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Compressing Politics in Counterinsurgency (COIN): Implications for COIN Theory from India's Northeast

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Abstract

Counterinsurgency (COIN) has long been recognised as a political phenomenon, but current theoretical understandings of politics in COIN reflect ideal types, overlooking the depth and complexity of the politics of insurgency and COIN. Drawing *from India's experience in its* north-eastern region, this paper argues that COIN theory overlooks the political agency and multiplicity of actors, as well as overlooking the fundamentally political scope of interactions that take place between them. It calls upon COIN theorists to begin to map out this complex picture by urging greater integration between academics and practitioners studying COIN and theoretical inputs from wider academic disciplines.

Introduction

Counterinsurgency (COIN) is widely considered a political rather than a military phenomenon. This recognition has been present for decades in a body of knowledge developed by what has become a hall of fame of "scholar practitioners" deriving lessons from postcolonial counterinsurgencies.[1] Doctrinal thought and publications by the militaries of major practitioners have reaffirmed this principle.[2] Academia and the latest generation of "scholar-practitioners" frequently use it as an analytical benchmark with which to measure COIN operations worldwide, and are quick to draw commonalities with states seemingly sharing this acceptance,[3] while drawing distinctions with others.[4] This principle has become so deeply-engrained that, as one analyst puts it in an analysis of COIN "best practices", "one cannot seriously challenge [it] without appearing spurious".[5]

It is the very strength of this conceptual orthodoxy, reinforced by policymaker desires for actionable policy principles and a veneer of intellectual fashionability that has paradoxically stunted the development of an important part of COIN theory. The result is a state of conceptual inertia, in which our understanding of political primacy has failed to develop to reflect the complexity of the politics of insurgency and COIN. Critiques of COIN theory do clearly exist, but tend to go too far, rejecting the validity of COIN theory altogether.[6] A smaller group of scholars, on the other hand, argue that the core theoretical underpinnings do bear relevance but require further conceptual development to better connect them with empirical complexities.[7]

This paper seeks to amplify that contention, arguing that the decades-old orthodox understanding of the relationship between COIN and politics, while relevant, analytically flattens out the complex, multi-layered processes of political interaction and contestation that occur in an insurgency environment. By scrutinising the concept of political primacy, the paper argues in favour of the development of growing calls to "put the politics back in" to the study of COIN,[8] calling for a rejuvenated approach to the study of COIN in which the

boundaries of theoretical comparability and empirical depth are scrutinised, tested and revised.

To do this, it first reviews the development of understandings of "politics" in COIN theory both in broader theory and its manifestation in the Indian context. It then draws upon an expanded definition of what we mean by politics to highlight two key issues in COIN theory: the over-ascription of counterinsurgent agency and a narrow understanding of what is considered "political" in "political violence". This reveals that conceptualisations of the political in COIN theory are restricted to ideal types, overlooking the myriad of complex interactions that make up politics in insurgency-affected areas.

It then demonstrates this through a brief exploration of COIN in Northeast India. This begins by discussing how existing scholarship has conceptualised the COIN-politics relationship in the region, which most commonly frames its understanding using the prism of the successful resolution of insurgency in Mizoram. It then briefly explores the politics behind this case study and others in the region to demonstrate the deficiencies in the current analytical focus, before highlighting the agency of non-state actors in conducting politics in the region that do not always match with conventional theoretical understandings of the conduct of politics in insurgency and COIN. Finally, it unpacks and critiques distinctions that are commonly made between the "military" and "political" in COIN by examining how COIN operations can themselves constitute processes of political signalling and the recalibration of power relations. It situates this common aspect of COIN theory within this expanded understanding of politics, revealing the potential implications and applications of doing so.

To conclude, it outlines a tentative framework for expanding the remit of COIN studies in a way that better integrates the complex politics of COIN. To achieve this, greater integration between practitioners and students of security is required to begin with. It then suggests that disciplines that examine the functioning, management and resilience of societies over time, such as sociology, anthropology and the study of policing, can offer important clues for better connecting COIN theory with the politics of COIN.

