

Objective: to examine the strategic logic of political violence and dilemmas in counterinsurgency.

1 Key terms

- terrorism
- costly signaling
- asymmetric conflict
- counterinsurgency (COIN)
- credible commitment problem

2 Key readings

- Mueller, “Six rather unusual propositions about terrorism” (2005)
- Pape, “The strategic logic of suicide terrorism” (2003)
- Abrahms, “What terrorists really want” (2008)
- Kydd and Walter, “The strategies of terrorism” (2006)
- Malkasian, “The American war in Afghanistan” (2021)
- Brathwaite and Konaev, “War in the city” (2019)

3 Key ideas

Question: What motivates terrorism?

Answer: On the one hand, Pape (2003) and Kydd and Walter (2006) view terrorism as rational/strategic. Pape argues that terrorism is a rational, nationalist response to foreign occupation. Kydd and Walter argue that terrorism is a mechanism for costly signaling. On the other hand, Abrahms (2007) argues that terrorism does not conform to strategic logic. Instead, he views terrorists as social solidarity seekers.

Question: What are the major strategic challenges great powers confront in COIN operations?

Answer: (1) Divergent interests: the standard of victory for the great power vs. the insurgents is different (insurgents win by “failing to lose”); (2) credible commitment problem: the intervening power cannot credibly commit to wage COIN campaign forever due to the asymmetry of stakes; (3) identification problem: hard to identify civilians vs. insurgents

Question: What are the trade-offs of transitioning from COIN strategies to one of violence management?

Answer: A violence management strategy may (1) permit military efficacy but at the cost of the civilian population, (2) exacerbate the challenges of forging on-the-ground alliances with local militias, and (3) neglect efforts to promote long term political stability.

4 Additional review questions

- How has the definition of terrorism changed over time?
- According to Mueller, what are some of the major pitfalls of counterterrorism responses?
- According to Kydd and Walter, what are the five strategies that terrorists use to pursue their goals?
- What constraints did Obama face in following through on his public commitment to draw down the war in Afghanistan?