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Widening the Spectrum of Insurgency

Stephen Phillips

Warfare blogs, Department of Defense forums, and defense industry conferences have debated terms surrounding the current global conflict. This clash has a myriad descriptive names such as “The Global War on Terrorism,” “The Long War,” and “Overseas Contingency Operation.” Similarly, defense pundits have wrestled with the terms, asymmetric warfare, irregular warfare, and terrorism. Another definition that must be reviewed is “insurgency.”

Two salient questions are the catalyst for this discussion. First, should criminal enterprises that want to remove rather than replace government control and seek a passive rather than a complicit populous fit into the definition of insurgency? Second, can a non-violent overthrow of a government, a “velvet revolution,” be called an insurgency?

To begin, it is important to highlight the definition in the U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual, FM 3-24, and Joint Publication 1-02.

insurgency: (joint) an organizational movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict.¹

If the answer to each question above is “yes,” this definition must be rewritten. A “yes,” to the first question implies that a drug cartel conducting violent action to elicit government inaction is an insurgency – and that a government in this predicament may apply counterinsurgency methodology. In this case, the word “overthrow” and its associated implications must be dropped. Responding “yes” to the second case suggests that insurgency includes a peaceful uprising leading to a government’s demise – and that unconventional warriors may leverage a large movement employing nonviolence to prevent a protracted struggle. As such, the phrase “armed conflict” and maybe even “subversion” should be reconsidered.

Perhaps a more appropriate definition is:

insurgency: a campaign to remove or replace government control using means that are outside the state’s political framework.

¹ U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 385.

Joint Publication 1-02: Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2008.), 268.

This definition allows the likes of Pablo Escobar and Mahatma Gandhi to be included among the list of insurgents. More importantly, it provides a broader framework for those who study and analyze counter-insurgency and unconventional warfare.

Though a simpler definition, this wider view demands categorization of two different types of insurgencies.

criminal insurgency: a campaign employing violence and terrorism to influence a population and its government to allow or ignore illegal activity.

velvet insurgency: a non-violent campaign to replace a government employing methods outside the system's political framework.

These would be supported by a slight modification of the original definition of insurgency with the added adjective of "classic."

classic insurgency: a campaign to overthrow a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict.

In the current construct for an insurgency, the center of gravity, the area of influence, is the population. If this new set of definitions is accepted, this assumption must be considered under new light. For example, a criminal insurgency likely sees the government and the population as part and parcel. To succeed, the criminals must conduct their activities in a manner that will not be too disruptive. If the violence level rises to high, the local population might demand that the government react. If the government cannot do so, it may be replaced by one that will. Thus the criminal insurgency will have lost. This is not to say that the criminal insurgency itself may not replace the government in some areas, as is happening in parts of Mexico now, but this method seeks acquiescence rather than incorporation. Think Mafioso not *Sendero Luminoso*.

A velvet insurgency can be considered in a similar manner. In this case, the population *is* the insurgency. Perhaps a classic insurgency was in its infancy, but then the underground blossoms before force is employed. This has interesting implications on both sides of the equation. The host government may not know how or where to focus its counterinsurgency efforts since there is no armed element and it may be too late to provide for the population's needs without in effect, submitting. Conversely, analysts may develop a model wherein this size of politically disenfranchised group and its ability to garner popular support removes the need for armed insurrection.

Revising the definition of insurgency to include criminal and velvet insurgencies will widen the spectrum of recognized insurgent conflict. This will benefit policymakers, analysts, and practitioners of counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare as they deal with insurgent objectives and varying levels of violence.

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