

Measuring Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare

In *The War of the Flea*, Robert Taber characterizes the vulnerability of modern democratic states to insurgent warfare:

The modern industrial society cannot function, and its government cannot govern, except with popular participation and by popular consent.... They must make great concessions to popular notions of what is democratic and just, or be replaced by regimes that will do so.... They must use the liberal rhetoric and also pay something in the way of social compromise...if they are to retain power and keep the people to their accustomed, profit-producing tasks. This fact makes such governments extremely vulnerable to a sort of war—guerrilla war with its psychological and economic weapons—that their predecessors could have ignored, had such a war been possible at all in the past. They are vulnerable because they must, at all cost, keep the economy functioning and showing a profit.... Again, they are vulnerable because they must maintain the appearance of normalcy; they can be *embarrassed* out of office. And they are triply vulnerable because they cannot be as ruthless as the situation demands. They cannot openly crush the opposition that embarrasses and harasses them. They must be wooers as well as doers.¹

Thus, elections place enormous pressure on democratic regimes to produce quantifiable and decisive results against insurgencies in order for the voters to justify a repeat term. Unfortunately, insurgent and counterinsurgent conflicts tend to deny analysts on both sides quantifiable and decisive results with which one can accurately assess progress or defeat.

Previous editions of the *Irregular Warfare Message of the Week* have proposed both IDAD (Internal Defense and Development strategy) and tipping points as important components to effective strategy against insurgents.^{2,3} Both of these recommendations can better assist warfighters in managing populations as a more integral role on the battlefield. However, while IDAD and the tipping point are powerful concepts, they fall short of offering solid measurements that inform both regimes and constituencies of progress against an insurgency. Worse, since insurgencies are social phenomena, assessing victory against them involves far more variables than more symmetrical or conventional wars. Therefore, trying to reduce success or failure to one or two criteria is risky if not irresponsible. In Vietnam, the U.S. inclination for strategies of annihilation elevated body counts as a dubious criterion of success against the enemy. McNamara is also famous for chartering his Whiz Kids to generate limitless statistics about the war in Vietnam in hopes of gaining a better grasp of the situation. Determining appropriate success criteria that are simultaneously quantifiable is no easy task.

I would like to propose six initial criteria for analysts to consider. Though Joint Pub 3-07.1 does not explicitly provide success criteria, an examination of two of IDAD's four functions may be helpful. First, IDAD's *balanced development* function helps regimes focus their strategic efforts to solve the problems that lead to instability.

¹ Taber, Robert, *The War of the Flea*, (London, Granada Publishing Ltd., 1965) 25-26.

² <http://www.usma.edu/dmi/IWmsgs/Kill-em-all.pdf>

³ <http://www.usma.edu/dmi/IWmsgs/DecisivePoints-vs-TippingPoints.pdf>

It allows all individuals and groups in the society to share in the rewards of development, thus alleviating frustration. Balanced development satisfies legitimate grievances that the opposition attempts to exploit. The government must recognize conditions that contribute to the internal threat and instability and take preventive measures. Correcting conditions that make a society vulnerable is the long-term solution to the problem.⁴

Therefore, we can begin to consider one criterion for success to be how well the current regime is solving the problems facing the population. Furthermore, we can see that the specifics of this criterion will vary between countries, insurgencies, and regimes since the problems endemic to each vary as well.

However, when successful insurgencies violently propose alternate systems to a population, they create economic, social, and political infrastructure to co-opt inhabitants away from the regime. In order to establish legitimacy with limited means, insurgent systems prioritize community problems. This grants insurgencies a triple advantage. First, their system appears more responsive to the population's needs. Second, their operations work to exacerbate those problems and create new ones, either overtly or covertly. The insurgency grows an organization that itself presents another problem. Comparatively, the regime is triply burdened. First, it must solve the original problem(s) more responsively than the insurgency. Second, it must continue to administer all other areas of governance that the insurgency can neglect. Finally, it must defeat the insurgency.⁵

Therefore, in addition to a regime's capability to solve problems, how fast the regime solves problems is also important. Measuring success of this second criterion is simple: when running from the bear you don't have to be faster than the bear, you just have to be faster than the guy next to you. In other words, the standard for success for this criterion is that the regime must be able to solve problems faster than the insurgency that challenges it. As a result, this standard will also change depending upon the particular insurgency that a regime faces, and not just between countries, but within a given country as well.

