

DEFEATING INSURGENTS WITH TECHNOLOGY

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AS THE United States military looks to the future, two themes dominate most projections. The first is advanced technology. Underwritten by the microchip, the technologies of war are changing rapidly. Weapons with microprecision accuracy, supercomputers linked by unlimited bandwidth, platforms providing continuous surveillance of practically any spot on the digitally mapped earth—all are coming into view. These emerging technologies are combining to produce orders-of-magnitude increases in military capabilities. Adm William Owens, vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, calls this “The Emerging System of Systems,” spawning a new revolution in military affairs.¹ Understanding the ramifications of this revolution is an immense challenge for US military planners.

The second trend facing the US military involves insurgencies. For the past 50 years, insurgencies have been the most common type of war. Wars in Afghanistan, Angola, Bosnia, Chechnya, Liberia, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Vietnam, and many similar conflicts pitted insurgent groups against established governments. This course will likely continue. Trends in demographics, economics, and technology all indicate continued worldwide instability as many nations grapple with exploding populations, stagnant economies, and centuries of ethnic hatred. Although conventional aggression (such as the Korean War and the Gulf War) will continue to threaten US interests, insurgencies will probably persist as the most likely form of conflict in which US military forces may be called upon to fight.

A major challenge for American military planners is to reconcile these twin themes of technology and insurgency. Some may argue that the two themes are mutually exclusive—that using high technology against guerrillas is pointless. However, that argument is not entirely true. As curious as it may sound, a guide for using modern technology to defeat insurgency was provided 60 years ago by a master of guerrilla warfare—Mao Tse-tung.

Mao taught us that insurgencies must transit three phases before gaining victory: strategic defensive, stalemate, and strategic offensive. During the first phase, insurgents use guerrilla tactics to sap the will and strength of government forces. They raid when possible and retreat when necessary. During the second phase—stalemate—neither side can conduct major offensives. A sense of futility or endlessness seeps into the government's troops and populace. Casualties and costs mount, with no decision in sight. During this second phase, insurgents build up their strength and retrain their guerrillas. When government forces and morale are sufficiently weakened by stalemate, the insurgents launch the strategic offensive, using conventional maneuver attacks with organized army units. Their goal in this third phase is to defeat government forces and exercise political control over territory. Mao insisted that an insurgency *must* transit all three phases to gain victory.

The major point here—one that is poorly understood by some defense professionals—is that insurgents must eventually adopt a conventional posture in order to finally “win.” According to Mao, insurgents in the first and second phases can only weaken government forces; they can't win. To replace an existing government, insurgents must eventually shed their guerrilla tactics and fight as a conventional force. Governments may be weakened during the first two phases, but they won't fall without a final “push.” It's the goal of the first two phases to impair the government to the point that a strategic offensive has a chance of victory.

The concept that guerrilla warfare is an end to itself and that guerrilla activities can be divorced from those of regular forces is incorrect. . . .



Mao Tse-tung

Guerrilla operations during the anti-Japanese war may for a certain time and temporarily become its paramount feature, particularly insofar as the enemy's rear is concerned. However, if we view the war as a whole, there can be no doubt that *our regular forces are of primary importance, because it is they alone who are capable of producing this favorable decision.* (Emphasis added)

—Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*

Reflecting Mao's theory, the Khmer Rouge, Vietminh, Vietcong, and Afghan Muj all started fighting as guerrillas but eventually fought strategic offensives as organized units. More recently, we saw the Bosnian Serb insurgents evolve into an organized army with heavy weapons. All of these insurgents used tanks, artillery, logistics bases, command and control nodes, and so forth, in their final (strategic offensive) campaigns. In so doing, they reflected Mao's theory: insurgents must eventually organize, equip, and fight as a conventional army.

Contrary to many impressions, insurgents can't remain guerrillas indefinitely and expect to win. Only a concerted offensive can topple a po-

litical system. Terrorism may cause great damage, but it won't overthrow a regime. This is why the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) have failed to win, despite inflicting substantial damage. Neither progressed to a strategic offensive. In addition, by staying indefinitely in the guerrilla stage, insurgents practically ensure their eventual defeat. This was Che Guevara's mistake in Bolivia. State security forces eventually hunted him down in 1967. Abimael Guzman's *Sendero Luminoso* in Peru also remained in the guerrilla mode too long. His arrest in 1993 caused the insurgency to collapse. The lesson is clear: given enough time, state security forces will eventually kill or capture guerrilla leadership. The few exceptions, such as Fidel Castro's victory without an offensive in Cuba, are just that—exceptions. In order to win and survive, guerrillas must progress to the strategic offensive phase.

