

Conflict, Crisis, and Strategic Decision-Making:
Examine the concepts of 'guerilla warfare' and 'insurgency' and the effectiveness
of at least two states' counter-insurgency responses.

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SECTION 1:
Irregular Warfare.

Introduction.

From the onset of the 19th century, it has been clear that war is evolving at a dangerous unprecedented speed. Mary Kaldor, a famed academic known for her specialisations in the fields of humanitarian work and the analysis of conflict, proposed a theory of ‘new wars’¹. These new wars, better described as wars requiring new responses, are characterised by the effects of globalisation making the range at which nations can fight wars increase exponentially. Though some academics, such as Stephen Chan², have disagreed on the semantics of New War Theory, most academics agree that there has in fact been a shift. This shift has allowed for a rise in oppressive regimes, and therefore a power vacuum in which insurgency and irregular warfare can rise. Furthermore, globalisation has allowed for non-state actors to become a legitimate entity, questioning the reality of the Westphalian status quo. This essay aims to focus on a subsection of this new modern warfighting, one that does not see the use of specialists and trained soldiers but rather irregular personnel and ad-hoc units, one of resistance and insurgency, and one of guerilla warfare.

It is the viewpoint of this essay that the world has seen a rise in the use of irregular warfare as a form of revolution and civil warfighting, whereby oppression and invasion has become a fact of life, and insurgency has become a norm of existence. Furthermore, counter-insurgency (referred to outwith as COIN) is only effective when military success is directly subordinated to securing local political legitimacy demonstrating that campaigns which fail to address the insurgents core political root causes are ultimately destined for strategic failure irrespective of tactical military victories, otherwise the rise in political distaste and the use of unofficial political route will just increase.

¹ Kaldor, M. (2013). *New and Old Wars*. John Wiley & Sons.

² Chan, S. (2025). *Out of Evil*. [online] Umich.edu. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.131944> [Accessed 28 Nov. 2025].

Core Concepts

First, we must clarify some definitions. Guerilla warfare (from the Spanish “guerra”, meaning war, in the diminutive/minor form “-illa” thus meaning “little war”) is a form of irregular warfare (that of warfare fought not by traditional militants but para-militants and armed civilians). First noted during the Napoleonic era³, Guerilla warfare is characterised by rebellious tactics, knowledge of the land, and opportunistic raiding, aimed at exhausting a larger, conventionally superior enemy. While guerilla tactics are the means by which insurgents fight, insurgency on the other hand, is the overall political-military conflict. Insurgency is, as defined by Bard O’Neil, “a struggle between a nonruling group and the ruling authorities, in which the former consciously employs political resources and instruments of violence to establish legitimacy for some aspect of the political system which it considers illegitimate”⁴, which could imply insurgency is simply that of an organised movement of active subversion to the state by means of violence, designed to overthrow or fundamentally change a governing authority. They are a form of political conflicts, where the political objective of gaining popular support and legitimacy, is always paramount to the military objective.

The fundamental strength of an insurgency lies not in its fighting capacity but in its relationship with the civilian population. As famously articulated by Mao Zedong, the guerilla must move amongst the people, as “It is only undisciplined troops who make the people their enemies and who, like the fish out of its native element cannot live”⁵ This dependency requires the insurgents to gain (and especially maintain) the support of the local population. Providing security, justice, and a compelling political alternative to the incumbent regime is the best way to win. This is best done by maintaining a decentralised and often covert structure to evade the state's conventional military power, as publicly loud movements, underground political movements have been theorised to strike at the hearts of local population stronger⁶. Once an insurgent recognises, they cannot win in a direct confrontation, the goal becomes to prolong the conflict until the state’s political or domestic will to fight is exhausted, also known as reverse-attrition (that of attrition used by guerillas against the

³ Asprey, R.B. (2018). Guerrilla warfare | military tactics. In: Encyclopædia Britannica. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/guerrilla-warfare> [Accessed 27 Nov. 2025].

⁴ O’Neil, B.E. (1984). Insurgency - The Context of Terrorism (From Terrorism, Political Violence and World Order, P 173-202, 1984, Henry H Han, ed. - See NCJ-98738) | Office of Justice Programs. [online] Ojp.gov. Available at: <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/insurgency-context-terrorism-terrorism-political-violence-and-world> [Accessed 27 Nov. 2025].

