Modern Media and its Role in Insurgency

https://www.e-ir.info/2012/09/15/modern-media-and-its-role-in-insurgency/

SETH CARROLL, SEP 15 2012

The development of the age of mass media and communication has had a profound impact on the ways in which insurgency operates. Classical Maoist insurgency prescribes that the people and their support are the most important factor in initiating an effective anti-government insurgency[1], whereas Clausewitz stipulates that the relative center of gravity[2], in this case the people as the hub around which all effects rotate, should be the primary focus of a campaign. Media, in its modern post 1970's form, allows for an insurgent to change the center of gravity of a conflict to a distant population. This enables the inclusion of disparate third parties, however distant or detached, and for a direct line of communication between the insurgent and that part of the population still under government control. The introduction of this non-corporeal 'battle space'[3] increases the area vulnerable to insurgent pressure, while concurrently providing yet another locale where the counterinsurgent must remain on the active defense. The advent of this new media space[4], and its growing pains in use and exploitation, has become a major determinate factor in the success or failure of insurgency in the modern age.

The use of media by Insurgents to affect the population prior to 1970 had been limited by the existing resources. While teletype, telegraph, and local mass print newspapers did exist and prosper, transmission of issues from geographically isolated or under developed areas, with the notable exception of Ireland, were limited. 'Even in free society's with free press's and democratic ideals the weight of the populace that can be brought on their democratically elected leaders is limited by "either profoundly unconcerned about events which take place beyond their immediate region or uninformed about their real nature".'[5] The technology breakthrough in the 1970's eliminated this deficit. Caldwell wrote that 'small wars take place in distant lands'[6] but since the 1970's the standard of what is distant has changed. While 'distance' from a center of gravity, be it cultural or physical, is still a hurdle with which insurgency must cope, it is no longer a death knell for recognition. In the new media model of insurgency, the only limitation is one of internet access or satellite coverage.[7]

The first significant realization of the role of modern mass media in insurgency is best exemplified by U.S. President Johnson's quote, 'If I've lost Cronkite [an influential journalist], then I've lost Middle America'[8] in regard to a damning television report on the Tet offensive in Vietnam. This stands out as when for the first time the role of mass media was directly presented to a new center of gravity, the American public, with the resultant new realization of a new negative narrative present in Vietnam. 'The images beamed into American living rooms of a once faceless enemy suddenly popping up in the middle of South Vietnams capital had a profound [negative] impact on public opinion' observed a young Colin Powell.[9] 'Tet marked a turning point, raising doubts in the minds of moderate Americans … and the anti-war movement intensified.'[10] In addition to domestic troubles, the intensely disheartening media attention on Tet served to bring pressure upon the United States from its NATO allies to change the nature of the war.[11] Modern media had expanded a conflict's center of gravity from a small Southeastern Asian nation, to an elected democracy's population and voluntary democratic alliance.

This maturity of communication between disparate parts of the world also allowed for Diasporas to have a more significant impact in insurgency. Common cause's uniting shifted the center of gravity of an operation[12] from a potentially controllable national, to an uncontrollable international axis with monetary, moral and electoral pressure available to be brought onto third party governments to take notice of a 'distant' domestic concern.[13] When the center of gravity comprises multiple international population regions, with a potential mobility of membership and support, the root failure causing the insurgency, or any unpalatable methods of governance, are harder to

Modern Media and its Role in Insurgency
Written by Seth Carroll

conceal.[14]

The paths of the insurgency's in Palestine and Ireland since the advent of modern media are reflective of the impacts that modern world wide media has provided. In Palestine, television kept the PLO and its cause from being forgotten in the late seventies, when it was at risk of falling from public attention.[15] New media also highlighted the continuing fight with Israel in a manner which could not escape the 24 hour news cycle[16] and served to bring public pressure on Israel's main ally, the U.S. In Ireland the role and publicity associated with Hunger strikes in 1981-83 brought great domestic strain on the British government due to their perceived harsh prosecution of the IRA.[17] Additionally, 'Sinn Fein membership grew, while criticisms of IRA attacks in England proper were muted by this 'horror' perpetrated by the Home government'.[18] The actions of the IRA also caused the U.S. to inquire into internal U.K. governance, and thus potentially stress the Special Relationship, between the U.S. and U.K. It is notable that this happened only after the proliferation of modern media, and not when immigrant ties were stronger and more recent, such as during the 1919-21 Irish rebellion. The individual impacts that media had on these insurgencies is not the defining significance of modern media; it is that they continued as insurgencies, when previously they would likely have expired due to 'distance' and international neglect.[19]

