contests where populations, rather than territory, are decisive” (Cleveland and Egel 2020). Also in 2020, the US Defense Department revealed the following observations, among others, regarding its ability to employ Irregular Warfare: “We remain underprepared for Irregular War. 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” (Department of Defense 2020a, “Irregular Warfare Annex,” 4).

In his monograph of the same name, Lieutenant Colonel Ned Marsh employs the euphemism of “tickling the dragon’s tail”—referring to the practice in nuclear experimentation of “teasing” a plutonium core toward critical mass—to explain the idea that the ongoing development of an irregular critical mass “will produce such an uncontrollable chain reaction that the result will be social disruption and instability, adversely affecting peace and security to such a degree that the international order could be irrevocably altered” (Marsh 2019). Marsh uses a separate analogy, that of an irregular conflict “demon core” to describe the danger associated with the contemporary and prolific use of irregular conflict – referred to as Irregular Warfare in this document - as a tactic and strategy of global state and non-state actors in an

environment characterized by globalization, complexity, expanding populations, and the information age. The dynamic is compounded further by state nuclear and conventional warfare hegemony. The lesson to be learned here as it applies to this research on Irregular Competition is that an increased global asymmetry exists, and there is a decreased ability for actors to compete conventionally. This “space” is where Irregular Competition may prove useful to America. In 2022, Lieutenant General (Retired) Michael Nagata laid out two requirements for success in Irregular Warfare. First, he said, is an acknowledgement that America’s risk aversion in Irregular Warfare is “antagonistic to success in Irregular Warfare” (Nagata 2022). The simple message is that Irregular Warfare involves great risk because the initiator will never be able to control everything that is happening in the Irregular Warfare campaign. Second is that the US – or anyone participating in Irregular Warfare – must adopt a strategic or policy “attitude of generosity toward those you will work with...If you are a transactional actor, you will fail,” Nagata proclaimed (ibid.). These lessons are likely applicable to the larger idea of Irregular Competition laid out in this research.

Efforts among those affiliated with the Department of Defense to emphasize and educate others on Irregular Warfare seem to be growing. As author Sean McFate wrote in late 2022, “there is a growing insurgency within the U.S. military that seeks to revitalize our nation’s irregular warfare capacity, beyond simply kicking in doors and bagging terrorists. That’s a sliver of what irregular warfare entails, and what was demanded of irregular warriors over the past 20 years. But strategic competition is a different fight, and we need strategies beyond board games to deal with it” (McFate 2022).

To address such challenges, the Defense Department in early 2023 officially stood up the Irregular Warfare Center. The stated mission of the center is to “amplify and collaborate to build

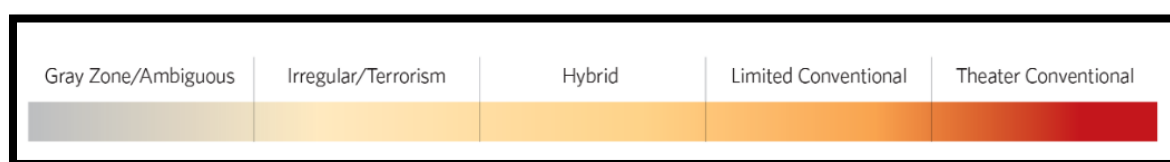


an innovative and adaptable global networked IW community of interest; To strategically illuminate current and future irregular threats, crises, and obstacles; and to address current and future irregular threats to the US, allies, and partners by providing optionality” (Irregular Warfare Center n.d.).

### **The Spectrum of Conflict Defined by Dr. Frank Hoffman**

In attempting to clarify the evolving complexity of conflict today, Dr. Frank Hoffman shared what he called the “Spectrum of Conflict in Unconventional Warfare” (2015a) found in Figure 5. In this work, Hoffman defines “Gray Zone” as deliberate multidimensional activities by a state actor just below the threshold of aggressive use of military forces. In such conflicts, adversaries employ an integrated suite of national and subnational instruments of power in an ambiguous war to gain specified strategic objectives without crossing the threshold of overt conflict. Adversaries may employ proxy forces to increase the level of military power being used without losing deniability (Hoffman 2015a).

**Figure 5. Spectrum of Conflict in Unconventional Warfare (Hoffman 2015a)**



Dr. Hoffman defines “Irregular Warfare” as indirect and asymmetric approaches that avoid direct and risky confrontations with strong forces. The goal for an irregular force is to erode its adversary’s power, legitimacy, and will. Such conflicts are usually drawn out or protracted in time. They can include insurgencies, counterinsurgencies, terrorism, and counterterrorism (ibid.).

Hybrid conflict, according to Hoffman, reflects more than a cross-breeding or blurring of regular and irregular tactics. It was originally defined as involving “Any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, catastrophic terrorism, and criminal behavior in the battlespace to obtain desired political objectives” (Hoffman 2007; Hoffman 2015a; Hoffman 2015b). In addition, crime, socially disruptive behavior, and mass terrorism aspects of hybrid warfare should not be overlooked, but the fusion of advanced capabilities with the fluidity of irregular tactics is key and has been borne out repeatedly over the past decade (Hoffman 2015a).

In defining “unconventional warfare,” Hoffman equates the term with what George Kennan defined as “political warfare.” Hoffman wrote that “Kennan’s definition of political warfare is misleading. His concept has little to do with warfare per se; it is largely about non-military efforts associated with subversion or counter-subversion. While these can have a political element to them, in terms of aiding political groups and factions, the range of efforts involved goes beyond the diplomatic and political sphere” (Hoffman 2015a). Hoffman noted, however, that this category of unconventional/political warfare is unique.

There is little doubt that unconventional warfare and the types of techniques included in Kennan’s definition of political warfare are relevant to the 21st century. Unlike other forms of warfare in the proposed spectrum of conflict, unconventional warfare does not fit easily within a spectrum in terms of the scale of violence. Moreover, unconventional warfare can occur concurrently with other methods in both peace and war. (Hoffman 2015a)

Hoffman concludes his definitions of the elements comprising the spectrum of conflict with those of limited conventional war and major theater war. To the right of hybrid conflicts on

the spectrum, Hoffman wrote, we next consider “limited” wars. “These are generally fought between state actors using conventional military means but are bounded by such limiting considerations as geographic boundaries, types of targets, or disciplined use of force” (Hoffman 2015a). Finally, in addressing major theater wars, Hoffman warns that while an American-led power structure has contributed to subdued levels of interstate conflict and war, “that system and its attendant security are being challenged by major powers” (ibid.). This dynamic has been abetted by “a reduced U.S. presence in key regions and diplomatic affairs relative to the Cold War era and by some regional players who are building up or pursuing nuclear weapons and acquiring other destabilizing weapon systems” (ibid.).

### **Whole-of-Government**

Author Pollitt defined whole of government to “denote the aspiration to achieve horizontal and vertical coordination in order to eliminate situations in which different policies undermine each other, so as to make better use of scarce resources, to create synergies by bringing together different stakeholders in a particular policy area, and to offer citizens seamless rather than fragmented access to services” (Christensen and Laegreid 2008, 98). It can refer to cooperation between agencies within a single government or cooperation among levels of government. Whole of government reforms are generally seen as “conscious organizational design or reorganization” that call for political leaders to force cooperation between bureaucracies (Christensen and Laegreid 2006, 9). The whole of government redesign attempts to shift existing bureaucratic structures in a way that forces collaboration and cooperation between agencies (Langberg 2010, 35).

As William & Mary University Chancellor and former Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates stated, "Whole of government efforts are all about bringing together all of the different tools available to advance American interests" (2018). Gates' quote provides a useful way of understanding the *objective* of Whole-of-Government activities. *Defining Whole-of-Government*, however, is more challenging. A Center for Security Studies report authored by Andrea Baumann posits that "there is as of yet no internationally agreed standard model for WGAs [whole-of-government approaches]. One would also search in vain for a uniform definition of such integrated approaches. In principle, WGAs aim to improve coordination within a given government" (2013, 2).

Daniel Langberg observed that today's national security environment demands whole-of-government approaches to complex national missions ranging from combating terrorism and trafficking in persons to securing cyberspace (2010, 1). According to the author, these "and many other twenty-first-century security challenges require an agile and integrated response; however, our national security system is organized along functional lines (diplomatic, military, intelligence, law enforcement, etc.) with weak coordinating mechanisms across these functions" (ibid.). Langberg references reforms in the US counterterrorism community as a case study presenting valuable lessons about Whole-of-Government synchronization. While terrorism was the impetus for changes and improvements, specifically the creation of the Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning (DSOP) within the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), the lessons learned from the case study may be applicable to other areas of national security. The terrorist threat, like Irregular Competition, was and is "representative of twenty-first-century national security challenges that are complex, trans-border, and fraught with multiple sets of networked, non-state adversaries" (ibid.). Similarly, Langberg noted that the threat required a

holistic approach to addressing the law enforcement, financial, diplomatic, military, legal, and other dimensions of it (ibid.). The author's case study analysis revealed that the DSOP provided a model for integrating "high-priority, high-complexity, multiagency missions," and that "Interagency teams for other national missions, such as cyber-security, should be seriously considered to support the National Security Staff in strategic management of end-to-end processes (policy, strategy, aligning resources with strategy, planning, execution, and assessment)" (ibid.). The purpose of this reform, according to Langberg, was to fulfill functions such as clarifying interagency roles and responsibilities, conducting integrated policy analysis and teeing up policy options, developing national strategies, conducting deliberate, dynamic and/or contingency planning, conducting assessments of the nation's progress in meetings its goals and objectives, and conducting long-term assessments on the changing nature of the threat/opportunity (1-2).

In researching approaches to more integrated national security, Douglas Brook explores budgeting as an instrument to achieve synchronization (2012). The author suggests that a whole-of-government approach is suggested as a means for integrating and coordinating national security policies and programs. To support this approach, recommendations are made for an integrated national security budget (32). Brook's assertion that the national budget may be a useful driver for greater government coordination is built around the notion of national defense versus national security. National defense versus national security arises because, according to the author, military-centric national defense "may not adequately describe the broad security needs of current circumstances. National defense tends to ignore those non-military national security activities involved in confronting the non-state/non-traditional threats that exist today"

(33). Brook's work is insightful in exploring both whole-of-government thought as well as national security versus national defense matters.

Use of the acronym *DIME* may be helpful in capturing the essence of Whole-of-Government. *DIME* represents the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) instruments of power (Rehberg 2019; Heffington, Oler, and Tretler 2019, 1). *DIME* is a helpful way of grouping the many instruments of power a nation-state can muster "into four basic elements" (Kodalle, Ormrod, Sample, and Scott 2020, 12). There are of course other models and acronyms that help capture the essence of Whole-of-Government. These include, but are not limited to, *DIMEFIL* (diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, law-enforcement), *PMESII* (political, military, economic, social, infrastructure, and information), and *MIDFIELD* (military, informational, diplomatic, financial, intelligence, economic, law, development).

The four components of *DIME* are referred to in this research simply as instruments of power rather than instruments of *national* power. The omission of the word "national" is deliberate, done to allow inclusion of those non-state actors who, by definition, do not represent a *nation* and can therefore not exercise *national* power, may nevertheless be capable of employing diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments of power to achieve strategic objectives. "Instruments of power" alone, without the inclusion of the word "national," is not a new term and has been used elsewhere (Thompson 2006, 72; Neğu and Gagea 2011, 29). Finally, whether these components of *DIME* should be described as elements, implements, or instruments, and debate about the differences in these terms, is not the subject of this research.

A note should be made regarding non-state actors from a political realist IR theory perspective. First, non-state actors obviously do not represent a true state, or government, as in

*Whole-of-Government*. Second, non-state actors may not have a standing *military* as it is commonly envisioned, represented by the “M” in DIME. Despite these realities, non-state actors may nevertheless behave similarly to a state, may govern territory similar to the way that a recognized state does, and may engage in military-type activities the way that a state does. Non-state examples might include the control and governance of territory by religious extremist organizations. Contemporary examples include ISIS governing territory in Iraq and Syria during the height of the “caliphate,” the Maute and Abu Sayyaf groups’ siege of Marawi in the southern Philippines (where they attempted to govern but were ultimately unsuccessful), and –arguably – the Taliban ruling Afghanistan today.

As a RAND study reported, anarchists, Marxists, and other groups managed to organize, communicate, and operate across borders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Hoffman 2006, 7–11). Today, however, non-state and pseudo-state actors have more power to influence the international system than ever before. As Richard Haass claimed almost a decade ago, one of the cardinal features of the contemporary international system is that nation-states have lost their monopoly on power and in some domains their preeminence as well” (Haass 2008, 45). Thanks to globalization, the world is increasingly interconnected, giving new power to non-state actors (Robinson et al. 2019, 219-20)

This is not said to imply that there is no difference between state and non-state actors. Instead, the point is that non-state actors may have the power and ability to act in ways similar to state actors and, as a result, one should not limit thinking to nation states alone when considering political realism, IR theory, and Irregular Competition. Non-state actors may employ the instruments of power found in DIME similar to the way that recognized states do.

Finally with regard to whole-of-government concepts, several of America's adversaries, with particular emphasis on China and Russia, while realizing that others do it as well, manage to exact *Whole-of-Society* - not just *Whole-of-Government* - Irregular Competition. This is possible as their authoritarian reach allows mobilization of resources beyond just the government (Spitzack 2018, 30). While *Whole-of-Society* action may be ideal in prosecuting Irregular Competition, authoritarianism is contrary to American principles and values and, as a result, this expansion of Irregular Competition activity to mobilize society itself is likely out of reach for the United States. Education of American society on the subject of Irregular Competition, informing other parts of the population on the topic, and other similar endeavors to share the importance of the subject, however, may be considered.

### **Information and Irregular Competition**

From an information-operations perspective, the objective truth is ultimately on the side of the United States and its allies—but delivering effective messaging continues to be a challenge (Starling, Iyer, and Giesler 2022). The war of ideas, “hearts and minds,” strategic messaging, propaganda, information operations, influence operations, information warfare, psychological operations, cultural diplomacy, cultural soft power, and countless other terms are employed throughout long-term struggles to dominate local, regional, and global human terrain. Danielly Silva Ramos Becard and Paulo Menechelli Filho's work titled “Chinese Cultural Diplomacy: Instruments in China's Strategy for International Insertion in the 21st Century” (2019) outlines how the Chinese government uses cultural diplomacy shared through information sources as a tool to improve its image and others' perception of China. In this sense, cultural diplomacy would thereby raise *knowledge* about China abroad, “which contributes to lowering



tensions and creating a more favorable environment for China's international insertion" (ibid). For China, "culture is considered the heart and soul of soft power, as well as a key resource for state power. Culture is seen as an important tool for China to increase its soft power, which, through cultural exchanges, hopes to assure the world that it is a civilized, responsible, and reliable nation" (ibid.) One needs to look no further than the nations across the Indo-Pacific region who side with China over the US – namely Myanmar, Cambodia, several South Pacific Island nations, Pakistan, and North Korea - to realize that the CCP's strategic, cultural, and diplomatic messaging campaign is not ineffective. This study is informative for this research in that it spotlights how cultural diplomacy as an information operation tool is used and turns it into a key influencing instrument for Irregular Competition purposes.

As Kevin Bilms wrote in 2021, "the United States must prioritize an active presence in the information space, and cannot sit idly by as China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and others employ millions to conduct information operations without distinction of being at war or peace" (Bilms 2021a). Neglecting the importance of information and influence operations in favor of kinetic or technical military solutions would be a grave mistake, said Bilms. In fact, "public or global opinion could shift in such a way that makes conventional military overmatch a moot point. Failing to respond to state-sponsored falsities risks generating complacency or tacit acceptance of conditions that undermine US values and interests" (ibid). It is for these reasons and others that information dominance remains a key component to any discussion of Irregular Competition.

In his 2021 book *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare*, author Seth Jones notes that through influence operations, the US and its partners should highlight examples of malign activities, human rights abuses, and corruption by its

adversaries. Jones notes that adversarial, authoritarian political systems attempt to control access to information which ultimately makes them vulnerable to a US and Western information campaign. Examples of vulnerabilities, many of which have been highlighted by investigative journalists – not just US or Western governments – include: Chinese, Russian, and Iranian involvement in human rights abuses; problems with regional and international economic campaigns like China’s Belt and Road initiative; corruption and cheating scandals; economic problems, including high unemployment, local growth rates, and massive income disparities; economic coercion against foreign countries, companies, and educational institutions; attempts to control information (such as through China’s Great Firewall, Iran’s Halal Net, and Russia’s Runet); malign intelligence collection overseas, including leveraging Chinese corporations such as Huawei and access to its 5G network; espionage and clandestine influence operations in the United States, including at US universities, corporations, government agencies, and China’s Confucius Institutes; anti-regime riots; protests and demonstrations that highlight the weakness of regimes; political and health failures, such as the outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan (193-6).

### **Technology and Irregular Competition**

Christian Brose’s *The Kill Chain: Defending America in the Future of High-Tech Warfare* (2020) outlines how the systems and weapons that America fights with have been – until recently – uncontested in lethality. This paradigm is shifting, according to the author, and unless the US reassesses how it will engage in conflict in the future with the advent of emerging technology, America may be severely outmatched. Author Brose posits that artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, and other emerging technologies that are revolutionizing global industries will render American defense obsolete. This work is important to this research,

particularly as it applies to the “information” and “military” aspects of DIME, highlighting how America must adapt and build a complex network of systems to confront its adversaries. This evolution will enable the US to rapidly understand threats, make decisions, and take action across multiple fronts, a process known as the "the kill chain."

In *The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder* (2019), author Sean McFate examines several past and present case studies in conflict to understand how terrorists, rogue states, and others who do not fight conventionally may succeed in war. The Roman conquest, World War II, Vietnam, and Afghanistan conflicts are examined as a backdrop to discuss the danger in believing that technology will save America and her allies. The author also explores the leverage of psychological and ‘shadow’ warfare. This book is useful for this research as it delves into the areas of asymmetric, unconventional, and hybrid threats with a cautionary note about technology.

American General Raymond “Tony” Thomas in 2016 wrote how “left of bang” is less a technological approach than a people-access approach: being there ahead of time, having relationships there ahead of time, identifying problems before they become crises, developing partner capacity, prior, not after, a response. The general explains that the US is too often on the other side of that. While this may appear to be yet another work that diminishes the role of technology, this is in fact not the point. While acknowledging the ever-growing relevance of technology, this work simultaneously reminds the reader that people-centric strategies remain relevant and pivotal to Irregular Competition.

### **Special Operations Forces (SOF) Contribution to Irregular Competition**

In its 2023 National Defense Authorization Act report, the House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services (2022) wrote:

The committee notes the unique capabilities offered to geographic combatant commanders (GCC) by U.S. Special Operations Forces (USSOF) to combat threats from non-state actors, transnational terrorist groups, and gray-zone activities of near-peer adversaries. The committee further notes the unique authorities afforded to USSOF to combat terrorist threats through support to foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals under section 127e of title 10, United States Code, and to provide support to foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals in supporting or facilitating ongoing and authorized irregular warfare authorities through section 1202 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018 (Public Law 115–91). Further, the committee notes the ongoing threats facing the United States from violent extremist groups, and additional, dynamic threats posed to the United States from near-peer adversaries, and their allies and proxies. The committee recognizes the utility of utilizing the unique capabilities of USSOF and the authorities provided to them through congressional authorization to combat these threats to the United States. (267)

For the US military, most of the literature, doctrine, and operational publications that speak to Irregular Competition are focused on Special Operations Forces (SOF). The term “Irregular Warfare” (IW) is most commonly used in this literature. While some of this literature will be reviewed below, it is important to know that the entire US Department of Defense – not just SOF - must be engaged to help facilitate success in Irregular Competition. The Defense Department itself has acknowledged this, noting that it plans to “institutionalize irregular warfare (IW) as an enduring core competency for the entire Joint Force” (Department of Defense 2020a,

2). Acknowledging the requirement for the entire US military's support to Irregular Warfare as a prerequisite for success, the literature reviewed below is admittedly concerned primarily with Special Operations Forces. This is the case only because SOF is where the vast majority of IW literature is focused or produced.

Retired Army Colonel David Maxwell, Senior Fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, has written and spoken extensively on what he terms the "New SOF Trinities." While SOF must of course continue to focus on surgical counterterrorism (CT) (White House 2018, National Strategy for Counterterrorism) operations which have been raised to a high art form, Maxwell writes that SOF must focus on the "modern SOF trinity" of Irregular Warfare (IW), Unconventional Warfare (UW), and support to political warfare (defined earlier in this chapter). Advanced CT and other high end SOF capabilities combined with the new "SOF trinity" are where SOF must invest in organizations, manning, equipping, training, and education, Maxwell believes. Maxwell continues to posit that SOF must not only *outfight* America's enemies, but it must also *outthink* them. As previously highlighted, the "first trinity" is an overall construct including IW, UW, and support to political warfare. The "second trinity," according to Maxwell, should be composed of the comparative advantage that SOF brings to the table in enhancing "governance, influence, and support to indigenous forces" (Maxwell 2020b). In a separate writing based on his command of the Joint Special Operations Task Force – Philippines (JSOTF-P) created to help the Philippines fight the al-Qaeda-linked Abu Sayyaf terrorist group during the US War on Terror, Maxwell illuminates the components of the "second trinity" by describing the importance of properly assessing and re-assessing the political-military situation on the ground, building capacity with host-nation *security* (not just military) forces, cooperation with US embassy teams, respecting a nation's sovereignty, advising and assisting

*government* (not just military) officials and organizations, promoting civil-military operations to build host-nation legitimacy in the eyes of the people, synchronizing intelligence activities with operations, and building trust (Maxwell 2020a).

In *Advancing SOF Cultural Engagement: The Malinowski Model for a Qualitative Approach*, Robert Greene Sands and Darby Arakelian (2018) propose a SOF-relevant model for “engaging populations, illuminating their worldviews and values, appreciating their interests, and translating significant social, cultural, and political information into operational analysis.” Drawing upon their familiarity with both the force and anthropology, the authors provide a picture of how to advance capabilities through the story of Bronislaw Malinowski who, as an anthropologist in the early twentieth century, lived alone and unafraid amongst foreign and vastly different populations.

A question naturally arises about how exactly the US Department of Defense might support NSS Strategic Competition objectives beyond traditional or conventional military means? In “The SOF Role in Political Warfare,” Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Becker (2018) suggests positioning more SOF on the ground around the world for longer durations with the intent of establishing a more enduring US presence and expanding US strategic influence with partners, friends, and allies. In a paper titled “UW Counter-governance: Political Warfare in Great Power Competition,” Major Jeffrey Uherka (2017) outlines the importance of acknowledging governance at the sub-state and non-state levels. This is essential because if the US fails to understand the relationships between its adversaries and those populations our adversaries influence, then America will likely fail in its strategy to employ political and economic instruments in GPC. One can conclude that in creating any type of Irregular

Competition strategy, American must recognize sub-state and non-state actors' abilities to wield influence and authority within a state.

Mark Boyatt's 2016 book *Special Forces: A Unique National Asset* details the criticality of working "through, with, and by" foreign friends, partners, and allies in achieving larger strategic objectives in unconventional spaces. The book describes not only how cooperating with partners should work, but also outlines challenges and how to overcome them in irregular warfare. This of course will be instrumental in the implementation of any Irregular Competition strategy, with particular emphasis on the "military" element of power in DIME.

As part of her 2021 doctoral dissertation focused on US Special Operations Command's Roles in Future Great Power Competition-Driven Conflicts, author Dalila Wolf Harrouche Deiters derived current and future implications for participants, policymakers, and researchers to improve special operations war-fighter support. The recommendations from the study in this regard included "robust defensive and offensive cyber capabilities and enforced certifications, increased military irregular warfare training, tailored special operations, redefined GPC, overhauled planning, programming, budgeting, and execution processes, and improved advanced and interconnected technology research collaborations" (3). For the military special operations establishment, this work provides both pragmatic and theoretical considerations for support in an era of Strategic Competition.

Richard Shultz Jr.'s 2020 book titled *Transforming US Intelligence for Irregular Warfare: Task Force 714 in Iraq* may appear to be limited to a discussion about Counter-Terrorism (CT) alone, but it is in fact more expansive. In fact, the most important lessons provided in this work are arguably not about CT at all. In this account of the US Counter-Terrorism Task Force in Iraq, the author makes clear the importance of flexible leadership, true

interagency cooperation and trust, and the necessity for “learning organizations” to deal with networked, non-traditional threats. This work is helpful for this research in that, when seeking the benefits of – and solutions provided by – an Irregular Competition strategy, organizational learning and adaption must occur throughout the implementation process.