⁵ Mao Zedong - 毛泽东 (1937). 游击战 (On Guerilla Warfare). [online] www.marxists.org. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/1937/guerrilla-warfare/ch06.htm> [Accessed 30 Nov. 2025].

⁶ Robson, D. (2019). The ‘3.5% rule’: How a small minority can change the world. [online] [Bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk). Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/future/article/20190513-it-only-takes-35-of-people-to-change-the-world>.

state). This tactic can be seen through the Indochina wars, especially through the lens of the Viet Nam civil war.

On the otherside, Counter-Insurgency (COIN) refers to the comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken by a government (or its allies) to defeat an insurgency and address its root causes. Due to the political nature of insurgency, COIN doctrine emphasises that the military component must always be subordinated to securing the political objective, establishing a legitimate and stable government. As set out in David Galula's "Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice" (one of the founding documents of Counter-insurgency which shapes modern tactics worldwide), disorder is the prime motive of insurgents and it fuels discontent towards the state, "Moreover, disorder - the normal state of nature - is cheap to create and very costly to prevent"⁷ which furthers the idea that the burden of cost is on the state, always, and thus can only be rebuilt with approval of the people.

When COIN is used in practise, the state (or that of the ruling body) often focuses primarily on the military defeat of the insurgency through overwhelming force, elimination of leadership, and destruction of infrastructure. This model of attrition over understanding may work in the short term to induce rule, but rarely fixes the underlying political grievances, sowing the seeds for future revolutionaries and insurgents to rise. This can be seen as a common trend throughout the following case studies of the Sri Lankan civil war, the War on Terror within Afghanistan, and the Viet Nam civil war.

⁷ Galula, D. (1963). Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice. [online] Available at: <https://dn790001.ca.archive.org/0/items/CounterinsurgencyWarfare/Counterinsurgency%20Warfare.pdf> [Accessed 29 Nov. 2025].

Case Study 1: Sri Lankan Civil War

The Sri Lankan civil war, born out of the oppression and persecution of the Tamil Speaking peoples of Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka, was fought between the years 1980 until 2009. The island has had a long history of oppressive regimes, leading into the rise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE, a group of renown for its use of guerilla tactics and separatist ideolog, had taken to the international scene for its pioneering use of suicide bombing⁸. This conflict is a critical case study in understanding how the effectiveness of a state's use of counter-insurgency techniques is not as black and white as one may imagine, as it represents one of the few instances where a state achieved a definitive, total military victory against an entrenched, politically motivated insurgency however overall failed to mitigate issues with a diplomatic approach.

Initially, the government of Sri Lanka struggled significantly, oscillating between failed peace agreements and ineffective military operations, however after 2005, the government adopted a fundamental shift in strategy. Under the leadership of President Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005-2015), the strategy moved away from the people-centric model of trying to win hearts and minds, towards a purely force based strategy focused on the LTTE's annihilation. The goal was to cripple the LTTE's leadership, military capability, and logistical base, regardless of the political or international consequences. The military campaign relied heavily on combined-arms operations, using armour, artillery, and airpower against the LTTE's fixed positions and strongholds. By isolating the territories in the north, and restricting access for humanitarian organisations and journalists, the Sri Lankan military was able to divide and overwhelm the LTTE. The effectiveness of this approach, measured purely in operational terms, was undeniable: Vellupillai Prabhakaran, Leader of the LTTE, was killed⁹ and the organisation's conventional fighting capacity was completely dismantled by May 2009.

However, the campaign's success serves as a reminder that while violence and force may appear to be effective in the short term, it does not solve the deeply ingrained issues that the separatist forces were fighting for. Crucially, the military victory did not lead to strategic stability or political reconciliation. Furthermore, the final stages of the conflict were heavily criticised for large-scale human rights abuses and high civilian casualties, with estimates

⁸ KUMAR, S.Y.S. (2005). Suicide Bombers In Sri Lanka. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, [online] 9(3), pp.96–106. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48577752> [Accessed 28 Nov. 2025].

