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US Strategy and the Changing LIC THREAT

Steven Metz

The post-Cold War environment offers many challenges to US interests. These certainly compound the tasks facing our strategic thinkers and planners. The author sees the need for a new strategy for the US role in low-intensity conflict that recognizes the dramatic changes occurring in the Third World and in the US-Soviet relationship.

THE CRUMBLING of the Soviet Empire both validates US national security strategy and makes it obsolete. For decades, the press of communist power demanded almost all of our attention. For both strategists and policy makers, the Soviet threat was preeminent. We thus did not even consider the shape of security problems after Moscow's demise. In fact, two years ago, such speculation would have seemed irrelevant. But now we have reached the mountain top and are entering a world with Soviet power purged or limited. Unfortunately, what awaits us is not a promised land where conflict is replaced by peaceful competition among nations but, instead, a confused security environment just as dangerous as the old one.

It is not hard to imagine US strategists bemoaning Moscow's decline, at least in private. The Cold War, for all of the danger and misery it generated, did bring conceptual clarity to a complex world.¹ The threat was obvious. Even when events like the Sino-Soviet split or the war between China and Vietnam indicated that communism was far from monolithic, we could be certain that the Kremlin was the ultimate enemy. And, while we disagreed over the

means and ways of national security strategy, nearly all Americans considered the demise of the Soviet Union's power the ultimate strategic objective.

Now, we must look beyond the Soviet threat. Many students of strategy assume that as the Cold War permutates into a different type of competition, low-intensity conflict (LIC) in the Third World will play an increasingly important role in US national security. Other writers contend that the United States has no vital interests in the Third World.² Even if true, this begs the point: Third World conflict will have the potential to distract us from the more central tasks of developing a post-Cold War relationship with the Soviet Union and engineering a more constructive world economic order. This means that managing LIC in what is now considered the Third World and in the parts of the Soviet Empire that will soon join the Third World is important.

The Changing Threat

For 40 years, US strategists viewed conflict in the Third World through the lens of containment. Since Moscow used discontent in Third

World nations to erode Western power and expand its own influence, our goal was to stifle the violence that contributed to Soviet aims and, more recently, to destabilize Moscow's Third World friends. Third World conflict was seen as superpower conflict in miniature. This image was never fully accurate and now is useless. Today, we simply cannot treat Third World conflict as a reflection of the Cold War but must look for endogenous causes and effects. This is a complex task that requires an understanding of the forces and trends that are changing the essential nature of the Third World conflict.

One important trend concerns LIC sponsorship. In the immediate future, the role of nonsuperpower sponsors will increase. In itself, this is nothing new. For the past decade, South Africa and Libya, for example, orchestrated violence in their regions with little linkage to the Cold War.³ Even if both superpowers had avoided involvement in southern Africa or the Sahel, violence would still have been rampant due largely to the role of regional powers. Southern Africa and the Sahel will thus form a model for the future.

There are now many regional powers that have the incentive and the ability to encourage, organize and supply terrorists or insurgents. The capability to manufacture munitions, which once was limited to the superpowers and their close allies, is widespread. Just as scientific and technological capabilities arise and then disperse, so, too, does the ability to engineer LIC. Furthermore, superpower disengagement from the Third World will remove constraints on regional powers that wish to further their interests through sponsorship of LIC.⁴ We can thus expect a multitude of terrorist campaigns, insurgencies and on-again, off-again local wars that do not need or want superpower support.

Terrorism. Other trends in LICs are also emerging. Terrorism, for example, will probably increase in destructiveness. Like any form of violence that relies on fear rather than actual force, terrorism experiences a diminishing rate of return on a given level of violence. The world has become more or less numb to airline hijackings, so terrorists must seek new techniques.

For terrorists who count the United States among their enemies, there are two options. One is to strike targets within the United States. For a variety of reasons, including elaborate counterterrorist measures enforced by government agencies, this is difficult. The other option

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is to raise the level of destruction. Clearly chemical, biological and eventually nuclear weapons offer the greatest opportunities. The capability is there, even in the nuclear arena where terrorists can substitute technologically simple, deliberate atomic pollution for more technologically complex atomic explosions. The absence of long-range delivery systems for weapons of mass destruction, which limits their utility for nonsuperpowers, is not a factor for terrorists. They would find an immobile, warehouse-size nuclear device perfectly acceptable.