In April 2022, US Special Operations Command released a new “Special Operations Forces Vision and Strategy document” in which the command shared several insights. The document highlighted that, among other things, the special operations community was responsible for “shaping the environment to reduce risk, prevent crises, and set conditions for success in competition and conflict...Respond swiftly to crises worldwide and accomplish high-risk, politically-sensitive missions with a low signature and small footprint...Cultivate strong relationships with our global network -allies, partners, joint, interagency, multinational, industry, and academia...Illuminate irregular threats, foster partners’ resilience, and create dilemmas for our adversaries” (2). Looking to the future, the document highlights a vision to achieve a “balanced force employment and readiness for integrated deterrence, crisis, and conflict...Sustainable counterterrorism to safeguard the Nation...Modernized formations, concepts, and capabilities leveraging emerging technologies...A resilient enterprise capable of conducting integrated all-domain special operations” (ibid.). With specific regard to Irregular Competition, the document highlights and intent to modernize SOF by pioneering “dynamic and unorthodox approaches (including the full toolkit associated with irregular warfare), leverage emerging technologies to mitigate adversarial activities by China, and create asymmetric advantages for current and future conflict” (7). This is intended to be accomplished while advancing partnerships and working with allies.



## **US Government Literature on Irregular Competition from Sources other than the Military**

Almost all literature from the US Government on the subject of Irregular Competition is directed toward the military or produced by the military itself. There are exceptions, although these standouts are often directed toward the intelligence community. H.R. 6452, “A Bill to Require the Director of National Intelligence to Produce a National Intelligence Estimate on Escalation and De-escalation of Gray Zone Activities in Great Power Competition, And for Other Purposes; To the Committee on Intelligence (Permanent Select),” also known as the “Gathering and Reporting Assessments Yielding Zero Overlooked Nefarious Efforts Act,” is one such example (US Congress 2022). This bill does not propose or consider any gray zone activity being used by the US itself. This is because, as defined in Chapter 1, the US considers gray zone activity to be something that adversaries, not America, engage in. Consequently, this bill is focused on the Director of National Intelligence, acting through the National Intelligence Council, producing a National Intelligence Estimate on how foreign adversaries use the gray zone, what responses by the US (or the allies or partners of the US) would tend to result in the escalation or de-escalation of such gray zone activities by foreign adversaries, and any opportunities for the United States to minimize the extent to which foreign adversaries use gray zone activities in furtherance of strategic competition (5-9).

In a January 2022 speech to a Meeting with the Infrastructure Implementation Task Force, President Joe Biden stated that “Russia has a long history of using measures other than overt military action to carry out aggression and paramilitary tactics, so-called “gray zone” attacks, and actions by Russian soldiers not wearing Russian uniforms” (Biden 2022). The President went on to say that “We have to be ready to respond to these as well—and decisively—in a united way, with a range of tools at our disposal” (Biden 2022). That said, no

clear explanation of what tools, including anything that might be referred to as Irregular Competition-like activity, may be employed.

In pursuit of peace and security across the Taiwan Strait, the US Senate proposed the following:

deepening existing treaty alliances, growing new partnerships, maintaining a system of forward-deployed bases in the Indo-Pacific region, adopting a more dispersed force posture throughout the region, fielding long-range precision-strike networks, strengthening extended deterrence, collaborating with allies and partners to accelerate their roles...all with the intent of deterring the PRC from using gray-zone tactics below the level of armed conflict. (US Senate 2021, 8-15).

This US Government bill discusses adversarial use of Irregular Competition but does not discuss or propose US employment of the same. Similar to other US Government literature, most of the principles discussed are military-centric rather than DIME-like.

As is demonstrated throughout this literature review, Congressional testimony often discusses the topic of Irregular Competition. In 2017 testimony to the House Armed Services Committee during a session titled “The Evolution of Hybrid Warfare and Key Challenges,” Dr. Francis Hoffman, Distinguished Fellow from the National Defense University, stated that one issue within the US – and particularly the National Security Council - is a lack organizational structure for handling Irregular Competition. Hoffman testified that,

without the regional architecture that we have in the military...the rest of the government lacks that regional architecture, and I think sometimes what happens with the NSC is because there is no other integrating body to both design, conduct, assess, and adjust, is

that the NSC ends up, you know, in that supra kind of role compensating for that.

(Hoffman 2017, 31)

The Senate Commerce, Science & Transportation Committee has noted with concern China's rise in conducting Irregular Competition enabled by cyber technology. Most of the committee workings deal with assessing the Chinese threat rather than the US itself taking any action in an Irregular Competition capacity. Recommendations have included requiring the Office of Management and Budget's Federal Chief Information Security Officer Council to prepare an annual report to Congress to ensure supply chain vulnerabilities from China are adequately addressed, as well as requiring the National Telecommunications and Information Administration and Federal Communications Commission to identify (1) steps to ensure the rapid and secure deployment of a 5G network, with a particular focus on the threat posed by equipment and services designed or manufactured in China; and (2) whether any new statutory authorities are required to ensure the security of domestic 5G networks (Wessel 2019). Numerous other US Government agencies, some in cooperation with private-sector organizations, conduct assessments on Irregular Competition threats in the cyber domain (Public-Private Analytic Exchange Program 2019).

In December 2018, the US Government Accounting Office (GAO) produced a document for Congress titled "National Security: Long-Range Emerging Threats Facing the United States as Identified by Federal Agencies" (Government Accounting Office 2018). The report noted that the "US faces a complex array of threats to our national security, including our political, economic, military, and social systems. These threats will continue to evolve as new and resurgent adversaries develop politically and militarily, as weapons and technology advance, and as environmental and demographic changes occur" (ibid.). This report was generated because a

House of Representatives committee report accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2018 included a provision for GAO to identify emerging threats of high national security consequence. The report from GAO focused on long-range emerging threats—“those that may occur in approximately 5 or more years, or those that may occur during an unknown timeframe—as identified by various respondents at the Department of Defense (DOD), Department of State (State), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI)” (Ibid.).

### **The Opportunity Cost for Employing Irregular Competition**

What is the opportunity cost for either using or not employ Irregular Competition to its maximum potential? Why is the US seemingly not as willing to employ Irregular Competition activities as freely as the CCP or the Kremlin? Russia, like many non-state actors, does not have the resources to confront the West head on to achieve the Kremlin’s desired place on the global stage and recapture the prestige of Soviet days past. Unlike CCP leadership, the Russians know that their country is not powerful enough to entirely displace the international order, “so they instead seek to disrupt it at every viable opportunity, primarily because they perceive the democratic values espoused by that order as an existential threat.... [and] utilizes a variety of hybrid tools such as political warfare, election interference, energy manipulation, mercenaries, and special operations, all of which are designed to divide the NATO alliance and sow fears of escalation among transatlantic states” (Starling, Wetzel, and Trotti 2021, 23). When considering why Russia is more willing to employ these Irregular Competition-like tactics than the US is, the prevailing answer is that Russia simply doesn’t have any other choice if it wants to compete.

What is holding the US back in its employment of Irregular Competition since resources for the current-largest economy in the world should not be the limiting factor that they are for Russia? In “Cyberspace as a Battlespace: Irregular Warfare through Bits and Bytes,” Admiral (Retired) Mike Rogers (2021), former commander of US Cyber Command and director of the National Security Agency (NSA), along with Hoover Fellow Dr. Jacquelyn Schneider, provide some insight into this question with specific regard for information operations that are cyber enabled. In summary, the US is reluctant to aggressively employ such operations (1) for fear of escalating situations into conflict and (2) because of the extreme bureaucracy that is involved in the approval of such activities. The panelists note that these types of Irregular Competition activities – tested through simulations as well as real-world case studies - are in fact less likely to escalate matters into conflict in the same way that escalation takes place with nuclear weapons (timestamp 22:00-26:00). Yet the US remains hesitant to employ them for the two reasons stated previously. In such cases, the US incorrectly estimates the opportunity cost to be too high and therefore remains self-constrained in its willingness to engage in effective Irregular Competition.

### **The Future of Irregular Competition**

*Learning the Lessons of Modern War* (2020) by Thomas Mahnken brings together contributions from several authors to study relatively recent conflicts, draw lessons in continuity and change, and help the reader imagine what future conflict will look like. Case studies are from recent wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Middle East, South America, and Asia. This book is helpful to this research because it highlights the importance of appreciating vastly different perspectives on conflict among America, American coalition partners, and foes.

Author Sam Sarkesian's 1993 book *Unconventional Conflicts in a New Security Era: Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, while somewhat dated, remains relevant today. It provides unconventional conflict examples from Malaya and Vietnam in order to analyze challenges and make predictions as to what will help America succeed in future conflicts. It encourages the US to constantly devise new military and political strategies since the nature of the threats to America are constantly evolving. The book also provides lessons for developing effective operations to counter everything from strife to drug wars to new types of conflict seen with non-state actors, all of which are relevant to an Irregular Competition strategy.

A comprehensive work on the current state of national security affairs, H.R. McMaster's *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* provides unique insider knowledge of America's prime threats. As a former US National Security Advisor, Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster writes that "prevailing on today's battlegrounds requires an unprecedented degree of cooperation among government, academia, and the private sector" (2020, 439). He outlines in great detail the threats of today, both traditional and non-tradition, which are relevant to this research as America seeks to compete against both. McMaster cautions the reader on the danger of political fissions and partisanship in the US, which enemies – Russia and China in particular - are quick to take advantage of. The author further highlights the necessity of building trust and fostering effective coalitions between America and others. This book helps the reader understand growing threats, which in turn allows one to envision how an effective Irregular Competition strategy might be devised.

An Atlantic Council report released in December 2021 titled "Seizing the Advantage: A Vision for the Next US National Defense Strategy," acknowledges that contending with China and Russia will require a "long-term, whole-of-nation effort among the executive branch,

legislative branch, defense industrial base, and strong coordination with allies and partners” (Starling, Wetzel, and Trotti 2021, 23). It highlights the need for diplomatic naming, shaming and sanctioning bad actors. Furthermore, the report suggests increased funding for the State Department’s Global Engagement Center to “lead whole-of-government strategic messaging and offensive information operations campaigns, and it needs to lead whole-of-nation efforts to engage with social media companies, and with allies and partners to create a coherent and effective campaign for countering mis- and dis-information” (26). The report, however, leans heavily on the military to shoulder the Irregular Competition effort, stating that,

The DOD needs to compete now and engage in offensive hybrid warfare actions. The United States must respond where competition with China and Russia is taking place today, primarily by playing an enhanced role in gray-zone competition. Accordingly, the Pentagon must embrace the paradigm of competition as a continuum from cooperation through competition to armed conflict.” (21)

### **Summary**

What is the overall analysis of the literature provided in this chapter? What overarching conclusions can and should be drawn from the documents and publications outlined above?

First, literature is focused on analysis of threats. Outside of the military but still within the US Government, most documents include speeches, testimony, or reports from Congress that focus on assessing adversarial threats. Second, most of the literature is produced by academics, think-tanks, the private sector, or the military, for example, but not the United States Government as a whole. The defense department clearly produces the majority of literature on the subject of Irregular Competition, as evidenced in this chapter. Finally, there are no discernable

publications produced *by the US Government* that contemplate Irregular Competition lessons learned which may potentially inform thinking about the subject in the future with emphasis on proactive measures.



## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

Robert K. Yin, a writer of seminal works on case studies, wrote that case studies are the preferred strategy when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (2003, 1). This is exactly the scenario that exists with regard to studying contemporary Irregular Competition. Case studies allow the investigator to “retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (2).

Yin wrote that multiple case study research, not the classic single case study, is the dominant substantive work of the future (1994, 289). Furthermore, evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust (Herriott and Firestone 1983). With this in mind, the researcher set out to reveal lessons learned from three Irregular Competition case studies. This chapter presents the procedures, design, and analysis used in the research. This chapter is also intended to provide details of how the research was executed to permit replication of the study. The actual results of the study are found in Chapter 4.

### **Design**

This research was supported by qualitative, inductive, grounded theory methods implemented through a linear-analytic approach to the examination of three cases. The elements of the research design – qualitative, inductive, grounded theory, and linear-analytic approach – are discussed below.

While quantitative and qualitative research processes have some similarities, qualitative approaches “rely on text and image data, have unique steps in data analysis, and draw on diverse designs” (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 179). Creswell and Creswell note that qualitative researchers typically gather information from multiple data sets (2018, 181). In order to achieve triangulation and build credibility, friendly and adversarial cases were chosen. Two cases involved friendly Irregular Competition while the third demonstrated adversarial use of it.

In inductive reasoning, researchers often work back and forth between data collected and themes derived from the data until a comprehensive theme – or set of themes - is established (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 181). This is essentially working the data “from the ground up,” noticing patterns that emerge, and eventually finding that some part of the data that suggests useful concepts (Yin 2018, 169). The effectiveness of thereafter implementing concepts derived from the inductive reasoning is, admittedly, still only *probable* rather than *certain*, which would be the case in a deductive argument (Martin 1994, 63; Fohr 1979, 5).

The Grounded Theory Method (GTM) of qualitative research used in this study is most often attributed to the work of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, aligned with the Chicago School of symbolic interactionism, which rose to prominence in the early part of the twentieth century (Glaser 1967; Williams and Moser 2019, 46). In their writing, which remains fundamental to grounded theory research today, the authors suggested a “pluralist and flexible approach to data coding” (Williams and Moser 2019, 46; Strauss 1998). Specific data coding methodology used in this research is discussed later in this chapter. Going back to the subject of grounded theory, it is a systematic methodology often applied to qualitative research in social science and involves the construction of hypotheses and theories by way of collecting and analyzing data.

In terms of methodology, the linear-analytic approach was used to observe the cases. Yin defines the linear-analytic approach as the traditional or standard approach to case studies (Manwaring 2010, 6). The major components of this approach applied to case studies, according to Yin, include the issue, context, findings, and conclusions and implications. The issue and context answer the “what and why” questions, the findings examine the “who, how, and so-what?” questions, and conclusions and implications address key points, recommendations, and countermeasures (Yin 1994, 138-9; Manwaring 2010, 6). These components, outlined by Yin, were applied to each case study in this research.

The components of the research described so far are closely related and overlapping in that they are mutually influencing and constitute the “cause and effect” dynamics of a given situation (Manwaring 2010, 7). Furthermore, the cause and effects related to the components of the linear-analytic approach demonstrate that the threats associated with Irregular Competition are not abstract but are real (ibid.).

According to Yin (2018, 18-22), there are several concerns with a case study approach to research. The first is whether case studies are rigorous enough. This concern has been addressed in this study by following systematic procedures (18). A second concern is whether generalizations can be made from the case studies. “The short answer is that case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, neither the ‘case’ nor the case study, like the experiment, represent ‘samples’” (20-1). The goal is to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalizations) and not to extrapolate probabilities (statistical generalizations) (21). A third concern is that case studies can potentially take too long and result in “massive, unreadable documents” (ibid.). While this may be true of case studies done in the past, Yin writes, it does not necessarily mean that they must be done this

way in the future (ibid.). One method of avoiding unmanageable case studies in this research was to avoid traditional, flowing, lengthy narratives (21). A fourth concern with case study research has to do with a potentially unclear comparative advantage over other research methods (ibid.). Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) or “true experiments” were believed to represent - especially early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century - more “esteemed” methods as they aimed to establish the effectiveness of various treatments or interventions (ibid.). While these methods effectively address questions of effectiveness, they are limited in their ability to explain “how” or “why” a given treatment or intervention worked (or not), and a flaw which case studies can investigate (21-22). Classic experiments often test simple causal relationships but case study research - such as that found in this study - helps investigate complex relationships with multiple interactions (George and Bennett 2005, 12).

### **Problem Statement and Research Question Restated**

The problem observed is that the US lacks a foundation of comprehensive thinking on Irregular Competition in support of greater national security objectives. This gap applies specifically to instances where U government initiatives have the potential to influence populations and affect legitimacy with the ultimate goal of indirectly confronting and deterring state and non-state adversaries (Troeder 2019, vii). The research question asked by this study is “Derived from contemporary case study lessons learned, what are the implications for the future of Irregular Competition in support of greater US national security objectives?”

### **Setting**

As no human subjects were involved in this research, the setting for this study was relatively unrestricted. For the gathering of case study information, the author's home office and the library located at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS) in Honolulu, Hawaii were used. Many of the physical publications used were acquired by way of inter-library loan through the DKI APCSS library. It was at these two locations (office and library) that the author reviewed published literature on the research subject. These settings were chosen because they provided access to necessary online and physical literature resources.

### **Adversarial Irregular Competition Demonstrated**

While it can be said that Irregular Competition, as defined in Chapter 1, has been employed in various forms for centuries (Starling, Iyer, and Giesler 2022), this research is focused mostly around the turn of the 21st century onward as adversaries – namely China, Iran, Russia, North Korea, and non-state extremists - enabled by emerging technologies - such as cyber and space capabilities - have evolved rapidly in the last three decades. America's adversaries are adept at operating in this space. As former White House National Security Advisor Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster emphasized throughout his book *Battlegrounds* (2020), these actors synergize, like never before, disinformation, denial, disruptive technologies, coercion, and other tactics to accomplish strategic objectives below the threshold of what might elicit a military response (17-18, 26, 33).

Examples of Irregular Competition originating from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) include artificial island-building and fishing fleet intimidation in the South China Sea, debt

diplomacy and economic coercion throughout the Indo-Pacific, along the Silk Road, and into Africa to influence state behavior in ways beneficial to China (Rajah, Dayant, and Pryke 2019), economic espionage and theft of intellectual property (Priestap 2018, Wray 2020a), military intimidation of Taiwan, funding research on alternative approaches to international law to rewrite history (Morris et al. 2019, 30-39), efforts to influence politics in Australia and New Zealand (De Wit 2019, 162), hostage diplomacy (Kennedy, S. 2021), seizing unmanned underwater vessels (Kiessling 2021, 127), internment and genocide of Uighurs in Xingjian to cleanse Chinese soil of foreign cultures (Finley 2020, 348-370; Stern 2021), co-opting small countries in Southeast Asia (Gershaneck 2020, 71-73), river patrols, casinos, and the establishment of Chinese micro-communities in the Mekong River Basin to exert influence on host nations, strong-arming the extradition of overseas critics back to China, and influencing foreign media, sports, and Hollywood organizations (Doesher 2018) to maintain a positive image of China.

In the case of Russia, Irregular Competition has become a steady state endeavor. This can be seen in the employment of the Wagner Group (Rácz 2021; House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services 2022) and other non-uniformed proxies in Syria, Ukraine, Georgia, Estonia and elsewhere, employment of the Night Wolves Motorcycle Gang to execute information operations and proxy conflict in Australia and Ukraine (Harris 2018; Harris 2021; Lauder 2018, 5-16), election meddling in Europe and America, financing foreign political parties like the repressive Maduro regime in Venezuela (Brown 2020), energy coercion, flying close to US warships in attempts to elicit an overreaction, cyber-enabled disinformation campaigns (Morris et al. 2019, 48-70), and poisoning of critics (Callamard and Khan 2021).

Iran exports terrorism through proxies such as Hezbollah (Coll 2004, 143) and Shia militia groups (US Congress 2022, 4), illegally transfers and sells weapons (Michaels and Coker 2009), and routinely uses armed small boats to harass UK and US warships (Kießling 2021, 129). North Korea utilizes Irregular Competition by routinely threatening other nations with nuclear devastation, which has resulted in it being designated as a state sponsor of terrorism (Department of State 2022; Byman 2017), as well as successfully assassinating individuals considered to be a political threat (Chin 2017).

From a position of weakness, non-state actors often employ components of Irregular Competition in an attempt to gain a relative advantage over better-resourced adversaries. These initiatives include, but are not limited to, disinformation campaigns to purport government illegitimacy, propaganda initiatives to incite violence, money laundering (Teichmann 2019) and the creation of shell companies/fake NGOs to support terrorism, the use of piracy, kidnap-for-ransom, cyber-crime and other forms of transnational organized crime to raise funds for illicit operations (Mullins 2020, 112-113; Singh 2018), sarin attacks on public transportation (Tekwani 2020, 91), and online radicalization to recruit new members (Zuberi 2018).

Numerous other examples exist from other countries and organizations which may be categorized as Irregular Competition as well, so the above should not be considered exhaustive. Instead, the purpose of the examples provided is to inform the reader of the tremendous depth and breadth of this illusive operating environment from which the researcher set out to select case studies.

## Procedures

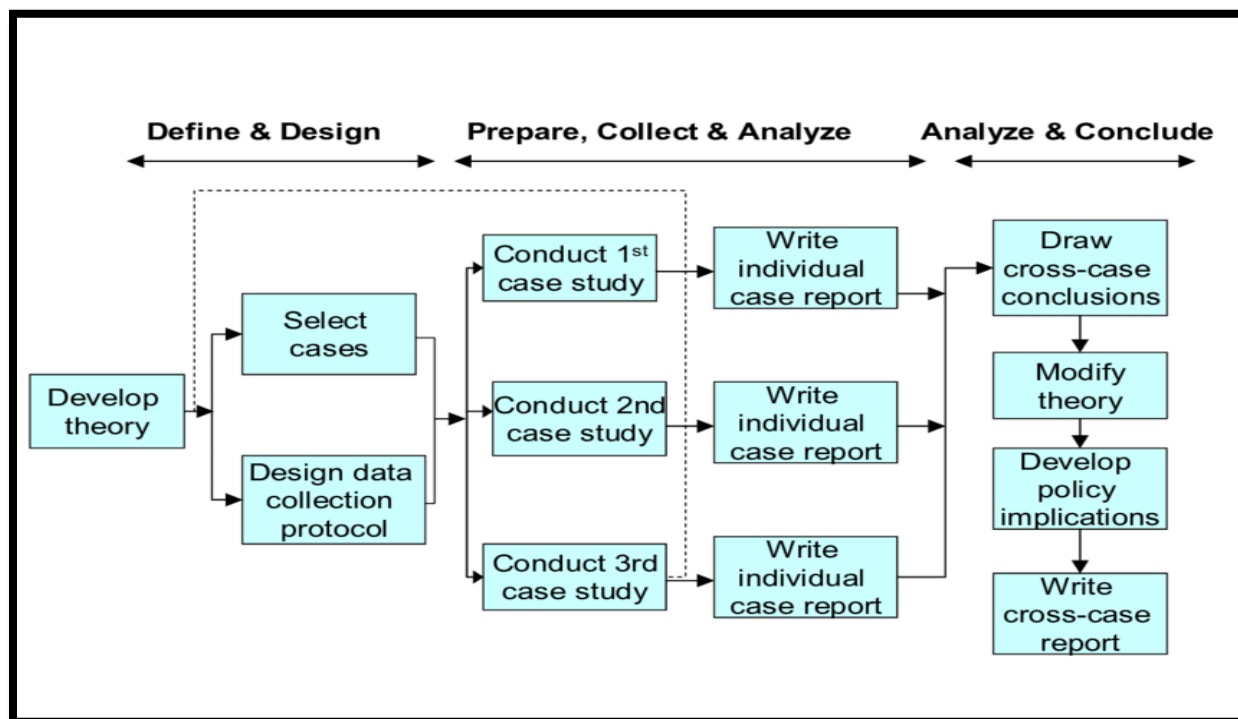
The general theory guiding this study is that lessons learned from contemporary Irregular Competition may inform recommendations to enhance US national security strategy thinking and policymaking. Having some theory or theoretical proposition such as this plays an important role in generalizing lessons learned from the study (Yin 2018, 37). This is the basis for analytical generalization (ibid.). Rather than thinking about each case as a sample, they should instead be thought of as an opportunity to shed empirical light on some theoretical concept or principle (38) – in this case the application of Irregular Competition to larger national security objectives. The intent of initially observing the individual cases is to ultimately “go beyond” each of them and strive for “generalizable findings or lessons learned” (ibid.).

Three cases were selected for the study – two “friendly” and one “adversarial.” Yin (2018) writes that in multiple-case study research, deciding upon the number of replications is an important consideration related to the researcher's sense of strength and importance of rival explanations (59). Yin contends that “two or three” replications may be acceptable when the theory is straightforward and the issue at hand does not demand an excessive degree of certainty” (ibid.).

With the determination that multiple case studies would be used in this research, procedures for conducting the research generally followed the sequence found in Figure 6. In the “Define and Design” phase, cases were selected, and data protocols were designed. Case selection and protocols are outlined later in this chapter. In the “Prepare, Collect, and Analyze” phase, studies were completed. In the “Analyze and Conclude” phase, cross-conclusions were drawn, implications were identified, and the final report was written. The information from this final phase can be found in chapters 4 and 5.



