

THE US AND FRENCH COIN EXPERIENCES IN VIETNAM AND ALGERIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Blessing J. Edet, PhD

Department of History and International Studies
University of Uyo, Nigeria
blessingjedet@uniuyo.edu.ng

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Anietie H.E. Inyang

Associate Professor
Department of History and International Studies
University of Uyo, Nigeria

Abstract

This study analyzes, in comparative and historical context, international events as they concern the US and French approaches to counter-insurgency (COIN) in Algeria and Vietnam. While the two super-powers embraced a whole gamut of counter-insurgency experiences, this study is selective in discussing the major differences and similarities that distinguished their approaches to COIN in both Algeria and Vietnam. Leaning on the basic principles and foundations of international studies, continuity and changes that occurred over time in respective COIN operations and experiences have been identified. While indices bordering on: ‘colonial origins’, ‘adoption of familiar COIN principles’, and ‘war of national resistance’, have been put forward as causal explanation for similarities in the COIN operations, the US and French COINs, however, differed in the application of the COIN principles. The later determined the overall success and failure of the COIN operations in Vietnam and Algeria.

Keywords: (Insurgency, Counter-Insurgency, National Resistance, COIN Principles, COIN Operations)

Introduction

During the post-World War and the Cold War periods, passive resistance in Africa and South-east Asia against indigenous regimes and external forces appeared to have awakened from the slumber by orchestrating events of the World Wars. The rapidly changing circumstances of these periods saw the escalation of internal resistance in these regions into mutating phenomenon of insurgency and violent extreme organizations (VEO) in the years that followed. Most debates on the causes of insurgency worldwide tend to focus on four paradigms: the deprived actor, the rational actor, the state actor and the external actor. The argument along these paradigms was that frustration due to deprivation by the state and external actors were the major causes of insurgency. Counterinsurgency (COIN), a response to insurgencies by state actors’ only continued a holiday of, at least, a negative peace proportions, and then neutralize insurgencies. While flurries of approaches have been adopted by state actors to counter insurgencies around the world, the increase in this phenomenon clearly shows that experiences of past COINs are either uncharted, overlooked or not adequately understood and implemented in dealing with the surge. The US, for example, for most of the 20th century, approached COIN using conventional war strategies and tactics against COIN principles (Glover, 2008, p.3). COIN, over time, has given birth to doctrines deployed to

deal with mutating nature of insurgency. The study will attempt to examine the specific relationship between COIN operations and COIN principles in a comparative context of the US and French COIN experiences in Vietnam and Algeria. The essay argues that the success and failure of COIN in these cases was a reflection of the extent of the application of COIN principles.

Methods

The idea of methodology in historical studies is to answer the ‘how’ question in the course of carrying out a study. In providing a methodology for the US and French counter-insurgencies in Vietnam and Algeria, respectively, the study relied on a combination of complementary methods which included content analysis of extant literature on counter-insurgency, comparative study, historical investigation and qualitative analysis of available data on the US/French approaches to counter-insurgencies. The content and qualitative analysis involved the collection of text information from books, book chapters, articles, electronic sources, historical documents, interviews and informal conversations. Unlike in the social science methodology, historical studies, more often than not, rely on recorded information than the collection of data from people (ISU, 2017).

Texts for the content analysis were also drawn from primary sources on the doctrinal manual of the US military such as The United States Department of the Army, The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual: U.S. Army Field Manual No. 3-24(2007) and Center of Military History United States Army’s publication, “U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1860-1941, (2004). The study was supplemented with information from the internet and synthesized to provide a comparative picture of similarities and differences in US and French counter-insurgencies in Vietnam and Algeria, respectively.

