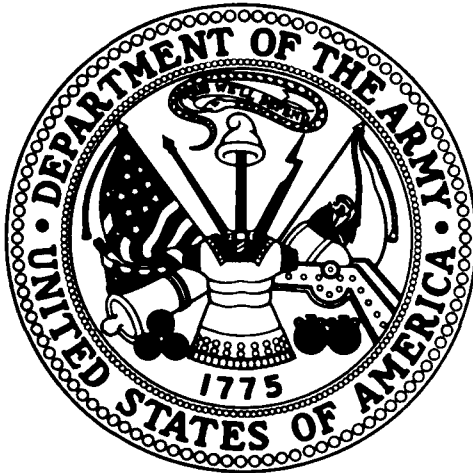


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# CLIC PAPERS

**A THEATER APPROACH TO  
LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT**

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Langley Air Force Base, Virginia**

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**A THEATER APPROACH TO  
LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT**

by  
Steven Metz



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The mission of the Army-Air Force Center for Low Intensity Conflict (A-AF CLIC) is to improve the Army and Air Force posture for engaging in low intensity conflict (LIC), elevate awareness throughout the Army and Air Force of the role of the military instrument of national power in low intensity conflict, including the capabilities needed to realize that role, and provide an infrastructure for eventual transition to a joint and, perhaps, interagency activity.

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## PREFACE

The development of a coherent and effective United States strategy to manage the global low intensity conflict threat is contingent on understanding this complex phenomenon. This, in turn, requires a comprehensive theory of low intensity conflict be crafted by security professionals and scholars.

A general consensus has emerged concerning the definition of low intensity conflict, but a "level-of-analysis problem" currently hinders further theory-building. Most American security professionals and policy makers have taken either a "macro" approach to low intensity conflict which skims key regional differences, or a country-specific "micro" perspective which ignores regional linkages.

A better approach is to divide the world into nine theaters of low intensity conflict, seven regional and two functional. This could contribute to the development of a more comprehensive theory of low intensity conflict as well as providing more immediate benefits such as a greater range of strategic options and organizational clarity.

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## **A THEATER APPROACH TO LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT**

### **Introduction**

During the past decade United States security professionals and policy makers became aware of the strategic threat posed by low intensity conflict. They recognized that the Third World remained a chaotic place as the strains of modernization combined with repressions, poverty, and underdevelopment to generate insurgencies, revolutions, coups, and terrorist campaigns. This, in turn, hindered the development of democracy and free-enterprise economies which the United States saw as necessary to the construction of a stable world order. Third World conflict was made even more dangerous by the linkage and growing sophistication of those who sought to violently manipulate discontent in order to seize power and fuel revolutionary change in the global political order. But, events in the Third World nations themselves only partially accounted for the strategic threat posed by low intensity conflict. The absence of doctrine, appropriate capabilities, and, most importantly, understanding of the low intensity conflict milieu amplified the challenge.

It is clear that a coherent strategy for managing the low intensity conflict threat is contingent on understanding its nature, causes, and manifestations.<sup>1</sup> In fact, these factors are closely related; effective doctrine and efficient capabilities rely on understanding. Yet, understanding does not come easily. Because the modernizing Third World is so alien to United States citizens, it is difficult to wade through appearances and grasp the essential nature of problems which arise there. At the same time, the linkage of understanding and action makes strategy and doctrine -- the two components of a coherent response -- dependent on the development of a comprehensive theory of low intensity conflict which would explain causes, catalysts, contexts, manifestations, and curatives. Currently, this difficult process of theory-building is underway among security professionals and scholars.

Defining key terms is the first step in any process of theory-building. After a period of debate, the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved a definition of low intensity conflict which was, in turn, further developed in the President's official statement of national security strategy.<sup>2</sup> According to this document, "low intensity conflict typically manifests itself as political-military confrontation below the level of conventional war, frequently involving protracted struggles of competing principles, ideologies, and ranging from subversion to the direct use of military force."<sup>3</sup> While this description does come dangerously close to confusing manifestations and essence, the



core fact remains intact: low intensity conflict is an attempt to violently alter the distribution of power and wealth by minor actors in the global system.

Despite some lingering discomfort with the official definition, enough consensus exists within the national security community to move beyond this first, definition-generating stage of theory-building. Based on the application of the scientific method to social phenomena, the logical next step is the development and application of categories and typologies of low intensity conflict in preparation for the eventual analysis of causal relationships and the generation of testable hypotheses.