**Figure 6. Case Study Methodology. COSMOS Corporation model adapted by Robert Yin (Yin 2003, 59)**



The chief characteristic of case study research is the specification of the boundary and the scope of the research cases and the unit of analysis (e.g. organization, group of people, certain system, activity); this is compatible with the grounded theory concept of theoretical sampling as mentioned by Strauss and Corbin (1990) where the criterion for selection of the cases and the unit of analysis in the case study is relevance, and theoretical sampling serves to seek in-depth information from the cases, and to discover and develop the concepts and theories. (Halaweh, Fidler, and McRobb 2008, 7)

During case study selection, it was the intent of the researcher to choose cases that were analogous to the conduct of an experiment on related instances of Irregular Competition (Yin 1994, 31, 46). Early in the design phase of this research, only “friendly” cases where America

demonstrated Irregular Competition were to be used. The logic for this was that friendly cases alone should be sufficient since they demonstrate the capacity and limitations of the US to execute Irregular Competition. It was subsequently determined, however, that at least one case of adversarial Irregular Competition should be included in the study. This was necessary to illustrate the capacity and limitations of an adversary while also providing a model to compare friendly cases to. China may be able to mobilize State Owned Enterprises (SOE) in its execution of Irregular Competition, for example, while America may be limited in this ability. At the same time, the US may demonstrate greater adherence to internationally accepted standards, rules, and norms while China may not. Including friendly and adversarial differences such as these provided the researcher with the ability to make comparisons, identify benefits and limitations of different approaches, and extrapolate more meaningful lessons learned.

As noted, there are cases where adversaries such as Russia and China execute Irregular Competition activities with malign intent. These activities are often demonstrative of comprehensive, proactive, whole-of-government - and in some cases whole-of-society - capacity. It was from this pool of potential cases that the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) use of Irregular Competition against the Philippines from 2012 to 2021 was chosen.

Choosing two "friendly" cases of Irregular Competition proved to be more challenging. This difficulty arose because of the criteria for choosing cases established by the researcher. The two cases ultimately selected for this study included (a) an examination of US actions taken to undermine the Soviet Union in Afghanistan from 1979-1989 and (b) US Irregular Competition activities directed toward Iran from 2001 to 2021. These two cases were considered and selected based on the following criteria devised by the researcher:

1. While adversarial Irregular Competition may be present in the case study, the US, its friends, partners, allies, or some combination of the four must have initiated Irregular Competition activity themselves. This criterion was used to avoid cases where adversaries alone executed some type of Irregular Competition activity. While adversarial Irregular Competition examples abound, they are often demonstrative of authoritarian regimes which may not adhere to internationally accepted standards, norms, and values. Cases demonstrative of friendly use of Irregular Competition, therefore, provided examples of what liberal democracies such as the US may or may not be capable of.
2. The US, its friends, partners, allies, must have been *proactive* in some portion of their execution of Irregular Competition. This targeted a core element of the study, which was an examination of lessons learned from *offensive, proactive* Irregular Competition rather than simply reacting, responding, or countering something that an adversary did.
3. At least two DIME (diplomatic, information, military, economic) instruments must have been utilized in the conduct of friendly Irregular Competition. This criterion set the conditions for cases that demonstrated *comprehensive* approaches to Irregular Competition. This criterion was particularly important in helping avoid cases dominated by the military alone; such cases are abundant.
4. The case must have taken place within the last 40 years. This criteria was set not to imply that important lessons could not be learned from centuries of valuable Irregular Competition examples prior to this timeframe. It was instead meant to account for

technological advances which affect Irregular Competition in ways that earlier historic examples may not replicate.

The following friendly cases were considered and ultimately not used:

1. US v USSR (during the Cold War).
2. US v Russia (post-Cold War).
3. US soft power prior to WWII (all parts of the world outside of the Western Hemisphere).
4. The Vatican as it implements strategic influence.
5. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) helping to secure Ground Lines of Communication (GLOC) through Pakistan during the US war in Afghanistan.
6. Japan in the 1980s, at a time when it was conceived that the US may cede superiority to Japan (similar to the narrative about China today).
7. US v Libya.
8. NATO 2022 Strategic Concept and NATO vision 2030.
9. Finland's comprehensive security concept.
10. Europe's resistance operating concept (ROC) during and after WW2.
11. US/Coalition v ISIS.
12. Jammu and Kashmir.
13. The Cuban Missile Crisis.
14. Russia in the Arctic.
15. Ukrainian propaganda during the 2022 Russian invasion

The case studies listed above were ultimately not chosen for inclusion in this research because they did not meet all of the selection criteria. One interesting Irregular Competition case

considered but not selected was the Russia-Ukraine conflict initiated in 2022. Regardless of the eventual outcome of that conflict, the first several months or years of the conflict alone would have provided insight into an extremely effective Irregular Competition campaign - on Ukraine's part alone – which clearly sparked a global reaction. Since the conflict was happening as this study was being written, conflicting information and a lack of peer-reviewed, historical data points prevented its selection.

Following case study selection, the second procedure involved analysis of the cases in order to deduce lessons learned which may help inform thinking about Irregular Competition as it applies to future national security matters. Analysis was accomplished by extrapolating specific Irregular Competition activities demonstrated in the cases and organizing those activities according to their fit within the DIME construct. Seeking to locate cases that involved proactive measures, and which included all components of DIME, would indicate what the researcher considered a comprehensive or “whole-of-government” Irregular Competition approach to the situation. At a minimum, at least two components of DIME needed to be present for a case to be included in this study. Two or more DIME elements, applied proactively, were required to indicate what the researcher generally considered a “comprehensive” approach to the Irregular Competition situation.

### **The Researcher's Role**

As the human instrument in the study, the researcher was involved in a sustained and intensive experience with the cases studied. This circumstance introduced a range of strategic, ethical, and personal considerations into the research process (Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman 2013; Creswell and Creswell 2018, 183). The researcher strived to achieve four key objectives in fulfilling his role in this study. First, the researcher sought to analyze and reveal all evidence in

each case, not just evidence that was convenient or supporting of any personal biases that he may have had. Second, the researcher made all efforts to analyze all plausible rival interpretations of the evidence gathered. Third, the researcher addressed the most significant aspect of each case study. Finally, the researcher was charged with demonstrating familiarity with the prevailing thinking and discourse on the subject of Irregular Competition (*ibid.*).

An additional role for the researcher was to demonstrate originality and a contribution to the literature by comparing this research with the previous work (Halaweh, Fidler, and McRobb 2008, 9). This was achieved by deriving lessons learned which may inform thinking about Irregular Competition as well as a foundation for future research.

### **Data Collection**

The main purpose of data collection in this study was to gather qualitative insight through case studies on the idea of Irregular Competition and generate themes. Researched material was collected by reading and analyzing multiple documentation sources on the three case study subjects. Documentation, including published literature, archival records, and government testimony, provided several benefits in the case study research.

Three principles of data collection were adhered to. First, multiple sources of information and evidence for each case were collected and analyzed (*ibid.*). Second, the researcher developed a case study database to organize and document data (130). Third, a chain of evidence was maintained in order to increase construct validity as well as to “follow the derivation of any evidence from initial research questions to ultimate case study findings” (134). This chain of evidence is presented in the form of references at the end of this work, which the reader has access to.

Data in this research was then chunked into three categories: Issue, Context, Findings, and Conclusions & Implications. Lessons learned from individual cases were then analyzed for themes and eventually consolidated into a list of overarching lessons that may inform future thinking on the subject.

### **Observations**

Observations were documented via memoing and reflective journaling. Memoing was used initially to simply record notes about what the researcher observed along the way during research and case study analysis. Memoing notes were used to identify recurring themes and ultimately assisted in organizing data into the categories needed for axial and selective coding.

Reflective journaling - a more deliberate and thoughtful process than memoing - was utilized as a last step in the observation process. Reflective journaling forced the researcher to engage the data more carefully and in-depth. This in turn allowed the researcher to reveal thoughts arising from the data (Ortlipp 2008).

### **Data Interpretation**

Sandelowski wrote that qualitative interpretation is different than quantitative because codes are commonly generated from the data (i.e., derived inductively) during a study (2000, 338; Seixas, Smith, and Mitton 2018, 780). Data from the case studies in this research was first interpreted by the researcher by way of chunking, identifying categories, and generating broad themes. The researcher started off by simply assigning observed data on Irregular Competition in terms of the geopolitical context in which it occurred, as well as breaking down the components of the case or experience into the sub-components of the DIME construct.

Moustakas (1994)'s procedures were followed during data interpretation. Importantly, as a first step, the Greek concept of "epoche" was embraced. "Epoche" is the idea of setting aside pre-judgements (Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell 2004, 21). The researcher set about identifying key lessons learned in the data collected. Lessons were then clustered into meaningful units and themes (ibid.). The researcher synthesized the themes into a description of the textual and structural elements of the cases, and then construct[ed] a composite description of the meanings and the essences (22). Data was interpreted in this way by the researcher specifically in terms of (a) what lessons could be learned from the case or experience and (b) how the context, lessons learned, and other information observed, might inform future thinking or study. "Inferring associations, depicting tendencies and making predictions provide[d] insight into the latent content of data obtained (i.e., the type of information that requires a deeper analytic effort to be revealed)" (Seixas, Smith, and Mitton 2018, 780).

### **Data Analysis**

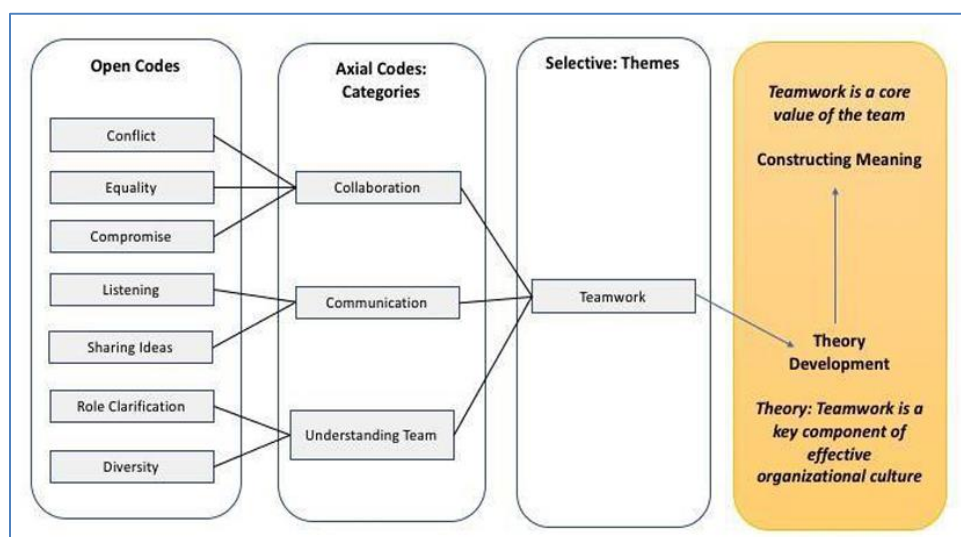
Data was analyzed for trends and outliers to help illuminate important aspects of Irregular Competition that may inform thinking, policy, strategy, and future study on the subject. Interpretation and categorization of the data was highly subjective as the information provided was qualitative and ambiguous. For this qualitative, inductive, grounded theory study involving case studies, open, axial, and selective coding were used in sequence to analyze data and generate themes.

Coding in a qualitative study such as this is accomplished by way of a process of taking raw data and progressively transforming it into useful data by identifying concepts, themes, or ideas that connect to each other (Skjott & Korsgaard 2019). Qualitative data was then collected



from the cases and thereafter broken down into discrete parts to create codes with labels. Williams and Moser (2019, 45) noted the importance of detailing the process for coding regardless of any research approach (Williams and Moser 2019, 45). The methodology employed “for data collection and organization must be clear and repeatable, leading to and enabling data analysis” (ibid.). An example of a coding process, in this case to develop a theory of teamwork, can be found in Figure 7 below.

**Figure 7. Creation of Theory and Meaning Example (Williams and Moser 2019, 54)**



For this study on Irregular Competition, open coding was utilized first on data collected. Open coding is typically a first step in grounded theory research. The purpose for using open coding initially was to allow the researcher to organize data collected while at the same time remain open to new theoretical possibilities (Williams and Moser 2019, 45). This also allowed the author to compare data in an organized way. Furthermore, it forced the author to see the data as objectively as possible in order to avoid preconceived biases that the author had about Irregular Competition. More specifically to this study, open coding was used to identify Irregular Competition activity in each case and label that activity according to the DIME element

of power that it represented. Open coding allowed the researcher to not only identify the elements of power that a particular Irregular Competition activity displayed, but also assisted in validating the case study as one that demonstrated a comprehensive approach to Irregular Competition (meaning more than one instrument of power was present). Following open coding, axial coding was used as the second step in this grounded theory study. Axial coding was the point where connections between open codes were observed and understood. The result of axial coding is expressed as the key Irregular Competition takeaways from each case.

For case study analysis, one of the most desirable techniques is to use pattern-matching logic (Tronchim 1989). In political science research such as this, pattern matching is often called the congruence method (George and Bennet 2005, chapter 9). If the empirical and predicted patterns appear to be similar, the results of the analysis strengthen the internal validity of the study, including lessons learned from the data (Yin 2018, 175). It should be noted that in this study, a subset technique of pattern-matching known as “explanation building” was *not* used (Yin 2018, 179). The explanation building technique is most relevant and commonly found in explanatory case studies, often resulting in a hypothesis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The intent of this research was not to explain the cases but instead to identify patterns and congruence leading to a summary of lessons learned. The final step in achieving this pattern-matching in this research was to implement selective coding. During this step, axial coded information was analyzed to determine overarching lessons learned that spanned all three cases. The intent of this step was to connect the information into a core category of Irregular Competition lessons learned. An illustration of how all coding described above was applied to the cases can be found in Table 4.

**Table 4. Case Study Coding Summary**

|   |
|---|
| <p><b>Case Study 1 - Afghanistan</b></p> <p>Geopolitical Situation.<br/> Yin (1994) describes this in case study research as “issue and context”<br/> (Open Coding). Irregular Competition activities demonstrated.<br/> Yin (ibid.) describes this as “findings”<br/> (Axial Coding). Key Irregular Competition Takeaways<br/> Yin (ibid.) describes this as “conclusions and implications”</p> <p><b>Case Study 2 - Iran</b></p> <p>Geopolitical Situation<br/> (Open Coding). Irregular Competition activities demonstrated.<br/> (Axial Coding). Key Irregular Competition Takeaways</p> <p><b>Case Study 3 - Philippines</b></p> <p>Geopolitical Situation<br/> (Open Coding). Irregular Competition activities demonstrated.<br/> (Axial Coding). Key Irregular Competition Takeaways</p> <p><b>Selective Coding</b></p> <p>Themes presented in form of overarching lessons learned</p> |
|---|

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness addresses credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of this study. These areas in qualitative research may not carry the same connotations as they do in quantitative research (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 199). For this specific qualitative investigation, trustworthiness was achieved using multiple case studies, followed by analysis conducted through a procedure shared transparently with the reader. Each aspect of trustworthiness (credibility, dependability and confirmability, and transferability) is addressed and discussed below.

The methodology for multiple-case study design follows what is known as replication logic, which is directly analogous to multiple experiments (Yin and 2018, 55). *Replication* logic found in case studies must be distinguished from *sampling* logic, which is common in surveys, for example (56). Sampling logic requires an operational estimation of the entire universe or

pool of potential respondents and then a statistical procedure for selecting a specific subset of respondents to be surveyed. Resulting data from sampling is assumed to reflect the entire pool or universe (ibid.). Alternatively, using replication logic, as was done in this study, each individual case combined with the others becomes the subject of the whole study where convergence evidence is sought regarding findings and conclusions (ibid.).

In replication logic, each case must be selected so that individual cases either predict similar results (literal replication) or predict contrasting results (theoretical replication) (ibid.). The ability to conduct individual case studies is analogous to the ability to conduct multiple experiments on related topics. If all the cases turn out as predicted, they will - in aggregate – provide compelling support for the initial set of propositions pertaining to the overall multiple-case study (ibid.). An important part of replication logic is the concept of a feedback loop. This loop represents a point where important discovery occurs in individual cases. That discovery then requires reconsideration of one or more of the multiple-case study's original theoretical propositions (Yin 2018, 57).

## **Credibility**

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings of this study accurately describe the reality surrounding Irregular Competition. During this research, credibility was achieved primarily through the richness of the information gathered from both friendly and adversarial case studies (Patton 1999, 1190). Patton wrote that the credibility issue for qualitative inquiry depends on three distinct but related inquiry elements:

1. Rigorous techniques and methods for gathering high-quality data that are carefully analyzed, with attention to issues of validity, reliability, and triangulation.

2. The credibility of the researcher, which is dependent on training, experience, track record, status, and presentation of self.
3. Philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry, that is, a fundamental appreciation of naturalistic inquiry, qualitative methods, inductive analysis, purposeful sampling, and holistic thinking. (ibid.)

Patton continued saying that, “Because the researcher is the instrument in qualitative inquiry, a qualitative report must include information about the researcher. What experience, training, and perspective does the researcher bring to the field? What personal connections does the researcher have to the people, program, or topic studied?” (1999, 1198). In what may be characterized as interpretive inquiry, this research is set apart from quantitative study since the researcher interpreted data through the lens of his own background, which was presented in Chapter 1 (Marshall & Rossman 2016). Credibility was achieved through the analytical abilities of the researcher. These abilities were developed throughout decades of first-hand experience observing state and non-state behavior in various Irregular Competition settings around the world with the Department of Defense as both a career uniformed service-member and federal civilian employee.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability and confirmability were achieved in this study primarily by way of one consistent, unchanging set of analysis tools applied to case studies. Case studies were broken down and analyzed uniformly using the coding methodology described earlier in this chapter. This was accomplished through a disaggregation of cases into (a) geopolitical situation, (b) Irregular Competition activities demonstrated (categorized by the DIME model), and (c) case

study takeaways. Dependability and confirmability were also achieved with triangulation. This is the process of converging several sources of data or perspectives. This included both friendly and adversarial case studies of Irregular Competition analyzed in order to build a coherent justification for themes (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 2000). Triangulation resulted in the application of a systematic process for integrating multiple methods in order to offset researcher biases, decrease process distortions (Greene and McClintock 1991), and increase validity of the findings (Scandura and Williams 2000) in the analysis of qualitative studies (Jonsen and Jehn 2009, 124).

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the possibility that what was found in one context is applicable to another context. The content of this study focuses on Irregular Competition thinking. Transferability of the lessons learned for Irregular Competition may possibly apply to other aspects of national security beyond Irregular Competition, such as to Strategic Competition itself, although that was not tested in this study. That said, the researcher cautions the reader to avoid “qualitative generalization” (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 202). In the case of this research, qualitative generalization would mean that the line of inquiry into Irregular Competition may not be generally applied to “individuals, sites, or places outside of those observed in the study” (ibid.). For example, Irregular Competition activities may not be appropriate in all cases of “regular” or traditional competition with rivals. Particularity rather than generalizability (Caracelli and Greene 1997) “is the hallmark of good qualitative research” (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 202).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were taken into account, not just in the initial planning but throughout the implementation of the qualitative study (Creswell and Poth 2017). Honest and trustworthy reporting of findings was the primary ethical objective in the conduct of this study.

From a conceptual standpoint, the implementation of Irregular Competition activities should be considered ethically. The idea to be contemplated from an ethical perspective is that Irregular Competition involves state and non-state actors involved in activities that *may* be considered controversial. Many of the Irregular Competition activities undertaken by America's adversaries, for example, can be considered dubious, malign, and perhaps illegal according to internationally accepted standards, norms, and laws. Whether one state considers another state's activities legal or illegal, however, is a point of contention and may very well depend on definitions and interpretations of law that not all parties involved agree on. This is sometimes a gray area for legal experts and open for debate. Ethical considerations, most likely in the form of a legal review, should be factored into any Irregular Competition strategy. From a research procedure perspective, however, limited ethical considerations applied.

### **Summary**

The sample of cases was chosen to familiarize the reader with the diversity and complexity of the Irregular Competition phenomenon, to articulate patterns that state and non-state actors demonstrate to achieve explicit or implicit strategic objectives, and to clarify linkages that may exist between the employment of Irregular Competition and the outcomes achieved (Manwaring 2010, 6). With the information collected, observed, and organized, strategic-level

analytical commonalities and recommendations were determined that were relevant to larger, general global security problems (ibid.; Yin 1994, 1-15, 31-32, 46, 51, 147).

This chapter described the method of data collection and analysis used in this multiple case study research to gather lessons learned about future thinking on Irregular Competition. While Irregular Competition is an ambiguous matter, this research attempted to collect, organize, and interpret data through a qualitative, grounded theory process to ultimately arrive at consistent lessons learned. Data analysis employed open, axial, and selective coding to holistically connect the data. This chapter concluded with information on trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and ethical considerations.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

Robert Yin, who has written extensively on case study analysis, noted that one difference between case studies and other types of research is that the case study itself can be a significant communication device (Yin 2018, 224). It is the hope of the researcher that exposure to the below three cases will raise awareness, provide insight, and suggest solutions to problems associated with Irregular Competition (*ibid.*). This Chapter is focused on the derived lessons learned. Chapter 5 will take those lessons and present implications.

### **Case Studies**

Section 1 below covers the first case study focused on US Irregular Competition directed toward the USSR during the 1979-1989 Afghanistan War. Section 2 covers US Irregular Competition directed toward Iran, 2001 to 2021. Section 3 covers CCP Irregular Competition activities against the Philippines, 2012 to 2021.

While key findings of each case are presented in this chapter, the reader is advised that not every aspect of every case is included below. As Yin noted, in a multiple-case study, individual case data need not always be presented in entirety, or at all, in the final manuscript. “The individual case studies, in a sense, serve only as the evidentiary base for the final composition and may be cited sporadically in the cross-case analysis” (2018, 228). For this reason, the researcher has presented only the most significant events in the case study geopolitical overviews.

## **1. Case Study 1: US Irregular Competition Directed Toward the USSR during the 1979-1989 Afghanistan War**

### **1.1 Geopolitical Situation**

The relationship between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan was a tense one prior to the Soviet invasion. In 1953, the pro-Soviet General Mohammed Daoud Khan, cousin to King Mohammed Zahir Shah, became prime minister and turned to the Soviets for economic and military assistance. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev agreed to help Afghanistan in 1956, and the two countries became close allies. In 1965, the Afghan Communist Party secretly formed, and in 1973, Khan overthrew his cousin the king in a military coup. Khan's regime formed the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, abolished the monarchy, and Khan named himself president. "The Republic of Afghanistan [was] established with firm ties to the USSR" (Public Broadcasting Service 2021).

In 1978 Nur Mohammad Taraki, one of the founding members of the Afghan Communist Party, took control of the country as president, and Babrak Karmal was named deputy prime minister. Karmal would emerge again later in the turbulent history of Afghanistan. Taraki and Karmal were quick to proclaim a break from Soviet influence and instead focused policies based on Islamic principles, Afghan nationalism, and socioeconomic justice (ibid.). To maintain cordial relations, however, Taraki signed a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union. A rivalry between Taraki and Hafizullah Amin, an influential communist leader, led to fighting between the two sides and at the same time, more conservative Islamic leaders who objected to social changes introduced by Khan began an armed revolt in the countryside. This revolt grew into the guerrilla movement of the Mujahidin, destined to fight the Soviet-backed government (ibid.). Also in

1979, the US cut off assistance to Afghanistan after its Ambassador Adolph Dubs was killed in an incident that remains shrouded in mystery to this day.

It is interesting to note early in the case study the existence of speculation that Amin may have been affiliated with the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). There is evidence of Amin's likely relationship with the US, including his studies in America (Rurikov 2022, S20). "One of the most famous arguments in favor of the version of Amin's connection to the CIA is information received in the fall of 1979 about an entry in his work telephone book, discovered after the storming of the presidential palace in December 1979, with the telephone number, name, and surname of a certain American, labeled "CIA" (ibid.). Indications that Amin was working for the US was significant in influencing the Soviets. Amin was an Afghan communist revolutionary, politician, and teacher who co-founded the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and ruled Afghanistan as General Secretary of the People's Democratic Party from September 1979 until his assassination in December 1979. There was no doubt at the time that the implications of him acting as an agent of the US was influential, whether it was true or not.