Another likely trend is the emergence of new targets of terrorism. To have the desired psychological effect, terrorism must be aimed at states that are developed enough to provide numerous high-profile targets and are linked by electronic communication nets that would disseminate the impact of a terrorist strike. But to stand any chance of having the desired political effect, terrorism must also target nations with fragile or unstable governments. This second requirement explains why terrorism has had little real influence over the policies of nations like Israel, Italy or Germany. There are, however, a range of rapidly modernizing states that meet both requirements. Examples include Brazil, South Korea and Mexico.⁵

Ideological or class-based insurgencies are relatively rare today because of the inherently limited appeal of communism (or conversely, anti-communism) in traditional societies. They . . . must attach themselves to a larger force, usually nationalism. Only when this larger force is present can ideological insurgencies succeed.

Finally, terrorism will continue to undergo the same integrative trends that have characterized LIC in general. This is illustrated by phenomena such as narcoterrorism. Because they have large amounts of money, are global in scope and suffer none of the constraints that political objectives confer, narcotics traffickers can easily use terrorism. In addition, narcotics traffickers do not rely on a state sponsor as do many political terrorist groups, thus preventing any attempts to "strike at the source" by counterterrorists. This means that the distinction between political terrorism and organized crime will fade or disappear. Terrorists will continue to rely on robbery and extortion for funds, and more ominously, criminals without a political agenda will adopt the techniques of terrorism.

Insurrection. Broad-based and relatively quick blows against government will also remain an important element of the emerging security environment. Insurrection takes two forms. One is the sort of "people power" that toppled Ferdinand Marcos and Nicolae Ceausescu and challenged Deng Xiaoping. For the United States, a more dangerous form is a quasi-legitimate arrogation of the power of new or weak democracies as pioneered by Adolf Hitler and used by Maurice Bishop in Grenada and Manuel Noriega in Panama. As the number of new and weak democracies expands, this second form of insurrection will become more common.

Insurgency. Protracted rural insurgency will persist but decline in strategic importance. Despite Che Guevara's imploration to "create two, three, many Vietnams," a classical Maoist insurgency can, in reality, only threaten very weak or corrupt governments in nations with rugged terrain. Barring gross incompetence on the government's part, ideologically based rural insurgencies can continue for extended periods—witness Afghanistan, Angola, El Salvador, Peru or the Philippines—but cannot win outright. As a type of LIC, ideologically based rural insurgencies will continue to erupt but will not be a major factor in the global security environment.

