

Wars Without Splendor: Low-Level Conflict in World Politics

by
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A useful way to understand the difference between various forms of violent conflict in the contemporary world is to use the concept of "levels of conflict." Specifically, conflicts can be envisioned as taking place on one of the following three levels: nuclear war; conventional war; or low-level conflict.

The distinction between nuclear war and conventional war is quite simply whether or not nuclear weapons are used in the conflict in question. It has, of course, been pointed out many times that the line between nuclear weapons and conventional weapons is somewhat unclear because some nuclear weapons are so small as to be less destructive than the larger conventional weapons. The nuclear/non-nuclear distinction is also blurred by dual-capable systems such as tactical aircraft, long-range artillery, and cruise missiles. However, most strategists feel that the question of the use or non-use of nuclear weapons is an absolutely crucial distinction between the different levels of violent conflict. Given the fact that nuclear weapons have not been used in warfare since 1945, *any* use of nuclear weapons in a particular conflict would almost certainly radically transform the nature of the conflict in question.

The difference between conventional conflict and low-level conflict is not as distinct as that between conventional and nuclear conflict. Nevertheless, there are five key differences between conflicts carried on by means of conventional military forces and low-level conflicts.

First, in low-level conflicts, because the fighting involves regular soldiers vs irregular troops, usually fighting over large expanses of territory, and engaging in combat on an intermittent basis, casualties are almost invariably much lower than in conventional warfare, or if comparable, they accumulate over a much longer period. For example, the war in Northern Ireland (1969-present) and the Malayan insurgency (1948-1960) produced nowhere near the level of casualties as did the Battle of the Somme at its height in July 1916¹ and the Russian army's destruction of Germany's Army Group Center in June and July of 1944.² In those cases where low-intensity conflicts do result in fatalities comparable to conventional warfare, such as the Colombian civil war (*la violencia*) where at least 200,000 people died³ and the Algerian war where the total fatalities may have been as high as one million,⁴ the fatalities took place over a much longer period of time than did the fatalities in the Battle of the Somme and the destruction of Germany's Army Group Center; the Colombian civil war lasted from 1948 to 1958 and the Algerian war, from 1954 to 1962.

The second important difference between conventional warfare and low-level conflict is that conventional warfare consists of direct clashes

between the conventional armed forces of two or more nations, while low-level conflict consists of either struggles within a particular country or of *indirect* conflict between two or more nations, that is, conflict carried on by proxies. Third, low-intensity conflict tends to be a "low-tech" form of warfare. There are, to be sure, uses for "high-tech" in low-intensity conflict, such as the Merville line that the French built along the Algerian-Tunisian border to curb infiltration by the FLN into Algeria and the extensive use made by the United States of helicopters in Vietnam, but for the most part low-intensity conflict involves the use of a level of weapons technology that is considerably less sophisticated than in conventional war.

Fourth, low-intensity conflict tends to be manpower intensive rather than technology intensive. The bulk of the fighting on both sides usually involves relatively lightly-armed infantry units rather than armor, aircraft or artillery units. As the French learned in Algeria, the Americans learned in Vietnam, and the Russians are learning in Afghanistan, armor, artillery, and advanced aircraft are of marginal utility in low-intensity conflict, and sometimes prove to be detrimental. During the Algerian war, for example, one individual remarked that if the French had had tanks when they invaded Algeria in 1830 they would never have gotten beyond the beach where the invasion began.⁵

Fifth and finally, in low-level conflict political factors are more salient on a day-to-day basis than they are in conventional warfare. If, as strategic theorist Carl Von Clausewitz asserts, war is the continuation of politics by other means, then both conventional and low-intensity conflicts are fought ultimately for political ends. In the latter case, however, political factors have a more immediate importance, since what is at stake is not just the conquest of territory or the defeat of an enemy army, but the shaping and control of social and political structures and attitudes. For this reason, the political dimension dominates decisions and actions, from the macro to the micro levels—from the general staff level to the rifle platoon in the field. By contrast, in a conventional war the commander of an armoured battalion need not concern himself during the battle with the political aspects of the war in which he is engaged.

