

THOUGHTS ON THE OPERATIONS OF MODERN GUERRILLAS

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The operations conducted by modern guerrilla movements are an expression of the irregular armed confrontation, giving substance to a complex phenomenon, of an unconventional nature. Modern guerrillas operate in a particular manner that nullify the advantages of regular forces and allows for the survival and development of the movement. Their operations are based on assumptions that time never ends, sizing space is not of a great importance, and the final objective is not to annihilate the enemy but to degrade its fighting will. Guerrilla operations mean clandestine posture and innovative approach. They are conducted with the support of the people and represent a hidden power, whose effects cannot be easily quantified.

Keywords: *unconventional war; guerrilla warfare; operations; insurgency; terrorism.*

The idea of studying the modern guerrillas' operations came to our mind years ago, as we understood their real importance for the contemporary security environment. In order to have a good analysis, we conducted this scientific endeavour bearing in mind the possible parallel that exists between conventional and unconventional wars.

The conventional/classic armed conflict is a war that opposes state armies, following conventions and abiding by rules and customs. It is a violent confrontation between legitimate, recognized armies, known also as "regular warfare"! In this respect, Andre Beaufre considered that "classical warfare exploits the technical dimensions and geographical features of states, being the struggle of a specialized branch of society."¹

It is obvious that the unconventional war does not abide by conventions, being a genuine conflict, waged by other belligerent entities, under different forms of manifestation. The unconventional warfare is also closely related to

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¹ Andre Beaufre, *La guerre revolutionnaire*, Paris, Fayard, 1972, p. 5.

asymmetric/irregular warfare. Using the American publications as references, we present their definition of "unconventional warfare":

a. a 1992 version: "A broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations, normally of long duration, predominantly conducted by indigenous or surrogate forces who are organized, trained, equipped, supported and directed in varying degrees by an external source. It includes guerrilla warfare, and other direct offensive, low visibility, covert, or clandestine operations, as well as the indirect activities of subversion, sabotage, intelligence activities, and evasion and escape."²

b. a 2011 version: "Activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area."³

A peculiarity of the unconventional warfare is that political and economic aspects of the struggle are of a high importance, differing from the conventional warfare which stands for an almost pure military confrontation. We have chosen to analyse guerrilla operations, because guerrilla warfare is an important component of unconventional/irregular/asymmetric warfare.

The modern military theorists have begun writing about this subject since the second half of the 19th century. Carl von Clausewitz, Henri Jomini, T.E. Lawrence and Liddell Hart wrote about guerrilla warfare as partisan wars. Other theorists like Mao Tse-tung, Vo Nguyen Giap, Andre Beaufre, Che Guevarra, Carlos Marighella and Robert Taber viewed guerrilla warfare as a reference for revolutionary wars/classical insurgencies, while contemporary authors like Bard O'Neil and Steven Metz see it as a tool of modern insurgencies.

How do modern guerrillas express themselves?

In order to get an answer, we have to think about the typology and purposes of their operations. They act in accordance with a specific approach that gives them a temporary advantage and preserves their operational potential. From a military view, guerrilla warfare "is a form of warfare in which small, lightly armed groups use mobile tactics against a stronger opponent. Guerrillas employ small-scale attacks, such as ambushes and raids, to harass their enemy rather than to win a decisive victory in battle."⁴

² *Joint Publication (JP) 3-05, Doctrine for Joint Special Operations*, The Joint Staff, Washington DC, October 28, 1992, p. GL-22.

³ *Joint Publication (JP) 3-05*, April 18, 2011, p. II-9.

⁴ U.S. Government, *Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency*, 2012, p. 1 at <http://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=713599>

Here are the main types of guerrilla operations/activities:

- a. Intelligence collection activities (enemy situation, disposition, strength, intentions; ongoing and planned political, social and economic activities; security systems at governmental buildings, police stations, military depots, communication hubs, check points, etc);
- b. Propaganda in local communities and proselytism over individual soldiers and civil employees of the opponent;
- c. Psychological operations at local, national and international level, using legal and pirate media and the cyberspace;
- d. Self-sustainment/protection/survival activities, including reception/distribution of foreign aid and entrance on foreign soil in border areas, or on friendly ethnical/tribal areas;
- e. Sabotages and subversion;
- f. "Hit and run" operations against the political, economic and military objectives of the opponent (ambushes, raids, close range assaults, infiltrations and attacks from the interior, rocket attacks, mortar attacks, demolitions, improvised explosive device – IED attacks, vehicle-born IED attacks, road mine attacks, etc);
- g. Terrorist actions as a tactical tool of insurgent movements (kidnappings and assassinations of opponent's political and military leaders, bomb attacks, suicide attacks, arson on government's/opponent's important objectives etc.).

