



**Government Responses to Asymmetric Threats:
The State of the Literature on Counterinsurgency from 2002 to 2022—
The Military Lever of Power**

Global Responses to Asymmetric Threats Report

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

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ABOUT START

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is a university-based research, education and training center comprised of an international network of scholars committed to the scientific study of terrorism, responses to terrorism and related phenomena. Led by the University of Maryland, START is a Department of Homeland Security Emeritus Center of Excellence that is supported by multiple federal agencies and departments. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and effects of terrorism; the effectiveness and impacts of counterterrorism and CVE; and other matters of global and national security. For more information, visit www.start.umd.edu or contact START at infostart@umd.edu.

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Findings.....	1
Research Type.....	1
What is Explained—COIN-Relevant Dependent Variables and Concepts	2
What is the Cause—COIN-Relevant Independent Variables and Concepts.....	3
Publication Venue	14
Frequency of Publications over Time.....	15
Methodological Focus	16
Geographic Focus.....	21
Target	22
Research Gaps & Recommendations.....	23
Tactics & Non-Tactics Relevant Focus.....	23
Methodology, Concepts & Generalizability	25
References.....	27

Introduction

This report is a companion report to the publication “Government Responses to Asymmetric Threats: The State of the Literature on Counterinsurgency from 2002-2022,” which outlined general trends in government response to asymmetric threats as part of the Global Responses to Asymmetric Threats project. The latter is part of a broader research effort, Irregular Warfare Net Assessment Data Structure (IW-NEADS), that aims to create a data resource for assessment, analysis, and prioritization across various pillars of irregular warfare.¹ This report presents an overview of existing state of research on governments’ use of military lever of power in counterinsurgency (COIN) from 2002-2022.

The first section of the report—*Findings*—discusses insight from the analysis of the data that the research team compiled by coding the literature on several dimensions related, in this report specifically, to research on government use of military lever of power in COIN. These include findings on research type (empirical vs. non-empirical publications), patterns on the frequency of publication across time, geographic focus of the literature, and methodological tools employed in empirical studies. The report also sheds light on the extent to which the literature focuses on governments’ military strategies targeting the insurgents or the state itself in the form of institutional reforms or outreach to the general population. It highlights what the literature most often seeks to explain (dependent variables and concepts) in the context of COIN. It then discusses the causes (independent variables and concepts) that the literature explores to explain COIN-relevant phenomena. The most prominent part of this section are insights on key findings from empirical studies on the effectiveness and limitations of specific COIN tactics based on the qualitative and quantitative literature that engages in scientific testing of hypotheses or key arguments.

The second section—*Research Gaps and Recommendations*—identifies key missing areas in existing research and provides suggestions for future research agenda. Considering existing findings, the report outlines directions for future exploration of factors related to military tactics specifically and non-tactic related military factors that nevertheless have relevance for tactical/strategic design and implementation. Lastly, this section also addresses methodological and conceptual limitations and offers suggestions for improvements in these areas.

Findings

Research Type

The literature on the states’ use of military lever of power in COIN contains empirical pieces or those that include qualitative or quantitative testing and non-empirical pieces that either highlight policy recommendations, review existing insights on the subject, or provide a theoretical foundation for unpacking connections between variables without engaging in hypothesis testing. Most of the literature pieces reviewed (67.1 percent) adopt an empirical approach, while over a third (32.9

¹ Irregular warfare is defined in this report as a violent struggle between state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over target populations. The five pillars of IW include: unconventional warfare (UW), foreign internal defense (FID), counterterrorism (CT), counterinsurgency (COIN), and stability operations (SO) (Irregular Warfare, Joint Operating Concept 2007). Increasingly, state actors are engaging in irregular warfare against state adversaries below the threshold that would result in conventional response (Department of Defense, Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy, 2020).

percent) of them provide policy recommendations, review past work, or develop theoretical concepts relevant to the military lever of state power. This resembles the trend found in the general report, which highlights insights that are, to a larger extent, driven by the military lever of state power sample as it is the most frequently studied source of power in counterinsurgency by scholars and policy practitioners.

What is Explained—COIN-Relevant Dependent Variables and Concepts

The general report identified six categories of dependent variables and concepts that are most examined in COIN research. These include: 1) security; 2) socio-political-economic factors involving the state; 3) socio-political-economic factors involving the public/individual; 4) duration of conflicts; 5) COIN outcomes; and 6) the sustainability of COIN practices.² When considering the literature that focuses on the state's use of military lever of power, the distribution of dependent variables across these categories resembles the one found in the general COIN report. As shown in Table 1, the literature's most dominant interest is in explaining or addressing COIN outcomes such as victory/defeat or success/failure (59.5 percent of the variables), followed by the category of "other" (15.3%), which includes variables that do not focus directly on COIN outcome, though they relate to COIN outcomes, such as, for example, variation in government's compliance with external patrons' policies.³ The emphasis on exploring some aspect of security is present in 12.3 percent of the variables. There is a considerable drop in exploring the remaining categories of dependent variables and concepts. Thus, only 5.2 percent of the variables focus on the population's socio-political-economic phenomena, followed by COIN sustainability (4.9 %), conflict duration (2.8 %). There were no pieces of literature that explored the phenomena related to the state's socio-political-economic institutions.

The major difference between literature with the focus on military lever of power and other pieces is the greater interest of the former in explaining COIN outcomes such as success and failure. Within the military-lever of power literature subset, 62.4 percent of the variables focus on COIN outcome while only 53 percent of the variables in the literature that includes all levers of power explore this type of dependent variable. As might be expected, the military-lever of power subset of the literature is also less concentrated on exploring the connection between military approaches and socio-political-economic phenomena involving the public (5.2 % of the variables) in comparison to the sample of the literature that includes all levers of state power (8 % of the variables).

² Radziszewski et al. (2023) provide the following description of the dependent variable categories. Security factors focus on explaining the levels of violence, such as violence targeting civilians, levels of violent insurgent activity, or the ratio of insurgents killed to COIN forces. Indirect measures of security, such as the presence of tactical innovation, the formation of indigenous military units, the disruption of insurgent supplies, or the degree of public fear of the militias also belong to this category. Socio-political-economic factors at the state level explore the development of non-military state institutions and include, for example, an analysis of the success or failure of state building initiatives broadly defined or specific institutions such as the rule of law at the federal level. Socio-political-economic factors at the population/individual level focus on addressing the success or failure of COIN initiatives aimed at the public, the type of initiatives undertaken, the scale of the initiatives, and the variation in public attitudes towards socio-political and economic issues, among others. The conflict duration category includes literature pieces that explain which factors account for the time taken to reach conflict termination or negotiated settlements. The category of COIN outcomes focuses on measuring the effectiveness of COIN practices, accounting for whether the government or the insurgents achieved victory in a conflict, whether there was a draw, stalemate, or a negotiated settlement, or capturing the overall success/failure of a specific operation. COIN sustainability focuses on long-term effectiveness. Studies with dependent variables in this category examine the endurance of peace over time and measure how tenable security operations are across time and space.

³ For example: Ladwig 2016.

Table 1. Distribution of Dependent Variables Across Categories	
Dependent Variable Category	% of Dependent Variables
<i>Security</i> (e.g. levels of violent insurgent activity; ratio of insurgents killed to COIN forces)	12.3
<i>COIN outcome</i> (e.g., COIN success/failure; draw, stalemate, negotiated settlement)	59.5
<i>Socio-political-economic factors involving the public/individual</i> (e.g., civilian collaboration with the state; public opinion towards the government/insurgents)	5.2
<i>Duration of conflict</i> (e.g., time taken in years to reach conflict termination or negotiated settlement)	2.8
<i>Sustainability of COIN</i> (e.g., endurance of peace over time)	4.9
<i>Socio-political-economic factors involving the state</i> (e.g., success/failure of state building)	0
<i>Other</i> (e.g., variation in government’s compliance with external patrons’ policies; civil-military coordination)	15.3

What is the Cause—COIN-Relevant Independent Variables and Concepts

There are 12 main categories of independent variables (for empirical pieces) or concepts (for other pieces) that COIN literature has focused on, as further broken down and defined in Table 2 below. These include exploring the role of tactics, adaptability to conflict/innovation, military capability of the government, doctrine development, external military interventions, the military’s organizational structure, military unity and cognitive factors, the relationship between the host state and third-party external intervener, military culture, public support for the military, and military leadership. There are also pieces that fall into the “other” category, and these include articles where the military lever of power is not directly analyzed. Instead, a study might explore another variable, which in turn, can impact the state’s military approach and the outcome of COIN.⁴ When considering all pieces of the

⁴ Consider, for example, Kramer’s (2004) study of Russian counterinsurgency in Chechnya in which he shows that Russia’s military capability and the capability of the Chechen forces had an impact on

literature, the report identifies 769 unique independent variables and concepts, with tactics comprising the largest category.