Approaches to COIN Operations

COIN operations have featured prominently in debates, books and articles in the last two decades. Mainstream slants to COIN approaches around the world tend to nestle on the issues of conventional and unconventional techniques (Birtle, 2004), traditional column and multiple columns methods (Glover, 2008), Psychological Warfare or *Actionné Psychologique*, or PSYOPS (Norton, 2007), information warfare (Watson, 2008); Roger Trinquier principles (Trinquier, 1964), direct and indirect military intervention (Burgess, 2019); nation building and pacification (Harnessy, 2020), the Razia tactic (Rid, 2010) Grid Operation or *quadrillage and rattissage* (Tachikawa, 2017, p.68), the winning of heart and mind (Fearon and Laitin, 2003). While the mainstream approaches portray distinctiveness on the bases of policy, strategic, operational, tactical, cultural, environmental and technical levels of analysis, these issues weave effortlessly into conventional and non-conventional approaches to COIN. The conventional approach to COIN (CACOIN) line of thought highlights COIN operations based on common principles while the non-conventional approach (N-CACOIN) downplays the conventional and sometimes emphasize extremes measures like torture of detainees and mass roundups of suspected insurgents (Cohen, 2019, p.49). According to Hixson (2008, p.7), both approaches were deployed in the Algeria and Vietnam by France and the US respectively highlighting parallels in the two cases.

Moreover, COIN is not just a response to insurgency but an attempt to counter revolutionary campaigns that thrives on definable frameworks and doctrines (Watson, 2007). In fact, recent insurgent activities around the world appears to assume more complex and dynamic patterns aided by revolution in the ICT and difficult-to-track criminal networks that are going transnational. Whether in the case of Algeria in Africa or Vietnam in Southeast Asia, Fearon and Laitin (2003) have argued that insurgency represent a

movement that is often well-organized and, sometimes, sufficiently financed. In the case of Algeria and Vietnam, insurgents employed guerrilla warfare marked by shooting, bombing and use of unconventional acts that were increasingly difficult for the dyads. To this end, unconventional practices of insurgents against COIN operations remains an elusive variable that is yet to gain sustained tenancy within the tapestry of COIN doctrine (Glover, 2008). While this gap presents a strong point for academic contention, the focus here on the dimension of conventional COIN principles as they affected the COIN operations in Algeria and Vietnam. COIN principles are derived from past insurgences containing some guideposts for forces engaged in counterinsurgency operations. According to the US Army Field Manual (2006, 3-24), they include military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological and civic actions taken by a government to subdue insurgency.

Similarities in the US and French Counterinsurgencies in Vietnam and Algeria

The US and French counterinsurgency identify certain historical COIN context traceable to insurgences in Algeria and Vietnam (Shurkin, 2021, p.53). The US counterinsurgency in Vietnam is often viewed as a collective reaction to the problems that came to bear on the communist/capitalist ideological wars during the Cold War era (Shurkin, 2021, p.38). The leading protagonists- the US and the USSR were determined to domicile and consolidate their ideologies in friendly states around the world. Vietnam was one of the flashpoints. However, the remote cause to the course of armed conflict between the Northern and Southern Vietnam had colonial origins in which the French battled to maintain colonial dominance over Ho Chi Minh's independent movement (Watson, 2007). This problem continued and found an escalating ground in the 1960s when the battle line was drawn between North Vietnam represented by the Communist insurgents known as National Liberation Front (NFL) and the Republic of Vietnam in South represented by the US and its allied forces. The NFL in the North fought and resisted attempts by the US controlled South Vietnam to impose a democratic government on the communist north. The withdrawal of US forces on January 27, 1973, after a decade of unsuccessful COIN operations against the NFL, paved way for the unification of the South under communism in 1976 after the Paris Peace Accord of January 27, 1973.

The French COIN in Algeria aptly qualifies for a paradox. While the French were the military victors having apparently subdued the Algerian insurgents in what it called "operations to maintain order (*opérations de maintien de l'ordre*), the Evian Accords of 1962 changed the narrative with the recognition of Algeria's independence from France. Although France appeared the loser and Algeria the winner, the French COIN in Algeria is regarded in most quarters as a successful example of counterinsurgency operations (Innes-Robbins, 2016, p.128). Arising from this success, a significant quality of scholarly ink was invested into writings on the winning strategies and tactics employed by the elite commanders in French-Algerian war. These writings would later form the crux of COIN doctrine the US and France. It started with the colonial works of Joseph Gallieni (1849–1916) and Hubert Lyautey 1854–1934. According to Rid (2010, p.751), Gallieni, and then his disciple Lyautey, developed a counterinsurgency doctrinal tenet known as the oil-slick/stain method. The Gallieni/Lyautey method regarded the population as the centre of gravity- the central battleground to be secured and protected from insurgent violence (Rid, 2010, p.751). In the cold war era emerged Roger Trinquier, a veteran of the counterinsurgency in Algeria also wrote "Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency (1964)". This was followed by David Galula, another veteran of war who authored the work: 'Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice (1964)'. His book was subsequently revised and developed into a Field Manual US Army in 2006 (Tachikawa, 2017).

