On irregular wars, insurgencies and how to counter them: enemy and population-centric approaches in comparative perspective

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La guerra irregular, insurgencias y cómo contrarrestarlas: una perspectiva comparativa entre los enfoques centrados en el enemigo y en la población

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ABSTRACT. This article takes the current debate between the enemy-centric and the population-centric approaches as a point of departure to make its contribution by shifting the focus from the operational and tactical to the strategic realm. To this end, it traces the meanings of each approach to its historical origins, discussing the theoretical underpinnings as to distill the basic tenets and to evaluate to what extent each is suitable to counter an insurgency. The central argument of this article is that while both approaches have different 'philosophies,' they are two sides of the same coin. Thus, what needs to be taken into account is the strategic dimension and, logically enough, the political, when referring to counterinsurgency as the two will be determinant in which approach is employed.

KEYWORDS: Clausewitz; COIN; contemporary war; counterinsurgency; enemy-centric; irregular wars; population-centric; small wars; strategy

RESUMEN. Este artículo toma el debate actual entre los enfoques centrados en el enemigo y los centrados en la población como un punto de partida para hacer su contribución, cambiando el enfoque del ámbito operacional y táctico al estratégico. Con este fin, rastrea los significados de cada enfoque desde sus orígenes históricos, discutiendo los fundamentos teóricos para destilar los principios básicos y evaluar hasta qué punto cada uno es adecuado para contrarrestar una insurgencia. El argumento central de este artículo es que, si bien ambos enfoques tienen "filosofías" diferentes, son dos caras de la misma moneda. Por lo tanto, lo que se debe tener en cuenta es la dimensión estratégica y, lógicamente, la política, al referirse a la contrainsurgencia ya que los dos serán determinantes en el enfoque que se emplee.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Clausewitz; COIN; contrainsurgencia centrada en el enemigo; contrainsurgencia centrada en la población; estrategia; guerra contemporánea; guerra irregular; guerras pequeñas

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> The curious obsession with identifying particular categories of war, based as it often is on superficial tactical manifestations, distorts the essence of war and … turns it into something that is alien to its nature.
>
> (Smith & Jones, 2015, p. 28)

Introduction

Irregular wars have manifested themselves throughout many centuries, with the 20th and 21st centuries being no exception (Joes, 1996).[1] The first writings on the subject appeared as early as the 16th and 17th centuries. Spanish and French theorists and practitioners, such as Don Bernardino de Mendoza, Santa Cruz de Marcenado, and Paul Hay du Chastelet faced the same problem that besets many countries today (Heuser 2010, pp. 427-433). Despite the earlier isolated attempts to make sense of irregular wars, it was not until the second half of the 20th century—in particular, after the end of World War II and subsequent decolonization—that irregular wars, and, especially, their subset (insurgency), started receiving serious attention in both academic and military circles. One of the main reasons for such increased curiosity towards the subject lies in the dismal record that both domestic and expeditionary forces have attained in dealing with this problem (see Paul, Clarke, Grill, 2010, p. xiv).

As a result of this negative trend, two dominant approaches related to *how* to counter this issue emerged, being the enemy-centric and the population-centric schools of thought. In basic terms, the first holds the view that the Gordian knot should be cut, i.e., the enemy should be annihilated. The second, in contrast, posits that it is the population that should be won over by separating it from the irregular adversary with the use of minimum force; that is, as little force as absolutely necessary. However, what approach is best suited to resolve the problem?

This article will contribute to this unresolved debate by examining each school of thought in detail, highlighting their theoretical underpinnings and debunking some of the existing misconceptions on both views to show that the current debate is cyclical if not futile given that both approaches are right and wrong at the same time. However, the current analytical angle precludes one from recognizing that very fact.

To this end, before getting to the root of the problem, the article will define the terminology associated with the topic given that irregular war is just one of many terms ascribed to the subject matter. Then, each school will be considered to gain an understanding of the essence of each approach. Finally, the article will discuss the main shortcomings of both approaches from a strategic perspective, concluding that the narrow focus on the operational and tactical levels, mainly, and insufficient attention given to the

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1   For the evolution of the paradigm of war, see Serrano Alvarez (2018).

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higher echelons of strategy and policy makes these approaches conceptually flawed and practically useless, thus, rendering the debate inexhaustible and misleading at best. The final recommendation is to reframe the debate by paying more attention to the political and strategic domains.

Irregular wars and insurgencies: What is what?

This section briefly defines the terms of interest, irregular war, insurgency, and counter-insurgency to avoid conceptual confusion. Such basic understanding is necessary to fully appreciate the debate related to the mentioned schools of thought and understand *what* it is that one is seeking to counter in the first place.

Irregular wars and insurgencies

Irregular wars[2]—in contrast to conventional wars— refer mostly to the modus operandi employed by one or all of the belligerents. Such modus operandi is often preferred by a weaker side and consists of surprise attacks, guerrilla tactics, and terrorism to reach a political objective. This modus operandi is often ascribed to non-state actors who do not hold the monopoly of the legitimate use of (physical) force (Kiras, 2009, p. 187; Heuser, 2010, p. 387). However, to caution the unwary, such modus operandi does not necessarily imply that the actor employing it is a non-state actor. Regular (or conventional) armed forces can resort to guerrilla warfare should the exigencies of war dictate so (Luttwak, 2001, pp. 152-154). Similarly, non-state actors can use regular/conventional tactics if they happen to gather enough strength to execute Mao Tse-Tung's (2005)[3] theory fully. Though, admittedly, the occurrence of such an event is infrequent.

The main protagonists of these so-called irregular wars are, naturally enough, insurgents and their state counterparts (counterinsurgents). Insurgents are (violent) non-state actors who resort to an unconventional *modus operandi*—that is, an indirect approach, to borrow Basil Liddell Hart's (1941) terminology—consisting of ambushes, hit-and-run tactics, and avoidance of direct battle with their state adversaries. Insurgents seek to wear down their adversaries—to dislocate them psychologically—to gain political legitimacy in the eyes of their potential base of support, namely the population of the territory in question. Such legitimacy and popular support form prerequisites for the ultimate aim of displacing the existing government and replacing it with one of their own. More often than not, such insurgent organizations rely upon external support for financing, training, and

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2   It should be noted that the term used here is only for the purpose of this article and the sake of distinction. However, wars, in general, should not be conceptually subdivided into categories. See (Jones, Smith, 2015, pp. 1-4).

