

Is it Impossible to Solve an Insurgency only by Military Means?

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Abstract

Insurgency presents the armed struggle over a distinctive terrain by a group demanding change of the status quo – putting an end to the influence of colonials or occupying power, autonomy, secession or shift in the current politics of the government (Boyle, 2012). Insurgents rely on clandestine attacks against security forces and use irregular forms of fighting due to the fact that they do not have the military capacity to fight a conventional war against a modern army (Boyle, 2012). Attempts at defeating insurgencies in the last century have taken various forms, with different strategies and tactics, but the military has always been an indispensable part of every counterinsurgency. This essay will look at enemy-centric and population-centric counterinsurgency approaches and will seek to demonstrate that militaries play a vital role in solving insurgencies, but overall victory in counterinsurgency operations is dependent on a wide range of variables. Thus, the main argument of this paper is that whichever counterinsurgency path is embarked on, it is possible to be successful only if key factors such as capabilities, coordination, cooperation and information are taken into consideration. However, despite the fact that it is possible to resolve insurgencies solely with military force, the vast majority of ‘success stories’ in counterinsurgency operations has relied not only on military means, but also on comprehensive strategies involving social, political and economic forces, enhancing

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the capabilities of the army, working on better inclusion in social terms, and making political reforms so as to accommodate the grievances that caused the insurgency.

Keywords: Insurgency, Counterinsurgency, Military force, Military

The framework

The concept of victory is crucial for this discussion since this essay seeks to address whether exclusively military solutions to insurgencies lead to the ending of the conflict. Here, victory for the counterinsurgents is defined as the achievement of long-lasting political stability and absence of violence stemming from the insurgents (Mandel, 2006, pp.139-140). For the purposes of this essay, counterinsurgency missions are divided into two categories: enemy-centric and population-centric operations (Kilcullen, 2007). The former refers to counterinsurgencies where the military is the sole, or at least the leading factor in all operations. These missions rely overly on kinetic approaches since the ultimate goal of the campaign is the total elimination of the insurgency movement (Kilcullen, 2007). Such kinds of operations often do not seek to engage the civilian population, or are not focused on any socio-political solutions to the root causes of the insurgency. On the other hand, in population-centric counterinsurgency operations the military still plays a key role, but there are great efforts made in order to balance military action with political, economic and social endeavours addressing the conflict (Kilcullen, 2007). In such types of campaigns, the function of the military usually expands from its ordinary tasks to the provision of support operations to humanitarian and socio-political responsibilities, often in joint operations with the other law enforcement units of the state. The goal of population-centric approaches in counterinsurgency is to isolate and protect the civilians from both the influence of the insurgents and the threat they might pose to the ordinary people (Jardine, 2012). The local population needs to be convinced of the significance of the counterinsurgency and most importantly its commitment to the campaign. As Mao Zedong has compared insurgents to 'fishes' which are 'swimming' in the 'sea' of popular support, counterinsurgents need to focus on decreasing the assistance and approval the local population grants to the rebels so as to break the backbone of the insurgency (Nagl, 2010, p.161). As to Robert Thompson (1966), there are a few but vital points to be followed in every counterinsurgency doctrine: efforts at the preservation of state's legitimacy and political capacity,

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abidance by the law, and focus not only on the military aspect of counterinsurgency, but also on the political, economic, and social elements. In other words, the counterinsurgency campaign has to secure its operational bases and territory, but at the same time address the grievances and the politics of resolving them, while balancing all these aspects with its respective military means. The preparedness to lead a potential prolonged conflict and not to lose the political and military will is also quintessential (Thompson, 1966). Thus, it can be argued that the population-centric approach is more comprehensive than the enemy-centric approach; still, victory in counterinsurgency is dependent on a diverse range of variables.

The RAND Corporation Report *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies* has provided an extensive comparative analysis of counterinsurgency efforts from WWII to present (Paul et al., 2013). The report focuses on 59 cases, which have been divided into two categories: 'Iron Fist' - covering the definition of enemy-centric approach in this discussion - and 'Motive-Based' - covering the definition of population - centric approach in this discussion - (Paul et al., 2013, pp. xx-xxi). The key finding of the report is that in 44 of the cases where enemy-centric approaches were prevalent, the success rate of the insurgents over the counterinsurgents was 61% (27 of the cases), while in the 15 cases where population-centric approaches were predominant, counterinsurgents were defeated only in 4 instances (Paul et al., 2013, p.79). The findings of this analysis will serve as the basis of the argument that even if it is possible to resolve insurgencies solely with military force, the vast majority of 'success stories' in counterinsurgency operations has relied not only on military means, but on comprehensive strategies involving social, political and economic aspects. A discussion on the implications and the reasons why overall population-centric approaches have higher success rates than enemy-centric ones will aim to point at the wide spectrum of determinants of the outcome of the counterinsurgency campaign. It should also be noted that approaches are defined on the basis of whether the predominant time of the conflict enemy-centric or population-centric modus operandi have been applied.