The subsequent analysis presents insights on 415 independent variables from empirical pieces only. Table 2 shows the literature’s level of interest in 12 categories of independent variables. The most dominant category is Tactics with 41.2 percent of all independent variables focusing on the government’s tactics in COIN, followed by Other, defined as a category where military lever of power is analyzed indirectly (29.9%), Military Capability (5.3%), Adaptability to Conflict (4.3%), and Doctrine Development (4.1%). A surprising finding is the limited interest in exploring the impact of Third-Party Intervener’s Relationship with the Government on COIN outcomes (1.9%), the role of Culture (1.2%) and Leadership (1%). The last two have been studied in the mainstream international relations literature to explain, for example, how leadership traits impact public mobilization in war⁵ or how culture affects mediation⁶ yet remain infrequently explored in the context of COIN.

Table 2. Distribution of Independent Variables Across Categories in Empirical Studies	
Independent Variable Category	% of Independent Variables
<i>Tactics</i> (e.g., use of non-state actors, resettlement, use of indiscriminate violence, provision of security to the population)	41.2
<i>Government’s military capability</i> (e.g., level of mechanization of forces, troop size, quality of junior commanders)	5.3
<i>Adaptability/Innovation</i> (e.g., changing tactics during the conflict, flexibility in implementation; adapting practices from past conflicts)	4.3
<i>Doctrine development</i> (e.g., disconnect between theory and practice of COIN, COIN doctrine, unity of political & military goals)	4.1
<i>External intervention</i>	3.6

prolonging protracted stalemate. The independent variable categories are “military capability” and “other.” While military capability of Chechen forces is not a source of the state’s military power, it can have an impact on how the state’s military is deployed and the level of effectiveness. Thus, Chechen military forces (the second independent variable that is studied) can impact the state’s use of military, which in turn, can affect COIN outcomes. Rather than exclude pieces with main independent variables that are not directly military-lever-of-power relevant, the report classified such variables into “other” category for their indirect connection to the state’s use of military power and COIN outcomes.

⁵ For example: Horowitz and Fuhrmann (2018).

⁶ For example: Bercovitch and Foulkes (2012).

(e.g., external military aid, level of commitment by intervening state)	
<i>Military organizational structure</i> (e.g., type of force structure, level of force integration)	3.4
<i>Military unity and cognitive factors</i> (e.g., consistency of effort among coalition partners, commitment to COIN, beliefs)	2.9
<i>Third-party intervener-government relations</i> (e.g., coordination between intervener and government forces, training of government forces)	1.9
<i>Public support</i> (e.g., public support for the military/COIN operation)	1.2
<i>Culture</i> (e.g., ethnicity of forces conducting COIN, military institutional culture)	1.2
<i>Leadership</i> (e.g., leadership structure, role of military advisers)	1.0
<i>Other</i> (variables that capture indirect connection to state use of military power; e.g., rebel strength, threat level)	29.9

Turning to empirical pieces that focused on the largest independent variable category where the military lever of power is directly examined, and which is the key focus of this report—governments’ tactics in COIN—Table 3 identifies top 10 most frequently examined tactics and notes the findings on the tactics’ effectiveness.⁷

⁷ When considering effectiveness, the studies’ dependent variables fall into the following general categories: conflict duration, security, COIN outcome, and conflict sustainability.

Table 3. Top 10 Most Frequently Analyzed Tactics in Empirical Studies and Their Effectiveness

Counterinsurgency Tactic	% of Findings with Positive Impact⁸	% of Findings with Negative Impact	% of Findings with No/Mixed Impact
<i>Use of armed non-state actors</i>	38.1	28.6	33.3
<i>Military presence/kinetic operations/use of conventional forces</i>	60	24	16
<i>Use of indiscriminate violence/repressive force</i>	37.5	62.5	0
<i>Forced population resettlement</i>	63.6	36.4	0
<i>Provision of security to the public</i>	75	25	0
<i>Restraint & legitimacy in the use of force</i>	57.1	42.9	0
<i>Cordon & search operations</i>	83.3	16.7	0
<i>Use of special forces</i>	60	20	20
<i>Use of air power</i>	0	100	0

⁸ Percentage is calculated based on the number of times that a variable was studied and not on the number of articles. This accounts for the possibility that a single article could have more than one hypothesis, and thus more than one finding, related to a given variable.

<i>Use of former insurgents as forces</i>	75	25	0
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1. Use of Armed Non-State Actors

The most studied tactic is the use of armed non-state actors by the government and includes private military and security companies/mercenaries, civilian resistance/defense groups, and other types of pro-government militias that consist of former servicemen and engage in offensive tasks (Table 3 and Table 4). This variable was analyzed 42 times in 22 studies. Overall, there is more evidence to support the claim that the use of such actors is helpful to the government when considering conflict duration, security, COIN outcome, and conflict sustainability. Approximately 38 percent of the time that scholars focused on the use of armed non-state actors in their research, they found this tactic beneficial to the government, 28.6 percent of the time the impact was negative and 33.3 percent of the time, the results were either not statistically significant or reported mixed effects.

Positive impact for the government is connected to the use of citizen defense groups⁹ and militia due to their ability to gather superior intelligence and familiarity with local dynamics,¹⁰ and to the reliance on the services of private military companies under specific conditions.¹¹ When it comes to private military companies, these favorable dynamics occur when such actors are integrated with the activities of the army, face competition, and the ratio of employees working for public companies or those that are listed on the stock market is greater than those working for closed ones—factors that enhance their accountability to the government.

Studies by RAND researchers on 30 and then 71 insurgencies reported several findings on the use of militias, the impact of which they studied under different conditions. They note that relying on militias is beneficial when such actors are either well trained or perform in unity with COIN forces' interests.¹² They also find that when COIN forces are not denied access to any conflict area, they can mitigate negative externalities associated with using militias even when the latter work at cross-purposes and achieve success. Finally, the use of militias has no impact on COIN outcome when external interveners are involved in the conflict.¹³ Unlike the prevalence of qualitative methods found in the general report on government responses to COIN across multiple levers of power, findings on government use of armed non-state actors are more evenly balanced in the use of qualitative case studies and quantitative statistical analysis.

⁹ For example: Oyewole (2017).

¹⁰ For example: Kozera (2018).

¹¹ For example: Akcinaroglu and Radziszewski (2013), Tkach (2020), Petersohn (2011).

¹² Paul et al. (2010, 2013a, 2013b).

¹³ Paul et al. (2013 and 2013b).

Table 4. The Number of Times that Empirical Literature Analyzed Government’s Use of Armed Non-State Actors by Actor Type and Their Impact

Actor Type	Positive	Negative	No Effect/ Mixed
<i>Private Military & Security Companies/ Mercenaries</i>	6	5	3
<i>Civilian Defense Forces</i>	3	2	0
<i>Pro-Government Militias</i>	7	5	11

2. *Military Presence/Kinetic Operations/Use of Conventional Forces*

Studies also examine whether military presence, the use of conventional forces, or engaging in kinetic operations—broadly defined—have helped the government gain advantage over the insurgents.¹⁴ Military presence, kinetic operations, and use of conventional forces were studied 26 times by 23 empirical pieces. These studies sometimes refer to kinetic operations as coercive operations or the militarization of strategy. At times, they focus on the increase in military presence (the surge). Four studies concentrate on the use of conventional forces (as opposed to special or other types of irregular forces). Overall, military presence and kinetic operations are important for COIN success. Close to 62 percent of the time that military presence, kinetic operations, or the use of conventional forces were studied, research demonstrated their effectiveness. For example, in his analysis of the Dhofar War, DeVore (2012) notes that conventional approaches were critical for conflict termination. Creating a barrier between rebel forces and the population centers enabled the government to emerge successful in this conflict.¹⁵

Still, within the group of studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of military presence or the use of kinetic operations/conventional forces, several note that such operations work under specific conditions. Thus, the benefit of military actions is more likely when it occurs together with “softer” population-supporting and rehabilitation tactics¹⁶ and is more heavily employed only after the implementation of an intelligence-gathering phase to ensure precision of actions and limiting blowback from the population.¹⁷ Ground forces also have a greater impact when they work together with irregular forces, such as militia groups, reaping the benefit of local groups’ intelligence insights while also maintaining the ability to limit the risk of such groups simultaneously working for the rebels.¹⁸ This joint effect was also evident in Iraq during the surge where an increase in military

¹⁴ Studies that focus on specific types of operations, such as bombing campaigns or raids, and that analyze these variables separately without the reference to more general independent variables like military presence and/or military operations, are not included here. Some of these specific tactics, such as the use of special forces and bombing campaigns, are discussed in this report while others, such as the use of raids is not because it is outside of the top 10 most frequently analyzed tactics.