3   Mao's theory consists of three phases: strategic defensive, strategic equilibrium, and strategic offensive. During the third phase, namely, the strategic offensive, the revolutionary forces are to emulate a regular army as to face the adversary's army (Tse-Tung, 2005, pp. 110-112).

sanctuaries (Record, 2007, pp. 23-66; Gray, 2007, pp. 43-44) to stand a chance against their (considerably stronger) state counterparts. Counterinsurgents, logically enough, are composed of state and its forces that are faced with the insurgent problem. The war between these protagonists is often referred to as 'insurgency' in contemporary parlance and can be best understood as "...a struggle for some form of political power, which is nearly always the end, not the way or means, of the insurgent's strategy and tactics" (US Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018, p. I-3).

Paradoxically, however, despite their asymmetrical disadvantages, in most cases insurgents have proven to be victorious vis-à-vis their state counterparts, as in the case of the French in Algeria (1954-1962), the US in Vietnam (1955-1975), and the Soviets in Afghanistan (1979-1989), to name a few. Plainly, the belief that power—including, but not limited to military power—is determinant for winning wars, even those of irregular character, has been turned upside down. As Ivan Arreguín-Toft (2001; 2005) demonstrates, in the majority of cases from the second half of the last century onwards, so-called Davids succeeded in beating Goliaths.

As far as counterinsurgency campaigns—countermeasures to an insurgency—are concerned, it is worth recalling Henry Kissinger's (1969, p. 214) puzzling maxim: "The conventional army loses if it does not win. The guerrilla wins if he does not lose." What holds true for counterinsurgency is that a military defeat of the adversary is, despite its indisputable importance, not the primary objective; unless the adversary, in line with Mao's theory, matures from a guerrilla force into a regular army (Gray, 2006a, p. 22; 2007, p. 46). It is worth remembering that counterinsurgency campaigns, regardless of their degree of success, are time-consuming and intricate. The parameters evincing success are unlikely to be measured in insurgent casualties or military victories (Beckett, 2007, p. 82), given that the latter is more often than not impossible to attain.

Against this background, and given the vast amount of literature that exists on the subject, it is important to examine what solutions exist in the contemporary setting and assess to what degree these are viable. To that end, the next sections will discuss the prevalent approaches, analyzing their theoretical underpinnings, and deriving their principal characteristics for the sake of comparison and assessment.

The enemy-centric approach

The enemy-centric approach, which was outlined in its elementary semblance in the introduction, will be described and analyzed with due attention in this section. The aim here is to establish some principles that characterize it to draw a comparison between both approaches. This undertaking helps understand why this approach remains both important and influential to this day in the conduct of COIN, as well as clarify some of the common misconceptions associated with enemy-centric counterinsurgency.

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Enemy-centric approach in history and literature

By and large, the primary objective of the enemy-centric approach being the destruction of enemy forces is as old as war. Focusing on the enemy's forces rather than trying to engage the population in which such enemy operates used to be the obvious default choice in any war (Clausewitz 1976, p. 196).[4] In essence, there was no need to consider the population of the enemy state or political grouping. In strategic military terms, the enemy's defeat could be achieved through annihilation on the battlefield; psychological exhaustion through attrition, and the killing of individual leaders, that is, through decapitation or targeted killings, to use a more contemporary term. All these methods are not mutually exclusive. Once the forces of a state/political grouping had been defeated, the population belonging to that state/grouping invariably was subdued. In case of internal revolts, however, whole populations were, in essence, treated as the enemy. Such was the case with the first Jewish Revolt from A.D. 66 to 70 which—despite its reassuring beginning—was violently suppressed by the Roman Army, led by the Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasian and his son Titus, which annihilated a massive number of people (including non-combatants) and destroyed Jerusalem (Bloom, 2010, pp. 65-147). This practice took place in most colonization attempts, including Spanish ventures in the Americas (Céspedes del Castillo, 2009, pp. 265-294; 488-506), the American-Indian Wars (Brumwell, 2005) and, perhaps most notably, the German campaign against the Hottentots in South-West Africa (Olusoga, Erichsen, 2010, pp. 241-251). In all of these campaigns, the main enemy was the *population*.

Two variants of the enemy-centric school

The "regular warfare" approach to counterinsurgency

The first variant of enemy-centric thinking does not consider *small wars* as a distinct category of war. Instead, it is based on conventional thinking about warfare, and most notably on Clausewitzian principles. Given that Clausewitz dedicated his attention to what we might perceive as regular conflict with only marginal attention to '*den Kleinen Kriegen*' at least in his opus magnum *On War*, his suggestions—even if read selectively—are suitable to insurgencies too.

One of the most central contentions made by Clausewitz (1976, p. 196) in regards to *ends* and *means* in war (whether 'large' or 'small') is based on the premise that the former concerns "the subjugation of the enemy" while the latter "the destruction of his fighting forces". Given the historical background of Clausewitz's writings, it would be only logical to assume that populations had only a limited role to play in the outcome

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4   It should be noted that destruction of the enemy force does not automatically imply victory. However, it is a
     sure way to subjugate the enemy psychologically.

of any conflict; thus, the main focus *ipso facto* should fall upon the enemy's army and its destruction. Ends were obviously linked to means.

