

Counterinsurgency in the Age of Globalism

by
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The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.¹

If insurgency is an armed political campaign — mass mobilization of a counter-state to challenge the state for political power — then it is intuitively obvious that counterinsurgency is intended to prevent this. Armed politics of the challenger must be met with an armed political counter. Less obvious but necessary to this formulation is that counterinsurgency is a strategic category realized through operational art. There is no such thing as “counterinsurgency tactics.”

As a strategic category, the goal of counterinsurgency is always legitimacy. If every member of a society accepted the essential rectitude of a state and its institutions, there would be no insurgents. Since that is impossible, insurgency has been a regular feature of history. The strategic goal of the insurgents is a new society, one that is more “correct,” more just. Their strategy is the creation of this counter-state; their operational art the implementation of the lines of operation (LO) that realize the strategy. Consequently, the operational goal of the counterinsurgents must be the neutralization of the counter-state, negating the insurgents’ lines of operation. Tactically, on both sides, goal and strategy boil down to a contest for human terrain in local space. The insurgents seek to gain the population while the state, theoretically starting from a position of ownership, seeks to retain the people by providing security.²

It is operational art which is particularly important for our present consideration, because the conceptualization of what initially was called the “Global War on Terrorism,” or GWOT, has given way to the term “Global Counterinsurgency.”³ This has been a logical progression as the realities of the present terrorist challenge have been more broadly conceptualized. From an assessment that *al-Qaeda* and its affiliates were terrorist entities operating in a state of clandestinity, cut off from popular support and utilizing terrorism as a logic of action, analysis has moved to recognition that the mobilization actions

of these groups more closely resemble traditional insurgency and its use of *terrorism as a method of action*.⁴ Following a neo-Guevarist model, *al-Qaeda* and its affiliates seek through their actions to mobilize a mass base from the alienated who have swelled social movements opposed to the present world order.⁵ Hence, the global insurgency they represent must be met by a global counterinsurgency.

To be quite clear on one point: *insurgency* and *terrorism* are not synonyms, despite the fact that they are frequently conflated in texts simply because sub-state actors engaged in insurgencies often use terrorism.⁶ Hence the appeal to Clausewitz in the opening exhortation of this article. Insurgency consciously devotes human and material resources to mobilization of a counter-state and does so in three dimensions: tangible (the traditional movements in physical space); conceptual (categories, e.g., moving politically as opposed to moving violently); and intangible (virtual space, as it is often termed, a key component of which is information). Terrorism, in contrast, is “propaganda by the deed,” in the classic formulation; it is a form of armed political communication engaged in by using violence to attack the innocent. Though it may inspire mobilization, it does not apply the resources of insurgency to the effort to do so. The ends, ways, and means of terrorism are the violence.

The consequence of this distinction therefore is that *counterinsurgency* is not *counterterrorism*.⁷ Necessarily, the former includes an LO or a campaign devoted to the latter, because all insurgencies involve the use of terror. Absent violence, there is no insurgency, rather it is a social movement. Certainly there are groups that occupy the boundaries, and historically insurgencies have demonstrated the ability to degenerate into terrorist entities, just as some terrorist entities have found their calling, so to speak, and become mass mobilizing bodies. State repression has generally been as central as ideology in this respect,⁸ with both key intervening variables determining the trajectory of groups that have the potential to become either insurgent or terrorist.

Surveying the globe, the US government realized early on in the GWOT that in “international terrorism” it faced groups (such as *al-Qaeda* and its affiliates) that were, in the first instance, the product of local upheaval and, in the second instance, often survivors of or even active participants in localized insurgencies who had “moved upstream” to participate in a form of “deep battle” made possible by “globalism.” Where historically insurgents had focused upon the “near enemy,” they now could attack the “far enemy,” as well.⁹ To grasp this change imagine the Viet Cong or the FMLN (of El Salvador) forming not simply front organizations abroad but actually orchestrating systematic international campaigns of violence even as the US deployed its forces on their territory. For the US government the necessary course of action in the GWOT was to fight terrorism in the same manner that one fought insurgents, but on a global scale using all elements of national power.¹⁰