Theoretical context

Before doing this, it is important to note the theoretical origins of the principle of political primacy in COIN theory. The principle itself emerged in the context of revolutionary science,[9] adapted to the particular context of Maoist guerrilla politics during both the anti-Japanese campaign of World War II and the Civil War:

> Without a political goal, guerrilla warfare must fail, as it must if its political objectives do not coincide with the aspirations of the people and their sympathy, cooperation,

> and assistance cannot be gained. The essence of guerrilla warfare is thus revolutionary in character.[10]

Following World War II, these writings became a source of theoretical and practical inspiration for the communist-inspired insurgencies of that period, while efforts to counter them ultimately forged the doctrinal centre-pieces of modern COIN theory. British late colonial practitioner Robert Thompson stressed the importance of defeating the political subversion rather than the guerrillas themselves, implying the centrality of the political as a tenet of COIN theory.[11] David Galula reinforced this assertion with his oft-quoted analytical division of COIN duties into 80 per cent political action and 20 per cent military.[12] These core assumptions, forged in the context of late colonial COIN amid a Cold War backdrop, have significantly influenced how democratic states think about the conduct of COIN well into the 21st century. The understanding of COIN as a fundamentally political endeavour has been widely accepted and, to a certain extent, intensified. US COIN advisor David Kilcullen, in an attempt to distinguish the "new" environment from the writings of "classical" theorists, for instance, has asserted that COIN has become "100 per cent political" given the political implications of military actions in an increasingly complex information environment in which perception management is key.[13]

In India, the centrality of the political in COIN policy was embraced by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru immediately after Independence with the notion of the Naga rebel as the "misguided citizen" in need of co-option into the political "mainstream". This gradually became engrained within military doctrinal circles through a combination of political pressure and Commonwealth military exchanges.[14] The nature of civil-military relations in India since its independence has been characterised by a clear division of responsibilities over which the civilian administration retains overall primacy. Reflecting these clear boundaries, the Indian Army's doctrinal assumption is that it must operate within its sphere of professional expertise to reduce the fighting capacity of insurgents, effectively conducting Galula's 20 per cent, creating the conducive conditions for the political administration to implement the political 80 per cent. This creation of two almost distinct conceptual phases, as well as the lack of an "all-of-government" policy that accounts for the other 80 per cent, creates an artificial boundary between the "military" and the "political" components in doctrinal and theoretical thinking on COIN. This risks divorcing an understanding of the politics of COIN from doctrinal thought.[15]

Percentage ratios aside, the universal acceptance of the dominance of the political in COIN is clear and reflects lessons obtained through decades of experience across numerous cases. Most analyses of insurgency and COIN begin or conclude with the

recommendation that insurgency and COIN are political phenomena and that only a "political solution" can resolve conflict. This oft-repeated dictum has generated a perception that this principle can be employed as a benchmark for analysing COIN campaigns, based on how "political" the campaign is perceived to be. Commonly used indicators to gauge the political nature of a COIN approach include the ability to redress popular grievances by empowering disaffected communities through "good governance", to implement and equitably distribute economic development, to increase democratic participation and co-opt former combatants into political structures and to subsume these within a clear political message.[16] While each of these sub-components clearly mark a political engagement with insurgency, they nonetheless represent visions of a desired end-state in line with the political and ideological compulsions of democratic states.[17] While it is important to politically hold practitioners to account in line with these desired end-states, we need to prise apart discourse from conflict analysis. As an analytical tool, the current conceptualisation of politics in COIN fails to encapsulate the complexity of the political environments within which COIN takes place on two key levels.

The politics of COIN: two levels of complexity

Framing the politics of COIN as a series of "ideal types", such as the principles of good administration mentioned above, only captures a portion of what politics actually constitutes. Much of politics, which can be defined as the interactions between actors to secure key interests, occurs outside of the realm of these ideal types, resulting in compromises, bargains and the testing of key thresholds as actors seek to push the limits of what is possible in a given context. The extent to which these actors can secure key interests can depend on power capabilities, interests and contestations and commonalities with other actors. For counterinsurgents, this therefore means that the "ideal type" understanding of politics in COIN can be subjected to two key critiques.

1. **Counterinsurgents (and insurgents) are not the only actors with an ability to implement a political vision**

Very few states, no matter how politically, administratively or militarily strong, have the power or the will to create a Hobbesian Leviathan that completely monopolises power.[18] In any insurgency environment, there exists a vast array of actors such as local political strongmen, organised criminal syndicates, political parties, civil society actors, commercial actors or foreign intelligence agencies. Some of these actors may predate conflict, while some may emerge or be empowered by the opportunities conflict offers, such as criminal actors capitalising on the state's reduced ability to enforce the rule of law. Each of these actors may command unique forms of political, cultural, social, economic or military power that can be

employed to retain or carve out a respective place within that order. Conversely, they may seek to transform it altogether. These negotiators of order may serve as spoilers or enablers for counterinsurgents. For example, a cluster of major Naga civil society organisations has been able to leverage legitimacy derived from spiritual sources such as the church, the influential role of women in society and the salience of tribal structures to articulate the narrative of a societal-level weariness of conflict. By challenging the relationship between insurgents and local populations, these actors have at times pressured several insurgent groups into participation in reconciliation and peace processes.

