

## Balance of Terror Study Guide

### Suggested Reading

David J. Kilcullen, “Three Pillars of Counterinsurgency,” remarks delivered at the U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Conference, Washington D.C., 28 September 2006: 3:  
[http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/uscoin/3pillars\\_of\\_counterinsurgency.pdf](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/uscoin/3pillars_of_counterinsurgency.pdf)  
<http://renekogutudartiklid.blogspot.com/2010/11/three-pillars-of-counterinsurgency.html>

Gordon McCormick, Steven B. Horton, and Lauren Harrison, “Things Fall Apart: The ‘Endgame’ Dynamics of Wars,” *Third World Quarterly* vol. 28, no. 2, 2007.  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01436590601153721?needAccess=true>

Hy S. Rothstein, “The Problematic Future of Irregular Warfare,” *Third World Quarterly* vol. 28, no. 2, 2007: 275-294.

### INTRODUCTION

Balance of Terror helps players to better understand asymmetric warfare, terrorism, and insurgency by highlighting key concepts, terminology, and cause-and-effect relationships. The game’s structure encapsulates many of the critical political dynamics and tactical choices that can tip a society from stability to revolution. When a state is challenged by an insurgency, the state seeks to maintain the status quo and its legitimacy among the population by undermining the insurgents’ messaging and by attacking their organization through both kinetic and non-kinetic tactics. Insurgents seek to destabilize the state by launching attacks and by convincing the populace that it has more to gain if it supports the insurgent cause. The state will win the game if it can keep its stability and popular support close to or above the levels they were at when the game started. The insurgent side wins if it can grow and adapt in ways that will undermine the status quo and shift the balance of support and instability in its favor.

## KEY CONCEPTS

Balance of Terror introduces several important concepts related to how states confront non-state rebel groups:

- (1) asymmetry: states have power, insurgents have information. Each side has to invest in different kinds of activities to shift the balance of asymmetric assets in its favor while managing limited resources;
- (2) tradeoffs: this is a fundamental aspect of Balance of Terror: to avoid losing the game, the state must maintain its legitimacy and avoid bankruptcy while carrying out its COIN strategy, while the terrorists must remain relatively popular, robust, and solvent while attacking the state;
- (3) uncertainty: states and insurgents must make policy choices based on limited information about the opponent's plans and the consequences of their own previous decisions;
- (4) messaging: both states and insurgents need the support of the population to win. Each side must try to convince people that their best interests lie with the side that is delivering the message;
- 5) kinetic vs. non-kinetic strategies: insurgents leverage people's grievances (non-kinetic means) to win popular support for the use of violence (kinetic means) against the state. To undermine the insurgents' base of support, a successful COIN strategy must both establish security (kinetic means) and reinforce civil institutions (non-kinetic means) that will alleviate the grievances that fuel insurgency.

It is important to keep in mind that these concepts and their related actions do not occur separately from one another. In both real life and in the game of Balance of Terror, the effects of each concept and the policy choices that arise from them are overlapping and iterative.

### **Asymmetry**

As both McCormick et al. and Rothstein note, states start out in an internal conflict with access to more kinetic, financial, and surveillance power than do insurgent groups. What states lack, particularly in the early stages of COIN operations, is information about the insurgency. Insurgents, in contrast, operate within the state and therefore have access to a great deal of information about the state, which helps to offset their relative logistical weaknesses. If the

insurgency leverages local grievances, then it will also be able to draw support, including intelligence, directly from the people among whom it lives and operates. Insurgents are able to choose when, what, and how to attack, particularly early in the conflict, while the state tries to gather information and decide what it can afford to defend (McCormick et al., 327-328). The state can offset the insurgency's "hearts and minds" campaign by directing resources to disaffected parts of the populace in an effort to keep them from becoming radicalized or to win them back if they are already supporting the insurgency. Both players in Balance of Terror have tools available to implement these strategies and thereby try to shift the information and logistical imbalances in their favor.

### **Tradeoffs**

Every policy choice that insurgents and states make to gain advantage in a conflict comes with a financial, strategic, or opportunity cost or, frequently, some combination of these (see McCormick et al.). The state must find a sustainable balance between the social/political costs of maintaining security through kinetic means and the financial costs of providing the services and reforms that will address grievances and undermine the insurgents' popularity. The insurgents are similarly constrained: providing services, growing the organization, and carrying out more attacks against the state can enhance support, mobilization, and effectiveness, but they also deplete funds and decrease overall security by making the insurgency more visible and vulnerable to attack by the state.

There is also an inverse tradeoff for both sides, in the real world and in the game, between winning battles and winning the war. If, on the one hand, the state succeeds in weakening and shrinking the insurgent group without defeating it outright, the insurgency becomes less visible and gains breathing space to regroup and resurge at some later time. On the other hand, as the insurgency grows and carries out bigger, more devastating attacks, the state will acquire better intelligence, making the assets and firepower it brings to bear against the insurgency increasingly effective.

