

10. Irregular Warfare and Future War: Strategy and Defense Planning

James A. Russell

The purpose of this paper is threefold: to speculate on the role and prominence of irregular warfare in the strategic environment over the next quarter century, to comment on the impact that phenomenon may have on shaping the postulated scenarios addressed in the US National Intelligence Council's *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (2025 Report), and to evaluate the relationship of this strategic environment to US defense-planning assumptions that will shape the capacities of the Defense Department to address threats to US interests over the next quarter century.

What is irregular warfare? Irregular warfare also goes under a host of other pseudonyms, such as guerilla war, insurgency, and terrorism. A cottage industry has grown over the last decade purporting to describe the modern variation of this phenomenon as a kind of discrete form of warfare. Terms such as 4th generation war, 5th generation war, and hybrid war have appeared, all with the avowed purpose of lending greater definitional specificity to term in its most modern iteration. The Defense Department's Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept states: "Irregular warfare is defined as a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations. IW favors indirect or asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence and will."¹

It is generally believed that in this construct one or more of the adversaries involved is using terrorism, subversion, sabotage, insurgency, and criminal activities or other asymmetric tactics.² To fight adversaries, both state and non-state, that are using these tactics the Department of Defense identifies a number of critical core competencies for organized military forces: counterterrorism, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, counterinsurgency, and stability operations.³

The United States and its coalition partners have been engaging in two such wars over the last decade—one in Iraq and another in Afghanistan—in which both US forces and its adversaries could be said to be engaging in irregular warfare. Senior US decision makers have stated that this is likely to be the kind of warfare confronting the United States in the future. Former US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently stated: "Where possible, what the military calls kinetic operations should be subordinated to measures aimed at promoting better governance, economic programs that spur development, and efforts to address the grievances among the discontented, from whom the terrorists recruit."⁴ Since the 9/11 attacks, the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the promulgation of terms like the "long war" and the "war on terror," the Department of Defense has generated an enormous amount of reports, directives, and planning and training guidance that has sought to reorient US capabilities away from conventionally oriented war toward irregular warfare, which take into account the strategies suggested by Gates.

This is for a reason—the US has been increasingly engaged in these kinds of operations since the end of the Cold War, finding itself involved in various policing and humanitarian missions over the last 20 years. The vast enterprise of the US military increasingly finds itself as the only viable government instrument in any state to carry out these kinds of missions around the world. The United States Air Force and the US Navy today constitute the most comprehensive freight service in the world; the Army and Marine Corps can be moved to virtually any part of the world courtesy of

this global logistics and freight-forwarding network. No other state in the international system possesses such organizational capacities.

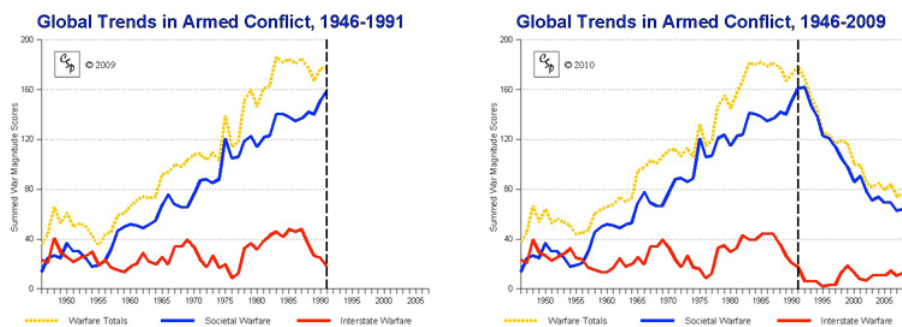
Predicting the future nature of war is impossible, but it is not so difficult to draw inferences from the current strategic environment. These inferences can then be used to draw some speculative conclusions about the prominence of irregular warfare in the strategic environment in the next quarter-century.