Furthermore, multiple interest groups may exist within state structures, socio-political movements and insurgent groups, making the employment of these forms of power the outcome of a series of interactive processes. The example of Naga civil society organisations again merits attention, who equally should not be considered unitary or "apex" actors as is often considered, but complex relational webs of cooperation, competition and conflict. For example, protests against the inclusion of a 33 per cent female representation quota during the scheduled Urban Local Body elections of 2017 pitted tribal organisations that purport to represent "traditional" values against women's civil society organisations, revealing cleavages between this cluster of actors.[19] Furthermore, the positions of tribal organisations such as the Naga Hoho on the reconciliation and peace process clearly require a delicate management of competing political interests. The summer 2016 departure of the Ao, Sumi and Lotha representative bodies within the Hoho over the recognition of the Manipur-based Rongmei tribe is a particularly salient example. The definition of who exactly constitutes a "Naga", and the inclusion or exclusion of such organisations must be taken within the context of constitutional incentives. Naga tribes in Nagaland itself enjoy Scheduled Tribe status under Article 371-A of the Indian Constitution. The extension of such rights to Manipur-based groups and the resources that this would entail could alter the ordering and dispersal of power across the broader network of inter-tribal relations, particularly since the power of non-Nagaland Nagas has increased in areas such as Dimapur district following the expansion of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) across Nagaland since the 1997 ceasefire. This demonstrates the complex politics within these civil society bodies and their intimate connections to societal-political rivalries and dynamics that may limit their capacity to act as a unifying force.[20]

COIN theorists in policymaking and security circles understandably need to be seen to be able to monopolise power within their sovereign boundaries, strive for excellence and seek to "win" wars. That being said, they need to also be cognisant of the fact that the principles espoused in doctrines are but one of many desired end-states of a wide-ranging spectrum of interaction across a wide range of state and non-state actors. Using desired

end-states as benchmarks of analysis in this context threatens to bracket off and flatten out the myriad interactions and outcomes that take place as actors secure and negotiate core interests. It is therefore crucially important that analytical frameworks be developed to incorporate these myriad interactions.

2. Interactions within this environment may not necessarily reflect traditional revolutionary and counter-revolutionary political competition, but they should nonetheless be recognised as political

Academics studying insurgency and civil wars have since the end of the Cold War challenged the idea that insurgencies purely operate according to a Maoist, mass-based formula. Theories of "New Wars",[21] and categorisations of "criminal",[22] "warlord",[23] sectarian[24] and globalised insurgencies[25] challenged conventional insurgency theory by identifying centres of gravity beyond the traditional, somewhat romanticised conceptualisation of rural, mass-based revolutionary organisations by exploring other drivers.[26] Elements of an insurgency may, for example, seek to access and consolidate control over illicit markets. They may seek to carve out an exclusionary ethnic enclave to consolidate power bases, deliberately use insecurity as a tool of control and penetrate state structures to immobilise state responses. While these writings mark an important recognition that insurgencies may interact with their surrounding environment based on very different calculations, distinguishing "criminal" or other types of insurgency as different from "political" insurgencies threatens to miss the point and reinforce a faulty notion of "political" tied to that of the Maoist, mass-based variant, creating a risk of misdiagnosis for counterinsurgent theorists.

This is particularly apparent in the Indian context, since there exists an analytical division in responsibility between the state government, which is charged with maintaining law and order, and the centre, which is generally expected to aid insurgency-afflicted state governments through the provision of military and paramilitary forces. While an important professional and political distinction,[27] this has implicitly influenced an analytical distinction that an insurgency may "degenerate" into criminality and, by doing so, no longer constitute an insurgency.[28] This overlooks and flattens out the complex politics of insurgencies as groups vie for access to power resources in ways that may not necessarily fit with traditional understandings underpinned by classical COIN thought. For example, in Manipur, violent competition between NSCN-IM and Kuki militants over the border town of Moreh during the 1990s was based on control over the city's position as a major hub of the regional drug and arms trafficking network, providing a significant source of illicit revenue.[29] However, collecting extortion funds from ordinary citizens both in Moreh and further afield has also

offered armed groups opportunities to effectively mimic state "taxation" practices, in doing so posing as legitimate sources of authority and situating these practices within claims to sovereignty.[30] Therefore, it is difficult to locate these complex dynamics within the dichotomous juxtaposition between insurgency and criminality evident in the Indian COIN discourse.

