

## GREAT POWER COMPETITION WILL DRIVE IRREGULAR CONFLICTS

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If the United States is drawn into a new war in the next few years, what will that look like? Will the government deploy troops and heavy arms to a front in Eastern Europe or naval forces to the Taiwan Strait? Or will it engage in the kinds of activities that have been central to recent conflicts: special operations teams conducting drone strikes on insurgents, security force assistance brigades training partner militaries, development professionals running small-scale

projects in remote villages, and diplomats learning the fine details of local politics?

The U.S. *[National Defense Strategy](#)* argues that preparing for the former is the best way to stave off major conflicts, and the Department of Defense is overwhelmingly emphasizing preparing for conventional warfare with China or Russia. This is a risky strategy in one key respect: Historically, irregular warfare has been a major part of great-power competition.

Building up conventional arms may contribute to deterrence, but having too narrow of a focus creates its own problems, as several [colleagues](#) have [pointed out](#). The situation parallels having an overly concentrated investment portfolio: A wise investor will buy stocks for growth but supplement that with bonds to provide reliable income regardless of how the market performs. Similarly, as the United States invests massively in conventional deterrence, it should continue preparing for the irregular environments where strategic competition is most likely to turn violent.

So, where should U.S. leaders look to figure out what the right mix is and which bonds to invest in, so to speak? They don't have to depend solely on their imaginations to decide, as they can utilize almost 50 years of evidence from the last era of strategic competition: the Cold War.

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## **Lessons from the Last Great-Power Faceoff**

Why should we look to Cold War case studies to inform policy today? While it is essential not to over-read similarities between then and now, the two eras have

important parallels.

Then, two major superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, were in competition, while a third major power, the People's Republic of China, also played an important role. Each of these countries had nuclear weapons, serving to keep direct conflict off the table. Today, the United States and China are the two superpowers, while Russia is a major power seeking to reverse its decline. While there are important differences between the periods, we can surely learn from how the great powers competed before.

When we look back at the Cold War, it turns out that irregular warfare was a central feature of almost all conflicts involving the great powers. Civil wars and other kinds of irregular conflict accounted for 107 of the 123 armed conflicts active around the world from 1975 to 1991, according to the [Uppsala Conflict Data Program](#). The great powers supported at least one side in a majority of these: 61 percent in the Middle East and 60 percent in Africa.

Cold War-era conflicts involving a great power on one or both sides were vastly more intense. At least two thirds of battle deaths in the second half of the Cold War came in conflicts with two or more great powers involved. If past is prologue, we can anticipate that the consequences of similar “small wars” today will be anything but modest and likely worse because the great-power competition provides strong incentives for reciprocal interventions.

One way to see how much worse wars with two great powers involved can be is to notice that while the 26 conflicts with two or more great powers supporting combatants represent less than one quarter of irregular conflicts active from 1975 to 1991, they caused 64 to 70 percent of the battle deaths during this period. Exceptionally violent conflicts happened around the world, from Afghanistan and Ethiopia to Cambodia and El Salvador. But all shared some common traits: they lasted for more than a decade, one great power supported the government and one supported at least one rebel faction (often more), and most settled shortly after the

end of the Cold War when support to at least one side dried up. What this all implies is that in a world with competing great powers we should expect there to be multiple extended, brutal conflicts for which irregular warfare competency will be critical. This is a world we are sadly already living in.

## **The Current, Pivotal Moment**

Given that many leaders in Washington started their careers during the Cold War, why isn't preparing for irregular warfare a larger part of the narrative about strategic competition?

Experts have warned Congress that irregular warfare will likely be a major type of struggle between the United States and its competitors. President Joe Biden's prologue to the implementation plan for the Global Fragility Act states that the United States will "consider how U.S. engagement in fragile states can affect and is affected by our broader geopolitical interests" such as competing with China and Russia. Senior Defense Department leaders have recently outlined how irregular warfare supports campaigning and deterrence, core principles in U.S. efforts at strategic competition.

