
Sub-Conventional or Low Intensity Conflict? Phraseology and Key Characteristics

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Low intensity conflict is the prime challenge we will face... the future of peace and freedom may well depend on how effectively we meet it.

— Former US Secretary of State George Shultz¹

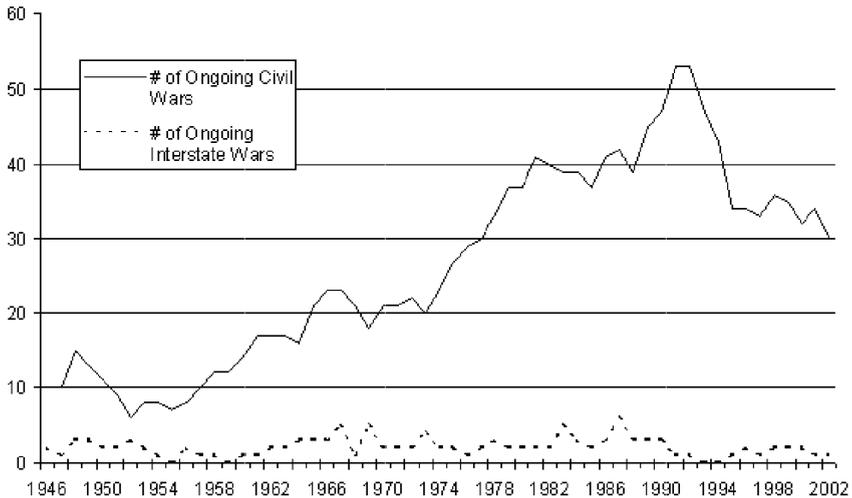
Crummy Little Wars

The last century of the second millennium was by all yardsticks the bloodiest in recorded history. While the two World Wars devastated Europe, northern Africa and parts of the Asia-Pacific rim, the Cold War that followed was marked by even greater strife and chaos. Numerous small wars and conflicts resulted in the loss of life and property on a very large scale across Asia and Africa. One or the other great power was invariably behind these conflicts, directly or indirectly. However, a balance of power system, tentative and skewed as it was, ensured that the world was spared the spectre of another major World War. In some ways history is now working in reverse: the possession of nuclear weapons has ensured that the days of large-scale inter-state wars are almost over and, in their place, the world is witnessing the rise of ‘crummy’ little wars – fought by insurgents, terrorists, guerrillas, bandits, drug cartels and criminal networks.

Conflict continues to be commonplace with no clear distinction between war and peace. Even relatively minor conflicts that are localised sometimes have major implications for world peace and stability and often hamper trade and commerce. This makes it important for many nations that are not directly engaged in a conflict to intercede so as to monitor, manage and resolve actual or potential conflicts.

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Wars (1946-2002)²



Source: Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University; and International Peace Research Institute, Oslo.

Modern conflicts are often marked by increasingly stark asymmetries between the contenders. On one side is usually the state with well-equipped, modern forces but limited public support and severe political and moral constraints. On the other side are irregular combatants, organised into small groups of lightly armed forces, with utter disdain for international law, total commitment to the cause, scant regard for life and property and often with overwhelming public support.

No matter which term it goes by – civil disobedience, counter-insurgency, guerrilla warfare, insurgency, insurrection, internal security, revolutionary warfare, small wars, subversion, terrorism – conflict in the first decade of the 21st century is predominantly sub-conventional conflict that is more often intra-state than inter-state. The root causes of modern conflict are primarily socio-economic and ethno-religious tensions that transcend state boundaries, rather than territorial and boundary disputes. It is mostly a contest between state and non-state actors and often a triangular one between disparate groups of non-state actors and the state. There are seldom any victors but the vanquished abound in the shape of displaced and homeless persons, those who are severely wounded or maimed for life, those

who cannot find productive employment and those who spend prolonged periods under custody, sometimes without even a chargesheet being filed.

