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## Counterinsurgency Effort: A Conceptual Approach



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*Counterinsurgency is an umbrella term that describes the complete range of measures that governments take to defeat insurgencies...there is no template, no single set of techniques for countering insurgencies. Counterinsurgency is simply whatever governments do to defeat rebellions.<sup>1</sup>*

—David Kilcullen

**Abstract:** *Counterinsurgency operations are among the most complex conflicts since there is no template or sacrosanct strategy for success. The most common understanding is that, support for insurgency emanates out of a shared sense of wrong or the frustration of not having the ability to meet the basic requirements. In response to rebel movement, employment of force may work initially but the foundation of counterinsurgency strategy has its roots in the legal-rational, just force and redressal of grievances to end political / economic suppression. This wrong cannot be set right by force or coercion. Therefore, the counter insurgents must give priority to defeating the political subversion, not the guerrillas. The options with the state are to choose any of the three approaches. First, “enemy centric approach” against hard core non-compromising / radicalised insurgents/ terrorists; second, “population centric approach” of winning hearts and mind of the population; and third, “perception centric approach” targeting population, overground workers and even the young disillusioned insurgent cadres. Another important aspect is that strategic leadership should not consider tactical successes as victory, since it means nothing in the long term. The focus of strategic leadership should be to eliminate insurgency and not insurgents. Tactical leaders should focus on transparent and precise intelligence based operations to target the leaders and allow lower ranks to return back to the society.*

### Key Points

- Counterinsurgency is building a society and restoration of trust of the people in the ‘constitutionally elected’ government.
- Tactical successes mean little in counterinsurgency and its impact is short term.
- Counterinsurgency is broadly military, political and civic actions with an objective to restore rule of law and not an endeavour to defeat people.
- Over reaction and indiscriminate use of force is counterproductive.
- People are not enemies of the state; rather they are the victims and must be guaranteed security and freedom to live a life without coercion and fear.
- Improvement in material conditions is not the answer to resolve grievances of the people— idea of counterinsurgency is to build capacity for peace & development.
- Counterinsurgency should not be treated as an operation but an effort to develop society and reintegrate ‘disaffected’ people with the state.



## Introduction

The meaning of insurgency has changed post World War II — it is no more a clash of military prowess, but rather a war of ideas and clash of intellects. Eric Thor Olson, a retired United States Navy admiral wrote that “The best weapons in counter insurgency do not shoot.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, counterinsurgency is complex and delicate, full of metaphorical minefields<sup>3</sup> and is often surrounded by controversies and ambiguity. Kinetic force cannot possibly act as a binding factor; rather it drives people away from the government. Killing insurgents is not the solution; suppression of violence has temporary impact and is unlikely to establish enduring peace. Due to the lack of understanding of counterinsurgency/counterterrorism objectives, often, the first reaction of a state to violent extremist actions, is to instinctively reach for the most coercive tools, however in doing so, the situation becomes worse.<sup>4</sup> It is true that counterinsurgency is not part of appeasement policy, but decisive actions at tactical level must continue without any disruption to keep the violence level manageable. But to look at the success and failure of counterinsurgency from a tactical perspective is indeed a conflict trap. Tactical success of elimination of insurgents means little and does not have enduring impact on the movement or on the cause of the rebels or terrorists.<sup>5</sup> There is a need to understand that counterinsurgency is neither a development strategy nor a political victory over anyone. In principle it is humanitarian in nature, as it creates a stable and secure environment and makes people feel owned by the state. The protagonist of counterinsurgency campaign is the society and the indigenous people. Endeavour of the state should be to make indigenous people vanguard in building bridges with the rebels, but at the same time, the state should avoid to use indigenous people as mercenaries against insurgents because that will create mistrust and divide in the society and could act as ‘drifter’ rather than ‘binder’.

An insurgency, according to the current US joint military field manual/ doctrine, is “an organized movement aimed at to overthrow a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict. In another words, an insurgency is an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power or other political authority while increasing insurgent control.”<sup>6</sup> According to David Galula, prompting disorder is a legitimate objective for the insurgent. It helps disrupt the economy, hence to produce discontent; it serves to undermine the strength and the authority of the counterinsurgent. Moreover, disorder— the normal state of nature— is cheap to create and very costly to prevent.<sup>7</sup> Counterinsurgency is broadly divided into



military, political and civic actions taken to target insurgents, population and overground workers. Counterinsurgency, therefore, is an umbrella term that describes the complete range of measures that governments take to defeat insurgencies; however, there is no template, no single set of techniques for countering insurgencies. Counterinsurgency is simply whatever governments do to defeat rebellions<sup>8</sup> to establish rule of law and restore enduring peace.

