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FINDING THE CENTRE OF GRAVITY DURING COIN CAMPAIGNS

Maj J.P.A. Hoekstra

JCSP 40

Exercise *Solo Flight*

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"Suppose we were… an influence, an idea, a thing intangible, invulnerable, without front or back, drifting about like a gas? …We might be a vapour, blowing where we listed… so we might offer nothing material for the killing."[1] So wrote Colonel T.E. Lawrence in his famous account of the Arab Revolt, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. What he was describing was his concept of how Bedouin tribesmen could fight a guerilla war against the Ottoman Empire, while denying their Turkish enemies the opportunity to strike back effectively at them. While the Arabs would suffer casualties in their insurgency, Lawrence was determined to deny the Turks any target of great significance. He would deny them the ability to identify and target the Arab centre of gravity (COG). The Ottoman inability to do just that has been a source of consternation for armies squaring off against insurgencies throughout the ages. In 1961 Colonel Roger Trinquier, referring to French military frustration over its experiences in Indochina and Algeria, described the difficulty in attacking, "…an enemy who is invisible, fluid, uncatchable."[2] In several articles and his recent book, appropriately titled, *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present*, Max Boot describes similar frustrations experienced by soldiers battling insurgencies from antiquity to the present. Over the past five millennia of human history, military commanders have repeatedly wrestled with the question of how to come to grips with an insurgent enemy who refuses to "play by the rules." How can one identify and attack the centre of gravity of such a foe?

Before examining historical examples of successes and failures in counter-insurgency operations (COIN), it is necessary to briefly review the concept of centre of

gravity. There is much debate amongst scholars and military personnel about what defines a centre of gravity, or whether the term is even relevant, particularly in the case of insurgencies/guerilla warfare. Even the CAF's publication, *Land Operations* (B-GL-300-001/FP-001), acknowledges differing definitions before deferring to the following concept proposed by Dr. J. Strange and Col R. Iron and favoured in current NATO doctrine: COG is, "…a dynamic and powerful physical or moral agent of action or influence that possess certain characteristics and capabilities and benefits…"[3] The CAF publication goes on to state that a COG, "…may be a leader, a key ruling element, or a population segment capable of creating a motivational effect."[4] What becomes evident while reading a variety of interpretations of the nature of a centre of gravity is that different COGs can exist for the same enemy at different levels (i.e. tactical, operational, strategic) and that even at the same level, multiple COGs can exist.[5] In his detailed analysis of Carl von Clausewitz's iconic *On War*, Antulio Echevarria II asserts that, "Centres of gravity… resembled Jomini's decisive points – anything that, if captured or destroyed, would imperil or seriously weaken the enemy."[6] Echevarria paraphrases Clausewitz further when he states, "The type and number of his centres of gravity will thus depend on the degree of connectivity, or overall unity, that his forces possess…"[7] Current Canadian doctrine distinguishes between physical and moral centres of gravity. In *Land Operations*, the authors point out that, "A moral COG in many campaigns may be the will of the majority of population, or the will of a particular segment of the population. Such will be the case in a COIN campaign."[8] This last point is particularly relevant to the case studies below for, as General Sir Rupert Smith explains, "The old paradigm (in war) was that of industrial war. The new one is the paradigm of war

amongst the people…"[9] As will become evident, the COIN campaigns which achieved success were those that correctly identified and targeted the enemy COG, while the COIN campaigns that failed, did not.