Since a regime cannot abandon one administrative duty in order to solve the problems of another, the number of administrative functions that a regime can effectively and simultaneously manage becomes a third criterion for success. Analysts should include executive agencies, judicial processes, and legislative requirements in addition to more apparent security and economic duties.

Looking at a second IDAD function, *mobilization*, leads me to two more criteria:

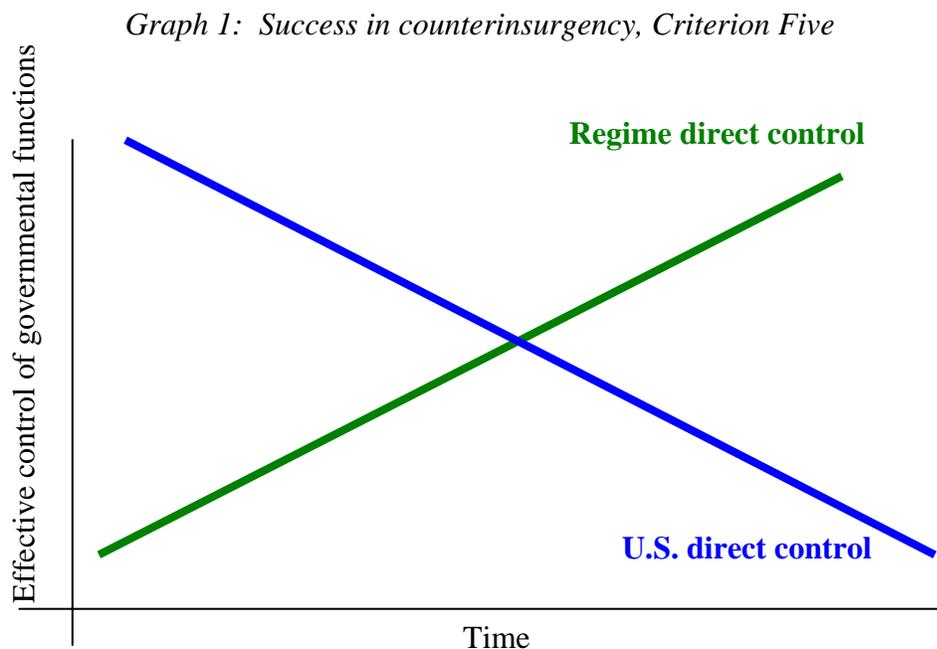
Mobilization provides organized manpower and materiel resources and includes all activities to motivate and organize popular support of the government. This support is essential for a successful IDAD program. If successful, mobilization maximizes manpower and other resources available to the government while it minimizes those available to the insurgent. Mobilization allows the government to strengthen existing

⁴ Joint Publication 3-07.1, *Foreign Internal Defense*, Appendix B, B-1 to B-2.

⁵ Also noteworthy is that the advantages of the insurgency help them more efficiently allocate resources—their key limitation, while the disadvantages of the regime consume more resources—the exact goal of the insurgency.

institutions, to develop new ones to respond to demands, and promotes the government's legitimacy.⁶

As effective governments develop in opposition to an insurgency, the government can mobilize greater resources to sustain a greater number of duties. External sponsors like the U.S. will initially assume direct control of most if not all governmental functions following a regime's voluntary or involuntary abdication of power. Since the U.S. system is not in direct competition with the insurgency's system, the U.S. system should transition governing functions to the regime in power as soon as that regime can mobilize the indigenous resources required. Thus, the fourth criterion is how much of a particular governmental responsibility the regime can resource and administrate given a demand for that duty from the population. Likewise, a fifth criterion measures how many administrative duties that the regime assumes complete and effective control of relative to the external sponsor. This fifth criterion can be graphically captured:



One could effectively create this graph for each of the four previous criteria as well. A graph showing the amount of host nation direct control of a given governmental duty relative to the amount of external sponsor direct control would be an enlightening portrayal of criterion four. A graph that presents the number of simultaneously managed governmental duties relative to that of the external sponsor could characterize criterion three. Graphing how fast the regime solves problems relative to the speed of the external sponsor could represent criterion two. For criteria one, graphs could reflect the regime's overall capability to solve problems relative to that of the external sponsor's.

