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Counterinsurgency as Violent Politics in Nepal

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Abstract

At the strategic level, a framework of counterinsurgency demands the synchronised application of instruments of national power-diplomatic, informational, military, and economic. The paper argues that since the threat group unleashing violence is targeting the state both militarily and politically, the strategy of counter must be designed to go beyond military measures and target the adversary comprehensively. This paper will use the framework to analyze Nepal's internal conflict (1996-2006) as it makes an intriguing study for such use, albeit it is understood that any framework is only a guideline and requires continued modification.

Keywords

Insurgency, counterinsurgency, roots, framework, strategy, concept of response

Introduction

Insurgencies and counterinsurgencies (COIN) are a complex, linked political phenomenon requiring logical and systemic approaches. In a dynamic environment, it is a challenge to symbiotically link various actions for the attainment of the political objectives. The effort of a democratic government can be viable only if it takes a whole-of-the-government approach. A strategic framework will aid analysts, commanders, and politicians in understanding the complex military, political, economic, and social context of counterinsurgency.

In Nepal, the insurgency waged by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), CPN (Maoist), provides a useful case for study and framework application. This model discourages the tendency to see the military as the only tool in the approach, which was largely the case in Nepal's conflict and is also in many other conflicts globally.

Analytical Frameworks for Analysis and Actions have been Developed by Several Authors

Bruce Hoffman and Jennifer M. Taw (1992) discuss about all the elements of the counterinsurgency to be integrated and exploited particularly the areas where the strength of the government lies. However, this framework undermines assessment of the problem thus falls short of being a comprehensive approach. David Kilcullen (2010), for instance, outlines a framework having four elements: diagnosis, design, execution, and evaluation. He states that in a given environment, the insurgents and counterinsurgents compete for control over the population. There are some literatures (Adhikari, 2014; Lawoti and Pahari, 2012 and Baral, 2011) that discuss and analyze about the counterinsurgency effort by the Nepali government, however; do not outline the analytical framework to understand the conflict. Thomas A. Marks and David Ucko (2022) have taken a diagnostic and prognostic approach and present a comprehensive framework for analysis and action in irregular warfare, where counterinsurgency is but one of its manifestations. This paper mainly draws from this Marks and Ucko approach (2022) to briefly analyze the Nepal case.

This paper encompasses two key parts. The first part is the estimate of the situation that includes identification of the problem, roots of the problem, frame and narrative by the insurgents, threat groups' strategy and the current response by the government; and the second part includes the strategic response that comprises the concept of response, legal authority, assumptions, implementation of the strategy, risks involved in the planning process and its mitigation. These elements look linear, yet in reality the process is very interactive and iterative.

Estimate of the Situation

Identification of the Problem remains the central challenge in counterinsurgency. The famous Prussian military thinker Carl von Clausewitz writes that the foremost challenge is to discern the nature of the conflict to be fought. In the post-9/11 era, the U.S. was quick to label its fight against the Islamists as the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), which proved to be a distortion of the actual war (Kilcullen, 2005). The war in Afghanistan, which was a component of the GWOT, missed identifying the actual problem on the ground, whether the U.S.-led Coalition partners were engaged in counterterrorism, counterinsurgency.

Turning to Nepal, the government was quick to declare the struggle with the Maoists as combating terrorism, when, in reality, the issue was insurgency, an armed political

campaign to build a new order to challenge the existing order. Terrorism was but one weapon among many for the Maoists. The situation had changed by mid-2003, when Nepal was in a civil war. This misunderstanding of the Maoist problem led the Nepali government to emphasize kinetic effort rather than adopting a mixed kinetic and nonkinetic approach, that is, a whole-of-the-government approach. Use of an analytical framework must begin in this manner, identifying the problem.

Once the nature of the problem is understood, it is logical to ask what has produced it; that is, what are the roots of the problem? Grievances demand solution; a solution which cannot - either in reality or as perceived - be addressed nonviolently, necessarily must be addressed violently. In the Nepali case, the historical symbiosis of poverty, unemployment, untouchability, and caste and ethnic domination produced marginalization, hence alienation, thus demands for resolution of injustice and inequality. State repression, actual and perceived, contributed to an inability for political resolution. Mobilization of the popular demand for resolution took the form of the Maoist insurgency.

It becomes important to understand that grievances of the people alone are not sufficient. Leaders, who emerge within the marginalized elites of rebel society, convince followers, those who comprise the masses, that they have a political way forward. They gain their own knowledge through ideological input. Violence was integral to the proposed way forward to solution of societal grievances. A negotiated relationship between leaders and followers allowed mobilization of an insurgent movement (Scott, 1977).

