

# Partner Capacity in Counterinsurgency Campaigns

## Does a Small-Footprint U.S. Presence Generally Lead to Success?

Facing severe fiscal limitations, U.S. decisionmakers are striving to place American defense on a more sustainable footing. Central to this effort is a commitment to work wherever possible through support provided to partner nations—countries with which the United States shares interests—while also ensuring that the primary responsibility for their security remains their own. In 2012, the U.S. Defense Strategic Guidance stated, in relation to partnerships: “We will develop innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to achieve our security objectives.”

The likelihood of success when using such small-footprint approaches, however, is a matter of debate. Proponents cite as models the recent successful U.S. operations in the Philippines and Colombia. Skeptics claim that the experience of those two countries may not be generally applicable—that success is inextricably linked with the local context and particularly with the nature of the partner government.

## RAND Sought the Answer in Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses

A team of RAND researchers sought to understand the extent to which the “success stories” of U.S. partnerships can be generalized—and, to the extent that they cannot, the conditions under which the small-footprint model is likely to succeed. The researchers explored how local circumstances shape the “art of the possible” in such partnerships and how the United States can get the most out of them.

The RAND team’s findings are derived from simple statistical analyses of 72 counterinsurgencies that have terminated since the end of the Cold War, together with more in-depth analyses of two important recent cases of U.S. partnerships: the Philippines and Pakistan. The case studies drew on scholarly studies, quantitative data sources, and interviews conducted with several dozen government officials, military officers, and civil society leaders in the Philippines, Pakistan, and the United States.

## Success Against an Insurgency Depends on Local Context

The researchers found that the strategies and practices adopted by regimes fighting rebellions are strongly shaped

### Key findings:

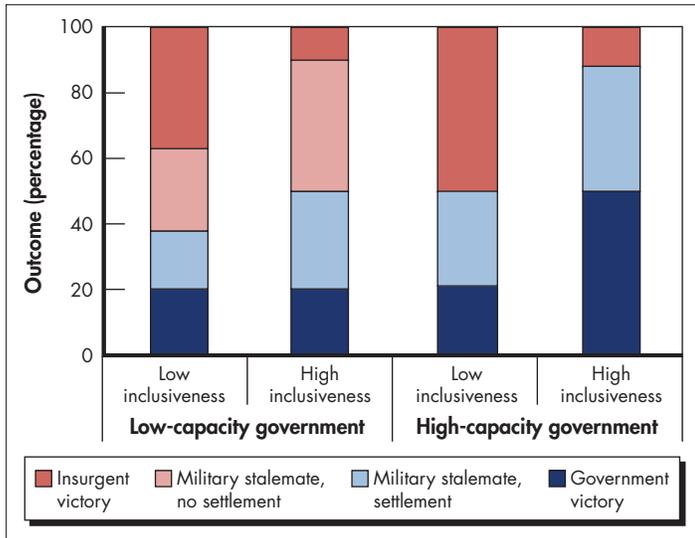
- “Success stories” in small-footprint U.S. interventions on behalf of partner governments have occurred in countries with relatively inclusive politics and reasonable levels of state capacity.
- Most insurgencies target governments that are weak in inclusion and in capacity. Such regimes gravitate toward counterinsurgency practices relying on blunt, abusive military force.
- The United States should seldom expect a productive counterinsurgency partnership with a regime whose character must be transformed to achieve a favorable outcome.
- Nevertheless, the United States can support difficult partner regimes in exploiting settlement opportunities, improving security force accountability, and buttressing more-inclusive successor governments.

by the characteristics of these regimes. “Success stories” like the Philippines and Colombia have occurred in countries with relatively inclusive politics and reasonable levels of state capacity, where the governments typically adopt strategies that approximate the so-called “hearts and minds” model of counterinsurgency. *Unfortunately, only about one insurgency in eight occurs in such best-case countries. Most rebellions take place in worst-case conditions—in countries that lack both inclusive politics and state capacity.*<sup>1</sup> There, the regimes tend to rely on blunt military force to contain or suppress rebellion.

These differing environments dramatically shape the prospects for success. *Only 13 percent of civil wars in the best-case environments fail to reach an outcome acceptable to the government (either outright military victory or a mutually acceptable settlement; see the figure). However, the failure rate is 60 percent in the worst-case environments.*

<sup>1</sup> State capacity is the government’s ability to exercise influence within society and to deliver quality public services and engage in quality policy formulation and implementation.

## Counterinsurgent Regimes and Conflict Outcomes



RAND’s case studies of the Philippines and Pakistan, comparing different time periods and regions with varying conditions within each, broadly support these quantitative findings. In both countries, more democratically inclusive governments were more likely to adopt a counterinsurgency model that sought accommodation with the reconcilable opposition and used violence relatively discriminately—particularly where the governments possessed sufficient civil capacity to implement “hearts and minds” approaches. In contrast, during periods of autocratic rule and in regions where the state exercised little control, governments were much more likely to depend on raw force.

The successes of U.S. operations in countries like the Philippines, in other words, appear unlikely to be reproduced in less-promising environments. And as suggested above, the large majority of potential U.S. partner nations—including many that are central to U.S. counterterrorism efforts—are much less-promising partners.

### A Few Principles Can Guide U.S. Behavior in Managing Partnerships

First, where U.S. and partner interests fundamentally diverge, there is little hope of a productive partnership to

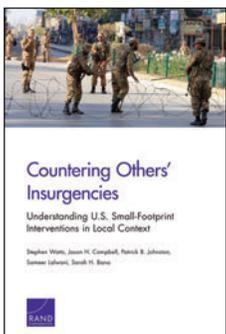
combat an insurgency. U.S. leverage and information are too low to attach conditions to aid so as to overcome such gulfs.

Second, conditionality can reasonably be used where the United States is willing to “walk away” from a partner if, for example, certain thresholds of acceptable behavior are crossed. Usually, however, it is unlikely that threats can be used to press for more fundamental transformations.

Third, given the lengthy duration of most contemporary insurgencies and the time it takes to build state capacity or political inclusion, the United States should enter into such partnerships with the expectation that they will be long-term efforts. This brings issues of U.S. domestic support to bear, particularly in contexts where the partner government is prone to abuses.

Beyond these broad rules of thumb, several specific mechanisms may be useful to manage partnerships with difficult regimes:

- The United States can help partner regimes credibly commit to political compromises with reconcilable elements of the armed opposition through a variety of instruments, potentially including large-scale commitments of foreign aid and, in some contexts, international peace operations.
- When an incumbent regime is no longer able to resist demands for greater political inclusion, the resulting liberalization may be weak in various respects but may at least provide a means for ending conflict. Such fragile political systems require buttressing if they are not to collapse—something the United States can help with.
- The United States should emphasize civilian oversight and other accountability mechanisms in its security-sector assistance. The United States should also stress quality over quantity in developing partners’ security forces by imparting and sustaining the necessary doctrine, leadership, and discipline.
- Security forces that do not represent the ethnic or religious affiliations of the population they nominally serve are at high risk of abusive behavior. The United States should thus work with partner regimes to improve the representativeness of their security services. This and all security-sector reform efforts should be undertaken as early within a conflict as possible. They should be a central element of U.S. “phase zero,” or peacetime, engagement strategy.



This research brief describes work done for the RAND National Security Research Division documented in *Countering Others’ Insurgencies: Understanding U.S. Small-Footprint Interventions in Local Context*, by Stephen Watts, Jason H. Campbell, Patrick B. Johnston, Sameer Lalwani, and Sarah H. Bana, RR-513-SRF, 2014 (available at [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR513.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR513.html)). The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark. © RAND 2014

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