⁹ BBC News (2025). Sri Lankan rebel leader 'is dead'. [online] [bbc.co.uk](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8054400.stm). Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8054400.stm [Accessed 28 Nov. 2025].

running into the tens of thousands, thus the underlying socio-political grievances of the Tamil population were left unaddressed and still do to this day¹⁰.

In post-war Sri Lanka, there has been tedious peace at best. The success of the military might first model concentrated immense power within the hands of the government, fuelling an authoritarian turn that systematically eroded the country's democratic institutions and rule of law. The tactics legitimised during the war's final phase (i.e. the disregard for human rights, the suppression of dissent, the vilification of critics as traitors) were repurposed as tools of general governance¹¹. This decay in democratic health and accountability created an executive ill-equipped to manage peaceful dissent or complex policy challenges, directly contributing to the profound national crises that followed. 2018 saw a constitutional coup¹², 2019 a devastating religious extremist bombing during easter (which exposed the lethal incompetence of a security state focused more on political control than effective policing)¹³, as well as the catastrophic economic collapse of 2022¹⁴. A state that had mastered solving a political problem through sheer coercion had forgotten how to govern through consensus and legitimacy. Not only did the COIN strategy not simply fail to build a sustainable peace in the North; it actively corrupted the foundational legitimacy and resilience of the Sri Lankan state. This only proved that counter-insurgency that subordinates political goals to military victory may defeat an enemy, but in doing so, it often devastates the very state it was designed to protect.

Ultimately, the Sri Lankan campaign demonstrates that a state can achieve tactical and even operational effectiveness against an insurgency by discarding the political constraints of classic COIN doctrine. However, because the state failed to subordinate its military success to securing long-term political legitimacy and reconciliation, the victory remains strategically incomplete. It averted immediate threat but created deep-seated resentment and a political environment ripe for future conflict should the conditions for a renewed insurgency arise. This case confirms the thesis by illustrating that military efficacy, divorced from political success, is a temporary rather than a permanent solution to insurgency.

¹⁰ House of Commons. (2023) Sri Lankan Tamils and Human Rights. Westminster Hall, Volume 742. [Online] Available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2023-12-05/debates/180695ca-3786-4b64-abeb-d6f630d88a2/WestminsterHall> [Accessed 28 Nov. 2025].

¹¹ Lunn, J. (2025). Sri Lanka since the end of the civil war. [online] House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06097/> [Accessed 30 Nov. 2025].

¹² Centre for Policy Alternatives (2018). Paradise Lost? Preliminary Notes on a Constitutional Coup. [online] Centre for Policy Alternatives. Available at: <https://www.cpalanka.org/paradise-lost-preliminary-notes-on-a-constitutional-coup/> [Accessed 1 Dec. 2025].

¹³ BBC News (2019). Sri Lanka Easter bombings. BBC News. [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/cdmmjkw6krwt> [Accessed 1 Dec. 2025].

¹⁴ Perera, A. (2022). Sri Lanka: Why is the country in an economic crisis? BBC News. [online] 20 May. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-61028138> [Accessed 1 Dec. 2025].

Case Study 2: The War on Terror

The two decade long American invasion of Afghanistan, as part of the war on terror, represents the modern era's largest and longest example of counter-insurgency, yet it ended in what is widely considered a catastrophic strategic failure. Unlike in Sri Lanka, the US-led effort initially utilised the humanitarian people-first model of counter-insurgency, exemplified by General Petraeus's command in 2010. However, the eventual collapse of the Afghan government in 2021 highlights that no level of resource investment or doctrinal commitment can overcome a fundamental crisis of political legitimacy.

The central failing of the Afghan mission was that it remained a foreign-led intervention, perpetually viewed by significant portions of the populace as an occupation rather than a partnership. The efforts to "Clear, Hold, and Build" were undermined by the simple fact that the resulting Afghan government structure was perceived as corrupt, ineffective, and ultimately beholden to foreign powers in Kabul. After all, "Clear-hold-build is not a strategy and must not be mistaken for one, as it has been in Afghanistan, where it inspired false hope for swift progress."¹⁵ This perception granted the Taliban a crucial advantage: they could credibly market themselves as the people's nationalist resistance force, despite their own history of violence.