Low-Intensity Conflict Proponencies Directorate

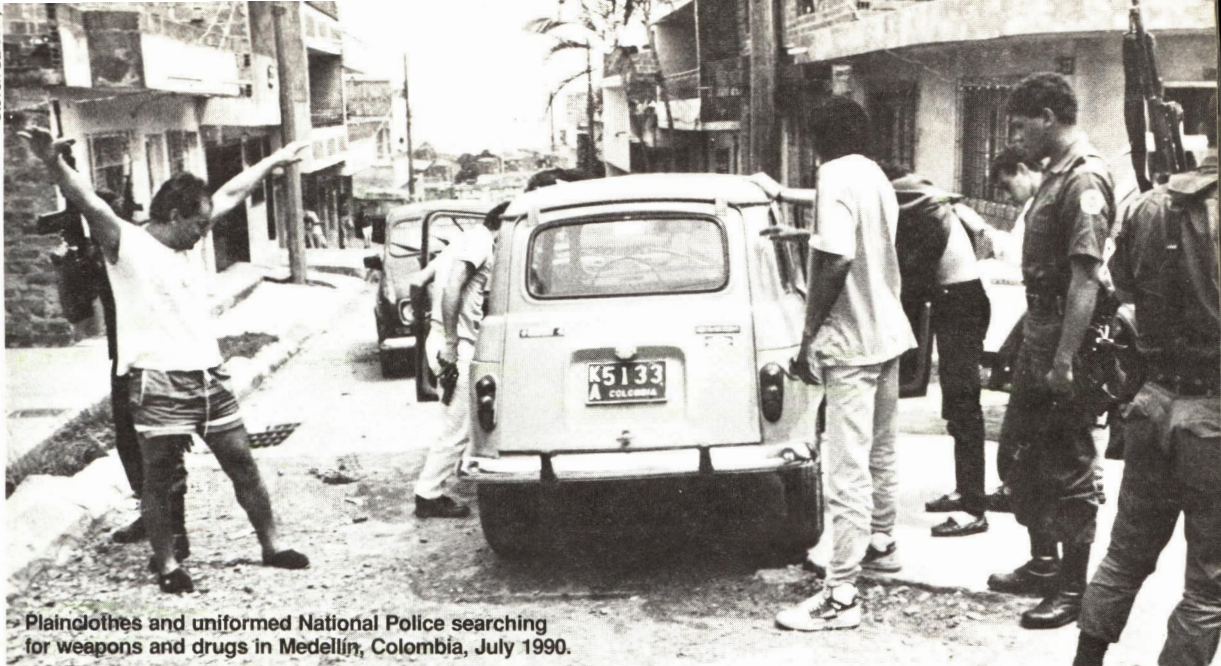
June 1991 marks the establishment of the Low-Intensity Conflict Proponencies Directorate (LIC-PD) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. This new directorate is charged with managing and directing the activities of three of the specified proponencies assigned to the commander, Combined Arms Command (CAC): low-intensity conflict (LIC), combating terrorism and counterdrugs. Although operated as a CAC special staff element because it, in fact, represents the CAC commander, LIC-PD functions under the direction of the Deputy Commandant, Command and General Staff College, and derives its support from the college.

LIC-PD was established to coordinate the efforts of these three proponencies and serves to emphasize the increasing importance of these activities as the focus of the current threat to our national security

begins to shift in response to a changing world environment. While the likelihood of a direct military confrontation with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact continues to diminish, instability in the Third World, international terrorism and illicit drugs remain vital concerns for which the Army must prepare.

Although all of the directorate's three proponency offices are responsible for developing, coordinating and documenting concepts, doctrine, organizational designs, materiel requirements and training programs as they pertain to their specific functional areas, their daily concerns and priorities are different.

The Army Proponency Office for Low-Intensity Conflict (APOLIC) is the focal point for ensuring LIC issues are considered in the Concept-Based



Plainclothes and uniformed National Police searching for weapons and drugs in Medellín, Colombia, July 1990.

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Sectarian insurgency based on tribal, ethnic or religious antagonisms is another matter. Ideological or class-based insurgencies are relatively rare today because of the inherently limited appeal of communism (or conversely, anticommunism) in traditional societies. They

are like remora fish that must attach themselves to a larger force, usually nationalism. Only when this larger force is present can ideological insurgencies succeed. The foundation for sectarian insurgency, however, exists in every nation that is tribally, ethnically or religiously

Requirements System. APOLIC is responsible for Armywide LIC doctrine as expressed in US Army Field Manual 100-20/Air Force Pamphlet 3-20, *Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict*. It monitors and assists other Army proponents and units to ensure that doctrine, training, leader development, organization and materiel LIC issues are addressed.

The Combating Terrorism Proponency (CTP) serves as the focal point for the Army's antiterrorism (AT) doctrine and training programs. In coordination with the subproponent schools—military police, special warfare and intelligence—the CTP develops and integrates AT doctrine and specialized training throughout the Army. CTP also provides training support packages for officer and noncommissioned officer education and training support material to Army schools, and serves as a clearing

house of AT information for the Total Army.

The Army Counter-Drug Proponency (ACDP) serves as the Army's instructive voice in this relatively new and evolving mission area. In addition to fulfilling the responsibilities normally associated with an Army proponent, this office will educate the Army community about its roles and missions in support of the national drug strategy and determine the requirements the Army must be prepared to support.