A key obstacle to the development and application of categories and typologies of low intensity conflict is what political scientist J. David Singer called the "level-of-analysis problem."<sup>4</sup> This simply means that in generating theory of any complex social phenomenon, deciding what level to focus on structures the entire theory; making this decision improperly retards the development of the theory. Singer was concerned with international relations as a whole, but the point is equally valid for other social phenomena.

Since low intensity conflict is exceedingly complex, a comprehensive theory must deal with factors ranging from the psychology of individual insurgents and terrorists to the general evolution of conflict in the international system. Given this complexity, a comprehensive theory must be postponed for the future. What is needed now is a more limited theory; this requires identifying the level of analysis which can support the ongoing process of theory-building and, simultaneously, serve as a practical foundation for strategic management of the low intensity conflict threat.

At the present, thinking about low intensity conflict by United States security professionals is hampered by a level-of-analysis problem; the result is analytical extremism. This has two manifestations. The first approaches low intensity conflict as a seamless whole spawned by a single cause. According to this school, since the combination of Marxism-Leninism and Soviet power is the only force powerful enough to foment instability on a global scale, insurgency and terrorism everywhere are attributed to Soviet machinations and low intensity conflict seen purely as reflection of the Cold War. The result of this "macro" approach is a failure to appreciate the very real (and relevant) differences between low intensity conflict in various parts of the world, and an inability to distinguish the inter-regional nuances of threat and response.

The second variant of analytical extremism takes the opposite tack and fractionalizes low intensity conflict into discrete events or country-specific conflicts. This leads to fruitless debate as to whether a specific incident or action was, in fact, low intensity conflict: Did the raid on Libya, the Desert One rescue attempt, etc., constitute United States involvement in low intensity conflict? By dealing with tiny slivers of low intensity conflict, those who take this "micro" approach confuse campaigns or operations with wars.

In any process of theory-building, a level-of-analysis problem is thorny, but not insurmountable. For low intensity conflict theory, one solution is a theater perspective which better matches the reality of the Third World. Specifically, the globe can be divided into 9 theaters of low intensity conflict, seven regional and two functional. This circumvents both the over generalized "macro" approach and "micro" analysis which treats each country as a discrete case. Instead, common features of low intensity conflict within a region can be linked to other political, economic, and cultural elements. A theater perspective can delineate both divisions and linkages within a region. Given this, a theater perspective could contribute to both long-term development of a comprehensive theory of low intensity conflict and the more immediate task of crafting a limited theory to undergird strategic management of the low intensity conflict threat.

#### Global Theaters of Low Intensity Conflict

A number of factors define a theater of conflict or war. The most obvious is geography. In World War II geography dictated the division of Allied effort into Pacific, European, and China-Burma-India theaters and structured the organization of these into theaters of operations (Mediterranean/North Europe; Central Pacific/Southern Pacific, etc.). At a deeper level, more than geography unifies a theater of conflict or war. Usually, similarities among threats and requisite responses outweigh differences, thus suggesting command and control arrangements, mission priorities, force structures, and methods of operational synchronization. In addition to considerations which hold for all types of theaters, a theater of low intensity conflict is unified by intricate economic and cultural connections, meaning that the "lessons learned" in one operation may contribute to a wider theater strategy. More importantly, actual conflict within a theater is based on a common foundation; this also structures the strategic response.

As noted, the United States is involved in seven regional and two functional theaters of low intensity conflict.

Middle East Theater. The core issues which contribute to instabilities in this theater are the Arab-Israeli struggle, the Palestine issue, the competition for power between rival factions (Shiite, Sunni, Christian), and religious fundamentalism. Theater linkages derive from the shared language, social organization, religion, and history among the Arab nations, and the significance attached to certain areas by both Jews and Arabs. United States support for Israel and Soviet ties to Egypt, Syria, and Iraq added the Cold War element. United States involvement has taken the form of peacekeeping, shows of force (Lebanon in 1958), and security assistance. Operations included Beirut I and II and peacekeeping activities in southern Lebanon and the Sinai.

Southern Africa Theater. The foundation of conflict in this region is ethnic and racial struggle as exhibited through decolonization in the former Portuguese colonies, the region-wide destabilization caused by apartheid in South Africa, and ethnic conflict within the majority-rule nations. Economic, communication, and transportation interdependence provides one major source of theater linkage; opposition to apartheid another. The Cold War dimension came from Soviet and Cuban support of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), and black nationalist movements such as South West African People's Organization (SWAPO) in Namibia and the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa. United States involvement has taken the form of security assistance and, in Angola, proinsurgency.

