SOUTHERN AFRICAN
PEACE AND SECURITY STUDIES
VOLUME 4 NUMBER 2

ARTICLE

South Africa's Total Strategy in the Context of Counterinsurgency (COIN) Theory

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Abstract

There is a great misunderstanding as to what the National Party (NP, South Africa) government's Total Onslaught and Total Strategy entailed, which leads to inaccurate criticisms of this strategy. This article examines the Total Onslaught and Total Strategy against the backdrop of historical and contemporary counterinsurgency (COIN) theory. It is shown that not only was the Total Onslaught an accurate assessment of the nature of the threats facing South Africa during the Cold War, but also that the Total Strategy was a sound countermeasure thoroughly embedded in COIN theory and doctrine at the time, and publications by Kilcullen and current US COIN publications illustrate that this strategy remains valid to this day. It is also argued that Total Strategy was ultimately ineffective because of the lack of international recognition enjoyed by the NP government.

Introduction

All wars are different, and similarly, all counterinsurgencies (COIN) are different, but as the current US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (2006: ix) recognises, "Most insurgencies follow a similar course of development. The tactics used to successfully defeat them are likewise similar in most cases." Because of these similarities, both insurgents and counterinsurgents study previous insurgencies and counterinsurgencies, and apply the lessons of these conflicts to current conflicts. In the case of the so-called Border War (1966-1989) and internal conflict in South Africa in the late 1970s and 1980s, this holds true for both the National Party government and its various enemies.

Lieutenant General Peter Walls, Rhodesian Commander of Combined Operations, remarked about the Rhodesian insurgency, "You cannot win a war like this purely through military means. The military is merely there to maintain law and order and provide a conducive atmosphere for political development" (quoted in Wood 2008: 185). Counterinsurgency is not only warfare, it is a systemic restructuring of a social and

political environment using the entire conflict system, "to include establishing the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the people, defeating the insurgent forces, providing a basic level of security for the population, and creating the conditions for economic growth" (Corum, 2006: 1). Mazarr (2008: 37) concurs, claiming,

> *Modern counterinsurgency doctrine rests on the truism that achieving lasting stability even in the face of an armed insurgent enemy depends primarily on nonmilitary actions and tools: building viable political institutions, resuscitating the national infrastructure, spurring the local economy, creating effective police forces, and much more.*

The military side of the conflict is thus closely interwoven with the political side in these conflicts, as already argued by Colonel David Galula in *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (1964), Sir Robert Thompson in *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (1966), and Carl Schmitt in *Theory of the partisan* (2007[1963]). Indeed, counterinsurgency theory goes back at least to the post-WWI Red Army vice-commissar for defence, Mikhail Tukhachevsky, who claimed, "Banditry cannot be radically overcome without action of a political, national, and economic kind" (Tukhachevsky, 1994: 915). This is a continuation of Von Clausewitz's theorem that war is "the continuation of politics," but as Schmitt (2007[1963]: 93) notes, the political dimension became the centre of gravity of conflicts after Lenin – a trend continued by Mao Zedong. Since COIN evolved as a response to insurgency that drew heavily on specifically Mao's insights, COIN doctrine thus emphasized the political aspect to a greater extent than Von Clausewitz had. The latest US Government Counterinsurgency Guide (2009: 2) stresses the importance of the political element in their definition of an insurgency:

> *Insurgency is the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify or challenge political control of a region. As such, it is primarily a political struggle, in which both sides use armed force to create space for their political, economic and influence activities to be effective.*

This article considers PW Botha's answer to the Total Onslaught – Total Strategy – to the Communist-inspired insurgencies in Southern Africa within the context of counterinsurgency doctrine. As Scholtz (2006: 119) notes, Botha's Total Onslaught and Total Strategy have led to much misinterpretation, notably in interpreting 'total' as indicative of intensity rather than breadth, as he had intended it. As illustrated in this article, the concepts of both the Total Onslaught and the Total Strategy are well-established principles of COIN.