Today's strategic environment⁵

As previously noted, the international system remains characterized by persistent conflict, albeit at reduced levels since the end of the Cold War. Without prejudice to the postulated scenarios identified in the NIC's 2025 Report, we can predict with some certainty that the future strategic environment will flow from trends in the current strategic environment. The trends in global warfare are reasonably well known and are well documented by rigorous empirical research. These trends seem relatively predictable and overwhelming: to change them would require some kind of systemic global shift. It is unlikely that the world will somehow see a dramatic change in the frequency and types of wars over the next quarter-century.

As indicated in Figure 1 below, there has been a decline in interstate war since 1990. The decline in interstate warfare since the end of the Cold War has been nothing short of remarkable. There is today an absence of war between developed states, which have decided the consequences and costs of war do not warrant the generalized use of force against each other either to solve disputes or to increase influence over friends and rivals. It is increasingly unlikely that the world will see a reemergence of wars like the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. Rather, to the extent that states go to war, the 1973 war in the Middle East may have been a forerunner of the future, where a state applies limited use of force for the purpose of achieving a favorable negotiated settlement. This does not mean that developed states will not go to war with each other in the future, but it does suggest that, in terms of planning assumptions, this is a much more remote possibility than other forms of warfare.

Figure 1: Global Trends in Armed Conflict

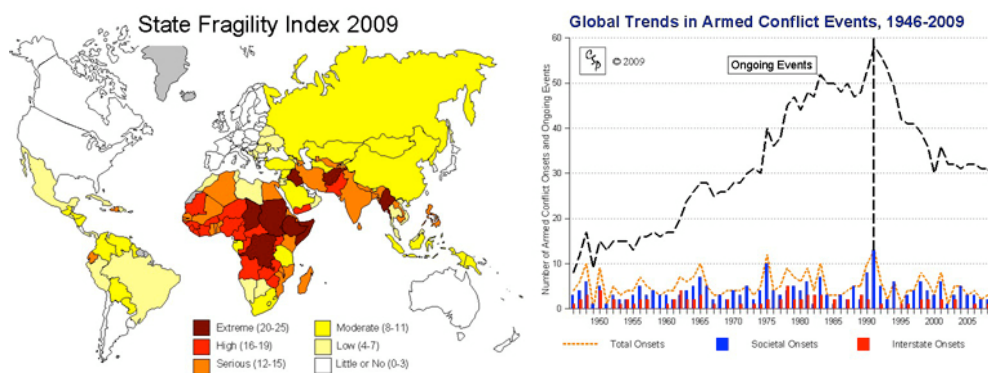


Additionally, warfare in today's international system is statistically much more likely to be intra-societal and ethnically organized in nature. Since the end of the Cold War, while the numbers of inter-state wars have fallen, intra-societal and ethnic wars have remained more or less constant. Overwhelming incidences of use of force over the last 15 years have involved ethnic or intra-societal conflict in many parts of the world: Shaped by political disputes, we have witnessed multiple attempts at ethnic separatism through violent means and clashes created by Islamic militants pursuing an anti-globalization and anti-modernity agenda. These wars tend to involve actors waging what could be characterized as irregular war in that the war is not waged between organized state-based militaries.

Behind the numbers, there are trends that bear highlighting for the purposes of this analysis. Trends in the early 21st century indicate that downward trends of certain kinds of armed conflict may be leveling off. Another way of looking at this is to suggest that *there may be a persistent background "clutter" of war that we can expect to continue for the foreseeable future*. Today there are 11 protracted societal conflicts in the world that have lasted more than a decade and which seem to defy efforts to solve them. These include conflicts in Afghanistan (30 years), Colombia (33), D.R. Congo (16), India (56), Iraq (28), Israel (43), Myanmar (60), Nigeria (11), the Philippines (36), Somalia (20), Sudan (25), Turkey (24), and Uganda (37). Sri Lanka only just ended its protracted war with ethnic-Tamil separatists in 2009 after 26 years of fighting. On average, during the contemporary period, interstate wars lasted about three years, civil wars lasted just over five years, and ethnic wars lasted nearly 10 years.

