

SCUSA 60 THEME:
“MEASURING PROGRESS AND DEFINING NEW CHALLENGES”

THE CHALLENGES OF INSURGENCY

WHAT IS INSURGENCY?

Insurgencies are usually waged by groups that do not have the military capability to win a conventional military confrontation. The concept of popular revolution as a form of warfare was first formally theorized by Mao Tse-Tung and only then did it truly become “revolutionary in both intent and practice.”¹ Building on observations from previous conflicts, Mao determined that although a revolutionary movement is militarily inferior it “derives from the masses and is supported by them.”² Successful guerilla warfare therefore requires a clear political objective and popular support.

Mao’s most famous insight into guerilla war is that insurgents “swim like fish” in the sea of a supportive populace. Mao understood guerilla warfare to proceed through three phases: the organization, consolidation and preservation of base areas; the progressive expansion of popular support and direct action; and, finally, the destruction of the enemy.³ Each of these phases should be deliberate and rely upon gaining popular support for the guerilla movement. The first phase called for the protracted and covert development of popular support and would target social grievances.⁴ Mao also recognized the importance of codifying the relationship between the guerillas and the people and called for the discipline of soldiers in the field towards local inhabitants and their property.⁵ The second phase would proceed when guerillas achieved necessary popular support and would result in the “expansion of political action into guerilla warfare.”⁶ The final phase would resemble conventional conflict once the guerilla forces evolved into regular soldiers and units capable of matching the opponent’s military strength but would also still rely on guerilla tactics when necessary.⁷ Mao’s legacy for the nature of unconventional conflict and the relationship between the guerillas and the people is unmistakable. Yet, his theory of guerilla warfare was often fatally applied to unrelated circumstances and misunderstood as a panacea for disaffected peoples. Furthermore, Mao reminds us that insurgencies frequently involve and require both conventional and unconventional forces and approaches.

¹ Tse-tung, *On Guerilla Warfare*. Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies: Guerrillas and Their Opponents since 1750*, vii.

² Tse-tung, *On Guerilla Warfare*, 44.

³ Tse-tung, *On Guerilla Warfare*, 21.

⁴ Gurr, Ted Robert, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), theorizes that rebellion is often a result of relative deprivation among the population.

⁵ Tse-tung, *On Guerilla Warfare*, 92.

⁶ Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies: Guerrillas and Their Opponents since 1750*, 75.

⁷ *Ibid.*

DESCRIBING INSURGENCY

Both politicians and academics have a hard time succinctly and accurately describing the concept of insurgency. Nevertheless, this section will identify some characteristics often associated with insurgencies.

Insurgencies are generally conducted by non-state groups. This characterization comes almost by definition: insurgencies aim to upset and alter the political status quo, not to preserve it. Many observers conflate insurgency with terrorism because the militant tactics used by insurgents and terrorists are often very similar. What is the difference between terrorism and insurgency? Is it a difference in the tactics that groups use, or is the difference determined by the political purpose and structure of the organizations conducting attacks? What kinds of societies create terrorists and insurgents and how do insurgents and terrorists relate to the society in which they act? Terrorists often use violence in order to compel a government to accede to discrete political goals, but they tend to be less focused on inspiring a mass revolt against the established political order. How do insurgents hope to achieve their goals?

Because insurgent groups want to establish a new political authority, they generally want to seize and control territory. This enables them to begin building an oppositional government to demonstrate their own vision of appropriate political authority. How does this compare to terrorist organizations? On the one hand, terrorists can embed themselves within host societies, but some groups labeled terrorists (Sendero Luminoso, Al Qaeda in Iraq, GIA) also seek to carve out governable spaces. Can we use a group's focus on territory as a way of classifying whether or not they are insurgents or terrorists?

Finally, we have to ask ourselves why it is important to distinguish between insurgents and terrorists in the first place. On the one hand, both are armed groups and can be dealt with using military means. On the other, a clear system of classification may help identify strategies and tactics for defeating the enemy organization. Reconciliation is also an important issue. Many people feel that 'insurgents' are legitimate combatants while 'terrorists' are not. When we label a group as one or the other, we create incentives and disincentives for groups to negotiate and lay down their weapons. How should we label organizations? Is it important to distinguish between terrorists and insurgents? Is this important for today's fight in Iraq? Are there some 'insurgents' in Iraq that are legitimate combatants and could ultimately be welcomed into the government? If so, what distinguishes them from 'terrorists' who must be killed, captured, or neutralized? To understand insurgencies it may be instructive to examine their evolution in terms of causes, conduct, and termination.

