We the People Are Not THE CENTER OF GRAVITY in an Insurgency

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E VEN THOUGH THE CONSENSUS among writers, thinkers, and school curriculums about an insurgency's center of gravity (COG) seems to be that it is the people, this is not the case. An insurgency's true strategic center of gravity is its cause.

Military thinkers and planners often identify the people as the COG in an insurgency because the people represent a tangible target against which the elements of national power, particularly military power, can be applied and their effectiveness measured. While this seems acceptable on the surface, it reflects a lack of understanding of the COG concept, a limited perception of the COG analysis process, and a targeting methodology that is stuck in the cold-war era and does not recognize the importance and effectiveness of intangible variables. Because the military's current fight against terrorists and insurgents does not follow the templates of the past, it requires innovative, adaptive thinking.

This essay will challenge the notion that the people are the center of gravity in an insurgency. It will argue that an insurgency's cause is its strategic COG, will identify the insurgency's administrative organization as the operational COG that links the insurgency at the strategic and tactical levels of war, and will show the interdependent relationship of all three (cause, organization, and people).

Defining Centers of Gravity

Joint Publication (JP) 1-02 defines center of gravity as "those character-istics, capabilities, or sources of power from which a military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight."[1] The final draft of JP 3-0 refines the definition to "the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act."[2] JP 3-0's changes are significant for three reasons: moral and physical strength are recognized equally; the word *capabilities* is removed, suggesting that a COG does not necessarily need to provide a capability on its own; and *will to fight* is replaced by *will to act*, further acknowledging the significance of the non-physical environment. This draft definition is attempting to keep pace with reality and will help military planners better conceptualize COGs.

The debate over defining *center of gravity* surfaces when planners try to identify enemy COGs. The current joint definition notwithstanding, each service has its own operational art and takes its own approach to defining and applying the COG concept.[3] The Army sees COGs as sources of strength to mass its capabilities against and destroy. The Air Force sees them as targets for air power. The Navy and Marine Corps believe that they are weaknesses to attack and exploit.[4]

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Carl von Clausewitz defined *center of gravity* as the "hub of all power and movement," but some military thinkers debate whether his theories are relevant to today's battlefield.[5] Recent writers on the topic define COG in ways that reflect the changing environment in which our military operates. Colonel Antulio Echevarria, for example, takes a *focal point* approach, arguing that COGs hold a combatant's entire system or structure together and draw power from a variety of sources.[6] This means that a COG is centripetal in nature and unifies an effort or draws resources toward it. Echevarria also suggests that once those resources are pulled in, a COG is able to direct their employment. This differs from the joint definition, which focuses on what a COG can project or is capable of, not on its ability to draw and direct additional sources.

Taking an approach aligned, not surprisingly, with the U.S. Air Force's targeting procedure, Air Force Colonel John Warden applies systems theory to define COG.[7] Warden suggests that a leader is always at the core of a COG. This leader is the first ring of a five-ring system, of which the remaining four rings (from the center out) are organic essentials (basic needs like food, water, and shelter), infrastructure, population, and fielded military. Moreover, each ring, a subsystem of the larger system, is itself made up of subsystems. While Warden's systems and subsystems description seems appropriate, it oversimplifies the targeting process by minimizing the complexities of the interaction between the levels of war. In addition, the approach might not be appropriate for insurgencies, where air power is less effective than against conventional forces and targets.

COG Characteristics

Regardless of the theory, most definitions agree that COGs are always sources of strength, never weaknesses. Independent of the limitations of a definition, COGs have characteristics that may make it easier to understand their theory and application.

● *There is a single COG at the strategic level of war and one at the operational level; the tactical level of war has decisive points.* Tactical decisive points protect the operational COG, which in turn protects the strategic COG. This partially explains the interdependence of the different levels of war and their corresponding COGs and decisive points.

COG CHARACTERISTICS

- There is a single COG at the strategic level of war and one at the operational level; the tactical level of war has decisive points.
- COGs may adapt or change as the environment or conditions change.
- COGs organize and direct the critical capabilities—tangible (physical) or intangible (psychological)—that they provide.
- It is not always necessary to destroy a COG.

In an insurgency, the people (a tactical decisive point) protect the insurgency's organization (the operational COG) through their willing or coerced, active or passive support, thereby allowing the insurgency to conduct daily operations with relative security. With its organization protected and free to operate, the insurgency is better able to provide the services the people desire and to offer a preferable alternative to the current (typically governmental) authority. The insurgency's ability to provide needed services not only gains it additional support from the people, but it also generates support for the insurgency's cause—its strategic COG. This cycle of increasing protective support is evidence of the interdependent nature of strategic and operational COGs and tactical decisive points.

● *COGs may adapt or change as the environment or conditions change.* When a COG fails to be a centripetal force that draws and directs resources and instead becomes a weakness or vulnerability, it must adapt or be destroyed. Assume that an organizational system, for example a political organization, is the operational COG. It provides the link between the strategic COG and tactical decisive points. If the organization is attacked and functionally destroyed, then a new operational COG must emerge. If it does not, there will be no link between the strategic and tactical levels of war. Without the protection of the organizational COG, the strategic COG's ability to utilize its resources is diminished, it becomes increasingly vulnerable to attack, and it risks destruction. When this occurs, the system represents weakness rather than strength and fails to act as a COG.