Furthermore, these conflicts have had ramifications for the security and insecurity of other ethnic groups. During the Naga-Kuki conflict, the NSCN-IM was significantly better-armed and equipped than its Kuki counterparts, which proliferated and militarised during the course of the conflict. This process, which bears similarities with the "security dilemma" dynamic observed in studies of inter-state arms races,[31] then generated insecurity amongst the Paite community of Churachandpur district, resulting in the militarisation of that community and Kuki-Paite clashes during 1997-1998.[32] This has led to ambiguities as to whether appropriate policies to counter these turf wars mark part of a law and order, COIN or indeed peacekeeping operations.

Furthermore, as recent works by authors such as Paul Staniland and Annette Idler have pointed out, actors in an insurgency environment may utilise a wealth of interaction patterns to pursue interests, including outright competition, tacit understandings, transactional bargaining and alliance formation.[33] The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) during the late 1980s was able to create political arrangements based upon alliances with former social movement comrades and coercive threats to penetrate parts of Assam's state- and district-level governance structures, creating localised forms of influence that enabled the group to avoid state suppression until the central government intervened in 1990.

Northeast India

Clearly, the "ideal types" that underpin the understanding of politics in COIN theory overlook processes of contestation, interaction and negotiation with the myriad actors that constitute the political environment. Counterinsurgents are not the only actors with political agency, and the interests governing actors in an insurgency environment do not necessarily coincide with traditional understandings of revolutionary politics. In Northeast India, the state has engaged with a web of political actors that manoeuvre to engage, coalesce or contest one another. In all but one case, this has significantly complicated the options available to the Indian state in conducting COIN. North-eastern insurgent groups have staked claims to power and influence in ways that have been portrayed as apolitical or criminal, but have nonetheless attained power and influence. Even counterinsurgents conducting the military "20 per cent", by adjusting the quantum of military force have displayed a critical

engagement with the politics and power relations sustaining armed groups. The next section reveals these dynamics and, in doing so, exposes potential possibilities for the study of COIN that will be further elaborated upon in the conclusions.

Current conceptualisations of COIN and politics in Northeast India

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to map out the historical trajectory of insurgencies and responses to them in Northeast India, of which there exists a dearth of material,[34] some existing applications of COIN principles to insurgencies in the region are worthy of note. Namrata Goswami, for instance, uses the centrality of politics as a "best practice" to analyse several regional case studies, highlighting the role of empowered political actors in reconciliation processes in Nagaland and the successful conclusion of political negotiations with the Mizo National Front (MNF) in Mizoram in 1986.[35] These examples support existing assumptions in COIN theorisation, but focus on overt, official political processes, missing out the complex interactions that occur in and around these arrangements while struggling to account for examples in which this process has encountered difficulties. For example, while Mizoram is lauded as one of the most successful examples of COIN in the country, ostensibly supporting Goswami's argument, it was the politics of the MNF that allowed Laldenga, in a strong position internally, to exert control over the organisation's cadres, while civil society actors, especially the church, played a considerable role in brokering negotiations.[36] This conducive political environment provided the foundations for a comprehensive settlement with the government, though this is often overlooked in favour of the success of the state's political maturity. This conclusion has been roundly deployed to support the contentions of the "ideal type" understanding of politics in COIN, meaning that the complex processes of negotiation between non-state actors and then between the MNF and the government – the key multi-party interactions that led to the emergence of this political settlement – are overlooked.

Unfortunately, the Mizoram success story appears to represent the exception rather than the rule in a region characterised by fluctuating, unequal power relationships across multiple levels. Far from operating in a vacuum, counterinsurgents in the Northeast have found themselves part of a complex conflict ecosystem in which an array of political actors that either make up an armed movement or provide support to it maintain often tenuous relationships. In many cases of insurgency in the Northeast, shifts in these relationships have led to the emergence of competing sub-factions within or between insurgencies. Multiple interest groups and actors have, for example, prevented insurgent groups from negotiating with the state as one coherent unit, and have in doing so limited the options available to counterinsurgents to produce a comprehensive settlement.