However, it is necessary to point out that Clausewitz acknowledged that the proposed 'destruction' of the enemy forces was not the only way to the enemy's 'subjugation.' Indeed, the Prussian stated, "… in war many roads lead to success, and that they do not all involve the opponent's outright defeat" (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 37). These can range from "…*the destruction of the enemy's forces, the conquest of his territory, to a temporary occupation or invasion, to projects with an immediate political purpose, and finally to passively awaiting the enemy's attacks*" (italics in the original) (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 37). Thus, such an approach need not be focused exclusively on the aggressive destruction of an adversary's armed forces. Varying degrees of passivity, too, can be involved. Included here are the likes of deterrence and coercion that may be employed in order to restrict the enemy's activities and, in essence, negate his actions. Clausewitz's thinking about 'regular' warfare can be just as easily transferred over to that involving 'irregular' warfare.

Thus, it is important to point out that talking about an (military-strategic) approach as being merely "enemy-centric" can oversimplify the matter. In the enemy-centric spectrum, there are several strategies involved, including, but not limited to the likes of the annihilation, exhaustion, and attrition of the enemy forces, but also more subtle actions such as the decapitation. So, while all of these are enemy-centric by default, and can be used either in isolation or in conjunction to reinforce the desired strategic effect, they can also be employed alongside less aggressive, less proactive activities—such as preventing offensives by the enemy. The ways of defeating an enemy in irregular wars can be seen as just extensions of those employed in conventional wars.

The "irregular warfare" approach to counterinsurgency

The second variant of what can be perceived to be the enemy-centric school of thought rejects the notion that the principles of conventional warfare apply to insurgencies.

The leading proponent of this view was the British Colonel Charles E. Callwell (1996, p. 42). Callwell's main argument is that irregular wars are distinct from conventional wars, demanding, their unique reasoning. Given that each small war is different, the specific objective will vary in every case (Callwell, 1996, p. 34).

Moreover, the destruction of the enemy force is not seen as a primary goal in small or irregular wars. A far better way to suppress an insurgency or conquer enemy territory is to generate a *moral* effect on the adversary. The reason for the primacy of moral over physical lies in the fact that, given the character of small wars, it might be difficult even to find an enemy force—if there is any 'organized force' at all—let alone to bring it to battle. To confuse things further, sometimes there will not be a capital to take, nor population centers to occupy (Callwell, 1996, p. 40). In contrast to conventional wars, the objective will depend on the *type* of small war, which can be either a punitive expedition, a suppres-

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sion of an insurrection or occupation of territories. While not different from Clausewitz, for whom every war has its unique character, what Callwell brings to the understanding of the enemy-centric approach is that there is a need for flexibility depending on the type of small war in terms of methods and objective.

In tactical terms, Callwell (1996, p. 91) urges regular forces to be aggressive against their rebel enemy, bringing the latter to battle as often as the situation permits. The idea here is to seek decisive victory, "…the opposing forces should be beaten so thoroughly that they will not offer further opposition" (Callwell, 1996, p. 106). Offensive tactics are, therefore, imperative in generating a "big casualty list in the hostile ranks" (Callwell, 1996, pp. 151-152); this can be achieved using a variety of tactical maneuvers, including enveloping, surprise raids, and pursuit of the enemy. The primary rationale behind these is to generate a moral effect on the enemy force (Callwell, 1996, pp. 207-209; 240-245). In the defense, too, the regular force can adopt rigorous patrolling methods that would hamper the freedom of movement of the enemy force (Callwell, 1966, pp. 196-200). For Callwell, a continuous aggressive attitude towards the insurgents would atrophy not only their capabilities but also undermine their morale.

In short, while Callwell bears more similarity with Clausewitz than he might have been willing to admit, the crux of the theory of the small war lies in seeking to achieve the set objectives by generating a moral effect upon the enemy force, using offensive tactics whenever the situation permits.

Contemporary enemy-centric approach

The first explicit definition of the 'enemy-centric approach' concerning current COIN campaigns was made by the anthropologist and security analyst, David Kilcullen in 2007. The enemy-centric approach, explains Kilcullen (2007), "understands counter-insurgency as a variant of conventional warfare." In other words, COIN operations would be conducted the same way as operations against conventional forces, with the defeat of the enemy remaining the primary objective. As not to risk reductionism, one should not perceive the enemy-centric approach as exclusively kinetic; it includes a vignette of different strategies, "including "soft line" and "hard line" approaches" (Kilcullen 2007), which inevitably implies that there are overlaps with the population-centric approach (discussed below) because the latter still implies the use of force against an insurgent foe (Kilcullen, 2010, p. 10). What distinguishes these two approaches is not so much the methods but the respective *philosophies* (Kilcullen, 2007). In Kilcullen's (2007) view, the enemy-centric mindset dictates that the defeat of the enemy should come first and the rest will follow, while the population-centric approach perceives "counter-insurgency as fundamentally a control [of the population] problem or even an armed variant of government administration."

Overall, the enemy-centric approach can be said to primarily focus on the physical destruction of the enemy as the principal route to success. The previous stands in contrast

to the philosophy behind the population-centric approach in which the physical obliteration of the enemy is of secondary importance.

Enemy-centric approach in official documents

Official definitions of the approach echo those offered by Kilcullen. The *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (2009)[5], for example, defines 'enemy-centric' as an approach that is "focused on defeating a particular enemy group" (12). Similarly, the U.S. *Joint Publication 3-24 Counterinsurgency* (2018)[6] refers to the enemy-centric approach—though avoiding the explicit term—simply as "a traditional military force-on-force operation," juxtaposing it to the "population-centric nature of COIN" (I-2). In other words, the enemy-centric approach is perceived to be more suitable for *conventional* wars rather than in counterinsurgency campaigns.

All of these above characterizations of the enemy-centric approach emphasize the insurgent defeat eschewing any mention of 'winning hearts and minds' of the key population. Nonetheless, it is possible here to develop one of the defining features of the enemy-centric approach: *a philosophy focuses on the physical destruction of the insurgent without paying attention to the population.*

However, while the above definitions have a shared view about the nature of the enemy-centric approach, their understanding perhaps insufficient to get a full grasp of the meaning of the approach. Once operationalized, the demarcation between enemy-centric and population-centric COIN is significantly blurred, making it often difficult if not impossible to determine which approach is being employed. For this reason, more differentiators are needed.

