

A Doctrinal Template for Insurgencies (part 3 of 3)

This message is the third of three essays that outline a doctrinal template for how insurgencies operate. The doctrine belongs to U.S. Army Special Forces (SF), the proponent for waging insurgency operations within the U.S. Department of Defense. Though this doctrine originates within the U.S., it may still be applied to other insurgencies to assist in identifying, understanding, and predicting enemy insurgent activities. This is especially true since most insurgencies lack the professionalism, experience, and resources to create their own doctrinal products. Additionally, SF doctrine is grounded with decades of rigorous research and practical experience in waging insurgency, giving their products a detail and scope that exceeds the capabilities of most insurgents. In short, if you understand SF doctrine, then you may understand insurgencies as well as or better than some insurgents themselves.

These three messages are not intended to make readers experts on insurgency—far from it. In fact, my intent is solely to introduce readers to a few of doctrine’s insights in order to wet soldiers’ appetites and encourage them to seek out SF’s works. FM 3-05.201 presents a lot of insights from which hungry readers can gobble, and those are only the unclassified ones. Further, there are numerous historical SF doctrinal publications which also can be useful. Hopefully, this e-column can create an interest among professionals to pursue SF’s experience as a benchmark for understanding insurgency.

In the first two messages, we have discussed resistance, insurgency, seven insurgency dynamics, and insurgency components: the guerrillas, auxiliary, and underground. This message will advance the three developmental phases of insurgency and the seven operational phases of insurgency sponsorship.

SF doctrine is not alone in describing insurgent development in three phases. Several historical U.S. army publications in the 1980s and 1990s mentioned them, including FM 90-8 *Counter guerrilla Operations* (1986), FM 100-20 *Military Operations in a Low-Intensity Conflict* (1990), and FM 7-98 *Operations in a Low-Intensity Conflict* (1992). More importantly, these three phases are actually just re-titled versions of Mao Tse-Tung’s original presentation. Mao called them “strategic defensive,” “strategic stalemate,” and “strategic offensive.” U.S. doctrine calls them “latent and incipient,” “guerrilla warfare,” and “war of movement.” I don’t know why we changed the names—it may have something to do with the fact that we adopted Mao’s terms at a time when his allegiance to communism conflicted with our Cold War culture.¹

Phase I, *latent and incipient*, is when the insurgency is most vulnerable. Insurgent leaders are focused primarily on two things: their organization and the population. Subversive activities commence, to include: establishing funding and external support mechanisms; infiltrating government and other key organizations; psychologically preparing the population; and arranging resistance struggles like boycotts and strikes. Moreover, resistance cadre (also often referred to by academics as “political entrepreneurs”) focus on organizational requirements like recruiting, training, group structuring, and unit development. Shadow governments are born, and violence is rare or very limited. Insurgents do not want to provoke attention or aggression from

¹ FM 3-05.201, pages 1-7 to 1-8.

the regime, and the focus on engagements is strictly survival. Mao's "defense" is typically accomplished through maneuver, not holding terrain. Once both its hold on the population and their offensive capabilities are sufficient, the insurgency can successfully progress to Phase II.

Offensive operations characterize the *guerrilla warfare* phase and are the most obvious indicator of the insurgency's progression. These operations—both military and non-military—overtly challenge the regime's capabilities. On the military side, limited offensive actions engage resources, symbols, and representatives of the regime. Guerrilla activity may be overt and aggressive, but successful guerrilla leaders must still balance engagement with maneuver. Leaders decide to either "fight" or "flee" based upon their confidence of success in the engagement. Guerrilla capabilities have advanced, but they are not yet capable of either holding ground or decisive engagement. Surprise, innovation, and information superiority typify their rapid and short attacks. In the non-military realm, the insurgency's political machine is also functioning overtly. Propaganda and economic activities occur openly. As the shadow government agitates the political, social, and economic grievances of the population, it simultaneously works to satiate population needs that are *within its burgeoning capability*, choosing to undertake non-military initiatives based upon a high confidence of success.

As Mao implied, the Phase II insurgency is trying to grind the regime's capabilities to a halt. First, the successful guerrilla forces the regime to choose between defending what it knows—its infrastructure, symbols, associations, and representatives—and attacking what it doesn't know—the endlessly mobile and seemingly ubiquitous enemy that prefers to vanish rather than stand and fight. Furthermore, as guerrilla capabilities continue to expand, the regime's rapid consumption of resources for defensive requirements begins to undermine support for offensive operations. Additionally, politicians are forced to present the population with evidence that the government remains viable because guerrillas only attack when success probabilities embarrass the regime. Since the guerrilla never offers a battle with quantifiable ends, the regime chooses a defensive posture—militarily, politically, socially, informationally, and economically—with the intent to visibly deter the insurgent and reassure the population. Despite Sun Tzu's warnings, the regime now defends everywhere, and thus, nowhere. Initiative is lost, and stalemate ensues.²

The *war of movement* in Phase III presents the regime with (1) an insurgency that has an effective military organization capable of conventional warfare and (2) a resistance organization that has an effective shadow government capable of administering to the population's needs. As the regime rapidly approaches exhaustion from the competing requirements of fighting the insurgency and running its country, the resistance continues to entice or coerce increasing support from support mechanisms that facilitate offensive both operations and growth.³ The regime may collapse, withdraw, abdicate, or lose. Mao described these dual processes as destruction (of the current regime) and construction (of the new regime).⁴ If the resistance has managed its strategy well, then direct confrontation between the insurgency and the regime is

² Frank Kitson further discusses this balance of offensive operations and defensive operations in his book *Bunch of Five* (1977, London: Faber and Faber).