At the beginning of the Twentieth Century the British Army was already embroiled in a counter insurgency campaign against the Boers in southern Africa. This epic struggle did not follow the pattern of later famous insurgencies led by Mao Zedong and Vo Nguyen Giap, whereby the insurgency begins as a guerilla war and later transitions into more and more conventional conflict as the insurgents gain strength, resources and outside support.[10] Instead, the Boer War began as a conventional struggle of sorts with highly organized Boer units fighting pitched battles against the British and achieving stunning tactical victories at Colenso, Magersfontein, and Spionkop. The Boers also conducted sieges of major cities at Ladysmith, Mafeking, and Kimberley using heavy artillery.[11] Granted the early war years felt anything but conventional to the British, as the Boer commandos typically disappeared across the veldts of southern Africa on their ponies anytime attacking British troops got too close to coming to grips with them. Even during this more conventional stage of the conflict, the Boers were demonstrating their ability to become "the vapour" that T.E. Lawrence later described. The British were faced with a question that other armies battling insurgents throughout history so often have, how does one find the centre of gravity of a vapour? Recovering from earlier defeats, the British under Lord Roberts modified their tactics, including mounting a substantial component of their infantry on horseback to try match the mobility of their Boer opponents.[12] In addition, as with later successful COIN campaigns, a "surge" of additional forces were injected from Britain and its colonies,

such as Canada and Australia. As described by Max Boot, "By the Spring of 1900, the British force had swelled from 20,000 men to 250,000, and everywhere the Boers were in retreat."[13] Ironically, the British successes on the battlefield that resulted ended up pushing the Boers to adopt a guerilla strategy, which Christian de Wett and several other prominent Boer leaders had argued for in the first place.[14] Consequently, the elusive Boers became harder than ever to track and target as, "…each group of commandos (was) more or less independent."[15] While this was a reversal of the type of transition that Mao would later advocate, it was not an uncommon historical pattern.

The first insurgency to be called a "guerilla war" arose in Spain directly after Napoleon Bonaparte's thrashing of the regular Spanish armies and imposition of French rule. Similarly, the most successful insurgent forces of the Second World War were Tito's partisans, which emerged only after the crushing defeat of the regular Yugoslav Army in April 1941. Trying to pinpoint and attack elusive irregulars in both of these conflicts was a constant source of frustration for both Napoleon's soldiers and the soldiers of the Wehrmacht. In South Africa, the British responded to this shift to guerilla warfare with a combination of innovative, methodical, and ruthless techniques, all of which were aimed at separating the Boer insurgents from their logistical base and the portion of the populace which supported them.

The solutions included the construction of blockhouses at regular intervals along railways and communications lines, with miles of barbed wire fencing off the areas in between the mutually supporting blockhouses. Heavily armed and armoured trains patrolled the intervals and served as a means of quick reaction to attacks against the fortifications. In addition, mounted patrols fanned out across the veldt to drive the Boers

up against the network of wire and blockhouses.[16] A more sinister component of the new COIN strategy included the rounding up of family members of Boer insurgents and relocating them, along with thousands of other Boer farmers, into concentration camps. The abandoned farmsteads were simply burned. As Rupert Smith points out, "the purpose of removing the people from their farms on the veldt was to prevent them concealing, sheltering and feeding the commandos…. and the commandos, denied information and food, would have to come out of hiding as they sought these vital commodities, thus risking death or capture."[17]

This new approach was not all immediately successful. Prior to the massive expansion of the blockhouse system, British sweeps of the veldt did not net the expected large numbers of Boers, largely due to a "…failure to garrison and police each district before moving on to the next one."[18] This enabled the Boers to simply move back into an area after the British had swept it. This pattern would sound all too familiar to later generations of Canadian soldiers serving in Kandahar, who were repeatedly forced to sweep and re-sweep the same areas of Panjwayi and other districts due to insufficient manpower. As the new British commander in South Africa, Lord Kitchener faced similar manpower shortages, albeit on a grander scale. An additional obstacle he faced was a war weary government and public back in England. Author Thomas Pakenham points out that, "The Cabinet's overriding priority… was to cut the cost of the war by cutting the number of troops in South Africa."[19] Kitchener fought tooth and nail against the proposed cuts and actually managed to get the troop increases which he campaigned for. This surge would prove decisive in facilitating the full implementation of the blockhouse and wire strategy. A further example that Kitchener's political instincts matched his

