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***Modelling the 'violence paradox' in irregular warfare
and terrorism***

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Abstract

Although the motives for committing violent acts in an irregular or terrorist campaign are often assumed to include 'irrational', 'cultural' or 'ideological' factors, these concepts cannot explain all of the complex dynamics involved. Ironically, one of the decisive factors, the strategic utility of violence, is rarely explored in the modelling of these forms of conflict. The 'violence paradox' endeavours to explain core motives for committing violence as a deliberate (and often instinctive) attempt to erode the legitimacy of the host nation by targeting its claim to provide safety and security for its citizens. The successful insurgency or terrorist campaign demonstrates the failure of the state it opposes without alienating either its core or potential supporters. The failed insurgency fades into obscurity or finds that the atrocities committed by its supporters actually increases support for the beleaguered regime. This paper seeks to explore the history and dynamics of the violence paradox and its implications for modelling insurgent or terrorist campaigns.

Introduction

[...] [R]evolutionary power tends to derive primarily from the capability to subvert, tear down, or destroy the incumbent regime and/or the existing social system. There is little question of legitimacy involved. The effective practise of revolutionary warfare, often in the form of extensive terrorism, may have

little relation to the desires of the people or their grievances... The Regime must govern adequately as well as fight, whereas the revolutionary forces need only disrupt government functions and fight a revolutionary war sufficiently sustained and effective to wear down the regime and the patience of the population...¹

The motives for committing violent acts in an irregular (or terrorist) campaign are often assumed to include 'irrational', 'cultural' or 'ideological' factors. While useful for making broad-brush assumptions about insurgents, these concepts cannot explain all of the social dynamics involved in their decision-making process. For example, a complex cultural context does not make violent conflict inevitable but it can provide the context for a range of contributory factors that initiate or intensify the violence. In another example, culture, often seen as a key factor, can explain how both sides maintain the emotional momentum of the conflict but it is difficult to see how culture alone provides a payoff to counterbalance the damage created by the continuing disorder. Given the long duration of these violent campaigns, whatever the cultural circumstances, a more general and prosaic explanation is required; one that is based on strategic utility.

While it is possible to oppose a regime through non-violence, and an insurgency can be based on a justified reaction against a tyrannical regime, this paper focuses on scenarios where a state, insurgents or terrorists consciously utilise propaganda of the deed to achieve their objectives.

The Role of Strategic Utility

Violence does not always elicit a response that assigns the entire blame for an action to the perpetrator; where the state's legitimacy is in question, the blame for an outbreak of violence may even be assigned to the force that 'failed to protect' the victim. Therefore, directing attacks to symbolically undermine the claim of a regime that it protects the populace can benefit the insurgent or terrorist even if the attack has little direct strategic effect (a useful recent example is the Taliban setting off a few improvised explosive devices in Eastern Afghanistan and then claiming to have 'surrounded Kabul'). Understanding the dynamics of this paradox might illuminate the decisions made by both terrorists and insurgents and offer insights into potential counter-strategies.

The violence paradox described above dates back to the earliest conflicts and the origins of organised warfare. It is predicated on the idea that success in conflict often enables an established 'military elite' to claim that it controls a region or populace in return for the provision of security – a paradigm shift in the evolution of governance that is arguably one of the foundations of legitimacy. While a nascent state can claim to provide a range of services (religious, ideological, economic) to a populace, monopolising the provision of security is the only one that enables undisputed control of the key functions of the state. It could even be argued that the evolution of the state is inextricably linked to the establishment and sustainment of the monopoly of violence by the state's security apparatus. The inherent weakness of claiming that the state can provide security is that it must be continuously upheld to retain its power and those that oppose the elite that control the state only have to succeed a few times

to shatter the illusion. Modern states continue to claim the same core justification for their authority and therefore suffer from the same challenges².

Control therefore depends on demonstrating that the state provides security and inevitably, many of these methods used to demonstrate the effectiveness of the state's provision of security are symbolic. A police force will therefore claim to provide overall security but support this assertion by being visible at key locations or at key events, optimising their limited ability to protect every potential target by focusing on a few. Unfortunately for the state, eliminating soft targets that have little operational or strategic impact can still have a huge political impact as a clear failure to protect the populace can be seen as invalidating the basis of the authority of the state. If the state is careless with its security narrative or misjudges the popular perception of either its authority or capability, a few well-judged attacks can transform the strategic situation and threaten the fundamental basis of both the regime and the constitutional structures that they use to justify their ascendancy.

