Thought leadership

Irregular warfare: *Using influence to dictate legitimacy*

The prevailing warfighting environment in an era of strategic competition

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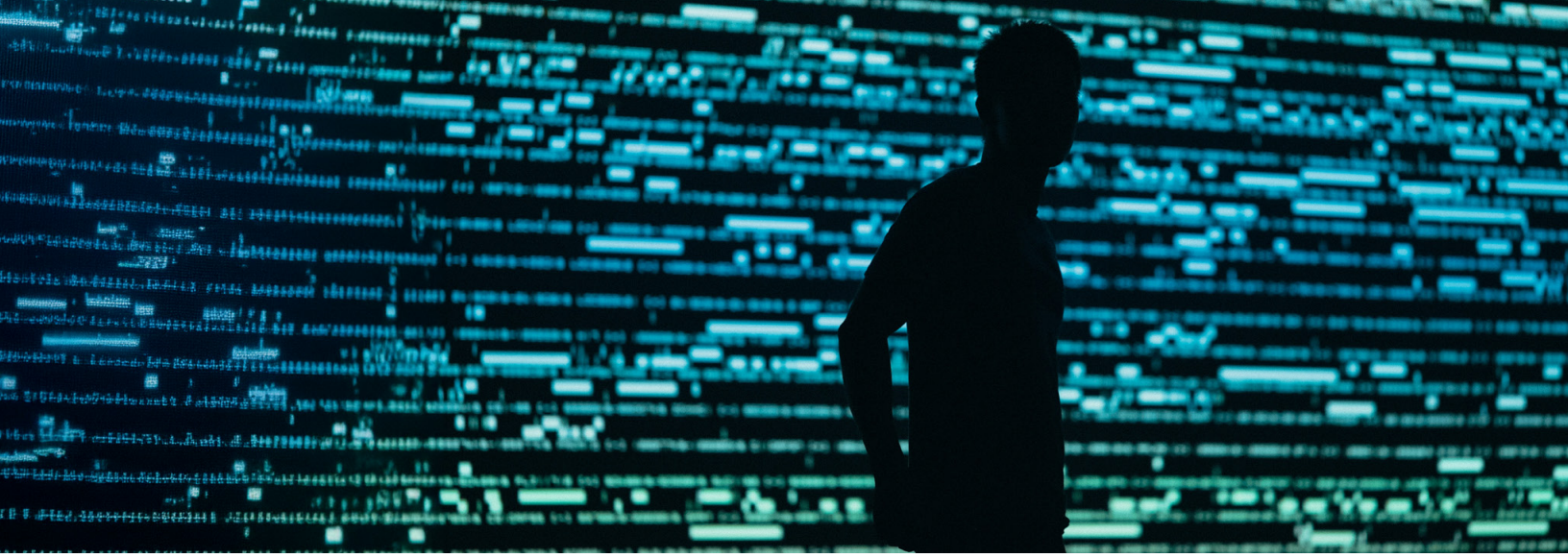

Foreword: Mastering the fight for the 21st century

This paper is the first in a six-part series developed by CACI to reframe how national security professionals understand and engage in 21st century strategic competition. Its core argument is that Irregular Warfare (IW) — anchored in the effective use of information, influence, and other instruments of power short of armed conflict — has become a coequal dimension of strategic competition. Our adversaries wield it persistently to create advantages and impose costs without escalating to open war or prompting a U.S. military response.

As the United States continues to invest in conventional deterrence, our rivals are too often winning strategic objectives through proxy warfare, disinformation, cyber aggression, legal or illicit manipulation, economic coercion, and narrative dominance. This series is intended to illuminate how the U.S. must adapt and expand — doctrinally, structurally, and cognitively — to succeed in this environment.

