



## Three Dangerous Men

Russia, China, Iran and the Rise of Irregular Warfare

Door Seth G. Jones

New York (W.W. Norton & Company) 2021

288 blz.

ISBN 9781324006206

€ 26,-

In *Three Dangerous Men* Seth G. Jones offers his view on how states operate in the expanding global competition. Jones highlights the modern state's 'tools of irregular warfare' (p. 3). But Jones is not alone in this segment. Another prominent Western scholar, David Kilcullen, recently published *The Dragons and the Snakes* with a similar narrative about how adversaries learned to fight the West.<sup>1</sup> And two decades earlier, two People's Liberation Army (PLA) colonels, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, introduced this same concept in their book *Un-Restricted Warfare*.<sup>2</sup> The growing literature on changing military strategy leads to the question of which book to read. It is therefore worthwhile to compare Jones' *Three Dangerous Men* with the two other publications on perspective, terminology, and research. To narrow the scope, this review focuses on Chinese strategic thinking, which each author frames differently. And precisely these nuances form essential considerations when deciding what to read.

### Perspective

Jones' overarching and warning message is similar to Kilcullen's. Jones warns that the United States 'needs to significantly alter how it thinks – and engages in – competition' (p. 6). In his book, Jones analyzes how three dangerous men in Russia, Iran, and China challenged the United States with an irregular strategy. In Russia, General Valery Gerasimov 'preached there were no clear boundaries between war and peace' (p. 75). In Iran, General Qassem Soleimani organized effective proxy forces to spread Iranian influence in the region (p. 108). In China, General Zhang Youxia designed a campaign centred around information, disinformation, coercion, cyber, and island building (p. 174). Kilcullen has a similar message. According to Kilcullen, dragons and snakes (meaning state and non-state actors) had studied and adapted to Western superiority. Kilcullen also warns that 'unless we too adapt, our decline is just a matter of time' (p. 6).

Jones and Kilcullen's views on China can be traced back to 1999 when Qiao and Wang published *Un-Restricted Warfare*, a Chinese analysis of future warfare after the US superior military victory in the Gulf War. The authors' main argument was that war would no longer be fought by an 'armed force to compel the enemy' but by 'all means, [...] military and non-military' (pp. xxi-xxii). Qiao and Wang hereby changed and broadened the definition of war 'without boundaries or limits' (p. 5). Future war would include all aspects of society, such as financial, trade, resources, economics, space, drugs, media, psychological, or diplomatic. As unrestricted warfare proliferated in the first two decades of the 20th century, Jones and Kilcullen now shed light on the operationalization of Qiao's and Wang's strategic concepts.

The key differences between the three books relate to perspective and time. Qiao and Wang wrote from a South Asian perspective after the First Gulf War. In contrast, Jones and Kilcullen wrote from a Western viewpoint after the Global War on Terror and at the start of the Great Power Competition. Nevertheless, the dominant theme – the widening of war – is the same.

### Terminology

Despite the common theme, all authors offer specific perspectives by introducing their own terminology. Jones reframed the current strategies in strategic competition as irregular warfare, in which states compete for power and influence. Kilcullen introduced conceptual development to point out 'the situation in which an adversary's concept of war becomes so much broader than our own' (p. 175). Qiao and Wang introduced the idea of

1 David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes. How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2020).

2 Qiao Liang and Xiangsui Wang, *Un-Restricted Warfare* (Brattleboro, Echo Point Books & Media, 2015).

unrestricted warfare in countless forms and categorized war as non-military, trans-military, and military. In essence, Kilcullen and Jones do not provide new insights because Qiao and Wang had already introduced their view in 1999. However, Kilcullen and Jones do offer an excellent framework to identify and monitor ambiguous activities in the current strategic competition. Their concepts are useful to grasp how adversaries undermine democratic values today. A closer examination of the terminology further specifies the authors' perspectives. Jones uses irregular warfare as an overarching strategy for China, Russia, and Iran, each with their own features. Kilcullen clearly contrasts China's conceptual envelopment with Russia's liminal warfare (in which activities stay below the detection threshold). Comparing both perspectives, Kilcullen's approach may lead the reader to a perception that China applies a different strategy or that China does not employ liminal warfare. Jones has a different approach and describes China's, Russia's, and Iran's strategies as irregular warfare, each with other features, but without the limiting conceptual framework that sets them apart.

### Research

A final comparison shows a remarkable difference in the research methodology. Examining Kilcullen's China chapter reveals that his research is predominantly based on Qiao's and Wang's work. The chapter contains an extensive introduction, a historical overview, and a strategy examination. However, the last part, i.e. conceptual envelopment, is Kilcullen's main argument. It is precisely this crucial part that is mainly based on Qiao's and Wang's writing, starkly contrasting with Jones' research. Jones' research appears more in-depth and contemporary. According to Jones, it is 'unclear –and perhaps unlikely–that it [*Un-Restricted Warfare*] had much influence on Chinese military strategy' (p. 141). Contrary to Kilcullen, Jones examined a vast range of primary resources, interviewed key officials, and translated Chinese documents. Jones also thoroughly researched prominent Chinese officials, studied their speeches, and examined their positions within the PLA and the Chinese Communist Party. Furthermore, Jones managed to weld the numerous sources together in a cohesive analysis of Chinese strategy, which makes his theory convincing.

### Conclusion

Comparing *Three Dangerous Men* with *The Dragons and the Snakes* and *Un-Restricted Warfare*, all three books will unquestionably enhance the military officer's understanding of China's strategy, or, more generally, the widening of war. However, there are some critical considerations in order to determine which book to read. The most evident is the different perspectives, in place and in time, between the Chinese officers Qiao and Wang and the Western scholars Jones and Kilcullen. Still, *Un-Restricted Warfare* is a unique insight into Chinese strategic thinking. Additionally, the Western authors offer a choice: Kilcullen provides a sharp framework to categorize current events. However, if you are looking for a well-researched and composited narrative, then Jones will absolutely meet your expectations. ■

*Major Ruud van den Bosch, Royal Netherlands Marine Corps/Naval Postgraduate School student*

## SCRIPTIEPRIJS VID

De Vereniging Informatici Defensie roept op tot het inzenden van bachelor- of masterscripties of wetenschappelijke artikelen voor de jaarlijkse René Olthuisprijs.

De scripties of artikelen moeten gaan over informatiemanagement, informatievoorziening of informatietechnologie bij of voor Defensie.

Inzenden kan tot 1 oktober via het e-mailadres [secretaris.vid@mindef.nl](mailto:secretaris.vid@mindef.nl). Alle defensiemedewerkers kunnen deelnemen. Meer informatie is te vinden op de website [www.vidonline.nl](http://www.vidonline.nl) of op intranet.