³ Internal and external support mechanisms are both important to consider. One should also remember that Mao correctly described this as a zero sum game: every resource that the regime loses supports the growth of the resistance against it. See footnote below for McCormick's discussion of Mao's theory.

⁴ McCormick, Gordon. "People's Wars." *Encyclopedia of Conflicts since WWII*. New York: M.E. Sharp, Inc., pages 26-28.

now possible. Decisive engagement presses a conventionally organized resistance force against a hollow, exhausted, and demoralized army of the regime.

Ho Chi Minh probably best illustrated that a resistance does not need to ever transition to phase III to be successful. Each North Vietnamese attempt to press U.S. and ARVN forces into a strategic conventional battle met in defeat (1965, 1968, and 1972). Notwithstanding, phase II successes eroded the U.S. national will to fight. An exhausted U.S. pulled out, leaving an ineffective ARVN force and an ineffective South Vietnamese government to face the North's 1975 final offensive. Also noteworthy is that Ho's miscalculations showed the criticality of timing when moving between the phases: his decisions to transition to phase III were poorly timed because the opposing forces were obviously not sufficiently hollow, exhausted, or demoralized.⁵ Therefore, analysts should remember that insurgencies may move between these three developmental phases in any order they prefer—and still win, but insurgent success often depends on the timing of his transitions.

Operationally, cadres facilitate this three-phase development through seven phases of sponsorship. In the interest of brevity, I will only describe each one quickly.⁶ First, cadres conduct their preparation: research of the target area includes examining the population, the environment, and the regime; propaganda, PSYOP support, and civil-military operations are also among preparation activities. Second, cadres initiate contact. During this contact, they meet with resistance leaders, assess resistance potential, and determine capabilities. PSYOP and civil-military operations expand. In the third phase, political entrepreneurs are infiltrated to position themselves and develop sustainment and internal command and control (C2). These cadres continue to assess their areas of operation and the population within it. In the fourth phase, building rapport with the population is the critical concern of political entrepreneurs. Once a relationship is established, cadres work through, with, and by the resistance leadership to create unconventional infrastructure that can sustain both military and non-military activities. C2 of the resistance (first between the political entrepreneurs and the resistance and later within the resistance itself) takes shape, and indigenous cadres are created. Buildup is the fifth phase. The resistance and insurgency expand. Internal and external support mechanisms are developed, and limited offensive capabilities begin. By definition, this fifth operational phase marks the insurgency's shift from its first developmental phase (latent and incipient) to the second (guerrilla warfare). Next, the insurgency begins combat employment as its sixth operational phase. Offensive guerrilla activities expand. If necessary, insurgency growth continues into the third developmental phase, war of movement, where large conventional clashes with regime forces are possible. Military objectives should now support a more centralized strategy, even if their execution remains characteristically decentralized. Finally, cadres must demobilize in the seventh phase. The most sensitive and difficult phase, demobilization is marked by the cadres' decision to cease their sponsorship of the resistance. The resistance may or may not have succeeded in its goals, and it may or may not be capable of continuing without the cadres. It is also important to note that the resistance may continue without the cadres in a way that the cadres do not prefer.

⁵ In fairness, Ho was already dead before the decision to launch the Easter Offensive in 1972, but the poor timing of his successor was no better than Ho's had been in '65 and '68.

⁶ Pages 1-11 to 1-18 of FM 3-05.201 explain these operational phases in greater depth.

As mentioned earlier, these operational phases belong to SF doctrine. However, I think one can find striking similarities when comparing these methods to those of al Qaeda when it infiltrates Muslim migrant communities around the world. I also think one can find similarities when comparison with other cadres in other social movements, to include communist insurgencies, religious ministries, and political or social action groups.

As with all of SF's insurgency doctrine, applying it as a doctrinal template may provide insights and understandings into how insurgencies begin, develop, operate, and sustain themselves. The third step of the IPB process calls for analysts to apply a doctrinal template to the terrain and weather situation within both the area of operation and the area of interest. Even if the enemy lacks doctrine, understanding SF's version may help analysts recognize how the enemy insurgent thinks or plans—even before the enemy himself does. Until more information about enemy insurgents provides a completely comprehensive understanding of their doctrine—assuming they have one—these last three *irregular warfare messages of the week* offer SF doctrine as a sufficient if not superior alternative that empowers both predictability and initiative in this war.

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