Horn of Africa Theater. Ethnic conflict again forms the foundation here, specifically Somali irredentism and the desire of Amhara in Ethiopia to preserve imperial domination over other groups such as Eritreans, Oromos, and Tigreans. Theater linkages arise from the fact that ethnic boundaries are not always conterminous with state borders. Ethnic Somalis, for example, live in Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti. The Cold War element arose from Soviet assistance first to Somalia and, later, to Ethiopia. United States involvement has taken the form of security assistance. This is one of the few low intensity conflict theaters where basing rights are a consideration for the United States.

Central Asia/Persian Gulf Theater. The foundation of conflict in this region is the struggle for hegemony involving both endogenous actors such as Iran and Iraq and the Soviet Union, whose interest in the region is centuries old. Islam provides a unifying factor and, in the case of the Sunni/Shi'ite split, a source of conflict. The Cold War dimension derives from the desire of the West to prevent Soviet hegemony both for

geostrategic reasons and to guarantee continued access to the region's petroleum supplies. United States involvement has taken the form of security assistance and shows of force. United States operations have included naval escorts in the Persian Gulf, the supply of the Mujaheddin in Afghanistan, and activities in support of the Pakistani government and armed forces.

Pacific Rim Theater. This theater has seen some of the most extensive and intensive United States activity in the low intensity conflict milieu. In addition, this is one of two theaters where United States activity predates the modern era (Philippines insurrection from 1899-1902). The Pacific Rim is also the most heterogeneous and complex low intensity conflict theater ethnically, in terms of levels of economic development, and by types of economic and political systems. Linkages are thus more tenuous than in some of the other theaters and tend toward unified sub-theater nodes, but growing interdependence of the region may, in the near future, serve as a surrogate for cultural, linguistic, or ethnic ties. The Cold War dimension originated in Soviet (and Chinese) assistance to communist national liberation movements throughout the Pacific Rim. The intensity of United States involvement is illustrated by past direct counterinsurgency or foreign internal defense operations in combination with the more common security assistance and show of force activities. As with the Horn of Africa, basing rights are also important here since large-scale projection is a feasible contingency.

Central America/Caribbean Theater. This is the other theater where United States involvement has a long history. Some of the earliest United States low intensity conflict operations in the modern era occurred here as, for example, Guatemala in 1954. The foundation of conflict is economic inequity, the resulting poverty, and political authoritarianism and repression within the nations of the region. Theater linkages derive from shared language, religion, methods of social organization, and economic and political types. The Cold War dimension grew from Soviet (and later Cuban and Nicaraguan) support for leftist national liberation movements. Activities have taken the form of contingency operations (Dominican Republic and Grenada), security assistance, shows of force, and proinsurgency (Cuba and Nicaragua).

South America Theater. In South America, the United States has been active, but involvement has largely been limited to security assistance. As with Central America, the foundation of conflict is economic inequity and political repression; theater linkages are also similar. In the future, inequities between nations may join inequities within them as a source of conflict. To date, the Cold War dimension of low intensity conflict is more muted in this theater than in any other, but Soviet and Cuban proinsurgency as in Bolivia is relevant.

**Terrorism Theater.** The terrorism theater represents an amalgam of other low intensity conflict theaters unified more by the particular manifestation that conflict takes than by a common foundation. To date, the "war on terrorism" has represented the most intensive and extensive non-geographic theater of low intensity conflict for the United States. Operations included counterterrorism such as the raid on Libya and a wide range of antiterrorism measures such as the hardening of likely targets and intensive intelligence collection. The Soviet role in fomenting and sponsoring various terrorist groups added the cold War element.

**Drug Theater.** Drug trafficking generated the newest and most important non-geographic theater of low intensity conflict. Similar to the terrorism theater, United States involvement included counterdrug activities such as Operation Blast Furnace in 1986 in Bolivia and antidrug activities such as shows of force and military support for border patrols and interdiction efforts.<sup>5</sup> Linkages in this theater are among the most direct since the drug trade, its associated weapons flow, terrorism, and, increasingly, insurgency, create a unified network in Latin America, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. The Cold War element comes from connections between drug traffickers, radical states such as Cuba and Nicaragua, and insurgent movements like the M-19 in Colombia.<sup>6</sup>

#### Advantages of a Theater Perspective

Approaching low intensity conflict from a theater rather than global or country-specific perspective would have three advantages: augmentation of understanding by United States security professionals and policy makers in the drive for theory building; expansion of the range of strategic options for managing the low intensity conflict threat; and increased organizational clarity and efficiency.