How to achieve victory? – A discussion

Insurgencies occur in various and different forms of warfare, from guerrilla to terrorism, but always need popular support to be effective (Hoffman, 2006). Governments confronting such cases of instability adopt a strategy to deal with the situation, a decision which should be based primarily

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on two components: first, the ability of the government to successfully assess the circumstances and the environment in which it has to operate a counterinsurgency campaign, and second, the relationship between the government/military and the civilian population (Shafer, 1988). In addition, there is often interplay between the components, in the sense that the civilians may deem the government illegitimate or the civilian population can be extremely divided in relation to government policies and the cause of the insurgents. One should bear in mind that public opinion is not constant and, while a country is experiencing an insurgency, the government should be cautious about the policies it takes so as not to create backlashes (Taber, 2002). We should note that the regime type is not of central importance in this discussion since autocracies can be equally good at solving insurgencies, and democracies can be disastrous in their counterinsurgency operations. For instance, in the case of Peru and the fight against the Shining Path which began in the 1980s, it was not until the highly controversial and authoritarian rule of Alberto Fujimori in 1992 that the counterinsurgency doctrine was revised and some progress was made. The administrations before had relied exclusively on military approaches, while Fujimori managed to embark on a more population-centric approach, which ultimately won him the victory over the Shining Path (McCormick, 1990). If we take governments as rational agents, making decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis, then we can expect their approach to the insurgents to be determined by a wide range of economic, social and political considerations. On the other hand, more liberal states such as Turkey in its counterinsurgency campaign against the Kurdistan Workers Party focused exclusively on military force to squash the insurgents (Metelits, 2010). Both Peru and Turkey achieved victory in their counterinsurgency campaigns disregarding their type of government and the counterinsurgency approach they took.

Despite the fact that victory of the counterinsurgents proves not to be conditional solely on the approach used, there are some central determinants of the 'success stories' that need to be addressed. One important factor is the capabilities of the military; what is meant by capabilities, is, namely, the military capacity of the armed forces and also the ability of the military to adapt to the irregular nature of insurgencies (Kilcullen, 2009, p. 23). This aspect is essential in both enemy and population-centric approaches. In the former, the military has to have the capacity to destroy the insurgents and outwit their irregular tactics, which can be a difficult task to achieve due to the fact that often militaries are not trained to fight in such asymmetric conflicts (Kilcullen, 2009). In

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population-centric counterinsurgency campaigns, the military might need to take responsibilities such as supporting the law enforcement forces, aiding in the distribution of humanitarian assistance and other roles, which are substantially different from the basic task of fighting wars. Counterinsurgents need good military equipment and also the ability to distinguish the type of force and the right time to be applied so as not to dissuade the population from their sympathy for the counterinsurgency. In Chechnya (1994-1996), the Russian conventional armed forces were inexperienced in leading an asymmetric conflict; the Russian counterinsurgency defeat in Chechnya showed the vulnerability of the Russian army to unexpected assaults on military equipment, vehicles and personnel (Kramer, 2004/2005).

Another important point to be considered is the counterinsurgency doctrine and the approach taken; it is crucial for the counterinsurgents to recognize the specificities of the conflict environment and to adapt strategy accordingly. For instance, the British in Malaya (1948-1960) focused on an enemy-centric approach initially, but this course of action generated huge losses for them. 'Winning the hearts and minds of the population' strategy, or the population-centric approach, made it possible for the British to collaborate with the local population for intelligence purposes and, with the appropriate technology, to isolate Communist guerrillas, cutting off food and equipment supplies and convincing the locals that they are better off not joining the insurgents (Stubbs, 2008). Careful relocation of Chinese Malayan and well-staged propaganda campaign made it possible to separate the insurgents (Carruthers, 1995). The lower the support for the rebels, the easier it will be for counterinsurgency to crack down the insurgency. The jungle terrain which made it impossible for British troops to fight the guerrillas at first, turned against the insurgents once they were cut off from food supplies and equipment, which greatly impaired their sustenance.

As demonstrated in the British experience from Malaya, territory and its population are key for counterinsurgents because their primary task is to deter insurgents from self-governance, ensure the population is secure and limit its connection to the insurgents. However, hard terrain such as unreachable mountains, jungles and swamps could be difficult to keep under close supervision and control (Gompert and Gordon, 2008). The 'hearts and minds' approach (here used interchangeably with population-centric approach) addresses the need for counterinsurgency to regain the loyalty of the people who have tendencies to or are alienated from the government, so as to ensure the country is still under central authority's control. The main focus is on economic and social