Most people have an image of what a war is like. When people think of war, they conjure up images of blood-and-guts wars like the two World Wars. They think of mass mobilisation, of conscription, of major disruptions in civilian life and they think of body bags being brought home. When civilians in authority think of war, they think of conventional conflicts. Their preferred style of war is usually World War II or the Gulf War. They do not like small wars and low-intensity conflicts, which don't have clear-cut outcomes, drag on endlessly, do not have exit strategies and force troops to act as social workers. Commanders in army headquarters the world over dislike such conflicts even more as these demand un-

conventional responses that dilute finely honed command and control systems and result in handing over the charge of conflicts to company commanders, subalterns and sergeant majors or, on the Indian subcontinent to junior commissioned officers. The Powell Doctrine, which holds that America should only fight if it is going to use overwhelming force, win a massive victory, and then leave immediately, has already fallen by the wayside, as the US is deeply, almost inextricably, involved in long-drawn sub-conventional conflict in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

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Terms in Vogue

Possibly the only element common to all types of conflict is violence. **Violence** refers to acts of aggression and abuse which intend to cause criminal injury or harm to persons, and (to a lesser extent) animals and property.³ The term “violence” also connotes an aggressive tendency to act out destructive behaviour. Violence falls into essentially two forms — random violence, which includes unpremeditated or small-scale violence, and coordinated violence, which includes actions carried out by sanctioned or unsanctioned violent groups as in war (ie. inter-societal violence) and terrorism.

The term **small war** is a literal translation of the Spanish word *guerrilla*. This term was popular around 1900 to refer to encounters between Western troops and irregular or guerrilla forces in the Third World. The United States has a long but largely uncelebrated history of fighting “small wars,” and “if the past is a prologue of what is to come, small wars will be the main occupation of the American military for the foreseeable future,” says Max Boot.⁴ According to the US Marine Corps Manual on Small Wars:

As applied to the United States, small wars are operations undertaken under executive authority, wherein military force is combined with diplomatic pressure in the internal or external affairs of another state whose government is unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory for the preservation of life and of such interests as are determined by the foreign policy of our Nation.

In a major war, the mission assigned to the armed forces is usually unequivocal — the defeat and destruction of the hostile forces. This is seldom true in small wars. [The more ambiguous mission is] to establish and maintain law and order by supporting or replacing the civil government in countries or areas in which the interests of the United States have been placed in jeopardy.

The British Defence Doctrine defines **civil war** as one that is “conducted largely within the boundaries of a state in which a significant part of the population is associated with opposing sides. The contest is for government of the state or regional autonomy or secession. One or both sides may have external help.”⁵ According to Col Gabriel Bonnet, **revolutionary warfare** “consists in the application of irregular warfare methods to the propagation of an ideology or political system.”⁶ **Irregular warfare** denotes a form of conflict where one or more protagonists adopt irregular methods. Irregular troops are combatants who are not formally enlisted in the armed forces of a nation-state or other legally constituted entity.

The two terms, revolutionary and irregular warfare, often used interchangeably, owe much to the theories of Mao Tse-tung, Vo Nguyen Giap, Che Guevara and Carlos Marighela. Revolutionary or irregular warfare usually relies on guerrilla tactics that are best summarised in Mao Tse-tung’s celebrated remarks:⁷ “Divide our forces to arouse the masses, concentrate our forces to deal with the enemy. The enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue... These

tactics are just like casting a net; at any moment we should be able to cast it or draw it in. We cast it wide to win over the masses and draw it in to deal with the enemy...”

The word **militant** has come to refer to any individual or party engaged in aggressive physical or verbal combat, normally for a cause.⁸ Militant is an often-used neutral term for soldiers who do not belong to an established military. Typically, a militant engages in violence as part of a claimed struggle for achievement of a political goal. Popular usage sometimes sees “militants” as synonymous with terrorists, though perhaps characterised with a slightly less loaded term.