While international coverage may not seem in itself the recipe for success of an insurgent cause, examining several cases that have, for a variety of reasons, been out of the public eye tend to disagree. Tibetan and Uyghur autonomy has stalled and not achieved any real progress, while it remains outside of the realm of coverage[20] due to a lack of media availability. In Chechnya and Dagestan an internationally acknowledged uprising has disappeared from international view due to both domestic press controls and the lack of a voice available in a third country able to bring public pressure on Moscow.[21] This continues despite the repressive measures imposed in Chechnya; measures which have prominent potential to rally international support to the insurgents cause.[22] These contrast even more sharply when compared to the momentum and international support that modern media provided to the uprising in Libya in 2011. Alternatively, international media coverage of Basque separatists, FARC, HAMAS, KGK, or the Real IRA has not accompanied any tangible success of those groups in achieving their stated ambitions.

Media focus and availability is not always the defining factor in the success or failure of an insurgency. Political resolution of what must have been, by definition, the political failing that gave rise to an insurgency is the only certain significant factor to end that insurgency. However, it is a significant and expanding factor in its chance of success or failure. Merely having a media issue, with its potential of unrestrained world access, is yet another obstacle that needs be countered, and yet another 'simple thing' to be dealt with in the friction of counterinsurgent warfare. Modern media is a unique, underdeveloped and as yet uncontrollable information battle space. It has the potential, when recognized, to leverage previously uncaring or unwilling internal and external forces to act on that side which can best understand and utilize its effects; that of moving and expanding the center of gravity of an insurgency beyond that envisaged by Maoist classical insurgency.

Bibliography

Asprey, Robert B. (2002), *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History Volume II* (iUniverse: Lincoln, NE)

Burke, James (2004), 'Bin Laden Master of Propaganda', *The Guardian* (31 October)

Caldwell, C.E. (1906), *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practices,* 3rd edn, (London: Harrison and Sons)

Calvocoressi, Peter (2009), *World Politics Since 1945,* 9th edn, (Harlow: Pearson)

Clausewitz, Carl von (1832), *On War*, Ed. Trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989)

Jenkins, Brian (2004), '*Does Terrorism Work?*', a RAND commentary originally published in Mercury News (21 March)

Modern Media and its Role in Insurgency

Written by Seth Carroll

Katzenbach, Edward J. jnr., and Gene Z. Hanrahan (1955), 'The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-Tung' ,*Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 70, No 2, pp. 321-40

Kilcullen, David (2006), Counter-Insurgency Redux, Survival: *Global Politics and Strategy*, 48:4, 111-130

Mackinlay, John (2009), *The Insurgent Archipelago* (London: Hurst)

Mackinlay, John (1998), Beyond the Logjam: A Doctrine for complex Emergencies, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 9:1, 114-131

O'Neill, Bard E. (2005), *Insurgency and Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse* , 2nd edn, Revised (Washington: Potomac)

O'Shaughnessy, Nicholas (2004), *Politics & Propaganda* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press)

Rid, Thomas, and Thomas Keaney (2010), *Understanding Counterinsurgency: Doctrine, Operations and Challenges* (London: Routledge)

Rid, Thomas (2007), *War and Media Operations* (London and New York: Routledge)

Schaefer, Robert W. (2010), *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad* (Santa Barbara: Praeger)

[1] Katzenbach (1955), p. 327-28

[2] Clausewitz (1832)*,* p. 595

[3] Rid & Keaney (2010), p. 224-27

[4] Rid (2007), p. 146

[5] Mackinlay (1998), p. 118

[6] Caldwell (1906), p. 73

[7] O'Neill (2005), p. 141

[8] Asprey (2002), p. 888

[9] Rid (2007), p. 58

[10] Asprey (2002), p. 888

[11] Asprey (2002), p. 890

[12] Mackinlay (2009), p. 148

[13] Asprey (2002), p. 1154

[14] Mackinlay (2009), p. 150

[15] Asprey (2002), p. 1155

[16] Jenkins (2004), p. 2

[17] Asprey (2002), p. 1134

[18] *ibid*

[19] 'Bin Laden Master of Propaganda', *The Guardian*, 31 October 2004

[20] Calvocoressi (2009), p. 145-47

[21] Schaefer (2010), p. 181

[22] Schaefer (2010), p. 178

—
Written by: Seth Carroll
Written at: King's College London
Written for: Dr. David Betz
Date written: June 2012