### **The Concept of Peace**

The concept of peace is a nuanced process that the policy makers and the political leadership should have a deeper understanding of, for conflict resolution. Often suppression of violence is mistaken as establishment of peace. There are multiple stages through which peace process traverses before conflict resolution. First stage is suppression of violence or 'enforced peace'. This period is also called as "negative peace". It is temporary peace where violence level is brought down to a manageable limit. Invariably in most cases it is mistaken as enduring peace. The focus during this stage should be consolidation of security and engagement with the insurgent groups through social groups and peace committees. However, military and civic actions must go hand in hand. Relapse of conflict is a high possibility if state or insurgents act irrationally. Second stage is 'adequate peace' when rule of law and public order is restored. At this stage, violence is suppressed and insurgent groups are weakened to a great extent and considered appropriate to initiate the political process for grievance redressal and negotiated settlement. Security forces continue to remain co-equal with political leadership to maintain law and order and initiation of political process. Third stage is 'enduring peace'. This is a phase when violence is eliminated, divisive forces are brought on the negotiating table, institutions of governance start functioning without coercion, public and societal space is regained, rehabilitation of displaced population is implemented, adequate cushion and capacity for peace building is created to prevent relapse of conflict. At this stage the security forces should start returning to the barrack in a phased manner. Complete withdrawal of the security forces is not advisable since relapse of conflict by some elements of the disgruntled rebels could take place. For instance, conflict relapse took place in Jammu & Kashmir in 2008, 2010, 2014 and 2016, because of triggers such as the Amarnath land row, the Machil fake encounter and elimination of Burhan Wani. Similarly, one cannot say that Nagaland and Manipur have enduring peace, because conflict relapse remains a possibility.



## Counterinsurgency Approaches

There are three approaches for counterinsurgency operations. First, is 'enemy centric' approach, where focus is on the elimination of insurgents/ terrorists. Second, is 'population centric' approach, where the centre of gravity is population, that is, to win them over instead of allowing them to drift away. Third, is 'perception centric' approach, where a perception is created by military and civic actions that insurgents/ terrorists are losing and their cause is unjust. The government must be cautious that neither of these approaches are perfect nor are an alternative of each other. Based on the circumstances, the government may choose to adopt either of these approaches or combination of these approaches to bring enduring peace to the society.

**Enemy Centric Approach.** The mindset of terming insurgents as enemies, is against the tenant of counterinsurgency. Unfortunately, conventional forces, when employed to take part in counterinsurgency operations, will often look at insurgency from the perspective of a conventional war. Whereas, this war, is not against any enemy but our own people who have rebelled against the government for political, social or economic reasons. The approach to crush or number game of kill is unproductive. Peace cannot be restored by defeating or coercing the citizenry unless trust of the people is gained. The objective of counterinsurgency is that people must feel 'victorious and owned' and not 'defeated or jilted'. Enemy centric approach of defeating people is a flawed policy. Referring to insurgents as an enemy is a fundamental mistake and security forces must avoid calling the insurgents as enemy. Endeavour should be to target those who refuse to shun the path of violence and defy the rule of law. Counterinsurgency forces should keep in view that tactical success means nothing and it does not guarantee peace. Gen DS Hooda, Former Army Commander says, "Killing terrorists is an integral part of military operations to ensure that the state does not descend into chaos. However, this is not the primary measure of success in conflict".<sup>9</sup> Terrorising the terrorists is an imperfect strategy and it does not work in long term. Two things that counterinsurgents must ensure are, first, no victory celebrations after tactical success— it creates sense of suppression of people by force and moreover it is misconstrued as display of naked force. Second issue is that, at no stage the tribe or family members of the insurgents (slain or alive) be targeted or singled out as untouchables. They must be included in all government welfare schemes and not treated with stigma.

**Population Centric Approach.** Paul Dixon, author of *Beyond Hearts and Minds: Perspectives on Counterinsurgency* writes that, "conventional warfare approach, while



dealing with counterinsurgency is a failed, ineffective and even dangerous approach to warfare".<sup>10</sup> The population centric approach is not new, it was first applied in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century by the Spanish to suppress the domestic rebellion. Marshal Thomas Robert Bugeaud is perceived to be the founder of population centric counterinsurgency approach and was involved in the French pacification campaign in Algeria, which served as a testbed for his dual strategy of coercion and accommodation.<sup>11</sup> Earlier, Western population centric approach mostly focused on chastising the population in order to weaken the insurgent. The present approach, however, seeks to protect the population and win its allegiance as to restore the legitimacy of the government in question by using both military and non-military means simultaneously.<sup>12</sup> The current concept of people centric approach is focused on soldier shifting from 'war-maker' to a 'peacemaker' and 'peace-preserver'.<sup>13</sup> It must also shift from coercion to protection of civil population. David Galula posits that "revolutionary war is only 20 percent military action and 80 percent political". Therefore, political wars are best fought by hearts and mind and not by coercion or suppression by force.

