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The Insurgent's Response to the Defense of Cities

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A significant and recurring feature of most, if not all, counterinsurgency campaigns is that the forces of counterinsurgency begin their efforts in the major cities of a contested country. Ideally, once effective control within these urban centers is achieved, the forces of the counterinsurgency then work outward from these islands of geographic isolation in an effort to establish political and administrative control over the rural countryside. During America's involvement in Vietnam, for example, the so-called "pacification campaigns" started in the provincial capitals and were expected to spread out into the remainder of the rural areas.¹ In the late 1950s, at the time of the French counterinsurgency in Algeria, the counterinsurgents placed a predominant emphasis on the control and administration of cities, largely ignoring the hot, arid, and inhospitable regions of eastern and southern Algeria.² Similarly, during the Soviet war in Afghanistan, counterinsurgency forces were positioned in the major cities of Herat, Kabul, and Kandahar to protect the "useful" portions of Afghanistan.³ More recently, during the latter portion of Canada's counterinsurgency in Kandahar province, Afghanistan, there was a similar operational bias toward the immediate vicinity of Kandahar city.⁴

The frequent recurrence of this tendency effectively answers an often implicit question with regard to a counterinsurgency's conduct: where, in geographical terms, does a counterinsurgency begin its campaign? The motivation for beginning a counterinsurgency campaign within the cities is rarely highlighted, and the effect of this decision on the conduct and ending of an insurgency is rarely given adequate treatment or consideration. The absence of deliberation on this subject is particularly puzzling because the retrenchment of counterinsurgent forces in urban areas actually favors the

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conduct of insurgency. It is, in fact, a response to insurgent activity that is sought by strategically mindful guerrilla leaders. As T. E. Lawrence noted during the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Turks, the Arab guerrillas “must not take Medina [a major city in Saudi Arabia]. The Turk was harmless there We wanted him to stay at Medina, and every other distant place, in the largest numbers.” The Turkish counterinsurgency was welcome in the major cities and transit lines “just so long as he gave us [the insurgency] the other nine hundred and ninety-nine thousandths of the Arab world.”⁵ Similarly, as Mao Tse-tung argued in his lectures, *On Protracted War*, “The enemy [the counterinsurgents] can actually hold only the big cities, . . . which may rank first in importance, but will probably constitute only the smaller part of the occupied territory in size and population, while the greater part [of the national territory] will be taken up by the guerrilla areas that will grow up everywhere.”⁶ In Mao’s assessment, with access to the greater proportions of the countryside secured through the counterinsurgency’s own urban beginnings, the insurgency could, with relative safety, mobilize the material and human resources of the countryside. Thus, as Mao further noted, the purpose of a rural insurgency’s strategic plan in response to an urban-biased counterinsurgency was “to encircle the cities from the countryside.”⁷ Put otherwise, successful rural insurgencies often besiege counterinsurgency forces within their urban bastions.

Under most conditions, it would be exceedingly rare to find one party to a conflict acting in a way that is explicitly desirable to its opponent. Yet this is precisely what an urban bias in counterinsurgency campaign planning and strategy entails. This raises two questions that this article will address. Why do counterinsurgencies begin their campaigns in cities? And, how does an insurgency react to this decision?

Rationale for Beginning a Counterinsurgency within Urban Centers

There are numerous reasons why a counterinsurgency might be initially compelled to emphasize the control of urban areas and use of urban-biased strategies. These various rationales can be clustered into three mutually reinforcing categories: strategic, economic, and political.