¹⁵ De Vore (2012).

¹⁶ For example: Shapoo (2019), Paul et al. (2016), Anderson (2011).

¹⁷ Anderson (2011).

¹⁸ Paul et al. (2010).

presence worked in synergy with the Anbar Awakening to create the conditions that enabled Sunni tribes to reduce insurgent violence in al-Anbar and beyond, again demonstrating that when the government's military approach is not the sole weapon against the enemy, it brings tangible benefits to the state.¹⁹

When it comes to implementing a surge, however, it is important to note the tactic's benefit in the short run in reducing insurgent activity, but limitations in ending the insurgency in the long run. This occurs because massive use of force drives the insurgents underground. Increasing military operations also does not necessarily address the underlying grievances and the broader geopolitical environment that can keep conflicts alive.²⁰ Most research shows, for example, that external assistance to the insurgents is a major obstacle to the long-term success of government operations.²¹ Therefore, military operations designed to physically interdict external support to the rebels combined with diplomatic efforts to reduce third-party assistance could extend the initial success of a surge.

Overall, while these post-2002 findings are consistent with past work on counterinsurgency that considers exclusive focus on conventional approaches insufficient in delivering the desired outcome to the government,²² the majority of the studies nevertheless show that military action is necessary. Insights on the post-2002 findings mostly come from qualitative, single-case analysis. Sixty four percent of the articles that explored the impact of military presence, kinetic operations, and the use of conventional forces on COIN outcome, sustainability, and security adopt this approach to examining the validity of their argument.

Three non-qualitative studies employed dynamic simulations and agent-based modeling to capture the impact of military surge and kinetic operations on insurgent activity over time, in combination with another military factor, unity among coalition forces, and non-military approaches that included changes in population growth and levels of legitimacy. This type of complex quantitative modeling accounts for the ever-evolving contours of the conflict environment to track the tactics' effectiveness while considering how balancing tactics can reduce blowback. Lastly, Paul et al. (2013b)²³ trace the impact of various COIN tactics, including military presence, in 71 insurgencies from 1944-2010 and note the importance of "boots on the ground" for government victory through the analysis of necessary and sufficient conditions.

3. Use of Indiscriminate Violence or Repressive Force

The third most frequently studied tactic is the use of indiscriminate violence or repressive force that results in heavy civilian casualties. Governments are more likely to pursue this approach when they are unable to differentiate between combatants and civilians, and when they face powerful guerrilla forces that derive their support from the population.²⁴ The outcome of this type of heavy-handed response was explored 16 times by 16 empirical articles, with majority of the literature (63.2%) relying on qualitative methodology to generate findings, and seven quantitative studies, four of which were based on multi-country analysis. Three studies generated by RAND's scholars provide findings

¹⁹ Biddle et al. (2012).

²⁰ Ibid (2011).

²¹ For example: Paul et al. (2016), Rabasa et. al (2007).

²² For example: Galula (1964), Nagl (1999).

²³ This work uses Qualitative Comparative Analysis, an approach that combines historical case analysis with quantitative analysis of sufficient and necessary conditions.

²⁴ For example: Valentino et al. (2004).

based on comparison of over 30 case studies, which they then extend to include a total of 71.²⁵ These studies are included in both qualitative and quantitative analysis count because of their use of Qualitative Comparative Analysis method.²⁶

Overall, the studies' findings indicate that using indiscriminate or repressive force is ineffective for the government. Over 62 percent of the time that scholars analyzed this tactic, they found that it failed to bring the desired outcome for the government. Indiscriminate violence leads to resentment among the population, which in turn diminishes trust between the population and the government and increases collaboration with the insurgents.²⁷ Even when it works in the short term, it tends to backfire in the long run. In his study of the Chechen conflict, for example, Souleimanov and Siroky (2016) relied on interviews with ex-combatants and witnesses to demonstrate that while indiscriminate violence reduced rebel activity in targeted areas, insurgent activity returned approximately 6-9 months later in an unexpected way—not in a location previously targeted by the government but it was instead deployed retributively somewhere else to avoid bringing more harm to the initially attacked area. This long-term failure was also noted by RAND researchers in their 2010 report. Overall, findings from 2002-2022 reflect insights like those found in pre-2002 literature on collective punishment representing a poor response by the government to insurgent threats.²⁸

4. *Forced Population Resettlement*

Across different insurgencies, governments resettled populations as part of their COIN strategy to deny the insurgents access to supporters and resources,²⁹ and at times, to create a human buffer zone, as was done in Vietnam.³⁰ This tactic has been analyzed 11 times by 9 pieces and most studies (63.6%) demonstrate that it has helped the government achieve its objective while 36.4 percent of articles note its failure. Paul et al. (2013a; 2013b) examined displacement alone and displacement with care for the population and found that this tactic works when it is done with responsiveness to the needs of the population but not when it occurs merely as a tool of relocation. Thus, the likelihood of success drops when the resettled population's living conditions resemble those found in refugee camps or worse rather than when the counterinsurgents strive to provide an adequate standard of living.³¹

Aside from Paul et al.'s qualitative and quantitative research on 71 cases of insurgencies and Miroiu's qualitative study of Malaya, Algeria, and Romania, empirical studies on resettlement's effectiveness

²⁵ Paul et al. (2013b) and (2010).

²⁶ The decision to classify RAND studies under both qualitative and quantitative methods is based on Roig-Tierno et al.'s (2017) study of QCA which notes that the method combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

²⁷ For example: Schutte (2017) and Kaiser and Hagan (2018).

²⁸ Lyall (2009).

²⁹ Miroiu (2015).

³⁰ Vong (2020).

³¹ Paul et al.'s (2013a and 2013b) findings on displacement were placed in the "negative" impact category and not the "mixed" one because the number of cases where counterinsurgents used care in the displacement process and were successful is rare, only 5 percent of all observations, while the common practice has been to pursue displacement without care. The evidence for the latter's impact suggests that it is mostly negative.

are mostly based on single-case analysis. Four studies (three of which are a series of RAND reports) rely on quantitative tools to assess the tactics' utility.³²

5. *Provision of Security to the Public*

As might be expected, there is strong support in the literature for the military's involvement in operations that provide security to the public. Such security-building efforts can be part of the broader pacification campaign that involves cordoning off the area, removing the insurgents, helping to cultivate governance, and establishing security on the ground.³³ At times, such efforts are studied as part of hearts-and-minds campaigns designed to win the public's support for the government through security and development provision. The enhancement of security not only increases the public's confidence in the military but also allows the military to strike more directly at the insurgents once the enemy's access to the villages is limited, as was the case in West Java in the 1960s.³⁴ The majority of the research finds this approach advantageous to COIN success. Out of eight times that studies examined the impact of security provision by the military, this tactic was found beneficial to the government six times (75%).

Associating security provision to the public with negative outcomes for the government appears counterintuitive. Yet it was noted in two studies, which attributed it to insufficient provision of manpower or the identity of the forces that provided security. The Dutch effort in Afghanistan, for example, was ineffective in stopping the insurgents from returning to Baluchi valley not because the Dutch lacked the skills and proper understanding of how to conduct COIN operations but because the mere presence of 400-500 infantry meant the mission was too small to establish continuous presence to deter insurgents from returning after kinetic operations were undertaken to clear the area.³⁵ Another piece found that when the provision of security to the population is in the hands of foreigners, especially for an extended period of time, the situation allows the insurgents to incite anti-occupation, nationalist sentiments and provides the counterinsurgent force with a limited latitude to succeed.³⁶

Post-2002 research on the military's role in providing security to the public and its impact on COIN outcome is mostly qualitative. Several pieces include multiple country analysis; most notable is the already discussed work by RAND researchers whose comparative approach is based on 71 insurgencies.³⁷ Given the presence of a relatively small number of studies (8) that have examined security provision to the public and only three quantitative analysis published after 2002 by the same group of RAND researchers, additional analysis of this tactic would be beneficial.

6. *Restraint and Legitimacy in the Use of Force*

Most of the studies demonstrate the value in reducing collateral damage from military operations and using force in accordance with ethical principles rooted in proportionality.³⁸ As building legitimacy is linked to the protection of the population, unnecessary civilian casualties can hurt the government's

³² Zhukov (2015).

³³ For example: Paul (2013b).

³⁴ Kilcullen (2006).

³⁵ Dimitriu and de Graaf (2010).

³⁶ Rabasa et al. (2007).