Much of the difficulty which the United States encountered in the low intensity conflict milieu can be attributed to the inability of many security professionals and policy makers to understand the essence of the phenomenon. This is because proponents of low intensity conflict -- insurgents, terrorists, and their sponsors -- operate with a global weltanschauung [Eds Note: a comprehensive conception or appreciation of the world especially from a specific standpoint] diametrically opposite that held by most United States citizens. The misunderstanding which flows from this generates cognitive constraints which are not merely theoretical, but create tangible obstacles to the development of a coherent strategy for managing the low intensity conflict threat. In plain terms, low intensity conflict is so at odds with the United States world view that our policy makers and security professionals often find themselves paralyzed when seeking a response.

In contrast to that of insurgents and terrorists, the United States weltanschauung sees conflict between and within nations as an aberration rather than the norm. War and peace, as Robert Osgood noted, are "diametrically opposite states of affairs, to be governed by entirely different rules and considerations."<sup>7</sup> When conflict does occur and United States involvement is required, an unbridled and total mobilization of national resources is the logical response. Such an approach brought victory in two world wars and propelled the United States to superpower status, but it was poor preparation for involvement in low intensity conflict.

While it is the endogenous foundation rather than Soviet machinations which, strictly speaking, causes low intensity conflict, the Cold War dimension historically amplifies conflict and creates strategic problems for the United States. In fact, the modern low intensity conflict threat originated in the East-West struggle. When, in the early 1950s, United States resolve in Europe and Korea thwarted the direct expansion of Soviet influence, Moscow was forced to pursue other avenues of superpower competition. Taking advantage of vulnerabilities arising from United States attitudes toward international conflict, the Soviets adopted a grand strategic manifestation of the "indirect approach" advocated by Sun Tzu and Liddell Hart.<sup>8</sup> Nationalism and decolonization were locomotives; the prevalent tactic was support for insurgency. In answer, containment became the primary strategic dynamic in the regional theaters of low intensity conflict. But because the disorder of decolonization, nation building, and modernization was linked to the Cold War by both United States perceptions and Soviet activities, the architects of United States counterinsurgency doctrine over compensated and adopted the "macro" approach which viewed Moscow as the key to the resolution of any Third World conflict.

In addition to these Manichaeian [Eds Note: a believer in religious or philosophical dualism] attitudes toward conflict in the international system, the United States weltanschauung generates other obstacles to management of the low intensity conflict threat. For example, this world view is essentially astrategic, favoring atomistic and reductionist techniques of problem solving and stressing dichotomies and differences rather than linkages and relationships.<sup>9</sup> The protracted, simmering, ambiguous nature of low intensity conflict exacerbates these astrategic tendencies.

These misunderstandings and conceptual limitations pose major problems for those charged with crafting a coherent United States strategy for low intensity conflict. Admittedly, adopting a theater perspective would not fully alleviate these dilemmas, but it could help. According to Edward Luttwak, a cardinal rule of strategy is to "never deal with the single issue, or the single affair of any kind, in isolation."<sup>10</sup> A strategy for low

intensity conflict must thus be teleological, reflecting the unitary nature of the threat, shared characteristics of insurgencies and terrorist campaigns, and the linkages of low intensity conflict to other elements of national strategy. A theater perspective would stress cultural, economic, political, and social interdependencies and linkages, integrate them into the strategic response, and augment United States understanding of the low intensity conflict milieu.

A theater perspective would also expand the range of options available to United States strategists. Since World War II, United States military strategy has sought to deter and control conflict through the threat of both horizontal and vertical escalation. Vertical escalation held out the possible use of nuclear weapons in response to impending conventional defeat. Horizontal escalation threatened to answer impending defeat in Europe with attacks in other areas of the world where Moscow was more vulnerable, especially the Pacific region.