The foremost strategic rationale follows from the primary objective of counterinsurgency warfare, that is, to control the local population.⁸ The insurgency’s strength, its access to intelligence, and, indeed, its very power and movement are all derived from its connections and control over the population of a given area.⁹ Control of the population, therefore, acts as a force multiplier for the insurgency, augmenting its weaker materiel capabilities with superior situational awareness and mobility. By disrupting this control, the counterinsurgency can effectively dislocate the insurgency

from the population and diminish its very capacity for resistance. Given this objective, controlling the largest amount of the population becomes a primary goal of a counterinsurgency's campaign planning. Cities provide the most concentrated percentage of the population per square mile. Intuitively, then, beginning a

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counterinsurgency campaign within the cities should start the campaign upon a firm foundation. Thus, as Roger Trinquier notes, "the army should therefore [as a result of the primary objective of counterinsurgency warfare] make its main effort in those areas where the population is densest; that is, in the cities."¹⁰

An additional strategic rationale is that urban areas are easier for a counterinsurgency to control than the vast expanses of the rural countryside.¹¹ This renders such control relatively cost-efficient from the counterinsurgent's viewpoint. Control of urban areas can also be achieved with relatively few troops, which may allow for greater offensive operations in other parts of the country. As Trinquier argues, "The forces of order can easily watch all the streets of a city with a minimum of troops. Anyone found away from his home at night is suspect."¹² Through extensive police presence and military patrols, the imposition of curfews, and restrictions on the movement of the urban residents, the control of a population can be readily achieved and insurgent activity suppressed. Indeed, the failure of many urban-biased insurgent groups amply demonstrates the ability of the counterinsurgent to achieve effective levels of control in urban areas. For example, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, urban-biased insurgencies proliferated throughout Latin America. Yet, in every instance—with the *Tupamaros* in Uruguay, Revolutionary Left Movement in Chile (*Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* [MIR]), *Montoneros* in Argentina, and Marighella's insurgency in Brazil—the urban guerrillas were decisively defeated by counterinsurgency forces.¹³ Speaking to this trend of failure for urban insurgencies, the Cuban revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro, later mused that cities and other urban areas truly are "the grave of the guerrilla."¹⁴

In addition to issues of strategy, all counterinsurgencies are motivated by economic rationale—in particular, by the notion that the benefits of waging a counterinsurgency must, at least in part, offset the costs of military, development, and political action. This is a broad calculus and probably impossible to determine with any precision, particularly in the fluid context of a war. Regardless, an excellent vision of this economic reasoning in counterinsurgency planning was espoused by Mao Tse-tung—the master

of guerrilla warfare and insurgency. In his work *On Guerrilla Warfare*, he clearly depicts the interaction of the strategic and the economic motivations of the Japanese counterinsurgency as they moved to capture and retain the major cities of China. An “important Japanese objective,” Mao wrote, “is to profit from the industries, finances, and manpower in captured areas and with them to augment her own insufficient strength. Certainly, it is not to her advantage to forgo these benefits, nor to be forced to dissipate her energies in a type of warfare in which the gains will not compensate for the losses.”¹⁵

Cities are, by their very nature, an agglomeration of industries, services, markets, and consumers.¹⁶ This concentration of economic benefits and its potential value to a counterinsurgency can be illustrated quantitatively through the very rough proxies of service and industry as a percentage of a country’s gross domestic product (GDP). While by no means a perfect measurement of the contribution of urban areas to a nation’s economy, both services and industry do tend to cluster in urban centers and can give an abstract sense of the contribution of cities to a country’s GDP. Afghanistan’s GDP, for example, is composed of 43 percent services, 26 percent industry, and 31 percent agriculture.¹⁷ Thus, according to these data, some 69 percent of Afghanistan’s GDP is derived from economic activity that occurs predominantly in the cities. Controlling these centers also produces tax revenue for greater service provision and provides some economic offsets that can compensate the counterinsurgency for their efforts. This makes control of these areas economically valuable.

Cities also tend to attract unemployed labor, drawing it in from the countryside. A counterinsurgency that maintains effective control of a country’s cities can then draft this excess urban population into new police and army units. This is particularly relevant for external counterinsurgencies, such as the United States in Afghanistan, which undertakes a concerted effort to develop indigenous police and army units in order to complement and, later, supplant the efforts of its own forces.¹⁸ When the comparatively minimal costs—in terms of troops and police—of maintaining control over the cities are balanced against the concentration of economic benefits and the access to surplus labor for the purposes of police and army training, the incentive to gain and retain effective control over the cities for reasons of economy and strategy is quite strong.

