

Information Campaigns in Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Expanding the Threshold of Competition

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Abstract: Contemporary irregular warfare increasingly unfolds through coordinated information campaigns designed to shape adversary perception, fragment decision-making, and expand competitive space below traditional escalation thresholds. While deterrence frameworks have historically emphasized military capability and economic leverage, modern competitors employ narrative operations, psychological pressure, and legitimacy contests to achieve strategic effects without decisive kinetic engagement. Classic coercion theory emphasizes that influence over adversary decision conditions often matters more than direct force application, particularly in ambiguous competitive environments (Schelling, 1966; Freedman, 2013). This paper proposes a decision-centric framework for information campaigns in irregular warfare that explains how coordinated narrative, psychological, and cyber-enabled information actions expand the threshold of competition. The framework integrates deterrence theory, irregular warfare doctrine, and gray zone competition research to show how information campaigns generate cumulative strategic effects through tempo disruption, legitimacy shaping, and perception control. Case evidence from Hizballah's psychological campaign, Chinese gray zone coercion, and contemporary Russian information operations illustrates how sustained campaigns produce denial, cost imposition, and delegitimization effects without triggering conventional escalation (Wehrey, 2002; Lin et al., 2022; Kalenský and Osadchuk, 2024). The contribution of this study is a structured campaign framework that links information actions to decision advantage and operational outcomes. This model supports parallel, multidomain action and helps practitioners design campaigns that shape competitive conditions before escalation thresholds are crossed.

Keywords: Information campaigns, Irregular warfare, Gray zone competition, Decision advantage, Psychological operations, Narrative strategy

1. Introduction

Irregular warfare has reemerged as a central feature of strategic competition, but its contemporary form differs from earlier insurgency-centric models. Modern competitors increasingly rely on coordinated information campaigns to influence perception, shape legitimacy, and alter adversary decision environments without crossing traditional escalation thresholds. These campaigns operate through narrative construction, psychological pressure, selective truth disclosure, and cognitive framing rather than decisive battlefield engagements. Competitive advantage is therefore often determined by decision influence and interpretive control rather than force superiority alone.

Classic coercion and deterrence theory emphasizes that shaping an adversary's expectations and perceived choices can be more decisive than the direct application of force (Schelling, 1966). Modern strategy scholarship similarly argues that competition frequently turns on perception, credibility, and narrative framing rather than material capability alone (Freedman, 2013). This insight is especially relevant in irregular warfare environments where legitimacy, narrative control, and psychological effects shape operational space. Clausewitz's conception of conflict as political and perceptual underscores that belief and legitimacy are operational variables, not merely contextual ones (Clausewitz, 2006).

Recent gray zone competition research shows that state and non-state actors deliberately design campaigns to achieve cumulative advantage through ambiguity, deniability, and narrative shaping rather than decisive engagement (Lin et al., 2022; Hybrid CoE, 2019). These campaigns rely on sustained information activity that fragments adversary sensemaking, increases decision latency, and reduces decision throughput across political and military institutions. The objective is gradual positional advantage rather than immediate operational victory.

Military doctrine increasingly recognizes the operational role of information. Joint and service doctrine describe information as an operational function that must be integrated with maneuver and fires (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2022; U.S. Marine Corps, 2020). However, doctrine typically describes capabilities and authorities more clearly than campaign design logic. Practitioners therefore lack a structured model for designing information campaigns that produce cumulative decision effects over time.

This paper addresses that gap by proposing a decision-centric framework for information campaigns in irregular warfare. The framework explains how coordinated information actions expand the threshold of competition by shaping perception, legitimacy, and tempo. It integrates deterrence theory, irregular warfare practice, and gray zone campaign evidence into a campaign design model expressed in mission-impact terms. Properly structured information campaigns strengthen denial, cost imposition, and delegitimization effects and help shape competitive conditions before escalation thresholds are crossed.

2. Problem

Information campaigns are widely acknowledged as important in irregular warfare and gray zone competition, yet they are still frequently planned and executed as supporting activities rather than as primary campaign instruments. Current practice often treats information operations, psychological operations, and narrative engagement as adjuncts to kinetic, diplomatic, or economic actions. This supporting-role model limits campaign coherence and reduces the ability of information actions to generate cumulative strategic effects. As a result, competitors underutilize information campaigns as independent drivers of decision influence and threshold expansion.