The term “militant state” colloquially refers to a state that holds an aggressive posture in support of an ideology or cause. The term militant also describes those who aggressively and violently promote a political philosophy in the name of a movement (and sometimes have an extreme solution for their goal). The present phase of militancy in Jammu and Kashmir, which originated in 1988-89, had a clearly stated initial goal to gain *azadi* or independence from India.

Frank Kitson has defined **insurgency** as the “use of armed force by a section of the people against the government to overthrow those governing the country at the time or to force them to do things which they do not want to do.”⁹ The British Army defines insurgency as an “organised movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict... Some insurgencies aim to seize power through revolution. Others attempt to break away from state control and establish an autonomous state within ethnic or religious boundaries... Generally, an insurgent group attempts to force political change by a mix of subversion, propaganda, political and military pressure.”¹⁰ Only well-organised insurgencies with a strong leadership and widespread popular support are capable of posing a viable long-term threat to the state. Successful insurgencies tend to have external political, diplomatic and military support, including for training and logistics, sanctuary in the supporting nation, the ability to control some territory and, at the culminating stage, the ability to raise well-trained and motivated battalions that are almost at par with the opposing army.

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Counter-insurgency is defined by the British Army as, “Military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency.”¹¹ Counter-insurgency is characterised by relatively infrequent combat at section, platoon and company rather than formation level with, consequently, a lower rate of logistics consumption than in major combat. However, counter-insurgency campaigns typically continue for several years.

Insurgencies often have transnational linkages and, hence, a successful counter-insurgency campaign must fight and break the links between insurgencies across a wide region to prevent recurrence. The British Army Doctrine lists the following principles for fighting such a campaign¹²

- Ensure political primacy and political aim.
- Build coordinated government machinery.
- Develop intelligence and information.
- Separate the insurgent from his support.
- Neutralise the insurgent.
- Plan for the long term.

The US Department of Defence defines **low intensity conflict (LIC)** as “Limited politico-military struggle to achieve political, social, economic or psychological objectives. It is often protracted and ranges from diplomatic, economic and psychological pressure through terrorism and insurgency. Low intensity conflict is generally confined to a geographical area and is often characterised by constraints on weaponry, tactics and the level of violence.”¹³

Terrorism, the latest scourge that has infested geo-politics with violence organised by both state and non-state actors, has defied definition because of its complexity. The United Nations Secretary General’s High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change described terrorism as “any action, in addition to actions already specified by the existing conventions on aspects of terrorism, the Geneva Conventions and Security Council Resolution 1566 (2004), that is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants, when the purpose of such an act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a Government or an international organisation to do or to abstain from doing any act.”¹⁴

The High Level Panel’s definition is wide ranging and short on specifics. According to the British Defence Doctrine, “Terrorism may be defined as premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated by groups or individuals and usually intended to influence an audience wider than that of its

immediate victims. In one form, terrorism may be an element of insurgency. In another, it may be employed for objectives short of the overthrow of the state. It may also be used by one state against another.”¹⁵

Small Wars

Small wars were primarily inter-state conflicts fought to achieve foreign policy objectives even though these were often skewed. The *Small Wars Journal* states on its homepage:¹⁶

We believe that Small Wars are an enduring feature of modern politics... The characteristics of Small Wars have evolved since the Banana Wars and Gunboat Diplomacy. War is never purely military, but today's Small Wars are even less pure with the greater inter-connectedness of the 21st century. Their conduct typically involves the projection and employment of the full spectrum of national and coalition power by a broad community of practitioners.

“Small Wars” is an imperfect term used to describe a broad spectrum of spirited continuation of politics by other means, falling somewhere in the middle bit of the continuum between feisty diplomacy and global thermonuclear war. The Small Wars Journal embraces that imperfection. Just as friendly fire isn't, there isn't necessarily anything small about a Small War.