Both strategy and economics are, during a counterinsurgency, frequently interlaced and often subordinated to international and domestic politics. Political calculations also motivate a counterinsurgency to begin and to continue to emphasize the control of cities and other urban areas.

The realities of international relations, most notably the frozen nature of the territorial boundaries of a state, can induce counterinsurgents into paying an inordinate amount of attention to the control of major cities,

particularly a country's capital.¹⁹ When examining international politics and its influence on a counterinsurgency campaign within a particular country, a clear distinction should be drawn between the "juridical" and "empirical" sovereignty of a state.²⁰ Juridical sovereignty establishes the legal and jurisdictional boundaries of a state—centered upon that country's seat of juridical sovereignty, namely, its capital. In this sense, juridical sovereignty is an exclusive and indivisible condition in that only one party can control a state in legal terms. Functionally, however, many states are marked by contested claims to sovereignty. Empirical sovereignty, then, represents the ability of the central government to exercise its control over the territory and the country's population. This means that, while juridical sovereignty is indivisible, empirical sovereignty is fundamentally a matter of degree.

It is the exclusive and indivisible quality of juridical sovereignty that induces the counterinsurgency to begin its campaign in the cities and maintain its emphasis on urban areas throughout the conflict. Essentially, international recognition of a party's control over a territory follows from that group's ability to control the capital city in a contested country. This recognition is certainly politically valuable. It is also profitable in material terms, because international assistance will follow a recognized claim of juridical sovereignty. The United States' counterinsurgency in Iraq provides an example of this. Initially, the US-led campaign to depose Saddam Hussein and establish a new system of government in Iraq was opposed by many members of the international community, particularly by the United Nations (UN). But, as major combat operations drew to a close, the situation changed. As one Congressional Research Service report dated April 16, 2003 notes, "The war with Iraq, which began on March 19, 2003, has now moved into a new phase as a result of coalition forces controlling all of the major cities in Iraq."²¹ The remainder of the report goes on to detail the presence and role of international agencies, including most notably the UN, which was beginning to provide material assistance to the United States in Iraq. Effectively, once the coalition forces secured Iraq's seats of juridical sovereignty, the UN and many of its member nations recognized shortly thereafter the legitimacy of America's claim to control of Iraq and began to provide material assistance for the purpose of reconstruction. Yet, as the history of this conflict shows, effective empirical sovereignty is still in question in a number of areas.

Domestic politics also necessitates the control of the cities and can pressure the counterinsurgents into beginning their campaign in a country's urban centers. Political officials, powerful economic and social elites, and other public figures all tend to congregate in urban centers, particularly national and provincial capitals where government infrastructure is located. The domestic political importance of protecting the urban centers

from insurgent violence is readily apparent when viewed in this context. The local forces of the counterinsurgency rely upon the direction of their political leadership; this means that the careful protection of the urban areas where these political officials reside needs to be ensured. Similarly, external counterinsurgents, such as the United States, Great Britain, and Canada in Afghanistan, rely on the stabilizing effect of indigenous political elites, who support and legitimize their presence within the country. Should violence befall these officials, the legitimacy, benefit, and effectiveness of the external counterinsurgent presence would be brought into question. Thus, both domestic and external counterinsurgent forces have an incentive to protect the political leadership of a contested country, which means protecting the cities.

In addition to the protection of political officials, counterinsurgents are also compelled to expend an inordinate amount of resources protecting cities due to the need to control the information environment that permeates modern military campaigns. Academics, think-tank researchers, journalists, and other media figures tend to cluster in the larger urban centers where the provision of physical safety is greater and modern amenities are more plentiful.²² This physical concentration within urban areas affects the reporting and accounts that these public officials produce. During the Bosnian civil war, for instance, Sarajevo “had an inordinate media prestige as the Bosnian capital, which distracted journalists from much of what was happening elsewhere [in the countryside].”²³ In a different context, a similar result emerged from a fact-finding mission during the American counterinsurgency in Vietnam. After being sent to Vietnam by President John F. Kennedy, Joseph Mendenhall of the State Department and General Victor Krulak returned to report on the state of the war to the president and the National Security Council (NSC). In response to the two divergent reports—one expressing optimism and the other pessimism about the state of the war—President Kennedy asked: “You two did visit the same country, didn’t you?” To which Krulak replied, “I can explain it, Mr. President. Mr. Mendenhall visited the cities and I visited the countryside and the war is in the countryside.”²⁴