**Perception Centric Approach.** There is a famous quote by Sir Robert Thompson, based on his experiences from Malaya and Vietnam, "What the peasant wants to know is: Does the government mean to win the war? Because if not, he will have to support the insurgent."<sup>14</sup> Enemy Centric and population centric approaches may not succeed in all cases, thus it requires a perception centric approach. Strategy of "shape, clear, hold and build" has tenants of enemy and population centric approaches. Some analysts are of this opinion that, both approaches are co-equal and complementary to each other and not alternatives to either of the two approaches. Defeat and victory in counterinsurgency is defined by perception centric approach. Population will swing on the side of victorious and the perception of victory is created when facade of 'just cause' of insurgents is exposed. Perception centric approach will succeed if the actions of the government are seen by public as transparent, legitimate and responsible. The civil government and security forces jointly should remove every course of action that is likely to antagonise civil population and create negative perception among the people. The perception centric approach must also be fully integrated in the military efforts and civic actions. Key in counterinsurgency is to first diagnose the environment, then design a tailor-made approach to counter the insurgency, and – most critically – have a system for generating continuous, real-time feedback from the environment that allows you to know what effect you are having, and adapt as needed.<sup>15</sup> A counterinsurgency force should not be just inducted without articulation of the doctrinal approach. Counterinsurgency is a battle of intellect and decision makers must not remain



fixated on pursuing single approach. They should be open to changing the strategy and approach based on shifting ground realities.

### **Counterinsurgent Approach Against Religiously Radicalised and Proxy Movements**

Instillation of a "respect for life", and "practice of non-violence, moderation, dialogue and cooperation" is unlikely to have any impact on religiously radicalised violent extremist groups and trans-border insurgent/ terrorist groups. The above mentioned three approaches may backfire by provoking more resistance than it suppresses, especially when insurgents/ terrorists are religiously radicalised. It does require a potent military campaign but also require strong and convincing battle of narrative/ war of perception. The gestation period to defeat the ruthless violent extremist's movement is long and so far most of the religiously radicalised movements continue to simmer. One of the major challenges for the counterinsurgent forces is "mental reconstruction" of radicalised youths or those who are in the process of being radicalised. Thus, it may require all three approaches (enemy centric approach, people centric approach and perception centric approach) applied simultaneously.

When there is a proxy support to violent extremist groups, the approach may differ. Focus along with the International Borders may be hard kills to deter and dissuade the infiltrators. At the same time, rogue state may also be subjected to punitive deterrence. But the same strategy may not yield results while dealing with own population and home-grown insurgents.

### **Understanding Counterinsurgency Efforts**

Counterinsurgency is a misunderstood concept, whereas, it involves a combination of kinetic (that is active military) engagement with insurgents and winning population support.<sup>16</sup> Population centric counterinsurgency is espoused by strategists such as David Galula, David Kilcullen, and David Petraeus, they are unanimous in their opinion on fighting the insurgency i.e. not by focusing on killing insurgents themselves; but rather, by assisting the government in meeting the economic, security, and political needs of the population, thus denying the insurgents the popular support necessary to continue the insurgency.<sup>17</sup> The strongest weapon insurgents possess is support of the masses. Counterinsurgency is often ineffective if support of the masses to insurgent is not weakened. The solution for unrest is usually political changes, not military intervention. Combat alone cannot solve fundamental instability.<sup>18</sup> Dealing with the counterinsurgency with conventional military approach is counterproductive. It adds further complications to the pursuance of peace and resolution of



conflict. There is also a lack of clear end state or political objective as a result in some cases, it can backfire and worsen a situation.

Counterinsurgency often lacks a clear end state; the objectives of state should be 'peace' and 'stability'. The counterinsurgent forces (administration, political leadership, security forces and intelligence agencies) need to be clear that insurgents are vanguards of the movement— the ideologues, separatists, and disaffected population are the real architects and stakeholders and beneficiaries of instability. Ultimately it is politics behind the violent extremism that needs to be exposed and illusion or false hope demystified by earnestly redressing the political, economic and social grievances of the population. Therefore, along with the military operations, counterinsurgency should endeavour to initiate the process of rebuilding trust and moral bond between state and the subjects. The counterinsurgency process must lead to building society and reaffirmation of faith of the people in the government. Weakening of insurgent campaign does not mean elimination of insurgents/extremists, but it also involves disruption in recruitment of new cadres, denial of access to population centres, denial and disruption of supply of weapons, ammunition, logistics and finances. Ultimate objective of counterinsurgency is to control physical and human terrain and it certainly cannot be done by force alone. It needs to be clearly comprehended that the problem of insurgencies is a political one, requiring solutions which includes political elements beyond a simple response by force.<sup>19</sup> Today defeat and victory in insurgency is decided by war of perception. Management of cognitive space is as essential as the military and civic actions.