The Army must adjust to the challenges posed by the changing world of the 1990s. LIC-PD will look into the future to ensure that Army forces are prepared to consistently and effectively respond to all LIC, combating terrorism and counterdrug missions that may be assigned in support of our national security. ■

heterogeneous. Sectarian LIC has been most evident in Third World nations such as Sri Lanka, India, Sudan, Ethiopia and, to some degree, Peru, but it may also explode within the Soviet and Chinese empires.

Whether ideological or sectarian, insurgency will probably become more urban. Most Third World cities are surrounded by slum belts. These

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have been cockpits of insurgency in the past, but revolutionaries working from urban areas often found counterinsurgency somewhat easier. The French in Algeria, for example, had much less trouble with the urban element of the insurgency there than the rural. The same holds true in El Salvador, Afghanistan and Vietnam. But, as urban slum belts grow and revolutionaries adopt modern communications techniques, the balance may shift away from counterinsurgents, and thus Third World cities will explode with revolutionary violence.

In general, the emerging security environment is one in which all types of nations face the threat of LIC. For modernized or rapidly modernizing states, the most immediate threat is terrorism. For new democracies or fragile dictatorships, the challenge is insurrection. For underdeveloped authoritarian states or nations with sectarian conflict, protracted insurgency is a real problem. Clearly, postcontainment US strategy must, in some way, respond to all of these.

US Strategy

It is often said that generals plan to fight the last war. The same holds true for military strategists and doctrine writers. After a decade of effort, US national security professionals are steadily developing an understanding of LIC. Witness emerging doctrine, such as US Army Field Manual 100-20/Air Force Pamphlet 3-20, *Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict* and Test Publication, Joint Publication 3-07, *Doctrine for Joint Operations in Low Intensity Conflict*, that is generally sound. Unfortunately, such doctrine indicates that we are beginning to understand forms of LIC, especially Maoist-style protracted rural insurgency, that are fading in strategic importance.

Great efforts are currently under way to adapt US national security and military strategy to the changing global security environment.⁶ Since LIC, even when it occurs in regions of peripheral interest to the United States, can complicate the attainment of central national security goals, equal attention must be given to the LIC component of our strategy. Even though the fluidity of the international environment makes it impossible to fully develop a new LIC strategy at this point, work can begin. This should be based on three imperatives.

Rules of Engagement. First, we must craft strategic rules of engagement that, at a generic level, specify when, where and how US power will be used to manage LIC. Changing US attitudes toward our world role will structure this process. As the Cold War fades, it is likely that such attitudes will resemble those of the pre-Cold War period. Specifically, Americans will be more idealistic, rejecting the notion that the enemy of my enemy, however repulsive, is my friend. In other words, only reforming democracies will deserve our support. It is also likely that we will see resurgent isolationism. It will take a threat to a clearly democratic friend to invoke US reaction, not simply a challenge to a potential democracy.

These rules of engagement should also reflect that the emerging international system will not simply be an old-fashioned multipolar one in



A Marine standing perimeter guard at the US Embassy, Monrovia, Liberia, 6 August 1990. The chaotic situation in the capital necessitated that the Sixth Fleet dispatch the Marines to protect US lives and property.

