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Should India Learn from the Russian Counterinsurgency Practice?



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INTRODUCTION

The Caucasus has been a contentious geo-political region at the border of Europe and Asia, flanked by the Black and Caspian Seas. However, the Region not only houses economically important minerals and energy resources, but it has also been the breeding ground of historically significant insurgencies.

North Caucasus was conquered by the erstwhile Tsarist Empire through a series of invasions from 1817 to 1864. In the process, the regions of Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan were annexed into Russia. The legacies of the nineteenth-century insurgent leaders Ghazi Mollah and Imam Shamil still reverberate in the forested zones and mountainous maze of the Caucasus. The present

Key Points

1. India's experience with insurgencies is worth a serious study.
2. 'Winning the Hearts and Minds' of the populace is the key aspect of India's counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine.
3. India must continue to use minimum force to avoid collateral damage.
4. Ruthlessly targeting the insurgent leadership and "fighting the guerilla like a guerilla" are also very much required.
5. There are certain aspects of the Russian COIN which would bolster the Indian COIN.

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Russian provinces of Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Chechnya continue to harbour sentiments of insurgency.

The fact of the matter is that with 10 million inhabitants, the North Caucasus Federal District of Russia is the smallest of eight federal districts (Cohen, 2014). Interestingly, some 40 ethnic groups reside in the Region.

In the turbulent 1990s, after the disintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union, the First Chechen War (1994/96) perhaps revealed a lack of combat readiness of the Russian military. However, Russian forces, later on, controlled the Second Chechen War of 1999/2000. Both the wars resulted in disproportionate casualties and internal displacement of the population. Though after the wars Moscow pumped in considerable funds to rebuild Chechnya, yet the grievances of the people still exist.

General Alexey Yermolov was a top Russian Commander in North Caucasus and had used harsh methods to conquer the Region and retain it under the control of the Tsarist Empire (Cohen, 2014). In the process, thousands of people were ethnically cleansed. As if following the legacy of Yermolov, the present-day Russian security officials maintain the broad authority to decide about the counter-terrorist operations, which allow them to work with few restrictions. Human rights groups allege killings, disappearances, torture, and punitive measures against the families of suspects by Russian security forces.

The 1990s of Russia, mired by the Chechnyan conflict, its troubled economy and the civil wars have had a lasting impact on the contemporary situation in the country (Laruelle, 2008). That period in a sense has disgraced the present-day democratic/

liberal parties—who allegedly failed to accept their culpability in the “hard power approach” of the Russian security forces in curbing insurgencies.

Sunni Islam is the dominant religion in North Caucasus. Moreover, Salafism was brought to the Region in the early post-Soviet years by students who studied abroad in Arab universities (Laub, 2005). Salafis demand the implementation of the Rule of the Sharia. Furthermore, the Region has become a potential area for spreading global jihadi violence. Al-Qaeda’s Ayman al-Zawahiri called the North Caucasus “one of three primary fronts in the war against the West”.⁵

North Caucasus is presently the hotbed of Islamist insurgency in Russia with thousands of jihadis having left the Region to fight for the Islamic State in West Asia. In fact, in April 2019, the Russian Police had to eliminate at least two suspected members of the Islamic State in North Caucasus. Furthermore, there were about eight incidents of violence amounting to around sixteen deaths in North Caucasus between January and April 2019.

RUSSIAN APPROACH TO COUNTERINSURGENCY

While evaluating Russia’s approach to counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns, Thomas Ricks at the *Foreign Policy* eulogizes the security-centric approach adopted by the Russians in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and even Lithuania (in the 1940s and the 1950s). Yuri Zhukov, points out that since 1917, the erstwhile Soviet Union and present Russia has faced the onslaught of 24 significant insurgencies (Zhukov, 2011). Zhukov further mentions that apart from the profound losses suffered in Afghanistan and the First Chechnyan War,

Russia has been able to successfully counter armed insurgencies.

However, one issue is noteworthy. Russian forces in Chechnya used massive firepower to destroy guerrilla forces and sanctuaries in the Second Chechen War, with over of 25,000 dead, mostly Chechen civilians. Russian forces destroyed armed Chechen resistance, with minimum concern for the civilian population. With this backdrop, the hard-power COIN approach could not prima-facie, be declared a success.