military instincts was his reversal of the decision to round up Boer civilians. Instead British soldiers were ordered to "leave them (the women and children) with the guerillas… (which) greatly handicapped the guerrillas."[20] Ironically, this appeased the Liberals in the British Parliament, who thought this the humane thing to do, whereas in reality "…it was less humane than bringing them into the camps."[21] The use of night raids on Boer camps, as well as the employment of thousands of native Africans as special police, militia, and construction labourers further added to the overwhelming British manpower advantage, as did the recruitment of growing numbers of white South Africans into British service.[22] A final triumph for the British occurred during the armistice that preceded the peace settlement. Following the recommendation of Lord Milner, the High Commissioner for South Africa, the Boer leaders were invited "…to come to Pretoria (to) see for themselves how well their capital was faring without them."[23] Whether this bit of psychological warfare made a difference is uncertain, but the collective devastation of their farms, crops, and livestock, and the misfortunes suffered by their families, in addition to mounting battlefield casualties combined to convince the Boers that, "…there was nothing left to bow to the inevitable."[24] In the end, the families and farms of the Boers proved to be their centre of gravity. When these had been systematically targeted by the British, Boer resistance unravelled and a final peace settlement followed.

According to T.E. Lawrence, the first fundamental principle of an insurgency is having "an unassailable base."[25] Clearly the British had denied this luxury to the Boers during their conflict in Southern Africa. Less than two decades later however, the Ottoman Turks would not be able to achieve this against the Bedouin tribes of the

Arabian Peninsula. As Basil Liddell Hart pointed out, "They (the Turks) were trying to hold down a vast area of country with a quantity of men which was not large enough to spread itself in a network of posts over the area."[26] Lawrence, the British advisor to Prince Feisal, commented on this Ottoman limitation in his famous *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, "I knew the Turkish Army exactly, and even allowing for their recent extension of faculty by aeroplanes and guns and armoured trains… it seemed they would have need of a fortified post every four square miles, and a post could not be less than twenty men. If so, they would need six hundred thousand men to meet the ill wills of all the Arab peoples."[27] The most logical strategy for the Ottomans would have been to abandon their over-extended positions in the deserts of Arabia and concentrate the 100,000 troops they had in the Middle Eastern Theatre along the narrow coastal stretch from Sinai through the Levant. This would have given them overwhelming numerical superiority over the main military threat, which was General Allenby's 69,000 strong Egyptian Expeditionary Force. Turkish commanders might also have done well to read the following passage from Jomini's *The Art of War*, "He holds scarcely any ground but that upon which he encamps; outside the limits of his camp, everything is hostile and multiplies a thousandfold the difficulties he meets at every step."[28] Lawrence however, knew that the Turks would do anything to avoid abandoning their hold on the Arabian Peninsula for fear that they would not be able to get it back. He capitalized on this by encouraging the Bedouin not to try eject the Turkish forces from their over-extended position in Medina, but rather, "…to strike and sabotage the railway, which ferried men, supplies and munitions across the peninsula."[29] In this way Ottoman forces remained dispersed amongst far flung garrisons and their lengthy supply lines were subject to continual

attack by the Arabs. By utilizing this strategy, Lawrence was able to wage "…an irregular war that kept the Ottomans tied down and distracted while the British pursued their own geopolitical aims in the region."[30]

The Turkish Army and Government were not idle in their attempts to quell the Arab insurgency. In fact one of their methods did bear some fruit as historian Eugene Rogan describes here, "Starting in 1915, the Ottoman authorities began to exile large numbers of Arab citizens of questionable loyalty..."[31] Rogan goes on to explain that, "…it was a way of neutralizing the threat an individual posed to the state by disconnecting him from "dangerous" friends and associates… Their friends and families went to great lengths to demonstrate loyalty to the government to help secure the return of their exiled loved one."[32] By 1918, more than 50,000 Arabs had been exiled as a result of these measures.[33] As with so many insurgencies, the authorities saw the people as the support base for the Arab Revolt. This is no different from Canadian military doctrine today, which asserts that, in the case of an insurgency, "…the populace is a strategic centre of gravity."[34] Ethics aside, the Ottoman strategy was logical, but in the end it may have hurt their cause more than it helped, as "Villages already depopulated by conscription were increasingly diminished by the new policy of exile. The impact on trade and agriculture was devastating, as shops closed and fields lay idle in farms worked by exhausted women, children, and the elderly."[35] The resentment of the Arabs smouldered in this environment and justified further acts of rebellion.