The Integrationist Approach to COIN: A Total Strategy Facing a Total Onslaught

During war, Mao Zedong advocated a concentration on the population, and General Chang Ting-Chen of Mao's central committee once stated that revolutionary war was 80 per cent political action and only 20 per cent military (The United States Army and Marine Corps, 2006: 1-22) – a statement taken up by many commanders in the South African Defence Force (SADF), amongst others General Jannie Geldenhuys (2007). This integration has become ingrained in COIN theory, as is clear from Kilcullen's (2009: 12) definition of insurgents as members of "an organized movement that aims at overthrowing the political order within a given territory, using a combination of subversion, terrorism, guerrilla warfare and propaganda."

The Chinese Civil War inspired many Cold War insurgencies, notably also the North Vietnamese insurgency, which in turn inspired numerous other insurgencies (see e.g. Wiest 2006: 24, Bobbit 2003: 59, Kilcullen 2006: 113, and Iron 2008: 173). Because of Mao's emphasis on the political struggle centred on the population, the Vietminh in Indochina divided the conflict into two closely connected sectors, the military struggle or *dau tranh vu trang*, and the political struggle or *dau tranh chinh tri* (Pottier, 2005, p. 126). Whereas the military struggle was modelled on the Chinese three-stage concept pioneered by Mao (see e.g. US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual 2006: 1-6, 1-7 and Van Creveld 2008: 223), the *dau tranh chinh tri* "encompassed not only political and diplomatic weapons, but also psychological, ideological, sociological and economic weapons" (Pottier, 2005: 127). Because the political was so closely entwined with the military side of the conflict, both the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) or NLF in Vietnam and the Peoples' Liberation Army of Namibia or PLAN in Namibia followed the Chinese example of furnishing military units with political officers (Dale, 2007: 204).

This integration between sectors of the modern conflict environment reflects PW Botha's concept of the Total Onslaught: a war that would be waged on a variety of fronts. General Magnus Malan (Carter, 1996: 73-6) defined the Total Onslaught in the following way:

> *A total onslaught is where you use all your power together to obtain your objective. For instance, if you want to conquer a country you do it through physical power, through economic means, political means, all the means you have to achieve your objective.*

PW Botha (2000) claimed, "daar is 'n Totale Aanslag, sielkundig, polities, ekonomies en militêr" [there is a Total Onslaught, psychologically, politically, economically and militarily]. As Botha intended the concept of a Total Onslaught, it referred to the scope of the onslaught, not that it was an extensive onslaught, as Scholtz (2006: 119) writes:

Dié konsep, wat eintlik vir ernstige misverstande vatbaar was, het nie bepaal dat die aanslag totaal in sy intensiteit was nie, maar in sy breedte – 'n aanslag op elke moontlike terrein, en wat dus op alle moontlike terreine gekoördineerd beantwoord moet word.

[This concept, which is susceptible to serious misunderstandings, did not specify that this attack was total in its intensity, but its breadth – an attack on every terrain, and thus had to be answered on all possible terrains.]