Maoist ideology provided both diagnosis and prognosis. Through its narratives, it created frames of analysis and action, a lens of assessment. The emerging solution was not merely against the old-order but sought to advance mobilization in support of the legitimacy of the new-order. Joseph Nye and John Arquilla state that “Victory may sometimes depend not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins” (Nye, 2014, p. 20). So, the emphasis is on winning the narrative in order to create the tangible and intangible basis for winning the war.

A frame provides the boundaries and content of the picture of reality it desires an audience to see. As a frame is dynamic, it is constantly being created and altered through the process of “framing.” The formative tools utilised are narratives, stories that provide the actual “pictures” that emerge within the frame. Narrative is understood in terms of story-like features. It is created and understood within a particular socio-cultural context (Levstik,

1995). Narratives are interchangeably used with stories, “the power of narrative” (Yogi, 2016). They can be the means through which support is "mobilised and directed, solidarity sustained and dissidents kept in line, and strategies formulated and disseminated" (Freedman, 2013, p. 430). The dissemination of narratives helps in broader articulation. This has become much effective in the era of generative artificial intelligence (AI).

In Nepal, the frame and narratives were extensively used during the internal conflict to weaken government legitimacy and build insurgent legitimacy. The diagnostic frame was created through narratives of alleged oppression. Necessarily, then, the prognostic frame was created through narratives of “liberation.” Constituent narratives were promulgated in the songs and performances of propaganda units, augmented by indoctrination of mobilized manpower. Cultural context determined vocabulary, forms, and messages.

A frame of “Justice,” for instance, spoke to liberating the masses from the clutches of alleged tyranny. The constituent narratives addressed the issues of differences and distortions within Nepalese society, such as inequities in land distribution and caste, ethnic, and gender issues. The exploitation of such issues helped the Maoists to mobilise political and militant support from the underprivileged groups and regions (ICG, 2005), even as the actual direction came from leadership drawn from marginalized elites. The key targets of such narratives were people, particularly from the marginalised communities, and the key cause was framed as social transformation (Yogi, 2016). The justice frame produced an image of the Maoists as the solution to injustices, and those deprived were assured that their aspirations would be fulfilled under their rule in “New Nepal”. (Joshi, 2007, p. 15)

A framework for assessing this approach – which serves as a template of analysis to examine any insurgency – is offered by Marks and Ucko in their previously cited work. Therein, the operationalization of the strategy does this complex work in a simple manner. Based on various insurgencies across the world, the authors delimit the insurgent ways (or how) of the Ends-Ways-Means detailing of strategy as requiring interrogation of five lines of effort (LOE): political, allies, violence, nonviolence, and international.

Analytically, then, each LOE noted above is comprised of a number of predictable conceptual campaigns. These in turn are made up of operational campaigns. Though it is oversimplifying the matter, it is useful to think of five keys of a piano, each of which can be played as appropriate to the particular score unfolding. The ultimate quest, of course, is to seize state power (Marks, 2007, p. 7).

The Political LOE is the central concern, because it comprises of building and governing an alternative to the existing order (see esp. Lindholm and Zúquete, 2010). The precise form will depend completely upon the moment of examination, hence the common error of labelling the political project as “terrorism,” when in reality that is but one form of enabling violence that conceptually serves to constitute the Violence LOE. In reality, the key to building a new-order is mobilizing manpower and resources.

As the alternative world is built, allies who are not members of the new counter-state, but who share concerns with the systemic challenge, are mobilized through front organizations or simply affiliated bodies. All strata of society (to include labourers, women, ethnic groups, peasants, teachers, intellectuals, and cultural groups) were approached in Nepal.

Emerging mobilization took place behind the shield provided by the Violence LOE. In people’s war, the purpose of violence was to advance, through armed propaganda, the emerging counter-state, while simultaneously defending what had been gained. Ultimately, early use of terrorism and guerrilla warfare developed to support a military effort that took tangible form in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The PLA emerged in full force with the November 2001 attack upon then-RNA at Ghorahi.

Occurring simultaneously and making violence much more effective, even as it weaponized normal processes for expansion and maturation of the counter-state, were the numerous conceptual campaigns that comprised the Nonviolence LOE. Propaganda is well understood conceptually, with its operationalization on the ground taking the form of everything from performance troupes to generation of song, dance, poetry, and even literature. Ultimately, a campaign of “peace” took tangible form in the so-called SPAM (Seven Parties Alliance and the Maoist), which served to mobilize the popular demand for empowerment in opposition to the old-order.