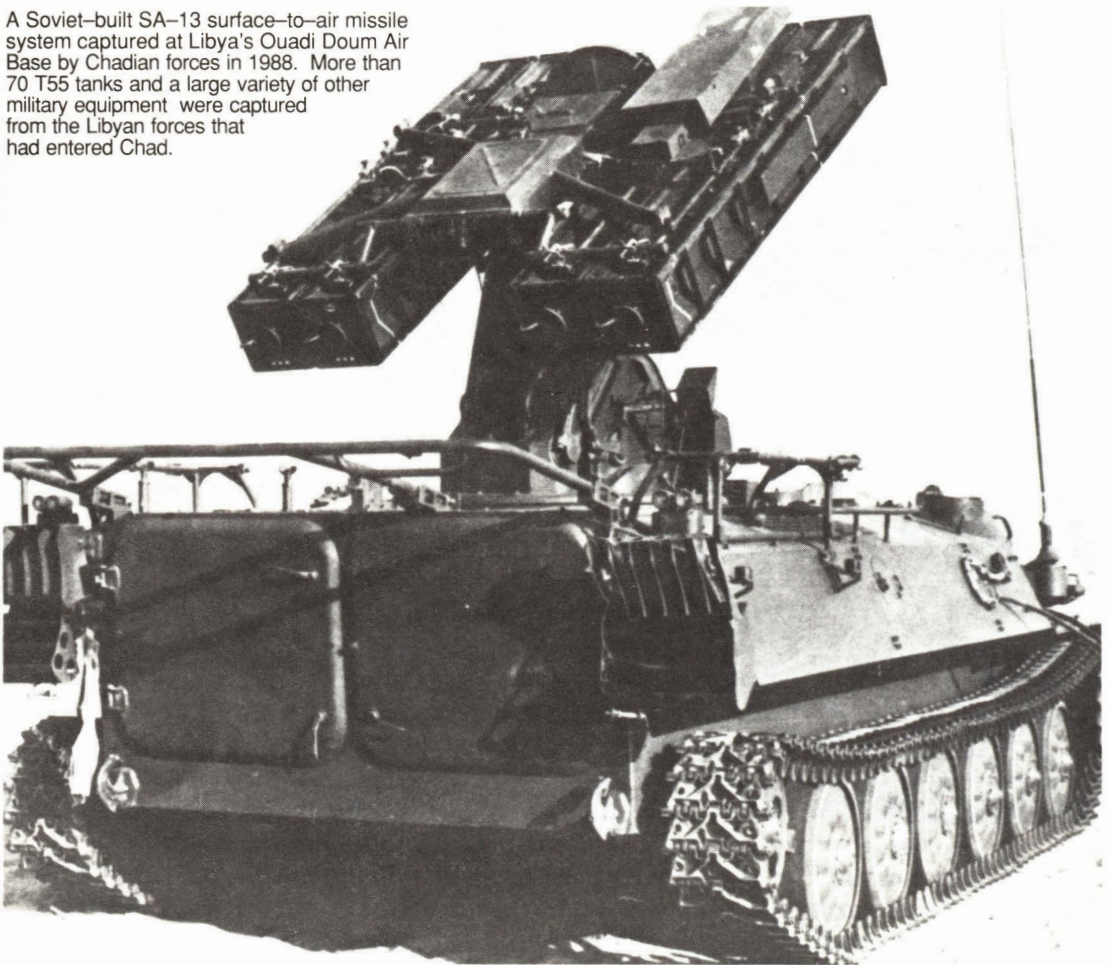
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which four or five great powers dominate, but it will form a complex web of interrelated regional balances. US power should be used when a regional balance is in a state of terminal disequilibrium and when this disequilibrium threatens other balances.⁷ In addition, these rules of engagement must be based on a sense of the life cycle of LIC. There are certain times when US power may prove decisive, but there are other times when a conflict is not yet ripe for resolution or when the judicious use of US power will be irrelevant. "Judicious" is the key word here since, outside of Mexico, we are unlikely to become massively involved in any given LIC.

Integration. The second imperative for US strategy is integration. Security professionals and strategists have always recognized that LIC poses an integrated threat. Military elements are intertwined with political, economic, social and psychological elements. For this reason, any response to LIC needs to be integrated and synchronized.⁸ Military thinking reflects this—Army doctrine evolved into joint Army/Air Force doctrine which, in turn, formed the foundation for all-service joint doctrine. This must continue.

The next logical step is interagency doctrine and strategy that link military activities to those

A Soviet-built SA-13 surface-to-air missile system captured at Libya's Ouadi Doum Air Base by Chadian forces in 1988. More than 70 T55 tanks and a large variety of other military equipment were captured from the Libyan forces that had entered Chad.



In the immediate future, the role of nonsuperpower sponsors will increase. In itself, this is nothing new. For the past decade, South Africa and Libya, for example, orchestrated violence in their regions with little linkage to the Cold War. . . . There are now many regional powers that have the incentive and the ability to encourage, organize and supply terrorists or insurgents. The capability to manufacture munitions, which once was limited to the superpowers and their close allies, is widespread.

of the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department, the Agency for International Development, the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, the Drug Enforcement Agency, the US Information Agency, Congress and any other segment of the government involved with LIC.