Keeping these distinctions in mind it is now appropriate to define the sort of military operations to which low-level conflict gives rise. In order to give a clear and comprehensive definition of these operations, it is necessary to do the following three things: first, to discuss the different forms of low-level conflict; second, to outline the general characteristics of the sort of military operations to which low-level conflict gives rise (such operations are generally referred to as "low-intensity operations"); and third, to define the specific types of such low-intensity operations.

The general definition of low-level conflict offered earlier in this article encompasses five specific forms of low-level conflict. Table I lists these five forms, noting the nature of these conflicts, the causes of these conflicts, and the types of low-intensity military operations that can be called for in response to these low-level conflict. Each of the five forms

has certain characteristics that make it different from the others and hence each should be discussed separately.

Insurrection. In an insurrection, a group of revolutionaries attempts to overthrow the existing government of a country by means of a popular uprising. The revolutionaries hope that the uprising will be of such magnitude as to be able to defeat the military and police forces of the government. On several occasions in 1919-1920 the German communists staged insurrections against the newly-formed government of the Weimar Republic; these various insurrections all failed because the leadership of Weimar allied itself with the German army and hence had enough military units at its disposal to crush the communist uprisings. An example of a successful insurrection was the uprising in La Paz, Bolivia in 1952 which overthrew the oligarchical government in a few days of fighting and brought the radical National Liberation Movement (NLM) to power.

Guerrilla Warfare. If a group of revolutionaries is not strong enough to try to stage an insurrection, it may resort to guerrilla warfare. In other words, the most important distinction between an insurrection and guerrilla warfare is the question of time. In an insurrection the revolutionaries feel that they are strong enough to achieve a quick victory over the government; in a guerrilla warfare campaign the revolutionaries, starting from a position of weakness, hope to gradually wear down the government's security forces while at the same time gradually building up their own military strength. The victory of Mao Zedong in China is a good illustration of the strategy and tactics of guerrilla warfare. Mao called his strategy against the government "the protracted warfare." In this protracted warfare, which lasted from the late 1920s until 1949, Mao envisioned three stages. In the first stage the guerrillas are on the strategic defensive. They are always retreating before the enemy. They counter-attack only when the odds are overwhelmingly in their favor. In the second stage the guerrillas begin to wage set-piece battles against the enemy. In the third stage the guerrillas have built up their popular support and military strength to the level of superiority over the government. In this stage they are prepared to go over to the strategic offensive and to gain full control of the country.⁶

The Sandinista guerrillas in Nicaragua also pursued a guerrilla warfare campaign against their government. The FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) was founded in 1961. The Sandinistas gradually expanded their base of popular support and their military capability, to the point where, by 1978, they were prepared to launch their final campaign to bring down the Somoza regime.⁷ The rebels in El Salvador are currently trying to imitate the success of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua; they too are pursuing a version of Mao Zedong's "protracted warfare."⁸

Terrorism. A terrorism campaign differs from an insurrection or a guerrilla warfare campaign in that the revolutionaries undertaking a terrorist campaign do not attempt to achieve their goal of destroying the existing government by means of defeating the security forces of this government. Instead, the terrorists try to achieve their aims by terrorizing the government and its supporters; by making them sufficiently afraid that

they may be the next victims of terroristic violence that they agree to give in to the demands of the terrorists. One successful terrorist campaign, that of the Irgun Zvai Leumi and LEHI (the Stern group) in the Palestine Mandate 1945-47, resulted, in part, in the British decision to leave the Palestine Mandate in 1948.⁹

Border Friction. This fourth form of low-level conflict arises when there are incidents of violence either along an internationally recognized frontier or along some sort of less formal frontier between ethnic groups within a particular nation. Three of the world's better-known troubled borders are those between Israel and the three states that refuse to sign peace treaties with her, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon; between Turkish-occupied Cyprus and the rest of Cyprus; and between China and Vietnam.