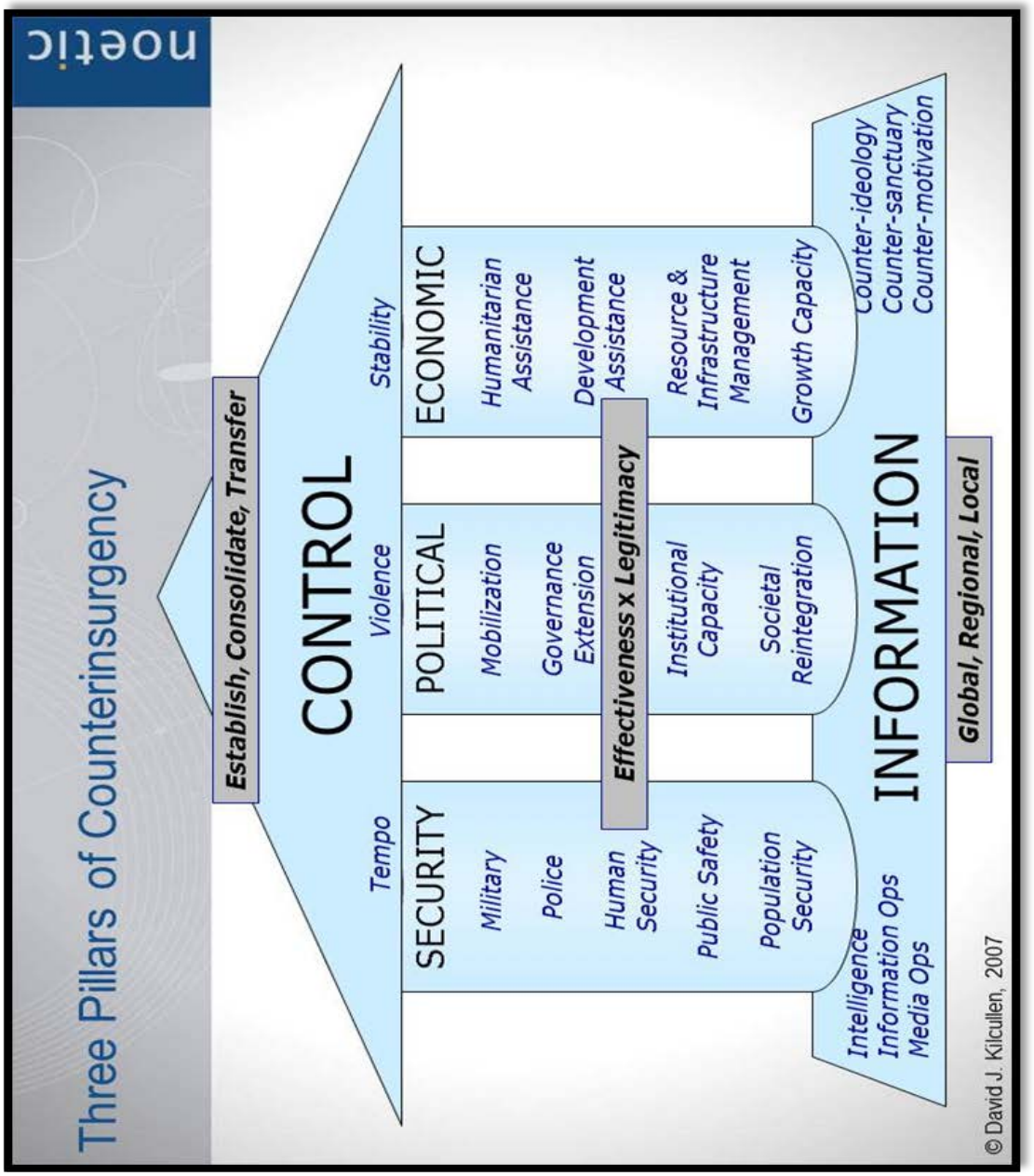
Compare Botha's Total Onslaught with the following statement in the current US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (2006: 1-1): "Insurgents use all available tools – political (including diplomatic), informational (including appeals to religious, ethnic, or ideological beliefs), military, and economic – to overthrow the existing authority." A Total Onslaught – as Botha conceived it – is therefore a standard insurgency, which, lacking military strength, utilises every available means to realise their political goals.

The US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (2006: 1-1) continues, "Counterinsurgents, in turn, use all instruments of national power to sustain the established or emerging government and reduce the likelihood of another crisis emerging." COIN-forces responded to revolutionary war's principles of an integrated conflict environment. During the conflict in Indochina, the French formed the *Groupement de Commandos Mixtes Aéroportés* (Composite Airborne Commando Group or GCMA) to combat the Vietminh, who were to "bring the struggle to the political and military fields; [to] use as much as possible psychological operations; [to] combine their effects with those of the guerrilla to snatch the population from the Vietminh influence by capturing their imagination, their heart, and their instinct" (Pottier, 2005: 125). In contrast with WWII, the French in Indochina therefore realized that victory would no longer be dependent on military victories on the battlefield, but also on what occurred in the political and psychological spheres. In counterinsurgencies, "[t]actical brilliance [...] translates to very little when political and social context is ignored or misinterpreted" (Marston and Malkasian, 2008: 16). To the political element should be added an economic element to constitute the three pillars of counterinsurgency identified by Kilcullen (2007: 11) as shown in Figure 1.