Journalists and other public figures have an inordinate ability to influence a counterinsurgency’s information environment and, by extension, the perceptions of a domestic population. In part, the presumption that democratic states are casualty adverse necessitates that a firm grasp be maintained on the flow of information out of war-torn areas. Additionally, third-party states that have intervened in a conflict that is not their own are required to convey an image to the local population and their domestic constituents that the war is being prosecuted with some prospect of success. But, rather than having an accurate image of the war being used as a measure of the overall success of a counterinsurgency, the state of security within the

cities is often publically applied as a generic proxy. This is a direct result of the concentration of journalists and public figures within urban centers. These individuals are constrained by the pressures of a 24-hour news cycle and therefore face a personal incentive to report on any information that is readily available.

In this context, insurgent activity within cities generates an inordinate amount of attention. As Walter Laqueur points out, "The political importance of urban terror has frequently been overrated, perhaps in view of its highly dramatic (or melodramatic) character and the fact that, unlike guerrilla operations, urban terror usually has many spectators."²⁵ Yet the issue is not just one of quantity, as Laqueur's observation suggests. Urban terrorism also results in a greater diversity of witnesses and, as a consequence, a greater fecundity of effects. The local people, counterinsurgency forces, media and, consequently, the domestic population of a counterinsurgency are all observers to instances of urban insurgent violence. Each thread of spectatorship causes a different but related ripple in the conduct of the entire campaign. The result is often interactive and cumulative. Negative perceptions of security among the local population discourages cooperation with counterinsurgent forces; perceptions of personal vulnerability and local acquiescence to insurgent violence among counterinsurgency forces may also encourage reciprocal abuses of the indigenous population. Finally, the domestic population's blurred understanding of the conflict can foster a resignation toward a potentially unfavorable ending to the campaign, which, in turn, pressures domestic politicians into invoking constant change to theater strategy and senior civil and military leadership.

Insurgent forces are not blind to these effects. In recognizing the vulnerability of counterinsurgent forces to information campaigns, insurgents tend to employ urban operations as distracting supplements to their rural mobilization of material and personnel. As *The US Army Counterinsurgency Field Manual* notes, "The information environment is a critical dimension of such internal wars, and insurgents attempt to shape it to their advantage. One way they do this is by carrying out activities, such as suicide attacks, that may have little military value but create fear and uncertainty These actions are executed to attract high-profile media coverage or local publicity and inflate perceptions of insurgent capabilities."²⁶ The counterinsurgents are, therefore, compelled to protect the cities based on realities depicted by the information environment, the vagarious nature of public opinion, and the deliberate actions of insurgents. It is in these areas where influential public officials congregate and where a powerful and possibly deleterious diversity of observation occurs.

The answer to the first question underpinning this work, why do counterinsurgencies begin their campaigns in cities, should now be clear.

Counterinsurgents begin their campaigns in the cities for international and domestic political reasons that are reinforced by economic incentives and couched in understandable strategic objectives. As this section has demonstrated, there are any number of reasons why counterinsurgents will plan to begin the campaign in a country's major cities and urban centers. Many of these same reasons ensure that a counterinsurgency campaign will continue to emphasize the control of urban areas and use of urban operations throughout the course of a conflict. Yet, as indicated in the introduction, the retrenchment of counterinsurgent forces in urban areas is actually desired by strategically mindful insurgents. Thus, what remains to be examined is the question of how an insurgency will react to this strategy.