*Finances*

A state can raise taxes to pay for increased security and other counterterrorist policies, but a democracy risks losing legitimacy and popular support when taxes stay too high for too long. In the same way, an insurgency needs to fundraise so that it can pay for recruits, training, and operations, but it does so at the risk of undermining its popular support. In the game, constrained resources have short- and long-term effects on each player's decisions, as they do in real life. Either side can lose the game by going bankrupt, a basic feature of game play that forces players to plan a realistic strategy, prioritize policy choices to meet goals, and be flexible when the emerging situation calls for rethinking those choices. In another reflection of the real world, the state has an advantage in this regard because it can deficit spend to a degree, while the terrorist loses quickly when the money runs out.

*Stability and Security*

To win against an insurgency, the state must remain stable in the face of unpredictable violence and anti-government messaging. To overthrow a state, an insurgency must maintain its security while growing an organization capable of launching attacks of sufficient severity to destabilize the state. In the game, the terrorist player has to attack the state to maintain mobility and support, but first must recruit and train new cadres before launching any attacks. Both growth and attacks drain resources and reduce organizational security, forcing the terrorist player to weigh its strategic and tactical choices against its own survival. To remain stable, the state player must counter the terrorist's activities through investments in intelligence, policing and emergency powers, counter-finance ops, and various kinetic tactics. Public perceptions affect the stability and legitimacy of a democracy, however, and this is true in Balance of Terror. The state player must balance the use of heavy-handed tactics such as emergency legislation and high levels of policing against the danger of losing legitimacy and undermining overall stability.

An unusual aspect of Balance of Terror is that games can end in an essential draw, in which neither player can achieve a decisive advantage and play continues at equilibrium until the players call an end. This option is a deliberate feature of the game that reflects what McCormick et al. call the "equilibrium trap:" a chronic low-intensity conflict in which neither side can defeat the other through force or find grounds for a negotiated settlement.

### *Legitimacy and Popular Support*

A democratic government must be regarded as legitimate in the eyes of the populace to remain viable. In a similar way, terrorists rely on the people's willingness to provide them with goods and services while they fight to overthrow the state. To win, each side must gain and retain the population's support ("hearts and minds") by convincing people that their interests lie with that side. This can be done with "soft" policies like the provision of services or kinetic "hard" policies that aim to show the other side to be weak and unreliable. And, of course, in life and in the game, every choice involves a tradeoff. The state needs information, but a heavy police presence, intelligence gathering, and the use of violent tactics undermine legitimacy and support. The insurgents must recruit and train cadres to grow the organization and launch effective attacks, but these are costly activities that force the group to take more resources from an already aggrieved population. Both sides have an incentive to propagandize, which is another important way to bolster legitimacy and support when circumstances require unpopular policies.

### **Uncertainty**

Decision makers in the real world seldom have the luxury of waiting to see what a potentially violent opponent, whether state or non-state, does next before they take countermeasures. Nor can they be certain of the consequences of their own previous decisions when deciding their next moves. Uncertainty is at the heart of these confrontations, and is captured in Balance of Terror by having players make their moves simultaneously. Victory rests in large part on how well each player "reads" the other and makes accurate guesses about what will happen next. Uncertainty makes the game exciting, but it also forces the players to be adaptable: a strategy that appeared strong in the early stages of the game may become disastrous once the opponent figures out how to counter it.

### **Messaging**

A vital aspect of counterinsurgency is undercutting the insurgents' message. Rothstein describes the importance for the state of letting people know that it is working on their behalf, and that their interests will be better served by supporting the state rather than joining the insurgency. This may be especially true for states where the population's legitimate grievances gave rise to the insurgency. Even a strong ideological message is less likely to take root in a contented

community than in a disenfranchised and marginalized one. Each player in Balance of Terror must pay attention to how policies and tactics affect popular support; a strong message campaign can boost support for oneself while simultaneously undermining the opponent's popularity.

### **Kinetic vs. non-kinetic strategies**

Rothstein explains the importance of understanding the difference between the goals of military operations and the goals of diplomacy and institution building for a counterinsurgency campaign. A successful strategy will usually balance these two approaches by using "hard power" as required to restore security and "soft power" to strengthen civic institutions and address the grievances that fueled the insurgency and brought it support. In Balance of Terror, the state player can choose to target members of the terrorist organization at random through a kinetic policy of kill or capture. This policy is expensive and may impact legitimacy, but it can weaken the terrorists at critical moments. The state can also launch a decapitation strike that takes out the terrorist leadership. Decapitation will have a strong effect on the terrorists' security, but if the state chooses such a policy at the wrong stage of the conflict, before the terrorists have launched a serious attack or when they are engaged in negotiations, the state risks losing enough legitimacy to bring defeat. The terrorist must launch attacks to win the game, but attacks drain resources and weaken organizational security by exposing the terrorist group to the state. A defensive strategy of soft power or "appeasement" allows either side to build up resources and popular support. This can be part of a longer-term strategy that leads to large-scale aggression, or it can lead to an essential draw, in which neither side gains enough advantage to defeat the opponent. In the real world, this is a not-uncommon situation that results in chronic low-level insurgency that keeps both the state and the terrorist organization too weak to win but functional enough to prevent outright defeat.