A successful counterinsurgency integrates these three pillars, like a successful insurgency also integrates the psychological, ideological, sociological and economic aspects. During the Malayan COIN-campaign, Lieutenant General Sir Gerald Templer for instance co-opted all government departments in fighting the insurgency, arguing that administrative, political, economic, cultural, spiritual, and military factors were relevant to defeating the insurgency (Stubbs, 2008: 121). The current US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (2006: 2-1) also recognises,

The integration of civilian and military efforts is crucial to successful COIN operations. All efforts focus on supporting the local populace and HN [Host Nation] government. Political, social, and economic programs are usually more valuable than conventional military operations in addressing the root causes of conflict and undermining an insurgency.

Figure 1. Kilcullen's (2007: 11) Three Pillars of COIN



The SADF studied French COIN doctrine closely (Dale, 2007: 201), as is evident throughout General Geldenhuys's (2007) account of the war. In particular, the work of General André Beaufre and the French experience in Algeria were revered, which were combined with the works of Samuel Huntington, John McCuen, David Galula, and Robert Thompson (the latter two are still prescribed in the US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual 2006: viii). John McCuen's *The art of counter-revolutionary warfare* was regarded as a Bible by the SADF (Scholtz, 2006: 120), and thus Lieutenant-general CA Fraser, an SADF officer heavily influenced by both Beaufre and McCuen, writes in the late 1960s:

> *Military operations ... are, in fact, of limited importance to both sides and are never the decisive instrument in the total strategy. Instead these wars are conducted by the revolutionary (and the government in power – if they learnt how) as a carefully orchestrated dialectic consisting of a series of actions, political, administrative, economic, psychological, supported by military action (quoted in Scholtz 2006: 121).*

The Total Strategy thus rested on sound COIN doctrine, as developed during Malaya, Aden, Algeria, and Vietnam. The 1977 South African White Paper on Defence stated (quoted in McWilliams 2009: 32), "the resolution for a conflict in the times we now live demands interdependent and coordinated action in all fields, military, psychological, economic, political, sociological, technological, diplomatic, ideological, cultural, etc." Compare this statement with the current definition of counterinsurgency as proposed in the US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (2006: 1-1): "*Counterinsurgency* is military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency." Similarly, the US Government Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative (2009: 12) defines *counterinsurgency* as, "comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes." As the theorists that the SADF based its strategy on suggest, Total Strategy was an integrated approach to the entire conflict environment to counter an integrated attack – the Total Onslaught – and remains sound COIN doctrine.

The direct result of implementing a Total Strategy in South Africa was the formation of the Joint Management System or National Security Management System, which aimed at integrating all government departments under one body so governance could proceed while keeping national security in mind (Hamann, 2001: 58). Stemmet (2011: 100) writes, "Strategically it meant the fusion of military, administrative, judicial and legislative powers." General Malan (quoted in Hamann 2001: 58) argues:

> *The Joint Management System was one of the best systems we ever had in this country. It allowed us to address a situation like the toilets in Queenstown [intelligence reports said a*

major cause of unrest in Queenstown was a lack of toilet facilities in the black residential areas] or the situation in Alexandra, which was at one stage declared a "liberated" area by the ANC. We [the SADF] approached the Public Works Department and told them they had to rectify the situation. They told us they had no money. "We don't give two hoots," we said. "Find the money and rectify the situation, it's affecting the security of the country." That was the problem. Other departments didn't realize they were involved in the security of the country. They thought of toilets, full stop. They didn't think how it affected our security.