An Insurgency's Response to the Defense of Cities

Any number of benefits are associated with the control of cities. In reality, though, retaining control is not sufficient to achieve a successful conclusion to a counterinsurgency. Indeed, once a hostile and reactive opponent is included in the equation, the benefits of controlling urban areas can be gradually overwhelmed by the increased costs of waging an urban-biased counterinsurgency campaign.²⁷

When confronted by an urban-biased counterinsurgency, a common strategy that is often a part of rural insurgencies is the judicious use of subversion and urban terrorism as a complement to rural mobilization.²⁸ The aim of these efforts is not to defeat the counterinsurgent's forces within the cities; nor is it meant to coerce the inhabitants of a city into supporting the insurgency. Instead, such acts are meant to distract the counterinsurgents' attention from the heart of the conflict that is found in the rural areas. All armies face constraints on their resources; in recognizing this, careful and strategically mindful insurgent leaders often use urban-oriented operations to coax their opponent into wasting resources in an attempt to secure urban areas that are, in fact, already relatively safe from all but the most minimal forms of harassment.

During the Soviet counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, a common tactic of the Mujahidin against the Soviets was to target Kabul, and other major cities, with errant rocket attacks. While these attacks did some physical damage, their main purpose was psychological. They were intended to coax the counterinsurgency into deploying more forces in defense of the city and its outlying areas—thus reducing the number of forces that would be available to contest the insurgents' control of the countryside. As Brigadier General Mohammad Yousaf of the Pakistani Afghan Bureau (ISI) later noted:

These tactics had the effect of creating a deep sense of insecurity in the minds of the Soviets and Afghans. They reacted by deploying

more and more troops in static guard duties [in and around the city], thus reducing their ability to mount offensive operations [in the countryside].²⁹

The same logic of tactical harassment extends beyond the commission of small attacks on cities. In such cases, insurgents attempt to develop a climate of insecurity, so counterinsurgency forces will retreat to static defensive positions along lines of transportation or bases that ring the country's urban centers. As Trinquier argues:

The [common] goal of the guerrilla, during what can be a long period of time, is not so much to obtain local successes [in rural operations] as it is to create a climate of insecurity, to compel the forces of order to retire into their most easily defensible areas [the cities and static defense posts]. This results in the abandonment of certain portions of territory that the guerrillas are then able to control.³⁰

This type of tactical withdrawal and concentration of counterinsurgent forces is, in fact, a fairly recurrent response to rurally based insurgent violence. As Jeffrey Race points out regarding the Viet Minh's insurrection against the French in Vietnam, "As the risk for the government of operating in the rural areas increased, its [the government in Saigon's] response was to withdraw, with the justification that 'those areas are insecure'"³¹

Once an insurgency has gained control of large portions of territory, the effectiveness of guerrilla warfare and ineffectiveness of counterinsurgent military operations are increased. This stark divergence in effectiveness is a result of the fact that, while guerrilla warfare requires a good deal of physical space in order to be effective, successful military operations by a counterinsurgent require that the enemy be fixed and unable to maneuver. As Mao once noted, guerrilla warfare is "impracticable in a country with a small territory," or, one might add, in any country where the counterinsurgency forces control so much of the territory that there is little physical space for the insurgency's guerrilla units to retreat or maneuver in an effort to avoid decisive engagement.³² In general terms, the effectiveness of guerrilla warfare is, in some measure, a direct function of the amount of physical space within which its fighters are able to operate. By initially ceding the countryside to the insurgency, the counterinsurgents unwittingly increase the military effectiveness of their opponent.

A counterinsurgent's initial loss of control in rural areas—a loss that often increases over the course of the conflict—also imposes severe economic costs upon the retrenched urban counterinsurgency. One common result of protracted insurgency is the movement of the rural population into the cities. People are often forced from their homes by uncertainty, insurgent violence, and counterinsurgent military actions that consequently swell a country's urban population. The American counterinsurgency in Vietnam is

a good example of this process. In 1962, the population of South Vietnam's capital city, Saigon, was estimated at 1.4 million people. In 1968, after six years of war and insurgent violence, the city's population had grown to an estimated 4 million people.³³ This accelerated process of urbanization has two effects. First, it brings more of the population under the counterinsurgency's control. This is a powerful strategy to pacify the insurgency.³⁴ Because, generally speaking, as the number of people under the counterinsurgents' control increases, the insurgency's capacity to execute its missions tends to decrease.