It would have significantly influenced the position of Soviet leaders on Afghan affairs as they considered whether to invade the country. "One can imagine what was going on in the mind of a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union], who read intelligence information that the head of the Afghan state and fraternal People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), may have been connected with the CIA. (Rurikov 2022, S20)

Whether or not Amin was actually connected to the CIA, it is a fact that American Irregular Competition activities aimed at undermining the USSR's position in Afghanistan started even before the Soviet invasion. In July of 1979, for example, US President Jimmy

Carter signed a directive authorizing the CIA to “provide . . . support to the Afghan insurgents” (US Office of the President 1979; Israeli 2022, 12). US aid to the Afghan rebels before January 1980, however, was limited to nonmilitary items (Bennett 1999; Israeli 2022, 12).

On the evening of 24 December 1979, Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan under the pretext of upholding the Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty of 1978. The invasion was launched for several reasons. “A loyal Afghanistan could secure the frontier of the Soviet Union and stabilize the Soviet Central Asia countries. Afghanistan was the bridgehead of the USSR against the Islamic world... Besides, the Soviet Union feared that Afghanistan would turn to America” (Peng and Huang 2000; Pengyu 2022, 139). On the 27th of December, Babrak Karmal, then an exiled leader from the Parcham faction of the Marxist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), was installed as Afghanistan’s new head of government (History.com Editors 2022). The Mujahidin thereafter began a guerilla war to oust the Soviet invaders believed to be infidels attacking both Islam and Afghanistan culture. In 1984, Osama bin Laden made his first documented trip to Afghanistan to aid the Mujahidin, although he would later claim that he travelled there immediately after the Soviet invasion.

The matter of partnerships and alliance, often with strange bedfellows, is not uncommon in Irregular Competition. All of the cases in this research demonstrate this point. During the American intervention against the Soviets, Pakistan played a most critical role. Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, the sixth president of Pakistan, for example, assumed a lead role. The US was in fact only in a supporting role in Afghanistan, although America’s part in orchestrating Irregular Competition from behind the scenes was significant. While America provided direction and funding, Zia was in fact the one responsible for training and arming the Mujahidin. This was not because of some sense of obligation to America. He did so primarily because of his conviction

that it was “every Muslim’s duty to fight the godless, atheist, Communist menace and to drive it out of Afghanistan” (Ricks 2014). The Americans were quite frankly just a tool to help Zia in his quest. It was not only Islamabad that emerged as an important ally. In addition to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia was heavily involved in the Irregular Competition effort “and matched the United States’ contributions dollar-for-dollar in public funds. Saudi Arabia also gathered an enormous amount of money for the Afghan Mujahidin in private donations that amounted to about \$20 million per month at their peak” (Ricks 2014).

US intervention and military support to the insurgency would increase as years passed under the Presidency of Ronald Reagan. By the end of 1986, America began providing FIM-92 Stinger missiles to the Mujahidin, which significantly improved their capability against the Soviet Air Force (Pengyu 2022, 143; Peng and Huang 2000; Kalinovsky 2010). By the end of 1986 the Mujahidin was receiving arms from the US, UK and China via Pakistan (Public Broadcasting Service 2022). With their new armament, the Mujahidin immediately began a successful campaign of shooting down Soviet planes and helicopters. If there was any doubt about US support to the guerillas to this point, it became implausible when the Mujahidin began destroying helicopter gunships and low-level bombers with extreme accuracy and effectiveness (Pach 2006).

In executing an Irregular Competition campaign to undermine the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, the US essentially brought together an informal global coalition in its proxy war. Eventually, after ten years of war, and proxy war, with no victory in sight, Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev ultimately had no choice but to order his forces to withdraw. In 1988, Gorbachev agreed to make concessions to the US (Kalinovsky 2010). In his estimation, Gorbachev was worried that continuing the war may push the Reagan administration into

Afghanistan militarily, including the establishment of US bases and airfields (Israeli 2022, 15). In April of that year, Pakistan, America, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), and the USSR signed the Geneva Accords on Afghanistan (Coll 2004, 176). At the time, Gorbachev expected that America would stop supporting the Mujahidin. However, when Reagan realized that Gorbachev was eager to withdraw, Reagan declared that he would in fact continue aid (Cordovez and Harrison 1995, 270). In the end, “Gorbachev gained nothing from his withdrawal” (Pengyu 2022, 143).

By February of 1989, the last Soviet troops crossed back across the border out of Afghanistan. Over the course of the ten-year war, “620,000 Soviets served in Afghanistan from the armed forces, Committee of State Security (KGB), and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). A total of 13,833 died, and 69,685 were wounded (Shaw and Spencer 2003). Following the Soviet withdrawal, the Mujahidin continued their resistance against the Soviet-backed regime of communist president Dr. Mohammad Najibullah, who had been elected president of the puppet Soviet state in 1986. The Mujahidin named Sibhatullah Mojadidi as head of their exiled government (Public Broadcasting Service 2022). Mojadidi would eventually become Acting President after the fall of Najibullah's government in 1992.

Never able to recover from the public relations and financial losses, the failure in Afghanistan became a contributing factor to the eventual collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991 (History.com Editors 2022). While not the focus of this case study, it should be noted that Bin Laden, and emergence of global jihadist terrorism which would take the world by storm on September 11, 2001, were borne out of this experience.

In a July 1998 interview with *Le Nouvelle Observateur*, Z. Brzezinski, who served as US National Security Adviser to Jimmy Carter, described American operations in Afghanistan as

“the embodiment of a brilliant idea: it dragged the Russians into a trap—their own Vietnam War—which caused demoralization and, ultimately, the collapse of the Soviet empire” (Rurikov 2022, S19). While the role of America and Brzezinski may be exaggerated in this statement, the application of Irregular Competition in this case was nevertheless significant in the outcome of this historic conflict.

### **1.2 Irregular Competition Activities Demonstrated (Open Coding - categorized by DIME)**

Analysis of the case above reveals diplomatic, informational, military, and economic aspects to the Irregular Competition story that played out in Afghanistan from 1979-1989. Some tactics employed by the US were planned while others emerged as time, events, and other international actors changed the course of the story.

(Economic Irregular Competition demonstrated). During the earliest days of the conflict in 1979, America made the decision to engage in economic warfare and cut off economic assistance to Afghanistan after US Ambassador Adolph Dubs was killed. To demonstrate to the reader the extent of the funding cuts, earlier that year, White House press secretary Jody Powell noted that the budget for American economic aid to Afghanistan had been \$15 million in 1979 and was slated to be \$17 million for fiscal 1980 (Mohr 1979, A3). As a result of America’s economic warfare, presumably in response to the assassination, the numbers were reduced drastically to \$3.1 million in 1979 and a range of \$3-5 million in 1980 following the reduction in support (ibid.). The aid that remained was to be used to finance only two projects of “humanitarian development assistance,” (ibid.). Powell also announced that a \$250,000 United States military-training program would be terminated (ibid.). As the war progressed through the

following decade, financial aid was redirected away from the government of Afghanistan and shifted instead to the Mujahidin, and would increase exponentially (Hughes 2012, 133).

(Diplomatic, Information, Economic Irregular Competition demonstrated). One interesting act of Irregular Competition occurred immediately after the Soviet Invasion involving the American boycott of the 1980 Olympics hosted by Moscow. Led by the US and President Jimmy Carter, more than 60 nations refused to compete in the Moscow-held games. The boycott included Canada, Israel, Japan, China and West Germany, as well as most Islamic nations. Interestingly, Afghani athletes competed in the games. While some countries around the world did not forbid their athletes from competing as individuals under the Olympic flag, American athletes attempting to compete faced losing their passports (Kennedy, L. 2021). As a side note, back in America, a group of Olympians sued the US Olympic Committee to participate but lost the case. In the end, the boycott resulted in only 80 countries competing in the Olympics, the fewest since 1956 (when many countries boycotted over various political flashpoints around the world).

(Diplomatic, Information Irregular Competition demonstrated). President Ronald Reagan saw anti-communism as a sacred responsibility and subsequently proposed what would be known as “the Reagan Doctrine” to counter it. In Afghanistan, this meant undermining the Soviet intervention and sabotaging the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) regime (Pengyu 2022, 143; Peng and Huang 2000; Kalinovsky 2010). Reagan was much heavier handed than his predecessor Jimmy Carter in Afghanistan in this regard. For Reagan, US Irregular Competition efforts were not just about Afghanistan. After a failure in Vietnam, the President sought to “restore US allies’ confidence that US post-Vietnam isolationism was over and that they could rely on US leadership. Reagan understood Irregular Competition in



Afghanistan could serve as a tool to help re-establish American domination in the region, a position significantly weakened by the recent US hostage crisis in Iran (Emadi 1999, 59; Israeli 2022, 14). The precise timing of Reagan's increased, aggressive Irregular Competition campaign can be pinpointed to March 27, 1985, when he signed the since-declassified, Top Secret, National Security Decision Directive 166 (NSDD-166) (Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum n.d.). NSDD 166 directed a fundamental shift in Irregular Competition from simply disrupting the Soviets to creating an intractable war to overthrowing the Kabul regime and defeating the USSR in Afghanistan (ibid; Hughes 2012, 124).

(Diplomatic Irregular Competition demonstrated). America's support of its proxy, the Mujahidin, was emboldened by another partnership of strange bedfellows in the form of US-Pakistan cooperation. The Soviet Union and PDPA had become the common enemy of both the US and Pakistan (Pengyu 2022, 143). Subsequent diplomatic and military support for the resistance from both the US and Pakistan contributed to making Afghanistan a quagmire for the Soviets (139). For Islamabad, America's Irregular Competition in Afghanistan and Pakistan's involvement were inseparable. Islamabad's interests in Afghanistan from the 1970s to today have been consistent and strong, not just because of geographic proximity but the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic connectedness that exists between the two countries. Pakistan's interests focused on installing a sympathetic regime in Kabul, suppressing Pashtun separatism and irredentism in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), and excluding Indian influence from Afghanistan (Hughes 2012, 126). The Pakistanis used their control over financial aid to favor select clients and marginalize factions, such as Pashtun nationalist groups loyal to ex-King Sahir Shah (ibid.). Islamabad therefore concluded that it was in their interest to back radical Islamist leaders like Kekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani (founder of the Haqqani

network, now deceased. Jalaluddin, however, had seven sons, one of them named Sirajuddin Haqqani, the de facto Head of State of Afghanistan at the time of this research). Ever since the 1980s, Pakistani leaders like Zia, Bhutto, Sharif, and Musharraf sought to use Islamist parties to subvert Communist Afghanistan, but these policies also encouraged internecine bloodshed in places like Karachi and the rise of small but vociferous radical Islamist minority groups throughout the region (135). For America, officials in Washington, DC assumed that their Pakistani counterparts knew how to handle the Afghans and therefore granted a great deal of authority to the Pakistanis in determining how to implement America's Irregular Competition strategy against the Soviets. At the same time, other countries in the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia being the main benefactor, were treated like an "exceptionally generous bank, rather than a state which had its own agenda of promoting Wahhabism in Central and Southern Asia" (137).

### **1.3 Takeaways from Irregular Competition Applied in this Case.**

Takeaway 1. As demonstrated in this case, Irregular Competition may result in impacts larger than what anyone expects at the outset. The initial goal of America in Afghanistan was to increase the cost of Soviet occupation. No one realistically thought that the Mujahidin would defeat the Soviets and eventually drive them out of Afghanistan (Riedel 2014, 144). While everything that happened in Afghanistan can surely not be attributed to American Irregular Competition activities alone, one takeaway from this case is that unintended consequences of Irregular Competition activity – such as the total collapse of the Soviets - should be considered as a possibility from the start (ibid.). In considering such possible outcomes, the architects of Irregular Competition should then be compelled to plan for such eventualities in advance.

Takeaway 2. A second lesson gleaned from this case is that American foreign policy and Irregular Competition activities are more likely to succeed when the policy and implementation communities work well together but “stay out of each other’s business” (Riedel 2014, 143). In the case of Afghanistan, the intelligence community was actually more cautious and conservative than the policy makers and White House (Galster 2001, 12). The intelligence community was a partner in the process but did not push for radical programs (ibid.). A main learning point in this vein is that policy dictated by the executive and legislative branches should generally drive Irregular Competition. It should not be the other way around with the military, or the intelligence community, or any other singular part of government, for example, driving the course of things.

Both the White House and the CIA wanted to maintain plausible deniability in the initial stages of the campaign (Riedel 2014, 144). However, as Mujahidin successes mounted, Zia and Congressman Charlie Wilson pressed for escalation, which CIA Director William Casey and President Reagan accepted (Riedel 2014, 144). The Irregular Competition campaign was escalated with the full support of Congress, which was notified at all stages and given full oversight (Riedel 2014, 145). Despite those who might argue that Congressional involvement diminishes the likelihood of success or slows down the process with bureaucracy, the Afghanistan campaign proved otherwise. Admittedly, technology, the ability to share information, and partisan politics are not the same today as they were in the 1980s, with considerable bipartisanship occurring in the American legislature. This is true, but the benefits of Congressional oversight and support for Irregular Competition cannot be ignored, as the Afghanistan case demonstrates.

Takeaway 3. Forging coalitions and alliances - sometimes with and among unlikely actors - is not unusual in Irregular Competition. Alliance management is a challenging endeavor. Both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were no doubt acting in their own interest while cooperating with the Americans. Both countries surely had their own agendas, but the US needed them. Zia and his ISI were key to arming and training the Mujahidin. Saudi Arabia provided financial support as well as served as a rallying point for the rest of the Islamic world to get behind the insurgents (Riedel 2014, 147-8). The key lesson is that actors' positions in Irregular Competition can change quickly, often, and should be considered conditional but essential.

Takeaway 4. Another lesson learned from this case is that one must be clear about the desired endgame to avoid prolonged or "endless" Irregular Competition activities. President Carter set out to simply weaken Soviet forces and make their occupation as costly as possible. Reagan continued this policy during his first term, but eventually transformed the objective to one of victory for the Mujahidin and the ousting of the USSR all together, with prodding from Zia. It is critical to note that this changing of the endgame did not occur until a relative amount of success was achieved during the initial phase, which was intended to simply make things so miserable for the Soviets that they wanted to pack up and leave. America's challenges were cheap and simple compared to the Soviets (Anderson 2010, 10). While not the focus of this case study, "mission creep" did occur afterward, when President George H.W. Bush attempted to continue Irregular Competition activities until the remaining communist regime in Kabul fell (Riedel 2014, 149), which did not happen. Afghanistan fell into chaos after the Americans and Soviets left (Anderson 2010) but the situation there was no longer a priority for America. By that time, the Soviet Union was collapsing and the US had to turn its attention to becoming the world's sole superpower.

Takeaway 5. Equally important to learn from this case is that in Irregular Competition, unintended consequences can never be entirely known or predicted but extensive analysis of possibilities should be continuously considered and updated. The world now has the luxury of hindsight to see that many of the Muslims who traveled to fight alongside the Mujahidin were the same jihadists that the US would confront twenty years later when America itself invaded Afghanistan. While America did not invite these foreign volunteers in the fight against the Soviets in the 1980s, the US was “responsible for not keeping a closer watch on what was happening on the ground” (Riedel 2014, 151-2). A new global Islamist movement was taking shape.

Takeaway 6. Only so much credit – both positive and negative – can be attributed to Irregular Competition. This case study highlights American Irregular Competition and extracts lessons learned from it, but in the end only so much credit can go to the US itself in the collapse of the Soviet invaders. The Soviet Union made mistakes including the invasion of Afghanistan itself. This was followed by years of instability caused by the people of Afghanistan themselves, and the regional dynamics that surrounded them. The US would make many of the same mistakes during its own war in Afghanistan decades later. The Soviet political and economic systems were also in trouble by the 1980s (Riedel 2014, 154-5). While the US achieved its initial Irregular Competition goals and much more, one must be cautious to give too much credit to America in causing the Soviet failure in Afghanistan. This is a cautionary note: many factors, nations, and stakeholders were at play in this complex story and Irregular Competition orchestrated by the US was but one.

## **2. Case Study 2: US Irregular Competition Directed Toward Iran, 2001 to 2021**

## 2.1 Geopolitical Situation

Official ties between the United States and Persia began in 1856 when the Qajar Nasseredin Shah dispatched Persia's first Ambassador, Mirza Abolhasan Shirazi to Washington, D.C. The United States dispatched diplomatic envoy Samuel Benjamin to Persia in 1883. The US has been engaged in some form of Irregular Competition ever since (Asgard 2010, 2). Fast forward to today and the situation between the US and Iran - in the context of greater Middle Eastern geopolitics - is more complex than any issues that may exist solely between the two countries. Among numerous incidents and happenings involving the two countries, a few worth noting since 2001 – when this case study starts – include America's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal), the US-Russia-Iran proxy war in Syria, the Yemeni proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Fraihat 2020), Iran-Russia-Turkey counter-terror cooperation, Iran's designation by the US as a state-sponsor of terrorism, Iranian hostilities toward Israel, Iran's plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the US (Department of Justice 2011), America's killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad, and other US-Iran confrontations in Iraq and the Persian Gulf. Keeping in mind that there are numerous layers of complexity surrounding the US-Iran relationship, this case study will attempt to focus predominantly on America's proactive use of Irregular Competition. These activities have been implemented alongside other, more traditional tools of statecraft in the hopes of achieving greater strategic objectives for the US. These objectives include impeding Iran's "nuclear ambitions, its support for international terrorism, its destabilizing activities in the region, and its human rights abuses at home" (US Senate 2011).

While there is a tremendous amount of history between the US and Iran, this case study is focused specifically on the period from 2001 to 2021.

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the US found an unlikely strategic partner in Iran although the positive relationship was short lived. Both countries shared a common enemy at the time: the Taliban. This was, and is, borne out of the reality that Iran has always targeted Sunni Muslims (including the likes of both ISIS and Al Qaeda) while supporting Shia populations. American and Iranian interests overlapped to a surprising degree as the US went to war in Afghanistan, and Tehran played a pivotal role in the US-orchestrated process that created a post-Taliban government in 2001 (Worden 2018). “In his memoir, the U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan, James Dobbins, chronicled his interactions with the chief Iranian negotiator, Mohammad Javad Zarif (who became foreign minister in 2013). Zarif played a pivotal role in convincing the opposition Northern Alliance to accept the U.S.-backed candidate, Hamid Karzai, as president” (ibid.) The unstable partnership between the US and Iran in Afghanistan did not last long, however, and in 2002, President George W. Bush publicly described Iran as part of the “axis of evil” - along with Iraq and North Korea - in his State of the Union address (Heradstveit and Bonham 2007). Iran immediately after that halted its meetings with the US aimed at capturing al-Qaeda operatives and combating the Taliban (Council on Foreign Relations 2021). After the War on Terror expanded into Iraq, tensions continued to escalate between the US and Iran as Iran-backed local Shiite militias in Iraq took up the fight against American troops.

Numerous actions which can be described as Irregular Competition in nature took place afterward. The US in 2006 passed the Iran Freedom Support Act to fund Iranian civil society, “hold the current regime in Iran accountable for its threatening behavior, and to support a

transition to democracy in Iran” (US Congress 2006). In 2010, the Stuxnet computer worm was introduced to Iran’s nuclear infrastructure and destroyed 1,000 centrifuges used to enrich uranium. Stuxnet’s creators have never been identified but it is widely speculated that the US and Israel were behind the attack. As the counter-terrorism czar for three US presidents, Richard Clarke repeated the speculation that America was behind the attack, giving it increased legitimacy (Clarke 2012).

In late 2011, two Iranians were arrested for plotting to bomb the Cage Milano in Washington, DC. The intent of the attack was to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the US (Mattis and West 2019, 230). The attack was directed and approved by elements of the Iranian government, including the Quds Force – the Special Operations Force of the Revolutionary Guards (ibid.). The US did not respond forcefully but instead chose to treat “an act of war as a law enforcement violation, jailing the low-level courier” (231). Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis “sensed that only Iran’s impression of America’s impotence could have led them to risk such an act within a couple of miles of the White House” (2019, 230). Following this and other overt, aggressive action taken by Iran in the Persian Gulf at the time (229-233), Mattis proposed calculated actions in response to “restrain the regime so it couldn’t thrust us into a war” (232). His proposed actions were denied by the executive branch. Mattis predicted at the time that “if you allow yourself to be goaded and trifled with, one of two things will happen: eventually a harder, larger fight will explode, or you will get moved out of the neighborhood” (ibid.). Several months later, an Iranian fighter aircraft attacked an American drone in international airspace. The pilot, apparently a terrible shot, missed repeatedly but was nevertheless empowered to take such aggressive action (232).



In 2015, Iran, the P5+1, and the European Union agreed to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (Mirza, Abbas, and Qaisrani 2022), also known as the Iran nuclear deal. The agreement provided Iran sanctions relief in return for undertaking steps to dismantle or redesign certain parts of its nuclear program (Robinson 2021). In early 2018, however, President Donald Trump withdrew support for the JCPOA, citing the agreement's temporary nature as a major flaw along with a lack of control over Iran's ballistic missile program (Mirza, Abbas, and Qaisrani 2022). Washington reactivated some of the previously suspended sanctions on Iran in November 2018 and called on the Iraqi government "to cease payments to Tehran for natural gas and electricity and to diversify its energy imports, including through contracts with U.S. companies" (International Crisis Group 2019). Iraq was very much caught in the crossfire between the US and Iran.

Baghdad asked Washington for time to pursue alternatives, fearing Iranian retaliation as well as electricity shortages. The Trump administration responded by issuing temporary waivers, the first one for 45 days. It then renewed the waivers for 90 days in December 2018 and March 2019, and for 120 days the following June. The respite has allowed Baghdad to continue importing gas and electricity from Iran, but the U.S. has continued to press Baghdad on other files, such as the energy infrastructure contracts it wants Iraq to sign with U.S. companies. A U.S. official in Baghdad explained: Our sanctions are on Iran and not on Iraq... (ibid.)

For several months in 2019, the US blamed Iran for attacks on oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz (Trevithick 2019). Later that year, a series of drone attacks occurred on the oil facilities of state-controlled Saudi Aramco in eastern Saudi Arabia, "striking the country's second-largest oil field and a critical crude-oil stabilization center" (Council on Foreign Relations 2021). Half

of Saudi Arabia's oil output was cut off, resulting in a global jump in crude prices. "Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels claim responsibility for the attack, citing Saudi intervention in Yemen's civil war, but the United States and Saudi Arabia blame Iran" (Voskuijl, Dekkers, and Savelsberg 2020, 113-134; Council on Foreign Relations 2021). Because of these and other incidents, then-President Trump designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which is a part of the Iranian military, as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) in 2019. This was the first time that the US had designated a part of another country's government as an FTO.

In January 2020, Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's elite Quds Force, was killed by a US drone strike while visiting Baghdad (Department of Defense 2020b). Soleimani was considered by some experts to be Iran's second most powerful person after Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The US Defense Department initially stated that "General Soleimani was actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region" (ibid.). However, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo shortly thereafter proclaimed that Soleimani was killed as part of a broader strategy of deterring challenges by US foes that also applied to China and Russia (Pamuk and Landay 2020).

A series of back-and-forth incidents occurred in 2020 following the Soleimani killing. First, in direct response, Iran attacked several US bases in Iraq, wounding dozens of US and Iraqi personnel. Other Iranian actions took place as well. For example, Iran launched its first military satellite, causing US concern for the system's support to Iranian missile capabilities. In response, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced his intent to implement new sanctions under the JCPOA by way of a UN Security Council resolution. Russia, however, made the case that the US abandoned the JCPOA. In May of the same year, the US sanctioned five Iranian ship captains for delivering oil to Venezuela despite US sanctions on both countries. In October of

2020, President Trump sought to extend a UN arms embargo on Iran set to expire under the JCPOA, but the measure failed (Mirza, Abbas, and Qaisrani 2022). At the end of the year, Trump released several new sanctions aimed at Iran's oil and financial sectors, a charity, and several top officials (ibid.). The administration cited as reasons for the new measures "the Iranian government's alleged interference in the 2020 presidential election, its suspected development of chemical weapons, and human rights abuses committed during a crackdown on protesters in November 2019" (Council on Foreign Relations 2021).

The end of 2020 witnessed the death of top Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. Israel, fearing that Fakhrizadeh was leading the way to develop a nuclear bomb, was suspected to be behind the assassination. Since 2004, Israel had executed a campaign of sabotage and cyberattacks on Iran's nuclear fuel enrichment facilities, and likely conducted the Fakhrizadeh attack remotely (Bergman and Fassihi 2021). "Iran blame[d] Israel for Fakhrizadeh's killing, and hard-liners insist[ed] the US was also involved" (Council on Foreign Relations 2021). Shortly thereafter, Iran's parliament approved a bill to boost uranium enrichment to 20 percent and proclaimed that it would expel International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors if sanctions were not lifted within two months (Takeyh 2020). The bill passed with approval from Supreme Leader Khamenei, despite President Rouhani's opposition (ibid.). To date, Iran continues to block IAEA inspectors.