The same rationale holds true any time there is weakness in the COG's protective layers. For example, if an insurgency does not have popular support, the people constitute a weakness that makes the organization vulnerable. The organization's vulnerability, in turn, makes the cause vulnerable. To overcome this weakness, insurgents may resort to techniques that coerce support from the people.

● *COGs organize and direct the critical capabilities—tangible (physical) or intangible (psychological)—that they provide.* It is the synergy of these capabilities that allows the COG to project power beyond its own strength. The strength of the capabilities and the layered protection described earlier make it difficult to attack a COG directly or to destroy it with a single blow; however, attacking a COG indirectly weakens its capabilities to the point where it may no longer provide synergy, direction, organization, and strength.

● *It is not always necessary to destroy a COG.* One may achieve the same effect by rendering the COG incapable of performing its function or unwilling to perform it.

Understanding the Importance of the Cause

In *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, David Galula posits that the only strength an insurgency has initially is the ideological power of its cause. According to Galula, the cause is the most necessary prerequisite for an insurgency.[8] It is what attracts support; it is the centripetal force that Echevarria argues draws additional resources to it. Without a cause, there is nothing for the people to support actively, passively, willingly, or unwillingly. The purpose of the cause is to draw the greatest number of supporters while decreasing the appeal of its opponents. Synthesizing the people's

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grievances and crafting them into a simple message the people can identify with separates a strong cause that draws the greatest support from a weak cause that fails to attract potential supporters. Put another way, the insurgency's cause is a system made up of the people's grievances. This seems to capture the essence of Warden's and Echevarria's arguments: an insurgency is a system made up of subsystems that draw resources.

An insurgency must be identified with the cause completely, the population must be attracted to the cause, and the counterinsurgency should not be able to adopt the cause without significantly reducing its own power.[9] If any of these conditions are not met, there is weakness, and the insurgency must modify its cause or eventually fail. For these reasons, an insurgency's cause is its strategic COG. Without a cause, there is no insurgency. With a weak one, an insurgency is critically vulnerable to government response.

The Naga Insurgency

The Naga insurgency in India illustrates the importance of an insurgency's cause and is a good example of what happens when an insurgency becomes preoccupied and neglects its cause. The Naga insurgency began in 1947, the same year India gained independence from Britain. Believing that the state of Nagaland was part of the country and that its tribes fell under the authority of the Indian constitution, India began to govern Nagaland.

The insurgency formed because the Naga tribes along the India-Burma border did not identify with India culturally or ethnically and wanted to form a separate, sovereign nation.[10] Initially, the insurgency had popular support because its organization addressed grievances that had existed for decades. However, in 1948, a split occurred in the insurgency, and two competing factions emerged.[11] Competition for the people's support led to guerrilla infighting that distracted the insurgents' attention and resources from their original cause and weakened both factions in the fight. Preoccupied with infighting, the organizations of both factions failed to perform their roles as operational COGs, failed to link the strategic level of war to the tactical level of war as before, and failed to address the people's grievances.

Of course, a complete analysis of the Naga insurgency cannot overlook the Indian government's strong response to it. Nonetheless, competing

Naga organizations failed to protect their strategic COG, the cause, by maintaining popular support, a critical decisive point. Unable to overcome the preoccupation weakening their operational COGs, neither Naga faction could unify supporters. Over time, support for the overall cause dwindled. The people did not see either party as a preferable alternative to the Indian government. At best, the Naga insurgency was a political reform movement in an Indian society tolerant of political disagreement.

The Naga insurgency illustrates several other points about COGs. It supports the argument for the cause as the strategic COG, the organization as the operational COG, and the people as a tactical-level decisive point. It shows the interdependence of all three and how weakening one of the COGs and its protective layering can lead to the collapse of the entire system. Using Echevarria's focal point theory, one could argue that the insurgency's cause failed to provide unity and the necessary centripetal force to gather additional resources. The Naga insurgency also shows that one can render a COG ineffective by preoccupying it; there may be no need to destroy it directly. In the Naga case, the split in the insurgency prevented opposing factions from focusing all their efforts on achieving their original goals.

Strategic COG: The Cause

If an insurgency's cause is a synthesis of the people's grievances, an effective cause must incorporate those grievances in a way the people can identify with and actively support. This is the responsibility of the insurgency's political or administrative organization, its operational-level COG, which turns grievances into slogans and messages.

Grievances alone, however, cannot be the strategic COG. Individually, grievances cannot draw upon,

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create, organize, and apply resources (although collectively, in the form of a cause administered by an organization, they can). Moreover, individual grievances are vulnerable to attack: if the counterinsurgency addresses each grievance individually, it can reduce the support that grievances elicit for insurgencies. (Conversely, by trying to remedy each grievance separately, the counterinsurgency risks legitimizing or justifying the insurgency's existence and potentially reducing its own power in the process.)