Stemmet (2011: 100) notes that the National Security Management System operated on nine separate levels, which can be represented with the diagram in Figure 2.

At the time, the National Security Management System thus reflected COIN practices and insights from previous counterinsurgencies. However, integrating various departments under a single military command was not only implemented in Malaya, but also the current US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (2006: 2-2) argues the merits of this approach:

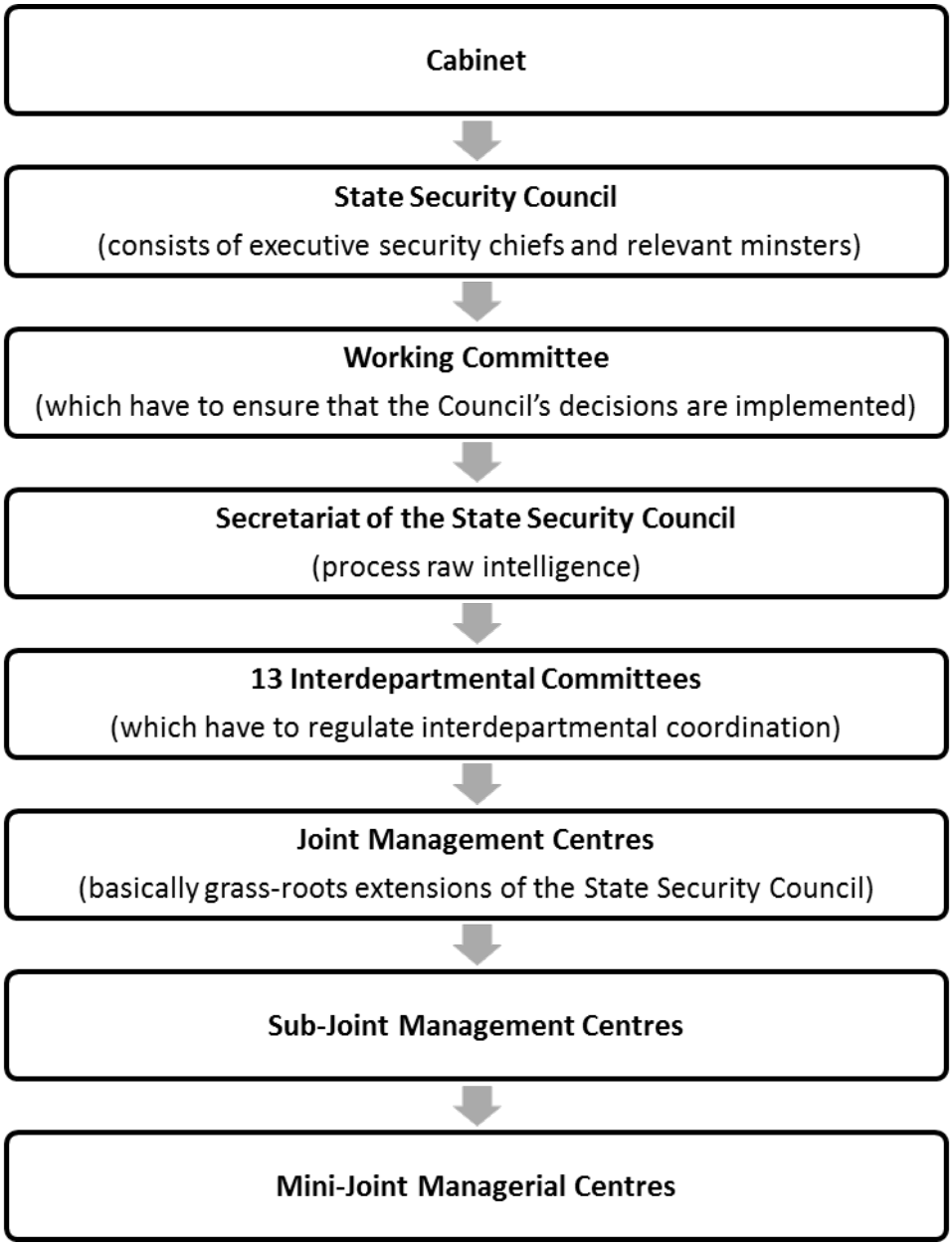
Unity of command is the preferred doctrinal method for achieving unity of effort by military forces. Where possible, COIN leaders achieve unity of command by establishing and maintaining the formal command or support relationships [...]. Unity of command should extend to all military forces supporting a host nation. The ultimate objective of these arrangements is for military forces, police, and other security forces to establish effective control while attaining a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence within the society. Command and control of all U.S. Government organizations engaged in a COIN mission should be exercised by a single leader through a formal command and control system.