While this appears to be a relatively straightforward proposition, conceptualizing the struggle as one of dealing with “global insurgency” leaves us with the difficult challenge of strategy and operational art. As counterinsurgency (or occupation) in Iraq has demonstrated, even a single theater of the larger campaign can be prohibitively costly. Nonetheless, the “three vectors” (i.e., LOs) that have informed American strategy since 9/11 are as applicable to counterinsurgency as to countering international terrorism. They are: protect the homeland; attack terrorist cells and networks; and attack the roots of the problem (often stated, in an ungainly fashion that not only misses the mark but gives little recognition to political economy, as “Combating Ideological Support for Terrorism,” or CIST. When all is said and done, these are but the classic three-part formula of counterinsurgency that has been taught in Western service schools for quite some time: population and resources control; security force measures; and eliminating grievances.¹¹ Put more generally: protect what you have, go after what the enemy has, and get to the roots of the problem.

It was the legendary Sir Robert Thompson who put this succinctly into a formula of sorts for counterinsurgency. When faced with an armed political campaign, which had both roots and present-day realities, the counterinsurgent must: get in place that which is correct (to address the roots and realities of insurgency); get in place that which is sustainable (as defined by you); and “play for the breaks.”¹² It follows that the Thompson approach must be followed on both a global basis and in particular conflicts. Global counterinsurgency consists of both an international dimension, following the three lines of operation (with their myriad campaigns or “decision points,” depending upon the terminology one adopts), and numerous local manifestations. It is a mirror image of the “Far Enemy/Near Enemy” division adopted by not only violent radical Islamists but also those insurgents motivated by the more familiar extreme leftist political ideologies.¹³

Whether insurgency is global or national, “all politics is local.” The heart of both approaches is addressing “local manifestations” as per above. Since the heart of counterinsurgent strategy is to use operational art to attack the counterstate and to neutralize the insurgent lines of operation, the challenge that must be met is a proper assessment of the insurgency concerned. Ironically, the Napoleon of irregular warfare, Mao Zedong, provides the manner in which to proceed. Like Clausewitz, he sought to treat comprehensively war as he knew it; but like Napoleon, he failed to set forth a single equivalent to Clausewitz’s *On War*. Indeed, the work for which he is best known in the West, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, is a very early manual (ca. 1937) that does not begin to treat comprehensively Mao’s full conceptualization of insurgency. Indeed its very title misrepresents what insurgency is about: armed politics.¹⁴ Mao ultimately advocated that insurgency proceed on five LO’s: mass line (political mobilization); united front (winning allies); violence (in forms appropriate to local circumstances); political

warfare (nonviolence intended to make violence more effective); and international action (which can be decisive).

Reformulated slightly, any insurgency must be assessed for what it is doing on the five LOs, which we may further state, for clarity, as questions:

1. POLITICAL • What is the political content of the insurgency?
2. ALLIES • Who are its allies?
3. VIOLENCE • How is it using violence?
4. NONVIOLENCE • How is it using nonviolence to make violence more effective?
5. INTERNATIONAL • What is it doing in the international arena?

To reiterate a point made earlier, each LO proceeds in three-dimensional space: tangible, conceptual, and intangible. Mao was astute enough to place his lines in conceptual space, what the US military refers to as “logical lines of operation.”¹⁵ Thus the insurgent does not simply proceed, as some would have it, on the violence LO alone but on the other LO’s simultaneously.¹⁶ Further, tangibly, an LO must advance through human terrain. Human and material resources preclude acting everywhere simultaneously. Likewise, actions resonate intangibly or “virtually.” A violent campaign proceeding along a course dictated by human and physical terrain, for instance, might make a move as dictated by the needs of propaganda but one which otherwise would be questionable.

