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Three Lessons from the Modern Era of Small Wars

In the case of ‘small wars’, what are the basic lessons we should have learned since 1945? Try these, says Haroro Ingram — successful insurgencies must create and provide meaning; counterinsurgency thinking is reactive, and therefore always one step behind the insurgent; and the ‘hearts and minds’ approach to counterinsurgency has to be revised.

By Haroro Ingram for ISN

The ongoing withdrawal of coalition forces from Afghanistan punctuates an era of ‘small wars’ that stretches beyond the “9/11 decade” to the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War. Although asymmetric military contests between established authorities and irregular guerrillas are among the oldest of military phenomena, the modern period of small wars represents a departure from this history. Before this period, irregular guerrillas tended to be overwhelmed by their stronger and better resourced adversaries. Modern small wars, by contrast, have seen significantly higher rates of insurgent victory. Between 1775 and 1945, about 20% of insurgencies were successful. After 1945, the success rate of insurgencies has doubled. What explains this trend?

Overall, three lessons can be learned from the experience of modern small wars: 1) counterinsurgency thinking and practice typically lags behind that of its insurgent foe; 2) insurgencies succeed or fail based on their ability to synchronize competitive systems of *meaning* with competitive systems of *control* and 3) the core assumptions of the dominant ‘hearts and minds’ approach to counterinsurgency should be re-examined in light of recent insurgent successes.

Modern small wars: a dual contest

Despite the rise in the success rate of insurgencies since the Second World War, most insurgencies still fail to achieve their objectives. Insurgencies are at their most fragile in their early stages – soon after discontent has given way to violence. Surviving this formative period is crucial to the success of an insurgency. However, the ability to survive this formative period often depends on the same complex mix of strategic and psychosocial factors that helps to determine an insurgency’s ultimate success or failure.

This mix of strategic and psychosocial factors depends on effectively competing in the two simultaneous contests that characterise a small war. The first is a contest to implement a system of *control* (i.e. a ‘political’ apparatus) by ‘winning’ the support of a population. This clash between incumbent and aspiring ‘competitive systems of control’ (to borrow Bernard Fall’s terminology)

typically involves ‘top-down’ military-political forces attempting to establish control over a population. This contest is the *raison d'être* of any small war: the ascendancy of one system of control over all others.

The second is the contest to implement a system of *meaning*. In almost all modern small wars, ‘competitive systems of meaning’ seek to leverage the contested population’s identity and its perception of crisis (which is the defining psychosocial condition of civilian populations in wartime) in order to shape assessments of the conflict and of the actors involved – and to influence decisions about whom the population supports, and how.

Competitive systems of meaning: The insurgent’s advantage

In the modern period, insurgents have demonstrated an acute appreciation for the strategic and psychosocial power of a competitive system of meaning. Analysis of a global cross-section of insurgency thinkers – from Mao Tse-Tung and Ho Chi Minh to ‘Abd Al-‘Aziz Al-Muqrin, the Irish Republican Army and Che Guevara – reveals extraordinary doctrinal uniformity: all of these thinkers prioritize the strategic role of ‘information operations’ (IO) and regard military and political activities as largely supporting functions. In contrast, ‘Hearts and Minds’ counterinsurgency strategy, especially as practised in Afghanistan and Iraq, has reversed this strategic logic.

Modern insurgents have also understood that there are gradations of a population’s support. While behavioral support (or collaboration) is the most palpable form, it is also usually the weakest. This is why modern insurgents tend to pursue deeper perceptual and attitudinal support from contested populations – support that may belie occasional behavioral support for their opponents during the hardships of war. As Mao Tse-Tung has reminded generations of guerrillas: “In a war of long duration, those whose conviction that the people must be emancipated is not deep rooted are likely to become shaken in their faith or actually revolt.”

No matter their ideological persuasion, modern insurgents have tended to use IO as a mechanism to target the ‘identity landscape’ of a population, attaching *perceptions of crisis* to ‘out-group’ identities (i.e. the counterinsurgency and incumbent authorities) and *solutions* to themselves (i.e. the insurgency) as members of the shared ‘in-group’ identity. This can have a powerful psychosocial effect because it is designed to shape and reinforce the same identity paradigms through which perceptions of crisis are framed and understood. The result is a cyclical process of cognitive reinforcement.