The other salient feature of today's environment is that we have a statistically good chance of predicting where wars will be. Over the last 20 years wars have tended to occur in the lesser developed countries, areas that lack strong governing institutions and a correspondingly strong sense of state identity, and places with existing ethnic and/or societal tensions. As shown below in Figure 2, *there is a high degree of correlation between the likelihood of armed conflict and state fragility*. The eight most "fragile" countries today are all experiencing armed conflict of some kind or another (Somalia, Congo, Chad, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Burma, and Ethiopia). This is not a coincidence.⁶

Figure 2: State Fragility and Armed Conflict



Other shaping factors

There is also a correlation between a state's ranking on the state fragility index and the absence of strong states with established standing armies. In other words, weak states tend not to have standing

armies waging more conventionally oriented military operations. Over the last ten years, the world's zone of "turbulence," so to speak, has remained relatively constant. This zone of turbulence has been in parts of Africa, Central and South America, South Asia, and the Middle East. It seems reasonable to predict that warfare over the next quarter century will overwhelmingly occur in this zone and that this warfare will not be conducted by organized militaries insofar as conflict involves the actors in these parts of the world.

Another prominent feature of the environment likely to shape the character of war over the next quarter century is the precipitous decline of power-projection capacities of conventionally structured standing armies around the world. This means the capacities of states to engage in conventional war, in which standing armies engage in protracted military operations in distant places, is likely to be reduced. It is also not unreasonable to suggest that over the next quarter century, developed and developing states may follow the lead of Europe and start spending less on defense with a resultant reduction in the sizes of their conventionally structured militaries. Global defense spending reached an estimated \$1.6 trillion in 2010, an increase of over 50 percent since 2001. The United States is mostly responsible for this increase in defense spending in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks; 15 states accounted for over 80 percent of global defense spending in 2010.⁷

While defense spending is increasing in much of the developing world, militaries in the developed world increasingly are focused on border and internal security. Armies of the developed world have generally followed in the path of their sister-service navies, which are now largely comprised of coastal-patrol and coast-guard forces.

There are several interesting illustrative examples of large standing armies in the developing world that have invested heavily in their land forces, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, and Iran. In each of these cases, however, the large numbers of personnel in uniform have not created credible conventional military capabilities. Both Saudi Arabia and Egypt have heavily invested in their air forces and have acquired new and sophisticated equipment, but remain unable to use them on the battlefield. A characteristic of militaries in the developing world is that regimes tend to not actually want their militaries well trained for fear of potential threats to the regimes. In countries like Turkey and Egypt, for example, the militaries are seen as pillars of social and political stability, not as power-projection instruments to influence adversaries or friends.

More generally, outside the United States, the number of competent conventionally structured armies is limited and is likely to decrease over the next quarter century. Western European militaries are in decline due to political decisions to decrease the size of their armed forces and may cease to be able to conduct even policing missions in the future. Outside Europe, Columbia, Israel, and Pakistan have militaries engaged in continuous operations. China and India both have large standing armies, but their ability to move these forces over great distances for extended periods of time is virtually nonexistent. This paper postulates a generalized decline in the abilities of conventional militaries around the world to conduct sustained operations. It is not that large standing armies will go away in these states, since they are institutions that perform important political and social functions in these societies. But, sustained conventional warfare will not be among the principal functions of these organizations.

It is also worth noting that the zone of turbulence that seems likely to remain with us is largely confined to littoral areas. Stated differently, those engaging in war will be on land, not at sea. The world's maritime domain has statistically never been safer. While the global economy is still recovering from the downturn of 2009-2010, and despite episodic and well-publicized incidences of piracy off the Horn of Africa, economic growth has resumed.⁸ The global level of twenty-foot

equivalent unit (TEU) container traffic tripled between 1996 and 2009 (from 137 to 432 million TEUs), and it is expected to continue to grow.⁹ One projection forecasts a growth in traffic to 731 million TEUs by 2017.¹⁰ As the world's seaborne trade continues its exorable climb, developed states in particular will continue to police critical waterway chokepoints. These waterways are policed by a diverse collection of formal and informal naval task forces. The stakes of developed states in the orderly functioning of the globe's maritime domains are overwhelming and are likely to motivate them to continue these policing functions.