As long as insurgents remain guerrillas (in the first two stages of insurgency), they remain difficult to target with American weapons. Small groups intermingled with the populace are poor targets for foreign military forces, whether the latter be special forces, infantry divisions, cruise missiles, or bombers. If anything, Vietnam taught the US military the high cost of applying military force against guerrillas. However, once insurgents move to the third phase—the strategic offensive—they change from a guerrilla posture to that of a conventional army operating without air cover. In so doing, the insurgents present a key weakness to modern, high-technology weapons—especially those delivered by air. *This third and final stage is the insurgents' crucial weakness.* Should the US decide to commit military forces against an insurgency, it should wait until the insurgents commit to the strategic offensive. Such a delay requires patience; the US has an understandable tendency to get involved at the early stages of most wars. However, this third stage exposes the insurgents' greatest vulnerability to US military power. When insurgents launch conventional operations, they become exposed to crushing defeat.

Emerging US technology weapons are proficient at detecting and destroying unprotected surface forces. Modern surveillance systems can detect even modest troop concentrations, logistics, and command structures. Satellites and unmanned aerial vehicles can monitor movements of large surface forces without putting US personnel at risk. Manned aircraft, operating from third countries, can supplement these platforms. Aircraft orbits can be offset 100 or 200 miles to reduce their chances of attrition to near zero. Working together, these surveillance systems can track and target surface forces with high fidelity. Small detachments will surely escape detection, but battalion-sized forces—the type Mao said are mandatory for insurgent victory—will be seen.

Insurgencies will probably persist as the most likely form of conflict in which US military forces may be called upon to fight.

Once pinpointed by US surveillance systems, insurgent forces and infrastructure can be attacked by precision missiles and bombs. The US military currently has 300,000 precision missiles and bombs in its inventories or under contract²—more than enough for several insurgencies. These weapons have the capability to strike specific insurgent targets with low risk of casualties to the larger population. Because political support is a center of gravity for all combatants in an insurgency, such care is mandatory. By using precision weapons, the US can destroy the heavy weapons, logistics, and command structure of the insurgents without alienating crucial political support in the process.

This combination of Maoist theory and US high-technology weaponry presents any insurgent with a conundrum. According to Mao, insurgents must eventually become a conventional army in order to topple an existing government. However, as soon as insurgents change to a conventional army, they become vulnerable to detection and destruction by US high-technology

weapons. Thus, the insurgents are left with two unsatisfactory options: remain on the strategic defensive (in which case they cannot win) or progress to the strategic offensive stage (in which case they face certain destruction by US weapons).

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As long as the US employs high-technology weapons from the relative sanctuary of the air, insurgents can do little to stop the attacks. Missiles and aircraft can launch from bases at sea or in third countries, outside the reach of the insurgents. Aircraft at high altitude can operate outside the range of most surface-to-air missiles (SAM) available to insurgents. Although a few airplanes will almost certainly be shot down (such as the F-16 in Bosnia flown by Capt Scott O'Grady), losses should be slight. Aircraft can suppress the small number of insurgent-operated SAMs and can fly outside the range of insurgent guns. Despite such high-altitude operations, modern aircraft have proven capabilities for delivering precision weapons. For example, in August/September 1995, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) aircraft (primarily American) dropped 1,026 bombs on 338 Bosnian Serb targets.³ Only one aircraft was lost (a French Mirage 2000K), and collateral damage was insignificant. The Bosnian Serbs, on the other hand, lost crucial equipment, logistics, and command infrastructure. It was not a fair fight. This operation demonstrated how high-technology weapons can remain beyond the insurgents' reach yet still have substantial effect.

If used alone, independent of US ground forces, high-technology weapons launched from the relative sanctuary of the air could indefinitely deny insurgents any chance of victory—as long as US political will remains intact (a status undetermined by high casualties or promises of quick

victory). However, by making the mistake of inserting ground forces during any stage of the insurgency, the US would present the insurgents with a proven method for removing the US totally from any further operations. That weakness is US casualties.⁴

The US track record for casualty tolerance in insurgencies is very consistent. Without clear risks to national interests, the American public has little stomach for US casualties. The lessons of Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia are plain. Knowing this fact, insurgents would pay a heavy price—possibly including suicide attacks—to inflict US casualties. In the past, such attacks have usually triggered political crises in the US. To resolve such crises, presidents almost always order withdrawals and are loath to reintroduce any type of military force—including high-technology airpower—at a later date. Once the US withdraws from a war, it seldom reenters it. By targeting US ground forces, insurgents could dissuade the US from employing its high-technology air forces.