The term “Small War” either encompasses or overlaps with a number of familiar terms such as counterinsurgency, foreign internal defense, support and stability operations, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and many flavors of intervention. Operations such as noncombatant evacuation, disaster relief, and humanitarian assistance will often either be a part of a Small War, or have a Small Wars feel to them. Small Wars involve a wide spectrum of specialized tactical, technical, social, and cultural skills and expertise, requiring great ingenuity from their practitioners. The Small Wars Manual notes that:

Small Wars demand the highest type of leadership directed by intelligence, resourcefulness, and ingenuity. Small Wars are conceived in uncertainty, are conducted often with precarious responsibility and doubtful authority, under indeterminate orders lacking specific instructions.

Small wars are likely to be small for four reasons.¹⁷ First, the political objectives of military intervention are likely to be specific. Second, finite political objectives will tend to limit the military objectives. Third, limited military objectives and the political necessity to keep the scope of the conflict as non-threatening to other states as possible restrains nations from bringing to bear all the force they have

available. Last, they are small because the likely enemies may be unable to engage in anything larger than a small war unless other countries sustain them. If other countries do sustain them, thus, compelling an increase in the forces to secure original objectives or new and larger ones, warfare may escalate from the small category into something else. Nonetheless, the size or site of the conflict may not always be a good pre-conflict indicator of its intensity.

Intensity is the product of many interactive variables, including the value placed on objectives, the strength of the opposed wills, and the armaments and training of the forces engaged. In his philosophy on war-fighting, codified in Fleet Marine Forces Manual 1, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Alfred M Gray, asserts that intensity is determined by the “density of fighting forces or combat power on the battlefield... Although we can attempt to estimate the density of battlefield combat power or the intensity of a conflict in advance, the variables are so numerous and complex, and the consequences of a miscalculation so serious, that we ought to consider most armed interventions as having within them the seeds of small wars. The adversary, besides resisting, may resist with modern weapons.”

A comprehensive approach needs to be pursued to wage small wars successfully, integrating the full joint, allied, and coalition military with their governments’ federal or national agencies, non-governmental agencies, and private organizations. Small wars are big undertakings, demanding a coordinated effort from a huge community of interest.

However, not all small wars can be so classified if the number of casualties is taken as the yardstick of measurement, as the following figures show:¹⁸

- Taiping Rebellion - 1851-54: two million dead.
- US Civil War - 1861-65: 800,000 dead.
- Great War in La Plata - 1865-70: a million dead.
- Sequel to the Bolshevik Revolution - 1918-20: 600,000 dead.
- First Chinese-Communist War - 1927-36: a million dead.
- Spanish Civil War, 1936-39: two million dead.
- Communal riots in the Indian peninsula, 1946-48: 800,000 dead.

Low Intensity Conflict (LIC)

One method of classifying conflict is based on its intensity. In this method, conflict is classified as low intensity conflict (LIC), medium intensity conflict (MIC) and high intensity conflict (HIC). LIC may be ‘non-violent’ (subversion, show of force, peace-keeping under Chapter VI of the UN Charter) or ‘violent’

(revolutionary or guerrilla war, counter-insurgency, terrorism, prolonged confrontation along a Line of Control (LoC), peace-keeping under Chapter VII of the UN Charter). LIC is a generic term that is prevalent in intra-state wars and is rarely used in the context of inter-state wars. Inter-state wars such as the Arab-Israeli Wars of 1967 and 1973

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and the Indo-Pak Wars of 1947-48, 1965 and 1971 with higher levels of violence and, consequently, a larger number of casualties than LIC, are usually classified as MIC as these are generally short of full-scale all-out conventional conflict. A full-fledged conventional war like World War I and World War II would normally be referred to as HIC. If there were ever a nuclear war in future, it would naturally fall in the HIC category.

The Indian Army Doctrine definition of LIC is wider ranging:¹⁹

LIC is a generic term encompassing all kinds of armed conflicts that are above the level of peaceful coexistence among states and below the threshold of war. These include proxy war, terrorism and insurgencies. Border skirmishes also fall within this category. It involves protracted struggle of competing principles and ideologies. LIC is characterised by one or all of the following conditions:

- Asymmetry of force levels between the regular forces and the irregular opposition force.
- The force applied and the violence generated depends on the code of conduct and the capabilities of the weaker side.
- Laws of the land impose restrictions on the actions of the security forces.