For example, since the early years of the Naga National Council (NNC) movement,[37] a multiplicity of leadership figures intersected with a fragmented clan-based social structure, resulting in a fragmented, multi-actor political environment beset by both violent and non-violent factionalism. As such, negotiated settlements such as the 1975 Shillong Accord with the NNC and the 19-year-long negotiations with the NSCN-IM have produced bouts of political manoeuvring as rival organisations seek to outbid one another in claims over commitment to sovereignty and leadership of the "national movement". Similarly, in western Assam's Bodo-inhabited region, accords in 1993 and 2003 granting and then extending the contours of autonomous political power have intersected with the politics of the Bodo armed movement and Bodo identity politics to fragment and refract new forms of political violence,[38] leading to the proliferation of other armed groups seeking to carve out their own space in the state of insecurity.

Despite this, COIN theory views North-eastern armed groups through the lens of traditional Maoist insurgency theory, assuming that insurgent movements are well disciplined, socially and politically integrated insurgent groups with specific political and ideological aims. Indeed, several organisations in the region have openly flaunted their Maoist credentials; the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur is a salient example, while both the NSCN and ULFA have declared allegiance to similar models.

However, each of these are very different types of insurgent organisations rooted in different social and political contexts, meaning the Maoist-centric prism overlooks the politics governing how these groups actually function and sustain themselves. Indeed, recent studies suggest that different organisational and political bases may render armed groups more vulnerable to particular COIN approaches,[39] making it important to integrate the politics of insurgent movements into our theorisation of COIN.

For example, ULFA in Assam had during the 1980s established strong connections to local populations through a combination of appeals to anti-central government and anti-migrant sentiments. This meant that during Operation Bajrang, the first major COIN operation in Assam, the group was on multiple occasions able to evade security forces. The large military presence placed stress on local populations, driving them further into ULFA's hands. However, the group's somewhat loose recruitment policy rendered it vulnerable to financial incentives and initiatives by Indian intelligence agencies, while its Commander-in-Chief Paresh Barua dominated the group's organisational structure and alienated its senior political leadership. A combination of these factors ultimately led to a series of surrenders and inter-factional clashes that shattered the group's organisational unity by the early 2000s. Naga insurgent groups, again supposedly of a Maoist mould, have similarly employed

religious, socialist and nationalist appeals in bids to win key constituencies, but depend on the politics of tribe-based group membership, while revenue generation through extortion has emerged as another prominent source of power. Clearly, examining these groups through the prism of classical insurgency theory overlooks the range of sources from which groups can draw power and support.

With these diverse sources of power in mind, a closer examination of militant group activity in the Northeast suggests that they have exerted political and strategic agency in ways that do not necessarily align with classical insurgency theory. Militant groups have, for example, utilised and exploited ambiguous boundaries between state and society to forge a unique form of asymmetric insurgent politics that has challenged the political agency of the state. Bethany Lacina, in her critique of COIN theory has drawn attention to insurgent groups' utilisation of coercion to establish protection rackets that penetrate state structures, allowing active militant groups to pursue and enforce their stakes in political processes across Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh.[40]

Furthermore, such forms of politics have transcended the boundaries between ceasefire and non-ceasefire; not only, for example, has the NSCN-IM been able expand its cadre base in the 20 years since the 1997 ceasefire, but it has also sought to intensify its access to government funds, attempted to test ceasefire boundaries and by doing so alter the terms of formal negotiation,[41] while attempting to outmuscle rival armed groups and providing logistics, training and patronage to non-ceasefire organisations.[42] These interactions are fundamentally political in nature, since they seek to carve out, maintain and extend power and influence over key resource bases, in doing so blending techniques of criminal resource appropriation, sophisticated ideological justifications that demonstrate elements of population-centrism,[43] and deals cutting across dichotomous boundaries of war and peace. This represents a blurring of the boundaries between insurgency, peacebuilding and crime, pointing towards a need to build analytical tools to identify the centre of gravity, gauge the power of and effectively counter these hybrid forms of insurgency.

The politics of COIN and the utility of force

Indeed, conceptualising a wide range of insurgent interactions and situating them within the realm of politics under an expanded definition offers some interesting implications for the study of COIN operations in the Northeast. For example, there has traditionally existed a dichotomous relationship between the "political" and the "military" in Indian COIN thought. The Indian Army's 2006 Doctrine for Sub-Conventional Operations conceptualises operations as part of a process of creating necessary conditions for the civil government to undertake political processes,[44] effectively viewing force as the prerequisite to politics.