After an ample investigation of contemporary conflicts, we have come to the conclusion that the purposes of guerrilla operations are:

- a. to support the regular forces of the national Armed Forces, acting on the occupied territory (see Russian partisans in World War II);
- b. to diminish the operational potential of an invading army/to support the regular army of an allied state which conducts operations against an enemy on the national territory, when the national regular army capitulated, disintegrated or was disbanded (see French resistance in World War II);
- c. to support the regular forces of a different state, which operates on the national territory, against national governmental army, perceived as the enemy of the people (see South Vietnamese guerrillas that supported North Vietnamese regular forces against South Vietnamese forces, 1959-1975);
- d. to liberate a territory from foreign occupation, or produce a social revolution by insurrectional movements, based on the mobilization of rural masses (see Mao Tse-tung in China, 1937-1945);
- e. to produce a social revolution by means of a military focus insurgency (see the Cuban revolution, put on paper as a theory by Ernesto Che Guevara);

- f. to weaken a government/force negotiations and obtain rights/material advantages/concessions, for a social group/minority (see Ivory Coast, Iraq);
- g. to impose religious teachings/customs/beliefs (Pakistan, Afghanistan);
- k. to prepare a revolution (Nepal, India);
- i. to overthrow a political regime perceived as totalitarian, corrupt or incompetent and install a new one (Uganda, Libya, D.R.Congo etc.);
- j. to remove from power a tribal/ethnic based regime and replace it with a regime representing another tribe/ethnic group (some states in Africa);
- k. to get autonomy for a territory or get independence and separate (see Chechnya, Kosovo);
- l. to control and exploit natural resources in a geographical area (Sierra Leone, D.R.Congo), or to nestle organized crime, in order to get financial resources (Columbia, Mexico, Nigeria, etc).

The influence of space, time and population on guerrilla operations

It is interesting to understand that guerrillas use space, time and population in a certain manner, both to survive and operate. They try to counter the superior military potential of an opponent by relying on local people, moving around to avoid destruction or capture, and surviving for a long time. If they operate on a small space/territory the survival is more important than the rhythm of operations. Guerrillas are forced to make extensive preparations, split into small cells and limit their operational footprint; usually they do not have enough room to maneuver, strike targets and withdraw to safe heavens.

A large territory is an important advantage for guerrillas who have better possibilities to conduct propaganda, establish bases and hideouts close in and attack enemy objectives with larger formations, with an increased rate of survival. An extended space creates problems for counter-guerrilla forces that had to split their troops in order to search for and engage guerrilla formations. At the same time, a large space allows for a multitude of fake and real guerrilla attacks and prevents an effective response of the opponent.

It is difficult to control a large territory, infested with guerrilla formations; regular forces have to provide perimeter, convoy and spot security, and to patrol and maintain reaction forces on a permanent basis. A piecemeal employment of regular forces might lead to a reduced operational capability, a complex logistical system with an increased rate of consumption, a reduced efficiency of the command and control system.

As we have seen, space is important for guerrillas, but time is their best ally! During a protracted, low intensity struggle, the employment of assets by guerrillas “will force the opponent to make a bigger effort, which

cannot be sustained for a long time.”⁵ They are not pressed to act in a certain amount of time, so they wait for proper conditions, before acting. Smart guerrillas delay the development of subsequent phases, to wear down the enemy and allow time for strengthening own forces. Time never ends, but resources do!

Regular forces of the opponent seek a quick decision, because they are not tailored and trained to drag on a stalemate, but to concentrate, maneuver and apply decisive force in order to annihilate the bulk of enemy troops. Clausewitz's model asks for a decisive employment of military power, in order to achieve the political goal of the war, in a short time. For a modern regular army time means a multitude of resources!