By adopting a country-specific low intensity conflict strategy, the United States excluded horizontal escalation as a strategic option. Attempts which were made at strategic horizontal escalation such as Nixon and Kissinger's "linkage" assumed a controlling Soviet role in all insurgencies and terrorist campaigns. Clearly, an approach more attuned to the realities of modern insurgency and terrorism is needed. This was made feasible by the "Reagan Doctrine" which added proinsurgency to the array of strategic options for Third World conflict. By recognizing that low intensity conflict is often not contained by national borders and that the Soviet Union is not always the sole or primary instigator of insurgency and terrorism, a theater perspective would allow security professionals and policy makers to use controlled horizontal escalation within a theater of low intensity conflict.

Finally, a theater perspective would contribute organizational clarity. At the present time, the State Department's decision making structure, with its emphasis on regions, approximates a theater perspective, but the State Department considers low intensity conflict a second priority to purely diplomatic concerns and thus cannot serve as an exact model for low intensity conflict organization. Within the military, United States Southern Command, as the only unified combatant command whose missions fall primarily in the low intensity conflict environment, is theater oriented, but the other unified combatant commands with some responsibility for low intensity conflict such as United States Pacific Command and United States European Command are not so organized.

Because of the multidimensional nature of the low intensity conflict threat, the United States response must integrate the various elements of national power (political, economic, informational, and military). Thus, low intensity conflict organized from a theater perspective should be based on a theater "directoriate" responsible for the generation of broad strategic guidance and the integration of the various elements of national power. The membership of this directorate should include: the appropriate unified commanders-in-chief; the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Low intensity Conflict and Special Operations and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs or one of their deputies; the appropriate State Department official, preferably at the assistant secretary or, at least, deputy assistant secretary level; a representative of the National Security Council Low Intensity Conflict Board; and representatives from the Central Intelligence Agency, Congress, and the Department of Treasury.<sup>11</sup>

The objective of such a theater directorate would be an integrated blend of military, political, economic, and informational approaches to specific problems; long- and short-term perspectives; and region specific and global considerations. The leader of each directorate should be clear. In most cases, either the appropriate regional commander-in-chief or the State Department representative should assume this role depending on the function of military force and diplomatic negotiations in the relevant theater.

The regional commanders-in-chief need the equivalent of a subunified command for each theater of low intensity conflict. This is especially true of the United States European Command and the United States Pacific Command where low intensity conflict missions are not clearly the top priority. Attention should be given the development of commander-in-chief authored strategies for each of the low intensity conflict theaters. As with all theater strategies, these should provide "broad conceptual guidance for deterrence and the prosecution of regional war and smaller conflicts, as well as direction for security assistance, support for treaties and agreements, the development of good relations with nonaligned nations, and expanding United States influence throughout the theater" and should link "all the elements of national power" (political, economic, informational, and military) "into a coordinated whole to achieve theater strategic objectives for the nation."<sup>12</sup>



## Conclusion

Adopting a theater perspective on low intensity conflict would not entail radical organizational restructuring or massive changes in the conceptual underpinnings of United States strategy. In fact, only an adjustment would be required, but the benefits in terms of understanding, expanded strategic options, and organizational clarity could be great.

Modern low intensity conflict is an intrinsic part of wider global trends and forces. Low intensity conflict within a Third World nation is equally linked to the strains of modernization, interdependence, and integration which characterizes a region. As global modernization continues, interdependence will increase and low intensity conflict in individual nations will blend into a single, regional phenomenon. United States strategy must match this integrative tendency. Thus, it is time for United States security professionals to move beyond both the blatantly artificial view that low intensity conflict around the world is part of a single phenomenon and the increasingly obsolete single-country view. Adoption of a theater perspective, then, is one small step in the development of a coherent national strategy for managing the low intensity conflict threat.

## Endnotes

1. For alternative approaches to the development of a national strategy for low intensity conflict, see the Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy, Supporting U.S. Strategy for Third World Conflict, a report from the Regional Conflict Working Group (Washington: Department of Defense, June 1988); Jerome W. Klingman, "Policy and Strategy Foundations for Low Intensity Warfare," CADRE Papers AU-ARI-CP-86-2 (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, September 1986); and Steven Metz, "Foundation for a Low Intensity Conflict Strategy," Comparative Strategy, (Spring 1989).
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10. Edward N. Luttwak, "On the Need to Reform American Strategy," in Planning U.S. Security, ed. Philip S. Kronenberg (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1981), p. 27.
11. For more on these organizations, see William Olson, "Organizing for Low Intensity Conflict," Military Review (January 1988).
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