In 2021, the US and Iran met in Vienna to discuss ways to return to the JCPOA agreement. While the talks were taking place, there was an explosion at the Natanz nuclear facility in Iran. Iran claimed that the attack came from Israel and subsequently started enriching uranium to an all-time high of 60% (Council on Foreign Relations 2021). In June of 2021, Ebrahim Raisi, a judiciary chief targeted by U.S. sanctions for his involvement in a 1988 panel

that sentenced thousands of dissidents to death, and for his role in the repression of Iran's 2009 Green Movement protests, won the presidential race (Takeyh 2021; Council on Foreign Relations 2021). The friction between the US, Iran, and many of the regional and global actors discussed above continue today.

## **2.2 Irregular Competition Activities Demonstrated (Open Coding - categorized by DIME)**

(Diplomatic, Information Irregular Competition demonstrated). With the advent of the war on terror, a unique relationship between the US and Iran was born out of a common goal of fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarded this situation as an opportunity to “increase cooperation with the US from Afghanistan to a wider set of issues” (Rubin and Batmanglich 2008, 3). However, President Bush signaled decisively that cooperation in Afghanistan would not lead to a broader rapprochement with Iran when he included Iran in the “Axis of Evil” in his January 2002 State of the Union speech (ibid.). The emphasis on this relationship between the US and Iran, in the context of Irregular Competition, is to highlight that unexpected or unintended partnerships often emerge and dissipate for numerous reasons.

(Information Irregular Competition demonstrated). Regarding space and cyber technology, a note about the 2010 Stuxnet computer worm is necessary. The virus, allegedly created by the US and introduced with the assistance of Israel, was an aggressive cyber operation with real-world sabotage effects on Iran's enriching capability. Stuxnet was designed to destroy the centrifuges Iran was using to enrich uranium as part of its nuclear program. Most uranium that occurs in nature is the isotope U-238; however, the fissile material used in a nuclear power plant or weapon needs to be made from the slightly lighter U-235 (Fruhlinger 2022). Stuxnet succeeded in being the first virus to cause the physical destruction of infected devices. However,

while it severely crippled Iran's nuclear program, the malware also spread beyond the limits of Iran's nuclear facilities because of the virus' aggressive nature (ibid). As Irregular Competition can benefit from emerging space and cyber enablers, the possibility of unintended consequences, and an increased need to understand such technologies, must be acknowledged.

(Diplomatic, Information, Economic Irregular Competition demonstrated). The 2015 JCPOA demonstrated an attempt by the Obama Administration to end Iran's development of nuclear weapons in exchange for sanctions relief. America's 2018 withdraw from the JCPOA was likely intended to influence Iranian leadership and send a message that the US was not going to tolerate Iran's nuclear ambitions. Reverberations, fallout, debate, and continued diplomatic efforts surrounding the JCPOA persist at the time of writing this research, with discussion about reviving it occasionally resurfacing in Iran-US geopolitical circles.

(Diplomatic, Information, Military Irregular Competition demonstrated). Related to the pursuit of nuclear weapons, and clearly in the realm of Irregular Competition activity, the US is also suspected by Iran as a co-conspirator in the assassination of top Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. This was a highly complex attack which likely caused considerable setbacks for Iran's nuclear program, including weapons development goals.

The Revolutionary Guards' assessment — that the attack was carried out by a remote-controlled machine gun “equipped with an intelligent satellite system” using artificial intelligence — was correct. The entire operation took less than a minute. Fifteen bullets were fired. Iranian investigators noted that not one of them hit Ms. Ghasemi, seated inches away, accuracy that they attributed to the use of facial recognition software.

(Bergman and Fassihi 2021)

(Diplomatic, Information, Military Irregular Competition demonstrated). The January 3, 2020, American targeting and killing of Iranian General Soleimani presented a clear and unambiguous signal of American resolve, not just in Iraq, and towards Iran, but in the greater Middle East region. As noted in Chapter 1 of this research, Irregular Competition activities are unlikely to elicit a major conventional military response, and the killing of Soleimani demonstrated this point. On January 8, 2020, in a military operation code named Operation Martyr Soleimani, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) launched over 12 ballistic missiles at the Ayn al-Asad airbase in Al Anbar Governorate, western Iraq, as well as another airbase in Erbil, in response to the Soleimani killing. The US did not initially concede the seriousness of the attack but later revealed that 110 service members had been diagnosed and treated for traumatic brain injuries from the attack (Martin 2021). Iran reportedly informed the Iraqi government of an imminent attack shortly beforehand. Some analysts suggested the strike was deliberately designed to avoid causing any fatalities in order to dissuade an armed American response, which would support the fundamentals of Irregular Competition (Baker 2020, Safi 2020). Incidentally, several hours after the Iranian missile attacks, during a state of high alert, IRGC forces mistakenly shot down Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752, killing 176 people (Salmani 2020). While any loss of life is unfortunate, and back-and-forth military responses clearly occurred between the US and Iran, the US and Iran did not go war. Iran responded to the killing with a ballistic missile attack that allowed the country's leadership to demonstrate to its population that it would not let the incident go unpunished (Safi 2020). This gets to matters of legitimacy and influence which are key to Irregular Competition, even amongst one's own domestic population. After the Iranian missile attack, President Trump backed away

from further military action against Iran and called for renewed diplomacy (Baker 2020). The US and Iran did not engage in a major conventional military war as a result of this event.

### **2.3 Takeaways from Irregular Competition Applied in this Case**

Takeaway 1. Foreign alliances and partnerships, although they may be fleeting, are critical to successes in Irregular Competition. Saudi Arabia, for example, in cooperation with the US, consistently provided support for Iraq in its conflicts with Iran (Riedel 2014, page). Iran demonstrated an interest in the success of America's counter-ISIS campaign...given the threat the organization present[ed] to Iran and to Shiites in Iraq (International Crisis Group 2019, 13). "Countries have interests, not friends – especially when they do not have common values" (Riedel 2014, 148). As demonstrated in the first case on Afghanistan, and reinforced in this case on Iran, strange partnerships often arise in Irregular Competition. Admittedly, these relationships are often transactional and subject to change with the slightest shifts in diplomatic, informational, military, or economic parameters.

Takeaway 2. The impacts of Irregular Competition often reverberate well beyond the intended target of the activity itself. For example, many of the actions taken by the US toward Iran put Iraq in a difficult position diplomatically, militarily, and economically. America's pressure on Iraq to comply with its sanctions against Iran, for example, had a host of unintended, negative effects on Iraq. "[The sanctions] are harming U.S.-Iraqi relations; emboldening Iranian allies in Baghdad; and complicating Baghdad's attempts to achieve what Washington claims it wants: warmer relations between Iraq and its Arab neighbors" (International Crisis Group 2019, 13). Strategic, far-reaching, second- and third-order consequences cannot be predicted with

certainty, but attempts should be made to contemplate as many as possible from the outset of Irregular Competition.

Takeaway 3. Another takeaway from this case is a demonstration of Irregular Competition's limitations. In observing US-Iran relations from 2001 to 2021 alone, it is evident that Irregular Competition, even when combined with other tools of international statecraft, can only achieve so much. The US still struggles with many complex matters of national security and regional instability in the Middle East, much of which is attributed to Iran. While not part of this case study, it is worth noting that Irregular Competition between the US and Iran goes back much farther than 2001. In highlighting a few instances of Irregular Competition prior to 2001, one might consider US and British intelligence agencies supporting the coup to overthrow Iran's democratically elected prime minister Mossadeq in 1953 (Alvandi and Gasiorowski 2019), America's direct and indirect support for Iraq during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war (Friedman 1993; Sciolino 1991, 168), the Iran-Contra affair (Byrne 2014) which led to subsequent American hostages taken by Hezbollah (Brody and Shapiro 1989), and Operation Eagle Claw's attempt to rescue American hostages in Tehran which led to Goldwater-Nichols and Nunn-Cohen reforms (Thornton 2018). While none of these historic instances of Irregular Competition, or the more recent ones that this case study highlighted, have resulted in major conventional conflict between the US and Iran, it can likewise be said that none of these activities have been hugely successful in achieving America's larger strategic goals either. America's objectives with regard to Iran include impeding its nuclear ambitions, its support for international terrorism, its destabilizing activities in the region, and its human rights abuses at home (US Senate 2011). The case can be made, however, that America's application of Irregular



Competition has perhaps helped deter major conventional military conflict involving Iran in the Middle East.

### **3. Case Study 3: CCP Irregular Competition Activities against the Philippines, 2012 to 2021.**

China is the country that predominantly uses the historical argument, citing the existence of numerous ancient written sources that illustrate how the Chinese people discovered, occupied, and administered the territories of the South China Sea. This evidence confirms, according to Chinese leaders, the right of the state to exercise sovereignty over those archipelagos (Cherhat 2022).

On 15 August 2019, [then-]Philippine National Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana disclosed the unauthorized passage of People's Liberation Army's Navy's (PLAN's) ships into the Philippines' territorial waters (Pareni et al. 2019). He claimed that China was taunting the Philippines because the Chinese warships' Automatic Identification System (AIS) was switched off and ignored the Armed Forces of the Philippines' (AFP's) radio communications directed to these ships while they were passing through the Sibutu Straits in Tawi-Tawi. He also accused the PLAN of reneging on an earlier agreement with the Chinese ambassador in Manila that the Philippines will be informed in advance of any entry of Chinese warships in Philippine maritime domain.

(Nepomuceno 2019a; Nepomuceno 2019b)

Notwithstanding international and domestic concerns about Chinese actions in the South China Sea, President Rodrigo Duterte said that he would not provoke China into war. He wondered what would happen to the Philippines should war erupt in the South China Sea

and if the U.S. would protect the Philippines. He argued that the more feasible solution was to forge a joint exploration pact with this regional power. In August 2018, President Duterte told Filipinos that he expected China to be just and reasonable on the South China Sea issue. He said, “I am sure that in the end, China will be fair and the equity will be distributed”... and that “in the days to come, we would realize that China...is really a good neighbor” (Kyodo News 2018; De Castro 2022, 259).

### **3.1 Geopolitical Situation**

“In the Indo-Pacific region, Chinese aggression demonstrates an effort by Beijing to deconstruct core elements of the international rules-based order and assert greater control over the waterways that connect it with its neighbors” (Lopez 2022). China’s Irregular Competition directed toward the Philippines since 2012, when this case study begins, demonstrates adversarial action spanning maritime, air, geopolitical, economic, cyber, and information operation domains intended to advance PRC objectives and legitimize Chinese claims (Lin et al. 2022, 177).

In April of 2012, the CCP maneuvered vessels of the Chinese maritime enforcement agencies - which were then the China Marine Surveillance and the China Fisheries Law Enforcement Command – to interfere with Philippine naval frigate attempts to arrest Chinese fishing vessels anchored in Scarborough Reef (Shinji, Masaaki & Rira 2022, 66) interfered. The Chinese fishing vessels were suspected of conducting illegal operations in Philippine waters. A subsequent standoff took place between the CCP vessels and Philippine Coast Guard ships. Beijing at the time demanded that the Philippine vessels withdraw from the area “and also

applied economic pressure by imposing de facto import restrictions on Philippine bananas” (ibid.). The Philippine vessels were eventually forced to withdraw, marking the start of China’s seizure and control of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines, which continues to this day. These acts of Irregular Competition occurred without leading to war and subsequently emboldened the CCP to strengthen its non-military maritime fleets (ibid.).

In 2016, a ruling by the International Court of Justice “rejected the historical-legal basis invoked by the Chinese state (United Nations Permanent Court of Arbitration 2016), but Beijing ignored it and increased its naval presence in the South China Sea” (Phan & Nguyen 2017; Cherhat 2022, 23). China has since employed coercive maritime and air activities, military and paramilitary operations, diplomatic pressure, and economic coercion while at the same time promoting greater economic engagement with Manila (Lin et al. 2022, 177).

In 2022, The RAND Corporation developed a framework to categorize China’s use of Irregular Competition tactics used against five U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, and to identify the most problematic People’s Republic of China (PRC) tactics that the United States could prioritize countering. The final report found that over the past decade, “China employed nearly 80 different gray zone tactics across all instruments of national power against Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, India, and the Philippines” (Lin et al. 2022). The entire list of 80 types can be found in Appendix B. Of those 80, a tiered list of the 20 most problematic CCP Irregular Competition activities – labeled by RAND as “gray zone tactics” – was generated and can be found in Table 5 below. In answering the question, “problematic for who?” the list outlines activities that create challenges presumably for those that adhere to internationally accepted standards, rules, and norms.

**Table 5. Tiered List of the 20 Most Problematic CCP Irregular Competition Tactics (Lin et al. 2022)**

| <b>Tier</b> | <b>Category</b> | <b>Tactic</b>   |
|-------------|-----------------|---|
| Top         | Military        | Establish military or dual-use air bases or facilities in disputed territories  |
|             | Military        | Land or forward deploy military aircraft or equipment in or near disputed territories   |
|             | Military        | Establish military or dual-use ground bases or facilities in disputed territories   |
|             | Military        | Land or forward deploy military ground troops or equipment in or near disputed territories  |
|             | Economic        | Use PRC companies or economic assets to advance disputed PRC territorial claims   |
|             | Military        | Use People's Liberation Army Navy, China Coast Guard, or maritime militia to harass or disrupt target commercial activities in disputed territories |
|             | Geopolitical    | Support the target's adversaries or rival countries using a combination of political, economic, and military means                                  |
|             | Military        | Establish military or dual-use maritime bases or facilities in disputed territories   |
|             | Military        | Anchor maritime vessels and/or forward deploy military maritime troops and equipment in or near disputed territories                                |
| Second      | Economic        | Reduce trade or flow of specific goods (exports or imports)   |
|             | Geopolitical    | Use diplomatic or political threats to disrupt normal business activities within the target   |
|             | Cyber/IO        | Buy or control existing target media outlets (directly or through proxies)  |
|             | Military        | Engage in highly publicized and large-scale, cross-service military exercises or shows of force near or against the target                          |
|             | Military        | Deepen military cooperation and/or establish military bases or potential dual-use facilities in neighboring countries to threaten the target        |
|             | Military        | Build up or acquire military capabilities for deterring or countering the target  |
| Third       | Economic        | Control or reduce availability of public or international resources to the target   |
|             | Economic        | Engage in PRC economic or civilian activity in or near target-sensitive or key geopolitical locations   |
|             | Cyber/IO        | Engage in cyber operations against target government or military activities   |
|             | Cyber/IO        | Engage in cyber operations to disrupt or undermine target economic activity   |
|             | Geopolitical    | Limit international sanctions or crack down on violent nonstate actors opposing the target and/or operating against the target                      |

China's maritime activities alone in the South China Sea demonstrate Irregular Competition executed with the intent to badger and coerce nations into supporting China as a regional hegemon (Colby 2021). Regarding the Philippines specifically, "China's unlawful encroachments into Philippine territorial waters have harassed the Philippines and undercut reasonable expectations of sovereignty and entitlements, even as the Philippines won a stunning and historic arbitral award against China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016"

(Ormsbee 2022; Perlez 2017). Vessels belonging to the Chinese Coast Guard, People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), People's Armed Police (PAP), and Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) continue to harass Filipinos and their ships today. In a 2021 incident, for example, journalists in a civilian boat, on their way to the Philippine-occupied Second Thomas Shoal, within the 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the Philippines, were pursued for an hour by Chinese vessels before returning to the Philippine mainland (Quirk 2021). Numerous examples of harassment and coercion such as this can be cited. A list of major international maritime incidents caused by China in the South China Sea - involving the Philippines as well as other Southeast Asian nations - can be found in Table 6.

**Table 6. Summary of the Main International Maritime Incidents Caused by China**

(Cherhat 2022)

| Year                             | Incident Name           | Target      | Chinese Forces Engaged     | Incident Type  | Official Cause        | Casualties |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|----------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|------------|
| <b>Deng Xiaoping 1979-1993</b>   |                         |             |                            |                |                       |            |
| 1988                             | Johnson Reef            | Vietnam     | Army                       | Armed conflict | Resource exploitation | 64         |
| <b>Jiang Zemin (1993-2003)</b>   |                         |             |                            |                |                       |            |
| 1995                             | Mischief Reef           | Philippines | Army + Paramilitary forces | Harassment     | Fishing               | 0          |
| 2001                             | Hainan Island EP-3      | USA         | Army                       | Harassment     | Military presence     | 1          |
| <b>Hu Jintao (2003-2013)</b>     |                         |             |                            |                |                       |            |
| 2009                             | USNS Impeccable         | USA         | Army + Paramilitary forces | Harassment     | Military presence     | 0          |
| 2011                             | Reed Bank               | Philippines | Paramilitary forces        | Harassment     | Resource exploitation | 0          |
| 2011-2012                        | Binh Minh O2, Viking II | Vietnam     | Paramilitary forces        | Ramming        | Resource exploitation | 0          |
| 2012                             | Scarborough Shoal       | Philippines | Paramilitary forces        | Harassment     | Fishing               | 0          |
| <b>Xi Jinping (2013-present)</b> |                         |             |                            |                |                       |            |
| 2014                             | Second Thomas Shoal     | Philippines | Army + Paramilitary forces | Harassment     | Fishing               | 0          |
| 2014                             | HYSY-981                | Vietnam     | Army + Paramilitary forces | Ramming        | Resource exploitation | 0          |
| 2014                             | Top Gun                 | USA         | Army                       | Harassment     | Military presence     | 0          |
| 2016                             | Natuna Islands          | Indonesia   | Paramilitary forces        | Ramming        | Fishing               | 0          |
| 2018                             | USS Decatur FONOP       | USA         | Army                       | Harassment     | Military presence     | 0          |
| 2019                             | Reed Bank 2             | Philippines | Paramilitary forces        | Ramming        | Fishing               | 0          |
| 2019                             | Vanguard Reef           | Vietnam     | Army + Paramilitary forces | Ramming        | Resource exploitation | 0          |
| 2020                             | Woody Island            | Vietnam     | Paramilitary forces        | Ramming        | Fishing               | 0          |

On the international diplomacy front, China has leveraged regional forums like ASEAN to frustrate Manila's attempts to multi-lateralize concerns regarding Chinese actions. For

example, China pressured Cambodia “to block a joint statement criticizing China at ASEAN’s summit in 2012 and again in 2016 to block Philippine messaging when Manila hoped to leverage the arbitral tribunal’s favorable ruling on the SCS” (Joshi and Malloy 2016). China restricted engagement with Philippine leaders following the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff as tensions rose (Fonbuena 2013). Along administrative and legal lines, the CCP advanced its territorial claims by establishing Sansha City on Woody Island in 2012 and the Nansha District in 2020 (Haver 2020). In 2016, “Chinese authorities tacitly allowed protests that called for boycotts of Philippine products following the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s ruling favoring Manila” (Lin et al. 2022, 178). At the community level, Chinese Irregular Competition has included support for “pro-China Philippine political leaders and parties, promoting PRC-friendly Sino-Philippine organizations, and creating new initiatives to strengthen education partnerships” (ibid.). There was even suspicion that Beijing had provided backing to Michael Yang, a Chinese national, in order to help him “secure a position as Duterte’s economic adviser in 2018. In 2015 and 2019, Yang hosted Duterte in Beijing for private meetings. Yang and others have also donated to establish drug habilitation facilities in the Philippines, a Duterte administration initiative (Lin et al. 2022, 178). Chinese United Front Work Department (UFWD) proxies are active in the Philippines, “and consortia of ethnic Filipino Chinese business leaders have been linked to pro-Beijing corporate executives close to Duterte, such as Yang, and to UFWD proxies” (ibid.). Interestingly, Philippine critics have called for the removal of the five Philippine Confucius Institutes, “arguing that China can use the institutes to propagate its preferred SCS narratives. [Despite this, both countries in 2019] signed a memorandum to recognize each other’s degrees, open new Confucius Institutes in the Philippines, and increase bilateral university exchanges, programs, and visits for faculty and students (ibid.). The above summary of CCP diplomatic

efforts to exact Irregular Competition against the Philippines is derived primarily from a 2022 RAND report titled “Competition in the Gray Zone: Countering China’s Coercion Against U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific” (Lin et al. 2022).

Chinese propaganda in the Philippines remains consistent with the broader aims of Xi Jinping’s objective to “better present China to the world through the ‘Chinese Dream’” (Yeo and Gloria 2022, 1). To promote China’s neighborhood diplomacy, emphasis has been placed on the idea of a community of a shared future, where values “such as amity, mutual prosperity, and cooperation are highlighted as China’s priorities when deploying public diplomacy towards neighboring countries” (Jinping 2017, 483). Chinese propaganda and cultural influence have benefited likewise through the growth of Chinese Confucius Institutes (CI). The Angeles University Foundation CI, for example, saw increases from 20,000 students in 2017 to 30,000 students the following year (Yeo and Gloria 2022, 11). The largest institute in the Philippines in terms of number of enrollees, this CI executes non-traditional cultural engagements, language training to government personnel, the signing of MOUs with government agencies, and other efforts aimed at promoting Chinese cultural diplomacy and influence (Confucius Institute at Angeles University Foundation 2022; Lili and He 2019)

In economic terms, China has exerted coercion in many non-traditional forms as well. For example, the CCP has sometimes provided “unrelated reasons for well-timed punitive actions that do not mention the activity China officially protested. Their timing, however, causes regional countries to interpret them as part of China’s overall coercive response” (Lin et al. 2022, 3). One example was the CCP’s destruction and limiting of banana imports from the Philippines from 2014 to 2016 because of alleged pesticide contamination problems while Manila pursued an international tribunal ruling against China’s SCS claims (Peel and Ramos 2017). Another

example of unconventional activity surrounds Chinese online gambling investments in the Philippines. Through the Philippine Offshore Gambling Operators (POGO) scheme, a large share of Chinese capital growth in the Philippines has emerged. The economic and social exclusions that these ventures have created room for China to influence Philippine politicians while at the same time stoked anti-Chinese sentiment among locals (Camba 2020).

On the larger diplomatic front, the reorientation of Philippine foreign policy toward China under President Duterte worried America, Japan, Australia, and other like-minded countries. Japan was concerned that the Duterte administration's efforts to distance the Philippines from the US would adversely affect Philippine-Japan relations (De Castro 2022, 272). Australia was concerned that that the prospects of forming a common association with the Philippines that adheres to a rules-based regional order, freedom of navigation, and support for America's role as East Asia's strategic off-shore balancer would be thwarted by President Duterte's increasingly independent foreign and strategic posture vis-à-vis the U.S. and its other Asian allies" (Tow 2017; De Castro 2022).

Compounding the problem for the Philippines, there simultaneously existed two clashing views between the Duterte Administration and the Philippine defense/military establishment during the Duterte reign. Duterte often sought to reconcile with China while the military remained adamant about protecting territorial sovereignty (and cooperating with the US). This predicament placed the Philippines in a difficult dilemma while dealing with China's maritime expansion in the South China Sea. After years of implementing a policy of appeasement towards China, the country has since been considering a policy of "limited hard balancing" to constrain the potential hegemon's revisionist agenda (De Castro 2022, 259; Paul 2018). The goal of such an approach would be to constrain China's revisionist agenda in the South China Sea (De Castro



2022, 258). Elected President in 2022, the position of “Bongbong” Marcos on this matter has been widely speculated but remains to be proven (as of the writing of this study).

The overall Chinese approach to Irregular Competition toward the Philippines can be described as one of “coercive gradualism.” Gradualism itself is defined as “principles or policies for achieving a goal by gradual steps, rather than by drastic change” (Bhatia 2018, 25). In the case of the Philippines, the CCP’s coercive gradualism strategy reveals the “state employing coercive instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve objectives by incremental steps” (Pierce, Douds, and Marra 2015, 51). It has allowed China to advance its interests in incremental moves, as opposed to a single coup de main (52). For the CCP, Irregular Competition, demonstrated in this case in the form coercive gradualism, is “a broader precept that informs its strategy across paradigms” (Bhatia 2018, 25). Former PRC premier Deng Xiaoping referred to gradualism as “fording the river by feeling for the stones” (“The Death of Gradualism” 1997; Bhatia 2018, 25). “This combined approach minimizes international involvement, localizes issues, and ensures contentious outcomes in China’s favor. For smaller players in the region [such as the Philippines], this implies significant security, sovereignty, and economic challenges, especially due to their limited capacity to counter the sophisticated and integrated Chinese approach” (ibid.).