Finally, the International LOE proved of nearly decisive import. On the one hand, internationalizing the conflict created constant pressure upon the state to negotiate away the old-order. Simultaneously, the security forces were subjected to constant attack for lapses in discipline, even as the much greater Maoist deviations were given a virtual pass.

If the discussion above details what a proper Estimate should have looked like, it can be seen that there was ample basis for understanding the Maoist strategy and their theory of victory for the purpose of devising a state counter-strategy. The threat sought its objectives in the most efficacious ways, which were operationalized, both tangibly and intangibly.

Legitimacy is always the center of gravity at the strategic level – even as there are operational centers of gravity – and a battle for support was being waged at all levels of the polity. At numerous key junctures, then, when there should have been an assessment and a strategic reorientation by the state, this did not occur.

An early effort did occur in the form of the Internal Security and Development Program (ISDP), but this in essence took colonial era civic action and advanced it as a strategy. Further, though the military embarked upon certain tactical civic-action efforts (building roads, digging wells, giving shots, as the banter put it), none of this was a systemic approach, and it did not speak at all to the structural dysfunction which was feeding marginalization and alienation, hence Maoist ability to recruit.

To summarize, in Nepal's counterinsurgency, the state failed to identify the Maoists as a political problem. It focused upon the violence – which was awful and substantial – and treated insurgency as terrorism. The government thus initially relied upon the supposed experts in law and order, the police, and mobilised the military only after some six years. By that time, the Maoists had a substantial, tangible counter-state in the rural areas. No structural root causes of the problem were addressed, and there was no whole-of-the-government approach.

The Strategic Response

Returning to theory, at any point in time, construction of an Estimate will allow preparation of a counter. In the discussion above, it is well known that the situation in, say, 1994, was not the situation in 1996, much less in 2000 or 2002 or 2005, and so on. It is consideration of just what the state is doing at any chosen moment which is integral to preparation of the Estimate itself. For more likely than not, what the state is doing is making things worse.

A concept of response is appropriate to the moment chosen to act. Different strategic behavior in 1996 might have averted what followed. Likewise, the concept of response speaks to a theory of victory. What is the desired end-state to be achieved by reaching the various ends (goals) of the various campaigns and their incorporating LOE? For a democratic state, reincorporation and a “second chance” at getting these correct is normally chosen. For authoritarian states, simply wiping out the challenge is often selected. Necessarily, democratic action aspires to take place under the rule of law; authoritarian impulse treats state desires as the rule of law.

Continuing with democratic approach, there must be a response framework which adopts a clear plan to implement strategic purpose and intent. Normal considerations of

planning are in evidence, such as having a clear operational approach, scheme of maneuver, and assignment of tasks and responsibilities to various stakeholders. Yet these must be whole-of-government, which means command and control must be integrated civil-military.

The strategy, therefore, must pursue a political purpose. Jeremy Black (2009), using the example of the American War of Independence, states that there are generally two conceptual problems associated with strategy. The first is that very few have an idea of what strategy is – stated above as Ends-Ways-Means – and the second is that the military activities of war are labelled as strategy when in fact they are the operationalisation of strategy – the point also treated above. The Maoist combination of violence and non-violence to achieve goals was strategy. Use of only the military to win the conflict by the state is simply the operationalisation of strategy by use of one tool and not strategy.

If the government is addressing the insurgents only along the Violence LOE, tactics and operations are occurring but not strategy. To make the implementation of strategy effective, response must neutralize what is playing out along the five LOE discussed above. This must be done according to the theory of victory. The theory of victory incorporates in its articulation why the particular approach chosen at the moment of promulgation is better than what was being done – and how the recommended approach will change the environment and help accomplish the desired outcome. It includes political objectives, concepts of operations, and courses of action (Mooney, 2017). The strategy also requires setting priorities for resource allocation, as well as the phasing and sequencing.

Metrics are selected to measure the performance or effectiveness in each phase. Metrics must be chosen cautiously. They are normally thought to be tangible but in a political contest, the intangible aspect is critical, especially building of trust and confidence within the people. Quantitative data or statistical analysis are important but often mislead (Kilcullen, 2010). Nepal's counterinsurgency effort initially relied on Measures of Performance (MOP) - e.g., number of patrols executed or encounters made - "body count" also quickly became central. Yet it is Measures of Effectiveness (MOE) which are key.