But beyond these particular items, the U.S. National Defense Strategy is clearly focused on building a military to counter China and Russia, to the point that both it and the National Security Strategy largely dispense with preparation for irregular warfare. The unclassified version of the *National Military Strategy* makes no direct reference to irregular warfare at all. And in our own experience, we have seen that honing and capturing lessons from the past two decades of irregular warfare is all too often viewed as a distraction from, rather than complementary to, the current focus on strategic competition.

Without a clear perspective on irregular warfare's importance to great-power competition, decision-makers will not even consider a range of potential tradeoffs. There are dozens of opportunities for investing slightly less in the expensive tools needed to fight and win a conventional war to gain huge amounts



of capacity for irregular conflict. For instance, buying one fewer C-17 military transport aircraft would have saved more than \$300 million — which in turn could have enabled relatively large investments in tools for irregular warfare environments such as training hundreds of foreign service officers in languages used on the African continent (or more than 1,000 in Russian, based on 2013 costs), or doubling the usually small complement of foreign commercial officers at U.S. embassies across Africa. Federal budgeting is a complex process in which State Department training priorities are not typically substituted for Defense Department acquisitions, but surely leaders on Capitol Hill and in the executive branch could establish a process to explicitly consider these kinds of budgetary tradeoffs.

There is another problem: The establishment of U.S. Special Operations Command following the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 may have had the unintended consequence of locking in the military's overinvestment in large-scale combat operations. By encouraging a small portion of the military to specialize in irregular warfare and other “non-traditional” missions, the law drastically reduced incentives for the rest of the military to invest in this domain. Returning to the previous analogy, this has left the military in a position where Special Operations Command invests almost completely in bonds while the rest of the military invests almost completely in stocks. Arguably, this might still enable systematic consideration of the right mix between preparing for irregular warfare and conventional operations if Special Operations Command had the same heft on the civilian side of the Department of Defense as the military services, but it does not. The special operations portfolio is managed at the assistant secretary level (the third level of the civilian bureaucracy) and does not have a civilian service secretary — as do the Air Force, Army, and Navy — which reduces its ability to influence policy and resource allocation.

Looking at recent events through this lens shows how operating effectively in irregular warfare settings can support U.S. national interests. The United States made a modest investment in Ukraine from 2015 to 2021, no more than \$500

million in any given year (compare that to the billions the United States is spending every year to support Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion). This involved a combination of special operations, National Guard, Ministry of Defense, and other advisors and trainers from the United States and other countries. Although this effort by itself did not deter Russia from invading in 2022, if you consider it a success that Ukraine didn't immediately fall to Russia, as had been widely predicted, then you should see value in the long-run U.S. investment in providing security assistance to the country — a key irregular warfare capability.

And if you worry that Russia's increased clout in the Sahel region of Africa is a threat to political stability and potentially critical mineral supplies, that too relates to irregular warfare and broader questions of the importance of sustained engagement in fragile states. Starting in the Trump administration, the United States signaled a decreased interest in Africa as it "rebalanced" its attention toward Asia and viewed the Sahel primarily as a locus of counterterrorism and irregular warfare. The 2022 National Defense Strategy, at 80 pages, mentions the entire continent of Africa only four times, and the Sahel never. But in the past two years, Russia has been steadily gaining partners there. In this region, one country after another experienced a coup, often precipitated by the civilian government's perceived inability to control the jihadist threat in the country. Russian actors appeared in many capitals with an offer of stabilizing muscle for the new leadership. Now that Russia is gaining friends across the region, it's clear that if the United States had foreseen how instability there might enable Russian encroachment, policymakers may have viewed its significance differently.

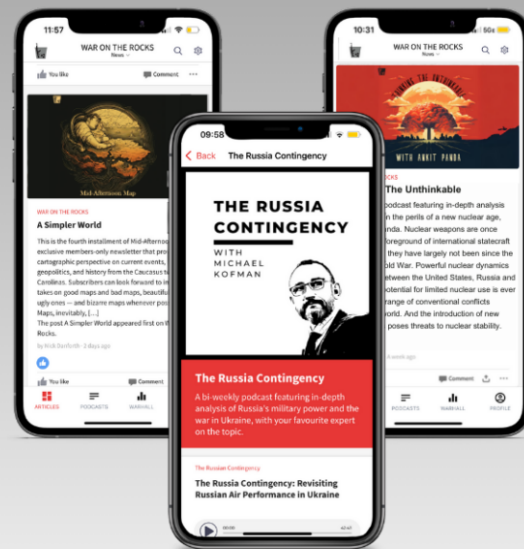
In addition, with the current segregation of strategic competition from irregular warfare and stabilization, policymakers may miss the opportunity to leverage irregular warfare toolkit *toward* strategic competition. For example, currently, the U.S. Agency for International Development invests about \$23.6 million annually on stabilization and peacebuilding programs in the Democratic Republic of Congo — a relatively modest sum for the largest country, geographically, in sub-

