

Low-Intensity Conflict
by MAJ Hong Kian Wah

Since the end of WW II to 1991, nearly 75 percent of the 160 armed conflicts around the world were of the "low-intensity" variety 1 . This trend has continued into the 1990s, according to the 1996 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's report. Of the 30 major conflicts which were raging around the world, none were conventional, state-on-state in nature. All were international low-intensity conflicts, some involving outside participation.² Nobody will disagree that the most common form of warfare today and in the foreseeable future is low-intensity in nature, a shorthand term for a diverse range of politico-military activities less violent than modern conventional warfare. Low-intensity conflict is defined by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (as promulgated in the US Army Field Manual 100-20) as:

"... a politico-military confrontation between contending states or groups below conventional war and above the routine, peaceful competition among states. It frequently involves protracted struggles of competing principles and ideologies. Low-intensity conflict ranges from subversion to the use of the armed forces. It is waged by a combination of means, employing political, economic, informational, and military instruments. Low-intensity conflicts are often localized, generally in the Third World, but contain regional and global security implications".³

This definition covers a wide spectrum of conflicts including combating illegal drug trafficking, terrorism and counter-terrorism, insurgency and counter-insurgency, and other special operations needed to counter activities which threaten security and requires a government response - whether revolutionary or non-revolutionary, political or non-political, open or clandestine. However, some of these low-intensity threats such as the Aum Shinrikyo cult's gas attacks in the Tokyo subway, the bombing of the Alfred P Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and cyber terrorism do not require more than effective police operations from the government. This paper analyses the effectiveness of modern conventional forces⁴ of democratic countries⁵ in countering illegitimate arms-organised⁹⁹ groups aimed at overthrowing the legitimate government or forcing the states they target to modify their policies and actions. The following definition of low-intensity conflict by the College of Combat, Mhow (India), is more relevant for this analysis:

"It is a politico-military confrontation between the established authority (state) and organised group(s) of people with or without external assistance, beyond the scope of legitimate, route, peaceful contest/agitation. Being on the low end of the conflict spectrum, it imposes an undefined restraint on the execution of military operations".⁶

Such forms of low-intensity conflict usually involve armed forces and have similar qualities identified by Blaufarb and Tanham in their definition of insurgency. "First, it is organized rather than spontaneous ... Second, it relies heavily on (irregular) armed forces to advance its cause ... The armed forces is usually deployed in the guerilla mode... Finally, ... is not a brief affair that flares up and burns out quickly" .⁷ In addition to these three qualities, van Creveld has pointed out that the irregular armed forces of such groups usually comprise guerrillas, terrorists, and even civilians and they do not rely on [large quantity of] high-tech weapons and conventional armaments such as tanks, heavy artillery and aircraft.⁸ These irregulars are capable of operating in both the country and urban settings. Current examples would include the Kosovo

Liberation Army in Yugoslavia, *Mujahideen* guerrillas in Indian Kashmir, Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, Tamil Tigers in Northern Sri Lanka and the Irish Republican Army in British Northern Ireland.

'Victory' in low-intensity conflicts can be considered achieved in situations where the threatened government is able to conquer or pacify the illegitimate arms-organised group or limit the conflict to a manageable proportion at a domestically "acceptable" cost. However, the acceptance of such a cost is often subject to debate and controversy. Wong has rightly pointed out that 'victory' in such conflicts, if defined and achieved, "will be less meaningful compared to conventional wars due to the irrelevance of the Clausewitzian war trinity, the likelihood of war atrocities and a great need for political compromise".⁹ Nonetheless, are there countries which have succeeded in securing an ideal victory in low-intensity conflicts in the modern era?

Britain lost most of its crown colonies - India, Palestine, Kenya, Cyprus, and Aden - to name a few, largely due to their failure to overcome the upsurge in insurgencies witnessed in these countries after WW II. The Dutch attempted to hold on to resource-rich Indonesia by military means but ended up withdrawing. Both the rich and powerful France and US suffered humiliating defeat in Vietnam after fighting hopelessly for six and nine years respectively. The Russians failed to secure victory in Chechnya despite their overwhelming combat power and years of counter-insurgency experience gained while fighting *Mujahideen* guerrillas in Afghanistan. The intervention of the Indian armed forces in the Sri Lanka's civil war proved disastrous too. Even the once 'never-give-up' Israel is tired of continuing the 'never-ending' low-intensity conflicts with its neighboring Arab states: it is trading in its hard-earned land for peace.