A strategy, both in outline and execution, must respond to legal authorities (i.e., the law). A common error - one much in evidence today globally - is to bend the law to comport with operations, rather than the other way around. Governments quite often are confused and treat adversaries as criminals or combatants, rather than political opponents. Similarly, since insurgents use lawfare, which is the use of law as a weapon of war, the state must err on the side of angels, as the saying goes.

Assumptions are a necessary but particularly fraught part of response. They are made in the absence of planning details to fill knowledge gaps and are held to a minimum throughout the planning. These assumptions are constantly revalidated and reassessed. It can be fatal to wish away the inconvenient realities. Planning assumptions must be valid, important, and necessary. A fresh course of action is chosen when assumptions are proven wrong. In Nepal's case, some of the assumptions proved disastrously wrong, yet the state failed to plan for mitigation.

Some examples remain vivid. It was assumed that the U.S. would keep Nepal within the sphere of its Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) and help it to fight insurgency. The first Maoist attack on the army barracks in Ghorahi took place on 23 November 2001, almost two months after 9/11. Yet the assumption proved wrong, as the use of terrorism by the Nepali Maoists fell outside Washington's area of interests.

Another assumption was that all the political parties within the country would unite for counterinsurgency in defense of democracy. Tactical mistakes, in particular by the palace, ensured that this did not happen. Yet the extraordinarily confused state of politics was as much the work of the SPA as of the palace. In many ways the latter was responding to the ineptitude and lack of moral fiber of the former.

It was also assumed that the sheer level of atrocity executed by the Maoists would lead to a popular backlash. In many places it did, but the input from the first assumption negated any effort to mobilize popular outrage. In particular, foreign pressure prevented local self-defense. Absent local self-defense, though, the people's war approach has a free hand in seizing control of the population.

Preparatory considerations, such as discussed above, ultimately lead to actual strategy of counter. As noted, it is the campaign architecture of the opponent which will guide the defensive aspects of counterinsurgency; it is the implementation of the solution - of reform - which will guide the offensive facets. Means are those which exist and which it is determined must be generated for the plan to be accomplished. For example, if an adversary is engaging in a campaign of terrorism, a campaign of counterterrorism is required, which would demand plans for providing security to people, protecting critical infrastructure, safeguarding key persons, protecting financial centres, and so on. It is a state effort enabled by the defense and offensive of the security forces.

Throughout the process, risk assessment and mitigation are carried out. Risk can be in each stage, including the planning and the implementation of strategy. Generally, risk emerges from the disconnect between ends, ways, and means. Continuing with the current strategy may be a risk, and going for a new strategy must not increase that risk. In Nepal's

case, not mobilising the military for almost six years after the start of the insurgency and waiting for all parties' consensus proved disastrous, because the ineptitude of counter had wounded both operational response and legitimacy.

In this way, a methodical estimate of the situation is important prior to devising a strategic response. This is where most of the governments adopting counterinsurgency effort have gone wrong, including Nepal. As discussed above, the framework will have to be devised and modified based on the context. The suggested framework above is a guideline only. The threat group, the Maoists of Nepal, mainly relied on the mobilization strategy, and violence was used to coerce the population. It was only a means to an end, while it kept its political project vibrant, by seeking alliance with the political entities of the country to fulfill their goals.

Conclusion

Counterinsurgency is an armed political campaign. Without politics it ends up in criminality. The politics that promotes violence takes the shape of violent politics and it requires a comprehensive national approach by the government to address the problem. Nepal saw the Maoists problem as a law and order issue initially, and even in the later stage, the counterinsurgency was devised but without fully understanding the true nature of the problem that mainly lied in the socio-economic domain though on the surface it looked like a security challenge.

From the foregoing, it should be apparent that one must avoid the risk of turning any study of counterinsurgency into a study of tactics. Rather, what is dealing with a particular slice of political violence. Moreover, counterinsurgency itself is not the solution. It neither solves all the problems of the world nor merely restores the status quo. Rather, it restores a political equilibrium which gives the polity a second chance. Counterinsurgency is armed reform to counter efforts at armed upheaval, offering the structure of opportunity another political opportunity to empower the citizenry. (It should be obvious how different this is from the objectives of an authoritarian state, which focus upon repression and label the result as “unity.”) If the government invest in reform - or is not seen to be doing so - legitimacy is lost. This is what occurred in Nepal.

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