A central problem is the absence of a decision-centric campaign framework that connects information actions directly to adversary decision outcomes. Many planning models emphasize message development, audience segmentation, and delivery channels without clearly linking these activities to measurable changes in adversary decision conditions. Without decision linkage, information activity becomes output-driven rather than effect-driven. Campaigns produce content but not necessarily decision advantage.

A second problem is that escalation models remain overly centered on kinetic thresholds. Traditional escalation frameworks focus on force levels, geography, and weapon systems while underestimating how sustained information pressure reshapes competitive space. Modern competitors deliberately operate below armed conflict thresholds through narrative operations, legal framing, and psychological pressure designed to fragment political consensus and slow response coordination (Lin et al., 2022; Hybrid CoE, 2019). Without an expanded threshold model, planners misclassify these campaigns as peripheral rather than operationally central.

A third challenge is organizational and doctrinal fragmentation. Information-related capabilities are distributed across multiple communities, including cyber operations, psychological operations, public affairs, and influence functions. These communities often operate under separate authorities and planning processes. When campaign integration is weak, narrative signals conflict, tempo diverges, and cumulative effects degrade. Fragmentation increases friendly decision latency and reduces decision throughput, weakening campaign coherence.

Historical and contemporary cases demonstrate that sustained psychological and narrative campaigns can produce strategic effects independent of kinetic superiority. Hizballah's psychological campaign against Israel in South Lebanon illustrates how narrative shaping and perception management influence legitimacy and political tolerance despite force asymmetry (Wehrey, 2002). Recent state-backed disinformation and influence campaigns show similar patterns of cumulative perception shaping and response delay (Kalenský and Osadchuk, 2024; Wilde, 2024). However, these cases are often treated descriptively rather than translated into repeatable campaign design logic.

The result is a persistent gap between recognition and execution. Information campaigns are recognized as decisive in theory but underdeveloped in campaign design practice. Without a structured framework that links information actions to decision advantage and operational outcomes, practitioners struggle to design campaigns that produce denial, cost imposition, and delegitimization effects in mission-impact terms. Closing this gap requires a campaign model that treats information as a primary competitive instrument rather than a supporting function.

3. Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to develop a decision-centric framework for designing and evaluating information campaigns in irregular warfare that expand the threshold of competition and produce measurable strategic effects. Rather than treating information activities as supporting functions, the framework positions coordinated narrative and psychological actions as primary campaign instruments that shape adversary decision conditions, legitimacy perceptions, and response tempo.

This study connects classic coercion and strategy theory with contemporary irregular warfare and gray zone practice. Coercion theory demonstrates that shaping expectations and perceived consequences influences adversary behavior more reliably than force alone (Schelling, 1966). Modern strategy scholarship reinforces that perception, credibility, and narrative framing are central to competitive outcomes (Freedman, 2013). This paper integrates these theoretical foundations with current doctrine and campaign evidence to produce an operationally usable model for information campaign design.

The framework proposed here links information actions directly to decision effects by focusing on how campaigns alter sensemaking, increase decision latency, and constrain adversary options. It emphasizes campaign coherence, tempo synchronization, and constraint-aware prioritization across narrative, psychological, and cyber-enabled activities. Information campaigns are evaluated not by message volume or engagement metrics, but by their contribution to decision advantage and operational positioning.

A secondary purpose is to improve doctrinal integration and practitioner usability. By expressing information campaign effects in mission-impact terms and aligning them with operational functions, the framework supports integration with broader operational planning (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2022; U.S. Marine Corps, 2020). This alignment enables information campaigns to support parallel, multidomain action rather than operate as isolated communication efforts.

The intended contribution is both conceptual and practical. Conceptually, the paper reframes information campaigns as threshold-expanding instruments in irregular warfare. Practically, it offers a structured campaign model that planners and operators can use to design campaigns that generate denial, cost imposition, and delegitimization effects. Properly structured campaigns shape competitive conditions and expand maneuver space in persistent competition below armed conflict.

4. Theoretical Foundations and Campaign Logic

Information campaigns in irregular warfare are grounded in coercion theory, strategic interaction, and legitimacy-centered models of conflict. Coercion theory explains that influence is achieved by shaping an adversary's expectations, perceived risks, and available choices rather than by applying force directly (Schelling, 1966). Coercion depends on signaling, credibility, and controlled escalation, all of which are mediated through perception and interpretation. Information campaigns extend coercion into the cognitive and narrative domain by shaping how actions are interpreted before and after they occur.