The only and often-quoted success story is the British counterinsurgency operations in Malaya. However, as van Creveld points out, the communist insurgency "was largely confined to the Chinese minority and unsupported by most of the population ... struggle was conducted in vacuum".¹⁰ Lately, the Indian government announced "victory" in Kashmir as the Indian armed forces had successfully forced the Pakistan-backed *Mujahideen* guerrillas out of Indian Kashmir. However, it is not clear how lasting the victory would be since the *Mujahideen* guerrillas are still very much alive and capable of making more such advances anytime.

Against these statistics, are modern conventional forces of democratic countries capable of achieving victory in low-intensity conflicts? The ineffectiveness of these modern conventional forces in low-intensity conflicts could be due to three reasons:

- Inability of many democratic countries, especially the Western states, to apply the perceived desired amount of military resources needed to counter low-intensity threats.
- Modern conventional forces are not configured primarily to deal with such threats. They are thus, incapable of "defeating" the opposing irregular armed forces.
- The sole use of modern conventional forces may be inadequate to achieve victory in low-intensity conflicts.

There are differences between a democracy, such as the US, and a dictatorial system, such as the former Soviet Union, when confronting low-intensity threats. The domestic factors have more influence over the outcomes of protracted conflicts for democratic countries as the strategic and tactical adaptation to warfare of these countries are more affected by their domestic structure. In democratic countries, the liberal values often spill over from the society to the military and civil authority, and thus their ability to win low-intensity conflicts is further reduced.¹¹ The Soviet

treatment of Afghanistan and America's approach to Vietnam well-illustrate the differences. An experienced French observer who was in Afghanistan during part of the Soviet invasion highlighted two aspects of the Soviet strategy which he thought differentiated the outcome in Afghanistan from the Western experience. One was the use of mass terror, completely unlike any of the more moderate types of intervention. The second was the fact that the Soviets could afford a protracted war, as the Soviet public opinion did not influence Soviet policy. Unlike their American counterpart, the Soviet government had absolute control over the media and the nature of their "closed" society allowed them to manipulate the war information intended for the public.¹²

Today, many democratic countries cannot effectively commit their conventional forces to fight insurgents, guerillas, terrorists or whatever they may be called, due to the moral and political difficulties in waging small wars. These irregulars, to use Mao's famous words, are like fishes in the sea.¹³ In situations where the 'fishes' cannot be singled out, one may have no choice but to withdraw the water - to attack the civilian population and sometimes, other sovereign states, supporting the insurgents and terrorists. However, the deliberate targeting of the civilian population and counter-operations that intentionally violate another state's sovereignty, are not morally acceptable to the general public nor the international community. The high doses of brutality inflicted by some US Marines on Vietnamese villagers (to deter the opposing Vietcong) seemed immoral and provoked many anti-war demonstrations. Similarly, the US 'military intervention' in Grenada has been seen as an invasion and received world-wide condemnation. Today, no democratic country can apply crude power to dominate weaker states without facing internal social backlash, political trouble or risk international outrage and condemnation. The modern day use of conventional forces by democratic countries in low-intensity conflicts is certainly not equal to those of Nazi Germany.

The protracted nature of low-intensity conflicts is never attractive to the general public, bureaucrats or the military commanders. Both the victorious British counter-insurgency operation in Malaya and the disastrous American Vietnam War lasted for more than 10 years. Many more similar low-intensity conflicts such the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka and the Kurds' independence movements in Iraq and Turkey are on-going despite years of fruitless fighting with no apparent clear-cut victories or defeats in the foreseeable future. In the democratic countries, the short time-span given to the politicians to govern usually does not allow the government to hold such issues as priority in the agenda for very long, making it impossible to deal effectively with low-intensity conflicts. Likewise, military commanders find it hard to fight "protracted small wars" where the political objective and priority change frequently over the years.