Coup d'Etat. In a coup, the armed forces of a nation (or some significant portion of these forces) overthrow the existing government. The military leaders of the coup may be acting alone, or they may be acting in alliance with civilian groups and foreign forces. The time involved in a coup is usually quite short, because if a government loses the support of its security forces it ordinarily cannot defend itself. If, however, the military is divided and a number of its units do not support the coup, then the attempt can lead to a prolonged civil war. Franco's 1936 coup, for example, led to the three year Spanish civil war. In the post-World War II era, three of the better-known examples of coups are that in Egypt in 1952, in which a group of Egyptian military officers, including Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, ousted King Farouk; the 1963 coup in South Vietnam in which the South Vietnamese military overthrew President Diem; and the 1973 coup in Chile in which the Chilean military destroyed the government of Salvador Allende.

It must be recognized that these five forms of low-level conflict do not always occur in their pure forms. Instead, there may be two, three, four or even all five of these forms of low-level conflict in any given case. For instance, the Front de Libération National (FLN) in Algeria made extensive use of both guerrilla warfare and terrorism, the latter most dramatically in 1956-1957 during the so-called "Battle of Algiers."¹⁰ The Polisario in the former Spanish Sahara and the Afghan rebels in Afghanistan are also making use of both guerrilla warfare and terrorism.¹¹ Then too, the overthrow of President Marcos in the Philippines in 1986 included elements of insurrection—in that the population of Manila rose up against Marcos—and of coup—in that the Filipino military revolted against the Marcos government.

The five forms of low-level conflict noted above can give rise to the following types of military operations: counter-insurgency, assistance to insurgents, counter-terrorism, peace-keeping and counter-coups. Before defining each of these specific forms of low-intensity operations, one should consider the three general characteristics that all five of these types of operations possess.

First, such low-intensity operations are carried on by what is called

in military jargon "unconventional methods." Specifically, these types of operations do not have the characteristics of conventional warfare, that is, they have no clearly-delineated front (Forward Edge of the Battle Area, or FEBA) where two armies engage in conventional military operations such as close air support, armored attacks and artillery barrages. Instead, these operations take place over broad stretches of territory and involve "unorthodox" military operations such as commando-type raids and ambushes, propaganda designed to subvert the loyalty of the enemy's population, and pacification programs designed to preserve the loyalty of one's own population.

The military units involved in these operations often are small and their destructive power is low. This characteristic—small units with limited destructive power—is what gives these operations the name "low-intensity operations."

Geographically, these low-intensity operations are not limited to any one region of the globe; on the contrary, such operations can take place all over the world. In recent years various governments have undertaken commando raids for the purpose of liberating terrorist-held hostages in Great Britain, Iran, the Netherlands, Somalia and Uganda. In Afghanistan the Soviet military is trying to defeat, or at least keep under control, the powerful guerrilla forces that arose in response to the Soviet invasion in 1979. In Namibia the South African military is trying to crush the guerrillas of the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO). Further, there are United Nations Forces helping to keep the peace between Turkish-held Cyprus and the rest of Cyprus and helping to supervise the cease-fire along the Israeli-Syrian border.

In response to the five forms of low-level conflict outlined above, a government can initiate several types of low-intensity military operations.

Counter-Insurgency. A government can respond to an insurrection or to a guerrilla warfare campaign within its territory, or within the territory of a friendly country, by undertaking a campaign of counter-insurgency. This normally consists of three measures. First, the government can undercut the popular support of the rebels by rectifying as many of the grievances of the population as possible. In the Philippines, he ordered the Filipino military to guarantee the honesty of the 1951 Filipino elections. The honesty of the 1951 elections caused many ordinary Filipinos to stop supporting the Huks and to rally to the side of the government.¹² In Malaya the so-called "strategic hamlets" established for the Chinese population resulted in these people having a level of public services that they had never known before.¹³