Operational COG: The Organization

A cause attracts support that leads to the formation of an insurgency's initial political-administrative organization. This organization becomes the insurgency's operational COG. It protects the cause (the strategic COG) by the way it administers the insurgency's continuing operations. Although insurgents have no responsibility to provide for the people early on, they gain popular support by providing such services. (Warden discusses these organic essentials in his five-ring model.) The better insurgents do this, the more support they acquire for their cause. In short, effective administration on behalf of the cause protects the strength of the cause. Later, as the insurgency matures, it can consolidate its gains by maintaining order and providing increasing services to the people.

Tactical Decisive Point: The People

The people are critical to the success of both the insurgency and counterinsurgency. In fact, because the people provide a tangible target against which to apply military power, military planners are comfortable with thinking they (the people) are the COG. But while the people are key terrain, a critical resource, an objective for both sides to dominate, and a decisive point, that does not make them a COG.

If the people are equally important to the success of both the insurgency and counterinsurgency, and the battle is decided by each side's ability to gain as much support as possible from the people, then the people are the decisive factor in every operation. The varying definitions of, and theories about, COGs commonly suggest they are sources of strength, never sources of weakness. At the beginning of an insurgency, the support of the people is

minimal and therefore not a source of strength. Foco theory suggests that an insurgency can take violent action without the initial support of the people and gain popular support later through those actions: as the insurgency's cause becomes known, some people will support it willingly, and others after being coerced.

The people define the battlespace. They determine what is acceptable and unacceptable by providing or withholding support and resisting coercion from either side. They also provide critical resources such as recruits, leaders, logistical supply lines, and information. The need to influence the people's decision-making process makes the people an objective for both sides.[12] For these reasons, the people are not a COG at any level of war; they are a decisive point equally important to both sides.

Those who believe that the people are the COG in an insurgency fail to answer several questions. At what level of war are the people a COG? Military planners tend to think tactically; however, by focusing on the tactical level, they ignore the true sources of strength—those that link the strategic and operational levels of war to the tactical. What are the links between the levels? Are they interdependent, or do they exist in isolation? How does one protect the other? What are some tactical decisive points? Those who believe the people are the COG rarely answer these questions. Hopefully, this article in some measure has.

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Conclusions

An insurgency's cause is its strategic COG, its organization is its operational COG, and the people are a decisive point at the tactical level. The population is critically important in an insurgency, but it is not a COG. Although military historian Colin Beer (*On Revolutionary War*, 1990) never uses the term *center of gravity*, he appears to concur with this

analysis when he asserts that "the main ingredient [of an insurgency] will be a sound doctrine which will sustain the dedicated few along their long road."[13] It is understandable why those charged with counterinsurgency operations gravitate towards identifying the people as the COG: the people are a tangible entity to target using typical methods for planning and execution, whereas attacking something as ambiguous, intangible, and conceptually unfamiliar as a cause, an ideology, or a system of beliefs is difficult and may not yield results for months or years. Some cultures measure time in generations, so how do you measure the effectiveness of your efforts on future generations? How do you do so during a one-year deployment? It is difficult to remain confident that your efforts are effective when the results will only be evident in the history your children read in school textbooks years later.

In the end, successfully targeting and attacking the strategic COG, the cause, directly or indirectly will cause the entire insurgency to fail. That is the essence of a COG: its defeat leads to overall defeat. Attacking an insurgency's organization will weaken its ability to protect its cause and its ability to link its cause with the people. If this occurs, the strategic COG becomes vulnerable to attack and is at greater risk of destruction. ***MR***

NOTES

1. U.S. Department of Defense, Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 12 April 2001), <http://jdeis.cornerstoneindustry.com/jdeis/dictionary/def.jsp?word=centers+of+gravity>.

2. This comes from a joint doctrine update briefing presented 15 February 2006 by Rick Rowlett, U.S. Joint Forces Command, Joint Warfighting Center Joint Doctrine Group. Michael Chychota emailed a copy of the file to me.

3. Mark P. Krieger Jr., *Improving the Joint Staff through a Joint Understanding of Centers of Gravity*, Master's thesis, Webster University, 2005 (np).

4. Major Seow Hiang Lee, *Center of Gravity or Center of Confusion: Understanding the Mystique* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air Command and Staff College Air University, 1999).

5. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 595.

6. Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: Changing Our Warfighting Doctrine—Again!* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2002).

7. John A Warden, *The Air Campaign: Planning for Combat* (Maxwell Air Force Base AL: National Defense University Press Publication, 1988).

8. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (St. Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 1964), 7.

9. Ibid., 19-21. Galula refers to this as the "strategic criteria" of a cause.

10. Ramachandra Guha, "A Question of Honour," *India Together: The News That Matters*, <www.indiatogether.org/2004/feb/opi-nagapride.htm>.

11. Sashinungla, "Nagaland: Insurgency and Factional Intransigence," *Faultlines: Writings on Conflict & Resolution*, <www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume16/Article4.htm>.

12. Galula, 7-8.

13. Colin M Beer, *On Revolutionary War* (Bromley, Great Britain: Galago Publishing Ltd., 1990).