Many operations needed to successfully counter low-intensity threats demand secrecy and sometimes, deception to mask politically sensitive training and deployment. For example, the measure to isolate civilian population from insurgents has proven to be effective, efficient and essential in many counter-insurgency operations but often invites criticism. It is therefore, tempting for government counter-insurgency agencies to engage in such effective but morally and politically ambiguous operations or 'dirty tricks' hidden from the public. These 'government secrets', if exposed, will certainly prove costly to the politicians governing the democratic country. Nevertheless, today's democratic governments are finding themselves increasingly unable to monopolise the supply of information to the public and isolate the 'battlefields' for long periods of time. As seen in the Vietnam War, the North Vietnamese successfully exploited the American media to expose the "distasteful" operations carried out by the US military and turn the American public against the war.

Grant highlights: "low-intensity conflict is even more politically distasteful because the US government rarely gives it high priority... the (military) services have traditionally given few rewards for work in low-intensity conflict, and the situation with civilian agencies is not much better... Low-intensity conflicts are low priority and are likely to stay that way".¹⁴ The design and implementation of more effective strategy and tactics for low-intensity conflicts are difficult under such unfavourable conditions. In many democratic countries, the perception and policy gap between support for major wars and lack of support for low-intensity conflicts is wide. It is such a short-sighted view that is further weakening the ability of the agency-in-charge of countering low-intensity conflicts to rally support from both bureaucrats and military commanders.

Besides the inability of today's democratic countries in committing their military forces to low-intensity conflicts, there are numerous solid military reasons why conventional forces are largely ineffective in fighting such conflicts. Conventional forces are unlike their irregular counterparts: they are fashioned by the Clausewitzian notion of war, focusing on decisive battles to defeat the enemy forces. Table 1 highlights the major asymmetries between modern conventional war and irregular warfare:

Modern	Irregular
Organised	Informal
Advanced technology	At-hand technology
Logistics-dependent	Logistics-independent
National direction	Local direction
Coherent doctrine	Ad-hoc doctrine
Decisive battle	Raids and skirmishes
Soldier	Warrior
Allies	Accomplices
Segregation	Integration

Table 1 : Contrasting Dimensions of War ¹⁵

Modern conventional forces often prefer to deal with military opponents rather than irregular armed forces comprising civilians who are inseparable from society. As mentioned earlier, low-intensity conflict is not a brief affair that flares up and burns out quickly - it can continue for generations and become a routine part of a society. White notes that this has clear implications for external forces entering a conflict to settle it, and in a protracted conflict, time will generally be on the side of the local forces.¹⁶ Operations in Lebanon and Somalia have demonstrated the difficulty for a technologically more superior external force to have more than just a passing effect on a conflict that is deeply embedded in the society. Internal legitimate conventional forces have not done better in such a setting. The Sri Lankan armed forces are still trying hard to pacify the Tamil Tigers after years of fighting. Battle-tested British forces have also not made much headway against the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland.

It is rarely possible to force the irregulars to a military showdown and fight a decisive battle as in a conventional war. The irregulars usually 'own the ground,' and they are unconcerned with time. They do not seek a decisive battle, preferring to engage in raids, skirmishes, and ambushes. In many cases, the conventional forces switch their prime targets for eradication to insurgency-

warriors and leaders, as was seen in the controversial *Phoenix Program* of the US during the Vietnam War, where assassinations were carried out without any consideration for laws. Most military commanders of civilised forces would find the approach distasteful and difficult to formalise as a conventional military doctrine. There is also not much preparation in terms of training or planning for the modern conventional force in such operations.

Van Creveld suggests that the conventional war-oriented command-structures of modern armed forces are too tall and battle procedures too cumbersome. According to a source, the US Air Force required 24 hours advance warning to tailor-plan missions during the Vietnam War.¹⁷ Such tall command-structures offer little help in neutralising the irregulars' monopoly of the offensive. They have the element of surprise and determine who or what is to be attacked, when, where and how and "customarily", strike quickly and depart before the clumsy regular force can respond - thereby effectively extending their life expectancy and prolonging the conflict.