CAUSES OF INSURGENCY

The purpose of an insurgency is inherently political and economic. Insurgencies are designed to undermine the legitimacy and authority of specific governments in order to seize control of or destroy the established political authority for political and economic purposes. Although circumstances differ, the conditions necessary to excite a populace to rebel exist in "any country where the government consistently fails in its obligation to ensure at least a minimally decent standard of life for the great majority of its citizens. If there also exists even

the nucleus of a revolutionary party able to supply doctrine and organization, only one ingredient is needed: the instrument for violent revolutionary action.”⁸

Of course, the reasons for determining that the present political and economic situation is unjust are extraordinarily diverse. Insurgents can be motivated by political ideology, economic greed, ethnic or religious concerns, or a simple thirst for power. What is clear is that the impetus of insurgent movements is highly varied. Some scholars argue that insurgent movements are often a result of economic motivations when primary commodity exports, domestic economic growth rates, kleptocratic rivalry, and short-term economic benefits produce economic incentives for insurgent movements.⁹ Some scholars suggest that ethnic and ideological grievances provide incentives for insurgent movements, particularly given post-colonization state boundaries.¹⁰ Still others suggest that insurgent movements are best explained by weak domestic state institutional capacity and that state per-capita GDP offers a clear explanation when grievances over political and economic conditions escalates into collective insurgent action.¹¹

Some of these motivations are on display in Iraq today. Some Iraqi insurgent groups aim to create an Islamic state within the borders of Iraq; others hope to reestablish Sunni control of the country, similar to the political system under Saddam Hussein; others hope to entrench Shiite control over the current Iraqi government, or secede from Iraq altogether. Intertwined throughout these positions are concerns over control of economic commodities that the country relies upon for revenue.

Insurgents use a variety of tactics to undermine the legitimacy of a government. Ultimately, insurgents try to convince a populace that their government does not serve them effectively. Sometimes they use violence to demonstrate that a government does not really have control over its territory, and thus cannot be trusted. Insurgents also use educational campaigns and formal propaganda to convince the populace that their government is unjust and illegitimate. Especially during Mao’s first stage, these political activities supersede violence in importance. During the Cold War, for example, many leftist insurgencies used classical Marxist or Maoist ideology to convince poor urban and rural dwellers that their governments were illegitimate. Likewise, numerous nationalist groups used anti-colonial messages to inspire uprisings against colonial governments in Asia and Africa. Insurgents therefore, struggle to establish control and collaboration of the population vis-à-vis the state to alter the political order.¹² Historically, what are the most important motivations for insurgents? Do different core motivations change the

⁸ Griffith, Samuel B. *Introduction to translation of Mao Zedong’s, On Guerilla Warfare*. (University of Illinois Press: Chicago. 1961) P. 6

⁹ Collier, Paul and Anke Hoeffler, "Rebellion as a Quasi-Criminal Activity," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44, no. 6 (2000). Collier, Paul and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56 (2004); Collier, Paul and Anke Hoeffler, "On the Incidence of Civil War in Africa," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (2002). Grossman, Herschel I., "Kleptocracy and Revolutions," *Oxford Economic Papers* 51 (1999). Keen, David, *The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹⁰ Cederman, Lars and Luc Girardin, "Beyond Fractionalization: Mapping Ethnicity onto Nationalist Insurgencies," *American Political Science Review* 101 (2007). Sambanis, Nicholas, "Do Ethnic and Nonethnic Civil Wars Have the Same Causes?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 3 (2001). Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*.

¹¹ Fearon, James and David Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003). Fearon, James, "Primary Commodity Exports and Civil War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2005). Fearon, James, Kimuli Kasara, and David Laitin, "Ethnic Minority Rule and Civil War Onset," *American Political Science Review* 101 (2007); Reynol-Querol, Marta, "Ethnicity, Political Systems, and Civil War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46 (2002).

¹² Kalyvas, Stathis N., *The Logic of Violence in Civil War, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

structure, strategy, and tactics of insurgencies? How do the different motivations of Iraqi insurgent groups affect their strategies and tactics? What historical insurgencies provide valuable lessons for the current struggle in Iraq? Should counterinsurgents employ different strategies based on the purpose of their enemies?

CONDUCT OF INSURGENCY

Recent theories that address the irregular war process focus on the role of the public, the state, the insurgent, or the challenge of examining the strategic interaction of more than one of these factors. An additional challenge when examining the process of internal war is that the process is rarely conceptually separated from its causes or its termination. Consequently, sources and solutions of internal war are generally required to diagnose the process of the conflict.

