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# **THE PERILS OF MISPERCEPTION: WHY U.S. STRATEGY MISJUDGES THE NATURE OF PROXY RESISTANCE**

**BY MAJ. MICHAEL LARKINS**



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# **The Perils of Misperception: Why U.S. Strategy Misjudges the Nature of Proxy Resistance**

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## Introduction

Over the course of the Vietnam War, the U.S. military in Vietnam advised and assisted nearly 80,000 indigenous and paramilitary troops, transforming highland tribes into effective counterinsurgency forces in a seemingly successful “with, and through” campaign.<sup>1</sup> This operational achievement, however, could not overcome a flawed national strategy that fundamentally misjudged the political why of the broader Vietnamese resistance/proxy. Specifically, the U.S. viewed these indigenous partners/proxies as legible military subordinates to be synchronized with American objectives, rather than as organic social movements with localized, existential interests. This led to a strategic failure when U.S. tactical support created artificial structures that lacked the internal legitimacy to survive the eventual erosion of American political will. The eventual strategic failure in Vietnam, despite U.S. Special Operations Forces’ (SOF) tactical success in partnering, serves as a powerful lesson in the perils of misunderstanding the true nature of supported proxy resistance. Repeated misinterpretations of fundamental proxy resistance dynamics are a primary driver of strategic misalignment in U.S. unconventional warfare (UW) efforts, directly impacting SOF’s ability to achieve lasting strategic success. The U.S., in its efforts to leverage resistance movements, has often misunderstood or oversimplified the intrinsic who (actors and their motivations), the why (their objectives), and the how (direct vs. indirect approach mindsets). This gap in understanding leads to SOF UW campaigns that, despite tactical proficiency, frequently become misaligned with long-term U.S.

strategic interests, sometimes producing counterproductive results. Explaining the gap between current doctrine and the messy reality of organic resistance will help explain why these misalignments persist.

## Resistance Dynamics and U.S. Doctrinal Understanding

Special Operations Command Europe’s (SOCEUR’s) *Resistance Operating Concept* (ROC), published in 2020, describes resistance as “the natural response of a sovereign government and its people when faced with a threat to their sovereignty and independence.”<sup>2</sup> It later specifies society and resistance as “a nation’s organized, whole-of-society effort, encompassing the full range of activities from nonviolent to violent, led by a legally established government...to establish independence and autonomy within its sovereign territory that has been wholly or partially occupied by a foreign power.”<sup>3</sup> Key to the ROC’s resistance definition is that resistance isn’t merely guerillas conducting L-shaped ambushes; rather, it includes all members of society and all actions, from kinetic military action to civil noncompliance. Although the ROC provides a snapshot definition of what ideal, generic resistance should look like, the reality of resistance is not quite as neat. David Kilcullen, on the other hand, describes resistance as constantly evolving as it adapts to context; adversaries; and global demographic, technological, and societal changes.<sup>4</sup> Because of this rapidly and continuously changing environment, the U.S. understanding of resistance must be flexible.

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critical examination reveals a tendency for the U.S. military to view resistance as merely an instrument to be leveraged rather than a complex political and social phenomenon to be understood. This perspective creates foundational gaps in the doctrinal grasp of resistance dynamics. Current SOF-focused publications, while intending to improve mission success, often prioritize operational considerations and risk management from a U.S. policy perspective over analysis of the intrinsic who, why, and how of a potential partner force. This approach risks creating a doctrinal foundation more focused on the technical aspects of fostering resistance rather than on understanding the conditions that make it viable, legitimate, and strategically wise.

An example can be found in Will Irwin's *Decision-Making Considerations in Support to Resistance*. Although the intent is to reveal to military leaders the variety of considerations facing U.S. decision- and policymakers in instances of support to resistance, the document is reflective of

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most publications—it's invaluable for understanding policy, but inherently top-down and U.S.-focused. Irwin concentrates on risk, legality, timing, and policy alignment from a U.S. standpoint, effectively framing the resistance as a variable in a U.S. strategic calculation.<sup>5</sup> While this information might prepare a military planner to interact with the U.S. national security apparatus, it does not adequately equip them to grapple with the core question of whether the resistance's own motivations or internal composition are fundamentally compatible with U.S. long-term interests, even if short-term goals align. The focus thus remains on support to resistance as a foreign policy option, which may inadvertently lead practitioners to prioritize partners who are most amenable to U.S. support, not necessarily those who are most legitimate or effective in achieving sustainable positive political outcomes.