### **Strategic Objectives of Counterinsurgency Operations**

There should be tactical and doctrinal clarity in the minds of the commanders operating at strategic, operational and tactical level. All three levels of command have different role and charter. Tactical commanders would be focused to eliminate the insurgents whereas, strategic and operational commanders should focus on elimination of insurgency. The objectives of strategic and operational leaders in dealing with counterinsurgency are as under:-

- Kinetic force cannot possibly act as a binding factor; rather it drives insurgents/people away from the government. Elimination of insurgents is not elimination of insurgency. Elimination can only suppress violence, impact is temporary and is unlikely to establish enduring peace.



- Most significant objective is to disengage public from the insurgents and reintegrate the disaffected/disengaged section of population with the state. Reintegration certainly cannot be achieved by deterrence or force; it can only be achieved by deliverance of governance and redressal of grievances.
- Strategic leaders must work to undertake actions in coordination with other agencies to dismantle organisational network, degrade war waging potential and defeat insurgency.
- Disable capacity building— denial of weapons, ammunition, funding, safe haven and cadres (drying up of recruitment of new cadres). This would require close integration of intelligence agencies with security forces.
- Defining the end state as to how the counterinsurgent forces want to see the state in near future.
- "The security forces must never forget the fact that it is the enemy that serve as source of supply of ammunition and arms to the rebels".<sup>20</sup> Objective should be to sever links with an enemy state.
- Strategic leadership should endeavour to make counterinsurgency efforts as moral compass which extends beyond the counterinsurgency force to act as a bridge between people and the government. This can be done when there is transparency, mechanism for redressal of grievances and good conduct of the counterinsurgent forces.
- Strategic and operational leaders must discontinue the practice of calling it as counterinsurgency operations but rather they should term it as counterinsurgency efforts because these actions encompass both civil and military measures to rebuild society and the state.
- Counterinsurgency is building a society and building trust between the state and the subjects. Strategic leadership must endeavour to focus on efforts to build a society free from coercion and mistrust.

### **Tactical Objectives**

There is a school of thought that "first defeat the enemy, and all else will follow".<sup>21</sup> Tactical operations are mandatory to keep the violence at manageable limit but it loses its impact if they are dragged for a prolonged period. The objective is to bring the security to the area so that people can benefit from security dividend. Tactical objectives are to ultimately create



safe and secure environment for people to pursue social, economic and political activities without fear and coercion. Following are the tactical objectives of counterinsurgency efforts:-

- Create secure environment by protecting civil population.
- The concept of operations should be 'clear-hold-shape-build'. It will involve disengagement of public from insurgents, cutting the support of the public to the insurgent groups, exposing the corrupt practices and atrocities of the insurgents and assisting state to rebuild infrastructure by providing security for development works.
- Over reaction and indiscriminate use of force is counterproductive. The tactical leaders at times tend to over-react and the victims of this over-reaction invariably become innocent civil public. Such actions lead to increase in support for the insurgents.
- Tactical operations must be focussed on coercion incentives, and control of population. Use coercive power of security forces against insurgent groups, incentive to those who shun the violence and join main stream and control of population not by force but by people friendly operations and civil society. However, control does not mean intruding in private space of the public.
- The main task of the counterinsurgent force would be winning over passive middle-which is the majority-using "a combination of offensive, defensive and stability operations.
- Attrition on insurgent leadership must continue because that affects the morale of the cadres. This attrition should be by intelligence based surgical operations.

## Conclusion

United Nation's Secretary-General indicated that there is a "need to take a more comprehensive approach which encompasses not only ongoing, essential security-based counterinsurgency/counterterrorism measures, but also systematic preventative measures which directly address the drivers of violent extremism".<sup>22</sup> Competition in coercion with insurgent/ terrorists is not a correct strategy. Insurgents can coerce and use disproportionate force against unarmed civilian population but counterinsurgency forces must avoid such an approach. In fact counterinsurgency is low intensity conflict with high intensity clash of intellect. Neither of the approaches mentioned above in isolation is an answer to conflict resolution/ establishment of enduring peace.