Some scholars suggest that the nature of rebel recruitment explains why some insurgencies are so much more violent than others. Rebellions are costly endeavors and must recruit based on either social or financial endowments. The presence of economic endowments allows rebel groups to recruit members based on short-term rewards resulting in opportunistic members. Without economic incentives, some rebel groups must recruit based on social ties with promised future, long-term rewards tied to victory. Ultimately rebel groups face the challenge of collective action. The problem that rebel groups face when they can offer some mix of both social and economic incentives is overcoming private information problems. With a resource mix, it is more difficult for rebel leaders to distinguish between high commitment and low commitment members. Consequently, the type of members that rebel groups attract determines the types of strategies and the means of violence they employ. Some scholars find that rebel groups rich in natural resources often commit high levels of indiscriminate violence because it is much more difficult to control the actions of its members. Rebel movements that rely less on natural resource incentives are able to employ violence selectively and strategically. Presumably, violence is more selective for groups with social and ideological ties because these binding mechanisms allow for greater control vis-à-vis the principle-agent relationship between group and members. Therefore, these types of groups are able to more effectively employ selective violence and prosecute insurgencies.¹³

These theories struggle to explain, however, the complete dynamic of insurgency because they assume that the endowment profile presupposes *a priori* the types of violence that rebel groups employ based on its membership rather than any choice determined by the actions of the incumbent that the rebel is attempting to displace and defeat.

A second set of theories examines the nature of the state or incumbent regime to explain the dynamics of insurgencies. Merom suggests that regime type affects the ability of counterinsurgents to win in “small wars” or correspondingly, the ability of insurgents to achieve their objectives. Specifically, he suggests that democracies traditionally fail in small wars because democratic structures are much less willing to escalate the level of violence and brutality necessary to achieve victory. Democracies must rely on societal dependence, consider normative implications, and the political importance society plays in policy choices. These factors often prevent democracies from overcoming domestic audience costs associated with higher levels of

¹³ Humphreys, Macartan and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Handling and Manhandling Civilians in Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 3 (2006); Weinstein, Jeremy M., "Resources and the Information Problem in Rebel Recruitment," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 4 (2005).

violence and brutality necessary in these types of conflict.¹⁴ Merom's theory has also generated debate because it examines why insurgents often succeed by limiting analysis to the actions of the incumbent or intervening force, particularly restricting analysis to democracies, and assumes that high levels of brutality and violence are inherently more effective in waging counterinsurgencies.

Several recent theories attempt to examine the process of insurgency as a strategic interaction between the incumbent and insurgent rather than focusing on one side or the other. According to Kalyvas, irregular war fragments space which ultimately creates either segmented or fragmented divisions of sovereignty between zones of incumbent control, zones of insurgent control, and contested zones. Political actors enjoy full sovereignty in segmented divisions while fragmented divisions, or areas where two competing political actors enjoy only limited sovereignty, are the domains of contestation. To gain collaboration, political actors must attend to the importance of achieving popular support which can't be assumed based on pre-existing allegiances. He suggests that preferences are malleable and the lack of alternatives or the selective use of violence can produce collaboration regardless of the level of satisfaction by the population. Military resources can play an instrumental role in producing control and ultimately collaboration and the amount of military resources can surmount population preferences. However, the level of military resources necessary to ensure adequate and lasting control is often prohibitively high. Consequently, the selective and strategic use of violence can overcome military resource impediments and produce control and in turn collaboration. Achieving control should bring collaboration just as the loss of control will evaporate collaboration. While selective violence can ensure control by deterring defection and offering assurances of survival, indiscriminate violence is counterproductive because it does not directly affect the levels of control and corresponding levels of collaboration by the population. Selective violence depends on the ability of political actors to gain credible information to ensure violence does not become indiscriminate and counterproductive.¹⁵ This conception may have been apparent in the recent effort of Coalition Forces to gain control over Sadr City in Baghdad which resulted in a cease fire agreement with the Sadrist militia. The challenge remains over how to fully understand the complex dynamic between the insurgent and incumbent.

ENDING CIVIL CONFLICT

The previous sections discuss how insurgencies evolve and the factors that might influence their evolution. An additional aspect to consider is how insurgencies and civil wars are terminated. In some conflicts, both sides fight until one side is victorious and the other surrenders. In other conflicts, both sides come to an agreement where power, land, and/or resources are shared. In other situations, one or even both sides would like to stop fighting, but cannot trust the other to abide by any rules or norms of civility much less conduct negotiations or observe an agreement. In political science literature such a situation is often referred to as a "commitment problem," where players involved cannot trust the other to commit to an agreement and thus continue to fight.