Tactical military operations further eroded support. Over-reliance on overwhelming force, including night raids and aerial strikes, frequently resulted in high amounts of so-called "collateral damage" (including the lives of civilians)¹⁶. In COIN, these deaths are not just tragedies, but they stand as strategic victories for the insurgents, as they successfully alienate the population from the state forces and drive local communities into the arms of the Taliban for protection or recourse. This loss of consent fatally undermined the goal of securing the population's loyalty. Tactically, the war on terror in Afghanistan would always have been a lose-lose scenario, as any Afghan casualties would just lead to a growth in Taliban troops. Furthermore, the Taliban effectively countered counter-insurgency measures through guerilla warfare tactics, capitalising on the political fragility of the US-backed government and the use of reverse-attrition.

Finally, Afghan interim government was ridden with corruption and greed, so much so that locals were left "unwilling to fight for a distant government that did not treat them with

¹⁵ Ucko, D.H. (2013). Beyond Clear-Hold-Build: Rethinking Local-Level Counterinsurgency after Afghanistan. *Contemporary Security Policy*, [online] 34(3), pp.526–551. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2013.839258>.

¹⁶ McChrystal, S. (2009). Commander (ISAF) Initial Assessment (UNCLASSIFIED). [online] Available at: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/qy3fic-cl4be/15.pdf> [Accessed 27 Nov. 2025].

dignity.”¹⁷, the state lacked the robust institutional foundation necessary to survive. Lack of political will left the security forces of Afghanistan untrained and unmanned, creating the perfect environment for a power vacuum, in which the Taliban stood up. Despite having access to better weaponry and technology, doctrine and vast resources, the U.S. led forces failed because they could not successfully achieve the necessary political objective: to support a popular, legitimate, and sustainable governing structure, with military action and not the other way round. The eventual collapse proved that strategic failure is inevitable when the political environment cannot be won, regardless of how many tactical battles are secured

¹⁷ Murtazashvili, J. (2022). The Collapse of Afghanistan. [online] Journal of Democracy. Available at: <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-collapse-of-afghanistan/> [Accessed 28 Nov. 2025].

Case Study 3: The War in Viet Nam

The protracted series of conflicts in Indochina, specifically the First (French) and Second (American) phases of the Viet Nam War, serve as arguably the definitive case study of modern irregular warfare triumphing over overwhelming conventional power. This conflict illustrates the fatal strategic trap set when colonial or external powers fail to recognise a deep-seated nationalist, anti-colonial insurgency for what it is (a political movement) instead viewing it narrowly as a purely military problem. In 1954, the battle of Dien Bien Phu saw the end of the first Indochina War. The French forces lost to the Viet Minh who, under the ideological and military leadership of Ho Chi Minh and General Giap, used classic guerrilla tactics to control the countryside, drain French resources, and leverage local support driven by over a century of colonial resentment. This connects back to the point that an ideology will always stand stronger than any legion, which is at the heart of the US Army / Marine Corps' field manual on Counterinsurgency which states COIN is to be used to help "friendly forces reestablish political order and legitimacy where these conditions may no longer exist."¹⁸

The American-led involvement in the War in Viet Nam showcases an example where overwhelming conventional military power ultimately failed against an insurgency fuelled by nationalist ideologies and adept guerilla techniques. The Viet Cong (VC - the South Viet Nameese communist insurgents) and the North Viet Nameese Army (NVA) perfected the use of guerilla warfare. Their strategy was driven by Mao Zedong's Protracted War theory¹⁹, focusing on avoiding decisive battles and instead engaging in low-level, continuous operations designed to wear down the American and South Viet Nameese political will. Crucially, the VC were masters of political mobilisation. They operated under the idea of villagers by day and revolutionaries by night, leveraging nationalist and anti-colonial sentiment to secure the complete loyalty of the local population. This loyalty provided the VC with essential cover, intelligence, and recruits, effectively nullifying the US's technological advantages. The American-supported Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN) and the government in Saigon were consistently portrayed as illegitimate foreign puppets, ensuring the fundamental political contest was lost before many battles even began. This portrayal can be seen through the 10-point program used by the Viet Cong, in which it explicitly states that

¹⁸ U.S. Department of the Army (2006). Counterinsurgency (FM 3-24). [online] pp.I-24. Available at: https://iccforum.com/media/background/sanctions/2006-12-15-US_Army_Field_Manual-Counterinsurgency.pdf [Accessed 28 Nov. 2025].