For example, Chechen insurgents, aware that they cannot fight the Russian Army directly, have deliberately targeted symbolic targets in Moscow to show that their enemy is 'weak' and open to attack. The operational reality is that protecting every potential target is impossible to achieve but the symbolic impact of a successful attack can influence the strategic narrative.

It is also important to note that, while the insurgent or terrorist has a wealth of potential soft targets that can be used to undermine the claims of the state, the violence paradox can be a two-edged sword. Due to the cell structure that makes an insurgency difficult to crush, sporadic arbitrary violence by overenthusiastic cell commanders can lead to the alienation of key elements of the populace that the insurgent or terrorist leadership wishes to subvert. In some situations, atrocities can even strengthen the insurgency; for example as the deliberate targeting of a 'scapegoat' might inspire the established core supporters of the violent campaign even though the deed itself alienates potential allies or external observers. In the long term, as the campaign unfolds, uncontrolled and unplanned atrocities against the group or community labelled as the enemy can intensify until it leads to outrage and an eventual backlash from those who come to identify the supporters of unregulated violence as a greater threat than the regime (particularly when the insurgents increasingly target the community that 'fails' to support them). Rupert Smith noted this dynamic during in the Bosnian War in the 1990s. "The Bosnian Serbs (were) seemingly unaware that however much the coverage of their deeds might please them and their domestic audience, it revolted the external viewer"³. Inevitably, the Bosnian Muslims skilfully exploited this error in their strategic communications plan. A misjudgement by Belgrade therefore contributed to the assumption, by the media (and other ill-informed outsiders), that the Serbs were the only significant perpetrators of atrocities in the conflict.

A focus on symbolic targets can prove counterproductive if the state in question resists the urge to increase the level of violence to intolerable levels and is able to absorb the damage being inflicted; particularly where the level of violence is such that it provides just enough 'own community' satisfaction to perpetuate the campaign but not enough damage to threaten the authority of the state. The Provisional Irish Republican Army and Ulster Volunteer Force campaigns during 'The Troubles',

although highly unpleasant, rarely strayed from being a sporadic series of symbolic attacks on peripheral (and usually soft) targets. Increasing the level of violence would have alienated wider support for the extremists but the focus on satisfying their supporters by targeting a small number of symbolic targets meant that both campaigns continued for decades. Even though the two campaigns did incalculable damage to the economic and cultural potential of Ulster neither was ever a genuine threat to the established order in the United Kingdom. Their problem was that while the UK state made enough errors to inspire sectarian violence, it adapted quickly enough (however slowly this process appeared to those that experienced it) to address the core issues that the extremists used to justify their campaigns; leaving them isolated and unable to intensify their campaigns without alienating their relatively meagre support.

Demonstrating the State's Weakness

Targeting the populace has been used in state versus state conflicts since the earliest recorded conflicts. When a state gains its authority from a contractual, and later a constitutional, relationship based upon its claim to be the protector of the populace, it cannot afford to allow an opponent to devastate its territory without contesting the intrusion. Examples where a state survives the negative impact of failing to protect territory are rare; the most notable being Pericles convincing the Athenian Ecclesia (assembly) to sanction the abandonment of farmland to the invading Spartans and to rely on the navy to strike back during the Peloponnesian War. For example, William of Normandy used the devastation of King Harold's own lands to force him into battle before his army could rest after the Battle of Stamford Bridge. This strategic concept continued throughout the medieval period with the vast majority of campaigns being based on demonstrating or undermining claims that rulers could provide security to key regions (defending Plantagenet territory or contesting the possessions of others, Richard I fought only three field battles in a military career spanning 27 years). This process reached an apogee during the 100 Years War when English kings habitually used the infamous *chevauchée* (a large scale raid designed to penetrate deep into enemy territory and wreak havoc) to demonstrate the weakness of the Valois dynasty.