The six papers in this series will address the following themes:

1. Defining the Environment – Understanding IW as a critical component of modern strategic competition, and aligning our doctrine, posture, and planning to compete effectively within it.
2. Gray Zone Conflicts: Redefining Victory Without Combat – Exploring how adversaries use ambiguity, information, and lawfare to shift the status quo without crossing conventional redlines.
3. Operationalizing CAPIA: Planning IW in the 21st Century – Introducing a new campaign-planning construct built around Capabilities, Access, Partnerships, Information, and Authorities — the core levers of IW success.
4. Doctrine and Authorities: Overcoming the Legal and Structural Barriers to IW – Examining the Title 10/Title 50 divide, planning gaps, and doctrinal inertia that limit IW effectiveness — and offering actionable solutions.
5. Force Design for Persistent Competition – Proposing a restructured force posture for IW dominance, from Special Operations Forces (SOF) deployment models to interagency integration and digital influence capabilities.
6. Institutionalizing IW: A Roadmap for Enduring Advantage – Providing a blueprint for integrating IW with the full range of U.S. competitive advantages — military, diplomatic, informational, and economic — while avoiding the pitfall of confining IW to a narrow “silo of excellence.”

This first paper — Irregular Warfare: The Prevailing Warfighting Environment in an Era of Strategic Competition — lays the foundation. It explains why IW is the current fight, how adversaries are winning without triggering war, and what the United States must do to adapt before it is too late. The next five papers will expand the lens — from operational frameworks to structural reform — so that we are not just aware of the threat, but ready to win in its domain.

BLUF: This paper examines the strategic risks inherent in deprioritizing irregular and information-centric warfare. Despite the U.S. military’s continued emphasis on conventional strength, recent policy shifts reveal a growing mismatch between our investment priorities and the evolving character of modern conflict. Adversaries are advancing their strategic aims through persistent, ambiguous, and asymmetric methods — while the U.S. remains largely focused on traditional force projection. The takeaway is clear: IW can no longer be treated as a supporting effort — it is integral to how we fight and compete.

Preamble

Strategic erosion of the United States' ability to compete is happening now without war. At stake is the U.S.-led international order built on democratic norms, open markets, and enduring security partnerships. America's rivals — chiefly China, Russia, and Iran — are waging a coordinated campaign to rewrite the rules, reshape global perceptions, and weaken Western cohesion.

This competition is not theoretical. It is happening in plain sight.

- China wields infrastructure and technology as weapons — using Belt and Road investments, digital surveillance systems, and disinformation networks to entrench influence across Africa, the Indo-Pacific, and Latin America.
- Russia conducts continuous hybrid operations, from cyberattacks on critical infrastructure and election interference to mercenary deployments and psychological warfare designed to fracture NATO unity.
- Iran projects power through proxies, militias, and coordinated information campaigns that expand its reach without triggering direct confrontation.

Each of these efforts advances strategic objectives without firing a shot. While the United States invests heavily in platforms, formations, and conventional deterrence, its adversaries are accumulating advantage in the areas that shape outcomes — perception, access, alliance cohesion, and trust.

IW is how these strategic effects are being achieved. It is not a replacement for traditional strength; it is a critical complement to it. Where our adversaries integrate diplomatic, informational, economic, and military tools into unified campaigns, the United States remains structured for episodic warfighting, not continuous competition.

Bridging that gap demands leaders who understand how to align America's full power — military and non-military alike — for persistent advantage.

This paper matters because it defines the true battlespace of modern competition: the struggle for legitimacy and influence over key populations and partners. It exposes the growing mismatch between what U.S. institutions are organized to do and what the strategic environment now demands. The warning signs are visible — loss of access in parts of Africa, eroding partnerships in Latin America, adversary control of digital and infrastructure ecosystems, and disinformation shaping public sentiment in allied nations. These are not isolated setbacks; they are cumulative indicators of strategic displacement.

This paper sets the foundation for the series by asserting a simple but urgent truth: we are in a contest for influence — and winning it requires fully integrating IW with the conventional strength, partnerships, and values that have long defined U.S. power.