This emphasis on integration is also reflected in the latest US Government Counterinsurgency Guide (2009: 50), "Effective counterinsurgency requires multi-faceted and integrated operations that apply civilian and military capabilities across information, security, political and economic functional areas." However, while "Ideally, a single counterinsurgent leader has authority over all government agencies involved in COIN operations" (The United States Army and Marine Corps, 2006: 1-22), it is usually difficult to implement in practice:

An insurgency's complex diplomatic, informational, military, and economic context precludes military leaders from commanding all contributing organizations – and they should not try to do so. Interagency partners, NGOs, and private organizations have many interests and agendas that military forces cannot control. Additionally, local legitimacy is frequently affected by the degree to which local institutions are perceived as independent and capable without external support. Nevertheless, military leaders should make every

effort to ensure that COIN actions are as well integrated as possible. Active leadership by military leaders is imperative to effect coordination, establish liaison (formal and informal), and share information (The United States Army and Marine Corps, 2006: 2-4).

Figure 2. National Security Management System



The US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual therefore suggests "coordination and liaison" as less authoritative means to achieve the same "synergy" (2006: 1-22). In South Africa, however, PW Botha established this unity of command under the State Security Council. Although strikingly undemocratic and authoritarian, Total Strategy in this sense thus belongs firmly within not only Cold War COIN doctrine, but also modern counterinsurgency doctrine. However, such coercive strategies may be effective in the short term, but in the long term, they are fatal to COIN efforts. The US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (2006: 1-21) notes,

> *The primary objective of any COIN operation is to foster development of effective governance by a legitimate government. Counterinsurgents achieve this objective by the balanced application of both military and non-military means. All governments rule through a combination of consent and coercion. Governments described as "legitimate" rule primarily with the consent of the governed; those described as "illegitimate" tend to rely mainly or entirely on coercion. Citizens of the latter obey the state for fear of the consequences of doing otherwise, rather than because they voluntarily accept its rule. A government that derives its powers from the governed tends to be accepted by its citizens as legitimate. It still uses coercion – for example, against criminals – but most of its citizens voluntarily accept its governance.*

By using coercion, the NP government created a situation that could not be sustained. As the US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual argues, co-operation is key to integrating the different functions of the state – although coercion may be useful in the short term. In the long term, however, coercion undermined the legitimacy of the NP government, which had to resort to draconian measures to maintain security – using "disincentives" rather than "incentives" to maintain order. However, given the NP's growing illegitimacy in the eyes of the international public (and foreign governments), nothing done internally could regain its legitimacy.

Hearts and Minds

As General Malan indicates, creating infrastructure is part of *hearts and minds* – a term coined during the British campaign in Malaya (Stubbs, 2008: 113). Unlike conventional warfare, COIN is a carrot-and-stick approach, of which *hearts and minds* constitute the 'carrot' section, and military action constitutes the 'stick' aspect. Tukhachevsky (1994: 915) already wrote about "incentives" and "repression" as two complementary strategies in the 1930s. Alternatively, in the terms of Botha's regime, counterinsurgency combines "incentive levers/techniques of persuasion" and "disincentive levers/techniques of coercion" (Davies and O'Meara, 1985: 195, see also Stemmet 2011: 99-100).