Even in the modern era, armies and irregulars have utilised the devastation of territories ostensibly under the protection of their enemies to force them to fight or to undermine their authority. The Duke of Marlborough forced the Elector of Bavaria and his French allies to stand and fight at Blenheim in 1704 by resorting to a ruthless policy of ravaging the Elector's territory. Sherman's 'March to the Sea' through Georgia in 1864 was as much about shattering Confederate morale as it was about disrupting the South's capacity to wage war⁴. The strategy continued to prove useful in the Twentieth Century, with Carl Spaatz's fighter escorts drawing the Luftwaffe into attritional battles over the Reich as they desperately tried to interdict the USAAF bomber offensive⁵.

Internal Enemies

A nascent state claiming a monopoly of violence cannot afford to allow internal enemies to conduct violent campaigns within its territory⁶. As a result, early states ruthlessly crushed regions or groups that challenged the unified state's monopoly

of violence. Examples include James I of England's (VI of Scotland) campaign to break the Border Reivers⁷, the execution of the Comte de Bouteville (on the orders of Cardinal Richelieu) being used to inspire obedience amongst the fractious French nobility and the near annihilation of the rebellious Streltsy bodyguard by Peter the Great in 1689⁸. This process often grows increasingly systematic as the state evolves, with arbitrary brutality being gradually replaced by the deliberate policy of 'slighting' centres of resistance (degrading the defensive capacity) and the building of roads to facilitate the movement of trade, armies and materiel⁹. Inevitably, resistance to this process is often romanticised and relatively minor rebels and bandits are sometimes imbued with improbable heroic qualities by their admirers¹⁰. This friction between the often chaotic evolution of the state and the archaic (and often violent) communities that it supplanted is the foundation for a peculiar but pernicious myth that any resistance to the 'inherently oppressive' state is intrinsically laudable. A myth, when it ignores the context in which such events occur, that sometimes credits the successful assassin and the most common of criminals with a status their actions do not merit and creates the illusion that any minor success against a state is a threat to its existence.

The Power of Myth

In fragile or evolving states, internal predators masquerading as heroic rebels conveniently omit the negative impact of their own activities when they are creating the mythology upon which their campaign is based. Their target is the centralising authority which is attempting to moderate their predation and any structure that underpins the peaceful development of the state. While anarchy and destruction appear nightmarish on the outside, a few predators profit from the situation and these groups have little interest in the paradigm shifting to a situation where opportunities for exploiting the chaos are undermined by inconvenient improvements in the quality of governance¹¹. Demonstrating that the state cannot protect the populace therefore has the double advantage of undermining the regime and legitimising the insurgent's own violent (and often profitable) activities.

It is worth noting that, in a number of counter-insurgency (COIN) campaigns, technological advantages for Blue have proven to be narrative tools for Red. Laser guided munitions, designed to reduce civilian casualties, are presented as examples of the deliberate targeting of innocents when their targeting systems fail ("you tell me you can see a pen on the ground from the sky with a plane, why can't you not kill civilians") and drones are presented as murderous and inhuman machines unleashed by societies incapable of taking on the insurgent on their own ground.

Exploring the Paradox

The main effect of the violence paradox is that security forces, engaged against the insurgency, share some of the opprobrium with the perpetrators of violence. The degree of this share is dependent on a number of factors:

- The degree to which the level of violence outrages potential supporters of the insurgency (this is a risk for ideological insurgencies which often profit

from the fanaticism created by their ideology/belief but sometimes suffer from the negative consequences created by the over-enthusiastic actions of their adherents)

- The ‘symbolic’ or ‘expressive’ nature of the target (or the date) and the perceived success of the attempt/attack
- Whether the security forces are perceived as failing to provide security or showed little inclination to risk themselves to safeguard civilians
- The claims of the host nation or security forces regarding security
- The level of dependence on ‘outsiders’ - who will be seen as being less interested in local concerns (and may even be seen as the ‘traditional’ or ‘real’ enemy)
- The sophistication of the media narrative presented by both sides both before and after the attack

The importance of symbolism and the claims made by both sides highlights the vital role of the media environment in establishing and shaping the impact of the violence paradox. Theoretically, the media can highlight the arbitrary cruelty of the attack, explain the contextual nature of the insurgent’s choice of target, demonstrate the wider activities of the security forces and focus attention of the state’s success in defending itself. All too often, the media (most usually due to editorial bias or wilful incompetence) excuses the level of violence, exaggerates the strategic impact of the attack (“Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) is cut off” by a handful of IEDs) and denigrates the actions of the host nation’s security forces by suggesting they will always be dependent on foreign assistance.