1. Irregular Warfare — The overlooked imperative of great power competition

Strategists have long warned that Great Power Competition would define the coming era of national security. That warning came to a head in the 2017 National Security Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy. But while the documents said one thing, our institutional behavior did another. Counterterrorism remained dominant, and now, with strategic competition squarely in focus, the U.S. is overcorrecting by prioritizing conventional deterrence while neglecting the more persistent threat: IW.

China, Russia, and Iran have not made the same mistake. They exploit the "seams and vulnerabilities" inherent to the modern, technology-dependent security environment, operating persistently and effectively below the threshold of armed conflict. Their tactics do not aim to defeat the United States in open war. Instead, they aim to bypass, neutralize, and create doubts about our own strengths and those of our allies, shaping the environment in ways beneficial to their goals, and ultimately "winning without fighting." They rely on proxies and cyber-enabled information operations (IO) that span social media, data networks, and the Dark Web, along with economic coercion and "gray zone" maneuvering, to change facts on the ground while Washington debates legal authorities.

Irregular Warfare: Strategic Competition Framing

IW is the deliberate use of influence, access, and ambiguity to shape the strategic environment, undermine adversarial power, and achieve national objectives — often below the threshold of armed conflict. It is executed through overt, covert, and clandestine means, leveraging indigenous partners, proxy forces, IO, cyber capabilities, economic coercion, political subversion, lawfare, and other sensitive activities. IW is nonlinear, population-centric, and perception-driven — waged in contested physical and cognitive terrain where legitimacy, narrative dominance, and the denial of adversarial freedom of action are key strategic objectives. This framing builds on the Joint Pub 1 doctrinal definition, which rightly emphasizes IW as a violent, asymmetric struggle for legitimacy and influence. However, it extends that view to reflect how state actors now use IW as a persistent tool of strategic competition — employing nonviolent, multidomain campaigns to shape outcomes without triggering conventional conflict.

The U.S. must recognize that IW is not a sideshow — it is a central arena of modern strategic competition. And within that arena, Operations in the Information Environment (OIE) are essential to shaping the conditions that determine success. Influence and perception are not simply outcomes — they are the foundation of behavioral change. Beliefs shape emotions, emotions drive perception, and perception leads to action — action that can be observed, measured, and exploited. Without first shaping how individuals and populations feel and perceive, attempts to influence behavior will fall short. Our adversaries understand this deeply. They are reconfiguring the battlespace through persistent, perception-driven campaigns — achieving strategic effect without crossing the threshold of open conflict. Meanwhile, the U.S. remains organized for a future large-scale war that may never come, while neglecting the ongoing contest for legitimacy, access, and narrative dominance.

2. Institutional focus on the visible fight

Despite a shift in rhetoric toward integrated deterrence and competition, U.S. defense strategy remains largely oriented toward high-end conflict. The enduring emphasis on conventional superiority and large-scale force projection reflects a mindset rooted in traditional deterrence.

Recent actions illustrate this enduring conventional mindset. Kinetic responses — such as the strikes in Venezuela against cartel-linked targets or the attacks in Yemen to reopen Red Sea shipping lanes — signal a preference for high-visibility displays of force over persistent influence operations. These are not inherently missteps; decisive action in the physical domain remains vital to deterrence and credibility. But when executed in isolation, such actions reflect a strategic default — rapid, visible results rather than sustained, ambiguous shaping within the cognitive and political spaces where today's adversaries thrive.

Meanwhile, institutions designed for long-term influence — like Radio Free Europe and Radio Free Asia — have been sidelined, and their missions have been diluted or defunded just as adversaries expand their IO. The result is a defense strategy that continues to prioritize kinetic actions over efforts to persuade, pressure, or undermine through persistent, irregular means.

The path forward is not to replace kinetic power with IW, but to integrate them — to synchronize influence, information, and unconventional operations with conventional strength. When combined in a coordinated campaign, the whole becomes far greater than the sum of its parts: a force capable not only of winning battles, but shaping the strategic environment that prevents them.

