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Countering Others' Insurgencies

Understanding U.S. Small-Footprint
Interventions in Local Context

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Cover image: Pakistani soldiers place barbwire to secure a street during a curfew in Rawalpindi on Nov. 17, 2013 (Reuters/Faisal Mahmood).

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Summary

With the United States exhausted by more than a decade of war and facing severe fiscal limitations, decisionmakers are striving to place American defense policy on a more sustainable footing. Central to this effort is a commitment to work through partner nations wherever possible, providing support to countries with which the United States shares interests or values while also ensuring that the primary responsibility for these nations' security remains their own. Thus the document that currently guides U.S. defense policy states:

Building partnership capacity elsewhere in the world . . . remains important for sharing the costs and responsibilities of global leadership. Across the globe we will seek to be the security partner of choice, pursuing new partnerships with a growing number of nations. . . . Whenever possible, we will develop innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to achieve our security objectives.¹

This emphasis on partnership strategies is particularly central to U.S. efforts to manage the “security externalities” of fragile and conflict-affected states. Such states increase the risk of spillover conflicts throughout the region in which they occur, damage the economies of neighboring states, contribute to flourishing transnational crime networks, spread pandemic disease, and foster transnational terrorism.

¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, January 2012, p. 3.

When pursuing partnerships with regimes that are fighting insurgencies, however, the likelihood of success using such “small-footprint” approaches is inextricably bound with the local context and particularly the nature of the partner government. Too often the importance of local context is minimized in discussions of U.S. security strategy, particularly in relation to the problems of fragile states. Proponents of small-footprint and indirect approaches overwhelmingly cite as models the recent U.S. operations in the Philippines and Colombia—without providing any indication of the generalizability of these models.

This study seeks to understand the extent to which the “success stories” of U.S. partnerships such as those with the Philippines and Colombia can be generalized—or, phrased differently, to understand the conditions under which the small-footprint model is likely to succeed in bringing an end to an insurgency that both the United States and its partner seek to combat. It explores how local circumstances shape the “art of the possible” in such partnerships and how the United States can best maximize the potential and minimize the risks of these often uneasy alliances. More specifically, the study asks three central questions:

- Why do counterinsurgents adopt particular counterinsurgency strategies and practices?
- What are the likely consequences of these strategies, in terms of conflict outcomes and civilian casualties?
- When the United States finds a partner government’s counterinsurgency strategy and practices problematic, what can it do to influence its partner’s actions to improve the chances of a favorable outcome?

Research Findings

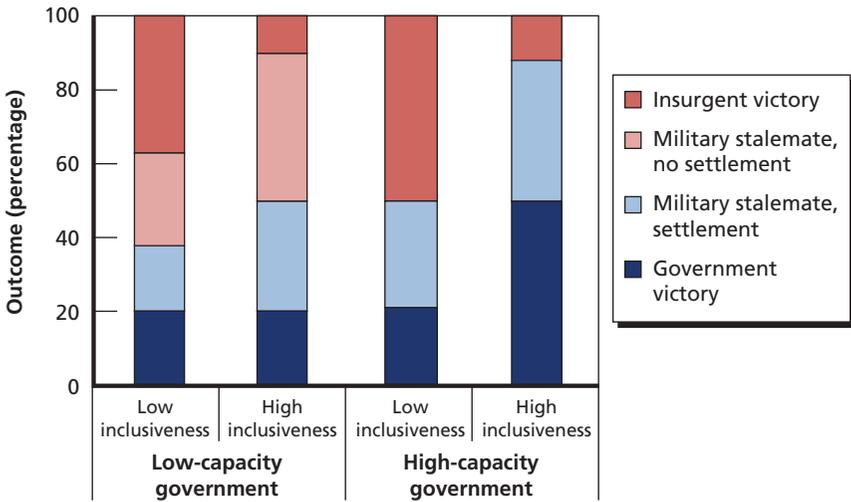
The answers to these questions provided in this report are derived from a mixed-method research design incorporating both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Simple statistical analyses are applied to a dataset of counterinsurgencies that have terminated since the end of the Cold

War (72 in all) to understand the manner in which they were fought and how they terminated. This broad overview frames more in-depth analyses of two important recent cases of U.S. partnerships, the Philippines and Pakistan, drawing on secondary literature, a wide variety of quantitative data sources, and interviews conducted with several dozen government officials, military officers, and civil society actors in the Philippines, Pakistan, and the United States.

