Six Reasons Counterinsurgencies Lose: A Complementary Perspective

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Dr. Donald Stoker's article, <u>Six Reasons Insurgencies Lose: A Contrarian View</u>[1], provides a welcome paradigm shift to assist U.S. military practitioners analyze the outcome of past insurgencies, and by extension formulate strategies to defeat future insurgencies. Similar to Stoker's argument that insurgents often fail through their own missteps, counterinsurgents can also be their own worst enemy. Therefore, the following list of reasons why counterinsurgencies lose complements Dr. Stoker's perspective.

Why do counterinsurgencies lose?

1. Failure to recognize the insurgency during its early stages.

Insurgents have the initiative in the earliest stages of an insurgency because they choose the time and place to initiate the conflict. Left unchecked, insurgents use this initiative to negate counterinsurgent strengths. For example, in 2003, Coalition Forces in Iraq missed a window of opportunity when they perceived early violence as low-level criminal activity, rather than the initial stages of several different insurgencies. This "random" activity, which Coalition Forces might have controlled had they made it their top priority, soon led to a power vacuum that required years of blood and treasure to stabilize.

2. Failure to recognize the insurgents' political strategy.

Insurgencies usually lack the strength to engage counterinsurgents conventionally. Instead, they use indirect tactics, such as engaging in a battle of ideas to influence the political environment. A key component of this is attracting support from the population by attaching the insurgency to a popular cause. For example, Mao Tse-tung and his associates in the Chinese Communist Party used a series of popular causes as a means to an end, starting with land reform, then opposition to Japanese aggression, then Chinese nationalism. More recently, Ayman al-Zawahiri claimed in a 2005 letter to Al Qaeda in Iraq leadership that AQ would fight at least half of their war on the media battlefield.[2] Counterinsurgents must equally respect the power of information operations,

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[1] Donald Stoker, 'Six Reasons Insurgencies Lose, A Contrarian View,' *Small Wars Journal*, posted 4 July 2009, http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/07/six-reasons-insurgencies-lose
[2] Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi, dated 9 July 2005, obtained during counterterrorism activities in Iraq, http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2005/zawahiri-zarqawi-letter_9jul2005.htm

by identifying insurgent causes and opposing, accommodating, or otherwise influencing the issue to weaken the insurgency.

3. Over-reliance on offensive military force.

Much of US offensive doctrine has its roots in Napoleonic concepts, such as achieving victory through the annihilation of enemy forces, preferably in a single decisive battle. Applying overwhelming force in a counterinsurgency is problematic because insurgents embed themselves within the civilian population. A paradox of counterinsurgency is the requirement for a defensively weighted strategy, despite the fact that insurgents are physically weaker.[3] The United States' experience in South Vietnam, 1964-1972, demonstrates the pitfalls of waging a war of attrition, through primarily military solutions such as large unit sweeps backed with heavy firepower. Insurgents blended into a population that they controlled, which led American units to rely on indiscriminate use of force, feeding the insurgents' cause. As the war dragged on, the US military did adapt, but none of their innovations led to a fundamental shift from an enemy-centric strategy to the required population-centric strategy. In Vietnam, the U.S. perceived tactical victories and positive measures of effectiveness, but failed in its ultimate political objectives.

4. Sacrificing legitimacy.

Counterinsurgent forces claim the mantle of legitimacy, which provides advantages and disadvantages. Legitimacy garners support with local, regional, and international populations, but inhibits counterinsurgents from matching insurgent tactics such as manipulation, terrorism, and intimidation. Indeed, the insurgents often use these tactics as a means to attract a disproportionate response from the counterinsurgent. Even when the disadvantages of legitimacy outweigh the advantages, legitimacy is required in the end for victory. Therefore, the counterinsurgent must protect legitimacy in all circumstances. The surge of operations in Baghdad, 2006-2007, provides numerous examples where US forces protected legitimacy. Lieutenant Colonel Dale Kuehl, commander of the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, believes that one of the reasons the Sons of Iraq agreed to work with US forces was the restraint and discipline displayed by his unit after an IED killed six soldiers and one interpreter.[4] Because of cases like this and other related initiatives, the surge succeeded strategically.

5. Unilateralism.

Over sixty years ago, Mao Tse-tung stated confidently of his Japanese enemies, "[Japan's] manpower, her raw materials, and her financial resources are all inadequate and insufficient to maintain her in protracted warfare or to meet the situation presented by a war prosecuted over a vast area."[5] In the context of the time of his writing, when Japanese forces were very strong,

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[3] FM 3-24 provides nine paradoxes of counterinsurgency. Department of the Army, *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, December 2006), 1.26-1.28.
[4] Dale Kuehl, 'Inside the Surge: 1-5 Cavalry in Ameriyah,' *Small Wars Journal*, 2008, http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/118-kuehl.pdf
[5] Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerilla Warfare* translated by Samuel B Griffith (Printed in the U.S.A.: BN Publishing, 2007), 66.

Mao's supporters were probably skeptical. His prediction came true, though, largely because Japanese forces insisted on a unilateral occupation. The lesson from the Japanese is that counterinsurgent forces have to recruit, train, and mobilize citizens into an enduring security apparatus.

6. Failure to isolate the insurgents from the population.

Physically isolating the insurgents from the population is problematic because the insurgents are not identifiable until the population turns against them. An example of success in this area is the 2006-2007 Baghdad Security Plan.[6] U.S. and Iraqi forces completed three phases of operations: Clear, Control, and Retain. During the clear phase, specialized units entered each district, kinetically targeting insurgents when possible, but primarily searching systematically from house to house for weapons caches or other insurgent infrastructure. A US Army battalion and an Iraqi Army brigade then controlled each district over a longer duration. Throughout these operations, Baghdad residents witnessed American and Iraqi Soldiers working together. Large portions of the population realized these military forces were committed to succeed, so they started to provide them with actionable intelligence. Other residents who had previously actively supported the insurgency, often through coercion, became friendly to the government and the occupying security forces.

Stoker's article, combined with the complementary counterinsurgent perspective above, provides US forces with an expanded operational paradigm. Despite the countless COIN-related theories, books, and articles, practitioners must continuously remain engaged as new paradigms such as Dr. Stoker's are published, in order to remain on the cutting edge of this dynamic field.

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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[6] For a comprehensive history of the Baghdad Security Plan, see Chapter 5 of: Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General Petraeus and a Search for the Way Out of Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs Books, 2008), 119-140.

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