### **3.2 Irregular Competition Activities Demonstrated (Open Coding - categorized by DIME)**

(Diplomatic, Informational, Military, Economic Irregular Competition demonstrated). China engaged the Philippines and others in the region with a variety of Irregular Competition activities simultaneously. The intent of these actions was to centralize CCP influence, grow geopolitical, economic, and military power, develop linkages between military and economic

growth, and co-opt a variety of actors for military operations (Lin et al. 2022). The CCP “layers different types of tactics to pressure targets via multiple dimensions. As a result, Beijing may not need to engage in significant escalation in any one specific domain” (ibid.). Following the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident, for example, some Chinese analysts and media sources referred to China’s successful layering of diplomatic, administrative, economic, and nongovernmental activities (cyberattacks), supported by military deterrence against the Philippines, as a “Scarborough Shoal model” that China could potentially harness elsewhere in the future to “protect Chinese maritime rights and interests” (Erickson 2016; Lin et al. 2022, 15).

(Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economic Irregular Competition demonstrated) As demonstrated throughout this case study, China continued to rely on military tactics (such as the militarization of Scarborough Shoal), exercise caution in using high-profile tactics (it did not invade any foreign territory as of this writing), wield influence via third party actors (such as pressuring ASEAN), and expanded its grassroots activities via local proxies or influence operations (such as through Confucius Institutes). In the case of the Philippines, China emphasized geopolitical cooperation through bilateral tactics. On the military side, China relied heavily on air- and maritime-domain tactics, although these tactics were often implemented through non-military or semi-military instruments like its fishing fleets (Lin et al. 2022).

(Diplomatic, Informational Irregular Competition demonstrated). The effectiveness of CCP Irregular Competition in the Philippines may be gauged in two ways. The first measure of effectiveness in influencing populations and legitimacy is determined by how the elites interpreted CCP actions. The second measure is determined by how the general Filipino population interpreted China’s actions. The CCP therefore gauged the effectiveness of diplomatic and informational Irregular Competition by whether Beijing’s outreach shaped public

opinion or elite decision-making to the extent that China could secure economic gains, security concessions, and political winds from its counterparts (Yeo and Gloria 2022, 6; Custer et al. 2018). In this regard, as the case study highlights, CCP Irregular Competition has not always resulted in the positive effects that Beijing desired. Territorial disputes, for example, have tended to boost Philippine nationalist sentiment and evoke national identity in a negative way toward China (Yeo and Gloria 2022, 8).

### **3.3 Takeaways from Irregular Competition Applied in this Case.**

Takeaway 1. The first lesson learned from this case is that in Irregular Competition, determining the efficacy of public diplomacy or propaganda is challenging because of its contingent nature. These activities do not take place in a political vacuum (Yeo and Gloria 2022, 8). Despite its efforts to influence populations in a positive way, the CCP's Irregular Competition campaign directed toward the Philippines had demonstrable negative effects. Filipino perceptions of China remained predominantly negative since the Duterte period. Chinese incursions in the West Philippine Sea (the preferred name used by Filipinos starting in 2011 following repeated Chinese sovereignty claims over Scarborough Shoal) as well as an influx of China-based offshore gaming businesses in the country "have elicited a strong nationalist response from Filipinos, perpetuating perceptions of China as untrustworthy and threatening" (Yeo and Gloria 2022, 1). Evidence drawn in a study by Yeo and Gloria determined a correlation between an increase in Chinese public diplomacy and a decrease in Filipino public trust towards China (ibid.). The study was enabled by process-tracing how national identity dampens any positive effect Chinese public diplomacy may have otherwise had on Philippine attitudes towards China. There is an interesting sub-lesson here: In trying to understand the case

of China's use of Irregular Competition toward the Philippines, the corollary that follows is that America and its allies must remember to examine how the adversary – in this case the CCP – views the situation. According to a 2022 RAND report, US support for the Philippines' UN arbitration case against China concerning the SCS was considered by China to be an example of *American* Irregular Competition activity, *not* Chinese Irregular Competition (Lin et al. 2022, 14). This serves as a reminder that one must always consider the adversary's interpretation of the geopolitical situation in Irregular Competition since it is likely different than our own.

Takeaway 2. With specific regard to Irregular Competition at sea, an important lesson learned is that China's maritime militias have blurred the lines of traditional maritime security. The interaction between fishing boats and naval forces is a clear example of this. In essence, the fishing vessels “are empowered to perform the critical function of the Chinese government as provided by Chinese internal laws” (Yoo and Koo 2022). Evidence shows that China's maritime militia groups are instructed, directed, and/or controlled by the Chinese state organs, including military authority and party leadership, both central and local (ibid.). A study of this reality by Yoo and Koo found that the conduct of Chinese maritime militias constitutes a breach of China's international obligations “in terms of (1) due regard for other states, (2) maritime safety, (3) marine environment protection and preservation, and/or (4) the overfishing ban” (2022) CCP activities directed toward the Philippines, Irregular Competition activities are implemented in accordance with a “carefully-designed campaign plan controlled by strategic-level commanders” (Layton 2022, 106). The highest levels of the CCP and PLA command structures are involved (ibid.). While Irregular Competition may involve coordinating many non–military entities such as fishing vessels, “they ultimately rely on hard military power provided by the PLA and wielded by the Party” (ibid.).

Takeaway 3. Another lesson that emerges, not just in this case but in the previous two as well, is the importance of leveraging alliances. With like-minded countries partnering together to support a rules-based order, the result of Irregular Competition coalition building exemplifies “a unique strategic advantage that our competitors cannot match” (Chang 2021). “Perhaps more than ever, the critical Philippine location and its role in the South China Sea make the archipelago nation indispensable for both Chinese and American strategic planning...Treaties between the United States and the Philippines represent core international law that states routinely use to obligate themselves to other states and vice versa (Ormsbee 2022). Legally binding agreements between states - such as the one between the US and the Philippines – provide foreign leaders with assurances that the US can be relied upon to help counter traditional and non-traditional threats and, at the same time, deter aggressors like China from seeking to expand their illegal reach and influence (ibid.). With this in mind, the US may want to consider updating international agreements, treaties, memorandums of understanding, defense vision statements, etc., to include specific provisions for Irregular Competition-type activities, both friendly and adversarial. This would not be an easy task, and every country’s perspective on Irregular Competition is different, but the important takeaway is that the *spirit* of Irregular Competition should be captured in in both formal and informal agreements. With specific regard to the Philippines, this may entail an update to the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) (Ormsbee 2022, 4). Building a coalition of like-minded partners – empowered through formal agreements – may very well assist the US in taking a firmer stand against China in the South China Sea, and elsewhere while supporting partners like the Philippines.

## **Contemporary Irregular Competition Lessons Learned**

The research question asked in this study was “Derived from contemporary case study lessons learned, what are the implications for the future of Irregular Competition in support of greater US national security objectives?” In answering this question, selective coding was performed and takeaways from the three individual cases studies were consolidated into themes. The themes are presented below as contemporary Irregular Competition lessons learned. Note that not all lessons learned from all cases are included here. Instead, only the primary lessons that were determined to demonstrate cross-cutting themes across all cases are included. Also note that only the thematic lessons learned themselves are presented here; the implications of these lessons will be discussed later in Chapter 5.

### **Lesson Learned #1: Irregular Competition Is Used by Everyone**

The use of Irregular Competition is common amongst those who are dissatisfied with some aspect of the status quo and are “determined to change aspects of the global distribution of power and influence in their favor” (Wilson and Smitson 2016, 57; Bhatia 2018, 26). This is evident in all three cases where the use of Irregular Competition was implemented by both America and its adversaries. Those employing Irregular Competition prefer it as one strategic option to challenge - and ultimately change - the way global politics work without eliciting unacceptable cost and attention (Mead 2013). These types of activities are often implemented through a sequence of gradual steps that go unnoticed. In other cases, the Irregular Competition activities are noticeable but seemingly inconsequential, so they do not cause alarm. Overall, Irregular Competition is an instrument that may be used to support the achievement of greater geostrategic objectives while minimizing the risk of major conventional military escalation.

**Lesson Learned #2: Authoritarian Irregular Competition**

An important debate regarding Irregular Competition focuses on how and if authoritarian regimes conduct activities using non-state actors against their democratic adversaries (Carment and Belo 2020). The Philippine case study suggests that an authoritarian actor such as the CCP does in fact have the ability to mobilize portions of their populations, enterprises, and infrastructure to support Irregular Competition in ways that liberal democracies generally do not. In this case alone, the CCP was able to mobilize fishing fleets, employ ethnic Filipino-Chinese businessmen to manipulate politics and economic transactions (Frialde 2016), and operate gambling establishments in order to indirectly influence Philippine populations.

**Lesson Learned #3: Interagency and Intergovernmental Cooperation**

The benefits of American internal, interagency cooperation and Congressional support are substantial and increase the effectiveness of Irregular Competition activity. The importance of cooperation between policymakers and those planning and executing Irregular Competition - to achieve commonly understood objectives - cannot be overstated. This point was made most clearly in the Afghanistan and Iran case studies in which whole-of-government-like involvement took place at various times over the years.

**Lesson Learned #4: Coalitions and Alliances**

The importance of coalitions or alliances, sometimes with and among unlikely actors, is not unusual in Irregular Competition. Furthermore, the formation of a coalition or alliance increases the effectiveness of Irregular Competition activities. This was evidences in all three

case studies whether Irregular Competition was friendly or adversarial in nature. In no case did the state using Irregular Competition go at it alone. As described in the case studies, the US partnered with Pakistan to manipulate activities and people in Afghanistan against the Soviets, it partnered with Saudi Arabia and Israel to counter Iran, and China partnered with Cambodia to influence ASEAN. Foreign alliances and partnerships, although they may be fleeting and/or conditional, are common in Irregular Competition.

### **Lesson Learned #5: Limitations**

Irregular Competition is not a “silver bullet” and in each case study analyzed it is reasonable to assume that the actor employing Irregular Competition was not completely satisfied with the results. Furthermore, Irregular Competition can have impacts larger or different than what anyone may expect at the outset. In Afghanistan, for example, Irregular Competition was successful in supporting the ultimate defeat of the Soviet Union but also likely contributed to a continuation of regional instability which America would not have chosen. American use of Irregular Competition against Iran has at least supported maintenance of the status quo in the Middle East with no major conventional war with Iran. At the same time, however, there has been no substantial limitation of Iran’s ability to negatively influence populations or affect regional legitimacy. In the Philippines, Chinese use of Irregular Competition has resulted in marginal political and economic gains for the CCP – such as the Philippines ultimately choosing not to push the results of the UN tribunal against China - but simultaneously caused a Filipino population backlash in several instances, as outlined in the case study. Irregular Competition has limits but it is nevertheless used by all actors in concert with



other instruments of statecraft. Because of this reality, the researcher proposes that it be used or countered with maximum effectiveness, which is what this study hopes to support.

### **Summary**

The three cases outlined in this chapter included (a) US Irregular Competition directed toward the USSR during the 1979-1989 Afghanistan War (b) US Irregular Competition directed toward Iran, 2021 to 2021 (c) CCP Irregular Competition activities against the Philippines, 2012 to 2021. With each case study, data analysis and coding occurred in accordance with the methodology presented in Chapter 3. Overarching themes were then derived and presented in the form of contemporary Irregular Competition lessons learned. Chapter 5 will take these lessons learned and in conclusion, generate theoretical, practical, and empirical implications.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

A summary of the findings shared in Chapter 4 reveals that America, its partners, and its adversaries all use Irregular Competition to alter the global distribution of power in their favor. The research generated empirical, practical, and theoretical implications. These implications are presented below.

### Empirical Implications

Empirical *evidence* is something verified by observation or experiment. In this research, case study observations represent empirical evidence. Empirical *implications*, suggested by the empirical case study *evidence* observed, were presented in Chapter 4 in the form of lessons learned. These lessons should be considered the primary empirical implications resulting from this research.

A second, unexpected empirical implication of this study was revealed during case study selection. The researcher discovered that finding observations or experiments – the definition of empirical evidence from which empirical implications are thereafter derived – was in itself a challenge. Specifically, finding evidence in the form of case studies that met all selection criteria specified in Chapter 3, was more challenging than expected. There are in fact few examples of friendly Irregular Competition activity being implemented comprehensively – meaning it espoused more than two instruments of DIME - in a proactive manner.

The researcher admits that the primary explanation for the limited number of cases to study, from the friendly perspective, was the case study selection criteria established for this research. The reader is reminded that the friendly selection criteria was very restrictive and included, in summary, the following requirements:

1. While adversarial Irregular Competition may be present in the case study, the US, its friends, partners, allies, or some combination of the four must have engaged in Irregular Competition activity themselves. This criterion was used to avoid cases where only adversaries executed some type of Irregular Competition activity.
2. The US, its friends, partners, allies, must have been *proactive* in some portion of their execution of Irregular Competition. This targeted a core element of the study, which was an examination of lessons learned from *offensive, proactive* Irregular Competition rather than simply reacting, responding, or countering.
3. At least two DIME (diplomatic, information, military, economic) instruments must have been utilized in the conduct of friendly Irregular Competition. This criterion was important to avoid cases dominated by the military alone. Such cases are abundant.
4. The case must have taken place within the last 40 years. This was not to imply that important lessons could not be learned from centuries of valuable Irregular Competition examples prior to this timeframe. It was instead meant to account for technological advances which affect Irregular Competition today and, in the future, in ways that earlier historic examples may not demonstrate.

### **Practical Implications: Recommendations for the Future**

This section outlines the practical implications of the study, expressed as recommendations for future thinking, planning, and policymaking on the strategic employment of Irregular Competition. The practical recommendations below are derived directly from the lessons learned found in Chapter 4.

## #1. The US, its partners and allies, and its adversaries, all engage in Irregular Competition

**Summary of Lesson Learned:** The use of Irregular Competition is common amongst those who are dissatisfied with some aspect of the status quo and are determined to change aspects of the global distribution of power and influence in their favor. Irregular Competition activities are often implemented through a sequence of gradual steps that go unnoticed, or are noticeable but seemingly inconsequential, so they do not cause alarm.

**Practical Recommendations:** America's adversaries employ Irregular Competition regularly, and the US should expect this to continue. As Tobias Burgers and Scott Romaniuk wrote in late 2022, for example, China's real takeaway from the war in Ukraine is that Irregular Competition is best. The steep costs of Russia's invasion of Ukraine will bolster China's continued use of its effective salami-slicing and irregular tactics" (Burgers and Romaniuk 2022). Irregular Competition activities are cost-effective, unlikely to provoke a major military response by themselves, are difficult to call out since they are gradual in nature and difficult to deter.

The US approach to Irregular Competition should be one that focuses not only on reacting to adversarial activity but one that involves American use of proactive Irregular Competition as well (Jones 2021b, 193). Decision-makers should reconsider whether they are truly in a state of "peace" and, as a result of this assumption, not inclined to initiate actions that they fear America's adversaries may consider provocative" (Babbage 2019b, 7). Furthermore, a proactive approach must transcend tactical action alone and embrace a comprehensive Irregular Competition strategy that supports larger Strategic Competition objectives (Bhatia 2018, 29). As author Seth Jones wrote, America must engage in both defense *and offensive* activities "to advance US interests and deter its adversaries from aggressive actions" (2021b, 193). At the

same time, America must acknowledge that proactive Irregular Competition involves risks. Using the Cold War as an example, it is important to remember that America would never have succeeded in undermining Soviet power and influence “without taking prudent risks that exploited its adversary’s vulnerabilities” (Jones 2021b, 196).

The US must “get over its obsession” with conventional conflict (Jones 2021b, 189). This is not a “fool’s dilemma” in which America must choose one or the other – traditional or Irregular Competition. Both are important and deserve attention. Competition and cooperation are not zero-sum (198). As Lieutenant General Michael Nagata (2020) posited, America is looking for conventional struggles - struggles that we *want* to have rather than the struggles that we are having right now or may have in the future. America would do well to remember that it may compete through both traditional and irregular methods while at the same time cooperate in other areas. The ability to employ Irregular Competition as a compliment to other things the US Government is doing may result in unexpected benefits.

## **#2 Authoritarian actors are able to mobilize sectors that other may not**

**Summary of Lesson Learned:** Authoritarian actors have the ability to mobilize portions of their populations, enterprises, and infrastructure to support Irregular Competition in ways that liberal democracies generally do not.

**Practical Recommendations:** The US must make a more deliberate effort to understand adversaries. This includes investing in language skills at home to read and analyze competition from the perspective of adversaries, understand how adversaries talk externally and internally about competition, and thereafter develop information campaigns to provide both counter and alternative messages (Jones 2021b, 186-8). Adversaries are vulnerable to campaigns that exploit

their weaknesses by encouraging democratic reforms, opening up financial markets, and undermining their control of information (199).

A potential method of interfering with CCP progress may be to disaggregate its China's local-level activities and target specific elements of those instruments in order to mitigate their effectiveness (Layton 2022, 113). For example, targeting the CCP's military instrument of power, this line of effort would not target CCP military assets directly but instead seek new and creative ways to diminish capability. Examples may include utilizing emerging technologies to confuse or interfere with PLAN maritime reconnaissance aircraft GPS (ibid.) or identify malign maritime activity through persistent unmanned aerial systems (Mahnken, Sharp, and Kim 2020) followed by "naming and shaming" to expose the CCP for its violations of sovereignty.

The CCP case in the Philippines suggests that it may be beneficial for the US and its partners to seek marginal gains through Irregular Competition while confronting the CCP. Just as the impact of the CCP's strategy stems from the cumulative effect of carefully coordinated actions, tailored American (or Philippine) Irregular Competition directed toward the CCP could possibly aim to tip the balance in small steps. The most viable approach may be to seek marginal gains targeting "accessible vulnerabilities" (Layton 2022, 113). This approach may have the greatest impact if it is possible to target specific assets central to China's local Irregular Competition campaign in order to "frustrate, undermine, and deny" the individual Chinese instruments and elements of power being used in a combined manner locally (ibid.). Shutting down or providing alternative messaging to that propagated by Confucius Institutes, may serve as an example of such action.

In addition, the US and its partners should more deliberately and publicly highlight irresponsible, illegal, or destabilizing adversarial activities. "That means establishing diplomatic

norms as well as naming, shaming and sanctioning bad actors” (Gould and Pomerleau 2022).

After doing so, America and its partners and allies should consider economic consequences for malign Irregular Competition activities. This would admittedly be difficult since such activities are often gradual and uneasily noticed.

### **#3 Interagency and intergovernmental support within the USG are critical to success**

**Summary of Lesson Learned:** The benefits of American interagency cooperation and Congressional support are substantial and increase the effectiveness of Irregular Competition activity.

**Practical Recommendations:** Holistic approaches to proactive American Irregular Competition will require involvement and “buy in” from those outside of the traditional security sector, such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the State Department, Treasury, or even the Department of Commerce. “The idea of incorporating non-military activities into the US government's operational definition of national security predates 9/11” (Brook 2012, 34). The Australian Government, for example, determined that in focusing on defense, its national security strategies and policies were too narrowly drawn toward conventional military threats – a focus that did not protect against emerging non-traditional threats (Swinsburg 2001, 7). A refocus should recognize the role of Irregular Competition in areas such as economic prosperity, diplomacy, national welfare, climate security, energy, infrastructure, education, industry, and the general nature of American society (Brook 2012, 35).

In support of this line of effort, as with any traditional conflict or competition, one should know what the intended outcomes are before setting off on the endeavor. America has often stepped into conflict, usually with good intentions, without having an idea of what success looks

like so that it may disengage and walk away when it has reached that point. The importance of determining strategic objectives and communicating those goals to all involved is critical to success. Furthermore, those goals must be realistic. Professor Donald Stoker from the Dwight D. Eisenhower School of the National Defense University wrote in 2022 that American leaders no longer know how to think about conflict, particularly conflict fought for limited aims. America often gets itself involved in conflict without understanding what it wants or valuing victory and thus ending the conflict (Stoker 2022, 171). America's involvement in Afghanistan, its longest war to date, provides a clear example of what can go wrong when clear, realistic objectives are not stated and understood from the beginning. "Moving the goal posts," or changing the parameters of the game as it is in progress, rarely results in success. Irregular Competition is no different than any other type of conflict or competition in this regard. It is critical for America's leadership to clearly understand and articulate intended objectives and outcomes from the start.

#### **#4 Coalitions and international cooperation are key to success**

**Summary of Lesson Learned:** The importance of coalitions or alliances, sometimes with and among unlikely actors, is not unusual in Irregular Competition. Furthermore, the formation of a coalition or alliance increases the effectiveness of Irregular Competition activities.

**Practical Recommendations:** The US must seek expanded international, coalition collaboration on (a) responses to adversarial Irregular Competition as well as (b) devising proactive friendly Irregular Competition activities. The US must include Irregular Competition in its bilateral and multilateral security dialogues and agreements. Security professionals today know well that one state cannot "go it alone" when it comes to achieving strategic objectives.



While partnerships and alliances must be developed, reinforced, and maintained, they must also be updated to account for the evolving technological innovations that shape the global security operating environment. Just as those relationships must account for space, cyber, social media, and other technological innovations, they must also account for friendly and adversarial use of Irregular Competition. Using the current US-Philippine defense pact as an example, the CCP “has been able to reshape security conditions in the region in ways that actively skirt the Mutual Defense Treaty and undermine the ability of the alliance to respond” (Winger and Amador 2022). This includes the use of malign Irregular Competition tactics like employing maritime militias and cyber operations that occur below the threshold of traditional military action, as discussed in Chapter 4. Instead of fostering new alliance mechanisms to counter these Irregular Competition tactics, bilateral discourse within the alliance has too often centered on military hardware which “at best paper[s] over the policy and institutional deficiencies (ibid.). The US should therefore consider developing an interagency/international network focused on Irregular Competition and hold scenario discussions with key allies and partners to better understand their concerns, responses, and needs (Lin et al. 2022, vi). Furthermore, along the lines of Irregular Competition coalition building, the US should consider economic incentives for partners demonstrating proactive Irregular Competition activities (which much be defined).

Additionally, building capacity for the Philippines and other partners and allies should be one of the highest priorities for the US. America’s “ability to pursue common security and economic goals with like-minded nations is the cornerstone of our success and at the root of our strategy” (Lopez 2022). America’s underlying approach in supporting the Philippines, however, does not need to be aimed at matching competitors' capabilities directly (Lopez 2022). As Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner noted in 2022,

America's strategy will of course include the development of more combat-capable credibility forward, but to also build "asymmetric advantages for U.S. partners" and enable "the most capable of U.S. partners in the region" (ibid.).

Moreover, the US should place a priority on educating partners, allies, US Government employees, members of Congress, and other relevant stakeholders on Irregular Competition. It is impossible to act on friendly or adversarial Irregular Competition if one doesn't understand it. This involves providing "self-help" tools to implement friendly Irregular Competition as well as tools to deter and defend against adversarial Irregular Competition. Understanding the issue is a prerequisite for successful Irregular Competition efforts (Manwaring 2010, 164).

#### **#5 Irregular Competition has limitations and is just one tool of many**

**Summary of Lesson Learned:** The value of employing Irregular Competition should not be given too much nor too little credit in the ultimate outcome of a geopolitical situation.

Irregular Competition is not a "silver bullet" and in each case it is reasonable to assume that the actor employing Irregular Competition was not completely satisfied with the course of the campaign or the ultimate outcome. Irregular Competition can have impacts larger or different than what anyone may expect at the outset. The limits of the strategic impact of Irregular Competition must be acknowledged.

**Practical Recommendations:** The US must acknowledge that there are limitations to what Irregular Competition can achieve. This applies to both friendly and adversarial use of Irregular Competition. Policymakers, strategists, practitioners, and academics alike must be aware of this. China in the Philippines, for example, has had limited success in its use of coercive gradualism. In some instances, Irregular Competition has backfired on the CCP, such

as with the aggressive sense of nationalism among Filipinos in the face of Chinese encroachment. For America, nearly 70 years of Irregular Competition directed toward Iran has resulted in limited diplomatic, economic, and strategic military accomplishments. Despite limitations, what is not possible to observe in this research, or anywhere else, is what the outcome would have been in the case of China/Philippines, US/Iran, US/Afghanistan, or anywhere else, had Irregular Competition *not* been implemented. Irregular Competition, like any other tool used by state and non-state actors, should be exercised in concert with traditional instruments (DIME) and elements (resources that enable the achievement of objectives, such as geography, population, natural resources, economic development, military preparedness, etc. (Rehberg 2019)) of power to achieve desired objectives. While Irregular Competition is only one tool, its effectiveness use should be maximized, nevertheless.