Second, the government must take measures to protect the population from the rebels so as to prevent the rebels from coercing the population into giving the rebellion the support that it needs to survive. In Malaya the strategic hamlets were fortified so as to protect the population from the rebels. The rebels, isolated from their popular base, were gradually worn down until the remnants were finally driven out of

Malaya and across the border into Thailand. (An attempt to duplicate the strategic hamlets program in Vietnam in the early 1960s failed because of the incompetence and corruption of the Diem government.)¹⁴

Finally, steps may be taken to strengthen the security forces (military, police and intelligence) of the government so as to be able to contain or destroy the rebels' military forces. In the on-going insurgency in El Salvador the United States has provided a significant degree of assistance in terms of arms, training, and advisors, to build up the Salvadoran military in an effort to defeat the rebels.¹⁵ In 1967 the United States flew a special team of advisors to Bolivia to help the Bolivian military hunt down and destroy Ernesto Ché Guevara's band of guerrillas.¹⁶

Assistance to Insurgents. Governments sometimes decide to aid insurgents in countries where they oppose the government or governmental policy, thereby carrying on a "proxy war" against these governments. There are a variety of objectives for the governments supporting "proxy wars." One objective may be to impose heavy costs on an opposing country. This is the central objective of the so-called "Reagan Doctrine," by which the United States pledges its support to anti-communist guerrillas fighting to overturn pro-Soviet governments. The "Reagan Doctrine" is based on the idea that the United States must force the Soviet Union to pay for its expansionist policies. This doctrine has resulted in American support to the "contras" fighting against the Sandinistas, to Jonas Savimbi's UNITA in Angola, and to the Afghan governments in Afghanistan.

Another objective of "proxy wars" can be to overthrow the government of a given country and replace it with a government more friendly to one's own country. For example, in the period 1959-1968 Fidel Castro's regime engaged in a series of attempts to overthrow governments in Latin America.¹⁷ In 1978-1979 the Sandinistas gathered arms and supplies from a broad array of international backers as they prepared for their "final offensive" against the Somoza regime.¹⁸

Counter-Terrorism. A terrorist campaign presents a government with a serious challenge. It must take determined and effective steps to protect the lives and property of its citizens. In dealing with a terrorist campaign, a government's security forces are faced with two distinct problems. First, there is the matter of dealing with hostage incidents. Because rescuing hostages by military force usually involves at least some casualties, military force should usually be considered as a last resort. Nonetheless, in a number of such incidents, the governments involved have felt that there was no alternative to the use of force, and hence have attempted to free the hostages by means of a military rescue operation. The Israeli raid at the Entebbe airport in Uganda in 1976, the West German recapture of a Lufthansa airliner at the airport on Mogadishu, Somalia in 1977, and the British assault on the Iranian embassy in London in 1980 are all examples of successful rescue operations. However, there have also been several failures.

The second problem for the security forces is to contain terrorist

efforts to undermine order in society by means of bombings, assassinations and acts of sabotage. In such a campaign it may be necessary to institute special judiciary procedures—for instance, the decision in Northern Ireland to move to trials without juries because of the dangers of intimidation of jurors—and it may be necessary to give the police special powers. In extreme situations where terrorist violence appears to be escalating out of control, a government may call in the regular military to reinforce the police in maintaining order. Examples of the use of military forces to combat a domestic terrorist campaign include the French decision during the Algerian war to give the French military the responsibility for crushing the FLN terrorist network in Algiers, the British commitment of troops to Northern Ireland in 1969, and the Uruguay's use of the country's military against the Tupamaro guerrillas following the Congress of Uruguay's declaration of a state of siege in the spring of 1972.

Peace-Keeping. Generally speaking, peace-keeping consists of efforts by outside parties to prevent violent conflict either within a nation or between two or more nations.¹⁹ Such efforts can take a variety of forms. The outside party, whether a nation or an international organization such as the UN, the OAS, or the OAU, can provide an impartial investigation of a given conflict so as to make sure that all parties to the conflict feel that their grievances are getting a fair hearing; these outside parties can mediate between the parties to the conflict; and outside parties can supervise the implementation of whatever agreement emerges from the mediation efforts.

