

FLETCHER SECURITY REVIEW

Summer 2017 | Vol. 4 No. 1



Book Review - *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State* by Seth G. Jones

Polina Beliakova

Waging Insurgent Warfare: *Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State* by Seth G. Jones

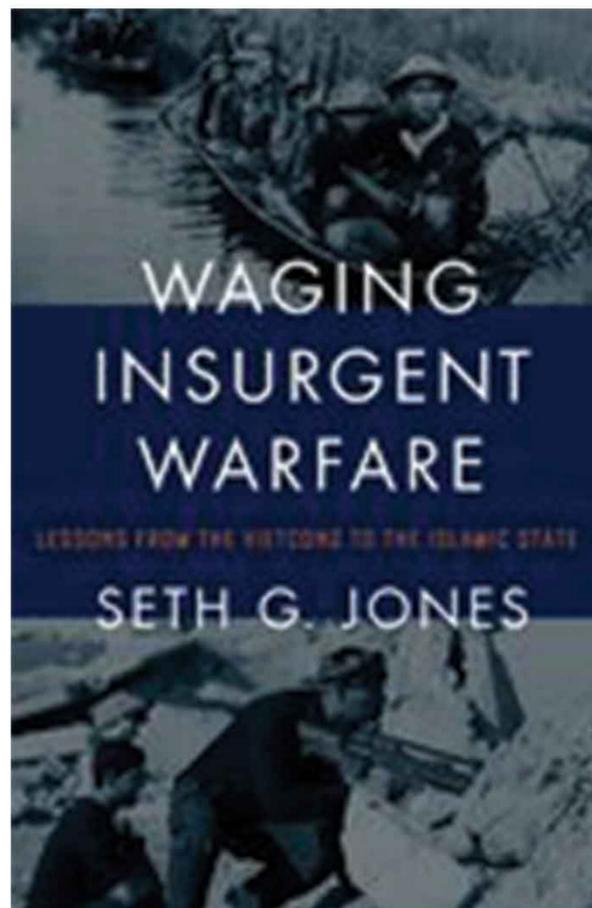
Book Review by Polina Beliakova

Insurgencies are often thought of as domestic conflicts between state and non-state actors seeking to challenge governmental legitimacy, overthrow the government, or take territorial control from the state. However, thinking about insurgency merely in terms of domestic affairs substantially limits our perspective, and might be misleading both in terms of theory and policy. In addition, the tendency of policymakers and scholars to focus their attention on counterinsurgency bears the risk of considering the solution before understanding all nuances of the problem.

Seth G. Jones' *Waging Insurgent Warfare* is truly a book about insurgency. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, Jones analyzes how insurgencies start, strategies and tactics used by insurgent groups, their organizational structures, and their informational campaigns. The author devotes particular attention to the role of outside support for insurgencies from various types of actors including great power states. Finally, he addresses the issue of how insurgencies end. Only in the concluding chapter does Jones discuss the implications of the key findings of the book for counterinsurgency.

Jones summarizes commonly known and intuitive facts about insurgencies (e.g., local grievances and weak government provide motivation, insurgents rely on guerrilla warfare), and then builds a basis for answering a critical question: which attributes affect the insurgents' chances to begin and win their struggle?

Waging Insurgent Warfare answers this question by combining qualitative and quantitative methodology. The qualitative data are driven from the firsthand accounts of the rebel commanders and operatives themselves. The author skillfully illustrates his arguments with examples taken from the primary source documents. The book is rich with anecdotes, which give the reader a feeling of a strong connection between the discussed issues and real-life events. When it comes to quantitative data, the author relies on the database of 181 insurgencies that took place in a period



of 1946-2015. The data accounts for the outcome of the war (victory, tie, defeat), insurgent strategies (conventional, guerrilla, punishment), group size, organizational structure, goals, and types of the outside support.