Kilcullen (2009: 13) notes, "activities to kill and capture terrorists seem (and are) offensive at the tactical level but are in fact strategically defensive, because they contain the problem rather than solving it." The SADF recognized this in light of previous failed insurgencies, and General Constant Viljoen (quoted in Hamann 2001: 65) argues that the emphasis was not on achieving a high kill-ratio as in Vietnam and Rhodesia, but rather on *winning hearts and minds*: "In whatever we did we always bore in mind the effect it would have on the general population. We realized, in a revolutionary war it is not a case of how many people you kill but rather the battle for the minds of the people."

Winning hearts and minds was a major objective of the SADF in Namibia and within SA's borders. General George Meiring, chief of the Army since 1990 and Head of the SADF from 1993, uses the image of a pot boiling over (Hamann, 2001: 62). If the insurgency is the pot, the security forces provide the energy to force the lid down. However, in order to achieve long-term results, the fire has to be taken away, and that is an economic and political issue. According to Meiring, the SADF always placed the most emphasis on removing the fire – building schools, homes, infrastructure, providing doctors and teachers, and even veterinarians. In the official South African Army Counterinsurgency Manual that was in circulation during the war in Namibia/Angola, it was explicitly stated:

> *Unless the trust, confidence and respect of the people are won by the government and the military forces, the chance of success is greatly reduced. If the people support the government and the military forces, the enemy becomes isolated and cut off from its supplies, shelter and intelligence (quoted in Scholtz 2006: 40-41).*

This standpoint remains a crucial principle of COIN; as the current US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (2006: 1-23) phrases the issue,

> *Dynamic insurgencies can replace losses quickly. Skilful counterinsurgents must thus cut off the sources of that recuperative power. Some sources can be reduced by redressing the social, political, and economic grievances that fuel the insurgency. Physical support can be cut off by population control or border security. International or local legal action might be required to limit financial support.*

Winning hearts and minds was aided by the SADF's policy of allowing deferment for its national servicemen that allowed it to field doctors, technicians, and teachers (Steenkamp, 2006: 14), and the SADF thus aimed at gaining trust by providing education, infrastructure, and medical assistance.

Note however that *hearts and minds* is often misinterpreted: Baines (2003: 13) for instance believes that *hearts and minds* is "supposed to build goodwill among the

civilian population by distributing food and medical treatment and collecting intelligence so as to root out guerrillas and cadres." This is a common misreading of the concept. Kilcullen (2007: 52) quotes Shakespeare:

> *We give express charge, that in our marches through the country, there be nothing compelled from the villages, nothing taken but paid for, none of the French upbraided or abused in disdainful language; for when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner*.

Kilcullen subsequently states, "Pop Quiz: *William Shakespeare was a writer of:* (A) Counterinsurgency Theory (B) Fiction." The objective of *hearts and minds*, as Templer conceived it, is not to win "goodwill" as Baines and Shakespeare believe, but to convince the local population that supporting counterinsurgency forces serves their own self-interest; "This is about perceived self-interest, not about whether the population likes us. The principal emotive content is respect, not affection" (Kilcullen, 2007: 55). That the SADF believed in *winning hearts and minds* as Kilcullen conceives it – as opposed to Baines's interpretation – is clear from the abovementioned South African Army Counterinsurgency Manual's emphasis on "trust, confidence and respect" rather than "goodwill."

Winning hearts and minds means undercutting the political message of the enemy. Insurgents form a narrative that is to be countered, as Kilcullen (2009: 67) writes, "To undercut their influence you must exploit an alternative narrative: or better yet, tap into an existing narrative that excludes the insurgents." In Malaya, the British were able to promise independence and establish a legitimate government with the support of the majority of the nation, thus undermining the insurgents' claim for freedom and independence. In Vietnam, this meant establishing a legitimate government in South Vietnam that carried the support of the majority of the population. This did not happen, and the reputation of the South Vietnamese government – deservedly or undeservedly – of corruption and brutality undermined US efforts and strengthened the North Vietnamese and NLF.