The report finds that the counterinsurgency strategies and practices adopted by regimes fighting rebellions are strongly shaped by the characteristics of these regimes—in particular, the degree to which they are politically inclusive and the extent of state capacity they possess. “Success stories” like the Philippines and Colombia have occurred in countries characterized by relatively inclusive politics and reasonable levels of state capacity. The governments of such countries typically adopt strategies that approximate the Western model of counterinsurgency, often (misleadingly) referred to as the “hearts-and-minds” approach. Unfortunately, only approximately one insurgency in eight occurs in such best-case countries. The majority of rebellions take place in worst-case conditions—that is, in countries that lack both inclusive politics and state capacity. Regimes in this latter category are prone to relying on blunt applications of military force to contain or suppress rebellion.

The quantitative analysis conducted in this study paints a stark picture of the different trajectories that conflicts follow in these best-case and worst-case environments. As shown in Figure S.1, only 13 percent of civil wars in the best-case environments fail to reach an outcome that the government finds acceptable (that is, either outright military victory or a negotiated settlement acceptable to both sides); the failure rate is nearly five times as high (60 percent) in the worst-case environments. Non-inclusive regimes are much more likely to suffer outright defeat than are more-inclusive ones. Weak regimes are much more likely to experience indeterminate ends to their conflicts, where insurgents retain their capabilities and de facto control over parts of the country.

Figure S.1
Counterinsurgent Regimes and Conflict Outcomes

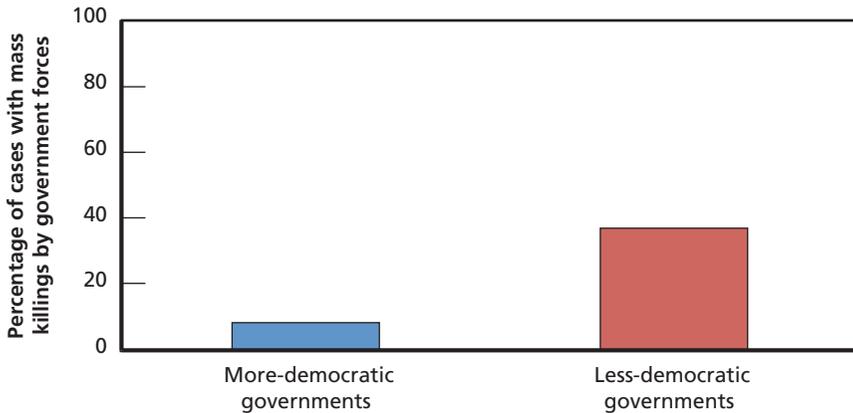


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Similarly, as shown in Figure S.2, whereas fewer than 10 percent of all politically inclusive regimes (high- and low-capacity combined) have resorted to indiscriminate violence as a tool of counterinsurgency, 39 percent of regimes that are less inclusive have used such tactics. In other words, the chances of wide-scale abuse by security forces are four times greater among less-favorable types of regimes than they are among the more-favorable types.

Case studies of the Philippines and Pakistan broadly support these quantitative findings. In both the Philippines and Pakistan, relatively more-democratic governments were more likely to adopt a classical counterinsurgency model that sought accommodation with the reconcilable opposition and used violence relatively discriminately. This tendency was particularly pronounced in regions where the governments possessed the necessary civil capacity to implement hearts-and-minds approaches. In contrast, during periods when these countries were ruled by more-autocratic governments and in regions where the state exercised little effective control, the governments were much

Figure S.2
Mass Killings by Counterinsurgent Regimes



RAND RR513-S.2

more likely to seek to contain and suppress insurgents through raw force.

The successes of U.S. operations in countries such as the Philippines appear to have more to do with the partner nation than they do with U.S. policies. This is not meant to deny the importance of U.S. assistance; to the contrary, the case study of the Philippines suggests that U.S. aid played a critical role in that country's recent successes. But similar U.S. policies with less-promising partner nations should not be expected to produce anywhere near the same levels of success. And as the quantitative analysis in this study reveals, the large majority of potential U.S. partner nations—including many that are central to ongoing U.S. counterterrorism efforts—are much less promising.