The methodology adopted by Moscow has been ham-handed: massive mobilisation of troops to outnumber the insurgents by sheer volume, coupled with the hard-power approach of using overwhelming firepower. No wonder that it was 1,00,000 troops which salvaged Russian pride in the Second Chechen War.

Further, to gather human intelligence, defections in insurgent ranks were skillfully encouraged. The support of the indigenous Chechen forces was vital in curbing the insurgency, opines Sean Renaud in his MA thesis to the Massey University. He further indicates that the unity of command worked critically well for the Russian forces in Chechnya (Sean, 2010).

Moreover, airpower was used to soften targets on the ground, and destroy and harass isolated insurgent groups. On top of these, Russian authorities were adept in manipulating the media outlets which helped to rein in public opinion.

In Chechnya (post-2001), the Russians effectively used more flexible groupings in the form of small unit operations. This enhanced the efficacy of the COIN operations. In addition to these, targeted killing of key insurgent commanders hastened the clearance of the decade-long insurgency.

ROLE OF CIVIL MILITIAS IN RUSSIAN COUNTERINSURGENCY

Another interesting aspect of the Russian COIN in the Caucasus was to develop local militias.

However, Russia's use of private military contractors dates back to the Livonian War in the sixteenth century. By 1610, the employment of foreign mercenaries in the Army gave way to a unique mixture of military contractors and guerilla fighters. The outcome was the "People's Militia" which threw out the Polish forces from Moscow in 1612 and founded the Romanov Dynasty (Sukhankin, 2019).

The legacy of People's Militia or Civil Militia has been carried forward into the Soviet regime too with the development of the irregular forces termed SPETSNAZ in 1957. Russia's use of SPETSNAZ evolved since its involvement in Georgia in 2008. In Crimea and eastern Ukraine, SPETSNAZ operated clandestinely, with their faces masked.

The conflict in Ukraine in 2013/14 also saw the use of Special Forces. Russia recruits SPETSNAZ agents from among the local populations within target countries. A contingent of Russia's irregular/expeditionary forces has even been deployed in the present imbroglio in Syria.

In a December 2010 report in Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst (CACA), Kevin Leahy informs that the then Dagestan's President Magomedov had set forth a proposal to oversee volunteer militias, comprised native Dagestanis, to tackle the rebellion.

Similar COIN strategy, notes Leahy, had been used, post-2001, in neighbouring Chechnya. The strategy in Chechnya involved four ethno-battalions, each comprised almost entirely of ethnic Chechens, undertaking COIN operations against their rebellious

countrymen with assistance from the Russian Military and Russian Special Forces.

In no way employing locals in the fight against ethnic insurgents could be seen as unethical and barbaric. According to Lieutenant Colonel Robert M. Cassidy of the US Army, during the Indian wars of the nineteenth century, the American Army's most skilled fighter, General George Crook “developed the tactic of inserting small teams from friendly Apache tribes into insurgent Apache groups so as to neutralize and psychologically unhinge them and to sap their will” (Cassidy, 2004).

Interestingly, Tomas Rid in an expository article writes⁹ that in the 1830s, the French conquerors of North Africa adapted an old practice of pre-Islamic Bedouin societies—the *ghazyra* or raid—to nab the local insurgents (Rid, 2010). That is, a local method was employed to defeat the locals.

Interestingly, if one looks at the historical events, what Russian forces have achieved is suppression of violence by the overwhelming use of hard power. On the face of it, that may not be a recommended option in the Indian context. However, an entire Russian COIN strategy cannot be ignored either.

THE PROS AND CONS OF THE RUSSIAN COUNTERINSURGENCY STRATEGY

According to Human Rights Watch, Russia's COIN tactics include, among other repressive measures, targeted killings, torture, disappearances, and extra-judicial executions.

The brutalisation of the population, solely focusing on the security-centric approach and relegating to dungeons, the winning hearts and minds (WHAM)

concept of the British-American COIN, did turn advantageous for the Russians.