However, considering the use of military force in COIN operations as a process in which power relations are transformed, reshaped or reinforced offers a potentially rich framework for analysts to develop tools to understand how power is articulated, conveyed and negotiated vis-à-vis the insurgent group during these operations.

Large military operations in the Northeast such as Operation Bajrang (1990-1991), for example, were conducted against ULFA to degrade the group's strike capability by destroying its camps, before being followed by elections and attempts to negotiate with the group on a fresh electoral mandate. Continued pressure in the form of OperationRhino marked an escalation from the new government that continued to alter the power configurations by militarily weakening ULFA, allowing the government to extract surrenders from the group and unleashing divisions within the internal politics of ULFA. Similarly, ceasefire negotiations between the central government and the NSCN-IM in the mid-1990s began in the context of increasing kinetic pressure on the group's mid-level leadership; key kilonsers (ministers) were being apprehended by security forces almost as quickly as they could be replaced.[45] Viewing military operations with this lens sits well with the Indian Army's stated understanding of its role in COIN operations of bringing insurgents to the negotiating table, an oft-repeated phrase used to demonstrate the Indian Army's limited role in COIN. It should not, however, be considered a pre-political or apolitical process, since this is essentially a re-ordering process in which political leverage is sought to be obtained using force.

While military forces clearly need to be able to demonstrate that they are powerful enough to considerably affect the battlespace, the political forces opposing and constraining the utilisation of force are also important and require careful consideration. Large military operations such as OperationBajrang (1990) in Assam involved up to 30,000 troops in an intensified state of interaction with civilian populaces across the state. A large portion of these operations consisted of "cordon and search" operations, in which villages were surrounded, sealed off, individual houses searched and civilians rounded up. Even with the Indian Army's minimum force doctrine, such intense contact raised the possibility of miscalculation, error or abuse, considerably disrupted the everyday lives of civilians, with political costs as errors, abuses and miscalculations were exposed and politically exploited. In Manipur, this dynamic has been particularly acute. Cases of abuse and alleged extrajudicial killings during sustained, long-term military and paramilitary operations have generated a potent political and civil society backlash against state legislation such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) (1958), symbolised by the 16-year-long hunger strike held by Manipuri activist Irom Sharmila. This sustained political pressure prompted a Supreme Court inquiry into 1,528 cases of alleged "encounter" deaths on July 8, 2016, ruling

that deaths taking place in areas under AFSPA should not be immune to criminal investigation. This added legal pressure to existing political and civil society pressure on army operations. Clearly, there are therefore complex, competing social, political and legal demands that counterinsurgents must balance in the context of long-term COIN campaigns.

Surgical strikes, such as the operation conducted in response to an NSCN-Khaplang ambush in June 2015 are illustrative of the delicate cost-benefit balance associated with the use of force. Indeed, such operations may offer the army the opportunity to convey a demonstrative, retaliatory message to raise the costs of future attacks. However, they may also politically backfire in the event of collateral damage, or produce diplomatic tensions in the event of a transgression of international borders. Military operations can therefore be theoretically situated within a series of political considerations: on the one hand, such operations present opportunities to reconfigure the political space by either weakening the striking power of insurgent groups or by sending a clear message. On the other hand, they may present considerable political risks that may bring about constraints in the state's ability to utilise force in future.

Indian COIN theory deals with the issue of force by stressing the importance of the principle of "minimum force" as an ideal benchmark upon which COIN operations should hinge. However, as a tool of analysis in examining COIN operations, it does not provide us with a toolkit that allows us to situate and analyse variations in the intensity and scope of the employment of force in COIN. Consequently, this leads to ambiguous interpretations of "minimum force" in analyses of COIN that differ substantially. There is therefore a need to conduct further research in a bid to construct analytical tools that engage with the complex, competing considerations conditioning the quantum of force employed.