Does this mean the US can use its high-technology airpower to force/coerce/win an insurgency? No, it doesn't. The US goal against insurgents should be neither "victory" nor "coercion" within a short time period. Those goals are beyond the attainment of foreign forces—whether they be ground, air, or naval forces. As evidenced by the longevity of the IRA and PLO, insurgents can always revert to the strategic defensive and then fight as long as they wish (or until they are killed/captured). In the final analysis, only indigenous government forces can exert long-term political control over a country. As a foreign power, the US will never be able to force a complete victory over insurgents.

Does this mean the US should just stand by and watch during the first two stages of insurgency? Of course not. Early in the war, the US can assist indigenous governments with security assistance by providing equipment, intelligence information, and training to government forces. It can provide this help over a long period of time with little risk of US casualties. By giving the indigenous government additional means to counter insurgents in the strategic defensive (i.e., guerrilla

and stalemate phases, the US may decisively affect the outcome of the war.

Can high-technology airpower do more than just deny victory? In some cases, yes. Depending on terrain and the quality of the indigenous army, US airpower may degrade insurgents to the point that they go on the strategic defensive. We saw this happen in the autumn of 1995 in Bosnia. Although the Bosnian Serbs were on a general offensive during the spring and summer of 1995, the introduction of NATO (primarily US) airpower against Bosnian Serb heavy weapons, logistics, and command facilities stopped this offensive (i.e., produced a stalemate). With the Bosnian Serbs weakened, the Muslim and Croat forces went on their own offensives, actually putting the Bosnian Serbs on the strategic defensive. The difference in this war was high-technology airpower; it tipped the balance in favor of the Muslim and Croat forces. Precise air strikes did more than just deny an insurgent victory by halting the Bosnian Serb offensive. It also weakened the insurgents to the point that government troops could break the stalemate.

Driving insurgents into the strategic defensive is situation dependent, requiring a credible indigenous ground force capable of offensive operations. But the ability of high-technology airpower to stop insurgent offensives is a constant. For this reason, it's important to emphasize *the ability of high-technology airpower to deny insurgent victory over an extended time with minimal risk of US casualties*⁵—a valuable capability. A recent editorial by Gen Ronald R. Fogelman, the Air Force chief of staff, reflected this theme: "And in most cases, when properly employed, [airpower] can deny an adversary victory. In today's environment, denying an aggressor's war aims at minimum risk to American and coalition forces may often become the primary objective."⁶

In summary, the US can defeat insurgencies by using its high technology to deny the insurgents' strategic offensive. It does this by destroying any massing of men/equipment by the insurgents. Inflicting such destruction is high-technology airpower's decisive role against insurgents. By this means, the US can deny

insurgents any chance for a strategic offensive. The US can force insurgents to remain in the first two phases (strategic defensive and stalemate), where forces of the indigenous government can eventually deal with them (with US security assistance, as needed). Once the insurgents' strategic offensive is rendered impossible, the insurgents must—sooner or later—cut a political deal. The timing is unknown, but it is inevitable.

Sixty years ago, Mao Tse-tung outlined three mandatory stages for insurgent warfare: strategic defensive, stalemate, and strategic offensive. Curiously, he did far more than give insurgents a recipe for success. He also gave governments the blueprints of insurgency. For the US, these blueprints reveal a fatal weakness in any insurgency—the strategic offensive, which US high-technology airpower can exploit. By using this airpower to deny insurgents any chance of a successful strategic offensive, the US can deny victory indefinitely. Thus, the US can take advantage of its high-technology edge, its "system of systems," to decisively negate the type of war it will most likely encounter—insurgency.

Notes

1. Adm William A. Owens, "The Emerging System of Systems," US Naval Institute Proceedings, May 1995, 35–39.

2. "Precision Guided Munitions in Inventory, Production, and Development," Report no. B-260458 (Washington, D.C.: General Accounting Office, 23 June 1995), 12–13.

3. Fact sheet, Public Affairs Office, Allied Forces Southern Europe, Naples, Italy, 6 November 1995.

4. Another insurgent option is to take hostages, who may be American civilians or foreign peacekeepers. Contrary to popular perceptions, however, hostage taking has limited utility during the insurgents' offensive. Hostages can dissuade attacks on existing gains, but they won't dissuade attacks on maneuver units—unless they are moved with those units.

5. US staying power over an extended period of time will usually be necessary as the war moves

among the three phases of insurgency at varying rates in different parts of the country.

6. "What Air Power Can Do in Bosnia," Wall Street Journal, 11 October 1995, 15.

There is only one thing which will really train the human mind and that is the voluntary use of the mind by the man himself. You may aid him, you may guide him, you may suggest to him, and above all you may inspire him; but the only thing worth having is that which he gets by his own exertions, and what he gets is proportionate to the effort he puts into it.

—A. Lawrence Lowell

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