Some thinkers aver that “while LIC is theoretically possible in a modern industrial nation, it is a form of conflict most appropriate to the Third World. Furthermore, it can be stated that this concept can be applied only in cases where there is no direct confrontation between the superpowers since such a confrontation, should armed conflict actually commence, could scarcely be stabilized at a LIC level. Although allied, friendly or client regimes of either side or one of the superpowers themselves may be involved, LIC theory does not allow for direct conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Third World.”²⁰

Not all analysts agree with the all encompassing definition of LIC. There are many detractors of the term LIC who are of the view that such categorisation

will hamper understanding of an emerging war form rather than enhance it. (In fact, many in the US are more comfortable with the term **Operations Other than War – OOTW**). Some opposing views are given below:

- Lt Col John Fulton of the School of Advanced Military Studies argues that in creating LIC, “the doctrine community may be creating a doctrinal foster home for orphaned warfare concepts. . . LIC’s definition is too broad, and the category is too large.”²¹
- Col Dennis Drew of Air University found it to be a “dismally poor title for a type of warfare in which thousands die, countless more are physically or psychologically maimed and, in the process, the fate of nations hangs in the balance.”²²
- Gen John R. Galvin stated, “The simple classification into high and low intensity conflict can be dangerous if it inhibits our understanding of what the fighting is all about.”²³

William Olsen of the US Army War College states: “In actual fact, the definition of LIC should not concentrate on the military level of conflict, but on its political character... The aim is not military conquest, but social control, for whose attainment military means can be employed as an element of the struggle... The use of military force must be measured by its social and political utility. Military means are a tactical element of a strategic program that emphasises goals and means. Though important, the use of military might is limited, while the use of diplomatic and political means may be unlimited.”²⁴

It emerges that LIC is a concept that is not of a purely military nature, even though it has been developed and propounded chiefly by various militaries the world over. LIC requires an integrated politico-economic-military approach, supplemented by psychological, social and diplomatic support. It can be stated without exaggeration that, conceptually, a successful counter-LIC campaign primarily requires a politically oriented integrated policy approach containing essential military elements – it is not first and foremost a military matter.

Sub-Conventional Conflict in the Indian Context

Independent India has been embroiled in conflict of one variety or the other. The long-drawn, so-called ‘eyeball-to-eyeball’ confrontation along the LoC with Pakistan since the first conflict over Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in 1947-48 and along the AGPL (Actual Ground Position Line) at Siachen Glacier in northern Kashmir since April 1984 can only be described as a “**low intensity limited war**”. The intervening periods of relative peace, such as the present period of the informal ceasefire that has been in force since November 25, 2003, is referred to

in Indian Army circles as a period of no war-no peace (NWNP).

In the early 1980s, Pakistan supported the Sikh militancy in Punjab with a view to encouraging some disaffected Sikhs led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale to establish an independent state that was to be called Khalistan. However, the movement did not have a mass base and, eventually, the Indian Army, the Punjab Police and the people of Punjab got together in the mid-1990s to defeat Pakistan's

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diabolical machinations. Since 1988-89, Pakistan has been waging a 'proxy war' against India in J&K and elsewhere through its mercenary marauders, the so-called '*jehadis*', who are armed, equipped, trained and financed by the Pakistan Army and the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate). According to the Indian Army Doctrine,²⁵ "Proxy war is a war conducted between nations utilising non-state players to fight on their behalf. At least one of them employs a third party to fight on its behalf. The extent and type of support provided by the states involved in proxy war will vary but financial and logistics support are always provided."