³⁷ Paul et al. (2010) and (2013b).

³⁸ For discussion of proportionality in war, see Hurka (2005).

effort to emerge as a stronger provider of security to the people than the insurgents and create anger that pushes individuals to join the insurgency. Restraint and legitimate use of force have been examined seven times by seven pieces, with over 57 percent of them showing the benefit of this strategy to the government. This body of research is mostly qualitative (60%), and aside from RAND researchers' study of legitimate use of force in 71 insurgencies,³⁹ the literature focuses on single cases. One quantitative work that used agent-based modeling to examine the impact of killing or injuring a civilian, the effectiveness of soldiers in removing insurgents, and the role of aid provided by soldiers, shows that avoiding injuring civilians is more important than provision of aid in COIN success. When both effectiveness and accuracy in limiting the killing or injuring of civilians are high, defeat of the insurgents is rapid.⁴⁰ The remaining three works come from the same group of RAND researchers who used Qualitative Comparative Analysis.

Practicing restraint, however, comes with some limitations. For one it can be exploited by the enemy who may strategically use human shields to gain advantage knowing that pro-restraint forces would resist using military power that could lead to civilian deaths as was the case in the context of the Rangers' operations in Somalia against General Aidid's forces.⁴¹ There is also a matter of coordinating policy with all counterinsurgent forces—the military and the police—and practicing the same approach. When the military shows restraint but the police engage in intimidation of the population and aggressive search-and-destroy missions, as was the case in Namibia, the benefits of legitimate practice by the military can be easily overshadowed by the police force's brutality.⁴² Therefore, the benefits of restraint bring desired outcome to the government when there is full commitment to the practice across all forces responsible for security.

7. *Cordon and Search Operations*

Cordon and search operations, based on limited studies, yield strong benefits for the government. The tactic, investigated six times by five studies, has been shown to contribute positively to COIN over 83 percent of the time that it was analyzed. By accessing insurgent weapons and driving them away from the cordoned area, the COIN forces can diminish insurgent activity and contribute to COIN victory. In his analysis of disarmament or cordon and search operations in the Soviet North Caucasus (Chechnya, Dagestan, and neighboring republics), Zhukov (2016) finds this tactic's effectiveness at the local and regional level and in the short and long term, while Braithwaite and Johnson (2012) demonstrate its benefit after the 11th week in reducing the frequency of insurgent IED (improvised explosive devices) attacks in Iraq. This type of operation is most likely to succeed when the terrain enables the government forces to encircle the insurgents, with infrastructure to move supplies and troops, and when population density is high and clustered in specific areas.⁴³ Thus, terrain type needs to be considered prior to planning the operation.

Research on cordon and search operations has slightly more quantitative work (55.6%) than qualitative (44.4%). This quantitative and qualitative sample, however, is dominated by the work of

³⁹ Paul et al. (2010) and (2013b).

⁴⁰ Pechenkina and Bennett (2017).

⁴¹ Ecklund (2004).

⁴² de Visser (2013).

⁴³ Kilcullen (2006).

RAND researchers based on comparison of 71 cases and which is classified under both qualitative and quantitative research. The remaining non-RAND studies focus on single cases.

8. *Use of Special Forces*

The use of special forces has been examined five times in five empirical pieces, and it is a beneficial tactic for the government—it has been found to bring success 60 percent of the time that it was analyzed. The main advantage is the special forces' ability to inject their presence into a conflict zone with less disruption, which often enables such forces to integrate themselves into the community without the risk of a backlash that can come from a large military presence. This, in turn, facilitates access to relevant intelligence and allows the counterinsurgents to better isolate the population from the insurgents.⁴⁴ When special forces fail to engage the population and gain full understanding of the nature of the threat, they are less successful in accomplishing their mission, as was seen in Somalia.⁴⁵

The shortcoming of this body of work reflects the limitations of post-2002 research on most other COIN tactics analyzed in this report. Insights on the use of special forces come from qualitative research, and they are based on single country analysis.⁴⁶ The report did not identify any quantitative study that specifically examined the use of special forces as an independent variable in the context of COIN effectiveness.

9. *Use of Air Power*

Using air power as part of counterinsurgency has not been beneficial to governments—there is uniform agreement on this among five empirical pieces that have examined this tactic (3 qualitatively and 2 quantitatively).⁴⁷ Air power can help support intelligence gathering and provide additional firepower to the troops on the ground, but these efforts have not brought the desired outcomes in practice.⁴⁸ The main challenge is that when air power is used to target insurgents, even when the intention is to limit its indiscriminate use, the odds are high that civilians will be victimized because it is harder for them than for the insurgents to hide and survive. This, in turn, can have a devastating outcome for the government in the long run as it leads to an increase in civilian participation in an insurgency.

The negative impact of aerial bombardment is systematically analyzed by Kocher et al. (2012) in their quantitative study of every bombing that took place across 10,000 hamlets in Vietnam over 10 years. Relying on rich data, which also includes control variables, and statistical methods such as matching techniques and instrumental variables to address causality, they demonstrate that as frequency of

⁴⁴ Rabasa et al. (2007), Salt (2018).

⁴⁵ Ecklund (2004).

⁴⁶ Paul et al. (2013a and 2013b) consider/unconventional personnel, other irregular forces, and regular troops as part of their Boots on the Ground factor. Our report includes this factor in the “military presence, kinetic operations, use of conventional forces” independent variable count. Paul et al. (2013a and 2013b) do not focus separately on special forces in their analysis.

⁴⁷ It is important to note that there is vast literature that explores the use of drones in intrastate conflict. However, our keywords search did not yield any of those pieces because their focus is on the use of drones in the context of counterterrorism rather than specifically in the context of counterinsurgency. Among empirical studies, Johnston (2012) is the exception, however, his study's independent variable is leader decapitation and not the use of air strikes, though air strikes were one of the tools used for decapitation.

⁴⁸ Oyewole (2017).

bombing increased so did the Viet Cong's control of the population. When the use of helicopters is analyzed across insurgencies over time and across space, their use is also negatively related to incumbent victory.⁴⁹ This report did not identify any empirical studies that attributed government success to the use of air power through case study or quantitative analysis of data, although potential benefits of air power are discussed by policy pieces⁵⁰ and one empirical article.⁵¹

10. Use of Former Insurgents as Forces

Finally, the last military tactic in the top 10 most studied tactics in the post-2002 empirical literature examines the value of relying on former insurgents in COIN operations. Former insurgents have access to intelligence that can help spot the location of insurgent havens, enable the counterinsurgents to be more selective in identifying supporters of the insurgency, and shed light on the insurgent organization's structure and operations.⁵² In Vietnam, for example, the creation of U.S. Chieu Hoi program that encouraged insurgent defection and integration with U.S. and South Vietnamese armies was deemed a significant threat to the strategic operations of Viet Cong by the enemy itself.⁵³ In Chechnya, the deployment of indigenous forces made up of former insurgents who were granted amnesty proved critical in achieving success in COIN.

This success is likely when insurgents served long enough in the enemy ranks to possess access to valuable intelligence and when structures exist to reduce the risk of former insurgents' collaboration with the enemy. In Chechnya, the risk of collaboration was reduced through the threat of collective punishment and initiation processes that required the killing of an insurgent to tie former insurgents to their newly formed unit. However, when counterinsurgents did not minimize the risk of collaboration, as was the case in the neighboring Dagestan, they faced major setbacks.⁵⁴

The report identifies three empirical pieces that analyzed the benefit of relying on former insurgents as counterinsurgent forces four times. This tactic was found to be effective for the government 75 percent of the time. All the empirical pieces that focused on the use of former insurgents in COIN are qualitative, including in either one or two case studies.

Publication Venue

Considering the representation of journals with focus on the states' use of military lever of power in COIN, there is similarity with trends noted in the general COIN report in that *Small Wars & Insurgencies* is considerably overrepresented (Figure 1). It is a publication venue for 17.2 percent of the literature, and it is followed by *Journal of Strategic Studies* (3.8%), *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, Defence Studies*, and *Civil Wars*, each constituting 3.2 percent of the literature. This distribution of journal sources not only demonstrates limited diversity in publication outlets but also highlights overrepresentation of qualitative research as all, but one journal (*The Journal of Conflict Resolution*), predominantly publish work that features qualitative methodology. Two highly ranked quantitative

⁴⁹ Lyall and Wilson (2009).

⁵⁰ For example: Meilinger (2008), Kemsley (2007).

⁵¹ Oyewole (2017).

⁵² Tovy (2012), Souleimanov & Aliyev (2016).

⁵³ Tovy (2012).

