Go Goliath!

America, Light Footprints, and the Challenge of Asymmetric Warfare

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There are two ways to fight the U.S. military—asymmetrically and stupid. Future enemies will not be passive; they will make every effort to avoid U.S. strengths, emulate advanced U.S. capabilities, and disrupt U.S. advantages.


In 2014, the United States spent over $610 billion on defense, more than the next seven countries combined.² This disparity in military spending creates vast inequalities in terms of military power—a modern David and Goliath situation. As long as these inequalities exist, we should expect less powerful actors to employ the “weapons of the weak”: terrorism and insurgency.³ We should also expect strong states to protect themselves and counter actors that attempt to challenge the status quo.

Over the past decade, the United States used population-centric counterinsurgency strategies in Afghanistan and Iraq with limited success. Both campaigns sought to secure the

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¹ The views expressed in this article are personal and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Military Academy, Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the United States government.
population and build local support for the new governments. These conflicts were tremendously expensive in terms of blood and treasure, but neither produced a definitive victory for the United States. Domestically the wars generated political, military, and public aversion to large-scale, American-led counterinsurgency operations. Consequently, many continue to question the efficacy of America’s counterinsurgency doctrine. After Iraq and Afghanistan, it is not clear whether powerful states have learned how to overcome asymmetric threats to their power.

Many U.S. policymakers learned from Iraq and Afghanistan that it is best to avoid counterinsurgency campaigns altogether. But policymakers are not always free to choose which conflicts will arise. The era of transnational threats persists; religious extremism, organized crime, ethnic and sectarian rivalry, poor governance, failing states, and other drivers of terrorism and insurgency continue to grow. Asymmetric threats – actors that attempt to avoid a state’s strength and attack where the state is weak in order to achieve a political aim – are likely to remain a central concern for U.S. foreign policy. This paper intends to frame the central questions facing policymakers as they grapple with these sorts of threats. Given current political and fiscal realities, how should the United States structure their military force? Is it possible to use counterinsurgency strategies to intervene successfully against contemporary threats like the Islamic State (IS)? What other asymmetric threats loom on the horizon?

David Comes of Age: The Evolution of the Modern Asymmetric Threat

Asymmetric War refers to a conflict involving a sizeable power gap between two rivals. This power disparity refers mainly to military capability, but can also include economic,

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diplomatic, and political power. Asymmetric war encompasses multiple categories of sub-state violence including: insurgency, terrorism, guerilla warfare, urban warfare, and proxy warfare. Mao Tse-tung was the most influential theorist and practitioner of this form of warfare. His central premise - that a guerilla fighter relies on the support of the people - remains central to understanding asymmetric war today.

Mao’s Contribution

Mao’s concept of revolutionary war combines traditional guerilla warfare with political mass movements. Mao prescribes a peasant mobilization to defeat the ruling authority, reform society, and alter economic conditions. In the protracted campaign he argues that popular will and political factors are supreme. The insurgency must pursue political objectives that “coincide with the aspirations of the people.” The people are “the fountainhead of guerilla warfare” - the source of recruits, supplies, intelligence, shelter, and freedom of movement. Thus, the insurgent must focus on controlling and organizing the population. Mao argues that guerillas cannot survive without the population; “like a fish out of its native element, it cannot live.”

Asymmetric war is as intensely psychological as it is political. According to Mao, “troops should have a precise conception of the political goal of the struggle and political organization to be used in attainment of the goal.” Propaganda educates the masses, disciplines the troops, and weakens the enemy. The key is to “link the political mobilization for the war with developments in the war and with the life of the soldiers and the people, and make it a

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continuous movement.” Propaganda and ideology achieve unity of effort, making every person a resource to support the guerilla and oppose the enemy.

Mao’s protracted war strategy consists of three sequential phases: strategic defensive, strategic stalemate, and strategic offensive. In the strategic defensive phase, insurgents build clandestine infrastructure, separate the people from the government, gain sympathetic support, and survive. This requires a vanguard, an elite group of leaders capable of building a political and military organization. In the initial phase leaders enmesh the people’s grievances with political ideology and the revolution’s objectives. In phase two, strategic stalemate, they isolate the people from the government, establish administration, and conduct protracted warfare. Guerillas avoid decisive battle and remain mobile to survive. Small unit tactics “deceive, tempt, and confuse the enemy.” Guerillas attack the enemy’s vulnerabilities and spread fear through sabotage. Units require secure bases for training and force generation. Finally, the insurgents shift to a conventional offensive to defeat the military and usurp the regime.