What about local population? We rally to the opinions of other authors who underline that local population has an essential influence on guerrilla operations and has to be approached in a holistic manner. Guerrilla formations spring up from local communities and develop with the support of local communities. Local communities are the breeding ground of a guerrilla movement, its backbone and blood. People represent the basis for the intelligence and support systems of guerrilla formations, and the pool of human resources from which fighters are selected or convinced to join.

Gaining the support of local people is a must for a successful guerrilla movement. If a local community has many grievances, being unhappy with a social, economic or political situation, there are good chances for a guerrilla movement to receive support. Using culture and religion as a tool is another method used by guerrillas. Some movements take advantage of the psychological profile of a certain group, influencing it in a desired way. They revive some territorial or natural resources disputes, social customs, or religious beliefs in order to embed a new spirit into people's hearts and make them active supporters.

Guerrilla movements develop in both rural and urban areas. Rural areas were the fiefdoms of modern guerrilla movements of the 20th century. Nowadays, there are still areas in some regions of the world, that offer good conditions for the establishment of local movements, due to peculiar terrain features and existence of social relations based on ethnical origins, religious ties and common economic interests. Rural areas in undeveloped countries suffer from a lack of large investments and economic enterprises, and are confronted with high unemployment, poor education and health care. Under these circumstances charismatic figures from the community can ignite rebellions, by steaming up people's support and enrolling the youth.

⁵ General A. Beaufre, *Introducere în strategii. Strategia acțiunii*, Military Press, Bucharest, 1974, p. 14.

The technological advance of the last decades is a disadvantage for rural guerrillas, because the opponent might have a better mobility and increased surveillance capabilities. They might be forced to live as small cells, dispersed over slow go or no go terrain, and to limit the scale of their operations.

Let's have a look at urban guerrillas! We think the accentuated industrialization and urbanization of the contemporary era, coupled with an unbalanced access to basic resources, have decreased the importance of rural areas and increased the importance of urban areas. As a result, guerrilla movements have greater chances to ignite, survive and develop in cities. Previous conflicts have shown us that a guerrilla movement can be successful, in places where people's support and direct involvement are maximized. It is hard to believe a rural rebellion in a sparsely populated region might have the magnitude of an urban insurrection, supported by the population of a big city.

In urban areas people can bring a greater contribution to guerrillas' efforts, mixing nonviolent actions with violent operations, over a crowded space, where regular forces are not in advantage. Regular forces might have modern surveillance and communication equipment, Special Forces, improved airmobile and riverine capabilities; however, they still have big problems in managing urban rebellions. We conclude that no matter of a rural or urban environment, without people's support a guerrilla movement cannot develop and has big chances of extinction.

Regular forces versus guerrilla formations

A short analysis will show essential differences that play a decisive role in the outcome of a guerrilla – counter guerrilla war. The campaigns/operations of regular/conventional armies look to detect, engage and annihilate the main forces of the enemy by a mass employment of maneuver and firepower, supported by a complex logistic system; they also aim at controlling the space of engagement.

We agree that conventional campaigns have clear objectives, but depend on time and space, and have operational patterns and limits. Time is always an important and pressing factor; operational planning, force generation, resources allocation and conduct of operations are intimately related to time. Area of operations as space of engagement is well established, in a direct relation to the type, size, organization of forces and their mission. Operations are complex, demanding a continuous planning and coordination of many elements that have been given particular tasks.

When talking about sustainment, it is obvious that human and material resources are needed in large quantities and their allocation takes in account

the missions of battle groups. The logistic support depends on the quality and control of existing territorial infrastructure. It is expected that battle groups achieve results that justify the expenditures. There is a permanent need for personnel trained in military occupational jobs of regular units, casualties being a constant presence of every armed conflict; human resources cannot be prepared and replaced overnight.

More than that, battle disposition is tailored for power projection and concentration of effects, but the elements have tactical limits and leave a clear footprint, easy to identify and locate. Finally, the multitude of variables that belong to such a system creates a high level of entropy.