Saharan Africa. A limited investment makes sense if the objective is to achieve a stable, accountable government in the Congo — unfortunately, an uphill battle for decades. But Congo is no longer just a peacebuilding concern for U.S. interests: China’s dominant role in resource extraction and influence in the country’s affairs make it a strategic challenge, as well. Imagine if policymakers had seen stabilization investment in terms of *both* advancing accountable governance in the Congo and cultivating deeper engagement in this crucial strategic arena. The conversation — and the resulting investment — may have been very different.

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## What Cold War Cases Should Teach Us

Some important observations are emerging from our Cold War case studies that can help U.S. decision-makers understand and prepare for conflicts on the horizon.

The most important centers on the fact that some of the irregular warfare capabilities that were important for U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War did not involve major financial outlays. They were modest long-term investments that

did not allow U.S. allies to “win” their military competition outright in the near term — e.g., the small-but-critical deployment to [El Salvador](#) — but shaped the political possibilities in their favor over the medium term. Such long-term investments also led to favorable conflict resolution in [post-Cold War Colombia](#). In fact, [research by one of us](#) suggests that the military is more likely to be successful when it is forced to stay small with a cap on its forces. It may be counterintuitive, but having too many forces is often counterproductive, as witnessed in Vietnam and Afghanistan. Information provision and relationship building also played a central role during the Cold War, often led by civilian government agencies.

A second observation is that some of the most strategically consequential Cold War failures for the United States and the Soviet Union came down, in large part, to handling irregular warfare environments badly. For the United States in Vietnam, this was a result of putting huge effort into an intervention which ran counter to powerful long-run local political dynamics. For the Soviet Union, the draining 10-year war in Afghanistan would never have happened if it had been sufficiently savvy about local politics to discourage its Afghan allies from mounting a coup in 1978, if it refrained from the 1979 invasion that inflamed the nascent national resistance movement, or if it had been able to quell Islamic insurgent groups, who eventually became well-supplied by the United States and other players.

Many of these cases also highlight the importance of realistic strategic patience. Indeed, taking the long, and broad, view will be essential: To compete with China and Russia, it is important to focus on actors beyond the Chinese Communist Party and the Kremlin. The United States will need to pursue engagement around the world in places whose strategic importance is not immediately clear to the public — but where, as a consequence, U.S. engagement may have outsized impact.



Finally, preparing for the wars the United States will almost surely fight, alongside being ready to fight the wars it hopes to deter, means investing in U.S. military and civilian officials' intellectual capital for the diplomatic and military aspects of irregular conflict. Since the Korean War, the United States has fought only two large-scale combat operations that did not involve significant irregular conflict (the Gulf War, and arguably the first weeks of the invasion of Iraq), yet it has spent trillions of dollars and thousands of lives in irregular conflicts around the world. Like so many aspects of preparing for the irregular aspects of great-power competition, the required investments are modest. Some inexpensive options include: reforming professional military education to include more analysis of the kinds of wars officers are most likely to fight in; placing flag officers in the lead in security force assistance missions (perhaps if that had been done in Ukraine before the invasion it might have deterred Russia); and creating a mechanism for the combatant commands to identify critical language needs among their civilian counterparts and leverage the interagency personnel assignment process to provide training to personnel in the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

If the nation fails to diversify its national security investments to retain hard-earned irregular warfare skills and capabilities, the United States will have more costly failures and fewer inexpensive successes. And the Cold War teaches us that this combination is a recipe for failure in long-run great-power competition.

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