Mao’s greatest contribution was his emphasis on guerillas building political support amongst the people to change the correlation of forces against a superior enemy. Mao exported his doctrine and provided a successful template to aspiring revolutionaries. However, Mao never intended his theory as a universal blueprint, and he emphasized the need for variation. He understood that “strategic theory has meaning only in terms of the concrete political, social, and

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15 Tse-tung, On Guerilla Warfare, 44-45.
16 Tse-tung, On Guerilla Warfare, 57
17 Tse-tung, On Guerilla Warfare, 103.
18 O’neill, Insurgency & Terrorism, 50 -51.
international circumstances at the moment in which theory is being elucidated.” As a practitioner, he believed ultimately in bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Insurgents of all flavors have studied the Maoist approach and innovated to form conflict-specific strategies. General Vo Nguyen Giap, for instance, internationalized the Vietcong’s guerilla war to destroy America’s national political will. The Shining Path in Peru and the Union for the Total Independence of Angola preferred to weaken their rivals’ economies before confronting their military forces. Che Guevara advocated a military-focused strategy in which martial action, instead of political organization, would mobilize the masses against a despotic regime. Carlos Marighella pioneered an urban guerilla strategy that combined protests, urban combat, and terrorism to provoke government overreaction and galvanize support for revolution. Today, al Qaeda and its associates follow a transnational military approach that uses attacks against America and ‘apostate’ regimes to generate support. To gain popular support, these insurgent leaders innovated and used a variety of techniques, including charismatic attraction, esoteric and exoteric appeals, terrorism, provocation of government repression, coercion, and demonstrations of potency.

Mao’s Students

TX Hammes argues that contemporary insurgency, termed 4th Generation Warfare (4GW), evolved from Mao’s strategy. 4GW uses superior political will to convince the enemy’s

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22 Hammes, The Sling and the Stone, 56.
23 O’neill, Insurgency & Terrorism, 54.
26 O’neill, Insurgency & Terrorism, 65-67.
27 O’neill, Insurgency & Terrorism, 98-109.
decisionmakers that their goals are unachievable.\textsuperscript{28} It forgoes attempts to defeat the state’s military forces and leverages new information technology and social networks to reach into the enemy’s population and weaken his political position over time.\textsuperscript{29} Information dominance is critical to winning these so-called “Long Wars” - conflicts that can potentially last decades.

Although 4GW evolved from Maoist principles, it differs from Mao’s vision in some crucial respects. David Kilcullen describes the differences between modern insurgency and Maoist revolutionary war.\textsuperscript{30} On the strategic level, modern insurgency is transnational, and technology provides some coordination between various groups. The Internet provides a virtual sanctuary that augments physical bases and allows fighters to establish connections, transfer knowledge, share ideology, and train. Kilcullen argues that resistance insurgencies sparked by foreign invasion are now more common than revolutionary insurgencies.\textsuperscript{31} Operationally, insurgents function “like a self-synchronizing swarm of independent but cooperating cells” rather than well coordinated mass organizations.\textsuperscript{32} Tactically, urban warfare and terrorism are more dominant than rural

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig1.jpg}
\caption{Insurgent in Iraq used advanced Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), such as this Explosively Formed Projectile (EFP), to destroy American armored vehicles. Jihadi groups, such as al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), transferred knowledge and tactics to their affiliates operating in Afghanistan.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{28} Hammes, \textit{The Sling and the Stone}, 2 & 5.
\textsuperscript{29} Hammes, \textit{The Sling and the Stone}, 14.
\textsuperscript{31} Kilcullen, “Counterinsurgency Redux”, 2-4.
\textsuperscript{32} Kilcullen, “Counterinsurgency Redux”, 6.
In the information age, leaders focus on perception management and media exploitation.

Even so, modern asymmetric warriors still require popular support to achieve a political objective. Accordingly, violent groups continue to study and implement Maoist strategy. For example, in 2002 Abu Ubayd al-Qurasi, an al Qaeda strategist, published a series of articles on Maoist revolution and contemporary guerilla warfare. In “Revolutionary War” al-Qurashi highlighted guerilla warfare tactics, the importance of a central political objective, and the need to dedicate equal effort to political and military lines of operation. In “War of the Ether” he argued that al Qaeda must use technology to internationalize the jihad in order to destroy U.S. popular support. Indeed, Osama bin Laden’s strategy was an evolution of Maoist doctrine. Bin Laden advocated a sequential guerilla campaign: 1) Provoke the United States into a protracted war; 2) Mobilize the Muslim people and transform al Qaeda from an organization into a self-perpetuating ideology and movement; 3) Exhaust the United States psychologically and economically to force it to withdraw; 4) Overthrow Arab apostates regimes and destroy Israel; 5) Resolve the heretical Shia situation. General David Petraeus sums up Mao’s pervasive influence: “al Qaeda is trying to control populations, terrain and administer it… it has embraced the Maoist concepts and used the very vocabulary. Again, these are peoples’ wars.”

