

Three Years and You're Out

Steven Metz

AS THE insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan fester and grow, we need to face facts. Americans are only prepared to support major counterinsurgency operations for about three years. Yet, when the United States enters a war, it doesn't base its strategy on this inevitability. Instead, we tell ourselves that we're in for as long as it takes. That may be morally satisfying, but it's politically unrealistic. With this certain wane in public and congressional backing, we need to choose our confrontations wisely and rethink our tactics.

Multinational peacekeeping missions dominated at the close of the Cold War, and counterinsurgency began to look like a strategic relic. Yet after September 11, strategists correctly assumed that "irregular warfare" would be America's most pressing challenge in the coming years. But as the security community pulled the old playbook off the shelf, it turned out that much of what we thought we knew about insurgency was wrong, or at least desperately in

need of revision. So there was a scramble to develop the first new counterinsurgency doctrine since the 1980s.

A flurry of conferences, seminars, symposia, war games, articles and studies ensued. Even though discussions included soft-power wielders like the State Department, the Agency for International Development and the intelligence community, the greatest effort—as in the past—came from the military. So, the current face of American strategy is General David Petraeus rather than Ambassador Ryan Crocker. Though the security establishment has dusted off and updated some old concepts, it hasn't gone far enough. By assuming that contemporary insurgencies are much like past ones, we underestimate the effort that successful campaigns require and overestimate the cost of simply leaving others to fight these battles. Counterinsurgency is still viewed as a variant of war. The objective is still the decisive defeat of the enemy. The risk is still that insurgents will seize control of the state.

As we begin to get involved, we should realize that, unlike decision-making processes in conventional war—where the president and his top advisors assess expected strategic costs, risks and benefits, and then decide whether war is the best option—in counterinsurgency there is seldom

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such a discrete decision point. Instead, the United States inches in, providing a bit of support to a regime, then a bit more, until it finds itself so deeply involved that the political and strategic costs of disengagement are seemingly overwhelming. Counterinsurgency support is simply an immense task.

The Nature of the Beast

CONTEMPORARY INSURGENCIES are just one dimension of deep, complex conflicts caused by flawed or ineffective political, security, social and cultural systems. Insurgency is intertwined with a range of other destabilizing phenomena: extensive organized and street crime; gang violence; economic, public health and ecological problems; social, ethnic or sectarian strife; rampant corruption; ineffective governance; and, in the broadest sense, a crisis of legitimacy.

The cast of characters has also expanded. Modern insurgencies don't simply involve the insurgents, the government and external state sponsors. Unaffiliated militias, organized criminal gangs and private military corporations all affect the outcome too. And it doesn't end there. Diaspora communities, the media, transnational corporations and non-governmental organizations also play a major role in the evolution of the conflict.

And now insurgents must generate their own funds. The Soviet Union, Cuba and China no longer serve as sponsors. This means that insurgencies shift from "grievance" to "greed" as they evolve. While they initially form in response to real or perceived political threats, over time they become more focused on generating resources.

Because big states are no longer underwriting the costs of battle, insurgent victory is unlikely, but it does mean battles can go on for a very long time. Modern insurgencies tend toward a stalemate in which the insurgents have vested personal interests in

sustaining the conflict: They become political *enterprises* rather than political *movements*. And the longer a complex conflict persists, the greater the damage to regional and global security. Today, the dangers insurgency produces—terrorism, expanded organized crime, refugee flows, humanitarian disasters, ecological damage, the profusion of arms and so forth—come not from the unlikely possibility of radical insurgents seizing state power, but rather from the continuation of the conflict itself.

Though few insurgencies have ever ended with an outright, decisive and final win, today this is even less likely. So long as a handful of militants can raise money, gain access to the Internet and the transnational media, and undertake regular acts of terrorism, they can sustain an insurgency. It is impossible to kill them all as long as whatever motivates them inspires new recruits and the United States is unwilling or unable to occupy a foreign country for an extended period.

Furthering this intractability, as an insurgency matures, personal motives—especially the desire for revenge—become more important. Placating someone's anger at a real or perceived personal wrong can be more difficult than meeting their political demands. Participation in armed rebellion is empowering; it provides fulfillment, excitement and identity, particularly for young males who had few of these things during peacetime. As insurgents, they are respected and feared. But when the insurgency ends, most return to marginalization, becoming simply one more uneducated denizen of society's bottom tier. Thus, it is less political objectives driving insurgents than deep psychological needs.

Flawed assumptions about the regimes we support also stifle progress. Our strategies are based on a commitment to a state; our objective is to sustain the regime and improve its legitimacy and capacity for self-defense. And as we partner up with fledgling governments, we take for granted that those in Baghdad or Kabul share our objec-

tives—defeating insurgents. We also often foolishly presume our partner government is both willing and able to undertake major political and economic reforms. And that strengthening our partner is the best avenue to stability and security.