Further background developments of counterinsurgency in Algeria appear to share relative semblance with the experiences in Vietnam. According to Shurkin (2021, p.37) "much of the story of French

COIN is familiar to Americans because of US became interested in the subject after 2003, when they viewed it as a model for U.S. counter-insurgency operations” However, based on the outcome of the US COIN operation in Vietnam, it appears certain principles that ensured French victory in Algeria were either neglected or largely unknown to the US (Shurkin, 2021).

From a chronological filter, the two COIN operations cut across critical periodization in international system: the World Wars, wars of national resistance and Cold War periods. Arguably, counterinsurgencies Vietnam and Algeria by external actors since the 1940s up to the 1970s, set the background to contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine (Shurkin, 2021, p.36). In terms of actors, insurgences in Vietnam and Algeria embody the impact of cold war politics and direct military interventions of external actors in the internal politics since colonial era. Expectedly, in the events of direct external interventions, there were organized indigenous resistance movements which naturally grew into uprisings against occupying powers and thereafter became armed resistance, and then insurgent. The point is that the occupying powers, in the event of direct military interventions, succeeded in shoring up the political process of the occupied states and thus precipitated the end of their occupation.

Similarities can also found in the protracted nature of insurgency. COIN generally demands considerable expenditures of time and resources from the belligerents. They are most likely to contend with the challenge of long term commitment (US Field Manual, 2006). The time factor affects both the insurgents and counterinsurgents. Counterinsurgents who, most times, enjoy the exposure to resources, may need time to deal with the unconventional methods of the insurgents. Likewise, insurgents who, in most cases, suffer financial weakness, need time to gain financial strength to achieve their objectives. According to (Hixson, 2008), time and resource variables in the context of conflict duration were overwhelmingly evident in the conduct of the COIN in Algeria and Vietnam. Just like in the Algerian case, the Vietnam COIN dragged and staled for about a decade before the belligerent ceased hostilities.

In most cases of insurgency, building a financial base through foreign support was all the insurgents needed to mobilize resources. Where this fraternity went unchecked, it turned out to impact on the overall outcome insurgences. Current trends on transnational terrorism tends to lend credence to the relationship between insurgents and foreign support. According to Fearon and Laitin (2003, p.79):

the fundamental face about insurgency is that the insurgents are weak relative to the governments they are fighting, at least at the start of operations and so needs the support of the nation’s other insurgent groups to survive.

In both cases of Algeria and Vietnam, foreign support played a critical in the outcome of COIN. In Algeria, the line along the border with Tunisia called the “Morice Line (ligne Morice)” and the line along the border with Morocco called the “Pédron Line (ligne Pédrón),”signified the respective borders used by the FLN to effect intrusion and supplies from their foreign supporters (Tachikawa, 2017, p.72). The Algerians, however, were forced to give up their attempts following spirited interdiction from the French army that led to the death of over 6000 people in those two lines of intrusion and supplies (Peterson, 2003). Foreign support in Vietnam was also a critical variable in the factorial mix of insurgency and counterinsurgency but unlike Algeria, the insurgents exploited it extensively against the US forces.

How Does COIN Principles Explain the Differences in the Outcome of COIN Operations?

The concern in this section is whether COIN principles provide an explanation for why the French and the US COIN operations in Algeria and Vietnam are considered successful or failure. Beyond the outcomes of COIN in Vietnam and Algeria are the lessons of the experiences that may inform future COINs.

Considering that the two COIN operations happened at a time after the US and France had garnered substantial experiences from past wars and also exerting military dominance at the height of the Cold War, it becomes a matter of scholarly concern to interrogate how the two countries had different outcomes. However, in explaining defeat suffered by the US or victory recorded by France, it is important to acknowledge that the two cases were won and lost fundamentally at three observable principles:

- Knowledge and utility of the operational Environment (terrain)
- Identify and Isolate Insurgents from Their Cause and Support
- Conduct intelligence and information operations

The three principles factored in explaining the differences between France and the US experiences of victory and/or defeat in their specific cases of COIN operation and also allowed the understanding of their causes and effects. Although the boundaries of the COIN principles blur, the argument so far is that the peculiarity of the COIN principles identified permits each to be applied and analysed independently.