Heavily mechanised "high-tech" modern conventional forces use enormous amounts of fuel, ammunition and spare parts and require huge numbers of non-combat supporting staff. They carry with them the 'ball-and-chain' of their logistics system which is often a constraint to mobility and operational flexibility, creating exploitable vulnerabilities. To use van Creveld's words: their 'tail' is far too long and the number of fighting 'teeth' is far too small¹⁸. Irregular forces, on the contrary, are substantially less limited by logistical factors as they usually draw support from the local population. They usually have a much higher 'tooth-to-tail' ratio due to their simple logistical requirements. These logistical factors reduce the vulnerability of irregulars to counter-logistic strategies. There are no rail or road networks to attack, no ammunition dumps to bomb, no bridges to knock out, no clear logistic centers of gravity to strike - a scenario where many modern conventional forces face difficulties in applying their military might.

The military intelligence collection system has been optimised to obtain information on modern military forces, not for those involved in irregular conflicts. The traditional focus at the corps, division and brigade levels is on military capabilities through analysis of order of battle, force deployment, relative combat powers, doctrine and tactics, sensors and weapons capabilities, and battle damage assessment. However, as highlighted by White, the order of battle of irregular forces does not approach the rigidity of modern forces and units differ in size and structure from tribe to tribe, and from time to time, if accountable. This makes it difficult to display confidently what the enemy's forces look like or how they are deployed. Even the concept of deployment loses some of its meaning when the forces are closely integrated with their society.¹⁹

A strong military force by itself does not deter insurgents and terrorists. In fact, guerilla warfare and terrorism developed in response to strong government powers. The US demonstrated its military might with the 1986 retaliation air strike against Libya.²⁰ In all, 100 military aircraft took part in the punishing operation, code-named, *El Dorado Canyon*, to demonstrate to all states sponsoring terrorists, the high costs of terrorism and that the US did not need an aircraft carrier nearby for them to fear retaliation. Unfortunately, the "military threat" failed to deter further terrorist acts by Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi or other terrorist groups. It prompted the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie in 1988, where the lives of 270 passengers, including 189 Americans, were cut short. The military could not have done anything to prevent or deter the attack.

Countries cannot rely solely on the use of their modern conventional forces to achieve victory in low-intensity conflicts. One must understand the politico-military nature of low-intensity conflicts. To counter such threats involves much more than military enterprise. Equal importance must be given to a broad range of non-military actions. As Sir Robert Thompson puts it unmistakably: "The first lesson to be learnt in this type of war (an insurgency or whatever it may be called) is [it is] all embracing and cannot be won by military means alone. If Vietnam did not prove that, Afghanistan certainly did. The military has only one function - to support the civil government."²¹ Such thinking is well indoctrinated in the US Army training and which reinforces that "in low-intensity conflicts, political objectives drive military decisions at every level from the strategic to the tactical. All commanders and staff officers must understand these political objectives and the impact of military operations on them."²²

The French experience in Indochina has taught them that counter-insurgency must mirror the Maoist 'people's war'. It thus requires a careful blend of military, political, and psychological efforts including pro-government propaganda, mobilisation of the state's political resources, attacks on the subversive infrastructure, re-conquest of liberated zones, isolation and destruction of insurgent military forces, and diplomatic efforts.²³ Similarly, the only country that has succeeded in 'winning' a low-intensity conflict, Britain, stresses strict unity of effort between the military, economic, political, and police forces during counter-insurgency, effective political and psychological operations, and the limited use of firepower in military operations.²⁴ Giving an Asian perspective of the issue, BG Chauhan of the Indian Army highlights in his essay, *Low Intensity Conflict In India: Organisation and Resources Required To Meet This Threat*, "... need to create a Bureau of Internal Security (BIS). The BIS would be directly responsible to the Prime Minister via the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs ... liaise with every ministry ... to formulate a national strategy to counter low-intensity conflict".²⁵

Sun Tzu argues that it is far more effective to attack an opponent's strategy than his army.²⁶ This suggests that the threatened government should examine why the insurgents and terrorists could be promoted and sustained in the first place and apply the most effective action, not necessarily the use of military force, to remove the support base of the threat. As Mao put it: "Without a political goal, guerilla warfare must fail, as it must if its political objectives does not coincide with the aspirations of the people, and their sympathy, cooperation, and assistance cannot be gained."²⁷ One must note that it was not the application of more conventional air power that forced Libya to hand over the bombing suspects for trial in Netherlands but the tough sanctions imposed by the US and the UN against Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi's regime for over 10 years.