This assessment, however, overlooks the second effect of rural-to-urban migration. Namely, that the costs of controlling urban centers in the face of massive population inflows tend to increase at an exponential rate. Cities have limited infrastructure, services, housing, and other accommodations, which can be quickly overwhelmed if the population increases too quickly. When the influx of new residents reaches a critical point, any additional input tends to generate severe negative externalities, such as disease, disorder, and criminality. It may also result in an environment where those exercising the counterinsurgency find the maintenance of control in the urban centers increasingly onerous in terms of financial and military costs. This process, what Samuel Huntington called "forced-draft urbanization," tends to make the counterinsurgents' control of urban centers less cost-efficient and often necessitates the use of additional scarce resources in an effort to secure order.³⁵ The initial choice to begin a counterinsurgency in the cities for reasons of cost-efficiency becomes quickly vitiated by the insurgency's violent reactions and the innately destructive processes of conflict.

While conflicts certainly tend to hasten the process of urbanization, most countries that are afflicted with protracted insurgencies still have a majority of their population living in rural areas. Afghanistan, for instance, has a rather minimal level of urbanization at around 24 percent of the population. This means that some 76 percent of Afghans live in the rural areas and are effectively left under the control of the insurgency.³⁶ The initial strategic rationale that urban centers provide the greatest concentration of the primary objective of counterinsurgency warfare is challenged by the fact that that initial choice leaves a majority of a country's population under the sway of the insurgents.

An additional consequence of an urban-biased campaign is that the government loses the ability to mobilize rural resources, while the insurgency gains that exclusive capacity. If this situation is allowed to persist for any meaningful period of time, counterinsurgents' ability to break free from their urban bastions is severely curtailed. As Race once again points out with regard to the Viet Minh resistance to the French:

Because the countryside is the 'heart' which pumps human and material resources into the government, its initial loss by the government will destroy the defensibility of the urban areas Through the Party's seizure of the rural areas initially, the government is forever precluded from developing sufficient forces to achieve victory on a national scale.³⁷

In contrast to the counterinsurgency's exclusion from rural resources, simply by controlling the rural areas an insurgency is able to mobilize the countryside's vast manpower in service of its revolutionary aims. During the communist insurrection in China, Mao's unfettered control of rural areas allowed the communist insurgents to begin the Red Army. These new army units, which would eventually encircle the cities and achieve control of mainland China, were built primarily from human resources mobilized in rural areas. The First Front Red Army from Jiangxi, for instance, was composed primarily of peasants and villagers. According to one study, some 58 percent of the army was drawn from the rural peasantry, an additional 38 percent of the force was rural workers, with the remaining 4 percent of the army's personnel being petty bourgeois or urban intellectuals.³⁸ Faced with massive rural mobilizations and cut off from the resources of the rural areas, the counterinsurgent can become increasingly isolated within the urban bastions. Eventually, as Mao noted, "The mobilization of the common people throughout the country will create a vast sea in which to drown the enemy."³⁹

The vulnerability of urban-biased counterinsurgencies to disruptions of resources can actually be extended to a point where it vitiates the initial economic rationale for beginning a counterinsurgency in the cities. As previously noted, counterinsurgencies emphasize the initial control of cities because it is relatively easy and cost-efficient to do so. At the same time, it may allow for the control of economic centers that can offset the cost of the campaign. Controlling cities is, therefore, economically profitable for any counterinsurgency. This analysis is largely based on a vision of a city as it functions during times of peace—absent the exploitive reactions of a hostile force. In reality, a city's economy and citizens' daily lives often depend on the resources that are produced elsewhere and imported into the metropolis along various lines of transportation. During the course of an insurgency, urban centers are often besieged by insurgent forces and cut off from their supply sources, so the economic vitality of the cities can be curtailed.

