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The Demise of Chin Peng: End of the Classical Counterinsurgency Era?

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Synopsis

The death of Chin Peng marked the 'end of an era' in counterinsurgency, but the 'lessons' from the Malayan Emergency remains enduring to this day.

Commentary

IN MANY ways, the death of Chin Peng, the leader of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) marked the 'end of an era'. Of the major Asian insurgent leaders who fought against the colonial powers in the 'Wars of National Liberation' era (1945-1975), Chin Peng, outlived them all. It was an era that came to define modern 'classical' insurgency and 'classical' counterinsurgency (COIN) as we understand those terms today.

The guerrilla successes of Chin Peng's contemporaries Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh are now enshrined as classics of insurgency whilst the guerrilla campaign in which Chin Peng was so intimately involved, the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), has become a paradigmatic case-study of how a COIN campaign can be waged and won.

Whole of Government approach in the Emergency

Founded in 1930, the CPM's focus in its first decade of existence was to foment unrest against the colonial government of Malaya. One of the CPM's key post-war strategies was to gain political ascendancy through the control of labour. Decisive influence over trade union organisations thus became the CPM's foremost weapon in its effort to control the masses.

However, no mass urban uprising occurred and from 1948, the CPM switched its attention and strategy to mobilising the rural populace. The CPM's open armed struggle against the British government, which began in June 1948 led to the declaration of a state of Emergency in Malaya and a 12-year long COIN campaign involving more than 300,000 British, Commonwealth and Malayan forces.

In the use of military force, by 1951, there was a gradual move away from large-scale army sweeps towards a more effective system of small-unit patrols. Intelligence by surrendered enemy personnel (SEP) and Special Branch infiltrators was used to target selected insurgents with 'minimum force'. Instead of carpet bombing the jungle, the primary use of air power was in psychological operations that eroded the morale and will of the CPM's fighters.

Most importantly, General Gerald Templer, High Commissioner of Malaya, treated the Emergency not as a military problem but a civilian problem. In this campaign, the decisive tactical element was the village police post rather than the army battalion. Both Templer and his military predecessor Gen Harold Briggs, adopted an integrated civil-military approach where all security forces (including the armed forces) operated under civilian control.

Battle for hearts and minds

In the battle for 'hearts and minds', the creation of the Malayan Home Guard proved not only to be an invaluable link between the security forces and the populace - but it was an exercise in trust. The act of entrusting a shotgun to what was once a Chinese squatter sent a strong message of the government's faith to the very same population group that the CPM was actively courting - that "we the government trust you."

Ultimately, the promise of independence for Malaya and citizenship for the Chinese population convinced the rural Chinese that their future was in an independent Malaya rather than one dominated by the Communists. By July 1960, the government forces of an independent Malaya had sufficiently rolled back the CPM insurgency to declare an end to the Emergency.

What remained of the hard core elements of the CPM retreated across the border to Southern Thailand to reorganise. From their newly established jungle strongholds in Southern Thailand, the CPM continued to battle Malaysian security forces from 1968 to 1989 until the signing of the Hat Yai Peace Accord.

Impact on Contemporary COIN

The impact of the Malayan Emergency on contemporary COIN thought and practice cannot be underestimated. More than half a century on, the applicability of lessons from the Malayan Emergency remains a hotly debated subject within academic and practitioner circles. However, there can be no question of how the 'rediscovery' of the works of Robert Thompson and Frank Kitson have been influential in setting the tone of the 'COIN Renaissance' in the last decade.

Certain key principles of classical COIN have been 'rediscovered': the recognition of the population as the centre of gravity; well-developed actionable intelligence as the key to success; the use of security forces as part of an overall coordinated response; the imperative of development and good governance in addressing the political, social and economic conditions that led to insurgency; and the concept of 'winning hearts and minds' - or winning the confidence of the population in actual terms.

The 'renaissance' of these classical COIN 'big ideas' have been instrumental in transforming the way in which the United States military and its coalition partners think and fight in the last decade. Gen David Petraeus, former Commander ISAF and Director CIA, was very much the intellectual driver and public face in this transformation. Indeed, in a speech in June 2013, Gen Petraeus maintained that "contrary to pundit opinion, the Counterinsurgency Era is not over. That is, quite simply, because the Insurgency Era is not over. Insurgency does not appear to have gone out of style. It is, after all, amongst the oldest style of warfare."

Insurgencies of today, be they Al Qaeda's diffused brand of global insurgency or the Taliban's more localised version, may have evolved beyond the 'Wars of National Liberation' template of Chin Peng's era. But as Gen Petraeus warned in a recent September 2013 interview with the *Small Wars Journal*: "to reject the principles associated to defeating a Maoist insurgency would be foolish." He said bin Laden's [Abbottabad] letters showed how much he had embraced the Maoist concepts and used the very vocabulary of people's wars. Al Qaeda did not typically have the strength, certainly not at the outset of the campaign, to seize and hold terrain.

Chin Peng may have passed on, but the Maoist precepts of insurgency that have inspired the CPM's own and others will remain a wellspring of ideas for insurgents well beyond the classical insurgency era. For the counterinsurgent, to ignore these time-honed principles, particularly the human and psychological dimensions that drive people's wars, is to risk defeat.

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