The Pentagon's Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy (2020) acknowledged the importance of IW, but little has been done to institutionalize its principles. IW remains stovepiped inside SOF units and is rarely integrated into broader campaigns. The result: a military preparing for the war it prefers, not the one it is actually in.

Components encompassed in IW: Our expanded definition of IW intentionally subsumes the following core operational components:

Unconventional Warfare – Enabling resistance and insurgent forces to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow hostile regimes.

Counterinsurgency – Defeating insurgencies by enabling host-nation legitimacy and control.

Foreign Internal Defense – Training and supporting partner nations against subversion, lawlessness, and insurgency.

Counterterrorism – Targeting and dismantling transnational terrorist networks and their support structures.

Military Information Support Operations and Psychological Operations (PSYOP) – Shaping perceptions, behaviors, and decisions through targeted influence and narrative campaigns.

Sensitive Activities – Low-visibility actions conducted under Title 10 and/or Title 50 authorities, including cyber operations, intelligence support, and clandestine influence.

Operations in the Information Environment (OIE) – Campaigns to seize cognitive terrain, shape the narrative space, and achieve digital persistence.

Economic and Legal Instruments – Including infrastructure debt entrapment, strategic corruption, sanctions, and lawfare to enable strategic advantage without direct conflict.

3. The strategic gap: Gray zone competition and IW

The problem is not conceptual — it is structural. The United States is not yet postured to compete effectively in the gray zone — an environment our adversaries regard as key terrain. Our adversaries use IW because it works. It delivers strategic effects below the threshold of war, creates faits accomplis in contested regions, erodes U.S. credibility, corrodes alliances, and seizes initiative — all while avoiding a decisive response. For example, moments of public uncertainty about U.S. commitments to NATO have provided Russia with IO windfalls. Even the perception of American hesitation can become a strategic asset — amplified by Russian campaigns designed to sow doubt, isolate vulnerable allies, and weaken the alliance from within. This is how IW operates: exploiting ambiguity, manipulating perception, and reshaping behavior before a single shot is ever fired.

In this space — known as the gray zone — the rules are deliberately murky. Attribution is blurred. Legal justifications are invented. Cyberattacks, maritime harassment, economic blackmail, and digital propaganda campaigns define the operational landscape. These are not precursors to conflict; they are the conflict. And the U.S. is still playing by old rules.

If we continue to focus on preparing for large-scale combat and underinvest in IW, we risk strategic irrelevance in the very environment where competition is actually occurring.

4. Understanding the IW environment

IW is not terrain-centric — it is influence-centric. Its battlefield spans information, cyber, economic, legal, and political domains. In this space, perception trumps firepower. Narratives shape outcomes more than missiles. Proxies often deliver more strategic effects than brigades. Victory belongs to those who master ambiguity, move faster than attribution, and shape what others believe to be true. For example, the "Free Palestine" movement seized the initiative in the absence of a coherent counter-narrative from the U.S. and Israel — using a single word, "genocide," to frame the debate and drive a wedge between Western allies, culminating in formal recognition of Palestine by the United Kingdom, France, Canada, and Australia.

Actors in this space rarely escalate to open war. Instead, they engage in campaigns of erosion — of norms, alliances, sovereignty, and political stability. It is a slow grind, not a knockout blow. China's economic coercion, Russia's hybrid warfare, and Iran's proxy strategy all reflect this reality.

Importantly, IW does not replace traditional military operations. However, it reframes how we use force — and how we define victory. The U.S. must treat IW not as a lesser-included mission but as the dominant mode of strategic competition. In this environment, success increasingly belongs to those who can shape outcomes with ideas before shots are fired.

5. The IW gap between the U.S. and its competitors

China's "Three Warfares" doctrine (psychological, legal, and media warfare) underpins its gray zone strategy. In the South China Sea, China has redefined maritime norms without firing a shot — using maritime militia swarms, legal manipulation, and narrative control. State-controlled media and cyber influence campaigns reinforce its legitimacy while discrediting U.S. presence.