In 1973, Prime Minister John Vorster declared South Africa willing to grant Namibia independence, and the Turnhalle conference was held in 1977 to pave the way towards Namibian independence. Apartheid laws were repealed, and SWAPO was allowed to act as a political party (Scholtz, 2006: 32). Scholtz (2006: 33) writes, "Apartheid, race discrimination and colonial domination diminished as *casus belli*. What remained was SWAPO's avowed aspiration to convert Namibia into a Marxist one-party state." The election of 1978 did therefore not bring SWAPO to the negotiating table. South Africa had agreed to the implementation of UN Resolution 435 in 1978, "but withdrew its agreement when SWAPO demanded – and the Secretary-General of the UN Security Council granted – assembly points in 'liberated areas' in

Namibia when there were none" (Barlow, 2007: 96). Geldenhuys (2007: 84) also notes that the elections held in December 1978 were free and fair and established a multiracial government, but SWAPO refused to take part. The UN High Commissioner of Namibia, Sean McBride, had already advocated that SWAPO is the only legitimate government of Namibia (Geldenhuys, 2007: 82), despite the fact that the organization mainly represented one ethnic group. Since the UN would not recognize the results of the election, promises of freedom and independence did not undermine insurgent propaganda. *Winning hearts and minds* could therefore only be achieved to a lesser extent in Namibia: whatever gains were made, in the end, international recognition of SWAPO meant that South Africa's initiatives were fruitless. Neither could South Africa convince the UN otherwise: its status as a pariah state determined that few South African political moves were condoned.

In South Africa, also, the South African government could not undercut the insurgent narrative. In Malaya, the British were able to promise independence and establish a legitimate government with the support of the majority of the nation, thus undermining the insurgents' claim for freedom and independence. The British campaign in Malaya is often cited as the 'model' COIN-operation, a "textbook-quality counterinsurgency campaign" (Joes, 2008: 42), however, "the British had to surrender their role as occupier to defeat the insurgents" (Metz and Millen, 2004: 36). With growing Black Nationalism in South Africa, international condemnation of Apartheid, and the end of the Cold War (thereby removing South Africa's claim of an ally of the West), very few options existed to undercut the South African population's support of the nationalist cause. Codevilla and Seabury (2006: 56) write, "fighting wars is really a matter of stripping hope from the enemy's causes – of killing causes rather than people." As such, under the abovementioned circumstances, there was no conceivable way that the NP government could kill the cause of universal suffrage.

Conclusion

Counterinsurgency is an extremely complex form of warfare. Kilcullen (2010) describes the modern insurgency as a complex system, noting,

> *Importantly, the argument is not that insurgencies are like organic systems or that organic systems are useful analogies or metaphors for insurgency. Rather, the argument is that insurgencies are organic systems, in which individual humans and organizational structures function like organisms and cell structures in other organic systems (Kilcullen, 2010: 194).*

In complex systems, all component parts are interdependent to the extent that the conflict literally takes on a life of its own. Predictability becomes extremely difficult in complex systems, as the outcomes of actions can often not be foreseen. In such a complex environment, "Political and military leaders and planners should never

underestimate its scale and complexity; moreover, they should recognize that the Armed Forces cannot succeed in COIN alone" (The United States Army and Marine Corps, 2006: 1-1).

As this article has illustrated, the NP government, SADF and PW Botha in particular recognised the complexity of the conflicts they were engaged in. Specifically, both the Total Onslaught and Total Strategy were sound COIN initiatives that were not only based on recognised and respected counterinsurgency theory, but the principles of integration (Total Strategy) and the recognition of the multidimensionality of insurgencies (Total Onslaught) remain valid to this day, as can be seen from current US publications on COIN. In the end, Total Strategy was, from a theoretical point of view, a sound strategy, but its legitimacy could not overcome the reality that white minority rule was at its end.

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