

A Framework for Irregular Warfare Capabilities

Dr. Bill Hurley

Irregular warfare (IW) is complex, existing in forms that include counterinsurgency (COIN), counterterrorism, and counter-criminality, blurring U.S. institutional boundaries. National security planners must wrestle with this complexity as they attempt to reshape the nation's capabilities to better deal with this threat.

Structure of Irregular Warfare

A recent IDA study, drawing on case studies from Iraq and Afghanistan, describes a structured way of thinking about IW that can 1) help identify broad areas in need of attention, 2) provide a "checklist" of the types of things that could be done, and 3) suggest promising initiatives.¹ The resulting IW framework has two principal components: the *types of IW capabilities* that correspond to the various actors in IW, and the *attributes of IW* that distinguish it from "regular warfare," and therefore suggest initiatives not addressed by traditional warfare planning.² The study described interactions among five generic types of IW actors (Figure 1).

Note that Population forms the center of this

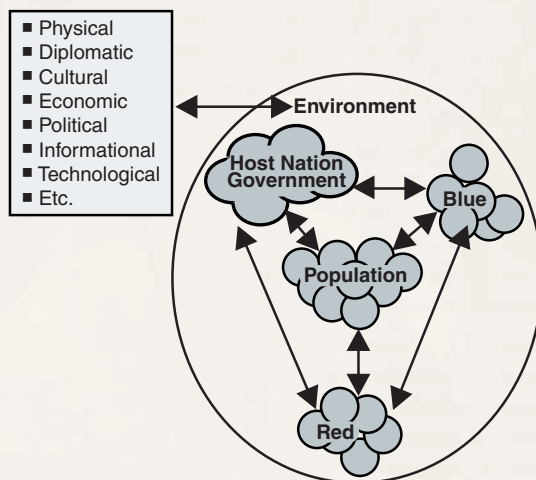


Figure 1: Structure of IW.

structure, with the other actors competing for its support. This is in keeping with the nature of counterinsurgency:

Whatever else is done, the focus must remain on gaining and maintaining the support of the population. With their support, victory is assured; without it, COIN efforts cannot succeed.³

The clusters denote the actors. Blue includes U.S. military and civilian organizations, coalition partners, international governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, and contractors. Likewise the other clusters denote factions within the population, host nation government (HNG), and the opposing forces (*Red*).⁴ The clusters denote the complexity of each group.

Equally important is the dynamic nature of IW. Factions within each group may vary from one location to another and may evolve over time. For example, a faction within an insurgent group (*Red*) may separate from the others and become neutral (move to the *Population*) or even align itself with Blue. IW strategies generally focus on strengthening or weakening such relationships.

Figure 1 also lists various dimensions of the complex environment in which IW takes place. These, too, may become the objects of strategies as actors seek to shape the environment to their advantage.

Types of IW Capabilities

The two-way arrows in Figure 1 represent interactions between actors. In particular, the Blue Joint Force Commander (military or civilian) must be able to effectively relate to five types of actors within the IW structure: Red, the Population, the Host Nation Government, the Environment, and other members of Blue. Each presents its own challenges, but we may generally characterize capabilities as three interrelated classes: Understand, Shape, and Engage.⁵ *Understand* means acquiring and interpreting information

¹ Hurley, W.J., Resnick, J.B., and Wahlman, A., *Improving Capabilities for Irregular Warfare, Volume I: Framework and Applications and Volume II: Capabilities Analysis Paper P-4267* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2007).

² Briefly, we take "regular warfare" to be warfare between the standing forces of nation-states.

³ *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, Dec 2006, A-9.

⁴ The terms Red and Blue are taken from the traditional language of regular warfare (RW), whereas distinguishing the actors in IW can be much more subtle. Nevertheless, we use this convenient shorthand with the understanding that Red refers broadly to U.S. adversaries and Blue to the United States and its (non-HNG) partners.

⁵ The "Understand - Shape - Engage" scheme originated with Joint Publication JP 3-06 (Joint Doctrine for Urban Operations (Sept 2002) as a construct for classifying capabilities for urban operations.

and involves a range of capabilities from cultural understanding to tactical intelligence to sensors and processing. *Shape* is about turning understanding into desired effects. Examples include capabilities to train indigenous forces or influence the population. *Engage* may be “kinetic” (applying physical force) or “non-kinetic” (e.g., communicating with locals). This categorization scheme, despite some ambiguities, provides a checklist for reviewing operational needs and the types of capabilities that could address them.

Distinguishing Attributes

IDA’s IW framework provides a structure for the landscape of IW capabilities, but the landscape is vast. Where should initiatives be focused? Insight can come from identifying IW capabilities that differ markedly from regular warfare capabilities and so are likely to have been neglected as nations have focused on regular warfare challenges. The IDA study offers a detailed review of IW missions and capabilities and identifies five attributes of IW that distinguish it from regular warfare:

1. Centrality of Human Terrain
2. Mix of Civilian and Military Organizations and Activities
3. Nature of IW Combat Actions
4. Consolidation
5. Transition

1. Centrality of Human Terrain

The population is IW’s center of gravity: Militarily, the population is critical to finding, identifying, and isolating Red because Red is



Figure 2: Visit to Afghan School.

embedded in the population. Politically, the population is the foundation for establishing the legitimacy and stability of the host government. Economically, the population is essential to reconstituting national resources and public services. The population’s support is driven by its attitudes regarding the opposing sides which, in turn, are driven by each individual’s sense of security and social, economic, and political well-being, and by messages being communicated by Blue, Red, and a host of opinion-shapers, including local leaders, social networks, media, rumors, traditions, and narratives.