Other facets of the enemy-centric approach: The question of territory

The enemy-centric approach, despite its primary focus on the enemy forces, has another important aspect, the role of the territory, which often occupies a marginal role in the discussion of counterinsurgency. However, some writings engage with the topic, offering a broader explanation that transcends the *modus operandi*. Bernard Finel (2010), for instance, brings the territorial aspect back into the equation, stating that by restricting population movement—that is, controlling the territory inhabited by the population—insurgencies can be gradually suppressed. However, the current international legal framework does not allow for such indiscriminate and coercive treatment of non-combatants. Therefore, the counterinsurgent could resort to systematic attacks on insurgent strongholds to undermine insurgent capabilities, and if not to compel the enemy to do one's will, to at least, bring him to some form negotiations by demonstrating that a negotiated

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5   Kilcullen contributed to the creation of the U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide (2009)
6   U.S. *Joint Publication 3-24 Counterinsurgency* (2018) provides the doctrinal basis for the U.S. Armed Forces and interagency coordination in case of an (military) involvement in multination operations.

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settlement is better than the alternative. In such a case, the emphasis on the use of the
military instrument to influence enemy behavior becomes paramount (Finel, 2010), and
is comparable to what J.C. Wylie described as a *cumulative strategy* in which the sum of
events until the total of these becomes critical (Wylie, 2014, p. 72-73).

At first sight, this might be deemed to be a population-centric approach. However,
the implicit point here lies in the fact that COIN operations should *not* be about holding
territory—as the population-centric approach and its 'clear-hold-build' variant suggest
(see below)—but about *preventing* the enemy from doing so, or, at least, demonstrating
that the enemy cannot hold it (by using offensive operations such as search-and-destroy).
In a sense, this resembles a strategy of deterrence as far as territory is concerned.

A more marked articulation of the importance of 'territory' in COIN campaigns is
put forward by James Worral (2014, pp. 98-104). Worral (2014, p. 98) states, "two of the
most unpalatable aspects for Western states are the physical and psychological control of
populations and the control of territory for long periods." Put differently, in his criticism
towards a more liberally oriented population-centric approach, Worral stresses the need
to not only control the [key] population, but also the territory upon which it resides.
He continues to emphasize the difference between expeditionary and non-expeditionary
COIN campaigns. In the latter case, the counterinsurgent knows to appreciate the po-
litical meaning of the so-called 'territoriality,'[7] while in the earlier, the counterinsurgent
simply withdraws with no intention of holding territory for a prolonged period of time
and with minimal risks for the force itself (as to not endanger escalation of domestic au-
dience's perceptions of the given conflict) (Worral, 2014, pp. 100-101). The latter scenar-
io is obviously problematic, given that the abandoned territory—and subsequent power
vacuum—will most likely be retaken. However, the decision to commit to such a trade-
off (territory vs. force protection) will depend on the particular case in question. While,
indeed, there is a recognition of the importance of territory, as Kilcullen (2007) suggests,
this recognition is rather *apolitical*. In other words, an (expeditionary) counterinsurgent
has to develop a fuller meaning to implement COIN campaigns with an 'insider view'
or rather with a full understanding of not only the insurgent enemy but also geography
and culture.

Enemy-centric approach vs. indiscriminate violence

Before moving on to a conclusion, it is necessary to clarify that despite the overall kinetic
nature of the enemy-centric approach, its conduct should *not* be automatically conflated
with the practice of 'indiscriminate violence,' which—as the name implies—would also
resort to highly kinetic measures. The following section explains what the indiscriminate

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7   The term 'territoriality" refers to two interlinked concepts. The first deals with "controlling a particular territo-
     ry, defending it against insurgents and of course exercising the power to control objects, people, and relation-
     ships in that territory," while the second relates to "the social systems and structures through which people have
     asserted control over territory and worked together to defend their control." (Worral, 2014, p. 104).

violence approach entails in order to avoid its conflation with a seemingly similar ene-my-centric approach.

First, it is important to note that there is a difference between intentional, indiscrim-inate violence and indiscriminate violence that was not planned for. In such latter cases, indiscriminate violence can be seen as merely part of the Clausewitzian *friction*—that is, it "is the force that makes the apparently easy so difficult" (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 86), for instance, fatigue, fear, and similar—which is present in every war, and cannot be predict-ed beforehand.

The intentional use of indiscriminate violence as a COIN instrument can be de-scribed as both a *systematic* and *intentional* targeting of non-combatants by the coun-terinsurgent forces (Kalyvas, 2006, pp. 146-172). The underlying logic of the use of indiscriminate violence in COIN lies in the failure to identify the enemy (the "guilty") and thus, such violence is employed against non-combatants associated with them. The rational calculus that follows from this is that the "innocent" will try to influence the "guilty" to change their behavior or the "guilty" will have to alter their strategy when the source of their strengths (namely, civilians) is driven away by them after the exposure to violence (Kalyvas, 2006, p. 150; Lyall, 2009, pp. 336-338).[8]

The occurrence of indiscriminate violence against non-combatants, which coun-terinsurgents resort to from time to time (Valentino, Huth, Black-Lindsay, 2004, pp. 375-376), trigger a myriad of different explanations, such as those focusing on the psy-chological aspects of the deed (Valentino, Huth, Black-Lindsay, 2004, pp. 376-377), the tendency (of the counterinsurgent) to terrorize or to rob non-combatants (Azam, Hoeffler, 2002, p. 482) or the primacy of racist ideologies (Kalyvas, 2006).

Notwithstanding this, and despite its occasional success in suppressing insurgencies, the practice of indiscriminate violence as an overall COIN approach is out of bounds for liberal democracies that are sensitive to domestic and international public opinion (Merom, 2003, pp. 48-80). Such violent practices would, indeed, incur devastating polit-ical consequences for the counterinsurgent (Arreguín-Toft, 2005, pp. 221-222).

In conclusion, indiscriminate violence exists in a category of its own, as far as COIN approaches are concerned, and should not be coterminous with the enemy-centric ap-proach.