On the contrary, guerrilla operations take in account that time never ends and sizing space is not of a great importance. Their objective is not to annihilate the enemy but to degrade its fighting will, by a relentless psychological harassment of its forces, combined with surprise attacks on weak targets, while maintaining guerrillas' operational potential. Guerrillas do not establish huge bases, do not need a complex logistic system, do not conduct large scale operations with big quantities of forces and equipment, and do not need an intensive training.

These are in our opinion, *the advantages of guerrilla formations*:

- An extended freedom of action; they strike where they want, when they want, taking into consideration their tactical capabilities and the strength of the target;
- There are no time limits; operations take place when guerrillas muster up enough combat power, the security situation is good and there are high chances of survival for the own forces;
- A simple planning; effective guerrillas choose carefully their future targets and design simple plans to close with and engage them, avoiding multiple-phase approaches and complex coordination;
- A simple execution, with swift maneuvers and limited fire support.

On the other hand, here are *the disadvantages of guerrilla formations*:

- A reduced mobility of large formations which can affect their operational performance; they might fail to deliver important blows on the enemy, due to the inability to concentrate rapidly and operate far from the permanent/ temporary bases;
- A lack of striking assets; they might use accurate intelligence and close with the target undetected, but fail to achieve decisive results because are unable to deliver the required amount of firepower;
- A limited training. Guerrilla fighters originate mainly from civilians of a diverse professional ground, having a limited

knowledge of military affairs. As a result, they have to refrain from complex tactical tasks and perform only simple operations;

- A great reliance on local population for safe heavens, hideouts, subsistence, which have to be balanced with the existence of a potential for treason.

We think *the results of a comparative analysis between conventional and unconventional*, applied to the relation between regular forces and guerrilla formations make us underline that:

a. A conventional military approach is directly related to the legitimacy of the political conflict and the subsequent military campaigns. The powerful actors choose the conventional way, because it preaches direct operations that produce decisive results in a short time;

b. There is a tendency of regular forces to slip towards a classic approach, and seek a quick decision, consisting in massive engagement that aims to neutralize or annihilate the enemy. This is a normal pattern, taking in consideration that regular forces receive a lot of training on classic operations, which are the essence of conventional warfare. They train to act following specific rules and patterns and expect the enemy to counter using the same set of techniques and procedures, meaning the same tactics;

c. Regular forces cannot disappear without a trace; they display footprints of a material and symbolic nature that can be easily monitored, and their tactical movements can be anticipated;

d. Regular forces mean an open power which is displayed permanently, measurable in time and space in terms of capacities and capabilities;

e. Weak forces avoid decisive confrontation in order to survive. Guerrilla movements usually represent weak military forces that display a limited operational expression in classical terms. However they are able to strike and survive, being supported by local people and living a clandestine life;

f. Guerrilla forces employ irregular patterns and procedures that nullify the military superiority of the regular armies. They do not control the terrain but use it in their favor. They do not rely on tactical repetition, but on tactical innovation;

g. Guerrilla forces mean a hidden power, because their operational capability cannot be easily quantified. The way guerrilla movements express themselves in a military way depend on the geographical location, historical roots, economic development, level of education and cultural characteristics of human communities living in a certain region;

As a whole, there are four basic requirements, important for guerrilla formations: a reason to fight for, because any guerrilla movement needs a cause and ignites as the only way of changing something that brought oppression,

injustice, sufferings, fear; a covert or open support from population, because due to their clandestine posture, guerrillas need a lot of aid, in order to survive, develop and conduct operations; a innovative tactical approach, based on mobility over a well known terrain, deception, surprise and rapid actions; temporary and permanent bases, where the core of the movement conducts planning, indoctrination and training, or builds material support for a later stage.

We conclude this analysis by underlining that guerrilla operations are a way of expression, adopted by the irregular forces against their opponents. This operational approach takes advantage of asymmetry as the prevalent nature of many contemporary conflicts. That's why modern guerrilla operations are based on doctrines, concepts, and flexible norms that display different organizational structures and tactical patterns. Guerrillas place a strategic importance on will and time in order to deny the opponent's superiority in military means and technology, and impose heavy costs on him. Guerrilla operations have a great potential, against traditionally organized and employed regular forces.

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