Modern strategy scholarship reinforces that competitive outcomes often hinge on perception management and interpretive framing. Strategy is not only the orchestration of force but also the management of expectations, credibility, and belief structures (Freedman, 2013). In irregular warfare, where decisive engagements are uncommon and legitimacy is contested, narrative and psychological effects become central operational variables. Clausewitz's conception of conflict as fundamentally political highlights that moral forces, belief, and legitimacy influence outcomes as directly as material strength (Clausewitz, 2006).

Irregular warfare research further shows that non-state and hybrid actors frequently rely on psychological and narrative campaigns to offset material disadvantages. Insurgent and hybrid campaigns often succeed by influencing population perception, fragmenting adversary resolve, and shaping international interpretation rather than by achieving battlefield dominance (Jones, 2017). Information campaigns therefore function as force multipliers and risk redistributors, enabling actors to compete effectively despite resource asymmetry.

Contemporary gray zone competition extends these principles into state-level strategy. Gray zone campaigns are deliberately structured to remain below conventional conflict thresholds while producing cumulative strategic effects through ambiguity, narrative pressure, and legal-political maneuver (Lin et al., 2022). These campaigns rely on sustained information activity to normalize incremental actions, complicate attribution, and divide responses. Hybrid competition research emphasizes that narrative and perception management are central mechanisms of sub-threshold coercion (Hybrid CoE, 2019).

Doctrine increasingly recognizes the operational role of information but provides more clarity on capabilities than on campaign design logic. Joint doctrine identifies information as an operational function integrated with maneuver and fires, while service doctrine emphasizes competition below armed conflict (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2022; U.S. Marine Corps, 2020). However, doctrinal publications offer limited guidance on designing information campaigns that produce cumulative decision effects across time and audiences. The gap between capability description and campaign logic remains significant.

Campaign logic in the information domain differs from kinetic campaign logic in three important ways. First, effects are cumulative and perception-mediated rather than immediate and physically measurable. Second, tempo is measured in decision cycles and legitimacy shifts rather than terrain change. Third, success depends on coherence and repetition across channels rather than singular decisive actions. Effective information campaigns therefore require synchronized narrative, psychological, and cyber-enabled actions designed around decision influence rather than event response.

These theoretical foundations support a campaign model that treats information actions as structured, cumulative, and decision-oriented. Such a model links narrative and psychological operations directly to decision advantage and threshold expansion, enabling actors to expand competitive space below armed conflict through sustained, coordinated influence activity.

5. A Framework for Information Campaigns in Irregular Warfare

This paper proposes a decision-centric framework for information campaigns in irregular warfare that links coordinated narrative, psychological, and cyber-enabled actions to measurable decision effects. The framework treats information campaigns as structured operational efforts designed to influence adversary sensemaking, legitimacy perceptions, and response tempo. Rather than focusing on message production alone, the framework emphasizes campaign coherence, constraint-aware prioritization, and decision advantage.

The framework begins with decision-condition targeting. Campaign design starts by identifying the specific adversary decisions to be influenced, delayed, divided, or redirected. These decision targets may include escalation responses, alliance commitments, attribution judgments, or domestic political thresholds. By defining decision targets first, campaign planners align narrative and psychological actions with mission-impact terms rather than engagement metrics. This decision-first approach reduces activity without effect and improves campaign focus.

The second element is narrative and legitimacy shaping. Campaigns establish and reinforce interpretive frames that define how events are understood by relevant audiences. Narrative shaping is not limited to persuasion; it structures perceived legitimacy, blame, and proportionality. Sustained framing influences how subsequent actions are interpreted and whether responses are politically and operationally sustainable. Evidence from irregular warfare campaigns shows that legitimacy framing significantly affects tolerance for escalation and counteraction (Wehrey, 2002).

The third element is tempo and repetition design. Information campaigns generate cumulative effect through repetition, variation, and cross-channel reinforcement. Rather than relying on single decisive messages, effective campaigns maintain narrative pressure across time. Tempo design increases adversary decision latency by forcing repeated interpretation and reassessment cycles. Research on contemporary disinformation campaigns shows that sustained multi-channel repetition increases uncertainty and slows coordinated response (Kalenský and Osadchuk, 2024; Wilde, 2024).

The fourth element is multi-channel synchronization. Narrative, psychological, cyber, legal, and diplomatic signals must be aligned to avoid contradiction and dilution. Fragmented messaging reduces credibility and weakens cumulative effect. Synchronization supports parallel, multidomain action in which information activity reinforces operational and political moves rather than trailing them. Gray zone campaign analysis demonstrates that synchronized cross-domain signaling produces stronger cumulative pressure than isolated messaging efforts (Lin et al., 2022; Hybrid CoE, 2019).