General Sir Gerald Templer, British High Commissioner in Malaya during 1952–54, sought to explain the key to victory in the Malayan counterinsurgency campaign and stated: “The answer lies not in pouring more troops into the jungle, but in the hearts and minds of the Malayan People”.<sup>23</sup> The counterinsurgent forces must understand that legitimacy is a finite object: the more legitimacy the insurgent gains, the less are left for the government.<sup>24</sup> The counterinsurgency forces continue to operate on the incorrect assumption that improvements in material conditions are the key to winning hearts and minds and thereby gaining the legitimacy needed for victory. Idea of counterinsurgency is to acquire legitimacy and consent by ideology, notion of just cause, and a sense of “we sacrificing for your peace”. The insurgents do not always win, actually they usually lose. But their defeats can rarely be attributed to counterinsurgency warfare.<sup>25</sup>

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Counterinsurgency: Fighting Back”, *Fernam Street Blog*, Available at:

<https://fs.blog/2017/06/counterinsurgency/>, Accessed on October 26, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Thor Olson, *Some of the Best Weapons for Counterinsurgents Do Not Shoot*, US Army War College: Lulu.com, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> N 1.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Parker, “Avoiding Terrorist Trap”, *World Scientific*, Book Review, July 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Egnell, “Winning ‘Hearts and Minds’? A Critical Analysis of Counter-Insurgency Operations in Afghanistan”, *Civil Wars*, Vol 10, Issue 3, 2010, p. 284.

<sup>6</sup> Russell W. Glenn, *Counterinsurgency in a Test Tube: Analyzing the Success of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI)*, California: Rand Corporation, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> N.1.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Happymon Jacob, “A blueprint for a National Security Strategy”, *The Hindu*, May 23, 2019, Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/a-blueprint-for-a-national-security-strategy/article27211062.ece>, Accessed on October 26, 2020..

<sup>10</sup> Paul Dixon, “Beyond Hearts and Minds: Perspectives on Counterinsurgency” In Paul Dixon (Ed.), *The British Approach to Counterinsurgency*: London: Palgrave macmillan, 2012, p.52.

<sup>11</sup> Marina Miron, “On irregular wars, insurgencies and how to counter them: enemy and population-centric approaches in comparative perspective”, *Revista Científica General Jose Maria Cordova*, Vol. 17, No. 27, July/Sept. 2019, Available at: [http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?pid=S1900-65862019000300456&script=sci\\_arttext&tlng=en](http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?pid=S1900-65862019000300456&script=sci_arttext&tlng=en), Accessed on October 26, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Brouns, “Why a ‘Population-Centric’ Approach Doesn’t Go Far Enough”, *Centre for International Governance Innovation*, Available at: <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/why-population-centric-approach-doesnt-go-far-enough>, Accessed on October 7, 2020.



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- <sup>15</sup> “Two Schools Of Classical Counterinsurgency”, *Small War Journal*, January 27, 2007, Available at: <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/two-schools-of-classical-counterinsurgency#:~:text=These%20two%20contrasting%20schools%20of,a%20variant%20of%20conventional%20warfare>, Accessed on October 7, 2020.
- <sup>16</sup> Lillian Figg-Franzoi, “Learning How Not to Scare People: The Paradox of Counterinsurgency”, *E-International Relations*, February 20, 2015, Available at: <https://www.e-ir.info/2015/02/20/learning-how-not-to-scare-people-the-paradox-of-counterinsurgency/>, Accessed on October 7, 2020.
- <sup>17</sup> Martin Myklebust and Tom Ordeman, “Six Requirements for Success in Modern Counterinsurgency”, *Small War Journal*, July 07, 2013, Available at: <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/six-requirements-for-success-in-modern-counterinsurgency>, Accessed on October 7, 2020.
- <sup>18</sup> N. 1.
- <sup>19</sup> Hugh Simson identifies the politicization of war in his *British Rule and Rebellion* published in 1937, observing the IRA in Ireland and the revolt in Palestine between 1936 and 1939.
- <sup>20</sup> Myklebust, N 16.
- <sup>21</sup> Brouns, N 14.
- <sup>22</sup> UNODC, “Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PVE/CVE)”, Doha Declaration, General Assembly report A/70/674, para. 6).
- <sup>23</sup> Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency 1948–1960*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp.1–2.
- <sup>24</sup> Miron N.11.
- <sup>25</sup> “Edward Luttwak’s Counterinsurgency Malpractice”, *Small War Journal*, April 15, 2007, Available at: <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/edward-luttwaks-counterinsurgency-malpractice>, Accessed on October 7, 2020.

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