Concluding remarks on the enemy-centric approach

Overall, the enemy-centric approach is not about attacking insurgents' *ends*—that is, an overthrow of the existing government—but about undermining their *means*, which in-

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8   Some argue that indiscriminate violence might not necessarily be counterproductive. It can drive the wedge between the insurgent group and the population it relies upon, thus demonstrating that the earlier fails to protect the latter (Lyall, 2009, p. 338). For a contrasting view, which claims that indiscriminate violence helps solve collective action problems for the insurgents, see, for instance, Popkin (1979), Wood (2003) and Kalyvas (2006).

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cludes physical obliteration of the insurgent forces or moral subjugation; this would lead to physical atrophy in order to prevent the insurgent foe from achieving the above ends. The previous can be achieved by using a variety of strategies including annihilation, exhaustion, decapitation, deterrence by denial (in the case of territory), and similar. Military victory or victories are perceived to be directly linked to political success.[9] In its contemporary understanding, the enemy-centric approach is more suited to conventional wars than to insurgencies, as per official documents. Last, but not least, despite its focus on the enemy forces, the approach should not be conflated with indiscriminate violence, as explained above.

The population-centric approach

Historical background in theory and practice

After discussing the enemy-centric approach, it is time to discuss its counterpart, the population-centric approach, to understand both its evolution, as well as what sets it apart, at least in theoretical terms.

In the theoretical realm, the population-centric approach dates back to the 16th and 17th century; this is reflected in the writings of Mendoza and Mercenado de Santa Cruz. The Spanish approach was rather humane; however, it must be said that the writings were designed to suppress domestic uprisings. In the 19th century, the population-centric approach was further refined by French theorists and practitioners, namely, Marshal Thomas Robert Bugeaud, Joseph Galléini, and his disciple Hubert Lyautey, in the colonial context.[10]

Bugeaud, who is perceived to be the founder of population-centric COIN (Porch, 2013, pp. 50-51), was involved in the French pacification campaign in Algeria (1830-1862), which served as a testbed for his dual strategy of coercion and accommodation. The first element—*razzias*—was a tactic used in mobile desert warfare, consisting of swift and overwhelming surprise raids to seize livestock and other goods (Rid, 2009, pp. 618-619). The main reason for using *razzias* was to deprive the enemy of what is valued most (Sullivan, 1985, p. 151). Tribal warriors commanded by French officers were used as a supplement to conduct *razzias* to help use the 'divide and conquer' principle and disrupt, in particular, the Muslim solidarity of the various tribes (Rid, 2009, pp. 621-623; De Durand, 2010, pp. 12-13; Porch, 2013, p. 31).

As a complement to offensive measures, Bugeaud set up the so-called *bureaux arabes*. These organizational structures collected intelligence about the enemy that would help carry out further *razzias*, and served as a primitive mechanism of law enforcement: pun-

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9   This view is prevalent in most articulations, except that of Clausewitz.
10   While it is beyond the limits of this article to discuss these practitioners, suffice it to say, their experiences during the conquest of Morocco led them to return to the methods devised by Bugeaud. See Bimberg (1999, pp. 1-26), De Durand (2010, p. 15), Porch (1986, pp. 397-398; 2013, p. 53).

ishing rebel supporters, terrorizing the neutral segment of the population and rewarding supporters of the French Army in Algeria—*armée d'Afrique* (Sullivan, 1985, pp. 151-154; Rid, 2009, pp. 618-619; 621-624; 2010, pp. 731-743; Porch, 1986, pp. 380-381; 2013, pp. 16-29). In short, the 19th population-centric approach was underpinned by coercion and accommodation, which, as we shall see, stands in stark contrast to what we understand as 'population-centric' nowadays.

In other countries, the preoccupation with the subject came much later. In the US, for instance, there was no explicit doctrine for counterinsurgency—or counter-guerrilla, to use the prevalent term during that time—warfare until the publication of the United States Marine Corps *Small Wars Manual* (1940), however, several authors have attempted to address the problem in some isolated attempts at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1910, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Bullard turned his attention to irregular wars in his article entitled "Military Pacification," shifting the attention from the role of a soldier as 'war-maker' to his role as 'peacemaker' and 'peace-preserver,' which to the date of writing remained a largely ignored subject (Bullard, 1910, pp. 1-2). A more detailed study, however, was written in 1920 by Colonel Harry Alexander Smith. In his *Military Government*, Smith (1920, pp. 7-8) argued that the emphasis in irregular wars should be on "the *psychology* of three peoples—its [government's] own, … the people of the occupied territory, …[and] the neutrals of the world" (emphasis added). In other words, Smith (1920) recognized the importance of the people not only in the theatre of operations but also in the domestic context; he also recognized the importance of psychological factors that played a role in the outcome in any military government operation. Similarly, Harold Utley (1931)—whose thinking has undoubtedly influenced the US Marine Corps *Small Wars Manual* 1940—put a great emphasis on the need to avoid killing non-combatants or destroying their property, relocating them (clearing the area), and laying to waste entire settlements, as this would turn the indigenous population against the foreign expeditionary forces (Utley, 1931, p. 51). These were the first appearances of the population-centric approach, as understood in the present day.

Perhaps, the most marked articulation of the population-centric doctrine[11] in the United States was offered by the Marine Corps Major Earl H. Ellis in 1921. His article titled "Bush Brigades" (1921), which appeared in the *Marine Corps Gazette* has laid the normative foundations for population-centric COIN. Arguably, crafters of the USMC *Small Wars Manual* (1940) were aware of Ellis' work (Friedman, 2015, pp. 15-16). Ellis had recognized the complexity of insurgencies, giving a very structured description of difficulties an (expeditionary) force might encounter. These included armed resistance in the form of jungle and guerrilla warfare and criminal activities (Ellis, 2015, p. 18). Given these tendencies, the counterinsurgent should aim at securing important seaports

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11   The doctrine devised by Ellis has a strong resemblance to the 'population-centric' approach in its contemporary form.