To be sure, there are additional important factors shaping the strategic environment that could change the ways in which states view their militaries. These include perceived changes in global balances of power that affect actor calculations on military spending and use of force; the transfer of wealth from West to East that could change decision making around the world; and the rise of China and India economically and politically, both of which have large standing armies and conventional military capabilities. There is also the decline of the US in relative terms to China and India that may cause regional states in South and East Asia to increase the size and competence of their armies and the decline of European militaries to handle anything other than peacekeeping operations. Other systemic-level variables induce additional layers of unpredictability, including population growth, unforeseen developments in global markets (financial, energy), environmental climate-change stresses, other sources of global competition for resources such as energy, water, and other stressed and vital commodities. All these additional shaping factors point to the prominence of irregular war as a form of global conflict over the next quarter-century.

Defense Planning Assumptions

The factors shaping the strategic environment over the next quarter century suggest that this period will not look dramatically different than it does today. Intra-state and societal conflict will prove a persistent feature of the international system while interstate conflict is less likely. These forms of conflict will likely occur in what is today's zone of instability (turbulence) and will take the form of irregular warfare conducted by state and non-state actors vying for power and influence. The actors engaged in these struggles all have objectives, regardless of the tactics used. They will likely rely on the tried and true tactics and equipment of the past. In other words, conflicts over the next quarter century will look much like they have looked over the last 15 years, and they will not emphasize mass destructive weapons and technologies or cyber warfare.

Despite the continuity, this suggests an alternative future scenario in which the international community will increasingly have to rely on the United States for policing actions in this zone of turbulence. While, as postulated by the NIC, there will be a political "concert" of powers that will provide a supporting backdrop, these powers will become steadily less capable of exercising military influence within this zone. Influencing events in these zones of turbulence will organizationally fall to the United States. Over the next quarter century, the United States is likely to remain the sole state capable of using force in the unstable parts of the world as referenced above: Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia.

The United States is systemically reorienting its military institutions away from predominately conventional military operations to meet the challenge of irregular warfare. The political leadership within the US Department of Defense over the last decade has made a concerted effort to direct its military departments to develop irregular warfare one of its six main mission areas. Myriad reports, directives, new doctrine, new organizations, and additional funding have been committed to the

effort. The 2009 *Quadrennial Roles and Missions Report* established irregular warfare as one of the six critical core mission areas for the Department of Defense.

Top-down direction from the civilian leadership to the executing elements in the military departments has helped build new organizational capacities over the last decade. The land force today has new doctrine and training not to mention a huge reservoir of experience over the last decade in fighting irregular war. Moreover, both the US Navy and Air Force have played strong supporting roles in supporting littoral operations. The Air Force has produced new doctrine designed to build organizational competency in irregular warfare. The Navy established the Navy Expeditionary Combat Command in part to consolidate its organizational elements engaged in irregular warfare operations (Seabees, Riverine, and the like).

As repeatedly noted by senior civilian leaders like Secretary Gates, however, persistent doubts remain over the institutional commitment in the military departments to the irregular warfare mission. The institutional preferences for the military departments remain predisposed for conventionally structured military operations. Their budgets – the true measure of institutional interest and intent – remain focused on equipment intended for conventional war. The entrenched institutional interest in fighting conventional war is, in some ways, more powerful than the ever-changing civilian management structure that attempts to provide managerial direction. Stated differently, institutional and bureaucratic interests are longer-lasting than their ephemeral civilian political masters who lack the staying power to take on these entrenched interests.