The Bedouin also proved capable of implementing Mao's aforementioned cross over from guerilla to more conventional attack. This achieved stunning success with the seizure of the port of Aqaba in 1917, and by the direct support provided by Faisal's Arab

Northern Army to Allenby's seizure of Damascus the following year.[36] For the most part however, Lawrence's Bedouin followers acted as a guerilla force, which the Turks never really succeeded in coming to grips with. Granted, pinpointing the Lawrence's fighters was no simple task when "…the Arabs were able to emerge like phantoms from the desert…"[37] Given the mixed results of targeting the Arab population for exile, the Turks should have looked for an alternate centre of gravity to target. Perhaps the source of the Bedouin's mobility; horses, and especially camels could have been targeted for mass extermination, with the exception of the communities which openly supported the Ottomans. Alternately, perhaps greater efforts could have been directed at exploiting rifts between Bedouin factions through bribery and disinformation. The Ottomans had already achieved considerable success in leveraging Libyan based Sanussi "jihadists" to invade western Egypt, forcing the British to create a Western Frontier Force with thousands of soldiers to suppress the threat.[38] Why greater efforts were not made to win over at least segments of their fellow Muslim Arabian citizens is puzzling. Had the Ottomans taken a page out of past and future British colonial experiences, the development of the Arab Revolt may have followed a completely different course. The British would increasingly show considerable clemency towards defeated enemies, including greater sovereignty, or even the outright independence that the insurgents had originally been fighting for. This was the case at the end of the Boer Wars, and would also be the case at the conclusion of the Malayan Emergency.[39]

In Malaya the British waged a successful counterinsurgency campaign against the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) from 1948 to 1960. In the assessment of historian Max Boot, "No other counterinsurgency campaign waged abroad by a Western

power in the postwar era was as successful."[40] The United States military would wage its own COIN campaign in the same corner of the world from 1962 to 1973, but with a much different outcome. In addition to the final outcomes, these two conflicts are a study in contrasts in many other respects. Given the close proximity of Malaya and Vietnam, both geographically and the time periods of their conflicts, these two COIN campaigns have been frequently compared by historians and soldiers. The comparisons are rather unfair for a number of reasons, such as the fact that in Malaya the insurgents and the overwhelming percentage of their supporters were from the ethnic Chinese minority of the population, whereas, despite the presence of ethnic Chinese communities in parts of Vietnam as well, the overall population of Vietnam was far more homogenous, as were the insurgents themselves.[41] Another key difference was that Malaya is landlocked, with no common border to an outside power with any sympathy for the insurgency.[42] South Vietnam on the other hand, was a long narrow country with open-ocean to its east and dense jungles along the length of its western borders, through which the host governments of Laos and Cambodia exercised no control, thereby facilitating the establishment of the famed Ho Chi Minh Trail.[43] Not only did North Vietnam (an active belligerent in the conflict) directly border South Vietnam, but the People's Republic of China bordered North Vietnam, allowing easy access of almost unlimited logistical support (both from China and the USSR) for the Communist forces. To top it off, whereas in Malaya the MNLA had gained recent experience and weaponry while participating in the insurgency against the Japanese, North Vietnam had a massive conventional army with years of combat experience fighting the French in Indochina.