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(to 'lock' the country) and set up fortified posts that would help control the area and pacify the population; in isolated areas, 'flying columns' should be used (Ellis, 2015, p. 19). What made Ellis' approach population-centric was his strong recommendation to avoid the use of artillery in urban areas (Ellis, 2015, p. 21), which otherwise could generate unwanted casualties. Instead, mobile columns should be used to pursue insurgents and destroy them, thus clearing those areas and establish fortified posts. In contemporary settings, this would fall under the 'clear-hold-build' operational approach.

Ellis' plan is based on several important premises. First, the plan enables the Marines to act by surprise. Second, the plan should be carried out to the end (without interruptions), because as he states, 'slowness of action' can only prolong hostilities (Ellis, 2015, p. 19). Third, since Ellis was well aware that the population was essential to the insurgent, he stressed the need to *fully* destroy the insurgent force (Ellis, 2015, p. 24). Fourth, the indigenous population was to be treated with care, for instance, destruction of property and killing of innocent civilians was to be avoided at all cost as not to risk losing legitimacy in the eyes of the said population (Ellis, 2015, p. 27). Unnecessarily harsh measures would undermine the very ideals of the United States, and, subsequently, have an adverse strategic effect on both the domestic and the indigenous populations. Last, Ellis stressed the importance of non-military measures designed to counter insurgent's propaganda, namely, intelligence and show of force (Ellis, 2015, pp. 28-29).

Overall, Ellis' approach was well-rounded in that it emphasized the need to physically destroy the enemy without alienating the population in the process. It was underpinned by both military and non-military measures, aspiring to generate not only a physical but also a psychological effect. Strictly speaking, Ellis' approach, despite its focus on the population, can be said to fall into both categories; however, it should be regarded in its historical context, which would suggest that the standard practice did not acknowledge the importance of the population.

Definitions of the contemporary population-centric approach

Before proceeding with the discussion of contemporary understanding, it is necessary to note one caveat; the nature of the population-centric approach has shifted over time. Currently, the population-centric approach is implicitly associated with an approach that, at its core, is population-*friendly*. This understanding of the population-centric approach as being population-friendly emerged between 2004 and 2007 as so-called a 'countervalue' approach (as opposed to the 'counterforce' approach, i.e., its enemy-centric counterpart). What it implies is an implicit focus on the popular support base and the underlying grievances that gave rise to the insurgency (Kilcullen, 2007; 2010, p. 94). The *center of gravity* (CoG) here is relocated from the enemy to the populace (Kilcullen, 2010, p. 144).

Essentially, this approach consists of two tiers in its effort to capture the so-called *hearts and minds* of the key population. The first tier is the use of force. However, in con-

trast to the enemy-centric variant, force is used with *great restraint* and discrimination—to avoid civilian casualties that would undermine support for the counterinsurgent)—with the sole aim to win the support of the population (Kilcullen, 2005, p. 603; 2009, p. xv; Cohen, Horvath, Nagl, 2006, pp. 51-52; Thompson, 2014, p. 96). The support of the population is thus won by separating it from the insurgents, thereby denying the insurgents any access to their potential base of support. The second tier is directed at redressing popular grievances, which is achieved, as the British military officer and counterinsurgency guru, Sir Robert Thompson (2014) describes, through the deployment of reconstruction projects to increase (host nation) state's capabilities and legitimacy. In other words, eliminating grievances rather than killing the insurgents is the normative underpinning. The primacy of military force is, thus, supplanted by socioeconomic and ideological means. After all, as the famous apothegm formulated by one of the perceived champions of the population-centric school, David Galula (1964, p. 63), posits that "revolutionary war is only 20 percent military action and 80 percent political".

However, in practical terms, it should be noted that both approaches consist of an identical set of elements, such as, coercion, incentives, and control, whereby the real difference lies in the emphasis on each of these elements. This implies that every counterinsurgency campaign presents a combination of enemy-centric and population-centric measures, akin to the peacekeeping operations from the 1990s and beyond, such as those implemented in Colombia post-2016 peace agreement with the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces) (see Greenhill, Staniland 2007, pp. 403-406; Brocades Zaalberg, 2012, pp. 81-91; Kiss, 2014, pp. 105-107; Hack, 2015, p. 136; Fernandez-Osorio, 2017).

The population-centric approach in official documents

The academic revival of the population-centric approach at the beginning of the 21st century had far-reaching consequences, spilling over from the academic domain into the practical. In the United States, for instance, the population-centric trend has first become evident in Field Manual 3.07-22 (October 2004), the forerunner to the iconic *U.S. Army/ Marine Corps Field Manual 3-24 Counterinsurgency*. The former recognized that COIN operations were not just about the use of military force, but required a whole spectrum of activities, including "political, economic, psychological, and civil" (FM 3.07-22, 2004, p.). Such an emphasis on *all* elements of national power resonates with earlier thinkers and practitioners such as Ellis, Galula, and Thompson.

In a similar fashion to the above, NATO has introduced a derivation of the population-centric theory into its Allied Joint Doctrine of 2009, giving prevalence to the so-called *clear-hold-build* operational approach (AJP-3.4.4, 2009, pp. 5-13). However, the most important and recent reincarnation of the population-centric approach came to be codified in the above *FM 3-24*, first in 2006 and later in 2014, which is discussed in more detail below. Before proceeding, it should be noted that the official documents perceive

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COIN from an outsider perspective in which expeditionary NATO and US forces offer support to a host nation government plagued by insurgent ailment.

FM 3-24 and the population-centric approach

FM 3-24 (2006) came into being in the midst of the turmoil experienced by the US forces in Iraq (2003-2005) (see Ward Gventer, Jones, Smith, 2014, pp. 1-3; 7) which highlighted the unpreparedness of Western forces to face contemporary threats associated with irregular modes of war (Gray, 2012a; Gentile, 2013). It was comprised of a set of tenets derived from theories based on French and British counterinsurgency experiences in Algeria (1954-1962) and Malaya (1948-1960) (see Hack, 2009; Mumford, 2012)[12] as well as lessons derived from the Iraqi theatre (Crane, 2010, pp. 60-62).