The violence paradox is central to understanding why the ‘propaganda of the deed’ has strategic utility and its impact is most apparent in the reaction of both the global and local media environments. Modelling insurgency without the media being included is highly counter-productive. Failing to address the impact of competing narratives in an insurgency campaign removes much of the relevance of ‘expressive’ strategies for the insurgent and undermines the effective evaluation of poorly articulated counter-insurgency campaign plans. In particular, it omits the counter-productive impact of coalition forces on the host nation’s claim to safeguard its own population – thus reinforcing the impression that the state is not capable of taking responsibility for its own security and, all too often, unifying opposition to the ‘outsiders’.

Red targeting and coalition Strategic Communications analysis should therefore take account of the strategic impact of ‘security failure’ and recognise, for example, that attacks directed ‘at the centre’ of the state can counter large-scale military deployments in the insurgent heartland. As noted above, an excellent example of this dynamic is the Chechen separatist terrorist attacks on Moscow which are used to demonstrate that Russian conventional military operations failed to eliminate the ability of the separatists to strike back at the centre of their enemy’s capital¹². Analysis should also be cognisant of the potential for outrageous acts in alienating their own support. The shift in the Iraq insurgency after the Anbar Awakening in 2006, or the revulsion that followed the Omagh Bombing in 1998, both show that the violence paradox loses its impact after an exceptionally violent atrocity, or a complete collapse in security, and the backlash can sweep away years of struggle. The long term erosion of confidence in the host nation’s ability to provide security can even lead to spoiler factions replacing the host nation as providers of security for their own communities and to the development of parallel governance structures (“shadow governance”).

How can we reverse the paradox?

The violence paradox is strategy exploited by those who cannot contest the power of the state directly; an asymmetric strategy using the determination of a few to overcome the foundations of the state. While this ‘perception/narrative’ approach is highly effective it is also fragile. The optimum impact of the paradox is obtained by killing enough ‘political targets’ to illustrate the weakness of the state while avoiding actions that alienate support. This fragility offers the counter-insurgent a range of counter-strategies to undermine or negate the impact of the paradox.

Violent insurgent campaigns can be challenged to prove they can provide a genuine alternative. Few insurgent groups (and even fewer terrorists) are capable of effective governance and their failure to articulate policy or adequately administer areas under their control can be used to demonstrate the fundamental weaknesses in their political claim to present an alternative to the existing government¹³. The wider negative impact of terrorist/insurgent activities can (and should) be highlighted so that the perception of attacks on the population and infrastructure are put into perspective. Examples include the negative impact of the IRA campaign on the economy of Northern Ireland and the Taliban’s self-defeating policy of targeting traditional structures as well as the regime – such strategies often lead to a wider socio-economic failure in the regions they contest. The process of contesting insurgent narratives can thus highlight the importance of cultural sensitivities and underline the importance of being aware of issues that are seen as ‘essential’ by our own culture but offensive to the host population; creating an analytical discourse that enables the identification of potential social and security strategies and the most appropriate approaches to isolating and eliminating the insurgency¹⁴.

If the security forces are expected to fail then every successful attack, even if it occurs in another province, reinforces the wider perception of failure; every success by the insurgent confirming the inadequacy of the host nation’s government. Where such a decline in confidence occurs, the negative perception of the security forces needs to be countered by a carefully structured campaign to highlight the efforts of the police and the military and examples of their willingness to face risks to reduce civilian casualties released to the media. To ensure that the over-simplification inherent in the violence paradox is negated, security contexts and challenges need to be better explained; a panic story suggesting that the detonation of a few bombs around the capital means that the capital is surrounded should be contested vigorously and evidence of corruption or mistreatment need to be countered by such abuses being dealt with quickly and openly. The latter is particularly important when coalition forces are assisting the host nation; damaging events (such as the activities at Abu Graib Prison and outrageous statements by eccentric Western fanatics) will be ruthlessly exploited by spoiler factions and counter-narratives need to be deployed before the damage becomes irreversible. If the host nation and their coalition allies disdain addressing popular concerns highlighted by the insurgent narrative then minor failures of policy and military errors will be used to ‘prove’ that the host nation supports ‘intruders that oppress the populace’ (or target their beliefs) against their own people.

