Harnessing GRAT for Irregular Warfare in Great Power Competition

Description

In a recent Irregular Warfare Initiative podcast, Dr. Jake Shapiro and Dr. Frances Brown highlighted the critical role of irregular warfare (IW) in great power competition. They emphasized the risk of neglecting IW, noting that from 1975 to 1991, irregular conflicts comprised 87 percent of all armed conflicts, with great powers involved in most of them. This historical context suggests that for the US to compete effectively with Russia and China, focusing solely on conventional military strength is inadequate. Strategic advantage in great power competition is likely to be achieved by also emphasizing competence in IW.

This type of warfare includes managing internal conflictsâ??usually insurgenciesâ??where great powers intervene to shape outcomes in their favor. Another is terrorism. U.S. and alliesâ?? inability to work effectively with partners in Africa to contain the proliferation of terrorism in the Sahel region has created an opening for Russia to step in and exploit natural resources to help finance the war in Ukraine. Managing IW in a way that reflects U.S. strategic goals requires prioritization of interests, appropriate allocation of resources, and interagency cooperation. Equally important is understanding which past and current efforts have been effective, under what conditions they succeeded, and what remains unaddressed or poorly understood.

To support both practitioners and scholars the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland, has developed an online knowledge and data portal on Global Responses to Asymmetric Threats (GRAT). This online resource, built on extensive coding and analysis of empirical and policy literature from 2002-2022, serves as an important tool for understanding government responses to asymmetric threats and refining strategic approaches to irregular warfare. This article discusses the portalâ??s utility and showcases how GRAT has already enhanced our organizationâ??s work, thus providing an example of the benefits of leveraging historical and current IW research to inform policy decisions in great power competition.

The Portalâ??s Value to Researchers and Educators

The GRAT portal can assist in improving our understanding of how governments respond to asymmetric threats across three types of irregular warfare: insurgency, information operations, and terrorism. It helps identify research gaps in the literature more efficiently. The portal features a

searchable data tool where users can find relevant insights using keyword searches, such as specific methodologies, state power levers, response targets, or geographical areas. Keywords are based on variable coding in academic articles or the main focus in non-academic texts. Users can also search by author names.

GRATâ??s first database focuses on counterinsurgency (COIN) and is currently available to the public. A second database focusing on information operations is in development and set to launch in late summer, with a third on counterterrorism expected by the end of 2024.

Using GRATâ??s filtering system, researchers can access a wealth of analytical data about selected articles, including findings, key variables, methodologies, and hypotheses. The findings highlight the relationship between key variables and discuss the outcome of hypothesis testing with an explanation of the logic behind each finding. For pieces with case studies, the findings provide enough depth that users can rely on them as examples to apply to their own research and teaching needs. For policy pieces, the findings are framed as a recommendation to a problem statement that is also noted for the relevant piece.

The portal can be used to provide insights on a variety of research and policy questions that can assist with research and teaching development. For example, users can rely on it to identify existing studiesâ?? findings on the impact of innovation/adaptability on COIN success and conditions under which the value of such innovation increases as they develop literature reviews for their own articles or to situate their own ideas within past frameworks. Educators interested in sharing with their students the examples of cases where indiscriminate use of force helped counterinsurgents and when it worked against them, can use the portalâ??s keyword filtering system and methodology filter to obtain a set of case studies. Browsing through the description of case study findings can then enable them to select relevant examples. In addition to the database component, the portal also features reports highlighting general and more specific analyses of the insights coming from the literature.

Application: Insights on the Effectiveness of Military COIN Approaches

In a recent START article titled Government Responses to Asymmetric Threats: The State of the Literature on Counterinsurgency, 2002-2022â??the Military Lever of Power, I used the GRAT portal to analyze how factors related to the governmentâ??s use of the military lever of power were employed in COIN. After I sorted independent and dependent variables into overarching categories, I found that over 41% of studies focused on COIN tactics, indicating dominant interest in this area. However, aspects like military leadership, culture, and the dynamics between external interveners and host governments remain underexplored, representing only 4.1% of all studied variables. The literature is most interested in linking these factors to explain COIN outcomes, such as victory/defeat or

success/failure.

Within the *Tactics* and *COIN outcomes* categories, I identified the top 10 most frequently studied tactics and relied on portal-provided descriptions of findings to determine if the tacticsâ?? impact was positive, negative, mixed, or had no impact. The top 10 ten most frequently analyzed tactics in empirical studies include:

1. The use of armed non-state actors (private military & security companies, mercenaries, militias, civilian defense forces)

2. Military presence/use of kinetic operations/use of conventional forces

3. Use of indiscriminate violence or repressive force

4. Forced population resettlement

5. Provision of security to the public

6. Restraint and legitimacy in the use of force

7. Cordon & search operations

8. Use of special forces

9. Use of air power

10. Use of former insurgents as forces

There are more positive than negative findings on the value of each of these tactics except for the use of indiscriminate/repressive force and the use of air power, both of which are more likely associated with COIN loss than victory. In most instances, the positive contribution of a given tactic depends on the presence of specific conditions. For example, forced population resettlement conducted with care for the population is linked to COIN success but not when done merely as a tool of relocation. However, the analysis of existing research revealed that many of the insights on these tactics are based on a single-case study, and some of the tactics are understudied despite making it into the top 10 most frequently analyzed list. A notable exception to this is the work on governmentsâ?? use of armed non-state actors, with a solid depth of findings derived from over 20 qualitative and quantitative studies based on small and large samples.

Working with the portal deepened my understanding of the current research on military responses to asymmetric threats in insurgencies. It also set the stage for proposing directions for future studies. Extending the analysis to a global sample of cases and relying on statistical approaches would significantly improve the generalizability of the findings.

For case studies, there is a need to move beyond Afghanistan and Iraq; these two countries have been the focus of over 42 percent of all pieces (empirical and non-empirical) that explore state use of its military lever of power in COIN. Despite the prevalence of insurgencies in sub-Saharan Africa and South America, only Nigeria, Kenya, Colombia, and El Salvador made it to the top 15 most frequently analyzed countries. Finally, my analysis of tactics demonstrated some overlooked areas within this specific category. Mainly limited focus on empirical testing of the benefits garnered by the militaryâ??s adoption of new technologies in gaining advantage over the insurgents and the impact of women in COIN-relevant leadership positions on strategic and tactical outcomes.

As demand grows to leverage IW tools for strategic advantage, it is crucial to identify and synthesize existing findings and pinpoint gaps in previous research. The GRAT portal is an important resource, helping scholars and practitioners deepen their understanding and refine their approaches to IW. By employing this tool, users can effectively expand their repertoire and address the evolving challenges of IW.

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Views expressed in this article solely reflect those of the author *and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton Universityâ??s Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.*

Main Image: A U.S. Air Force pararescueman, 83rd Expeditionary Rescue Squadron, scans for ground threats during a mission on November 7, 2012, over Afghanistan. (Jonathan Snyder via DVIDS)

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