### **Theoretical Implications**

As a result of this study, the researcher concluded with three main theoretical implications. These three implications serve as the main academic contributions of this research to the body of knowledge on Irregular Competition. The first academic contribution is the definition of Irregular Competition itself. The second academic contribution analyzes the existence of a unique Chinese version of International Relations (IR) theory in the Irregular Competition space. The third academic contribution is the development of a theoretical model for conceptualizing whole-of-government Irregular Competition.

#### **Academic Contribution #1: A definition of Irregular Competition.**

Gray Zone, Fourth Generation, New Generation, Irregular, Hybrid, Asymmetric, Compound, and Unrestricted “Warfare” or “Conflict.” All of these terms, and many others, have

made their way into contemporary lexicon denoting some aspect of the subject matter captured in this research. These terms we defined and explained in detail in Chapter 2 of this research. Each of them comes with bias and preconceived definitions. The first academic contribution to the body of knowledge on this subject is a definition of Irregular Competition that is unique and comprehensive.

The term “Irregular Competition” itself is not original to this study. It can be found in numerous publications – several of which are highlighted below – but without definition. For example, Seth Jones, director of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., wrote about Russia and China that “The future of conflict means that the United States needs to prepare to compete with these states not primarily with divisions, aircraft carriers and strategic bombers—but by, with, and through state and nonstate proxies, cyber tools, and overt and covert information campaigns. At the moment, however, the United States is ill prepared for Irregular Competition” (57). Furthermore, Jones wrote, “The likelihood of Irregular Competition has not been well-articulated by U.S. officials in public statements, nor have the dangers of Russia, Iranian, Chinese or North Korean irregular warfare been sufficiently emphasized” (63). In 2021, Jones penned another work stating that “The United States does not need to choose between conventional, nuclear, or Irregular Competition. All are important” (Jones 2021a). In a different light, US Army Major David Clamon wrote in 2017 about Irregular Competition, using the term to describe the impacts on water competition within the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in an era of irregular conflict (iv). Pelleriti et al. used the term in a militarily-focused sense, seemingly interchangeable with Irregular Warfare. Pelleriti et al. exclaimed that,

While aware of threats, U.S. strategists struggle to define them, as evidenced by the frequent use of nondoctrinal, poorly defined terms such as hybrid, gray zone, nontraditional, unconstrained, and asymmetric warfare. The doctrinal terms irregular warfare and unconventional warfare (UW) provide a common point of departure for the discussion, but are incomplete, generally not well understood, and often misused. To be successful in this new era of Irregular Competition, U.S. planners must reassess and update IW [Irregular Warfare] related terms, concepts, and authorities required to counter irregular threat strategies.” (2019, 104-5)

Dominique Lapprand (2020) used the term “Irregular Competition” in an economic sense. While not focused on the security sector specifically, Lapprand wrote that responding to illicit trade was “not just about avoiding being an accomplice of that crime or addressing Irregular Competition,” but that such action was also about ensuring social responsibility for businesses (*ibid.*). Lapprand’s use of the term is in line with the spirit of this study as it refers to Irregular Competition as something with meaning beyond traditional security matters, which may touch other parts of government and society.

As the reader can see from the above references, the term Irregular Competition is not new. The reader will also recall that the term Irregular Competition and its definition have been used from the very beginning of this work, starting with the title page. The researcher now reveals, however, that the choice to use the term “Irregular Competition,” and the definition of it presented in this research, were not decided upon until after the case studies were complete. The need for an uncommon term was deemed necessary because other terms such as gray zone conflict or hybrid conflict, for example, were inadequate, misleading, and/or problematic in describing what this research is about.

The term Gray Zone, for example, as evidenced in Chapter 2, is commonly understood as something that adversaries typically engage in while the US and its allies react to it. The use of Gray Zone often implies that it includes nefarious activity, a point which US military doctrine and Congressional research both reinforce (Hoffman 2018, 36; Koven 2016, 3; US Congress 2022, 9). One often sees Gray Zone used to describe the CCP's activities in the South China Sea, for example. Other terms have similar inherent biases that skew understanding and therefore were determined inadequate for this research. Hybrid Warfare, for example, which was also described in detail throughout Chapter 2, is commonly referenced to describe Russia's malign activity, including everything from election meddling to the employment of proxies in Africa or Ukraine (Fridman 2018). The term *Irregular Warfare* - not *Irregular Competition* - is likewise a problematic term because it includes the word "warfare." Warfare typically leads one to think of the military, or military activity. For this reason, diplomats, NGOs, academics, and most others not in the military assume *Irregular Warfare* to be something they would rather not be a part of. Other terms related to those just mentioned have similar, inherent implications or biases. It was for these reasons that the researcher found it necessary to adopt and define a term that could represent something that the US and its friends and partners – as well as adversaries – may engage in without immediate bias. *Irregular Competition* was chosen as the preferred term. The term is not perfect, but it is used much less frequently than the other more common terms and avoids a direct link to military-only activities.

With the need for a new term explained, and *Irregular Competition* chosen as a relatively "safe" option, the task for the researcher then moved to defining it. *Irregular Competition* is defined in this research as "state and non-state actors proactively engaging in programs to influence populations and affect legitimacy during times of peace, competition, and conflict."

This definition is unique to this study and exists as the first main academic contribution to the body of knowledge on this subject. There are several key elements to this definition, all described below.

First, the definition posits that state and non-state actors all engage in this activity. The idea that all actors, state and non-state, “good guys” and “bad guys” alike, was established in Chapter 4. Second, the word “proactive” was deemed necessary in the definition to emphasize that Irregular Competition should not be something that the employer only reacts to, as is the case with China’s Gray Zone activity in the South China Sea, or Russia’s Hybrid Warfare in Ukraine, for example. Irregular Competition is something that the employer, including America, may use aggressively and offensively. Furthermore, the term Irregular Competition does not have a military connotation. Since whole-of-government Irregular Competition is essential to success – a point discussed later in this chapter – it is important that the preferred term allows others outside of the defense establishment to embrace it without concern for compromising their values, being associated with the military, etc. Third, the term is focused on influencing populations and affecting legitimacy. This is in contrast to Strategic Competition which is predominantly focused on kinetic, conventional conflict between states per the 2017 NSS (White House 2017), the 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance document* (White House 2021), the 2022 *National Security Strategy* (White House 2022b), and the 2022 National Defense Strategy (Department of Defense 2022). The problem with this conventional focus is that such a concept of competition does not reflect the fundamental reality that “competition and conflict are about people” (Cleveland, Egel, Maxwell, and Rothstein 2023). In fact, the growing problem in linking conventional, kinetic action to achieving national objectives is that it is often defense led, and the military establishment tends to “focus on the clash and lose sight of the will” of the

population (*ibid.*). It is for this reason that the researcher includes in the definition of Irregular Competition that it is designed specifically to influence populations and affect legitimacy. This idea may be applied to hard or soft power initiatives.

Finally, the definition of Irregular Competition in this study includes the statement that it happens “during times of peace, competition, and conflict.” It is often said that Gray Zone, Hybrid Warfare, Unrestricted Warfare, etc., take place somewhere “between peace and war” (Arquilla 2018, 122; Morris et al. 2019, iii; Brands 2016, 9; Hoffman 2018, 156; Starling, Iyer, and Giesler 2022), and that these activities by themselves are unlikely to elicit a major conventional military response (Kiessling 2021, 122). The researcher posits that the former half of that statement is incorrect while the latter is correct. These activities do not only take place between peace and war, but the activities themselves are in fact unlikely to elicit a conventional military response. If the US and China were to become involved in a conventional military conflict, for example, it is not unreasonable to assume that both countries would continue to engage in Irregular Competition activities between themselves as well as with other actors around the world. Both countries would continue to engage in information and disinformation campaigns, propaganda initiatives, etc., with and against those not participating directly in the war effort. In the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which clearly involves conventional conflict, it can be argued that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s use of messaging, social media, Golden Globe appearances, Vogue magazine cover photos, etc., have been a key aspect of Ukraine’s ability to influence global populations (toward Ukraine and away from Russia) and affect perceptions of legitimacy (for Ukraine and against Russia). The goal of such Irregular Competition activities in the China or Ukraine examples just described remain unchanged regardless of any state of conflict or competition: to influence populations and affect



legitimacy in favor of the sponsor and against the adversary. If observed in a vacuum, the Irregular Competition activities themselves remain unlikely to elicit a major conventional military response. Therefore, Irregular Competition persists regardless of any state of peace, competition, or conflict. As a result, the common phrase that these types of activities occur “between peace and war” is incorrect.

This section has outlined the academic need for a relatively uncommon term to describe what this research is about. Irregular Competition was chosen for the reasons stated. Defining the term was then accomplished, with the nuances of the final definition explained in detail above.

**Academic Contribution #2: Analyzing the existence of a unique Chinese IR theory in the context of Irregular Competition.**

The second theoretical implication of this study addresses whether a unique “Chinese IR theory” exists. While Chapter 2 discussed this topic from a literature perspective, the China-Philippines case study found in Chapter 4 demonstrated and reinforced the CCP approach to IR in practice. To this point in the research, Western concepts of international relations (IR) theory have been outlined and utilized as a framework for studying Irregular Competition. While Western views tend to dominate the field of IR study (Geeraerts and Jing 2001, 251), it is necessary to consider the application of non-Western theory and determine if there are any discernable differences. Analyzing the *concept* of Irregular Competition, the way that America’s adversaries see it, was accomplished primarily through the related literature section found in Chapter 2. This look at Irregular Competition through the adversary’s eyes in Chapter 2 was required simply because America’s competitors – China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and violent extremist organizations - understandably do not think, view, plan, or contemplate Irregular

Competition as a *concept* the same way that the United States does. In terms of *theory*, however, it was necessary for the researcher to consider the application of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thinking and contemplate whether some unique form of CCP IR theory existed distinct from Western theories.

One might speculate that the result of this journey that the CCP has been on since the 1970s has resulted in some type of unique Chinese IR theory, perhaps labeled something akin to “Marxist-Leninist-Maoist-Xiaoping Theory,” for lack of a better name.

After Deng Xiaoping named Jiang Zemin to succeed him as “the core of the third generation” of leaders, Jiang advanced the new concept of the Three Represents to augment Deng’s theory. They are to “represent the development trend of China’s advanced productive forces; the orientation of China’s advanced culture; and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people.

Both Deng Xiaoping theory and Jiang Zemin’s Three Represents paved the way for China’s adoption of pragmatism and multilateralism as guides of action for the twenty-first century. Maoism, specifically Mao’s policies of “two camps,” “opposing imperialism and revisionism,” and “three worlds,” rejected nominal multilateralism. This major ideological paradigm shift in China’s worldview made possible the multilateral economic arrangements that rapidly developed in China during the 1990s. (Chai 2003, 169)

“Grand strategy refers to a comprehensive, long-term plan of essential actions by which a country plans to achieve its major objectives” (Mastro 2021, 2). As Oriana Skylar Mastro wrote, there is no one single official document akin to the US National Security Strategy that outlines China’s grand strategy (ibid.). China analysts must instead rely on a combination of leadership

statements and foreign policy behavior to piece together an overarching vision about China's desired role in the world. By analyzing the choices that CCP leadership makes, one can derive key elements of Beijing's objectives and the "political, military, and economic means it deems appropriate to pursue those objectives" (ibid.). Along these lines, Chinese strategic thinking does in fact differ from Western strategic thinking in three important ways. First, Chinese strategic thinkers hold that situations are constantly evolving. Western thinkers, in contrast, "tend to consider their course as being imposed on a circumstance, at least momentarily 'frozen' in time" (Layton 2022, 108). Second, Chinese ideas are not based on using one's agency to reshape the world, but instead exploiting the course the world is already on. "In international relations terms, this means that Western strategists privilege agency; Chinese strategists, structure" (ibid.). Thirdly, CCP strategists do not seek an endpoint the way that Western strategists do in designing strategic objectives or end-states. The Chinese instead prefer to intrude on the flow of time to move it in a favorable direction (ibid.).

The case could therefore be made that this Chinese IR theory is focused on pragmatism and multilateralism. Multilateralism in this case is, of course, on China's terms and solely intended to benefit China. Chinese scholars implicitly deny the applicability of "Western" concepts (hegemony) and related scenarios (power competition, imperial expansionism) (Noesselt 2015, 444). China hopes to consolidate the image of an independent Chinese approach to politics and justify China's development strategy by presenting it as a history- and tradition-based approach. As for the CCP's idea of "theory" aimed at the international community, Chinese IR concepts hope to defuse threat perceptions (ibid). The CCP's idea of IR often manifests as an attempt at soft power-building and public diplomacy. The case study found in Chapter 4 of this research calls into question the efficacy of such a goal, however, as Philippine

perceptions of Chinese IR appear to be trending downward. This is likely representative of global trends as well. The current international system, according to the CCP, is understood to be unfair and unilaterally dominated by the US and its allies” (ibid.).

With these insights in mind, the researcher concluded that there is no discernable indication or a unique “Chinese IR theory” to explain a unified understanding of how China engages in international politics, strategic competition, Irregular Competition, or the like. Cultural influences from Mao and Lenin and others surely dominate Chinese behavior on the stage of international politics (Babbage 2019a, 24-27). In the end, even with cultural influence acknowledged, China generally behaves exactly as political realist IR theory predicts it should. The CCP is focused on gaining, maintaining, and building power and security for the nation. The ultimate intent of any CCP IR theory can therefore be boiled down to a mechanism used to discuss the current state of international politics, criticize existing structures, and formulate strategy that will elevate China’s standing in world politics (ibid.). It is this reality that helps one understand why China would engage in such activities as economic coercion, claiming foreign territories, political subversion, and other malign Irregular Competition activities to bolster its position at the expense of major competitors and more vulnerable states alike. This behavior is pragmatic, rational, and focused on power. As a result, the researcher concludes that the application of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist-Xiaoping “theory,” while admittedly embracing unique Chinese culture and Chinese characteristics at times, is ultimately demonstrative of international geopolitical behavior exactly as Morgenthau says it would be: It is conducted to achieve power and security for the state. Chinese security policy scholars like Lin Minwang, Liu Feng, Yang Yuan, and Zuo Xiyong all adhere to the principles of realism in their writing (Chen 2016). Finally, the CCP’s adherence to realist theory simultaneously highlights Liberal

Internationalism's failure to explain engagement strategies. Aaron Friedberg, in his latest book *Getting China Wrong* (2022), cements the argument to return to the foundational aspects of realism following Liberal Internationalism's lack of understanding of the true nature of the CCP.

In the interest of transparency, however, the reader and researcher are both reminded that there is a great deal more to study on this subject before any definitive conclusion can be drawn about the existence of a unique CCP IR theory. China scholars have yet to "crack the enigma" of non-English, Mandarin sources of information on this subject (Rehberg 2023). That said, the comprehensive analysis resulting from this research at this juncture alone does not indicate that a unique theory other than realism is driving CCP strategy.

### **Academic Contribution #3: Conceptual Model for a Whole-of-Government Approach to Irregular Competition**

The third academic contribution of this research to the body of knowledge on this subject matter is the presentation of a theoretical model to guide how we conceptualize Irregular Competition within the greater context of Strategic Competition. Before getting to the theoretical model, however, the following several paragraphs begin with the practical need for a whole-of-government approach to Irregular Competition. After the practical requirement is justified, the theoretical, academic implication is presented by way of the conceptual model.

#### **Practical Necessity for Whole-of-Government Irregular Competition.**

This area of the research addresses the practical necessity for a "whole-of-government" approach to Irregular Competition in support of greater Strategic Competition national security objectives. After the practical necessity is discussed in the following paragraphs, the reader will

then find the theoretical implications of this practical matter. The theoretical implication is expressed as a conceptual model for thinking about Irregular Competition as a sub-component of a larger Strategic Competition construct.

Practically speaking, a whole-of-government approach may assist in (a) thinking about Irregular Competition policy and strategy and/or (b) implementing Irregular Competition itself. The main factor that drove the researcher to this conclusion was case study findings highlighting the benefits of cooperation between different parts of government which therefore increased the effectiveness of overall Irregular Competition activity. Cooperation and collaboration between policymakers, the interagency, and those planning and executing Irregular Competition - to achieve commonly understood objectives – was significant. As a result, it is determined that Irregular Competition should be understood as well as implemented with a whole-of-government approach.

Admittedly, the idea of whole-of-government synergy has both practical and theoretical aspects to it. The practical matter deals more with organizational design, communication, collaboration, and processes that are necessary to actually facilitate the implementation of Irregular Competition. The need to improve collaboration and avoid failures in Irregular Competition has led to the embracing of whole-of-government approaches to appropriately marshal the collective resources and capabilities of organizations across the U.S. government and host nations. A whole-of-government approach in this context refers to military and civilian agencies “working across boundaries to achieve shared goals and an integrated government response” (Doyle 2019, 106). Such a comprehensive approach widens the aperture to include all organizations operating in the competitive space to support peace and stability and reach common goals (ibid.).

Perhaps one of the more salient methods of achieving a whole-of-government approach to Irregular Competition is through organizational design change. In a US Army War College Press monograph titled “A Whole-of-Government Approach to Gray Zone Warfare,” Elizabeth Troeder wrote that, due to the accelerating speed at which technological and social changes are occurring, it is more essential than ever that bureaucratic processes become more efficient to meet rapidly emerging challenges (2019). Troeder cautioned that the US Government no longer had the luxury to work in stovepipes and that it is imperative that it works more collaboratively. Troeder’s observation was focused on the reality that the US develops Irregular Competition strategies primarily by way of the Defense Department engaging with other federal agencies when it deems necessary. The author recommended instead that whenever an agency believes that a US Government Irregular Competition approach is the best approach to take in response to an issue or event, it should formally request the Deputy National Security Advisor to convene a National Security Council (NSC) / Deputies Committee (DC) meeting to discuss the issue or event and propose a way forward (23). Furthermore, Troeder wrote, a standing NSC/PCC [Policy Coordination Committee] for Irregular Competition solutions should be developed with sub-NSC/PCCs for each component of the 4+1 [(Russia, China, Iraq, North Korea, and violent extremist organizations)] (ibid.). These sub NSC/PCCs would ensure that the appropriate subject matter experts are included in the development of Irregular Competition solutions. The lines of effort for each sub NSC/PCC for Irregular Competition solutions would be:

To identify diplomatic options, led by a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and assisted by a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense; identify information opportunities, also led by a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State but assisted by a director from U.S. Cyber Command; identify intelligence opportunities, led by the appropriate senior official from

the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and assisted by a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Intelligence; identify military opportunities, led by a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense and assisted by the Vice Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command; identify economic and financial opportunities, led by a Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Treasury and assisted by a Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Department of Commerce; and identify law enforcement opportunities, led by the Deputy Associate Attorney General and assisted by a Deputy Assistant Secretary from the Department of Homeland Security. (23-4)

Such an organizational design, with appropriate authorities and authorization, would “assure the President of the United States, Congress, and the American people that all elements of power have been employed and are synchronized (2). Furthermore, this model would assist in counteracting homogenization of thinking, policymaking, and executing Irregular Competition by forcing government agencies to hear from competing agencies. Additionally, it increases the likelihood that one agency might identify the others’ blind spots (27).

There may be other, less traditional methods of achieving whole-of-government synergy in the field of Irregular Competition as well. US Government budgeting, for example, may be used as a potential driver (Brook 2012). The Project on National Security Reform and the Center for American Progress both recommended an integrated national security budget. Specific recommendations included making a unified national security budget and mandating its development every fiscal year, submitting a defense appropriation bill and foreign operations bill concurrently to Congress, and creating a “Unified Security Funding Analysis” in the Office of Management and Budget’s analytical perspectives document (Korb, Duggan, & Conley 2009, 38; Brook 2012, 39). The Center for American Progress argued that a unified national security



budget would “enable policymakers to more readily recognize and evaluate the difficult trade-offs between the offensive (military forces), defensive (homeland security), and preventative (non-military international engagement, including diplomacy, nonproliferation, foreign aid, peacekeeping intelligence, and contributions to international organizations) aspects of American national power” (Korb, Duggan, & Conley 2009, 37; Brook 2012, 39). The US military, with assistance from other federal agencies, has historically led America’s implementation of Irregular Competition-type activities (Troeder 2019, 28). That said, “History has shown that this unilateral approach is not sufficient. In fact, we have known for more than a decade that a unified, whole-of-government response to [Irregular Competition] is needed. We can no longer postpone implementing a solid response mechanism” (ibid.).

### **Theoretical Model for Conceptualizing Whole-of-Government Irregular Competition.**

There is a theoretical aspect of whole-of-government Irregular Competition that results from the practical implications discussed above. This theoretical implication is perhaps the more important contribution of this study than the practical whole-of-government concept. The practical matters of whole-of-government Irregular Competition focus on how to organize and implement Irregular Competition with greater efficiency and effectiveness. It is proposed by the researcher that by collaborating with increased synergy across government through the practical methods discussed above, the results of proactive Irregular Competition will theoretically be increased. Taking this one step further, if the results of proactive, friendly Irregular Competition are increased, this leads one to surmise in theory that Irregular Competition’s contribution to larger geostrategic objectives is greater than if whole-of-government synergy was not achieved. Informed by the above reasoning, which is based primarily on the multiple-case study analysis

results, the author proposes a theoretical model for Irregular Competition thinking, planning, and policymaking to help offset shortcomings and improve effectiveness in friendly Irregular Competition. Implementing conceptual change is far less demanding and costly in political, military, monetary, and ethical terms than continuing a traditional, generally military, tactical-operational-level crisis management approach to contemporary global security (Manwaring 2010).

**Figure 8. Theoretical Model Conceptualizing Whole-of-Government Irregular Competition as a Component of Strategic Competition (Researcher's Illustration).**



The concept depicted in this theoretical model was derived by starting with the premise that whole-of-government approaches to competition in general are beneficial to the employer since they result in more effective and efficient competition. This was evidenced in the case studies.

Secondly, the DIME construct was adopted as a method of conceptualizing whole-of-government activities. DIME may not be a universally accepted framework to illustrate whole-of-government effort, but it captures the intent well enough. Combining the DIME instruments in concert will theoretically support furthering strategic goals without direct confrontation. With the interconnectedness of global economies, populations, and information, this whole-of-government approach to Irregular Competition should, in theory, help achieve strategic objectives but not provoke direct conflict.

The researcher then bifurcated competition activities into traditional and irregular areas. As noted in the literature review found in Chapter 2, Traditional Competition is predominantly government-focused activity, while Irregular Competition is more population-focused. Note that US national security strategy documents do not include such a bifurcated construct of Irregular Competition and Traditional Competition. Since this research emphasizes Irregular Competition, not Traditional Competition, the focus will remain on the latter.

Figure 8 graphically represents the theoretical idea of Traditional Competition and Irregular Competition as sub-components of the larger Strategic Competition paradigm. It is important to keep in mind that Figure 8 cannot adequately emphasize the overlap between the two types of competition. Additionally, collaboration and cooperation across the government, and among partners and allies, cannot be overstated. This is, after all, a theoretical model attempting to capture the idea of whole-of-government competition. Lines between Irregular and Traditional Competition are therefore not as clear as they may appear in a two-dimensional model like the one in Figure 8, but instead the lines should be understood to be blurred and cross-cutting; activities can and should occur on both sides of the Traditional-Irregular paradigm in concert, at the same time, and not mutually exclusive.

The researcher is not proposing that one must choose between Irregular or Traditional Competition. Instead, the implication is that both types of competition exist, they contain different components and avenues of approach (direct and indirect), but both may theoretically be employed and benefited from at the same time. As stated earlier, there does not need to be a “one or the other” decision between Traditional and Irregular Competition.

As depicted in Figure 8, the DIME instruments of power in Irregular Competition manifest differently than in Traditional Competition. For example, the *diplomatic* instrument of power is manifested in Irregular Competition as political warfare (discussed in Chapter 2). The *informational* instrument of power is manifested in Irregular Competition as propaganda and psychological operations. The *military* instrument of power is manifested in Irregular Competition as irregular warfare (IW), where the security sector of both state and non-state actors attempts to influence populations and affect legitimacy through military activity. The *economic* instrument of power is manifested in Irregular Competition as economic pressure, persuasion, coercion, and subversion. These sub-elements of Irregular Competition are defined and discussed in detail in Chapter 2 should the reader need more information on them.