It is not so well appreciated in India that while the nation has been at peace, the army has been fighting a war and losing approximately 300 to 400 soldiers every year to terrorist bullets, crude bombs, suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Similarly, various central paramilitary and police forces (CPMFs) have been suffering heavy casualties due to Pakistan's invidious strategy of "bleeding India through a thousand cuts." In fact, throughout the Cold War, the two superpowers fought proxy wars all over the world. This was done by one superpower providing military, diplomatic and financial aid to their surrogates to enable them to fight adversaries supported by the other superpower. At any one time, 10 to 20 such conflicts were being fought across the world. Since Pakistan's proxy war against India does not materially concern the major powers, it has not got the attention it deserves.

Another modern day scourge afflicting India and much of the rest of the world is **terrorism**. According to the Indian Army Doctrine:²⁶ "Terrorism is the unlawful use of force or violence against people or property to terrorise, coerce or intimidate governments or societies. This is most often resorted to with the aim of achieving political, religious or ideological objectives. Terrorism thrives on a fear psychosis and could be achieved by arson, sabotage, hijacking, hoaxes, maiming, bombing, seizure, kidnapping, assassination, taking hostages, raids,

ambushes and the use or threat of use of WMD.” Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist strikes against targets in New York and Washington DC, terrorist attacks in India have been receiving some attention. The West has been increasingly realising that the source of terrorism against India and the West is the same. Kashmiri terrorists are no longer being called freedom fighters.

Conclusion

Analysis of the various terms described above reveals that most of these have rather narrow applicability and are suitable only for specific sets of circumstances arising from the socio-political, socio-economic, ethnic, religious and military milieu in which the conflicts are waged. As a generic term, perhaps “sub-conventional conflict” best describes most of the ongoing conflicts across the world. It would be more beneficial to focus efforts to study modern intra-state conflict on sub-conventional conflict as the term that is the most representative. However, not all analysts agree that modern conflicts can be explained or understood in new terms. A contrary view is worth noting:²⁷

The argument advanced here seeks to demonstrate that terms like ‘guerrilla warfare’ and ‘low intensity conflict’ are fundamentally flawed. They do not exist as proper categories of war. Often they constitute inappropriate distinctions that impede intellectual understanding of internal war phenomena, which has in the past had a negative impact upon policymaking. The usage of these terms in strategic studies literature does not facilitate understanding but rather undermines the attempt to comprehend the complexity of warfare as a whole. What we call low intensity conflict can be fully understood – can only be understood – within Clausewitzian parameters, which embrace the entire spectrum of war.

Martin van Creveld has written: “The roughly three-hundred-year period in which war was associated primarily with the type of political organisation known as the state — first in Europe, and then, with its expansion, in other parts of the globe as well — seems to be coming to an end. If the last fifty years or so provide any guide, future wars will be overwhelmingly of the type known, however inaccurately, as ‘low intensity’. Both organisationally and in terms of the equipment at their disposal, the armed forces of the world will have to adjust themselves to this situation by changing their doctrine, doing away with much of their heavy equipment and becoming more like the police. In many places that process is already well under way.”²⁸

With regard to “the lessons of history,” Boot offers this advice in his book’s final chapter: “In deploying American power, decision-makers should be less apologetic, less hesitant, less humble. Yes, there is a danger of imperial overstretch and hubris – but there is an equal, if not greater, danger of under-commitment and lack of confidence. America should not be afraid to fight ‘the savage wars of peace’ if necessary to enlarge the empire of liberty. It has done it before.”²⁹ Perhaps Indian decision-makers too ought to heed this advice when it comes to considering hard policy options for intervention in India’s neighbourhood.

Perceptive observers of world politics disagree about the approaching outlook for war.³⁰ Is the world in the midst of an era of peace with a declining prospect of war, or is it facing a future characterised by increasing small wars and low intensity conflict driven by long-suppressed ethnic tensions, religious fundamentalism, socio-economic inequities and a revolution of rising expectations? This puzzle will continue to drive social scientists to strive for a more comprehensive examination of the phenomenon of conflict.

Notes

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