Knowledge and Utility of the Operational Environment (Terrain)

Terrain difficulties constitute the main debate of the US COIN operations in Vietnam. Earlier, Tringui (1964, p.62) had argued that insurgent's greatest advantages are his perfect knowledge of an area (which he himself has chosen) and its potential..." These lines aptly captured developments in Vietnam as the terrain greatly aided the insurgents in their battle with the US. The Vietnamese demonstrated mastery of their terrain in executing unstoppable movements of supplies and troops along the Ho Chi Minh trail and the Cu Chi underground tunnel. On the other hand, the US helplessness in coordinating actions in the harsh jungle terrain was compounded by their inability to fight on the frontiers and stop the insurgents from entering and gaining support across the North Vietnam, Laos, and Borders (Bergerud, 1991). The French COIN campaigns in Algeria was effectively executed through the knowledge and occupation of the terrains. The French divided the terrain, coordinated actions over a wide area and long enough to deprive the insurgents of the strongholds (Hixon, 2008, p.6). As argued further by Hixon (2008, p.6).

The French in Algeria maintained a presence in every cities but moved forces to keep the pressure on the insurgents. After the insurgents had sustained several defeats in the Atlas Mountain range, and unable to return to the population centres, the few remaining insurgents left Algeria. The French then moved to secure the borders while maintaining constant pressure across the entire country.

Arguably, the French did not allow the Algerians to enjoy the kind of external support they expected given the French COIN masterstroke that reflected the knowledge and mastery of the Algerian terrain.

Identifying and Isolating Insurgents from Their Cause and Support

While the US, to some extent, had population support in the South Vietnam, the NLF had, to a large extent, support base in the North, and to a lesser extent, from the South. Watson (2007) have argued The NLF support from South Vietnam stemmed from the constant aggression that existed between the South Vietnamese and the ethnic minority elements in the region. With this support base in place, the NFL via the ethnic minorities infiltrated the Southern population. The US response to infiltration from the North was to relocate the population away from the guerrilla to an area considered defendable (Glover, 2008). This relocation was known as the Strategic hamlet approach which aimed at isolating the insurgents from the support base. According to Glover (2008, p.4), the strategic hamlet policy never met its objectives as the varying issues of security, economy and culture plagued the relocated population. The French approach to

isolating the insurgent from the population was rather successful. By maximizing intelligence and developing a target lists, both the insurgents and their associates were arrested, driven out and cut off the population centres (Glover, 2008, p.4).

Conduct Intelligence and Information Operations

Intelligence gathering was an important variable in the COIN operations of the US and France. Employed locally and nationally by the US Marine Corps Combined Action Program (CAP), intelligence gathering formed the major principle of the CAP. According to Cassidy (2004), CAP organized indigenous intelligence nets within the villages and, in turn, gained essential intelligence from Viet Cong activities from the local population". Cassidy (2004) further noted that while CAP met with success in executing key issues of US COIN operations, its non-integration and overlapping by the Military Assistance Command Vietnam affected the outcome in COIN in Vietnam.

In Algeria, the French implemented an intelligence gathering method known as "block warden" (Horne, 2006, p.198). In the method, a local was appointed and saddled with the responsibility of each city block. His duty was to spy on residents and report any suspected insurgent activities. According to Hixen (2008, p.5), "the block warden had information on every household within the city block, and was also to coordinate the planning and spreading propaganda and developing acceptance to the policies of the government in his city block. This approach to intelligence gathering gave the French significant advantage in targeting the guerrilla and their support network. This technique also made it easier for the French forces to arrest and detain sympathizers and loyalist population the guerrilla forces (Hixen, 2008, p.5).

Conclusion

Past experiences in counterinsurgency are important in learning and applying the lessons for current insurgencies. They provide ideas on what is required and what to avoid in prosecuting COIN operations. When actors fail to learn from these experiences, they are most likely to reinvent the wheel. Using contemporary three COIN principles, the study has demonstrated that explanations for the US and France COIN operations in Vietnam and Algeria respectively can be understood along the lines of these principles. While the US and France shared COIN similarities in the areas of prosecuting their COINs within the same geographical (France-Indochina and US Vietnam) and chronological, doctrinal and ideological scope, the varying results at the end of the campaigns revealed lack of dedicated application of 3 three glaring contemporary principles of COIN operations.

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