⁶ Joint Pub 3-07.1, B-2.

Additionally, one should also consider where the insurgency's line falls on these graphs. For example, for criterion five, how does the insurgency's direct control of particular governmental functions compare to that of the regime and that of the external sponsor, and so on?

Graph 1 also illustrates another important point. Where the two lines intersect, we see an important shift in relative control of the population from the external sponsor to the regime itself. Arriving at this juncture in the counterinsurgency operation would be a landmark accomplishment, but I don't think it represents a tipping point—not yet.⁷

Solving the problems using effective government deafens the population to the insurgency's petitions. However, insurgencies are unlikely to surrender; when they cannot motivate populations to support them passively or actively, they can try manipulation; when manipulation fails, they can try coercion; when coercion fails, they can kill or terrorize the population. In short, one cannot rely solely on solving the population's problems to eliminate an insurgency. The regime must still engage those members of the insurgency who refuse to re-assimilate into the population. Those insurgents that the regime cannot co-opt, manipulate, or coerce, it must destroy.

Remembering that insurgencies typically fight strategies of exhaustion, they rarely present regimes (or external sponsors) opportunities for decisive annihilation. As exhaustion strategists, the insurgents balance fighting with fleeing, choosing to fight only when highly confident of success. Their intent is to wear down their enemy with small, winnable battles, fatiguing the enemy's money, lives, national will, morale, etc.^{8,9} Thus, counterinsurgents have to identify opportunities to engage the insurgency in ways other than decisive battles...at least until the insurgent tires of fleeing, makes a mistake, or reassesses his strategy.

One opportunity to strike the insurgent is attacking his most significant weakness: his resources. Typically, insurgents are militarily weaker than the counterinsurgent, but their hit-and-run tactics can offset their military shortcomings and adequately support their exhaustion strategy. This tactical and strategic approach also helps preserve an insurgency's limited resources, but they will not completely offset resource challenges. An insurgency rarely begins with sufficient strength to accomplish its strategic end state immediately, so it must grow at least in terms of capability if not also in terms of size. Therefore, insurgencies must take in more resources than just those required to execute their activities. Additional resources are also required to create growth. We can measure growth in terms of both resources and personnel acquired over a given period of time. Conversely, since an organization's collapse is represented when its growth becomes sharply negative, analysts can measure the tipping point by the loss of both resources and personnel over a given period of time for a given range of activities.

In fact, it seems intuitive that without resources, an insurgency faces a critical choice between sustaining the organization—survival—and sustaining operations—initiative. Therefore, I argue that the tipping point occurs when an insurgency can no longer sustain offensive operations

⁷ For an earlier discussion about tipping points versus decisive points, please see

<http://www.usma.edu/dmi/IWmsgs/DecisivePoints-vs-TippingPoints.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.usma.edu/dmi/IWmsgs/Strategies-of-Exhaustion.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.usma.edu/dmi/IWmsgs/DecisivePoints-vs-TippingPoints.pdf>

because it instead begins to devote 100 percent of its resources to survival. This analysis leads me to propose my sixth and final criterion to measure success against an insurgency: ratios of insurgent resources dedicated to operations versus those dedicated to organizational maintenance, growth, or survival.

I have not yet had time to test my proposal adequately for these six success criteria. I have done some research about the sixth criterion in three different historical case studies, but the work was tangential to a separate research initiative. For now, they remain proposals that I hope will generate some discussion about how to best measure success in insurgency and counterinsurgency operations. If validated, these measurements will empower democratic regimes that are engaged in irregular combat with relevant statistics. In turn, these statistics might insulate democracies with quantifiable results from the otherwise ambiguous environments that insurgencies leverage against voters and governments alike. And alas, this discussion sets up the next irregular warfare message of the week: how to exhaust insurgencies...

Read past *Irregular Warfare Messages of the Week* at
http://www.usma.edu/dmi/iw_message.htm .