This battle-hardened army would increasingly inject itself into the fighting in South Vietnam, especially as the fortunes of their Vietcong proxies waned.[44]

Geographic and geopolitical differences aside, enough similarities existed to warrant a brief comparison of why the one COIN campaign in Southeast Asia succeeded while the other one failed. In both struggles, much of the senior leadership of the UK and the USA acknowledged the now cliché statement that the people are a centre of gravity, if not the centre of gravity;[45] or to paraphrase Chairman Mao, the people are the water through which the guerilla swims.[46] In Malaya, the British took this idea to heart through "the systematic resettlement of some 500,000 squatters (landless Chinese peasants) into new villages to deny the Malayan communist guerillas the essential recruits and supplies and thus starve them into submission."[47] Following on the heels of his predecessor Briggs, Lt General Gerald Templer continued the resettlement program; furthermore, he "…speeded up the development of a Malayan army, and pursued administrative reforms within Malaya. He also pushed through measures granting ethnic Chinese residents the right to vote and handed key positions to indigenous leaders, pushing them on the way to self-government."[48] In South Vietnam the Americans tried to target the Vietcong COG with their own version of resettlement of the rural populace which they dubbed the Strategic Hamlet Program. The plan was initiated in a grandiose manner in 1963 with the creation of 8,000 hamlets in less than two years, compared to only 500 new villages in the first three years of the program in Malaya.[49] Not only was no consideration given to the Vietnamese peasants' historical attachment to their ancestral lands, but there were "…far too many (hamlets) for the fledgling South Vietnamese armed forces to safeguard."[50] Both the South Vietnamese and the Americans lost interest in the program

when it, not surprisingly, failed to yield immediate results. As John Nagl points out, "The concept that success in counterinsurgency consisted of separating the insurgents from popular support never took root. The U.S. Army proceeded with its historical role of destroying the enemy army – even if it had a hard time finding it."[51] While the United States failed to effectively target the Communist centre of gravity during the war in Vietnam, the Communists showed far greater sophistication in their targeting of American popular opinion. As explained by Colonel Thomas Hammes, "Against both the French and the Americans, the Vietnamese successfully exploited the natural divisiveness of a democracy to erode support for the war."[52]

Just as the COIN campaigns in Malaya and Vietnam are frequent subjects of comparison, so too are the more recent Soviet and NATO missions in Afghanistan. During their invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Soviets quickly gained control of the cities and tried to push their influence outwards to "pacify the countryside."[53] The Russian Army attempted to secure their own supply routes through the Panjshir Valley which resulted in bloody conflict for both sides along the Salang Route.[54] As attempts to win the support of the Afghan populace failed to bear fruit, the Soviets increasingly shifted their emphasis from pacification, to annihilation. It took the form of "…one of the most vicious, scorched-earth, counterguerrilla (sic) campaigns in history. They carpet-bombed villages, destroyed irrigation systems, and systematically sowed millions of mines across huge swathes of productive farmland."[55] As with the American experience in Vietnam, the Russians were unable to target one of the key Mujahedeen centres of gravity, their logistical nodes and safe havens in neighbouring Pakistan.[56] The United States and its Coalition partners would experience the same problem during their

foray into Afghanistan beginning in 2001, although with covert drone strikes and political pressure on the Pakistani Government, the Taliban did not enjoy the same degree of security as the Mujahedeen had twenty years earlier. In waging this COIN campaign, the United States military still made liberal use of a massive array of weaponry, but unlike in Vietnam, the precision of modern weaponry allowed the Americans and their partners in the International Stabilization and Assistance Force (ISAF) to hit what they were aiming at with far greater accuracy, while greatly minimizing collateral damage. Massively improved ISTAR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, Reconnaissance) capabilities further accentuated the improved precision. At the same time ISAF made very deliberate efforts to focus on a "comprehensive approach" to the conflict and towards the Afghan population. Acronyms such as WOG (Whole of Government) and JIMP (Joint Inter-agency Multinational Public) became more than just buzzwords, as deliberate efforts were made to synergize reconstruction efforts amongst the various Coalition Forces, departments of the Afghan Government, international aid organizations, various branches of the United Nations, and a host of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Over the course of more than a decade more than mere lip service was paid to the strategy of "Clear, Hold, Build," with the term "Secure" being added to the mix.