⁵⁴ Souleimanov & Aliyev (2016).

journals—*Conflict Management & Peace Science* and *Journal of Peace Research*⁵⁵—are both outside of the top 10 most frequent publication outlets covering the use of military lever of power in COIN. Three journals from the top 10 publication outlets are ranked in the top 40 of political science and international relations journals (*Contemporary Security Policy*, *International Security*, and *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*).

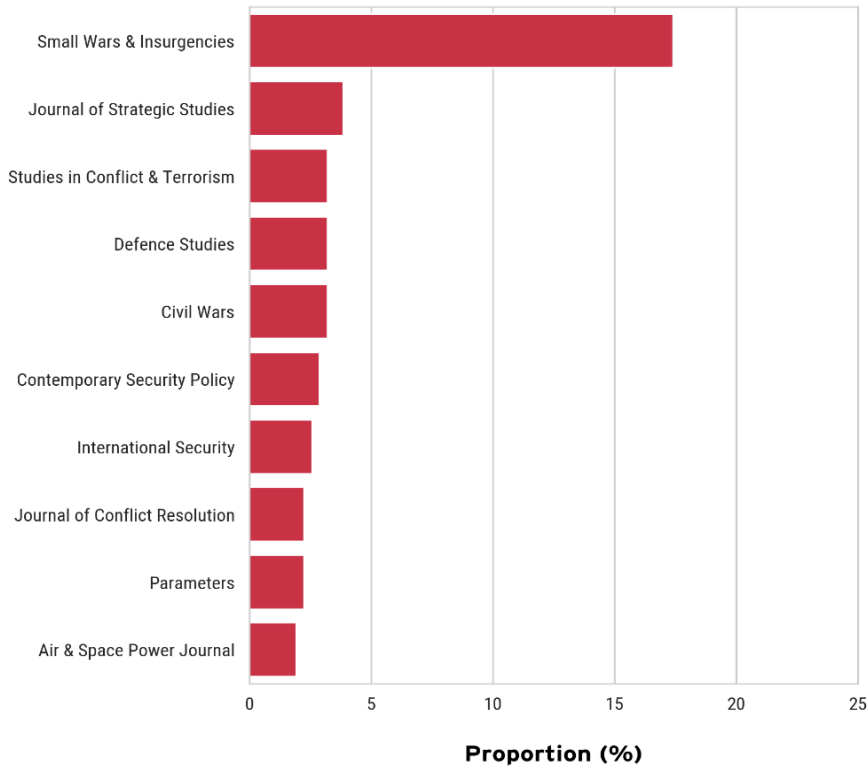


Figure 1: Top 10 Most Frequent Publication Outlets

Frequency of Publications over Time

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of publications over time. As might be expected, the presence of higher numbers past the year 2004 correspond to the growing U.S. and coalition involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, with a particularly higher frequency of publications in 2007 and then again in 2010. The frequency of publications then begins to level off as international military involvement in these conflicts either terminates (Afghanistan) or is greatly reduced (Iraq). The average number of articles published per year in the early stages of both conflicts (2002-2004) is two, at the height of the conflicts (2005-2018), it skyrockets to nearly 18, and then dwindles to, on average, 10 per year in the

⁵⁵ Ranking is based on Scimago Journal & Country Ranking. Both *Journal of Peace Research* and *Conflict Management & Peace Science* are in the top 40 rank.

final phases of the wars (2019-2022). Overall, this distribution demonstrates the strong impact that these two conflicts have had on reviving academic and policymaking interest in counterinsurgency.

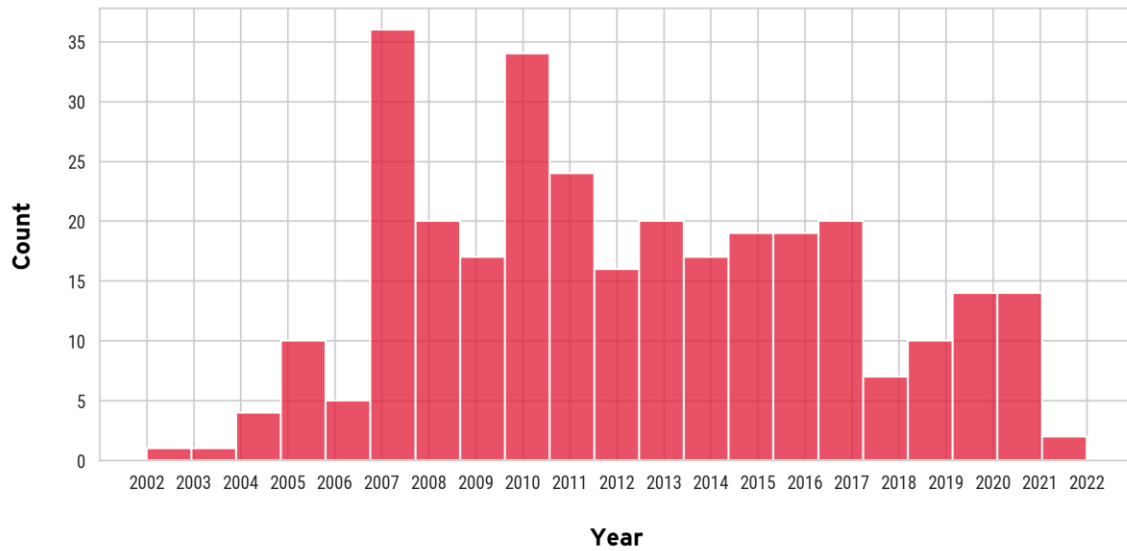


Figure 2: Distribution of Publications Over Time (2002-2022)

Methodological Focus

Qualitative methodology is overwhelmingly represented in the military lever of power sample of COIN articles, with limited use of quantitative methods and mathematical modeling (Figure 3). Seventy four percent of empirical pieces utilize qualitative approaches while close to 17 percent employ quantitative ones. Mathematical models are found in less than 2 percent of studies, and over 7 percent of the pieces rely on mixed method approaches. Overall, these numbers reflect the methodological trend found in the general COIN report, although the empirical pieces that focus on the military lever of power are slightly more likely to use qualitative approaches (approximately 8 percent more).

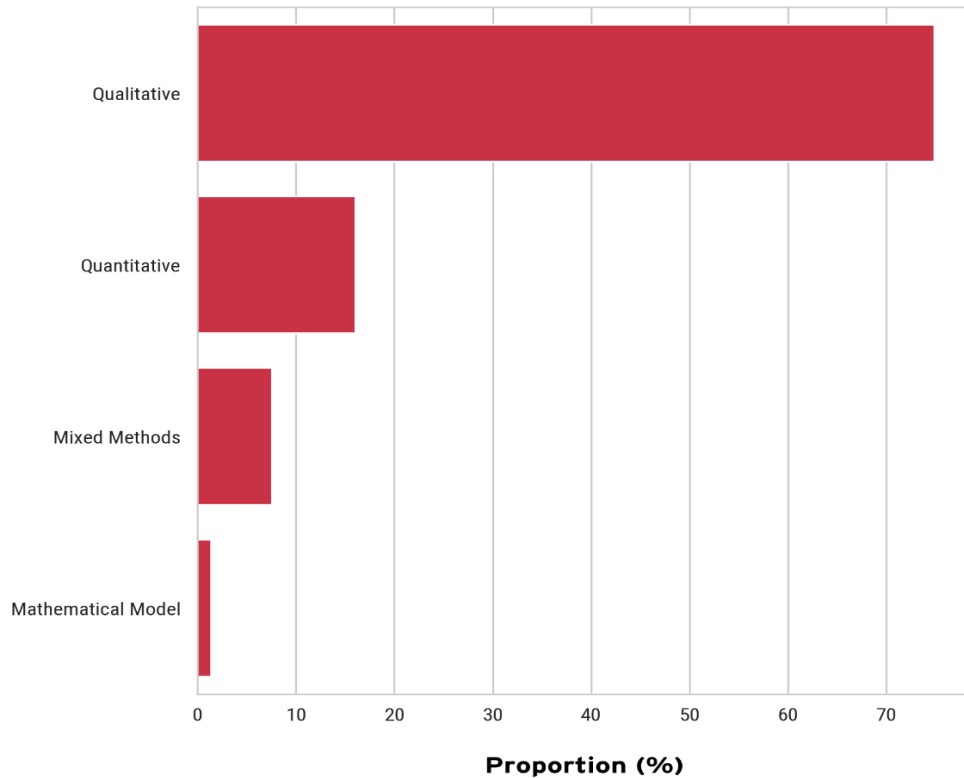


Figure 3: Distribution of Publications Over Time (2002-2022)