Despite the myriad top-down directions from political leaders proclaiming the dawn of a new strategic environment oriented toward irregular warfare, that leadership has shown little interest in aligning the overall budget with the capabilities needed in the supposedly new environment. As argued in this paper, irregular wars over the next quarter century will be on land, yet the Defense Department budget remains roughly equally divided between the Navy, Army/Marine Corps, and Air Force. This rough equivalency in budget share has been a constant in the Defense Department's budget in the post-World War Two era. Civilian political leaders have either been unwilling or unsuccessful in reorienting this budget to be better aligned with the strategic environment. The Navy's budget is overwhelmingly driven by its preference for carrier battle groups; the Air Force's budget is driven by its institutional interest in high-performance aircraft. The US Congress has been a supporting element in this complex equation, converging to prevent the systemic realignment of US defense capabilities. The Congress has successfully shoehorned expensive equipment into the Defense Department's budget that bears a tangential relationship to likely real-world military requirements.

In addition to organizational and institutional factors affecting US capacity to wage irregular war, domestic politics will continue to strongly influence whether and/or how often the United States commits its forces to these kinds of operations. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq must be seen in the context of a decision-making environment shaped by the 9/11 attacks and do not represent some sort of sea change in American politics that represents a broad embrace of a more general policing responsibility. Domestic politics, which undergirds foreign-policy decision-making, has, if anything, become more fractious in the last decade. The centrist domestic political coalition that supported a relatively consistent foreign-policy decision-making calculus throughout the Cold War and its immediate aftermath has largely vanished. This induces yet another uncertainty that makes any predictions about America's propensity to commit its forces to far flung conflicts around the world more difficult.

Certainly the last decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan has led to a certain institutional fatigue that will affect the willingness of military departments to make additional long-term commitments. This institutional fatigue, in combination with national fatigue and a changed domestic political environment, may make the United States even less interested in applying force in general policing missions that are likely to surface over the next quarter-century.

Conclusions

This paper argues that warfare in the next quarter century will bear a strong relationship to the wars of today in their type, frequency, and location. These wars will occur in the world's zone of turbulence characterized by weak states and enduring political and/or ethnic and societal disputes. Inferences from current data suggest that irregular war will be a persistent phenomenon in parts of the world that are well known to us. The phenomenon of persistent irregular war will be further reinforced by the general decline of large conventional armies capable of power projection or sustained operations of any kind other than border and internal security.¹¹

This paper further argues that the United States is likely to remain the world's only power capable of conducting sustained military operations in the zones of instability but that it faces institutional and political challenges in intervening militarily. This suggests that the parts of the world that are today prone to instability and irregular warfare are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

¹ Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept, Version 1.0, Department of Defense, 11 September 2007. Also See Department of Defense Directive 3000.07, *Irregular Warfare*, December 1, 2008.

² *Irregular Warfare: Countering Irregular Threats*, Joint Operating Concept, Version 2.0, 17 May 2010, Department of Defense, Washington DC.

³ Ibid

⁴ Robert M. Gates, "A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2009).

⁵ All data from the following section drawn from "Global Conflict Trends," Center for Systemic Peace, Severn, MD; posted online at <http://www.systemicpeace.org/conflict.htm>

⁶ Monty G. Marshall and Benjamin R. Cole, "State Fragility Index and Matrix 2009," Center for Systemic Peace, Severn, MD, posted online at <http://www.systemicpeace.org/SFImatrix2009c.pdf>

⁷ "Recent Trends in Military Expenditures," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, posted online at <http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/resultoutput/trends>

⁸ The United Nations projects global growth of 3.5 percent in 2010; *Review of Maritime Transport 2010*, Report by the UNCTAD Secretariat, United Nations, New York and Geneva 2010.

⁹ See "Long Term Trends in Container Throughput," Research and Innovative Technology Administration, US Department of Transportation, Washington DC; posted online at http://www.bts.gov/publications/americas_container_ports/2011/html/long_term_trends.html

¹⁰ A report by Global Industry Analysts, "Global Maritime Containerization Market to Reach 731.8 Million TEUs by 2017," posted by MACOR Shipping, April 7, 2011 at <http://macorship.blogspot.com/2011/04/global-maritime-containerization-market.html>