The fifth element is constraint-aware prioritization. Campaign resources are finite, and not all audiences, platforms, or narratives produce equal strategic effect. Campaign planners should identify decision bottlenecks and legitimacy concentration points where influence produces disproportionate impact. Prioritization focuses effort where narrative or psychological shifts most constrain adversary options. This improves efficiency and supports denial and cost imposition effects.

The sixth element is feedback and adaptation loops. Information campaigns must include continuous assessment of decision effects, narrative uptake, and legitimacy shifts. Assessment focuses on decision behavior and response patterns rather than engagement counts alone. Campaign elements are adjusted based on observed decision effects, reinforcing successful approaches and discontinuing ineffective ones. This adaptive structure sustains campaign relevance over time.

Together, these elements form a campaign design framework that translates information activity into operational decision effects. By targeting decision conditions, shaping legitimacy, managing tempo,

synchronizing channels, prioritizing constraints, and adapting continuously, information campaigns expand the threshold of competition and strengthen strategic positioning in persistent irregular conflict environments.

6. Implications and Recommendations

Historical and contemporary cases demonstrate that sustained information campaigns generate strategic effects by shaping perception, legitimacy, and decision tempo rather than by producing immediate battlefield outcomes. While each campaign reflects distinct political and operational conditions, recurring patterns appear across irregular warfare and gray zone competition. These patterns reinforce the need for structured campaign design focused on cumulative decision effects rather than isolated messaging events.

Hizballah's psychological campaign against Israel in South Lebanon illustrates how narrative and perception operations can influence strategic outcomes despite material asymmetry. The campaign emphasized resilience narratives, symbolic victories, and media amplification to shape regional and domestic interpretation. By framing continued resistance as success and portraying opposing actions as disproportionate, the campaign influenced legitimacy perceptions and political tolerance thresholds. Psychological and media effects amplified operational activity and produced cumulative strategic impact beyond battlefield engagements (Wehrey, 2002). This pattern demonstrates how legitimacy framing and repetition contribute directly to delegitimization and cost imposition effects.

State-level gray zone campaigns show similar cumulative dynamics at larger scale. Chinese gray zone coercion against regional neighbors integrates sustained narrative messaging, legal claims, diplomatic signaling, and media framing to normalize incremental actions and shape international interpretation. These campaigns reduce perceived escalation while steadily shifting positional advantage. Analysis indicates that cumulative narrative pressure complicates alliance coordination and increases adversary decision latency by fragmenting interpretive consensus (Lin et al., 2022). The operational pattern is steady interpretive conditioning rather than decisive signaling.

Recent Russian information and disinformation campaigns provide further evidence of tempo and sensemaking disruption effects. Sustained disinformation efforts have targeted attribution processes, public trust, and institutional credibility. Rather than persuading audiences of a single alternative narrative, these campaigns often aim to generate uncertainty and interpretive overload. Research shows that repeated multi-channel disinformation increases cognitive burden and slows coordinated response, thereby reducing adversary decision throughput (Kalenský and Osadchuk, 2024; Wilde, 2024). The operational objective is confusion and delay rather than belief alone.

Across these cases, three operational patterns consistently appear. First, information campaigns are cumulative rather than episodic, with effects emerging through sustained repetition and reinforcement. Second, legitimacy and interpretation function as central variables, with campaigns shaping how actions are understood as much as what actions occur. Third, decision tempo is a primary target, with successful campaigns increasing adversary decision latency and complicating coordinated response.

These recurring patterns support the proposed framework's emphasis on decision-condition targeting, narrative shaping, tempo design, and cross-channel synchronization. Case evidence shows that information campaigns produce denial, cost imposition, and delegitimization effects when designed as coherent campaigns rather than isolated messaging efforts. Structured campaigns expand competitive maneuver space below armed conflict through sustained influence and perception management.

7. Implications for Campaign Design and Practice

The framework and case patterns presented in this paper suggest several practical implications for designing and executing information campaigns in irregular warfare. The central implication is that information campaigns should be planned as primary operational efforts tied to decision outcomes rather than as supporting communication functions. Campaign effectiveness should be evaluated in decision and legitimacy effects, not message volume or audience engagement statistics alone.