Next, the report examines the different approaches used in quantitative and qualitative research.⁵⁶Turning to quantitative methods first, Table 5 identifies a wide representation of approaches, despite the literature’s limited focus on quantitative analysis overall. Different types of logistic and probit regression models and are used most frequently (8.1 percent of all methods and 33.3 percent of all quantitative methods), followed by quasi-experimental methods, such as matching techniques that estimate outcomes of treatments for a control and treatment groups under most comparable conditions. For example, one of Shutte (2017)’s approaches in his study of insurgent and government violence and civilian loyalties involves the use of difference-in-differences method to analyze civilian collaboration (outcome) by comparing indiscriminate violence events (treatment) against selective violence events (control) with matching on the spatial context and preceding trends in civilian assistance. Such experimental methods account for 3.8 percent of all methods found in empirical pieces and 15.8 percent of all quantitative methods. The fact that they rank only below the use of logistical analysis demonstrates a growing emphasis on establishing causal linkages in COIN quantitative studies. This approach is also slightly more prevalent in empirical work that specifically focuses on the state’s use of military power than in empirical studies of all levers of power in the general COIN report. The least frequently

⁵⁶ Some quantitative and qualitative pieces test their argument using more than one quantitative method or more than one qualitative method. In such cases, each approach is counted as a separate method. Doing so allows to capture the variety of quantitative/qualitative approaches that might be present in a single article.

employed methods are count models and survival analysis, each makes up 2.1 percent of all methods and 8.8 percent of all quantitative methods.

When considering the use of original datasets in the context of the dominant independent variable category—government military tactics—and dependent variables that focus on some aspect of COIN outcome/effectiveness, the report finds limited presence of such data. Only five empirical studies that explore the impact of different military tactics using statistical methods developed their own data sets as did case study work by RAND researchers that uses qualitative comparative method of analysis. These original datasets were compiled from multiple sources, such as newspapers, websites, institutes, satellite images, monographs, and historical records.⁵⁷ The remaining statistical studies have obtained their data on independent variables from a single source, for example from Iraq Body Count to capture civilian deaths inflicted by counterinsurgent forces,⁵⁸ or an already existing academic data set, such as pro-government militia dataset (PGMD).⁵⁹ The report also identified only one study that obtained data from developing and implementing an original survey—research that explores, among others, militia integration into Afghan Police and the presence of Afghan National Security Forces.⁶⁰

The most comprehensive datasets—those that identify various, as opposed to a single, government tactics across space and time—come from a series of RAND reports and from Sullivan and Karreth (2019). The RAND reports are based on comprehensive data collection of over 70 COIN concepts or approaches used by governments to manage the insurgent threats in 71 insurgencies from 1944-2010. It also includes data on conflict outcome (victory or loss for the government) and is the only data set that provides insights on non-tactic related, but nevertheless, relevant military concepts in analyzing COIN effectiveness, such as commitment/motivation and adaptability in conflict. Sullivan and Karreth (2019)'s The Strategies and Tactics in Armed Conflict (STAC) data is similar in time span (1945-2013) to RAND's data but includes more insights on specific military and civilian factors and moves beyond RAND's binary variable coding. Thus, it provides data on a scale from 1-4 to denote the extent to which the government relied on the tactic in each conflict. More specification of military tactics includes data on strategic bombing, decapitation, and coding of civilian targeting and mass killings (as opposed to repression and collective punishment used by RAND). STAC also provides systematic information on conflict and political characteristics, such as the government's party affiliation and estimates of troop levels, that could be useful in inclusion as control variables.

⁵⁷ The following pieces compiled original data for statistical testing: Lyall (2009); Lyall and Wilson III (2009); Gosztonyi et al. (2015); Johnston (2012); Enterline et al. (2013).

⁵⁸ Kaiser and Hagan (2018).

⁵⁹ For example: Clayton and Thomson (2016) use PGMA in their work.

⁶⁰ Gosztonyi et al. (2015).

Table 5. Quantitative Methodologies in the Empirical Military Lever Sample	
Method	% of Method in Empirical Articles
Logit/Probit	8.1
OLS (including fixed effects models)	3.8
Quasi experimental methods (matching or difference in differences)	3.8
Survival/Event analysis	2.6
Count models	2.1
Other quantitative methods (e.g., competing risks, time series)	3.8
Simulations/Agent Based Modeling	3.0

When studies employ qualitative methodology, they predominantly use case studies based on secondary sources (55.1 percent of all methods and 72.9 percent of all qualitative methods) and engage in historical tracing of causal mechanisms, processes, and developments (Table 6).⁶¹ This type of approach to case study is overrepresented in comparison to the use of original interviews and field work observations⁶² (13.2 percent of all methods and 17.5 percent of all qualitative methods). When studies used interviews, these were conducted with government officials,⁶³ military leaders⁶⁴ and personnel,⁶⁵ ex-combatants,⁶⁶ survivors of war,⁶⁷ private military contractors,⁶⁸ civilian defense forces,⁶⁹ civil servants,⁷⁰ and local

⁶¹ For example: Paul et al. (2013b) and McDonald (2013).

⁶² The method classification of “interviews and field work observations” includes studies that conducted interviews either without field work or as part of field observations.

⁶³ Kramer (2004/2005).

⁶⁴ For example: Henriksen (2005).

⁶⁵ Kinsey and Krieg (2021).

⁶⁶ Souleimanov and Siroky (2016).

⁶⁷ For example: Souleimanov and Siroky (2016).

⁶⁸ Kinsey and Krieg (2021).

⁶⁹ Udo-Udo Jacob and Akpan (2015).

⁷⁰ For example: Gosztonyi et al. (2015).

opinion leaders.⁷¹ Rare is the use of focus groups.⁷² Field work was conducted in Iraq,⁷³ Afghanistan,⁷⁴ Nigeria,⁷⁵ Chechnya,⁷⁶ Indonesia,⁷⁷ East Timor,⁷⁸ and various EU member states.⁷⁹ Field studies included analysis of terrain,⁸⁰ interviews, and ethnographic participant observation.⁸¹ Case studies that examined primary archival sources, such as declassified documents on intelligence and counterinsurgency in Brunei and Sarawak,⁸² or oral history records, such as those used to study the impact of force integration on civilian casualties in South Korean counterinsurgency,⁸³ are underrepresented and account for only 7.3 percent of all methods and 9.6 percent of all qualitative methods. Focus on primary sources also included analysis of maps and air photographs.⁸⁴ Overall, the contrast in qualitative and quantitative approach in the study of military lever of power in COIN is stark: the most common qualitative method has been used by 129 articles while the dominant quantitative method was found in only 19 pieces.

Table 6. Qualitative Methodologies in the Empirical Military Lever Sample	
Method	% of Methods in Empirical Articles
Case Studies (secondary sources)	55.1
Case Studies (interviews & field work)	13.2
Case Studies (primary archival research)	7.3
Other	1.3

⁷¹ Udo-Udo Jacob and Akpan (2015).

⁷² Karlborg (2015).

⁷³ Kahl (2007).

⁷⁴ For example: Lushenko and Hardy (2016).

⁷⁵ Bamidele (2020).

⁷⁶ Ratelle and Souleimanov (2016).

⁷⁷ For example: Kilcullen (2006).

⁷⁸ Kilcullen (2006).

⁷⁹ Ratelle and Souleimanov (2016).

⁸⁰ Kilcullen (2006).

⁸¹ For example: Azarbaijani-Moghaddam (2014).

⁸² Shaw (2016).

⁸³ For example: Paik and Park (2020).

⁸⁴ Kilcullen (2006).

Geographic Focus

When considering all the pieces (empirical and non-empirical) that focused on the states' use of military power in COIN, there is strong interest in a single-country analysis and limited focus on global analysis. Close to 40 percent of literature has a single-country focus while fewer than 9 percent have a global perspective (Figure 4). One of the more interesting observations is the emphasis on sub-national analysis; slightly over 17 percent of the pieces explore dynamics at the provincial or village-level. This is particularly evident in quantitative empirical research, which increasingly uses quasi-experimental approaches to examine relevant hypotheses and benefits from greater richness of data on various characteristics of provinces and COIN forces' activities to reduce the risk of omitted variable bias. Focus on multiple countries, either within the same or several regions, is found in close to 23 percent of the publications, while nearly 19 percent of the articles—mostly policy pieces—have no specific geographic focus. These percentages resemble the ones found in the general COIN report.

As might be expected, the literature had strong interest in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Together these two insurgencies were studied by over 42 percent of the pieces. These two countries were followed by Vietnam (7.4%) and Malaysia (5.8%). Just as was noted in the general COIN report, research that examines the states' use of military sources of power is overwhelmingly focused on Western experiences in only four insurgencies (55.2%). The remaining pieces split their focus among 66 different countries. Despite the prevalence of state fragility and 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. Overall, these trends suggest a strong bias in favor of studying Western experiences in counterinsurgency in the English language literature.