Finally, as Jomini set forth in his original conceptualization of war, an LO is comprised of campaigns. Militaries have struggled with precise wording, the term “decision points” often being used rather than “campaigns.” Regardless, the point remains the same: an LO is constructed much like a necklace, by stringing together the individual “links” or “beads” to form the whole. The violence LO, for example, in the Maoist formulation, could be seen to have campaigns of terror, guerrilla war, main force (mobile or maneuver) war, and war of movement. Each of these campaigns, in turn, would be playing itself out tangibly (in rural or urban human terrain) and intangibly (terror being the most easily understood example of a physical act with psychological consequences).

From this brief explanation, it should be clear that ideology is not a determining variable. The actual dynamics of mass mobilization are rooted in local space, in the particulars of local populations that allow an insurgent organization to make inroads. To the extent the target population shares common features, the task of recruitment is made that much easier. Still, recruitment must take place. Certain circumstances, of course, have surfaced time and again as facilitating the process, notably foreign occupation and local shared religion or ethnicity. Both serve the insurgents as the enemy and the cause of grievances.

This is a critical point because early on in the present struggle a powerful line of argument claimed that the lessons of the past were irrelevant in a changed global environment. Nothing could have been further from reality. Mao, for instance, was important not because he was a communist insurgent but because he was to irregular warfare what Napoleon (and perhaps Clausewitz) was to conventional warfare. To ignore his insights, as well as those of other insurgents, such as Truong Chinh or Ho Chi Minh, was to overlook their powerful insights. Similarly, to ignore those who fought insurgents, especially those who did so successfully, was to compound the error. For the reality that emerges from what we have discussed here is that any counterinsurgent strategy must attack the insurgents' strategy, neutralizing their LOs and taking away from them the ability to recruit in local space. That present insurgents overemphasize particular campaigns does not in any way compel counterinsurgents to forego the analysis that should take place using the five "Maoist questions" stated above. A failure of an insurgency on any LO, as appropriate to the situation, is a weakness that must be exploited. True locally, in national cases, this is also a regional and international reality.

Nothing that has been said should be in any way surprising. What seems to confuse the issue is a reality that no amount of exploration or presentation seems capable of elucidating: that insurgencies are no more integral wholes than institutions in "normal" society. Rather, they are aggregates of local phenomena. Marginalized elites produce insurgent leadership and advocate ideological solutions to grievances. This is as true of "political Islam" (an ideology not a religious category) as of communism or fascism or any other -ism. Followers, in contrast, are galvanized by local particulars, whatever their economic-social-political nature.¹⁷ This leads, at the local level, to seeming contradictions in the composition of any insurgent movement, as demonstrated by myriad local studies of numerous insurgencies, and at the national or international level to dogma that often has little or no relevance at the local level.¹⁸

Analytically, the key error is reification, the taking of insurgent statements or identity and imparting to local actors as attributes that which exists only in words (e.g., the longstanding claim that certain groups of people, say, Maoists and Muslims in the Philippines, or Christians and communists, or Sunnis and Shiites, will never work together). A related error is simply hubris: an unwillingness to follow where the data leads because the analyst claims "to know" better than the insurgents themselves what they are about. The most common manifestation of this shortcoming is a failure to take seriously what insurgents say (whether orally or in writing).

Few lessons have had to be relearned so often as these. When all is said and done, counterinsurgency in the Age of Globalism is "different" in only one real but important sense: that the processes that have long been with us are now accelerated beyond anything we could comprehend "in the old days." The

“fishbowl” effect created by instantaneous global media is a case in point. The ability of electorates to influence decision makers in democratic societies for short-term, ostensibly painless, gain at the expense of long-term, tougher strategy is another. These necessarily demand fresh approaches but do not negate the fundamental realities of the dynamic that sees the state challenged by non-state actors. It is a point that certainly the US has been very slow to grasp.