Conclusion

The idea that COIN is fundamentally a political phenomenon has been accepted by both practitioners and theorists worldwide. However, there has been very little engagement with what the "political" in COIN actually constitutes on a theoretical level. As such, analyses of COIN campaigns have often rested on somewhat vague perceptions of how "political" COIN is considered to be. These perceptions are rooted in COIN theory's ideal types, such as "hearts and minds" strategies, "good governance" and the pursuit of a "political solution", which have emerged as the benchmarks with which analysts judge success or failure in COIN campaigns. COIN theorists have contrasted the "political" in COIN with "military" approaches, resulting in a problematic dichotomy that overlooks and compresses the complex politics of case studies. In particular, this dichotomy overlooks the agency and multiplicity of both state and non-state actors that make up an insurgency environment, while

it also assumes that insurgents pursue an equally narrow, somewhat romanticised vision of politics rooted in theories of Maoist revolutionary warfare.

This paper has proposed that COIN theory is, at present, deficient in its theorisation of politics, and has called for a more nuanced understanding that captures the range of political interactions that take place in an insurgency environment. It has argued that insurgencies are not three-way competitions between states, insurgents and somewhat monolithic civilian populations, but that they in fact constitute ecosystems of political interaction, as different actors draw upon their access to power resources in a bid to secure core interests. Counterinsurgents represent one cluster of actors in this environment; while typically powerful and backed by state resources, they by no means operate in a vacuum and are forced to contend with a variety of powerful interest groups and actors.

The paper has sought to demonstrate the way in which COIN theory overlooks the complex politics of insurgency and COIN by drawing upon evidence from Northeast India. The successful resolution of the Mizo insurgency has been lauded as an example of the political approach in the Indian COIN literature, typically referring to the political maturity of the state. While this is true, the political strength of the MNF leadership and other non-state actors such as the church were equally pertinent factors in bringing about a comprehensive political settlement. The Naga and Bodo insurgencies meanwhile show that the politics of fragmentation and factionalism in armed groups and the communities they claim to represent reflect complex but under-theorised challenges.

It has then examined the political contexts within which armed groups in the Northeast operate, suggesting that our understanding of how insurgent groups operate is rooted in the Maoist theoretical tradition that overlook their range of interactions with the environment. ULFA and the NSCN and its breakaway factions, for example, have sustained themselves through often exclusionary ethnic appeals or appeals based on the intricacies of tribal politics, cognisant of the limitations of appealing to a monolithic notion of the “population” in politically-fragmented societies. The need for these groups to avoid counterinsurgent repression and fund their cadre bases has also led to the emergence of state-politician nexuses, extortion “turf” and market access as key power resources for these groups, dynamics that are too often disregarded as “criminal” in nature in spite of the power and influence that groups such as the NSCN-IM have secured through such methods.

Finally, the application of this expanded definition of politics to the use of military force in COIN operations revealed various nuances that could be further developed in the field of COIN studies. Counterinsurgents, through their use of force are effectively intervening into the politics and power relations of an insurgency-affected area. In Northeast

India, operations have ranged from massive army deployments, such as the large-scale deployments of Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino, to smaller-scale surgical or retaliatory operations. Altering the quantum of force to either roll back, contest or reinforce power relations is clearly a political phenomenon and should be considered as such by analysts.

Implications: towards a refinement of COIN theory

It may be tempting to then point towards the fact that since each case study of insurgency constitutes a unique political ecosystem, the development of theoretical and conceptual tools to allow for comparison with other cases is fruitless and that we should instead focus our efforts on case-specific studies. This somewhat pessimistic outlook would however prevent the drawing of key patterns, lessons and observations from other cases in the field – the very reason COIN doctrine and theory emerged during the Cold War. The study of COIN requires greater engagement with theory-building processes that acknowledge the uniqueness of case studies, but provide a toolkit for analysing the politics of these unique cases. The challenge therefore concerns the development of a middle-level theoretical approach.[46]

1. An agenda for mapping out actors in an insurgency/COIN environment

It is currently widely recognised that in any COIN campaign, the relationship between the state and non-state political actors represents the crucial battleground. However, as this paper has argued, the full extent of this relationship is rarely elaborated on in the literature on COIN, which has become somewhat bogged down within a narrow and increasingly outdated conceptualisation of the "political". Those who have critiqued this conceptualisation have often themselves been critical of the validity of COIN theory altogether, while others have been considered to favour a "military" approach. Polarised and lacking in nuance, these debates in CON theory have reached a stage of intellectual inertia.