Reality is different. The elites we support often develop a vested interest in sustaining an insurgency, at least so long as the rebels cannot win. Having a comfortable, controlled insurgency lowers pressure on the regime for reform, allows it greater latitude in controlling its opponents, and often provides a

stream of foreign assistance that can be skimmed or used for patronage. And while we ask our partner regime to improve its security

forces, these may be more of a threat than the insurgents themselves. After all, many more governments have been overthrown by military coups than insurgencies. We critique corruption and nepotism even though these are the lifeblood of patronage-based systems. Ultimately, American counterinsurgency strategy and doctrine assume that our partner elites will commit *de facto* political and economic suicide, reforming away the system that made them powerful and rich. Yet we are bewildered when this does not happen.

Rather than solely working through regimes and seeking decisive “victory” over insurgents, we should strive toward reconciliation, attempting to dampen, contain and resolve complex conflicts as rapidly as possible. And we must be prepared to return when a dampened conflict re-emerges. The U.S. role might be that of mediator, peacekeeper or even supporter of non-insurgent militias rather than simply the backer of the regime. This may mean accepting the insurgents as legitimate representatives of at least some segment of a nation’s people and buying them off,

whether economically or politically. This is a bitter pill to swallow for a nation that deifies “victory” and demonizes insurgents like the Taliban and Al-Qaeda—one does not share power with or meet the demands of the devil. But these polarized views are impediments to conflict resolution.

Effective state-building requires strong, insightful and reflective national leaders who understand what makes their nations susceptible to conflict and are willing and able to address it. Simply strengthening a regime and hoping that it eventually exer-

cises full control over all of its territory is unrealistic in most parts of the world today, particularly those prone to insurgency. “Un-governed spaces”

and ineffective governments are the norm. Visionaries are rare, and the United States cannot manufacture them or assure that they hold power. We should thus pick our fights more carefully, not simply based on the ideology of the insurgents, but on the nature of the regime and the nature of the system. Some regimes, even ones fighting horrible enemies, may not be redeemable. The cost of fixing deeply flawed systems may be greater than the benefits.

New Thinking

THESE ISSUES suggest three broad strategic approaches. All should be pursued multilaterally whenever possible, but we have to understand what we’re getting into.

When there is a flawed but functioning state with reasonably good leadership willing to undertake serious political, economic, security and cultural reform, our existing methods of regime support make sense. In this construct, the U.S. military’s primary function is what doctrine calls “foreign internal defense”—supporting the efforts of

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a partner state to augment its capabilities, effectiveness and legitimacy.

When there is no functioning state with a relatively strong leadership, and the economic, social, political, security and cultural systems are dysfunctional, our approach should be nuanced. When there is UN and multinational support for re-engineering such a state—for establishing what would be, in effect, a neo-trusteeship—the United States should participate. In cases where there are particularly strong ties to American national interests, we might even play a major role. Again, though, the United States must be aware of the narrow window of opportunity before public and congressional support begins to erode, particularly if there are American casualties. We should count on major support for three years, with a significant diminution thereafter.

Finally, if there is no multinational support for the creation of a neo-trusteeship, the United States should eschew counterinsurgency, opting instead for humanitarian relief (perhaps with the creation of refugee sanctuaries) and containment (largely by bolstering neighboring states). We must know when to walk away.

We must remain aware at the start that a flawed or failed system needs extensive re-engineering, not simply an aid package and a pat on the back. We should thus think in terms of system re-engineering with an emphasis on psychological and cultural shifts, rather than just political reform. Counterinsurgency is always about more than political grievances. Its causes—and solutions—lie deep within a failing culture.

Currently, the United States lacks the expertise to do this even when our partner is receptive. We have an adequate number of military trainers and advisors but are short in many vital non-military fields including law enforcement, judicial systems, civil-society building, and intelligence advice and training. We are unable to re-engineer the psychological structure of failed

systems by providing alternative means of empowerment for the disillusioned and methods for constraining the risk-taking behavior of young males (such as women's empowerment). We cannot do this in our own inner cities much less in a foreign culture. And we must be honest with ourselves: Often it is the very culture of a state that makes it uncompetitive and breeds instability. Modest political reforms and an infusion of security assistance will not fix this.

In all likelihood, we are facing a tumultuous security environment over the next few decades. This means there will be many insurgencies where a solution is bereft of multinational support or neo-trusteeships. This leaves the United States best served by offering up humanitarian relief and containment, not guns and soldiers. Few insurgencies, if any, will seize control of the state. We should not let the prevalence or the ideology of insurgents draw us into involvement when the chances of success are low. We must remember the Cold War assumption that without American action, insurgents would take over states, become Soviet satellites and shift the global balance of power did not hold. Insurgent victories in Vietnam, Cambodia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe did not save the Soviet Union or do serious damage to the United States. This remains true today. The chances of an insurgency affiliated with Al-Qaeda seizing and holding control of a state are limited. And, if one does, the chances that it will make a major difference in the global security environment are almost nil. It is, then, the protraction of insurgencies that threatens American interests. And the strategic costs of avoiding involvement in counterinsurgency are less than those of involvement in a drawn-out and potentially failed counterinsurgency campaign. The sooner the revision of U.S. strategy for counterinsurgency begins, the better. □