Russia's hybrid warfare model is on full display in Ukraine. Disinformation, Wagner Group mercenaries, cyberattacks, and plausible deniability enabled Russia to seize Crimea without conventional escalation. Their playbook now extends across Africa, Europe, and beyond.

Iran's asymmetric doctrine relies not only on proxies like Hezbollah and militias in Iraq to strike regional adversaries and shape narratives but also on complex financial networks to sustain and expand its influence. During the Gaza conflict, its IO portrayed Israel and the U.S. as complicit in humanitarian suffering — blunting Western resolve and bolstering Iranian legitimacy across the region. At the same time, Iran exploited global markets through oil laundering schemes that funnel proceeds back to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and capabilities to its proxies — sometimes with indirect benefit from U.S. and allied economies. These self-funding mechanisms offer a model of strategic resilience. While the U.S. possesses the legal authorities — via Treasury, FBI, and the Department of Commerce — to disrupt and potentially emulate such financial strategies, it rarely operationalizes them with the same coherence. Harnessing reutilization authorities and interagency tools could transform how the U.S. funds influence operations in contested regions.

Each of these actors understands that IW is not a stepping stone to war — it is the war. And they are executing it daily.

Rethinking the domains: Planning for irregular competition

We must abandon the notion that land, air, sea, space, and cyber are the only warfighting domains. The information environment is a battlespace. And influence is maneuver. This requires a planning mindset that does not relegate narrative to annexes but instead puts influence at the core of campaign design.

In IW, control of hashtags, algorithms, and perceptions often matters more than control of terrain. Our competitors understand this and flood the information space with volume, velocity, and narrative cohesion — amplified exponentially by algorithmic systems that reward engagement over accuracy. Their influence comes in swarms. Ours too often arrives one CONOP at a time — slowed by layered approval processes and a risk-averse culture that loses the moment to bureaucracy.

A commander must understand audience segmentation as well as fire support coordination. Every physical action must be preceded by narrative shaping — and followed by sustained influence.

IO can no longer be "messaging after the fact." It must be pre planned, synchronized, resourced, and measured alongside fires and logistics. OIE is not an accessory to strategy — it is strategy.

6. The centrality of IO in IW

IW truly is the main event in strategic competition — and within that contest, OIE plays a foundational role. While IO is not the end, it is a decisive enabler that sets conditions across the battlespace. In modern IW campaigns, strategic success is measured by legitimacy, not lethality. Influence operations — disinformation, viral content, and cyber-enabled PSYOP — undermine trust, fracture alliances, and shape the global narrative environment to favor adversary objectives. But these are just one line of effort within a broader IW campaign that includes lawfare, economic coercion, proxy activity, and political subversion — all aimed at achieving behavioral outcomes in relevant populations. IO/OIE is how those campaigns are framed, perceived, and ultimately judged — making it essential, but not singular.

This battlespace operates at machine speed. It requires IO planners to be embedded at every level — strategic, operational, and tactical. Planners must be able to act in real time, assess influence effects, and rapidly shift messaging across platforms and audiences. These effects are amplified by technology that enables multiple delivery vectors — social media, messaging platforms, streaming content, and bot networks — reaching global audiences instantly, regardless of geography or infrastructure. However, speed alone is not enough. We cannot settle for reacting at the speed of relevance — we must aim to dictate relevance. IO should do more than respond to adversarial actions; it should set the conditions under which decisions are made, shape what is considered important, and force the adversary to operate inside our narrative.

This is where Positional Play Planning (PPP) becomes important — treating IW like a chess match or soccer game where the objective is to create open space and opportunity for ourselves while forcing the adversary into positions of disadvantage. Rather than simply reacting to enemy moves, we use IO to script the environment, create dilemmas, and generate pressure that forces the enemy to expend time, resources, and credibility.