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Endnotes

1. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), Book 1, Chapter 1, pp. 88-89.
2. Two efforts that discuss this topic are Joseph D. Celeski, *Operationalizing the COIN*, JSOU Report 05-2 (Hurlburt Field, FL: Joint Special Operations University, 2005); and Thomas A. Marks, “Counterinsurgency and Operational Art,” *Low Intensity Conflict and Law Enforcement*, 13, no. 3 (Winter 2005), pp. 168-211. See also Chapt. 4 and 5 of the US Army’s much-discussed FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency*, available in any number of editions, the most widely cited being that published by the University of Chicago Press, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Manual* (Chicago, IL: 2007). It is my understanding that Chapt. 4 of the FM was constructed from Marine Corps input, Chapt. 5 written by LTC (US Army) Jan Horvath. Selections of my work in the initial chapter of the earlier FMI [Interim Field Manual] 3-07.22 *Counterinsurgency Operations* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: ATZL-CD, October 2004), for which LTC Horvath was the project officer, are incorporated in the FM, but the lack of their original context makes them an unreliable source for the discussion discussed here. Better is my update of the FMI first chapter, published as “Insurgency in a Time of Terrorism,” *Joint Center for Operational Analysis Quarterly Bulletin*, VIII, no. 3 (September 2006), pp. 33-43. An excellent discussion of both field manuals and the process surrounding their production is Olof Kronvall, *Finally Eating Soup With a Knife? A Historical Perspective on the US Army’s 2006 Counterinsurgency Doctrine* (Oslo, Norway: Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, May 2007). The title, of course, is drawn from the widely cited work of a principal member of the FM team, John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons From Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).
3. An early and important work in fostering the change of terminology was James A. Bates, *The War on Terrorism: Countering Global Insurgency in the 21st Century*, JSOU Report 05-8 (Hurlburt Field, FL: Joint Special Operations University, December 2005). The report had been circulating in official US circles for some time prior to its actual publication. Also highly influential was the work of the Australian scholar and prior service officer, David J. Kilcullen, whose various longer pieces and presentations may be usefully consulted in a single work, “Countering Global Insurgency,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 28, no. 4 (August 2005), pp. 597-617.
4. The distinction is drawn by Michel Wieviorka, “Terrorism in the Context of Academic Research,” *Terrorism in Context*, Martha Crenshaw, ed. (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 597-606. For Wieviorka’s own seminal work, which does not deal with insurgency *per se* but is applicable nonetheless, see *The Making of Terrorism*, new preface ed. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2004). As has informed my own work, Wieviorka’s insight follows naturally upon the analytical framework outlined by Donatella della Porta, “Left-Wing Terrorism in Italy,” in Crenshaw, *Terrorism in*

Context, pp. 106-59, as well as in della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