Aware of this weakness, insurgent factions sometimes focus on limited claims based

on core competencies. For example, noting the discontent of ordinary Afghans awaiting decisions from the often sclerotic and corrupt district and provincial courts, the Taliban often claims to be better and more moral providers of justice than GIROA. While such efforts are occasionally made to address popular concerns, insurgents are usually more concerned about ensuring continued support from their core adherents than ensuring the goodwill of the wider populace. In some cases, particularly when tensions already exist, targeting ‘traitors’ or despised communities can increase core support even when it alienates others and this can create the false impression that the insurgents are irrational or mere fanatics. Even if excluded groups are not deliberately targeted it is likely that victims drawn from one of these communities will be seen as being of less value than any casualties received in a security force counter-operation. Finally, convincing a populace of the wider implications of violence can be problematic; clumsy attempts to manipulate the media will invariably backfire¹⁵ and NGOs will continue to attempt to provide neutral aid to all communities thus indirectly sustaining even the most incompetent insurgent (or terrorist) campaigns.

Analysis and Planning Issues

For the purpose of studying counter-insurgency campaigns, it is important to note that the violence paradox can lead to sudden shifts in allegiance. The tipping point will depend on the context and the dynamics of the scenario and will probably be experienced in the form of a ‘punctuated equilibrium’ event (and thus observable only in hindsight) instead of a gradual and measurable process. In most scenarios, the populace is neutral or indifferent to the objectives of the nascent or fragile state. Analysis should therefore take account of groups that are far more focused on perceiving shifts in the overall narrative; ‘Grey’ factions (criminals or clan militias) that depend on their understanding of the balance of power for their survival are usually a more reliable guide to the dynamics of most insurgencies than the media (or even the intelligence services).

Losing the tacit acquiescence of the broadly neutral/disinterested majority of the population can seriously undermine a stabilisation/COIN operation. Planning should therefore take account of those reaction of groups (or individuals) who may be most affected by the perceived failure of the state in safeguarding its populace. As a result it is vital to outline a flexible campaign narrative based upon improving the capability of the host nation’s security and governance apparatus’ ability to adapt to changing circumstances. The potential response of each faction to a range of potential events should be evaluated to see how they would react and counter-narratives prepared for situations that can be exploited by the insurgents. The inherent fragility of the violence paradox should be exposed at every opportunity and the weaknesses in the claims made by the insurgents ruthlessly highlighted. The limits of the evolving security apparatus also need to be explained and perpetrators on either side held to account for any atrocity committed during the crisis. Coalition military forces should therefore endeavour to support and not supplant the host nation’s security forces and focus on assisting in the process of improving both their ethical behaviour and their military capabilities. Finally and most cynically, any briefings on the military effectiveness of any deployed technology should never be left to the manufacturer.

The insurgent/terrorist depends on ignorance, host nation incompetence and an

environment dominated by fear to thrive. The myths that are the ideological basis of their campaign need to be dissected and exposed and, where possible, addressed by reform and development. Insurgents rarely offer a coherent alternative to the state structures they oppose and this weakness can be exploited. Although many religious and ideological issues often prove difficult to counter without support of ‘moderates’, the insurgent claim to provide better governance can almost always be challenged (this dismal incompetence of the both the Taliban and al Shabaab in matters of governance is self-evident). With coherent planning, Security Sector Reform, anti-corruption policies, the enhancement or empowerment of traditional representative mechanisms and a contractual approach to engagement with the established elites; addressing the violence paradox can be used as the basis for establishing a new narrative that increases confidence in the fundamental structures of the state.

Conclusion

By undermining the state’s claim to provide security, the terrorist or insurgent creates the opportunity to thrive on the resulting chaos or to supplant the existing regime. Undermining security does not require the insurgent to target the armed security forces of the state – they merely need to demonstrate that those same forces cannot protect the populace. While the targeted populace may despise the actions of the insurgent, the success of each atrocity further erodes both the legitimacy and effectiveness of the state and creates new opportunities to profit (politically and often financially) from the mayhem. Winning the narrative may depend on resolving the violence paradox and successfully linking the unstable conditions that impede development and reform to the actions of the insurgents.