Persistent influence in this model is not just about protecting freedom of maneuver in the information space — it is about controlling the tempo and defining the fight. Through PPP, IO becomes the campaign — not just a supporting element — creating opportunities for strategic advantage and setting conditions to win without fighting.

To enable this, IO must be treated as maneuver. It requires more than better "messaging." It demands integration across all elements of national power, synchronization across agencies, and the ability to operate persistently in the cognitive domain. IO must be prioritized, resourced, and deconflicted like any other form of maneuver.

7. Critical capabilities for success in IW

Winning in IW requires access, agility, and adaptation — not just firepower.

- Persistent presence matters. This does not mean massive bases. It means smart positioning — forward SOF teams, cyber operators, and influence cells, both virtual and physical, building relationships and creating options.
- Influence agility matters more than mass. We must be able to maneuver in narrative space — shifting messages, themes, and target audiences quickly and credibly.
- Integrated intelligence is vital. HUMINT, SIGINT, OSINT, and GEOINT must converge into actionable insights — not just threat data, but narrative pattern tracking and audience analysis.
- Legal and policy authorities must evolve — but operations cannot wait. The current patchwork of Title 10, Title 50, and Department of State authorities creates friction and hampers responsiveness in IW and OIE. While legislative and doctrinal reforms are needed, the U.S. must act now — fighting with the authorities and tools already available. This requires understanding the existing legal playbook, establishing repeatable, risk-informed processes, and empowering practitioners to move with confidence and agility across domains. We cannot afford to wait for the perfect policy — we must learn by doing, and let operational realities inform future reforms.
- Messaging agility requires trust and delegation. In the information environment, adversaries are not constrained by truth — they shape perception through volume, imagery, and coherence, regardless of factual nuance. They win by moving first, not by being right. If the U.S. remains fixated on message accuracy and interagency consensus, it will continue to trail the narrative. Warfighters must be trusted with broad authority to develop and deploy messaging within high-level strategic guidance — shifting from reactive posturing to proactive influence. Without that trust and agility, we will forfeit decision space before the fight even begins.
- And above all, institutional agility is non-negotiable. IW is not forgiving of bureaucratic slowness, stovepiped command structures, or doctrinal rigidity.

We must train, organize, and lead for ambiguity — able to shift between partners, proxies, and platforms without waiting for headquarters to catch up.

8. Conclusion: Winning the future war before it starts

IW is the fight. And the U.S. cannot afford to sit this one out.

Our adversaries are not just preparing for conflict — they are already waging it. If we continue to focus solely on tanks and tariffs, we will lose strategic ground before the first shot is fired. IW is not a niche — it is the central campaign of our time.

To compete, we must take five decisive steps:

1. **Elevate IW in strategy and budgets —** treat it as core, not auxiliary.
2. **Modernize OIE authorities —** speed and agility matter more than jurisdictional purity.
3. **Integrate narrative into planning —** treat perception like terrain.
4. **Develop an IW cadre —** interagency planners should be fluent in ambiguity, access, and influence.
5. **Institutionalize IW education and wargaming —** senior leaders must understand the competition they are in.

This is not theoretical. The next campaign has already begun. And it is being fought in courtrooms, chat rooms, and crisis zones — not just on battlefields. From Deir ez-Zor to Warsaw, from the first island chain to the Horn of Africa, and from the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor to the Ndassima gold mine in the Central African Republic, adversaries are waging asymmetric campaigns that blend economic coercion, violent proxies, and narrative manipulation.

The influence war is also inside our homes — on phones and TVs, in classrooms, parades, protests, and community discourse. These operations are not bloodless; strategic narratives are often written in violence. The physical consequences of proxy militias, private military companies, and extremist networks leave emotional scars that shape public perception long after the shooting stops.

The next paper in this series — Gray Zone Conflicts: Redefining Victory Without Combat — will explore how adversaries are using irregular tools to reset the rules of engagement, redraw maps without triggering conventional response, and reshape legitimacy in a world that increasingly prizes ambiguity over aggression.