The task of the new manual was to help turn the tide of what was a deteriorating cycle of violence. Accordingly, the manual offered an arguably new understanding of the problem—insurgency—as well as a set of operational and tactical countermeasures, which came to define the contemporary population-centric approach. The manual thus stressed that insurgency "an organized, protracted *politico-military* struggle designed to weaken the *control and legitimacy* of an established government" (emphasis added) (FM 3-24, 2006, p. 1-1). Rather than a war, an insurgency was a politico-military contest for legitimacy in the eyes of the key population between insurgents and state (and expeditionary forces). The legitimacy available was perceived, therefore, as a finite object: the more legitimacy the insurgent gains, the less is left for the government. Following this reasoning, it is possible to deduce that the population became the central price in such endeavors. In a default scenario, the legitimacy distribution can be thought of like a bell curve with a passive middle and supporters of either insurgents or counterinsurgents at the two extremes (see FM 3-24, 2006, p. 1-20, para 1-108). The main task of the counterinsurgent would then consist of winning over that passive middle—which is the majority—using "a combination of offensive, defensive and stability operations" (FM 3-24, 2006, p. 1-19). In other words, contemporary population-centric COIN, in contrast to is enemy-centric counterpart, has a 'mixed' (i.e., politico-military) nature, consisting of integration of both civilian *and* military efforts required to counter an insurgency while concurrently attending underlying (popular) grievances that are exploited by respective insurgencies (FM 3-24, 2006, p. 1-4; 1-10).

Concluding remarks to the population-centric approach

The population-centric approach has been used for at least five centuries; however, in many instances, the understanding of the approach was very different from what it is now. The earlier variants of the population-centric approach mostly focused on chastising

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12   The Malayan Emergency was, as Mumford (2012) and Hack (2009) argue, was not population-centric at all, at least as far as the contemporary meaning of the term is concerned.

the population in order to weaken the insurgent. The present approach, however, seeks to *protect* the population and win its allegiance as to restore the legitimacy of the government in question by using both military and non-military means simultaneously.

Counterinsurgency approaches in summary

Table 1 below provides a brief synopsis of the two approaches.

Table 1. Counterinsurgency approaches

Enemy-centric	Contemporary population-centric
Counterinsurgency is a contest with an insurgent enemy.	Counterinsurgency is viewed as a contest for legitimacy and control.
The main focus is on the insurgent forces and organization.	The main focus is on winning over the population support.
The primary objective is the defeat of the insurgent forces and destruction of its organization.	The primary objective is recovering government's legitimacy through separation of the population from the insurgent.
Other objectives (context-dependent) include undermining the insurgents' physical and moral capability and will to fight.	Minimum force is used against insurgents to protect the population.
Once the insurgent forces and organization are destroyed everything will fall into place.	Protected population will throw its support behind the [HN] government and therefore restore the latter's legitimacy.

Source: Created by the author based on the above analysis of each approach.

Discussion

Having understood what both approaches entail it should be stressed that, as the definitions suggest, these approaches focus mostly on the *operational* and *tactical* levels, remaining not mutually exclusive given that both call for the use of force, though, to varying degrees and for varying purposes. Often, there is no clear delineation between approaches, whatever these approaches might be, such as demonstrated in the case of Colombia (see Palma Morales 2012). However, in how far does the semantic distinction matter, especially at lower levels of war? Also, is it useful at all?

The current debate related to disparities between the two approaches revolves around the aspiration to find the ultimate panacea. The main goal, therefore, is to convert operational and tactical successes into a *positive* strategic effect.[13] However, this debate misses several important aspects with the first being, as Clausewitz (1976, pp. 30-31; 252-253) rightly pointed out, that wars are not mere chameleons in that while

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13   All operational and tactical actions generate strategic effect; however, this does not always turn out to be positive or desirable. See, for instance, Gray (2010, p. 19; 27).

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these have their own "logic" they are ultimately governed by "grammar" that is set by policy, i.e., political end state.

Against this background and recalling Callwell's classification of small wars, it should become apparent that the operational approaches will be highly dependent on the objective, understood here as the political end state. While operational and tactical actions are undoubtedly crucial, given that they embody strategy in action; however, bereft of strategy, they become "nonsensically aimless" (Gray, 2010, p. 21). Therefore, pre-selecting an operational approach for any given war would make little sense (if any) as other important variables occupy higher levels of war and strategy that take primacy. To name them in a hierarchical order, these would include political end state, grand strategic and military strategic approaches as well as resources (military or otherwise). Moreover, perhaps most importantly, an understanding of what is being countered or in Clausewitz's (1976, p. 30) own words:

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for nor trying to turn it into, something alien to its nature.

In practical terms, taking Clausewitz's dictum to heart and following the aforementioned list of variables—though in its more expanded variety as to include fiscal responsibilities, conflict of interest, defense expenditure and the like—has, indeed, been shown to help produce the desired results in cases such as Colombia (Fernandez-Osorio, Cufiño-Gutierrez, Gomez-Diaz, Tovar-Cabrera, 2018).

The present criticism is directed at the contemporary species of the mentioned schools of thought, for example, the lead characters of the current debate. The enemy-centric school is overly fixated upon the insurgent enemy and the idea that once the enemy's physical destruction takes places, this would inevitably lead to political success. While for a counterinsurgent it is important to maintain the upper hand in a military sense—more so than for the insurgent counterpart who can retreat, recover, regroup, and return—such thinking deemphasizes the importance of politics (Gray, 2012b, p. 24). What this, inevitably, implies is that military victory—the sum of won battles—would lead to a political victory. However, in practice, there are exceptions to this rule, with the French-Algerian and Vietnam Wars being the prime examples.