Nevertheless, rampant use of force, especially the *zachistki*—a Russian term for security sweeps, designed to kill or capture terrorists and their supporters—have made the mountainous landscape of the Caucasus more fertile in terms of recruitment for the guerrillas. Such sweeps more often than not coerce the disgruntled youth “to go to the forest”, i.e. join the insurgency.

However, Renaud expresses serious doubts regarding the efficacy of security-centric COIN in larger geographical areas than Chechnya, Dagestan or Ingushetia or for larger populations.

Even the most optimistic supporter of Russian COIN, Mark Kramer of Harvard, raises some important problems for the Russians (The Perils of Counterinsurgency, Mark Kramer, 2005). First, a seemingly endless, unwinnable war was captured through a massive deployment of force in Chechnya. If the number of armed assailants increases, then to keep an insurgent-troop ratio of 1:50 may not be feasible. For instance, in the case of the Indian Maoists, who can recruit around 5,000 youth and adolescent girls from a single district in India, the security-centric approach becomes unrealisable.

Second, insurgents in the Caucasus aim soft targets like the civilian population in Moscow and other capital cities. Furthermore, the Caucasian insurgents use suicide bombers and unleash a deadly mine war. In fact, on an average, 20 mines per day come in the way of the Russian troops. The Russian security forces suffer psychological setbacks while countering ambushes. To deal with the guerrillas in the hilly tracts, the forces demand more sophisticated equipment.

Third, Kramer argues that the root causes of insurgency in the Caucasus turn out to be inept administration and blatant corruption. Hence, a prolonged security-centric COIN will “spawn public restiveness and cynicism”.

Probably such inherent criticisms of the Russian COIN culture made Vladimir Putin announce, in early 2011, to invest US\$13.4 billion in 37 new projects over the next decade in the volatile North Caucasus region. Putin himself has noted, reports Mikhail Alexseev, that a lack of gainful employment (*nesostoyatel'nost*) has increased the pool of young people in the North Caucasus willing to join the predominantly jihadist insurgency.

At the same time, however, the Russians have proceeded with targeted killings and incarcerations (TK-TI). Loss of leadership created vacancies in key top positions within the rebel organisations. Referring to COIN campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal of the US Army doesn't fail to mention the importance of strikes on “high-value targets” in his memoir. Democracies like Israel, USA, and the UK have used the tool of targeted killings against insurgents.

In a 2015 paper, Daniel Byman asserts that “authoritarian governments do counterinsurgency wrong. They slaughter civilians, politicize their militaries, maintain a discriminatory political system, and win neither hearts nor the minds” (Byman, 2015).

Yet, he avers that authoritarian regimes often succeed in subduing insurgents with a track record that is roughly comparable to that of democratic regimes. Russia, for example, has confronted over 20 insurgencies in the twentieth century and suppressed the vast majority of them successfully, writes Byman, 2015.

WHAT CAN INDIA LEARN?

While attempting to describe the Indian COIN doctrine, Rajesh Rajagopalan writes as follows:

...the Indian experience with insurgencies is worth serious study and perhaps emulation. India has not only managed to keep under control a large number of rebellions, but has managed to do so without recourse to the kind of methods that has recently been referred to as the ‘strategy of barbarism’... (Rajagopalan, 2009).

Further, the Indian Army's doctrine on sub-conventional warfare published in December 2006 stresses on the following:

Winning of the hearts and minds of the populace is paramount to the success of sub-conventional operations and should be undertaken through deeds and by ‘walking the talk.’ This reiterates the importance of people-friendly operations (Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defence, 2006).

Role of Security Forces is to suppress the violence and create conditions for the State to build capacity for peace building. According to Edward Luttwak, “Police states or militarisation of state cannot regulate a society” (Luttwak, 2007). Legitimate governance is inherently stable, the societal support it engenders allows it to adequately manage the internal problems for collective well-being. Conversely, governance that is not legitimate is inherently unstable and population ceases to obey it. In the backdrop of this, the application of hard power as part of COIN strategy is the absence of levers to deal with societal anger and disaffection of population with the State.