If the United States does not shape this environment, it will be shaped by it. As Seneca wrote, “The fates lead the willing; the unwilling they drag.” In the contest of IW, we must choose to lead — before we are dragged by events we failed to foresee or prepare for.

About the authors

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Lieutenant General Michael K. Nagata (Retired) served in the US Army for 38 years; 34 of which were in US Special Operations Forces. He works today as the Strategic Advisor and a Senior Vice President for CACI International, a National Security company headquartered in Reston, Virginia.

His final government position was Director of Strategic Operational Planning at the National Counterterrorism Center until 2019. Previously, LTG Nagata served as the Commander, Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT) in US Central Command, from June 2013 to October 2015.

A native of Virginia, and graduate of Georgia State University, Lieutenant General Nagata initially enlisted as an Army Private, and later received a commission from the Army's Officer Candidate School as an Infantry Officer in 1982. He initially served as a Platoon Leader in the 2d Infantry Division before volunteering for Army Special Forces in 1984.

During his Special operations career he served in various positions in both Army and Joint Special Operations. These included: Detachment Commander, Executive Officer, Battalion S-3, Battalion Executive Officer, and Group Operations Officer. Later, he served as the Commander of 1st BN, 1st Special Warfare Training Group, responsible for the Special Forces Qualification Course. In 1990, he volunteered and assessed for a Special Missions Unit (SMU), in which he served at various times as a Troop Commander, Operations Officer, Squadron Commander, and SMU Commander.

After graduating from the National War College, Lieutenant General Nagata served in the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence. He then served in the Intelligence Community as a Military Deputy for Counter Terrorism. As a general officer, he has served as the Deputy Chief, Office of the Defense Representative to Pakistan (ODRP), the Deputy Director for Special Operations and Counter Terrorism (J-37) on the Joint Staff, and Commander, SOCCENT, before his final assignment at NCTC.

Lieutenant General Nagata today resides in Arlington, Virginia with his wife Barbie, and their 5 adult children and two grandchildren are the lights of their lives.

Mark Haselton
Mark Haselton is a retired U.S. Army Special Forces officer with 23 years of service, including 18 years in Special Forces and a culminating assignment as Chief of Strategic Concepts for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. After six years in the intelligence community focused on unconventional warfare planning, he joined CACI in 2007 through its acquisition of The Wexford Group. He formerly led CACI's 1,100-person Special Operations and Asymmetric Solutions Group supporting USSOCOM missions globally. He now serves as a Subject Matter Expert and Solution Developer, contributing to CACI's ongoing research and assessments of irregular warfare threats to the United States.

Nick Wilcox
Nick Wilcox is a Senior PM at CACI and one of our lead practitioners supporting multiple Geographic combatant commands, USD (I&S), The FBI, HIS, and Dept of Commerce law enforcement elements, and coordinating across other government agencies and departments.

Nick started his career in the Department of Defense as an Analyst in the 82nd Airborne Division, and quickly assessing to serve as a Special Forces Engineer in both 5th Special Forces Group and 19th Special Forces Group. Nick has met with many challenges over his career both in contracting and in service, most notably in developing a HVI list partnered with the Iraqi Ground Force Command, supporting the establishment of multiple Task Force elements to include an Integrated Deterrence Task Force, TF 4025, the SREC, and the JICC. He has served as a Sensitive Activities Advisor with emphasis on great power, and as an analyst at SOJTF-A covering both the north and the west of Afghanistan. Most recently he has applied the knowledge and skills gained over the past two decades as a Program Manager providing commercial support to a range of SOF activities.

Nick continues to be a voice for application of Irregular Warfare across the whole of government by enabling planners and staffs alike as they apply multiple capabilities from the perspective of both an analyst and an operations professional.

A native of California's central valley agricultural center, Nick has completed a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, a Master of Business Administration, and an Executive Juris Doctorate along with several certifications including Lean Six Sigma Black Belt, Advance Scrum Master, Lean Portfolio Manager, and the Project Management Professional Certification.