The main findings of *Waging Insurgent Warfare*

are supported by the quantitative regression analysis. They demonstrate that the discussion of insurgency transcends the state and even regional boundaries and must take place in the context of international security. Jones shows that *direct combat support from a great power* to the insurgent group significantly *increases* the likelihood of the rebels' victory. Moreover, even when opposing great powers provide assistance to the government, insurgents still have a higher chance to win. Jones acknowledges the issue of endogeneity (i.e., superpowers only choosing to support insurgent groups they consider likely to win), but through historical examples he demonstrates the primary driver of a great power's decision is geopolitical, not the insurgents' likelihood of success.

Interestingly, *great power support to the counterinsurgent* (both direct combatant support and, for instance, resources and training) is expected to *decrease* the likelihood of the rebel's victory if they do not obtain assistance from another great power. Denying superpower support for rebels may therefore be a crucial component to counterinsurgency campaigns. This finding again underscores the international dimension of insurgency con-

Jones' findings also make evident that the classic hearts-and-minds counterinsurgency approach is still relevant and must be accounted for by governments striving to undermine insurgent support

flicts, and how they must be understood as multi-level games played both on domestic and international levels.

These findings have serious implications for understanding the significance of Russian and U.S. involvement in ongoing conflicts in Syria and Ukraine. For instance, the Russian strategy focuses on direct combat support of Bashar al-Assad's government as a legitimizing cause for involvement in Syrian counterinsurgency, while simultaneously providing assistance to insurgent forces in the Eastern Ukraine. In contrast, the U.S. strategy is one of limited support to some Syrian opposition rebel forces and providing training and aid to the Ukrainian military. Jones' findings suggest that Russian combat support increases the likelihood Assad's forces will succeed unless the United States or another great power puts troops directly into Syria to support the opposition. These findings are also bad news for Ukraine: without a great power's direct combat support, the fate of the Donbass insurgency depends on the Russian Federation's support for the separatist forces.

Jones' findings also make evident that the classic hearts-and-minds counterinsurgency approach is still relevant and must be accounted for by governments striving to undermine insurgent support. In particular, the *reliance on punitive strategies* that involve targeting noncombatants in order to overcome their resistance or to compel government *proved not to play in insurgents' favor*. Therefore, protecting general populations in conflicts where the battlefield and civilian-populated areas overlap becomes not only an ethical consideration for the counterinsurgent but also a strategically beneficial objective.

Waging Insurgent Warfare is a comprehensive overview of the subject, rich with real-life examples from primary sources and supported by the empirical findings of the quantitative analysis. While summarizing the existing bulk of knowledge about insurgency, it also reaffirms well-established principles of counterinsurgency

discussed by Galula,¹ O'Neill,² and Kilcullen,³ such as prioritization of the safety of the general population.¹ The main contribution of this book, however, lies in bringing to the reader's attention the critical influence that the great power support for the rebels has on the outcome of a conflict. Great power support for the insurgent can obviate the strategic asymmetry in tangible assets between the rebels and the government, which is one of the foundational assumptions of counterinsurgency theory discussed by Galula.⁴ Furthermore, it has a potential of decreasing the significance of the popular support for insurgents, since the general population is no longer considered as a provider of necessary resources for the rebels. Adding to the strategic equation of insurgency an actor with such a strong political gravity as a great power requires to adjust counterinsurgency theory accordingly. What Kilcullen calls an "armed social work"⁵ when referring to the counterinsurgent's necessity to provide civil governance to the population while fighting the insurgent forces, now has to be complemented with a strategy of international negotiations in order to manage the great power engagement in the conflict. In this way, Jones' findings open an avenue for further research on counterinsurgency as a multilevel domestic and international strategy.

To summarize, *Waging Insurgent Warfare* will be relevant both to students of intrastate conflict and international relations. While it does not provide new theoretical insights on this type of warfare, its empirical findings can serve as an inspiration for further research. The book can be a great opening read for those interested in internal conflicts, as it offers a clear and comprehensive summary of existing knowledge on the subject.

¹ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006).

² Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse*, (New Delhi: Manas Publications, 2006).

³ David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴ Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, 3-4.

⁵ Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 43.

Polina Beliakova

Polina Beliakova is a PhD student at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.