Unfortunately, the war in Iraq became a great distraction from efforts in Afghanistan for both the Americans and the British. Consequently, much of the momentum in Afghanistan's reconstruction effort was lost.[57] The subsequent resurgence of the Taliban was only reined in with a substantial "surge" of fresh U.S. forces in 2009. The jury is still out on what the future holds for both Afghanistan and Iraq, but it is encouraging to see that a recognition of the importance of a WOG and JIMP approach to

insurgencies is now generally accepted by NATO forces, at the very least amongst staff officers and most senior commanders. The increasing integration of Influence Activities such as CIMIC, PSYOPS, PA, and Info Ops is another positive development. By utilizing these capabilities in conjunction with robust ISTAR and joint kinetic elements, as well as detailed planning, the centres of gravity of future insurgencies can not only be more easily and accurately identified, but also more effectively targeted.

ENDNOTES

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[2] Max Boot, *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present*. New York, Liveright Publishing, 2014, xv.

[3] Department of National Defence, Canada: *Land Operations*. Ottawa: Director of Army Doctrine, 2008, 6-9.

[4] Ibid, 6-10.

[5] Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, 180.

[6] Ibid, 178.

[7] Ibid, 180.

[8] *Land Operations*, 6-11.

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[10] Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: Vol IX,* "On Guerilla Warfare," Mao Tse-tung Reference Archive, 2000, 8.

[11] Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War*. New York, Random House Publishing, 1979, 173-300.

[12] Ibid, 326.

[13] Boot, 187.

[14] Pakenham, 463.

[15] Ibid, 308.

[16] Boot, 194.

[17] Smith, 162.

[18] Pakenham, 515.

[19] Ibid, 567.

[20] Ibid, 581.

[21] Ibid, 581.

[22] Boot, 194.

[23] Pakenham, 586.

[24] Boot, 196.

[25] James Schneider, "T.E. Lawrence and the Mind of an Insurgent." *Army Magazine*, July, 2005, 34.

[26] B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*. London, Faber and Faber Ltd, 1967, 197.

[27] Lawrence, 198.

[28] Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War*. (Eng. Trans) London, Greenhill Books, 1992, 31.

[29] Smith, 165.

[30] Douglas Porch, "Irregular Warfare: Strength or Weakness?" *Military History Quarterly*, Autumn, 2014, 30.

[31] Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East*. New York, Basic Books, 2015, 289.

[32] Ibid, 289.

[33] Ibid, 290.

[34] Department of National Defence Canada: *Counter-Insurgency Operations*. Chief of the Land Staff, 2008, 2-2.

[35] Rogan, 290.

[36] Smith, 166.

[37] Liddell Hart, 200.

[38] Rogan, 238-241.

[39] Boot, 196.

[40] Ibid, 387.

[41] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam A History*. New York, Penguin Books, 1983, 98-100.

[42] John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife.* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005, xvi.

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[44] Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture.* New York, Doubleday, 2001, 404.

[45] DND: *Counter-Insurgency Ops,* 2-2.

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[47] Major F.A. Godfrey, "Smashing the Terrorists." In *War In Peace* Vol2, edited by Ashley Brown, Freeport Long Island: Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 1985, 385.

[48] Smith, 205.

[49] Boot, 417.

[50] Ibid, 417.

[51] Nagl, 115.

[52] Col Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century.* St Paul, MN, Zenith Press, 2004, 74.

[53] Ibid, 159.

[54] Ian F.W. Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies: Guerrillas and their Opponents since 1750*. New York, Routledge, 2001, 210.

[55] Hammes, 159.

[56] Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*. New York, Harper Collins Publishers, 2009, 160.

[57] Hammes, 164.

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