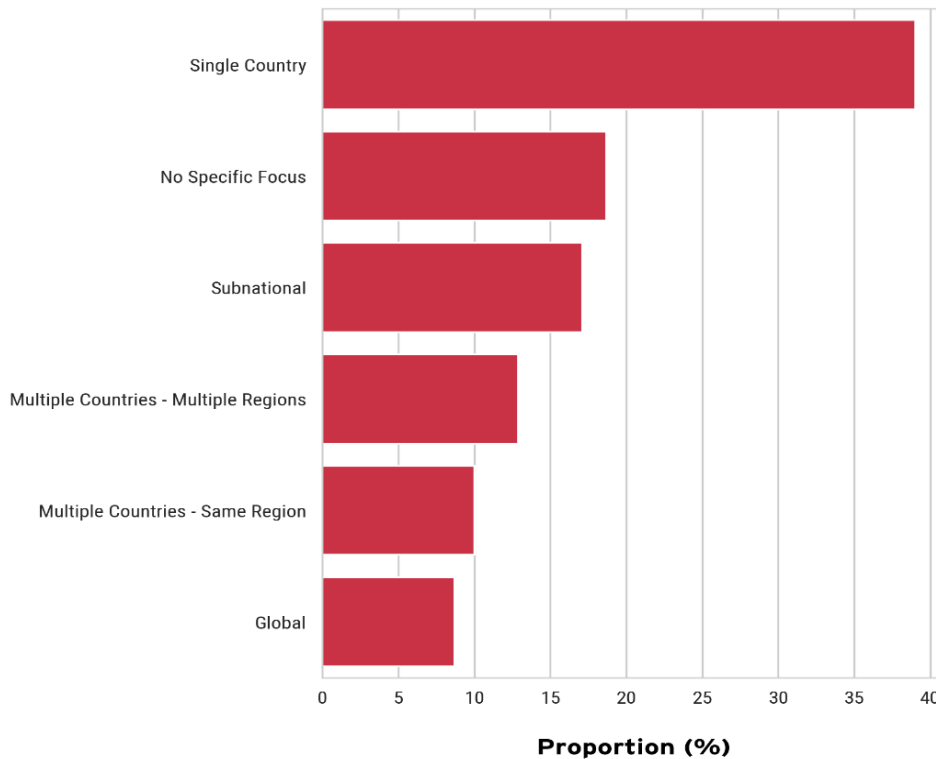


Figure 4: Geographic Coverage of the Literature

Target

This section examines how the literature explores the extent to which counterinsurgents target state actors (the state’s military, political, and economic institutions) as well as general population or target actors related to the insurgency (insurgents, constituents, and sympathizers) in COIN campaigns for the sample of articles that are interested in the use of military sources of power. There is strong emphasis in the literature on analyzing how the state’s military power is aimed at the general population (56.1%; Figure 5), which is evident in pieces that examine the military’s role in providing security to the population, conducting operations to resettle the population, or building connections with the population, among others. Compared to the general COIN report for all levers of state power, this sample of literature is slightly more interested in how the state manages its own military power as part of COIN—whether through building unity, flexibility, or adaptability. More than 42 percent of pieces explore this type of COIN targeting. Emphasis on the military’s role in improving the political and economic aspects of the state is more limited. This type of targeting is covered by 33.6 percent of the pieces (22.9 percent for political and 10.7 percent for economic targeting).

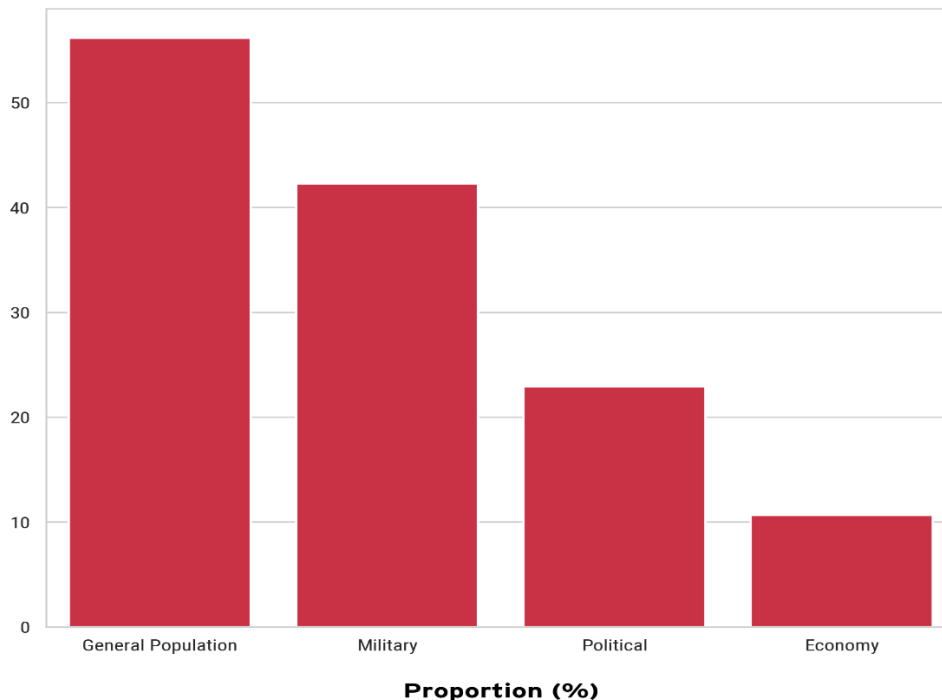


Figure 5: COIN’s Focus on State Actors and the General Population

Turning to the literature’s focus on targets related to the insurgency, there is an overwhelming concentration of articles in one specific area: how the states use military sources of power against members of insurgent groups that also include their leaders (Figure 6). Over 70 percent of the literature explores this form of targeting, followed by an interest in analyzing the targeting of constituents (56.1 percent of the pieces) and sympathizers of insurgent groups (58.7%). There is close to seven percent

more emphasis in the military lever literature sample on exploring the targeting of members of insurgent groups than the average for all other levers of state power in this category.

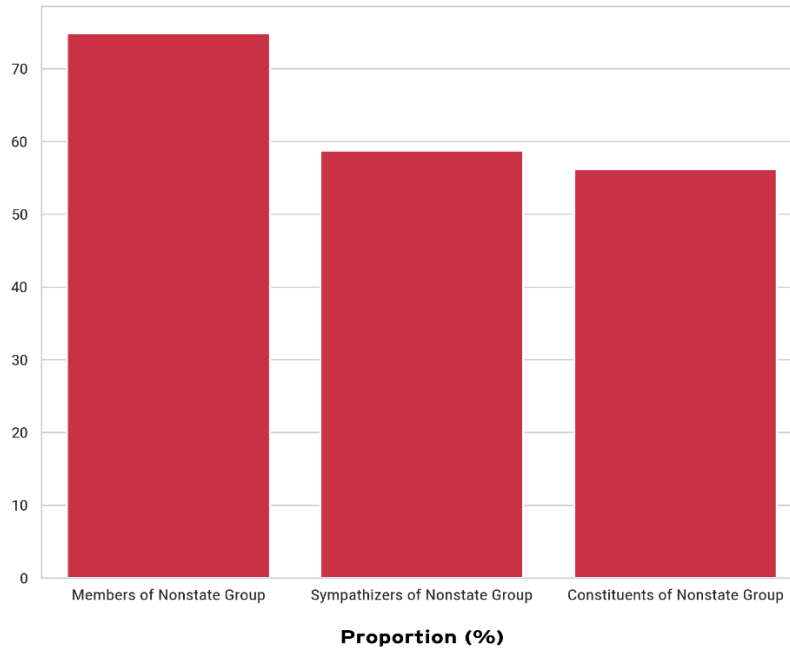


Figure 6: COIN's Focus on Targets Related to the Insurgency

Research Gaps & Recommendations

The review of the literature on the states' use of the military lever of power in counterinsurgency points to several areas for future research consideration. These areas pertain to methodology, concepts, generalizability, and the studies' substantive exploration. Each of these items is discussed below.

Tactics & Non-Tactics Relevant Focus

First, the literature places more value in analyzing the impact of specific tactics with less focus on non-tactic related factors that nevertheless affect design and executions of such tactics. While unpacking the relationship between specific aspects of military tactics and COIN outcome is undoubtedly vital, there is a pressing need to examine the role of culture, leadership, cognitive factors, and unity in shaping success as these are all understudied. Based on the report's time frame of analysis, 2002-2022, we identified only one data set that includes some of the non-tactic related factors (commitment, unity, adaptability, and cultural awareness): the data based on in-depth historical analysis of 71 insurgencies compiled by RAND researchers. This dataset, however, ends in 2010 and excludes 17 insurgencies from the analysis that were ongoing as of 2010.