The fundamental capabilities necessary are those needed to understand and shape the attitudes of the population. Just as battles on physical terrain require maps and physical surveillance, battles on human terrain require cultural understanding, human intelligence operations, and opinion polling. Shaping the population’s attitude through involvement with key members of the population, influence operations, and media effectiveness becomes central.

2. Mix of Civilian and Military Organizations and Activities

In regular warfare, the primary objective is destroying the enemy force. In IW, it is building a secure, stable society and a legitimate host government. IW therefore requires coordinated military and civilian actions (reconstruction, stabilization, transition of control to the HNG). Fundamental to success is unity of effort at all levels from the onset of planning. Critical focus areas include multi-organizational and multi-level communication systems to connect the Blue partners without compromising restricted information, multi-sided planning processes, and approaches to accommodating disparate organizational cultures.

3. Nature of IW Combat Actions

In general, combat action within an IW environment differs significantly from combat action in regular warfare.

- IW emphasizes ground-centric action against an enemy embedded in a population. Key capabilities include isolating Red from the population; engaging with measured effects to



Figure 3: Operations amidst local populations.

reduce collateral casualties and damage; protecting the population and facilities during day-to-day activities; and partnering with the population to enhance recruitment, local knowledge, and intelligence. Many of these challenges are similar to those faced by law enforcement agencies, so relevant approaches include biometrics, forensics, non-lethal effects, and a strong emphasis on human intelligence activities.

- In IW, Blue and Red share the same environment. This proximity presents threats and opportunities: threats because Blue is vulnerable to close-up attacks, e.g., by improvised explosive devices or snipers; and opportunities because Red must operate in Blue's battlespace, enabling Blue to exploit proximity to identify Red, restrict his movements, monitor communications, conduct human intelligence operations, and interrupt his supply and funding chains. Separation of forces in regular warfare has driven capabilities for surveillance, targeting, and attacking to remote means that cannot differentiate an IW threat mixed in close proximity.

4. Consolidation

When physical security is achieved in an area, IW emphasizes consolidating gains while conducting stability and reconstruction activities and transferring responsibilities to a host government. Key military capabilities include defensive operations to hold areas that have been secured; population management;

partnering with host nation, coalition, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations to leverage local resources; and being civil-support "first-responders" until civilian organizations become available to support humanitarian assistance, governance, police, and reconstruction activities.

5. Transition

Transition is the process of helping a legitimate HNG assume responsibility and authority for security, governance, social well-being, and reconstruction. This is IW's overarching objective and therefore drives all other IW actions. The key to transition is leveraging and empowering local resources—building partner capacity. Key capabilities supporting Transition include planning with interagency, HNG, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations and contractors; leveraging local capabilities (partnering with, hiring, supporting); training and advising HNG security and civilian personnel; and equipping host nation security and civilian personnel with systems consistent with host nation resources (costs, operator skills, operational environment).



Figure 4: Planning for Afghanistan Elections.

Applications of the Framework

The table that follows illustrates how the framework can identify a range of IW applications that a single technology initiative might provide. In this case, the initiative is to develop a system based on current technologies that could remotely identify and track vehicles in a specific area.⁶

⁶ Hurley, W.J., Bucher, C.R., Numrich, S.K., Ouellette, S.M., Resnick, J.B. Non-Kinetic Capabilities for Irregular Warfare: Four Case Studies Paper P- 4436 (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2009).

Types of Capabilities vs. Distinguishing Attributes of IW:
Applications of the Capability to Remotely Identify and Track Vehicles

	Human Terrain	Civil-Military	IW Combat Ops	Consolidation	Transition	
Environment—Physical, Economic, Cultural, Political, Informational, Technological, Diplomatic, etc.						
Understand	Economic activity		Traffic patterns		Transfer Capabilities to HNG	
Shape	Planning tool		Traffic control			
Host Nation Government						
Understand	Census, activities	Activities	Track civilian traffic	Track civilian traffic		
Shape	Traffic flow	Planning	Reduce civilian casualties	Traffic control		
Red						
Understand	Track activities		Track Red			
Shape	Isolate Red		Deter Red mobility	Border Protection		
Engage			Target Red			
Blue						
Understand		Track Coalition	Blue Force track	Track Coalition		
Shape		Coordination	Command and control, planning	Coordination		

Summary

The IDA study provides planners a framework for sorting through the complexities associated with improving capabilities for IW. It is not

a “turn-the-crank” solution but is useful for structuring the background, identifying issues, suggesting directions for initiatives, and focusing the debate on needed capabilities.