Al Qaeda’s leaders clearly understand the importance of leveraging the population. Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Deputy to Osama bin Laden and now the leader of al Qaeda, lamented in

Knights under the Prophet’s Banner that al Qaeda had failed to adequately mobilize Muslim

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35 al-Qurashi, Abu Ubayd. “Revolutionary Warfare.”
support for guerilla war.\textsuperscript{39} Abu Musab Aal-Zarqawi, leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), lost popular support by indiscriminately targeting Shia Muslims and coercing Sunni religious and tribal leaders.\textsuperscript{40} Dr. Zawahiri cautioned Zarqawi against fomenting a sectarian civil war in Iraq because it would endanger the insurgency.\textsuperscript{41} Documents captured in Abbottabad also revealed bin Laden’s frustration with regional affiliates’ ineptness with the people. Bin Laden warned al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) against pressing for an Islamic state in Yemen before establishing tribal support.\textsuperscript{42} Recently, the Islamic State has become the most advanced jihadist group by co-opting disenfranchised Sunnis in Syria and Iraq, and by using brute force to subjugate the people. This begs the question: Is it possible for insurgents to maintain popular support through brute force, or is this a vulnerability that U.S. policymakers can exploit?

\textbf{Go Goliath: American Counterinsurgency}

American counterinsurgency doctrine follows Mao in focusing on the population. The United States uses two approaches that seek to achieve popular support for the host nation government.\textsuperscript{43} The direct, “large footprint” approach, as envisioned in \textit{Field Manual 3-24: Counterinsurgency} (2006), is expeditionary, large-scale, American-led operations. The United States conducts combat operations while it develops the host nation’s institutions and security forces. Subsequently, the United States transitions authority and responsibility to the host nation. Campaigns in Vietnam (post 1965), Iraq (2003), and Afghanistan (post 2008), followed this model. Conversely, the indirect, “small footprint” approach combines Security Force Assistance

\textsuperscript{39} Peter L. Bergen, \textit{The Osama bin Laden I Know} (New York: Free Press, 2006), 389.
\textsuperscript{43} Collins, \textit{Understanding War in Afghanistan}, 54-55.
(SFA) and Foreign Internal Defense (FID) to “develop the capacity and capability of foreign
security forces and their supporting institutions.” Small contingents provide the host nation
with funding, weapons, training, and advice, but the host nation’s security forces perform combat
operations. At the core of this second approach is the concept that “only local governments can
establish legitimacy.” These two approaches, direct and indirect, can be seen as components of
a larger strategy; in fact, each conflict requires its own approach, and some conflicts require
policymakers to combine elements of each.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have discredited the direct approach in the eyes of
many U.S. policymakers. Has the indirect or small-footprint approach been similarly discredited?
Historical examples suggest, as one source puts it, “that comparatively small levels of American
security forces can succeed in defeating overseas insurgencies.” A partial list of successful
American advisory missions would include: Greece vs. Greek People’s Liberation Army (ELAS)
(1945-55); Philippines vs. Hukbalahap Insurgency (1946-1954); Thailand vs. Thai Communist
Party (1950-1970s); El Salvador vs. Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) (1981-
1991); Columbia vs. Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (1964-Present);
Philippines vs. Moro Insurgencies (MNLF, MILF). Admittedly, the record is not perfect.
American support was ineffective against Mao’s Communist movement in China and against the
Viet Cong in Vietnam prior to 1965. Yet, the indirect approach appears to have a better success
rate than the direct approach. The United States defeated the Filipino Insurrectos (1899-1902)
using brutal techniques that are unsuitable in the modern information age. American intervention

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Usually Fails Where Security Force Assistance Could Succeed”, Small Wars Journal, 9 April 2013,
in South Vietnam (1965-1975) was a failure. American efforts in Iraq did not produce sustainable security, and it is gripped by violence today. The verdict for Afghanistan is still out.