Indirectness. The final imperative is indirectness. The military already recognizes that armed force forms the secondary effort in LIC.⁹

When combined with the absence of public support for direct US involvement, this limits the US military to providing training, advice, intelligence and equipment. This indirect role must certainly continue. But there are avenues for greater indirectness at the strategic level, especially in pursuit of truly combined activities. A number of nations around the world have extensive experience with, and understanding of,

the processes of national development, building a Third World democracy and fighting an insurgency. Costa Rica, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Venezuela, Brazil and Thailand come to mind. Advisory teams that combine Americans with representatives of such states would have much more to offer nations facing an insurgency than would Americans alone.

The problems the Third World will face in the coming decades are immense. Many nations there will continue to experience economic stagnation fueled by weak world commodity prices, a shortage of investment capital, debt, ecological decay, underdeveloped infrastructure, population pressure and the absence of available and appropriate technology.¹⁰ The movement toward democracy that exploded in the 1980s will experience fits and starts as sectarian conflict, terrorism, economic stagnation, military involvement in politics and international tensions hinder political reforms. Uneven economic development and stifled political reform, combined with ever-increasing public demands, will set the stage for violent conflict.

As Third World conflicts erupt and abate in a melancholy rhythm, the United States cannot answer every call for help. We have neither the ability nor, in the post-Cold War era, the need to, in John F. Kennedy's words, "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any

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friend. . . ." But, when we do act, we must integratedly and indirectly act. There will be instances when vital global balances are truly threatened by LIC. Then, too, we must act. But, in general, conflicts that require US attention will be rare.

By looking at the future of LIC as much as its past, we can be prepared for these rare instances when we must become involved in LIC. The past is a guide on how not to act, but the essential nature of LIC is changing so dramatically that it offers only a limited indication of how to act. Knowing not to repeat mistakes does not alone tell how to solve a problem. That is a task for imaginative and visionary strategic thinkers. Let us hope that we have them. **MR**

NOTES

1. John J. Mearsheimer, "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War," *The Atlantic* (August 1990):35.

2. On the question of whether or not the United States has vital interests in the Third World, see Stephen R. David, "Why the Third World Matters," *International Security*, vol. 14, (Summer 1989):50-85; and Michael C. Desch, "The Keys That Lock Up the World: Identifying American Interests in the Periphery," *International Security*, vol. 14, (Summer 1989):86-121.

3. South Africa had some success in painting regional conflict as a Cold War struggle, at least during the Reagan administration. See Steven Metz, "Pretoria's 'Total Strategy' and Low-Intensity Warfare in Southern Africa," *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 6, (1987):437-69.

4. Geoffrey Kemp, "Regional Security, Arms Control and the End of the Cold War," *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 13, (Autumn 1990):34.

5. This does not imply that these states are likely targets of increased terrorism, but rather, that they simply fit into the category of states that are often targeted. The deciding factor, of course, is the extent of the anti- and counterterrorism programs implemented by the modernizing states.

6. A good explanation of the changing US military strategy can be found in Lieutenant General George L. Butler's speech to the Center for Defense Journalism, National Press Club, Washington, DC, 27 September 1990.

7. Many writers encourage the United States to take a hands-off approach to regional balances. See, for example, Earl C. Ravenal, "The Case for Adjustment," *Foreign Policy*, vol. 81, (Winter 1990-91):3-19.

8. For a more detailed explanation, see Steven Metz, "AirLand Battle and Counterinsurgency" *Military Review* (January 1990):31-37.

9. US Army Field Manual 100-20/Air Force Pamphlet 3-20, *Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict*, Final Draft (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army and Department of the Air Force, 7 March 1989), 2-17.

10. These are features of many Third World nations but not all. It is more accurate to at least divide the Third World into industrializing states and commodity exporters. See John Ravenhill, "The North-South Balance of Power," *International Affairs*, vol. 66, (October 1990):745-6.

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