It would be mistaken to interpret the insurgent’s competitive system of meaning as simply ‘good’ IO. Competitive systems of meaning consist of a combination of IO and military-political activities. As Guevara contends: “Every act of the guerrilla army ought always to be accompanied by the propaganda necessary to explain the reasons for it.” Equally, the actions of the counterinsurgency are often accompanied by insurgent IO messaging (reinforced by insurgent action) to shape how those actions are perceived. Modern insurgents understand that, if they can shape how contested populations perceive the conflict, its actors and their actions, IO becomes a dual mechanism of compounding returns: a ‘force multiplier’ for the insurgency and a ‘force nullifier’ for their opponents.

From the modern insurgent’s perspective, small wars are not about winning the ‘hearts and minds’ of contested populations but about shaping their perceptions in order to polarize their support. In short, modern insurgencies succeed or fail based on their ability to synchronize competitive systems of *meaning* and *control* – in that order of priority – to ‘survive, outlast and outcompete’ their more powerful adversaries.

The Taliban

The recent successes of the Taliban insurgency exemplify these dynamics. Within weeks of the commencement of Coalition military operations in 2001, the Taliban had been almost completely routed. In what former CIA Officer and Obama Administration advisor Bruce Riedel described as "one of the most remarkable military comebacks in modern history", the Taliban then began trickling back into southern Afghanistan in 2003 and, within two years, the insurgency was gaining momentum through Afghanistan's Pashtun belt.

A major feature of the Taliban's revival has been the evolution of its IO strategy and the synchronisation of its IO operations with its military and political activities. While its local IO strategy remains a tactical and operational strength, it has shown a willingness to communicate with regional and global audiences via multilingual spokesmen and maintains an active online presence. There is also a consistency to the Taliban narrative that reflects an understanding of the strategic and psychosocial dynamics described above. The Taliban has effectively leveraged the identity landscape of the target population, i.e. Afghans, especially Pashtuns, and the broader *ummah*; it has attached perceptions of crisis to the 'out-group', i.e., the foreign counterinsurgency and the Afghan government; and it has attached solutions to itself as the noble representative of the 'in-group,' i.e., Afghans and Muslims.

Enhancing the effect of the Taliban's evident appreciation for the strategic and psychosocial dimensions of insurgency warfare is the speed with which Taliban IO responds to events in the field. The Taliban often enjoys the advantages inherent in being the first to shape perceptions of events, especially for local audiences. As former NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer stated: "When there is an incident in Afghanistan, the Taliban are quick to say there have been high numbers of civilian casualties… This goes around the world in minutes. …our response comes days later – if we are lucky. By that time, we have totally lost the media battle."

IO is broadly recognized as a Taliban strength and a weakness for Coalition forces. Three explanations for this are significant. First, Taliban IO holds a central position in the broader insurgency strategy. Counterinsurgency IO, on the other hand, has tended to be used as a supporting mechanism for what is the central focus of 'hearts and minds' strategy: using military force to create time and space for the counterinsurgency's system of control to function effectively.

Second, while insurgents use IO to shape perceptions and polarize support, counterinsurgency IO tends to focus on a population-focused 'hearts and minds' narrative to encourage behavioral support. As Tim Foxley asserts: "Much of ISAF IO work is based around the promotion of ISAF and Afghan government narratives…. The work highlights 'good news' stories: a bridge built here, a school built there, a small child taken to hospital…."

Finally, Taliban IO is the centrepiece of an attempt to establish an entire system of meaning that is designed to both enhance the appeal *and* assist in the design of a competitive system of control. Coalition forces may be losing the IO battle in Afghanistan, but they have barely attempted to establish a competitive system of meaning.

The counterinsurgency lag

This is a critical juncture for the small wars field. It was only in the aftermath of the failures of military-centric counterinsurgency strategies in Indochina and Algeria – driven by the recognition that modern insurgencies are first and foremost 'political' phenomena – that the population-centric 'hearts and minds' approach to counterinsurgency was born. While this approach is now the status quo in counterinsurgency thinking and practice, the military-centrists of the time doggedly defended their positions – dismissing failures in the field as the result of faulty application. Decades later, the mixed results of 'hearts and minds' counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, Iraq and other conflicts are defended

in a similar manner. To overcome the counterinsurgency lag, the fundamental assumptions underpinning this dominant counterinsurgency approach must be examined and the lessons of insurgent successes must be learned.

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