Maintaining low troop levels in an advisory role appears to provide U.S. policymakers with many benefits. American forces avoid direct combat and focus on building capabilities in the host nation’s institutions and security forces. The host nation’s military and police do the majority of the fighting.\textsuperscript{49} Studies suggest that the American public is casualty-averse, especially when they detect incompetence, see little military progress, and believe that vital national interests are not at stake.\textsuperscript{50} U.S. public support eroded as casualties mounted in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Small footprint approaches rely primarily on Special Operations Forces and intelligence agencies, and they do not require a large Department of Defense (DOD) commitment. Small contingents prevent “impatient Americans from hastily attempting to do the job themselves.”\textsuperscript{51} This reinforces host nation self-reliance and limits free riding.\textsuperscript{52} The military also avoids having to restructure the force for counterinsurgency and can prepare conventional formations for other contingencies. Consequently, “a small, indirect commitment may provide the United States useful leverage against a Pentagon that does

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan forced the Pentagon to task Soldiers with missions that did not align with their specialties. Above, M1A2 Armored crewman prepare explosives to clear a minefield during a dismounted patrol in the Arghandab River Valley, Kandahar, Afghanistan.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{51} Hammes, “The Future of Counterinsurgency”, 571.
\textsuperscript{52} Walter C. Ladwig III, “Supporting Allies in Counterinsurgency”, 80.
not favor a counterinsurgency campaign.” Small footprint strategies do require the military to maintain a FID capability, update doctrine, and train specialized units.

Small footprint counterinsurgency is more likely to survive multiple political administrations because it is less costly. U.S. advisory missions in the Philippines, Colombia, and Africa, for instance, managed to “stay small enough so that no one in the U.S. is interested.” This produces consistency in American foreign policy and provides “the long term support the host nation needs to make the difficult political, social, and economic changes necessary to neutralize the drivers of an insurgency.” Advisors also stay long enough to develop local expertise and fight the long war. Unlike large footprint counterinsurgency operations, advisory missions do not exhaust the military or the economy. Properly executed, they may prove more sustainable than the alternative.

For the host nation, small footprint missions can also prove attractive, so long as U.S. forces protect the host nation’s sovereignty and legitimacy. American-led operations always risk undermining “the legitimacy of the government we are attempting to support.” This risk is usually more pronounced in large rather than small-scale interventions. A large military presence distorts the political and economic reality and damages the state’s ability to govern. It is extremely difficult for host nations to succeed without legitimacy, and they cannot achieve legitimacy if they are occupied by a foreign power. Large-scale interventions can also generate

56 Octavian Manea, “The Fallacies of Big Expeditionary Counterinsurgency: Interview with T.X. Hammes.”
“accidental guerillas,” i.e., cause otherwise peaceful people to join the fight. Modern insurgencies forgo attempts to defeat the state’s military forces and use information technology to weaken the state’s political will. The war of ideas and the insurgents’ narrative are paramount. Military occupation can validate the enemy’s narrative, paint the United States as “Crusaders,” “Occupiers,” or “Imperialists,” and reduce the host nation to a “puppet regime.” Critics argue that the United States created proxy governments in South Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, then used military power to defend them from their own countrymen who opposed them. The mere perception that this is so, whether or not it is true, can prove important in asymmetric war. Messaging shapes both domestic and international support.

Small footprint counterinsurgency has important limitations. It is a “multinational and interagency effort, requiring integration and synchronization of all instruments of national power.” The United States assists the political, economic, legislative, judicial, military, police, and intelligence functions of the government. Therefore, advisory missions require a standing government with some political capacity, administrative structure, and the ability to coordinate

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65 Hammes, “The Future of Counterinsurgency”, 584
actions.\textsuperscript{66} A light footprint approach is a poor sequel to regime change. A small contingent of advisors is also inadequate for a failed state. The light footprint in Afghanistan (2002-2004), for example, was insufficient because of the lack of established state institutions and security forces.\textsuperscript{67} However, as of this writing, the Afghan government may be strong enough to allow Washington to follow a light footprint approach. Advisory missions also require some level of political stability in the host country to facilitate the lengthy counterinsurgency process. The regime must have some right to govern even if its institutions require substantial reform.\textsuperscript{68} An insurgency indicates that some state institutions are performing poorly. Success usually “requires reform in both political and security arenas” to address societal grievances.\textsuperscript{69} Advisors must ensure that the host nation’s plan is sound and leverage America’s support to encourage change.\textsuperscript{70} Reformers within the host nation often require an external impetus to change policies or restructure the government. The country’s leaders may be driven by parochial interests and want to maintain the status quo inside their country.\textsuperscript{71} Advocating reforms may “threaten to alter fundamentally the positions and prerogatives of those in power.”\textsuperscript{72} Despotic rulers, corrupt elites, and unruly security forces can hinder success, and it is often difficult for advisors to achieve change. Last, America’s reputation depends upon the host nation’s just conduct during the war.