¹⁴ Merom, Gil, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Kalyvas, Stathis N., *The Logic of Violence in Civil War, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

In these instances, the intervention of an outside or third party actor(s) is often required to facilitate a conclusion to hostilities. This intervention can come in the form of mediation or negotiation efforts as well as military intervention to impose or monitor a tenuous peace. In other cases, separating the belligerent groups by partitioning the territory of the state might be an option. An additional argument exists that these types of conflict need to simply “burn themselves out,” and any attempts to end them prematurely will be counterproductive.¹⁶ In any case, an effective US strategy ought to bear in mind not only the challenges of conducting a successful counterinsurgency campaign, but, ultimately, successfully concluding that campaign in light of the catalyst that caused it.¹⁷

COUNTERINSURGENCY

Counterinsurgency and insurgency are rarely examined separately. This is primarily because together they comprise two sides of the same coin in the sense that both sides are competing against one another for control of the population of the state and legitimacy as a governing body. However, both sides by definition have different advantages that produce an inherently asymmetric struggle during this competition. On the one hand, the insurgent group by definition lacks the material resources to challenge the state using conventional military means and is forced in the beginning of its campaign to use primarily political or covert, unconventional military means as the primary method of achieving its desired objectives. On the other hand, the state has an inherent information disadvantage that prohibits it from effectively destroying the insurgent group from the outset. Furthermore, the state must defend an entire society and protect its legitimacy from a largely unidentifiable internal threat. Additionally, because revolutions are a political phenomenon, Shy and Collier lucidly point out that revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries face a “central doctrinal question.”¹⁸ Revolutionaries must determine “when and how to undertake military action” while counterrevolutionaries must determine the “relative importance of violence and persuasion” which “centers on the relative roles of political and military action.”¹⁹ Insurgents and counterinsurgents compete with military tools, government services, and economic provisions. Counterinsurgents often have difficulty providing services to their population because their government is inherently weak, insurgents prevent such services from being delivered, or insurgents are successful at providing a modicum of services themselves. How important are the military, political, and economic and information battles in the overall scheme of an insurgency? Over which factors do counterinsurgents generally have the advantage? What advantages do the insurgents have?

¹⁶ Edward Luttwak, ““Give War a Chance” *Foreign Affairs*, vol 78 (July/August 1999), 36.

¹⁷ Iklé, Fred Charles, *Every War Must End*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Kaufmann, Chaim, “Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars,” *International Security* 20, no. 4 (1996); Licklider, Roy E., “The Consequences of Negotiated Settlements in Civil Wars, 1945-1993,” *The American Political Science Review* 89, no. 3 (1995); Licklider, Roy E., *Stopping the Killing: How Civil Wars End* (New York: New York University Press, 1993); Mason, T. David and Patrick Fett, “How Civil Wars End: A Rational Choice Approach,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40, no. 4 (1996); Sambanis, Nicholas, “Partition as a Solution to Ethnic War,” *World Politics* 52 (2000); Walter, Barbara F. and Jack L. Snyder, *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Shy, John and Thomas W. Collier, “Revolutionary War,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986). 820.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

The fundamental purpose of government is to provide safety and security for the people governed. That is why insurgents often project violence against unprotected people: by attacking regular citizens they de-legitimize the government by demonstrating that it cannot achieve its most fundamental mission. Because defending the livelihood of individuals is so important, counterinsurgents often try to protect specially delineated geographic areas from insurgents. The thinking is that providing security is the most important step to maintaining legitimacy.

But this strategy is not always so easy to implement. If counterinsurgents concentrate their forces in population centers they may leave large swaths of the countryside undefended. The situation in Baghdad today is illustrative. The U.S. has moved troops into Baghdad in order to stem the sectarian violence in Iraq's capital. This is a reasonable strategy because if the Iraqi government and its U.S. allies cannot defend the citizens of Baghdad, they will lose legitimacy with Iraq's population. The problem is that it means fewer troops to patrol Iraq's outer provinces, which may allow insurgent groups operating in Al Anbar and elsewhere in Iraq to expand the scope of their political and military authority.