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improvements, while the military has a supplementary role for small operations mainly for the provision of security (Kilcullen, 2010). Victory in counterinsurgency campaigns requires well-managed collaboration and coordination between the military and the civilians on the ground so that basic operations like intelligence gathering, policing and training could be achieved. Counterinsurgency endeavours, be they enemy or population-centric, are more about cross-organizational cooperation, coordination and collective decision-making than solely a military deployment. The counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan seems to prove this point most vividly; the civil-military and politico-military relations in the war-torn country have been contradictory at best. In fact, the interplay between the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the Karzai Administration and other major stakeholders has been riddled by miscommunication, misinformation and marred by discrepancies in relation to tactics and the execution of operations and reforms (Eikenberry, 2013). As a result, in spite of military successes, the counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan lacks the cohesiveness and collaboration with the Afghan government and other sections of its society, which would guarantee a truly joint venture in stabilising the country. Thus, the Afghan case demonstrates the idea that collaboration and coordination are crucial for a counterinsurgency campaign and even the vast resources employed by the US and ISAF cannot compensate for the inadequate cooperation and organization. Information is also critical due to the fact that use of force can be consistent and justified only when counterinsurgents understand their enemy, its tactics and associations with the general population (Gompert and Gordon, 2008). From a different perspective, information dissemination by different media outlets and social media about the counterinsurgency campaign can be a double-edged sword, which potentially could affect the mission, and more importantly the support for the counterinsurgency effort. For instance, a wide audience is watching the progress of the counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan and there is danger for what is broadcasted in the media to be inconsistent with the reality on the ground, in ways that the media downplays or overestimates the achievements of the counterinsurgents (Betz, 2011). Proportionality in all military actions should be taken into account; there is always the question of how much military force is enough to be applied due to the fact that if counterinsurgents use too much violence, they may lose legitimacy, if not, they may be deemed as not determined enough. Quantitative and qualitative violence are terms used to correctly address this problem: quantitative violence values the number of killed as opposed to qualitative violence, in which what is important is whom you kill (Lynn, 2005). By leading a massive extermination campaign,

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counterinsurgency could alienate the local population, suffering collateral damage, and even make people join the insurgents (Lynn, 2005). Still, there is the flip side of the coin where decisive military action on behalf of the counterinsurgents could boost support for the mission among an already dissatisfied and anti-insurgency population. Here again, strategy and, on a tactical level, the proportionate use of force are conditional on the development of the conflict and the domestic realities.

A final point in this discussion - when a state is leading a counterinsurgency campaign on a territory outside its national borders, this could present a wide spectrum of difficulties, such as gathering intelligence and making troops familiar with the landscape and its specificities (Kiras, 2010). For instance, the US troops in Vietnam (1955-1975) were not adequately trained and prepared for irregular, small-scale operations, intelligence gathering and collaboration with the locals, while lack of experience and good analysis to determine what and how much force is suitable could not account for their great military capabilities (Nagl, 2005). Referring back to the aforementioned point about the military capability and mostly its adaptability, it is crucial for the counterinsurgent military force to adjust to the reality on the ground; in the case of the US in Vietnam even the military superiority of the US was not advantageous against an enemy engaging in irregular, low-intensity fighting. The French counterinsurgency in Algeria (1954-1962) demonstrates another aspect of counterinsurgency campaigns taken outside national borders – it is essential to have the support of the public at home. Perhaps in such cases the type of government of the state sending the counterinsurgency mission abroad plays a key role. The fight against the National Liberation Front indeed generated huge economic and political costs with numerous troops lost, but what made French troops withdraw was not the insurgents per se, but French people at home who were not willing to take the costs of the military campaign (Mack, 2008). The disproportionate and indiscriminate use of violence by the French, together with the lack of a clear-cut strategic goal, brought insurmountable negatives to the counterinsurgency effort and alienated both the French and Algerian people from their support for the campaign (Frémeaux, 2012). In other words, despite gaining the majority of the military victories, the French counterinsurgents lost not only the 'hearts and minds' battle with the civilians in Algeria, but also failed to keep adherents in France of the counterinsurgency (Canuel, 2010). The French experience in Algeria points out to the necessity of reconsideration of the political and civilian aspect of counterinsurgency, and to re-examine the

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military means, which could prove to be extremely costly and inefficient without the support of the general population at home and in the host country (Long, 2006). This case substantiates the argument that population-centric counterinsurgency approaches have better chances of being successful due to the fact that they adopt comprehensive means to the ends of resolving the insurgency and establishing stability.

Conclusion

Overall, a wide range of factors determines victory in counterinsurgency and there are no straightforward answers to the question whether enemy-centric, military counterinsurgency approaches can solely resolve an insurgency. While the military presence is an indispensable part of every counterinsurgency campaign, in most cases the predominance of the military force has given mixed results or outright defeats for the counterinsurgents. Often conventional armed responses to insurgencies have proven to be unsuccessful because of the asymmetry of the conflict and the constant implementation of new tactics by the insurgents. Thus, the military should be prepared for tactical innovations and new approaches, and in more population-centric approaches to have a supplementary role to the political efforts at solving the insurgency. The challenges of modern insurgencies require constant adaptation to the specific circumstances; focus on the military mainly as a guarantor of security and stability; good management of intelligence and high levels of coordination so as to defy the insurgents. Analysis and consideration of the insurgency environment are crucial. Exhaustion of military and political capability should not be catalysts for losing the will to lead the counterinsurgency campaign, because lack of commitment and persistence could shift the balance at the advantage of the insurgents. All in all, counterinsurgency campaigns are extremely difficult efforts to bring back stability to the country and this essay has tried to outline some of the most important variables at play in such operations. Still, most of the successful counterinsurgency campaigns have focused on the grievances that caused the insurgency through political, economic and social endeavours, while the military has had a supplementary role.

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