American prestige is often tied to our partner’s performance and adherence to humanitarian norms. The American advisory mission to El Salvador illustrates the advisor’s moral dilemma. Washington threatened to withdraw assistance to compel the Salvadorian

\textsuperscript{66} Ladwig III, “Supporting Allies in Counterinsurgency”, 81.
\textsuperscript{67} Collins, \textit{Understanding War in Afghanistan}, 76.
\textsuperscript{69} Hammes, “The Future of Counterinsurgency”, 582.
\textsuperscript{70} Ladwig III, “Supporting Allies in Counterinsurgency”, 78.
\textsuperscript{71} Byman, “Going to War with the Allies You Have”, 26.
government to stop war crimes. Vice President George Bush (December 1983) and Vice President Dan Quayle (November 1989) engaged El Salvador leaders to establish ethical guidelines for American support. After the Salvadorean military executed six Jesuit Priests in 1989, Congress halved American financial assistance.\textsuperscript{73} Salvadorian political leaders feared losing American support and suppressed the military vigilantes and death squads. This vital reform reduced grievances and support for the insurgency. Currently, the United States supports multiple governments in their fight against Salafist insurgents. It is difficult to force these countries to reform because they know that America has a national interest in their struggle.\textsuperscript{74} Accordingly, the “US may be tarred with the brush of a brutal ally, even if it is urging that ally to reform.”\textsuperscript{75} This begs the question: Should U.S. policymakers recognize that democratization and protection of human rights are not always feasible, or is it preferable to accept strategic risks compel our partners to pursue reform?

The small footprint approach cannot guarantee that our partners will be victorious. U.S. policymakers must therefore consider the danger of mission creep - the gradual expansion of mission requirements. Military Assistance Advisory Group – Vietnam (MAAG-V) was incapable of building sufficient political, economic, and security momentum to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam. Consequently, the United States intervened without a rigorous policy reassessment and committed its first maneuver battalions on March 8, 1965 at Danang.\textsuperscript{76} The military became mired in a costly protracted war and was not able to defeat the Viet Cong. As domestic support plummeted and the anti-war movement grew, the United States withdrew forces and cut support for South Vietnam. Without external support, the Army of the Republic of

\textsuperscript{74} Byman, “Going to War with the Allies You Have”, 28.
\textsuperscript{75} Byman, “Going to War with the Allies You Have”, 28.
Vietnam (ARVN) could not repel the North Vietnamese offensive in 1975. Would a sustained small footprint approach have produced a different outcome? Advocates suggest that the ultimate advantage of the small footprint approach is that we are not locked in a protracted conflict and can easily walk away. Critics argue that Vietnam shows how footprints have a tendency to increase in size. If policymakers engage in small-footprint approaches, they must be prepared for the possibility of failure and to answer a hard question: Is the government under attack worthy of the American commitment required to save it?  

More Tough Questions for the Big Guy

This is not the only hard question facing U.S. policymakers. General Petraeus, an advocate for small footprint strategies, warns that when the indirect approach is not enough, “some cold hard calculations and assessments of interests must be made.” Is there truly an existential threat present? What U.S. national interests are at stake? What might be the unintended consequences of our action or inaction? Which states or non-state actors will exploit the situation if we do not intervene? What are we willing to sacrifice, and what are we willing to do to achieve our ends?

The United States continues to grapple with how to best counter the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria. President Obama initially adopted a light footprint approach that combines SFA, FID, and coalition airstrikes. However, IS remains resilient and continues to control a large territory. Opponents of the current policy question whether host nation forces can defeat IS without U.S. conventional forces on the ground. Pundits also argue that our reluctance to intervene has made the United States appear weak and allowed Iran to become a regional

77 Melton, “Aligning FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency with Reality.”
hegemon. Will the current light footprint approach continue after the 2016 presidential election? Or will the U.S. footprint continue to expand until mission creep draws us into another large footprint campaign?

The United States will undoubtedly work to maintain its technological advantage and military might. This inequality in military power will continue to drive asymmetric threats and create dilemmas for the United States. Asymmetric threats are multiplying, and simultaneously rival states are modernizing. If we invest heavily in sub-state conflicts, near-peer competitors such as China or Russia may be able to close the conventional power gap with the United States. Budgets are tight, resources are scarce, and time is limited. Davids are rising and arming themselves with stones. What should Goliath do in response?
Recommended Readings


Additional Readings


Lou DiMarco “Losing the moral compass: torture and guerre revolutionnaire in the Algerian War”. *Parameters*, 36(2) 2006,


Octavian Manea, “Reflections on the ‘Counterinsurgency Decade’: Small Wars Journal Interview with General David H. Petraeus” in *Small Wars Journal*, 1 September 2013,


Republican Army *Green Book*, Volumes 1 and 2.


http://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R967/.


Rod Thornton. “Getting it wrong: the crucial mistakes made in the early stages of