Though COIN principles of one country may not have universal applicability, still effective lessons could be derived through deductive reasoning from the Russian case study in the Caucasus. Though COIN tactics are locale-specific and culture-centric, certain broad contours nevertheless could be drawn for the Indian scenario. These are as follows:

1. India is mostly concerned with three major insurgencies, viz., in the North-East, Kashmir, and the Maoist-Left Wing Extremism. The three cases have different historical, cultural, and political undertones. India has dealt with these keeping in mind their regional and ethnic specificities, within the overall ambit of the legalities imposed by the judicature.
2. India has effectively implemented the population-centric WHAM approach in Kashmir. After a period of “meeting the gun with the gun”, the North-East is being dealt with through engagement with the stakeholders, redressal of grievances, reconciliation, and reintegration of disaffected section of the society of the States.
3. It would be pragmatic enough if India proceeds with the WHAM-approach coalesced with the targeted approach against the top leadership as a viable mode of tackling the Maoist insurgency. Human intelligence could be best gathered in a WHAM-based COIN and it is the most effective parameter to nab the top leaders of the left-ultras. To decapitate the insurgency—by removing the top bosses and drying up the fertile recruitment grounds for the rebels—the WHAM-based COIN coupled with the targeted approach has to be followed meticulously.
4. India must continue to use minimum force to avoid collateral damage and use of heavy calibre weapons and aerial platforms should remain prohibited as weapons of choice. Presently, Indian Air Force supplements the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) in terms of logistics in the irregular warfare against the Maoists. That seems to be fair enough at this point.
5. A unified command structure precipitated success for Russia in Chechnya. India badly needs this as far as the Maoist insurgency straddling over several States is concerned. Operational coherence could be achieved with a unity of purpose between the Union Home Ministry and the affected State governments.
6. Lack of modern ammunition and poor facilities had severely marred the efficiency of the Russian forces. Similar problem zones exist in India. Such logistical obstacles need to be eradicated. Cost-effective anti-IED techniques must be incorporated. Standard Operating Procedures needs to be followed at all levels of the command structure to avoid ambushes.
7. Small operational mobile units, viz., of the level of platoons, must fight the “guerrilla like a guerrilla”. The Russians have successfully practiced it. However, in the Indian case, the CAPFs have to do the job which the Russian Red Army had done on most occasions.
8. Equally important is the aspect of civil militias used in the Russian COIN. However, the legitimisation of the same is required in the Indian context, especially when Civil Militia like the Salwa Judum in the Maoist hotbed of Chhattisgarh has been banned by the Apex Court. Moreover, the Ikhwan Militia in Kashmir did not turn out to be fruitful in the long run. Civil Militias act as force multipliers. The knowledge

of terrain, culture, basic instincts, and habits of insurgents can be understood better by the locals. However, excesses by unregulated armed cadres are a possibility.

There is a need to train, equip, and employ local youths according to their potential for intelligence operations. In this regard, Territorial Army Soldiers and Special Police Officers in Chattisgarh have done a commendable job.

At a tactical level, a much feasible option could be deploying local ethnic youths as Police Constables. Further, more locals ought to be encouraged to join the Central Armed Police Forces. It suffices three purposes. One, this reduces the ambience of unemployment. Two, it helps in gathering viable ground intelligence. And three, it sucks the water for the guerrilla fish as one youth with job means about 4 to 5 satisfied local people who would deter others in joining the insurgency.

India has been doing this in the recent past by employing ex-Maoists/locals in the constabulary/commando units (Ashna Kumar, 2019). Within the paradigm of legalities in India, this is the best possible solution and reflection of the Civil Militia concept.

In sum, the key to long-term peace in India has to be a holistic combination of good governance, weeding out corruption, and empowering the grassroots. In that direction, the present doctrinal stance of India is good enough. However, to expedite the process of WHAM based COIN, India can always extract the page of the Russian COIN which mentions the policy of “iron fist” insofar as the operational aspects are concerned. Nothing extra-judicial can be settled for in the Indian context. Nevertheless, ruthlessly targeting the insurgent leadership, fighting the guerilla like a

guerilla, following a unified command structure, and devising [a] legal framework to absorb local youths into counterinsurgency forces are the aspects from the Russian COIN which would bolster the Indian COIN.

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