Not only would additional data collection improve the validity of RAND findings, but incorporating additional factors would be beneficial for connecting the military structure to tactics to gain a deeper understanding of how this relationship affects COIN success. For example, several studies reviewed in this report show that while restraint in the use of force can help the government, lack of unity in acting upon this norm between different counterinsurgent forces can offset the expected benefits from ground

forces' implementation of the practice. Improvements in tactic coordination and implementation are dependent on a country's military structure, leadership, commitment, and culture. As such, more emphasis on conducting empirical studies and data collection on larger samples of these non-tactic explicit yet COIN relevant variables are vital. This is especially important considering growing U.S. interest in providing military training and assistance to several countries in Africa today to offset Russia's military influence. Insights into differences in leadership styles and culture, for example, and their impact on past COIN outcomes could be useful to the U.S. special forces in facilitating the host state's military's adoption of specific tactics and enable integration of existing practices with new ideas in a way that connects with the host government.

Considering U.S. experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, it would also be valuable to expand existing work on how the relationship between third-party interveners—whether these are intervening directly or indirectly—and the host government impacts the success of counterinsurgency beyond the prevalent focus on the impact of different type and level of interventions including direct/indirect military and/or economic aid.⁸⁵ Differences in training approaches between a third-party and the military of the host state, morale building, coordination, and communication, among others, could be explored. This is especially important given the limited value that came from U.S. training of the Afghan military. Such an analysis would benefit from a systematic study as our report identified less than 2 percent of empirical pieces that focused on the topic of third-party relations with the host government. It would also be useful to rely on ideas from business and management literatures for theoretical development to build upon existing, albeit limited, work on this subject, that turns to patron-client theory to examine how this type of relationships evolve, align, and diverge.⁸⁶

Second, although research on military tactics makes up 41 percent of all empirical pieces and is the largest subset of independent variables, it tends to focus on many tactics, which means that some are understudied to such an extent that conclusions about a tactic's effectiveness are based on one or two studies only. For example, the report identified that the use of non-state actors has been studied 42 times with a good balance of qualitative and quantitative methodology, including pieces that cover multiple insurgencies. Collectively, this body of work shows that there is greater benefit for the government in using non-state actors than conducting COIN alone if these actors are accountable to the government counterinsurgent force. However, many other tactics are covered by a small number of studies, even if they made it to our list of the top 10 most studied approaches. Specifically, the use of special forces, the use of air power, and the use of former insurgents are each covered by five or fewer empirical pieces, and there could be value in expanding research on these tactics. Given the existence of data on strategic bombing in insurgencies from 1945-2013, future studies could rely on this new data to increase external validity of current findings.

Outside of the top 10, several military tactics received limited attention in empirical studies. These include analysis of how the military uses technology to gain advantage over the insurgents and/or win the trust of the population and the reliance on and engagement of females as part of military COIN operations. In an era of the proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles in warfare, the impact coming from the use of drones, while studied extensively as part of counterterrorism is neglected in the context of counterinsurgency.⁸⁷ Future studies should thus extend this line of research; even with data

⁸⁵ For example: Regan (2002); Moran (2015)

⁸⁶ Ladwig (2016).

⁸⁷ Page and Williams (2022).

limitations on trends in the military's use and disruption of new technology, insights can be gathered from conducting experiments and/or designing simulations.

The role of females in COIN needs greater attention and systematic empirical analysis. While there has been abundant focus on exploring violence perpetrated against women in war and the role of women as perpetrators of violence, this report identified only two empirical articles that examined the role of women as counterinsurgents, case studies of conflict in Nigeria and Afghanistan.⁸⁸ While some women were incorporated into COIN operations as members of civilian defense forces others were U.S. marines whose task was to perform search operations in a culturally sensitive manner. Given that women are in a unique position to build rapport with other women and children and provide a different lens through which COIN forces can view the situation on the ground, it would be beneficial to compile a cross-sectional dataset on the presence of female counterinsurgents, the size of female counterinsurgent forces, type of COIN activity they were involved in, and leadership position they held in the context of post-1945 insurgencies to systematically assess their impact on COIN success. Such a dataset would complement existing efforts to track women's role as fighters and in supporting role through Women in Armed Rebellion Dataset⁸⁹ and Women's Activities in Armed Rebellion dataset.⁹⁰ These projects, however, only focus on women's roles in rebel organizations and not on women as counterinsurgents.

Methodology, Concepts & Generalizability

First, future research should consider expanding large sample and quantitative analysis to build upon existing interest in sub-national quantitative analysis and single case qualitative analysis. Aside from research on the use of armed non-state actors, which is represented by a good balance of qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study of other tactics is predominantly qualitative in nature. Limited focus on large samples and quantitative analysis is surprising given the existence of two data sets on many government COIN tactics across time and space that create the foundation for expanding external validity and unpacking broader trends. Given that this report's review ends with literature that was published in 2022 it is possible that scholars are already working with Sullivan and Kerreth's (2019) data, which was published in 2019. It is recommended that future work uses their data on strategic bombing and decapitation; these tactics are currently either understudied in quantitative empirical research on a global sample or the analysis ends in the early 2000s.⁹¹ Future research should also focus on updating the two existing comprehensive data sets. RAND's data ends in 2010 and already excluded 17 conflicts that were still ongoing or unresolved at the time. Sullivan and Kerreth's data ends in 2013; it also contains data on fewer tactics than RAND's data. Finally, new data collections, beyond those of RAND and Sullivan and Kerreth (2019), are beneficial as there are no large data sets on some of the tactics discussed in the report (e.g., the role of females in COIN, use of technology by the military or the use of special forces).

Second, due to the high level of complexity involved in understanding how best to incorporate different COIN tactics into a coherent whole and data limitations that are inevitable in capturing some elements of such complexity, the report suggests additional research that relies on dynamic simulations. Anderson (2011), for example, uses quantitative dynamic systems modeling to show the

⁸⁸ Agbiboa (2022) and Azarbaijani-Moghaddam (2014).

⁸⁹ Wood and Jakana (2017).

⁹⁰ Loken and Matfess (2023).

⁹¹ For example: Johnston (2012)'s decapitation analysis ends in 2003.

interplay between kinetic operations, intelligence gathering, legitimacy, quantity of troops deployed, and timing of missions to identify conditions that are most conducive for reducing blowback from kinetic operations over time. Similar approaches could be used with other combinations of tactics and their level of application, to evaluate how to best manage shifts in tactics, and to better understand sequencing.

Third, for qualitative research, the report recommends more precision in the development of conceptualization related to independent and dependent variables. There is a substantial gap in concept and measurement precision between quantitative and qualitative COIN studies examined in this report. Many qualitative studies required our researchers to infer the independent and dependent variables and relevant measurements. This lack of precision can undermine internal and external validity. Paik’s and Park’s (2022) study of how the integration of security forces affects military performance and the level of civilian costs is one example of qualitative research with clear variable identification that other studies could emulate. The study also provides clear summaries of causal mechanisms and describes how each variable will be measured in three of their counterinsurgency case studies.

Fourth, to improve generalizability, the report recommends not only increasing quantitative analysis of large samples but also expanding focus to non-Western COIN experiences. Given that existing research is heavily focused on Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam in connection with all levers of state power, including the military one, there is value in understanding the effectiveness of various COIN approaches outside of these contexts. As weak states continue to proliferate, the risk of insurgencies breaking out remains high, which means that generalizability of findings related to COIN practices will remain relevant.

Finally, to further theoretical development, and in turn, deeper understanding of how best to leverage the benefit of various COIN approaches, it is beneficial to identify outliers in the data or extreme cases that do not fit the overall pattern of the findings but may nevertheless offer useful insights about moderating effects. For example, this report shows that five empirical pieces find cordon and search operations to be effective while one demonstrates its limited value. Rather than dismissing that single piece it might be useful to investigate what drives the divergent finding to isolate a moderating effect. In this instance, looking at the outlier case shows that executing the operation successfully is dependent on the type of terrain where it is performed. Although there is a tendency for researchers to dismiss outliers,⁹² greater attention to outlier cases in the study of COIN operations ultimately improves our understanding of causal relationships and provides valuable policy recommendations on moderating effects. Aside from cordon and search operations, exploring outlier cases regarding the use of special forces and the use of former insurgents as forces—our review shows that both strategies have only one empirical study each that demonstrates these tactics’ ineffectiveness—could provide additional insights.

⁹² Gibbert et al. (2021).

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