During the Soviet counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, the vulnerability of Afghanistan's major cities, particularly the capital city of Kabul, was recognized and exploited by the Mujahidin insurgency. As Brigadier General Yousef of the Pakistani ISI noted, "I knew my enemy's sensitive spots—Salang Highway, aircraft on the ground, the [urban] power supply,

the dams, the bridges, the pipelines, the isolated posts or convoys and, at the center of them all, Kabul.”⁴⁰ Having obtained largely unfettered control of the rural portions of southern and central Afghanistan, the insurgents could defeat the counterinsurgency by slowly strangulating the cities. As Yousef further states:

There was a concerted effort on my part to coordinate attacks aimed at cutting off Kabul from supplies or facilities coming from outside the city. This involved ambushes on convoys or roads leading to Kabul, the mining of dams that provided water, or the cutting of power lines.⁴¹

As a result of these measures, Kabul became increasingly bereft of supplies and subsistence. In February of 1989, the capital city’s supply of wheat, flour, and other basic foodstuffs had dwindled to an estimated 12-day supply.⁴²

This growing deprivation resulted in an increase in urban unrest and city residents’ greater use of “everyday forms of resistance,” such as minor acts of theft, foot-dragging, and sabotage.⁴³ These economically damaging acts, when coupled with incessant insurgent harassment and growing popular unrest, serve to reinforce the urban-biased counterinsurgency’s isolation and introspective focus upon the control of urban areas. As popular discontent, criminality, and urban demonstrations increase, a counterinsurgency is induced to deploy scarce resources in an effort to maintain its tenuous control. This process of force retrenchment further exacerbates the counterinsurgent’s isolation from the rural areas and resources, compounding the population’s grievances within the cities as food, water, and power shortages increase in severity and frequency. Eventually, as this process continues, the cost of maintaining control of the cities far exceeds the benefits. Wearing by these acts and pressured from without by surrounding insurgent forces and from within by urban uprisings, the urban-biased counterinsurgents gradually lose control of the cities—their final bastions.

Conclusion

Economic, strategic, and political reasons induce the counterinsurgents to begin their campaign within a country’s urban centers. Yet, once one considers the insurgency’s reactions to this campaign strategy, the original benefits of an urban-biased campaign are diminished. This means that, while controlling the cities is necessary in achieving a successful resolution to the counterinsurgency, it is often insufficient in achieving that objective.

In the US campaign in Afghanistan, the dangers of urban bias need to be taken into account when deciding the strategic direction of a counterinsurgency. Unfortunately, General Stanley McChrystal’s initial assessment report on the state of war in Afghanistan that currently guides American and

International Security Assistance Force strategy illustrates a regrettable urban bias. The report notes, "In a country as large and complex as Afghanistan, ISAF cannot be strong everywhere." As a result, "ISAF will initially focus [its resources] on critical high-population areas [the cities] . . . not because the enemy is present, but because it is here that the population is threatened."⁴⁴ In other words, ISAF will retrench its forces in the major urban centers and confer on the insurgency the many strategic advantages that result from an urban-biased strategy.

Despite the dangers inherent to an urban-biased campaign, beginning somewhere other than in the urban areas is impractical—especially in light of the political rationale underlying the campaign. A possible solution to this dilemma may be found in the reality that urban bias can be, in fact, a matter of degree. Minimizing the extent of urban bias through the conscientious deployment of counterinsurgency forces in rural areas can increase the probability of success. This might even include permitting some level of unrest in urban areas in an attempt to free up resources for offensive operations in rural areas.

Another potentially effective method for overcoming the effects of urban bias is to leverage local tribal, ethnic, and religious power holders who can act as representatives for the counterinsurgency in the rural areas.⁴⁵ Clearly, monitoring these groups to ensure that they are consistently working in the interest of the central government may pose a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. The fact that these elites have survived decades of civil war demonstrates their keen sense of the strategic balance between the opposing sides. The difficulty, then, is that in order to leverage these local power holders, the counterinsurgency must demonstrate some initial level of success. Over the short term, a significant increase in forces may sway the tide of war to such a degree as to convince these local elites to join a particular side. Once thus allied, local engagement might provide the basis for the long-term strategy of assigning rural security operations to indigenous forces.

NOTES

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