First, campaign planning should begin with decision-condition targeting. Planners should identify the specific adversary decisions, policy commitments, alliance behaviors, or escalation thresholds they intend to influence. Information actions should be explicitly mapped to those decision points. This decision-centric approach aligns campaign design with mission-impact terms and improves decision advantage. It also supports constraint-aware prioritization by concentrating effort where influence produces disproportionate operational effect.

Second, narrative and legitimacy framing should be treated as operational design variables rather than messaging afterthoughts. Campaign planners should define the interpretive frame through which subsequent actions will be understood. Narrative framing should be consistent, repeatable, and adaptable across channels and phases. Legitimacy framing is especially important in irregular warfare environments where proportionality, attribution, and moral authority influence escalation tolerance and coalition cohesion (Clausewitz, 2006; Freedman, 2013).

Third, tempo design should be deliberate and sustained. Campaigns should control rhythm and repetition to maintain cognitive pressure and increase adversary decision latency. Rather than reacting to events alone, campaigns should maintain initiative through planned narrative sequencing and reinforcement cycles. Sustained tempo contributes to denial and cost imposition effects by forcing repeated adversary interpretation and response cycles (Kalenský and Osadchuk, 2024).

Fourth, synchronization across functions is essential. Information campaigns should be integrated with cyber, legal, diplomatic, and operational actions to support parallel, multidomain action. Signals that conflict across channels reduce credibility and weaken cumulative effect. Planning and coordination structures should ensure that narrative, psychological, and operational signals reinforce one another rather than compete (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2022; U.S. Marine Corps, 2020).

Fifth, assessment models should emphasize decision and behavior indicators rather than engagement metrics alone. Measures such as response delay, alliance fragmentation signals, policy hesitation, attribution confusion, and narrative adoption provide stronger indicators of campaign effect than impressions or reach. Assessment should focus on whether campaigns increase adversary decision latency and constrain available options.

Sixth, campaign organizations should incorporate feedback and adaptation mechanisms. Information environments shift quickly, and campaign narratives must adjust to counter-adaptation and audience response. Continuous assessment and controlled narrative adjustment improve campaign resilience and effectiveness over time.

Taken together, these implications reposition information campaigns as structured operational instruments. When designed around decision influence, legitimacy shaping, tempo control, and synchronization, information campaigns generate measurable strategic effects and expand competitive maneuver space below armed conflict.

8. Conclusion

Information campaigns are now central instruments of irregular warfare and gray zone competition, yet they remain under-structured in campaign design practice. Contemporary competitors use sustained narrative, psychological, and influence operations to shape legitimacy, fragment sensemaking, and alter decision conditions without crossing traditional escalation thresholds. These campaigns do not seek immediate decisive effects. Instead, they generate cumulative strategic advantage through perception shaping, tempo disruption, and interpretive control.

This paper presented a decision-centric framework for information campaigns that links coordinated narrative and psychological actions directly to adversary decision conditions and operational outcomes. Drawing on coercion theory, strategy scholarship, irregular warfare research, and gray zone campaign evidence, the framework emphasizes decision-condition targeting, legitimacy and narrative shaping, tempo design, multi-channel synchronization, constraint-aware prioritization, and adaptive feedback loops (Schelling, 1966; Freedman, 2013). Together, these elements convert information activity from message production into structured campaign design.

Case evidence from psychological and gray zone campaigns demonstrates recurring operational patterns. Sustained narrative efforts influence legitimacy perceptions, increase adversary decision latency, and complicate coordinated response (Wehrey, 2002; Lin et al., 2022; Kalenský and Osadchuk, 2024). These effects produce denial, cost imposition, and delegitimization outcomes even when material force balances remain unchanged. Information campaigns therefore function as threshold-expanding instruments that reshape competitive space below armed conflict.

For practitioners, the key implication is that information campaigns should be designed and evaluated around decision effects rather than engagement metrics. Campaign planning should begin with decision targets, align with doctrinal functions, and support parallel, multidomain action. Assessment should focus on behavioral and

decision indicators rather than message reach alone. Properly structured campaigns strengthen decision advantage and campaign coherence across phases of competition.

Information campaigns are not substitutes for other instruments of power, but they increasingly determine how and when those instruments can be used effectively. A structured, decision-centric campaign framework enables competitors to expand competitive maneuver space and shape adversary choices in persistent competition below armed conflict.

Ethics Declaration: Ethical clearance was not required for this research.

AI Declaration: Open-source artificial intelligence tools were used solely for proofreading and citation formatting. All analysis, arguments, and conclusions presented in this paper are the original work of the authors or are derived from appropriately cited sources.

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