While many forms of peace-keeping do not involve any use of military units, there are four situations in which some type of military forces will be an essential part of the larger effort at peace-keeping.

Border Friction Between Nations. There are some nations whose hostility towards each other is so deep and whose suspicion of each other is so great that there is a very real danger that some sort of minor border incident could set off a major war that neither side wanted. In such cases, an international peace-keeping force may be created to prevent border incidents from escalating to full-scale wars. The team of military officers from several of the member countries that the OAS sent to supervise the cease-fire along the Honduras-El Salvador border following the 1969 war between these two countries and the United Nations force along the Israeli-Syrian disengagement line (UN Disengagement Observer Force, or UNDOF) are examples of this sort of peace-keeping force. There have been proposals that the international peace-keeping forces be sent to the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan border and to the Honduran-Nicaraguan border to prevent further fighting along these borders.

Treaty Supervision. Even when two historic enemies have signed a peace treaty, it may be felt wise to reinforce the peace treaty by establishing an international military force to separate the parties to the conflict as part of the treaty. The international military force in the Sinai supervising the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, created under U.S. sponsorship and including a battalion of U.S. troops, is an example of the use of a peace-keeping force to supplement and reinforce a peace treaty. The United

States took the lead in creating this international military force after the United Nations refused to set up such a force; the 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt had envisioned such a United Nations force. If the Contradora nations (Mexico, Venezuela, Panama and Colombia) succeeded in getting a general peace treaty for all of the countries of Central America, it will almost certainly be necessary for the OAS or some other international body to set up an international peace-keeping force to supervise the implementation of the treaty.

Political Transition. In some cases, a peace-keeping force may be brought into a country to supervise its transition from one political status to another. For example, the 1979 Lancaster House agreement that provided for majority rule in Zimbabwe included provisions for Commonwealth military and police personnel to go to Zimbabwe to help supervise this transition process; the local parties to the conflict in Zimbabwe were sufficiently distrustful of each other that it was felt that without some sort of supervision by outsiders, the Lancaster House agreements would be impossible to implement.²⁰ Similarly, the various proposals for a transition to independence in Namibia have provided for some sort of international peace-keeping force to supervise this transition. Finally, some of the proposals for a transition to independence in the former Spanish Sahara have called for an international peace-keeping force to be created by the OAU or the UN to supervise this transition.

Separation of the Combatants. Some international peace-keeping forces have been created to separate the factions involved in a civil war and then to prevent and control incidents along the informal border between the factions. The theory behind this form of peace-keeping is that such a process of separation will, by preventing further bloodshed, allow the bitterness and hatred between these factions to recede and thereby open the way to some sort of compromise settlement of the civil war. The United Nations Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), which was created to end the fighting between the Greek and Turkish communities on Cyprus, and the multinational force in Lebanon from 1982-1984, which consisted of units from France, Italy, the United States and Great Britain, are examples of peace-keeping forces created for the purpose of physically separating the combatants involved in a civil war.

Counter Coups. Even if initially successful, a coup against an incumbent government can be reversed in certain instances. The coup leaders may not have achieved enough military support, and hence the coup may be suppressed by loyal military units. Expected support from certain key civilian groups may fail to materialize, leading to demoralization and disintegration of the military units attempting the coup. In a number of coups that have been reversed, military personnel and units from other countries have played a key role. In 1960, American military personnel performed a significant part in the reversal of an initially quite successful coup against Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, while in 1964 a coup in Gabon was reversed when France sent in a military force to reinstate the overthrown head of state.²¹

Before concluding, it is important to discuss, albeit briefly, implications of low-level conflict for world politics. First, it increases the danger of escalation of regional conflicts. Low-level conflict has, under the right conditions, the ability to spread local conflicts far beyond their area of origin. Perhaps the most famous example of escalation of a local conflict was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo by Serbian terrorists in June 1914. This terrorist act was the "spark" that set in motion the events that culminated in the outbreak of World War I.