¹⁹ Mao Zedong - 毛泽东 (1938). 论持久战 (On Protracted War). [online] www.marxists.org. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_09.htm [Accessed 30 Nov. 2025].

the south Viet Nameese government was a “camouflaged colonial regime of the American imperialists”²⁰.

After failing to ‘win over’ the Viet Nameese, the United States and allies changed their strategy from the population-centric COIN approach to the more tactical and militaristic attrition model of counter-insurgency, hoping to wear out the revolutionary forces, through means of the Search and Destroy missions. However, these efforts were undermined by several strategic failures, such as over-reliance on force-first, lack of legitimacy, and growing domestic discontent. The war in Viet Nam was fought in the age of televised media, exposing the tactical horrors directly to the eyes of citizens. The insurgents’ ability to refuse decisive engagement, coupled with mounting American casualties, led to a continuous and ultimately fatal erosion of domestic political will. The strategic victory of the communists was achieved not on the battlefield, but in Washington when the US populace decided the war was unwinnable and illegitimate.

The war in Viet Nam decisively reinforces the essay’s thesis: superior technology and overwhelming force cannot compensate for a complete failure to achieve the necessary political objectives. The US and South Viet Nam lost the war not because they were defeated in every engagement, but because they lost the political contest for the people's loyalty and the political contest for the will of the American public. Strategic failure was inevitable because the military campaign was never successfully subordinated to establishing a popular, legitimate, and sustainable governing structure.

²⁰ Vassar.edu. (2025). Program of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam | The Wars for Vietnam | Vassar College. [online] Available at: <https://www.vassar.edu/the-wars-for-vietnam/documents/program-national-liberation-front-south-vietnam> [Accessed 28 Nov. 2025].

It is within these three case studies that we have examined the use of guerilla warfare within the realm of insurgency and revolutionary fighting, as well as assessing the effectiveness of state-based counter-insurgency methods. The hypothesis (that COIN is only effective when directly supporting socio-economic reforms and addresses the deeply rooted political issues at hand, not when military might is the main goal) has been proven by the fact that the effectiveness of a state's COIN response hinges almost entirely on its ability to secure and maintain political legitimacy in the eyes of the contested population. The three case studies demonstrated three very different realities, one in which military might may have won but at a cost of irreconcilable damage, one in which the corruption and greed of the interim government and the disastrous military techniques led to its downfall, and one in which colonial forces tried to fight ideology with fire.

In the case of Sri Lanka, the state did achieve a total military annihilation of an entrenched insurgency. However, by prioritising kinetic action over political reconciliation, the Sri Lankan government exchanged an immediate threat for long-term ethnic resentment. This victory was operationally effective but strategically incomplete because it failed to address the insurgents' political root causes, proving that military success, when divorced from political consent, yields only unstable peace. In the case of Afghanistan, the prolonged American-supported COIN effort demonstrated the futility of massive resource investment when the foundational element of political legitimacy is absent. Corruption within the Western-backed Afghan state and the perception of foreign occupation fatally undermined the attempts at population-centric COIN. The failure to subordinate military action to the establishment of a popular, legitimate governing structure made strategic defeat inevitable, despite two decades of tactical military engagements. In the case of Viet Nam, the counter-insurgency measures failed to recognise the fact that an insurgency fuelled by compelling nationalist ideology can easily outlast superior conventional force. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces successfully employed guerilla tactics to wage a war of reverse-attrition, exhausting not only the political will of the South Vietnamese government but also the domestic political support of the intervening United States. This proved that the political battleground extends far beyond the theatre of operations.

All three case studies were that of COIN failure, but by three different means. However, all three demonstrated the same point: success is achieved not when the last guerrilla fighter is killed, but when the last citizen genuinely supports the state, and that remains an elusive goal in the modern theatre of irregular warfare, otherwise the rise in political distaste and the use of unofficial political route will just increase. To conclude, an army will fall with losses, but an ideology will strengthen with martyrdom, counter-insurgency must address the needs of the people or face an eternal war.

SECTION 2:
Annex and Accreditation.

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