The population-centric approach, in contrast, recognizes this fallacy, claiming that "tactical action must be linked not only to strategic and operational objectives but also to the host nation's essential political goals" (FM 3-24, 2006, p. 1-28). While this recognition is less parochial, the main issue with it lies in the fact that it inherently implies that political objectives of an *expeditionary* counterinsurgent would have to be aligned with those of the host nation in order for this to function, given that this doctrine is written for expeditionary forces who would implement it aboard. This goal, as discussed in the previous section, would be the restoration of legitimacy (of the host nation government), begging the question: to what extent can a foreign force help restore the legitimacy of a

host nation government, especially, if the latter's military capabilities are mostly limited. More importantly, what happens when the expeditionary counterinsurgent withdraws (see Worrall, 2014)—and given the finite resources and domestic appetite for war (see below), it will do so sooner rather than later? Can the host nation preserve such legitimacy? To answer the last question, it is worth quoting a retired US Army Lieutenant Colonel, Stephen Melton (2013), who stresses that "the foreign counterinsurgent force cannot transfer his hard-won, Hobbesian monopoly of violence to a domestic political entity without fatally undermining that entity's legitimacy in the eyes of the population."

Moreover, while the political aspect is—correctly so—allocated the necessary attention, the role of the use of force is demoted to its 'minimum' employment given that population-centric COIN is more about the protection of the key population—or so the contemporary variant asserts. This focus on the population has several caveats, however. First, population—though mostly true for revolutionary wars of the 20th century á la Mao—might not be the *center of gravity*. What happens if the main lifeline of the insurgency is its *external* support, that is, state and non-state actors that inhibit territories outside of the host nation's jurisdiction? In Afghanistan, for instance, the Taliban enjoyed sanctuaries provided by Pakistan, most notably, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Jeffrey Record (2007) makes a strong case for targeting external support that can be, for instance, in the form of sanctuaries, financing or weapons supply; this would, indeed, weaken if not wholly destroy the insurgent organization. While not a silver bullet solution, the broader point to take away is that a narrow focus with deterministic prescriptions obscures more than it reveals, often leading to the application of the wrong solution to the mistakenly identified problem. To paraphrase Abraham Maslow, if the only tool one has is a COIN doctrine, everything starts looking like a problem, i.e., insurgency, the said doctrine is designed to solve.

Second, the importance of the use of force cannot and should not be understated because a state that loses militarily cannot hope to win politically (Gray, 2012b, p. 26). Additionally, while protecting the population and addressing its grievances might be prudent in some scenarios, the narrow focus on such undertaking can, perhaps ironically, limit policy options available to the counterinsurgent with potentially detrimental consequences for the counterinsurgent (Smith, Jones, 2015, pp. 23-24). This point goes back to the necessity to understand *what* kind of war one is engaging in and *what* one is countering—for which there are many contemporary analytical frameworks as to assess the contemporary character of the foe at hand better, be it an insurgency or an insurgent-criminal nexus or similar (Álvarez Calderón & Rodríguez Beltrán, 2018). From a strategic perspective, both approaches are imbalanced, favoring either one aspect or the other; however, it should be stressed that *both* aspects, to varying degrees, form part of COIN that is essentially a war.

The third important point, and worth repeating, is that the majority of theorists and practitioners who wrote on counterinsurgency—both contemporary and otherwise—

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have been writing, to some extent, from an outsider perspective. Some were writing about colonial wars; others, about imperial policing; and others about pacification. Lastly, there are those writing about *expeditionary* counterinsurgency. This aspect is important given that in all these cases, the political objectives would be laid out on the spectrum of what can be perceived as *limited* objectives. This means that the ways and means (i.e., strategies and resources) dedicated to such adventurous endeavors—including the duration of the deployment of expeditionary counterinsurgent forces—would have to be limited, too; that is, "the more modest your own political aim, the less importance you attach to it and the less reluctantly you will abandon it if you must." (italics in the original) (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 20).

Put differently, should the COIN campaign fail, the respective country's national survival would not be immediately at risk. For this reason, there is no need to dedicate *all* available means as to guarantee one's survival. The risk here, however, rests with the host nation given that all the insurgent has to do is outlast its adversary; this can be done either actively through attrition and exhaustion or passively by retreating. For, as noted in the introduction, while insurgents do not have the monopoly on violence, they do have a monopoly on time, which is a rare commodity. As Andrew Mack (1975, p. 245) so eloquently put it, "[i]f the enemy's [counterinsurgent's] political capability to wage war can be attenuated, his military strength ultimately becomes irrelevant because it is increasingly unusable." The previous means that more often than not democracies engaging in expeditionary COIN campaigns will not have the necessary political will, for a variety of reasons to prevail in such undertakings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has addressed the present debate between the enemy-centric and the population-centric schools of thought by analyzing both approaches to grasp the fundamental meaning behind them. While both approaches have their merits, they also have their shortcomings. One of the shortcomings they share is their ultimate focus on the operational and tactical levels, although the population-centric approach does recognize the importance of politics. In the first instance, it is perhaps somewhat naïve to assume that favorable politics will follow once the enemy is physically obliterated. In the second instance, the approach is very deterministic in that it suggests not only tactical action but also defines what the overall political objective should be, therefore, limiting both strategic and policy choices which, given its practical expression in the official US Army/Marine Corps doctrine, can have seriously detrimental consequences.

Therefore, there is no value in focusing on the operational and tactical tenets characterizing each approach to determine the one with the best suitability to counter insurgencies. The reason for this lies in the fact that each and every instance of war, irregular or otherwise, will, first and foremost, require a sound policy followed by strategic assessment

as well as the definition of strategic and military strategic objectives and allocation of resources, in that order. The choice of approach will be determined once all of the above criteria have been fulfilled.

Moreover, as noted, enemy-centric and population-centric approaches do not have to be mutually exclusive, therefore, depending on one's political end state and resources one is willing to commit, these can be implemented either insolation or in conjunction—whichever would yield the most significant positive strategic effect.

From this, it follows that the question related to the best approach to counter an insurgency cannot be resolved, and the main contention is that it should not be resolved either. Rather the tenets that define both approaches should be seen as a part of COIN toolbox which should be readily available for operational planners to pick and choose from once the political and strategic objectives have been clearly defined.

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