Another instance of terrorist violence leading to escalation of a conflict is the case of Palestinian terrorism against Israel. This violence played a major role in the initiation of three Middle East wars between Israel and its Arab neighbors: namely, the 1956 war, the 1967 war, and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.²³

The second low-level conflict can lead to the realignment of countries in the Soviet-American confrontation. For example, in the period 1970-1973 Chile was quite friendly with Cuba and the Soviet Union. This friendship quickly ended after the September 1973 coup against the Allende government. Similarly, though Ethiopia had been an American ally for decades, in 1974 this alliance abruptly terminated following the military coup that overthrew the Emperor Haile Selassie. Henceforth, Ethiopia aligned itself with the Soviet Union. Further, prior to the Sandinista revolution of 1979 the United States had no more reliable ally in all of Latin America than Nicaragua. After the Sandinista revolution the new government in Nicaragua quickly moved to establish close relations with the Soviet Union and Cuba.

Third, low-level conflict can aggravate state-to-state relations. For example, on March 31, 1970, the West German ambassador to Guatemala, Count Karl von Spreti, was kidnapped by the FAR, a Guatemalan terrorist group. The FAR demanded the release of twenty-five prisoners and the payment of a \$700,000 ransom. When the Guatemalan government refused these demands, and the ambassador was killed, the West German government, angered by the Guatemalan refusal and its results, protested vigorously and reduced diplomatic contacts with Guatemala to a minimum. The West German acting chief of mission and most of his aides were recalled and the Guatemalan ambassador in Bonn was asked to leave the country.²⁴

As well, the terrorist violence at the Munich Olympics resulted in another example of aggravated relations between countries. On October 29, 1972, several weeks after the death of eleven Israeli athletes at the hands of the Palestinian terrorist group Black September, a Lufthansa 727 was hijacked by members of Black September. The terrorists who had survived the Munich Olympics incidents were released. The West Germans complied with the terrorists' demands and three Black September survivors were flown from Munich to Zagreb, Yugoslavia and then on to Tripoli, Libya.

The Israeli government was very bitter about the action of West

German authorities. Israel protested "with all urgency and gravity" the decision to release the terrorists. The Histadrut, the Israeli labor federation, stated that it would "end all visits by trade unionists and workers in Germany in a sign of protest against the freeing of those behind the killing in Munich."²⁵

Fourth, low-level conflict makes territorial aggression more difficult. Expansionist powers such as the Soviet Union are confronted with a new obstacle to their plans to expand their power. Under the "Reagan Doctrine," the United States has pledged itself to support anti-communist guerrillas in those countries like Afghanistan, Angola and Nicaragua where the Soviets are seeking to expand their influence. The "Reagan Doctrine" means, in brief, that the Soviets must be prepared to pay a high price to expand their power and influence beyond their borders.

Finally, low-level conflict has given the world's armed forces some new missions. For example, since their invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviet military has had to learn a great deal about counter-insurgency.²⁶ The United States' military, with the experience of Beirut behind them, has had to begin learning more about the military aspects of peace-keeping.

In the so-called "counter-insurgency craze" of the early 1960s, it was widely assumed that low-level conflict and low-intensity operations presented the United States and its allies with something unique to be concerned about. However, the examples cited in this article clearly illustrate that low-level conflict and low-intensity operations are not simply a Western concern. The Soviet Union is waging a major counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan, and certain Soviet allies (Angola, Ethiopia, Nicaragua and Vietnam) are also undertaking counter-insurgency campaigns. Third World nations like Iraq (the Kurds) and Morocco (Polisario) have been confronted with major rebellions. For the foreseeable future, then, it appears that many nations, particularly in the Third World, will be confronted with the difficult task of fashioning an appropriate response to low-level conflict.

Endnotes

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