Thus, historically the fundamental military dilemma for counterinsurgents has been whether to conduct counterinsurgency by focusing on the insurgent armed resistance or focusing on the population that provides the necessary insurgent support. However, this may be an artificial choice, since in an insurgency the center of gravity is the will and consent of the population "to be governed." The counterinsurgent has the double, inseparable tasks of (a) defeating/destroying the intractable while (b) "winning and keeping the hearts and minds of the people." The methods used to complete the tasks of (a) must be of a sort that does not delegitimize the accomplishment of the decisive objective, (b). Sir Robert Thompson's *Defeating Communist Insurgency* articulated that defeating an insurgency required defeating the political component and eliminating the political and subversive links between the insurgent and the population.²⁰ Thompson's principles underscore the role of the population and suggest that a government aiming to win a counterinsurgency must: have a clear political objective to establish a stable economic and political infrastructure; adhere to lawful practices; develop a plan that "covers not just the security measures and military operations" but also "must include political, social, economic, administrative, police, and other measures"; and "must give priority to defeating the political subversion, not the guerillas."²¹ How do governments train and equip militaries given the wide range of operations and tactics required for various kinds of war? Is it feasible to train and equip a military for both conventional and unconventional purposes?

Governments provide other services besides security: education, transportation, health care, food, etc. While insurgents, in an effort to separate people from their government, work to prevent governments from providing these services, counterinsurgents are trying to provide them. How important are these services in the overall scheme of a counterinsurgency? Providing food and aid is important, but it can also be very dangerous. Should military resources be put aside to protect people providing aid? Is it more important to provide a comprehensive set of services for the population, or to find and eliminate insurgents? How should counterinsurgents balance the need to provide services and the need to find and eliminate insurgents? Why have counterinsurgent forces struggled with balancing these competing demands? Would providing more services stem the insurgency in Iraq? In the political realm, what can the United States do to weaken the hold of insurgents? Provide aid to stand up more

²⁰ Thompson, Robert Grainger Ker, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam, Studies in International Security, No. 10* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966).

²¹ Ibid.

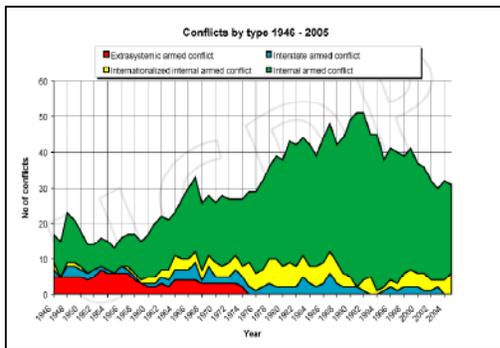


Figure 1 - Number of armed conflicts by type, 1946-2005

increasingly rival some existing governments as the legitimate source of political power in the state, ie. Hezbollah in Lebanon. Lastly, in recent decades as the militaries of the world's most wealthy nations have become more and more technologically advanced and dominant on the conventional battlefield, many non-state and weaker state actors have sought to minimize this military advantage through asymmetric methods such as terrorism and insurgency, which as explained previously are inherently asymmetric forms of warfare.²⁴

For some scholars the rise of insurgency and terrorism as the dominate form of warfare in the present era is evidence that the very nature of warfare has changed to what some are calling Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW), a modern form of insurgency that uses, "all available networks –political, economic, social and military – to convince the enemy's political decision makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit."²⁵ This evolving form of warfare, most thoroughly described by Col (Ret.) Thomas Hammes in his book, *The Sling and the Stone*, credits Mao's strategy of People's War as the intellectual starting place for this concept which has continued to evolve since the end of WWII and finds its modern counter-parts in such groups as Hamas, Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda. As Hammes describes, this form of warfare is intentionally asymmetric, relying on superior political will to defeat greater economic and military power. Moreover, as Hammes explains, practitioners of 4GW attempt to achieve victory not by defeating an adversary's military forces, but by defeating their political will to continue to fight.²⁶ Given this description, is the United States military facing a 4GW enemy in Iraq and Afghanistan? More generally, is warfare fundamentally changing in the modern era as Hammes and others describe? If so, how should the most powerful states in the international system respond to this threat? Should the United States change the way its government agencies are structured in order to deal with insurgency and terrorism around the world? More specifically, should the U.S. military focus its efforts on waging counter-insurgency instead of its current focus on conventional war?

²⁴ Christopher M. Schnaubelt, "Whither the RMA?" *Parameters* 37, no. 3 (Autumn 2007); Ralph Peters, "The Counter-revolution in Military Affairs" *The Weekly Standard* (February 6, 2006).

²⁵ Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2006), 2.

²⁶ For other sources on Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW) see, William S. Lind, Keith Nightengale, John F. Schmitt, Joseph W. Sutton, Gary I. Wilson, "The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation," *Marine Corps Gazette* 85, no.11 (November 2001); Thomas X. Hammes, "Insurgency: Modern Warfare Evolves into a Fourth Generation" *Strategic Forum* no. 214 (January 2005). For a critique of 4GW see, Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Fourth Generation Warfare and Other Myths* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, November 2005).

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