Similarly, proposals aimed at improving SOF's role in this space often concentrate on operational capacity over foundational understanding. In the article “Enhancing U.S. Special Operations Forces Capacity to Foster Resistance,” Jacob Zack and Adam Foote focus largely on fiscal authorities, approval processes, congressional notifications, and delegation restrictions.<sup>6</sup> Although these elements are undoubtedly critical in support to resistance, this analysis, and others like it, frame the problem as primarily one of U.S. capacity, authorities, and resourcing, whereas the actual primary challenge is gaining a deep, analytical comprehension of the resistance itself. Enhancing the U.S. capacity to foster resistance through more efficient authorities and permissions is of little strategic value if the U.S. government supports a movement

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whose intrinsic dynamics are destined to produce strategic failure or blowback. The capacity to act must be predicated on the wisdom of when and with whom to act, which stems from a deep grasp of resistance dynamics, not just streamlined U.S. processes. This instrumental focus, evident in U.S. doctrine and professional military discourse, creates a vulnerability where the *how* of U.S. support can become detached from the partner’s *why*, leading directly to strategic misalignments as observed in past campaigns.

This U.S. instrumental focus is, in fact, a symptom of a larger conceptual error: a failure to see resistance as part of a complete strategic continuum. This can be best explained and understood through Maurice DuClos’s Resilience, Resistance, Defense, and Deterrence (R2D2) model, which represents a more complete ecosystem that doesn’t simply isolate resistance into one phase on the competition continuum.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the R2D2 model “redefines resistance as a conditional state within broader national defense,” and suggests that support needs to begin with building resilience and

deterrence during steady state.<sup>8</sup> U.S. doctrine exhibits fundamental conceptual confusion about resistance, treating it inconsistently as either personnel involved in resistance activities or the activities themselves, rather than as a comprehensive strategic concept.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, by treating resistance as a siloed event rather than part of an interconnected ecosystem, U.S. doctrine fails to account for how inactions during deterrence and lack of resilience-building preordains strategic failure.

## **Legibility Trap: Why We Pick the Wrong Partners**

The U.S. has historically tended to view resistance movements through a simplified lens, a cognitive trap defined by DuClos as an “organizational fallacy,” or treating “resistance as a singular, unified organization” despite the fact that it may be many different groups conducting similar actions.<sup>10</sup> Popular narratives that fall into this trap include the French Resistance in World War II and Afghanistan’s Mujahideen during the Soviet invasion and occupation. This drives the U.S. to prioritize “big-R” hierarchical groups that are “organized, coordinated...with centralized command structures,” not because they are more effective, but because they are legible to U.S. bureaucracy.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. supports organizations that look like the U.S. military because they are easier to fund, track, and report on, even when they lack organic legitimacy.

This could stem from a lack of effort by decision-makers or because the provision and accounting of support seem more legible and manageable from a U.S.

perspective—a classic example of ignoring the “small-r” organic resistance, such as “individual actors, small groups, and organic networks,” because of a focus on finding “big-R” formal resistance groups.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, U.S. practitioners and decision-makers tend to search for existing factions out of convenience, which could, potentially, lead to overlooking broader, more powerful, and more deeply rooted resisting communities described by Christopher Sonn and Adrian Fisher in Benedict Anderson’s work “Imagined Communities.”<sup>13</sup> By taking the paved path, U.S. practitioners may end up completely missing the true center of gravity of resistance that may already exist within the community’s social bonds.

This answers the critical question of how partnering with the wrong part of the spectrum damages the overall ecosystem. Additionally, choosing the wrong partner doesn’t just miss the mark on mobilizing an entire community; it can also undermine and damage it. With one faction receiving support from the U.S., jealousy, internal rivalries, and conflict can arise that may destroy the social cohesion essential for a community’s resilient response. To ensure U.S. support, indigenous leaders may arise

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artificially due to their amenability to U.S. influence, despite their lack of organic legitimacy and trust within the community, such as with Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> This can lead to a partner force that abandons its indigenous and traditional methods to walk, talk, and act like Americans, leading to an inherent disadvantage. Tactical success may be achieved with the chosen partner group, but if that partnership has damaged the broader community’s social fabric and its own ability to resist and recover, then the long-term U.S. strategic goal of fostering a stable, self-sufficient, and legitimate local order has been made less attainable.

## **Existential vs. Incremental: The Asymmetry of Will**

The history of U.S.-supported resistance is defined by partnerships that were highly effective in defeating a common enemy only to unravel into strategic misalignment once the divergent *why* driving each party came into conflict after the immediate threat was gone or as the conflict drew on over time. In these instances, this ultimate failure was not from a lack of U.S. military capability, but its misunderstanding of the fundamental asymmetry of the conflict. Andrew Mack argues that “military and technological superiority may be a highly unreliable guide to the outcome of wars,” and that the U.S. has held a significant advantage in its wars since the end of World War II.<sup>15</sup>

The asymmetry of the conflict lies in the divergent levels of interest and political will between the larger external power and the smaller, weaker power. While the U.S. in its support to a resistance may undertake a

limited war with limited means to accomplish a particular foreign policy objective, the supported resistance may face an existential crisis resulting in divergent levels of interest and political will. In most instances when the U.S. supports a resistance in the post-World War II era, the

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conflict is limited in nature from the U.S. perspective: The survival of the U.S. is not at risk and thus is not expending the political capability and will to mobilize all its national resources. From the resistance’s perspective, however, war is considered total: Their way of life and survival are threatened, and they are fighting for national liberation or the expulsion of a foreign or occupying power. The U.S. government finds it difficult to understand that limited U.S. political objectives do not generate the same level of will as a resistance’s total, existential objectives.

