



**Maria Ryan.** *Full Spectrum Dominance: Irregular Warfare and the War on Terror.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. 328 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5036-0999-0.

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“Full spectrum dominance” was first used in the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review. The phrase captures the idea that American security hinges on both conventional military strength to win major-theater wars and smaller-scale operations to steer substate conflicts in a direction advantageous to US national security. As Maria Ryan shows, the events of September 11, 2001, propelled this strategy to the forefront of policymaking. Decision-makers focused on how terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda might exploit weak states and civil strife to find safe havens among local populations.

Ryan argues that in the aftermath of September 11, irregular warfare became central to this quest for full spectrum dominance. The Joint Operating Concept on Irregular Warfare defines the practice as using “the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary’s power, influence, and will” (p. 2). In theory, irregular warfare involves using force to shape political and ideological narratives at the substate level. In practice, this task is quite difficult, as the book’s case studies show.

This book focuses on how irregular warfare developed during the early 2000s in the peripheral theaters of the war on terror: Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Caspian Basin. The author’s selection of these fringe cases makes for an original project and allows her to complement ex-

isting scholarship on irregular warfare, which overwhelmingly focuses on Afghanistan and Iraq.

Ryan utilizes a trove of unclassified primary material across a range of government bodies, including the Department of Defense and its regional command centers, the Department of State, and the Government Accountability Office. Because irregular warfare is a population-centric style of conflict that involves shaping the political and ideological allegiances of foreign populations, latter chapters assess the transformational diplomacy push under the George W. Bush administration.

Ryan’s work contributes to a growing body of literature on how security concerns drive powerful states to forcibly transform the political composition and authority structures of weaker states whose internal affairs they see as potentially threatening.[1] States have engaged in this behavior for centuries and there is evidence that these interventions are not always about fighting terrorists. States may engage in irregular conflict operations inside other states to extend their spheres of influence relative to their rivals.[2] This blurs the boundary that the concept of full spectrum dominance constructs between conventional interstate conflict and irregular warfare at the substate level.

The book warrants three critiques. First, the motives that drive irregular warfare are multifaceted. Although the book frames counterterrorism

as the driver of irregular warfare, the book's cases show that other interests, such as access to energy resources and diplomatic goals, can also motivate irregular warfare. Ryan's analysis of US operations in Georgia shows how American officials used irregular conflict to secure oil and gas routes and pursue diplomatic aims in the Caspian region. While irregular warfare is a tool to combat the local spread of terrorists and nonstate actors, it clearly can be marshalled toward other strategic objectives. The book's assessment of operations in the Philippines also proves that irregular warfare is not exclusively about combating terrorism. Ryan notes that US operations in the Philippines served as a "springboard for the projection of US power in East and Southeast Asia" (p. 76).

Second, it is important to situate the US use of irregular warfare in history. During the Cold War, American presidents used irregular warfare to tip the balance of power in favor of anti-communists abroad. Sometimes they were successful, other times they were not. Operation Mongoose (John Kennedy administration) failed to spark an anti-Marxist rebellion in Cuba. Operation Urgent Fury (Ronald Reagan administration) successfully helped the Grenadan opposition oust the island's Marxist regime. Since well before the Global War on Terrorism, American officials have used irregular warfare to address international security threats. While Ryan notes that her project is contemporary history, irregular warfare is not a new phenomenon.

Third, the link Ryan draws between globalization and conflict may be overstated. Terrorist groups are increasingly networked, but as Ryan notes in the conclusion (citing David Kilcullen), local grievances provide terrorist groups a foothold inside target states.[3] Terrorists today are transnationally networked, but their success hinges on their ability to exploit local-level crises. Most recently, the Islamic State gained a foothold in Syria by embedding itself among the country's oppressed rural Sunni community amid the chaos

of the Syrian Civil War. The Islamic State used global networks to recruit foreign fighters, but the conflict that gave it a base in the Levant was a civil war pitting Syrian against Syrian. One final note: a list of abbreviations at the beginning of the book would assist readers unfamiliar with military terminology and agency acronyms.

Ryan offers an important contribution to the study of warfare, military intervention, and diplomacy in the twenty-first century. This is a book about more than just irregular warfare and the fight against terrorism; it is a broad assessment of how the events of September 11 heightened America's threat perception toward the internal conflicts and shortcomings of weak states abroad. The book's focus on understudied theaters of the war on terror generates original insight on America's counterterrorism campaign after 2001.

Finally, the policy implications of this book are noteworthy. Ryan's analysis brings into question the feasibility of irregular warfare. For example, Ryan shows how America's irregular tactics in the Philippines did little to address the narrative of alienation that fueled the rise of Islamist extremists in the southwest. Turning to the Georgia case, Ryan categorizes American involvement as irregular warfare that lacked a "non-kinetic" component. The US militarily assisted Georgian ground forces but did not undertake a major effort to shape civil affairs in the country. Perhaps this is the most feasible model of irregular warfare, particularly after the effort to make Iraq a stable democracy failed to prevent the rise of the Islamic State. Statistical analysis suggests that states are usually unsuccessful when they use military operations to export political systems to other countries.[4] Moving forward, it is worth considering whether irregular warfare in the twenty-first century may replicate the Georgian model of placing more emphasis on train and equip operations and less emphasis on shaping local politics.

Notes

[1]. Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Elizabeth Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Suzanne Werner, "Absolute and Limited War: The Possibility of Foreign-Imposed Regime Change," *International Interactions* 22, no. 1 (1996): 67–88.

[2]. John M. Owen, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change, 1510-2010* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 375.

[3]. David Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 4 (2005): 601.

[4]. Jeffrey Pickering and Mark Peceny, "Forging Democracy at Gunpoint," *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (September 2006): 555.

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