Unlike the colonial powers in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the ability of today's democratic countries in waging small wars (or low-intensity conflicts) are influenced more by domestic and international factors. Even in situations where modern conventional forces can be effectively mobilised and their "incompatibilities" in dealing with irregular armed forces are overcome, there is no guarantee that victory can be achieved in low-intensity conflicts. In an exchange between two colonels in Hanoi in April 1975, one an American and the other a North Vietnamese, the following was recorded:

"You know you never defeated us on the battlefield," said the American colonel.

The North Vietnamese colonel pondered this remark a moment before replying,

*"That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."*²⁸

The salient point highlighted by the North Vietnamese colonel is that the tactical responses provided by modern conventional forces can "win battles" (as evidenced by the US experience in Vietnam) but they cannot "win wars". The Indian armed forces have won just 'battles' in Kashmir today: the 'lower intensity' fight is far from over and the conflict could well escalate again. One must understand that the center of gravity of low-intensity conflicts is not on the battlefield per se, but in the complex political-social system. Thus, the main battle lines are political and psychological rather than between regular and irregular forces. No modern conventional forces, not even the multi-purpose 'forces of the future' projected by Irwin²⁹, are sufficient in such conflicts. Only strategic responses that incorporate both military and non-military actions can achieve victory in low-intensity conflicts.

Endnotes

1 Van Creveld, M, *The Transformation of War*, (New York: The Free Press, 1991), p. 20.

2 Based on news report of the *World Magazine*, Feb.8,1997, Volume 1, Number 35 at http://www.worldmag.com/world/issue/02-08-97/international_2.asp.

3 *US Army Field Manual 100-20* Chapter 1: 'Fundamentals of Low Intensity Conflict' at http://earthops.org/sovereign/low_intensity/100-20.1.html.

4 These are armed forces built primarily for warfighting, to fight against other armed forces. They do not cover the police force and other internal security forces.

5 Countries that have a government where the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation, usually involving periodically held free elections (based on Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary, Tenth Edition).

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8 Van Creveld, M., op. cit., p. 20.

9 Wong, C W, 'The Concept of Victory in Future Wars', *Pointer*, January-March 1997, p. 14.

10 Van Creveld, M, op. cit., p. 23.

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12 Sarkesian, S C, 'Low-Intensity Conflict: Concepts, Principles, and Policy Guidelines' in Dean D.J., ed., *Low-Intensity Conflict and Technology*, (Alabama: Air University Press, 1986), p.26.

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16 Ibid.

17 Van Creveld, M, op. cit., p. 30.

18 Van Creveld, M, op. cit., p. 29.

19 White, J B, op. cit.

20 Former US President Reagan ordered the 1996 attack in retaliation to the Libyan bombing of a Berlin disco where two US servicemen were killed.

21 Blaufarb, D S and Tanham, G K, op. cit., p. v (Forward by Sir Robert Thompson).

22 "U.S. Army Field Manual 100-20 Chapter 1: Fundamentals of Low Intensity Conflict" at http://earthops.org/sovereign/low_intensity/100-20.1.html.

23 Metz, S., "Counterinsurgency: Strategy And The Phoenix Of American Capability" at <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usassi/ssipubs/pubs95/counter/countr.txt>

24 Metz, S., op. cit.

25 Manvendra Singh, op. cit., p. 110.

26 Sun Tzu, *The Art Of War* translated by Griffith S.B., (New York; Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 77.

27 Mao Tse-tung, op. cit., p. 43.

28 Summers, H G, *On Strategy*, (Presidio Press, 1982), p. 1.

29 Irwin, A, 'The Buffalo Thorn: The Nature of the Future Battlefield', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, December 1996, pp. 242-249.

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