This is exceptionally evident in the ongoing Ukraine War. The Ukraine conflict serves as a live demonstration of the

asymmetry of will. For the indigenous resistance, the conflict is existential: a total war for survival. For the U.S., however, support remains a limited policy choice that is susceptible to the shifting winds of domestic politics and competing global priorities. Planners must recognize that the U.S. political clock is always shorter than a partner’s existential clock. If a strategy does not account for the inevitable erosion of the American will, it preordains a pivot from empowered partner to abandoned proxy.

The asymmetry of will between the U.S. and a supported resistance guarantees that the partnership between the *who* is temporary and built on divergent foundations. Initial support from the U.S. government will enable successful support from the onset and allow for training and equipping of a partner force, but that partner’s will to fight is tied to their existential *why*. The strategic misalignment between these scales of will becomes undeniable when U.S. political will inevitably erodes, as seen in Ukraine. The U.S. seeks an exit, while the partner, if not defeated, continues to pursue its own objectives, which may have little to do with the U.S. strategic goals that initiated involvement in the first place.

## **The Quantitative Trap: Direct Action vs. Indirect Strategy**

The strategic failure of many U.S. UW campaigns stems from a fundamental mismatch in the *how* of warfare. The U.S. military, trained and equipped for decisive, conventional battles, defaults to a “direct approach” that uses the military to “capture or eliminate an adversary’s armed forces.”<sup>16</sup>

However, the U.S. is consistently confronted by adversaries who master an “indirect approach” that “seeks to destroy an adversary’s will to fight.”<sup>17</sup> This “opposite-approach” interaction, as defined by Ivan Arreguín-Toft, creates a strategically disadvantageous dynamic where the very methods the U.S. prefers are often rendered ineffective or counterproductive. As he points out, this strategic interaction mismatch of opposite approaches has resulted in a victory for a weaker power 63 percent of time from 1800–1998.<sup>18</sup> This is because indirect strategies “sacrifice values for time,” protracting the conflict and playing on the strong actor’s limited political will.<sup>19</sup>

**The gap between U.S. SOF’s tactical proficiency and U.S. strategic success is not an unfortunate paradox, but the predictable outcome of a conceptual failure: a failure to see resistance as it is, rather than as we wish it to be.**

For the last two decades, the U.S. fought the Global War on Terror (GWOT), and, like during Vietnam, quantitative data points ruled the day. Senior leaders in 1968 and 2012 were both overly concerned with enemy fighters killed, raids conducted, and operations executed. Many of the senior leaders within the military today honed their craft during the GWOT era, and this has influenced them substantially. Although the

U.S. Department of War has specific practitioners who could, theoretically, execute a strategy through an indirect approach, the military still has a chain of command, and much of that chain of command is heavily influenced by what they believed worked right during the GWOT. The GWOT-honed preference for quantifiable data, such as enemy killed and raids conducted, remains a barrier to strategic success. This direct-approach mindset inherently undermines support to resistance, as senior leaders often view indirect methods as too slow or not trackable in a traditional brief.

## Conclusion

The strategic misalignment of U.S. UW is rarely the result of a single flaw, but rather a cascading failure of analysis. A superficial understanding of the *who*, the complex identities and internal rivalries of a potential partner, inevitably leads to a misinterpretation of their ultimate *why*, which creates a fundamental divergence of objectives. This initial political miscalculation is compounded when the U.S. imposes a familiar military *how*, which is a direct approach focused on tactical results, that, as demonstrated by Arreguín-Toft, is often strategically ill-suited to the partner’s reality and the adversary’s indirect methods.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the gap between U.S. SOF’s tactical proficiency and U.S. strategic success is not an unfortunate paradox, but the predictable outcome of a conceptual failure: a failure to see resistance as it is, rather than as we wish it to be.

As renewed strategic competition intensifies, the stakes of this

misunderstanding are magnified. Mack warns that an asymmetric approach that preys on the divergent interests and political will of a stronger power is the weapon of choice for adversaries seeking to counter American influence.<sup>21</sup> If the U.S. is to be an effective instrument in these contests, it cannot afford to repeat past errors by assuming its partners' motivations and methods will mirror its own. If U.S. SOF are to remain a primary instrument of national

power in an era of renewed strategic competition, they must shed organizational fallacy and bias for mirrored partners.<sup>22</sup> True strategic alignment is not achieved through streamlined authorities or increased funding, but by subordinating our operational *how* to the partner's existential *why*. To do otherwise is to repeat the tragedy of Vietnam and achieve tactical excellence in service of strategic failure. 📌



## Notes

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## **About the Author**

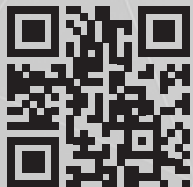
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