An injection of independent academic theories, concepts and case studies is therefore required to reinvigorate contemporary COIN studies and better integrate the complexity of these political environments into the tools we employ to understand and analyse COIN. To achieve this, COIN studies would benefit substantially from greater interaction and engagement with the disciplines of sociology and political science, anthropology and area studies. Sociology offers a range of theoretical tools to understand how societies function that can allow analysts to build in models of societal resilience and change during conflict. Anthropology and area studies meanwhile offer rich, in-depth knowledge of politics, culture and society of a given case study that can help towards

moulding these theoretical frameworks and adapting them to local contexts.[47] The key challenge here, however, concerns how to integrate knowledge across practitioner and academic spheres while managing disciplinary cultures and principles of academic independence. This challenge was particularly evident during the "Human Terrain" project in Iraq and Afghanistan, in which counterinsurgents sought to utilise social scientists as a battlefield tool.[48] The programme's critical reception points towards the difficulty of simply bringing very different lines of work and thinking together, but these critiques should not discourage a much greater level of interaction between academics and practitioners. Efforts towards this goal can be made through institutionalised exchanges between, for example, universities, think tanks and practitioner institutions such as training centres that serve to reduce the barriers between academia and policymaking and expose both academics and practitioners to new ways of understanding insurgencies and efforts to counter them.

2. An agenda for mapping COIN interactions and their evolution over time

The range of interactions in COIN, which include the deployment of force, the negotiation of arrangements or bargains point towards the utility of Staniland's conceptualisation of COIN as "violent bargaining", essentially capturing its fundamentally political essence.[49] This understanding unlocks potential avenues for the study of COIN and its integration with other disciplines. One example could include further integration with the literature on international interventions, peacekeeping and peace enforcement. Concepts such as deterrence and compellence used to analyse the utility of force in varying contexts offer inroads into establishing the impact of on power relations in a given society, exploring how force alters power calculations and in doing so influences action.[50] The literature on policing also provides a useful means to situate how the use of coercive power relates to and reinforces political dynamics within societal order that, if integrated, offers significant promise for the study of COIN. The similarities between COIN and policing duties are clear, but the policing literature currently performs significantly better at connecting policing activities with the maintenance of the power relations that underpin societal order. Such connections are beginning to be made in the emerging literature on policing, post-conflict environments and "cops as counterinsurgents",[51] but should be encouraged, nurtured and drawn upon to build further nuance into the study of COIN.

At the practical level, an awareness of these political dynamics is nothing new. It would be inaccurate to suggest that Indian policymakers and practitioners are unaware of the complexities of COIN. The challenge for counterinsurgents at the fundamental level remains unchanged: to seek out a common denominator that navigates the complex relational politics of insurgency-affected regions. The settlements arrived at are far from

likely to satisfy every stakeholder; resolving current conflicts can revive old ones and give rise to new ones. However, the crucial challenge for the counterinsurgent is to alter the patterns in which these forms of politics are conducted in a way that facilitates their resolution through democratic electoral politics rather than violent insurgency.

What is currently lacking, therefore, is a theoretical codification of these insights in an improved synthesis between empirical and theoretical understanding. For this, the discipline requires theoretical inputs from across the practitioner spectrum while drawing upon a much wider range of academic inputs. COIN studies are currently viewed as a distinct discipline within a sub-set of international security studies, similar but distinct from related subjects such as the study of civil wars, peace research, terrorism studies and conflict resolution. While these other disciplines have emerged as dynamic, multidisciplinary endeavours with a range of key schools of thought across the social sciences, COIN studies' own interaction with other disciplines has been minimal. Encouraging this interaction is therefore an urgent priority.

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Endnotes

[1] Any student of COIN, whether practitioner or academic, becomes quickly familiarised with the following works: Robert Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam, Chatto & Windus, London, 1966; Frank Kitson, Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peace-Keeping, Faber & Faber, London, 1971; Roger Trinquier, Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency, Praeger Security International Westport, Connecticut, 2006; David Galula, Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice, Greenwood, London, 2006; John J. McCuen, The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War: The Strategy of Counter-Insurgency, Stackpole, London, 1966; Julian Paget, Counter Insurgency Campaigning, Faber & Faber, London:, 1967.

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German Army, 2010, p. 1, at https://info.publicintelligence.net/GermanyCOIN.pdf (Accessed June 10, 2016).

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[11] Robert Thompson, No. 1, p. 55.

[12] David Galula, No. 1, p. 63.

[13] David Kilcullen, 'Counter-Insurgency Redux', Survival, 48 (4), 2006, pp. 111–130 (p. 10).

[14] Rajesh Rajagopalan, No. 2, pp. 48–59.

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