Of course, the fact that more than half of all insurgencies occur in countries governed by the least-favorable type of regime does not mean that more than half of all U.S. military interventions are likely to occur in such countries. Indeed, the historical record suggests that a disproportionate share of U.S. military interventions—somewhere in the vicinity of half—occur in best-case environments. This propensity might be explained by the fact that the odds of success are higher in such countries, or it may be that the United States shares many values

and interests with such states. It is sobering, however, to consider the number of least-favorable environments in which the United States has intervened and the levels of success it has experienced. Roughly half of U.S. interventions have been in these worst-case environments, and the record of U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq is hardly promising.

Policy Implications

Counterinsurgency is perhaps the most context-dependent activity in which militaries engage. Consequently, no universal set of policy prescriptions is possible. A few broad rules of thumb can nonetheless be discerned.

First, where U.S. and partner-nation interests fundamentally diverge, there is little hope of a productive partnership to combat an insurgency. The amount of U.S. leverage and information is too small for conditionality to be used effectively to overcome the divergence.

Second, conditionality can reasonably be used to enforce “red-lines,” where the United States would be willing to walk away from a partner if the partner crossed certain thresholds of acceptable behavior, or to press for a limited number of important but narrowly scoped reforms, or to take advantage of specific moments in time when more wide-ranging political change is possible. In most cases, however, it is extremely unlikely that conditionality can be used to press for more-fundamental transformations of partner nations in accordance with U.S.-preferred models of counterinsurgency.

Third, given the duration of most contemporary insurgencies and the length of time it typically takes to build state capacity or institutionalize mechanisms of political inclusion, the United States should enter into partnerships with the expectation that they will be long-term and will have relatively low odds of success in the short-to-medium term. Decisionmakers should carefully weigh their ability to make such long-term commitments, particularly where potential partner nations are problematic. With the memories of the September 11, 2001, attacks fading and public attention no longer monopolized by the wars in Iraq

and Afghanistan, decisionmakers should expect more critical scrutiny of such light-footprint engagements.

Beyond these broad rules of thumb, a number of specific mechanisms may be useful to manage partnerships with difficult partner regimes. Such mechanisms include the following:

- 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.
- Progress toward greater democracy is normally heavily contested, usually occurring only when incumbents are unable to resist demands for greater political inclusion. Periods of prolonged military stalemate in a civil war may provide such openings. In these cases, political reforms are less about alleviating popular grievances and winning the general population's hearts and minds in order to defeat insurgents. Rather, they are about providing a framework in which reconcilable opposition leaders come to believe they can participate with minimal fears of persecution or marginalization. These processes typically do not look like Western conceptions of "democracy," at least for many years, often two decades or more. But they can provide—and often have provided—a means for ending violent conflicts. Such fragile political systems require support in their initiation phase, and they require buttressing to prevent collapse. The United States and other international partner nations can help in both of these phases.
- The United States should make the principle of civilian oversight and other accountability mechanisms central to its security-sector assistance. As a general rule, the United States should also stress quality over quantity in developing partners' security forces. This finding highlights the importance of imparting the necessary doctrine, leadership, discipline, and (where appropriate) technology to manageable numbers of partner-nation forces and then sustaining these qualitative improvements. Wherever possible,

partner-nation units receiving such assistance should be closely paired with U.S. forces to ensure that the United States has visibility into how its assistance is being used.

- Security forces that do not include members of the same ethnic or religious affiliation as the population in which they are operating are at particularly high risk of abusive behavior. The United States, therefore, should work with partner regimes to improve the representativeness of their security services. Unfortunately, incorporating personnel from disaffected populations during the course of intensive fighting risks subversion within these forces. The ideal time to integrate personnel from different communities, therefore, is before fighting erupts or, if that is not possible, as early within a conflict as possible.
- Unfortunately, all of the above prescriptions are long-term and uncertain. Moreover, they are all substantially more difficult to implement during ongoing fighting than in peacetime. These challenges suggest that security-sector reform efforts should be a central element of U.S. “phase-zero,” or peacetime, engagement strategy, not a peripheral concern or an issue to which significant resources are devoted only after a crisis erupts.