5. References are numerous. A broad treatment is Francois Polet, ed., *Globalizing Resistance: The State of Struggle*, trans. Victoria Bawtree (Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2004). For basic social movement theory, few works are as elegant as the chapter, "Social Change and Social Movements," in the basic text by Rodney Stark, *Sociology* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1992), which may be usefully supplemented by his *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). More expansive treatment may be found in Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), as well as Mario Diani and Doug McAdam, *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
6. See, for example, the Crenshaw volume cited above, as well as the more recent Robert L. Art and Louise Richardson, eds., *Democracy and Counterterrorism: Lessons From the Past* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007). In both of these otherwise admirable works, groups that utilize terror, whether they are terrorist or insurgent, become simply "terrorist."
7. This is not a mere academic distinction. It could be claimed, in fact, that the US warfighting approach, as embodied in the important joint operating instructions (JOC) provided to the unified combatant commanders, has caught up with distinctions that have been recognized in academia (or some corners thereof) for some decades. See Department of Defense, *Irregular Warfare (IW) Joint Operating Concept (JOC)*, Version 1.0, 11 September 2007, at: http://www.dtic.mil/futurejointwarfare/concepts/iw_joc1_0.pdf. Use of the term "Irregular Warfare" within the US government is driven by the threat conceptualization contained in Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, 6 February 2006, wherein threats are seen as being posed by four "challenges": Irregular, Catastrophic, Disruptive, and Traditional (pp. 19-20). Terrorism and insurgency fall within the Irregular Challenge. Document available at: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/dod/qdr-2006-report.pdf>.
8. Donatella della Porta has been an early and seminal contributor to the study of this phenomenon. In addition to her works cited earlier, useful is Della Porta and Herbert Reiter, eds., *Policing Protest: The Control of Mass Demonstrations in Western Democracies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). See also Christian Davenport, Hank Johnston, and Carol Mueller, eds., *Repression and Mobilization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
9. For a discussion, see Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
10. One astute analyst who built upon this recognition to outline an explicit course of action was James S. Corum, *Fighting the War on Terror: A Counterinsurgency Strategy* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2007).
11. For a full discussion, see, for example, United States Military Academy, *Revolutionary Warfare*, 6 vols. (West Point, NY: Department of Military Art and Engineering, 1967).
12. For the interview at which Thompson outlined this formulation to me, see Tom Marks, "The Counter-Revolutionary: Sir Robert Thompson — Grand Master of Unconventional Warfare," *Soldier of Fortune*, 14, no. 10 (October 1989), pp. 58-65, 77-80. Thompson's seminal text remains as useful today as when it was written, regardless of the precise ideology adopted by the insurgents: *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (New York: Praeger, 1966), now also available in a reprint from Hailer Publishing (St. Petersburg, FL).
13. FARC in Colombia, for instance, a group that despite its "Bolivarian" face continues to claim it is Marxist-Leninist (the armed component, in fact, of the Clandestine Communist Party of Colombia, or PCCC), regularly attacks the US as the ultimate enemy of the Colombian revolution and the linchpin without which the near enemy, the administration of Alvaro Uribe,

would collapse. On the other side of the world, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) uses virtually indistinguishable analysis and verbiage. My own work on these two groups is extensive. Most accessible are several monographs, dated but still available on the web, all published by the Army War College (Carlisle, PA): *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency* (2002), *Insurgency in Nepal* (2003), and *Sustainability of Colombian Military/Strategic Support for "Democratic Security"* (2005).

14. Of numerous imprints available, a recent one is Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, Samuel B. Griffith, trans. and ed. (Mineola, MN: Dover Publications, 2005). My own analysis of Mao's approach began with my doctoral dissertation, published as *Making Revolution: The Insurgency of the Communist Party of Thailand in Structural Perspective* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994); was followed by *Maoist Insurgency Since Vietnam, and Counterrevolution in China: Wang Sheng and the Kuomintang* (both London: Frank Cass, 1996 and 1998, respectively); and recently has resulted in *Maoist People's War in Post-Vietnam Asia* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2007).
15. See, for example, the discussion in Chapt. 5 of FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency*.
16. It was the Vietnamese who took this recognition to its logical and most effective end, explicitly enunciating a doctrine generally translated as "the war of interlocking." See Marks, *Maoist People's War in Post-Vietnam Asia*, pp. 41-45. The benchmark Vietnamese work is Truong Chinh, *Primer for Revolt: The Communist Takeover in Vietnam*, Bernard B. Fall, ed., (New York: Praeger, 1963). Vietnamese doctrine, in turn, was copied by the FMLN in El Salvador. A synthesis of the Chinese and Vietnamese approaches, heavily influenced by FMLN manuals, is practiced by FARC in Colombia. The numerous Maoist movements active in India use rather dogmatic interpretations of Mao's "kinetic side," but the Nepalese Maoists have adopted an approach most faithful to the flexibility of Mao's ideas.
17. A recent work that may be thought to explore this topic "down to the last T-shirt" is the fascinating Thomas Hennessey, *The Evolution of the Troubles 1970-72* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007). For a comprehensive treatment of recruiting particulars, one which touches virtually every analytical base possible, see the superb Helen Graham, *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
18. I have dealt explicitly with this subject in "Ideology of Insurgency: New Ethnic Focus or Old Cold War Distortions?" *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 15, no. 1 (Spring 2004), pp. 107-28.