Irregular Competition should be understood as something that all state and non-state actors may employ. The theoretical model therefore includes activities that both friendly and adversarial actors may engage in. For example, economic subversion, a tactic used often by the CCP (as outlined in Chapter 2), is listed as a potential tool to be used under the economic instrument of power in Irregular Competition. It must be emphasized that the researcher is not suggesting that friendly powers such as the US should engage in such malign activity as economic subversion. Doing so not only violates US principles and ideals, and internationally accepted standards, rules, and norms, but it would likely have negative consequences toward

influencing populations and affecting legitimacy (as seen in the CCP's subversion in the Philippines case study). The point is that the model includes such activity nevertheless since it may be employed as an economic tool in Irregular Competition. The researcher holds that the US and its partners should themselves engage only in activities that support international law and mandates as outlined by UN mandates, as well as other internationally accepted standards, rules, and norms.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations are purposeful decisions the researcher makes to limit or define the boundaries of the study. In this study, the primary delimitations were using case studies alone to support the research. Original research designs for this study considered surveys and interviews, both of which would have enriched the outcome of the study. As the reader is aware at this point, however, neither surveys nor interviews were included in this research. The ultimate reason for not conducting interviews was that selecting individuals well-qualified on the subject of Irregular Competition, demographically diverse enough to represent various agencies and organizations, was problematic. Regarding surveys, the main consideration was finding a large enough population of "experts" – a highly subjective term – to adequately represent broad thinking about Irregular Competition. It was therefore determined that case study analysis was the most reliable and consistent method of research.

The primary limitation – or weakness - of the study was related to research design. Specifically, the number of cases studied was a limitation. The original intent of the researcher was to use two or three examples of only friendly Irregular Competition. The reasoning was that the study was focused on what America and its partners may be able to achieve through their

own proactive use of Irregular Competition, so observing cases of friendly Irregular Competition alone was all that was needed. It was generally known that adversaries used Irregular Competition with great frequency, so it was later determined that at least one example of adversarial Irregular Competition should be included. As the reader is aware, the final selection of cases represented one friendly, military-heavy case of Irregular Competition (US/Afghanistan), one friendly, non-military-heavy case of Irregular Competition (US/Iran), and one adversarial case of Irregular Competition (China/Philippines - which was ultimately much more representative of a whole-of-government approach, including more instruments of power than either of the friendly cases). The inclusion of an adversarial case was extremely important in that it (a) exposed the greater frequency and ease with which adversaries use Irregular Competition but, more importantly, it provided the researcher with (b) an important comparison for consideration against the friendly cases.

Another limitation of the study was that it relied solely on unclassified documents and records to substantiate the research and the recommendations. This research is unclassified and as a result, there are admittedly some elements of US national security strategy which were not referenced and accounted for. Second, at the time of writing, there were several new security documents - and revisions of existing security documents - being written. This research was based on the most current, unclassified, security-related documents available to the researcher at the time of writing.

A third limitation of this research points specifically at the theoretical model shared in Figure 8. The reader is reminded that this theoretical model was created through inductive reasoning. The researcher worked back and forth between data collected through the multiple case-study analysis, resulting lessons learned, and themes derived from the data in the case

studies until a comprehensive theme – or set of themes - was established (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 181). This essentially meant working the data “from the ground up,” noticing patterns that emerged, and eventually finding that some part of the data suggested a useful concept (Yin 2018, 169). This resulting “useful concept” is the theoretical model depicted in Figure 8 which may assist in conceptualizing Irregular Competition as one of two systems (the other being Traditional Competition) in a larger system (of Strategic Competition). It must be acknowledged that the effectiveness of employing the recommended theoretical framework found in Figure 8 - derived from inductive reasoning - is still only *probable* rather than *certain*, which would be the case in a deductive argument (Martin 1994, 63; Fohr 1979, 5). That said, while effective collaboration in Irregular Competition may not guarantee total success in achieving greater national security objectives, as is the case with most anything, “insufficient collaboration can ensure failure” (Doyle 2019, 105).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Who operationalizes our responses to indirect conflict, and who counters the propaganda designed to undercut our democratic institutions? Who designs and integrates strategic approaches in measures short of armed conflict? The NSC [National Security Council], the State Department, the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], or our theater commanders? In short, how do we organize ourselves to address this challenge? (Hoffman 2017, 4-5)

- Dr. Francis G. Hoffman

In consideration of the study findings, limitations and delimitations placed on the study, three recommendations and direction for future research emerged. While conducting this study, ideas emerged which led to more questions. These questions should be addressed but went beyond the scope of this study. The three recommendations for further research are included below.

First, the question of who in the US Government should lead Irregular Competition efforts, or ultimately be responsible for their success or failure, must be addressed. At the time of writing there was no single government office or institution responsible for such efforts. The Department of Defense spends an increasing amount of time and effort on Irregular Warfare, but Irregular Warfare remains only the military's contribution to a larger Irregular Competition effort. As discussed earlier in this chapter in the whole-of-government section, perhaps the National Security Council (NSC) could take the lead. A 2019 CSIS report suggested that such leadership might be put in motion by issuing an Irregular Competition presidential decision directive outlining a dynamic campaign approach and the supporting executive branch elements described herein, followed by designation of a NSC senior director (Hicks et al. 2019, ix). According to the CSIS study, this director, along with supporting intelligence-operations task force and senior interagency coordination mechanisms, would be responsible for driving Irregular Competition efforts. The researcher cautions that this may not be the best solution. In short, once the NSC is in charge, other government agencies and offices that have nothing to do with national security - such as NGOs or academic institutions - but have a role in whole-of-government Irregular Competition, may be put off by the idea of being directed by, or associated with, the US Government's security apparatus. Furthermore, with regard to putting the NSC in charge, one might look to the history of NSC-68 (discussed in detail in Chapter 2) for lessons



learned. Overall authority and drafting of the critical document were taken from the NSC following military bureaucratic infighting and hierarchies and shifted to the State Department which had “the clearest understanding of the sweeping and radical character of the work which they were undertaking” (Huntington 1961, 49). The Defense Department, on the other hand, was hampered by divisions of authority between the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and their attitudes toward the military budget (ibid.). With this in mind, along with the current organization of the US Government, would a reorganization or entirely new office be required to implement an effective Irregular Competition strategy? Additional research to answer these questions is recommended.

A second topic recommended for further research involves metrics. How does one measure success or failure in Irregular Competition? As outlined earlier in this chapter, it is important to set clear objectives prior to initiating any Irregular Competition campaign. This is true for any national security initiative in fact. This is a critical component of Irregular Competition because without metrics for success, the actor implementing Irregular Competition cannot objectively calculate whether they have succeeded, or failed, or made progress. Measurement tools are critical to providing decision-makers with quantified and qualified assessments and recommendations. A study conducted by Larson, Eaton, Nichiporuk, and Szayna (2008) proposed that any analysis of irregular environments should start with a generic and broad understanding of the conflict, and then engage in successively more-focused and more-detailed analyses of selective topics. The point is to develop an understanding and then uncover key drivers behind such phenomena as orientation toward principal protagonists in the conflict, mobilization, recruitment, and choice of political bargaining or violence. Such a framework may enable an ability to illuminate areas in which additional detailed analysis could

matter, and areas in which it probably will not matter. In the second activity, detailed stakeholder analysis, a more intensive analysis of each stakeholder in the Irregular Competition scenario is completed. In the third activity, dynamic analyses, the aim is to make sense of the data and insights collected in the previous steps. Such a tool may be useful in augmenting, not replacing, traditional analysis methods to accent irregular features at the strategic and operational levels that are important determinants of Irregular Competition outcomes (ibid.). Measurement frameworks such as this may facilitate continuous evaluation of any proposed Irregular Competition campaign. Additionally, the researcher suggests that one set of metrics may not be sufficient for all Irregular Competition environments. While a general set of metrics may be helpful, more nuanced metrics for each geopolitical situation may be necessary. Without such metrics, one might get involved in a protracted Irregular Competition struggle with no realistic end in sight. America often gets itself involved in conflict without understanding what it wants, or how to define victory (Stoker 2022, 171). More research in the area of metrics is thus recommended.

A third area requiring further research involves education. How do we educate and inform our own citizens, as well as our foreign partners and allies, of the importance and intricacies of Irregular Competition? The reason this subject must be researched further is because understanding the issue is a prerequisite for successful Irregular Competition efforts (Manwaring 2010, 164). As authors Stringer and Urban wrote in late 2022, there is a historic misalignment of efforts which has led to [Irregular Competition] campaigning failure. This is in part due to an overreliance on military power which can rarely address the underlying political, cultural, and economic drivers of conflict. In a context where each pillar provides critical resources to advancing an [Irregular Competition] campaign, each relevant stakeholder should

have access to [Irregular Competition] education (Stringer and Urban 2022). Education domestically and education abroad on this topic will likely involve different approaches. Similarly, educating government employees and educating civilians may require different methodologies. Before America and its partners can embrace Irregular Competition, there is a logical prerequisite for education to understand what Irregular Competition is and why it is important. How to implement this education aspect of Irregular Competition is therefore a recommended topic for further research.

Finally, it is the hope of the author that this research opens the door to a better understanding of not just Chinese Irregular Competition strategy and Chinese IR theory. Academic Contribution #2 presented earlier in this Chapter provided an analysis of CCP IR theory as it specifically relates to Irregular Competition. The results of this study may also provide insight into certain sub-components of China's larger, grand strategy, a topic that is more comprehensive than just IR theory. It is the hope of the researcher that this study will be helpful in future research designed to understand China's larger strategy concepts.

### **Summary**

Irregular Competition is a sensitive subject but the US, its partners, and its adversaries are all involved in it...one way or another. To rephrase a quote from Trotsky, "You may not be interested in Irregular Competition, but Irregular Competition is interested in you" (Furst 1988). Political, cultural, religious, legal, psychological, and historical factors among diverse populations must all be considered on this journey. This is a people-centric struggle in which cognitive awareness and emotional intelligence are more important than military power (Maxwell 2020b; Shinji, Masaaki & Rira 2022, 37-45). Additionally, any Irregular Competition

strategy must be flexible enough to transform with space, cyber, surveillance, social media, and other technological innovations. Adversaries are plugged in and hyper-networked. This expanding physical and virtual operating space makes working “by, with, and through” like-minded partners more important than ever. The threat space is bigger than any one actor can manage. As American General Richard Clarke noted, we must look to the multinational community, “leverage exporters of security, and pull them in with shared interests” (Clarke and Robinson 2021).

Those who are well read on US doctrine will recognize that the definitions presented throughout this study are a hybrid of many things. The reader is encouraged once again to focus on the overarching *idea* of Irregular Competition rather than any organizational or cultural dogma encoded in doctrine. As Retired Army Colonel Robert “Bob” Jones said in 2022 with regard to this matter, “We can define our way to failure or understand our way to success” (2022).

At any given time, Irregular Competition may be high or low on the US national security priority list. At the time of concluding this research in 2023, Strategic Competition with China was clearly the main national security priority for America. That said, Irregular Competition remains an important supporting effort in achieving America’s goals against its adversaries. Irregular Competition is not something that happens or doesn’t happen in place of Strategic Competition. While resources allocated to the left and right side of the model found in Figure 8 may differ, America can nevertheless focus on both sides at the same time. After all, influencing populations and affecting legitimacy – the goals of Irregular Competition – remain important no matter what the overarching security objectives may be. It can safely be assumed, for example, that the US spends millions of dollars annually on activities related to Irregular Competition.

One can imagine the spending necessary to support efforts associated with the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) activities, the Defense Department's Irregular Warfare initiatives, the Department of Energy's counterterrorism and -proliferation endeavors, and the Treasury Department's counter-threat financing programs, to name a few. All of these initiatives, paid for by the US Government, play a role in influencing populations and affecting legitimacy. The point is that regardless of where it falls on the list of priorities for the US national security enterprise, Irregular Competition is taking place and taxpayers are paying for it. Such activities should therefore be as effective and efficient as possible, and it is the hope of the researcher that recommendations in this study will help make it so.

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## APPENDIX A

### Key Definitions

Outlined below are key definitions used throughout this research paper. The reader will note that Chapter 2 of this study provides numerous, competing, conflicting definitions and understanding for several of these terms. Since there is no definitive source, and in the interest of moving the conversation forward, the following definitions have been selected by the researcher as the standard in this study.

- 1. Asymmetric Warfare/Conflict:** Conflict where the aims, means, and/or methods employed by parties are substantively different. A considerable power disparity exists between adversaries (Author's definition)
- 2. Gibrinaya Voyna (Russia):** Entirely non-military means used to politically subvert an adversary without conventional force (Fridman 2018, 139).
- 3. Gray Zone Warfare/Conflict:** Activity to advance the national interests of a State that— (i) falls between ordinary statecraft and open warfare; (ii) is carried out with an intent to maximize the advancement of interests of the state without provoking a kinetic military response by the United States; and (iii) falls on a spectrum that ranges from covert adversary operations, to detectible covert adversary operations, to un-attributable adversary operations, to deniable adversary operations, to open adversary operations (US Congress 2022, 9).
- 4. Hybrid Warfare/Conflict:** The purposeful and tailored violent application of advanced conventional military capabilities with irregular tactics, with terrorism and criminal activities,

or combination of regular and irregular forces, operating as part of a common design in the same battlespace” (Hoffman 2018, 40)

5. **Irregular Competition:** State and non-state actors proactively engaging in activities to influence populations and affect legitimacy during times of peace, competition, and conflict.” Furthermore, if observed in a vacuum, the Irregular Competition activities themselves remain unlikely to elicit a major conventional military response. (Researcher’s definition).
6. **Irregular Warfare:** The military’s contribution to supporting state and non-state actors in their attempt to influence populations and affect legitimacy (Researcher’s definition, which is a modification of the US Department of Defense (2020, 2) definition).
7. **Political Warfare:** The employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures, and "white" propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of "friendly" foreign elements, "black" psychological warfare, and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states (Kennan 1948).
8. **Proxy Warfare/Conflict:** Conflict which is perpetrated by others—either knowingly or unknowingly—on behalf of a third party to promote its own interests” (Maher 2019).
9. **Unconventional Warfare:** According to the US Defense Department, Unconventional Warfare (UW) is one of five core activities found under the umbrella of Irregular Warfare. It is defined as activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt or overthrow an occupying power or government by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary or guerrilla force in a denied area (United States Army Special Operations Command 2016, 3; Joint Chiefs of Staff 2014, xi).

10. **Unrestricted Warfare (China):** Using all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one's interests (Liang and Xiangsui 1999, 7; Norris 2020).

**APPENDIX B**  
**80 Types of Chinese Irregular Competition Tactics (Lin et al. 2022)**

| Category,<br>Subtype | Tactic No. | PRC Tactic  |
|----------------------|------------|---|
| <b>Geopolitical</b>  |            |   |
| International        | 1          | Establish new major international initiatives or alternative international institutions to pressure or incentivize the target to accommodate PRC requests   |
|                      | 2          | Exclude or limit the target's leadership and participation in existing international organizations  |
|                      | 3          | Undermine the target's regional or international influence and partnerships, including by engaging in campaigns to blame or shame the target  |
|                      | 4          | Support the target's adversaries or rival countries using a combination of political, economic, and military means  |
|                      | 5          | Limit international sanctions or crack down on violent nonstate actors opposing the target and/or operating against the target  |
|                      | 6          | Use international influence on third countries to pressure target citizens to retract or recant specific views or positions (e.g., pressuring ROK companies to force Taiwanese artists to drop independence position) |
| Bilateral            | 7          | Significantly manipulate or reduce high-level political contacts or engagements   |
|                      | 8          | Use high-profile political or legal campaigns (lawfare) to pressure the target  |
|                      | 9          | Engage in diplomatic or political activities to divide or split the target geographically beyond the territorial dispute (e.g., via preferred treatment to select territories, legal challenges)                      |
|                      | 10         | Use diplomatic or political threats to disrupt normal business activities within the target (e.g., create stock market volatility)  |
|                      | 11         | Detain or harass target citizens in China (beyond journalists and academics)  |
|                      | 12         | Impose restrictions on travel or visas for select target leaders, political parties, or individuals   |
|                      | 13         | Organize public protests (or counterprotests) in China or in the target region to criticize target activities   |
| Grassroots           | 14         | Use and/or provide support to individual elites, political leaders, political parties, groups, or organizations to act on behalf of China in the target   |
|                      | 15         | Use and/or provide support to religious groups or organizations to promote pro-China agenda   |
|                      | 16         | Use and/or provide support to pro-China Chinese ethnic groups (e.g., ethnic business associations)  |
|                      | 17         | Use and/or provide support to educational and civil society groups or organizations (that are not religious or political) to promote pro-China agenda (e.g., Confucius Institutes)                                    |
|                      | 18         | Use and/or provide support to pro-China groups with criminal links or ties  |
|                      | 19         | Use and/or provide support to other violent (insurgent, terrorist, or separatist) groups in the target  |
|                      | 20         | Engage in covert action (PRC agents directly in the target country or region), such as assassination or harassment of opponents   |

| Economic      |    |  |
|---------------|----|--|
| International | 1  | Purchase or invest in large civilian infrastructure or assets (such as land) in a third country (particularly neighboring countries) that pressure the target  |
|               | 2  | Export PRC products that advance PRC claims or narrative (e.g., products that portray disputed territories as part of China)   |
|               | 3  | Require products or services from international firms to adhere to PRC requests and/or claims compared with the target's claims <sup>a</sup>   |
|               | 4  | Control or reduce availability of public or international resources to the target (e.g., constructing dams to control the flow of the river to the target)   |
| Bilateral     | 5  | Reduce trade or flow of specific goods (exports or imports)  |
|               | 6  | Reduce provision of PRC direct investment or foreign aid   |
|               | 7  | Harass, pressure, or co-opt businesses from the target region operating in China or competing for PRC projects in the target   |
|               | 8  | Reduce PRC tourism to pressure the target  |
|               | 9  | Reduce number of PRC students to pressure the target   |
|               | 10 | Boycott, protest, destroy, or confiscate the target's goods or products in China, particularly goods that do not align with PRC interests  |
| Grassroots    | 11 | Purchase or invest (build civilian infrastructure) in or near disputed land or maritime features   |
|               | 12 | Engage in land reclamation or other economic activities to expand the size of disputed territory   |
|               | 13 | Ban or prohibit certain economic activities in disputed territories (e.g., fishing ban)  |
|               | 14 | Use PRC companies or economic assets to advance disputed PRC territorial claims (e.g., use of PRC oil rigs)  |
|               | 15 | Expand or engage in new PRC commercial activity to, on, or near disputed territories, such as tourism, new commercial flight routes  |
|               | 16 | Engage in PRC economic or civilian activity in or near target-sensitive or key geopolitical locations (e.g., near military bases or facilities)  |
| Military      |    |  |
| General       | 1  | Engage in highly publicized and large-scale, cross-service military exercises or shows of force near or against the target   |
|               | 2  | Explicitly threaten the use of force or military escalation against the target if it takes certain actions   |
|               | 3  | Deepen military cooperation and/or establish military bases or potential dual-use facilities in neighboring countries to threaten the target   |
|               | 4  | Build up or acquire military capabilities for deterring or countering the target (e.g., military buildup in region near the target)  |
|               | 5  | Use large-scale or cross-service military activities or exercises (excludes cyber activities) to disrupt normal business activities within the target (e.g., missile launches that interfere with target commercial port activities) |
| Air           | 6  | Declare an ADIZ near or surrounding the target   |
|               | 7  | Establish military or dual-use air bases or facilities in disputed territories   |
|               | 8  | Engage in large-scale air exercises near the target's home or main territory   |
|               | 9  | Engage in large-scale air exercises near disputed territories  |
|               | 10 | Engage in or increase air patrols or intrusions near the target's home or main territory   |
|               | 11 | Engage in or increase air patrols or intrusions near disputed territories  |
|               | 12 | Engage in military air intercepts or aggressive air maneuvers against target military aircraft   |
|               | 13 | Engage in live fire near the target or in simulated attacks (e.g., radar lock-on) on target assets   |
|               | 14 | Use PLAAF or PLAN Aviation to harass or disrupt target commercial activities in disputed territories   |
|               | 15 | Land or forward deploy military aircraft or equipment in or near disputed territories  |

|            |   |  |
|------------|---|--|
| Maritime   | 16  | Establish military or dual-use maritime bases or facilities in disputed territories  |
|            | 17  | Engage in large-scale maritime exercises near the target's home or main territory  |
|            | 18  | Engage in large-scale maritime exercises near disputed territories   |
|            | 19  | Engage in or increase maritime patrols or transits near the target's home or main territory  |
|            | 20  | Engage in or increase maritime patrols or transits near disputed territories   |
|            | 21  | Engage in military maritime intercepts or in aggressive maritime maneuvers against target maritime vessels   |
|            | 22  | Anchor maritime vessels and/or forward deploy military maritime troops and equipment in or near disputed territories                                     |
|            | 23  | Engage in exchange of fire, live fire near the target, or simulated attacks (e.g., radar lock-on) on target assets via PLA maritime forces               |
|            | 24  | Use PLAN, CCG, or maritime militia to harass or disrupt target commercial activities in disputed territories (e.g., CCG harasses target oil exploration) |
| 25         | Use PLAN, CCG, or maritime militia to detain or capture target citizens operating in disputed territories |  |
| Land       | 26  | Engage in border (or cross-border) skirmishes and/or mass troops on land border for demonstration of force   |
|            | 27  | Establish military or dual-use ground bases or facilities in disputed territories  |
|            | 28  | Engage in large-scale land exercises or movement of troops near land border  |
|            | 29  | Engage in exchange of fire, live fire near the target, or simulated attacks (e.g., radar lock) on the target assets via PLA ground forces                |
|            | 30  | Land or forward deploy military ground troops or equipment in or near disputed territories   |
| Cyber/IO   |   |  |
| Bilateral  | 1   | Engage in cyber operations against target government or military activities  |
|            | 2   | Engage in cyber operations to disrupt or undermine target economic activity  |
|            | 3   | Engage in cyber operations to interfere in the target's elections, including to support specific candidates or smear PRC opponents                       |
|            | 4   | Ban or limit information or content produced by leading voices in the target that oppose PRC views (e.g., ban music from prodemocracy artists)           |
|            | 5   | Pressure or coerce the target to change or amend content written in textbooks (e.g., revise history textbooks)   |
|            | 6   | Coerce or attempt to buy target journalists and academics  |
| Grassroots | 7   | Buy or control existing target media outlets (directly or through proxies)   |
|            | 8   | Buy content (e.g., pay for ads) in existing target media outlets or engage in content-sharing or joint production of content                             |
|            | 9   | Support or fund the establishment of new or existing pro-China media outlets operating in the target   |
|            | 10  | Engage in social disinformation campaigns in the target  |
|            | 11  | Use defamation lawsuits to sue target researchers or organizations for voicing positions against China   |

Note: The results of this 2022 RAND describe Chinese Irregular Competition activities as “Gray Zone” tactics.



## APPENDIX C

### Institutional Review Board Approval

Date: 6-24-2022

IRB #: IRB-FY21-22-857  
 Title: Irregular Competition Study  
 Creation Date: 3-14-2022  
 End Date:  
 Status: Approved  
 Principal Investigator: Jeremiah Lumbaca  
 Review Board: Research Ethics Office  
 Sponsor:

#### Study History

|                 |            |             |            |          |   |
|-----------------|------------|-------------|------------|----------|---|
| Submission Type | Initial    | Review Type | Exempt     | Decision | <span style="color: red;">No Human Subjects Research</span> |
| Submission Type | Withdrawal | Review Type | Unassigned | Decision |   |

#### Key Study Contacts

|        |                  |      |                           |         |  |
|--------|------------------|------|---------------------------|---------|--|
| Member | Anthony Hughes   | Role | Co-Principal Investigator | Contact |  |
| Member | Jeremiah Lumbaca | Role | Principal Investigator    | Contact |  |
| Member | Jeremiah Lumbaca | Role | Primary Contact           | Contact |  |

### **Author's Biographical Sketch**

Jeremiah C. “Lumpy” Lumbaca is a retired US Army Special Forces Lieutenant Colonel. He now serves as a US Department of Defense civilian professor of Indo-Pacific counter-terrorism, special operations, and irregular competition at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS) in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Prior to arriving at his current position with DKI APCSS, Lumpy served for over twenty years on Active Duty in various positions throughout the US Special Operations Forces (SOF) community with primary emphasis on the Indo-Pacific Region. He commanded Green Berets at various levels while living and operating in nearly every country throughout North, South, and Southeast Asia. He served in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines (OEF-P), and was involved in numerous other combat, operational, diplomatic, and inter-agency initiatives on behalf of the US Government.

Lumpy was commissioned in the US Army at Norwich University, the Military College of Vermont, where he graduated *summa cum laude* and Distinguished Military Graduate (DMG) with a Bachelor of Arts in International Studies. He earned his Master of Science in Defense Analysis (Irregular Warfare) from the Naval Postgraduate School.