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**Geopolitical Management through Irregular Actors**

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## **Geopolitical Management through Irregular Actors**

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### **Abstract**

The main idea of this study is based on the theory that State authorities can eventually use irregular actors and their connections, like organized crime groups, militias and terrorist organizations to manage Empty Areas, like Amazon area in Brazil, and Nonconforming Sectors, like Chechnya in Russia, bringing some kind of government presence to those areas. In areas where there is lack of a government authority due to geographic isolation or hard access, the central authority may establish deals with once illegal or marginalized groups to avoid separatist or others problems. There are a lot of factual examples not only in the ancient times, when kings and princes made arrangements with erratic bandits or mercenaries to guarantee their rule and loyalty over those places, or in present times when central authorities negotiate agreements, sometimes bribes, to stabilize or prevent disruptions of their power and legitimacy that can lead to separatist movements. This strategy, even if controversial, is a way that the State found to establish a management over troubled geographical areas.

**Keywords:** Geopolitics, Territory, Irregular Actors, Territorial Management

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## **Introduction**

The management of the outlying areas of the old colonial empires and of current National States has always presented a challenge both because of the physical distance and because, normally, these areas are filled with populations with different ethnicities, cultures, religions, languages, etc. This situation complicates central authorities' or federal governments' efforts to integrate those areas and establish their own administrative legitimacy. However, colonial empires frequently applied the strategy of *Divide et impera* (Divide and conquer) to facilitate their rule over conquered areas by using non-integrated groups against its own state representatives or to negotiate with local groups, even if marginalized, to subdue troubled territories.

Non-integrated actors, which I will call all groups that are considered to be non-state actors as well as groups that are marginalized and criminalized, frequently possess a vast network within the local population in the environments in which they are embedded. In some cases, they even possess Symbolic Capital that gives them legitimacy and a local community that provides them protection from "foreign" enemies, viewing them as protectors of the population or freedom fighters against the "invaders". Furthermore, even without carrying out direct confrontations, non-integrated actors still may resort to irregular warfare in asymmetrical scenarios, requiring central authorities to employ Human Terrain System strategies. While this Social Capital may evolve into a problem for the central authorities or an occupation force because of the difficulties caused by its presence, in some cases, it may also be used as a valuable tool to assist in the local administration. In fact, it may be easier to achieve stabilization (and maybe integration) of troubled areas using this type of strategy than by the direct use of coercive force.

## **Irregular Warfare and Irregular Opposition**

As Ratzel pondered, although economic and political systems tend to have some "organicity" in their development, this power will be unequal and will differ between regions (Costa, 2008: 37). Those regions with different patterns of development will represent different levels of interaction with central or federal governments, which in turn may show a variation of animosity in their relations with this central power and in their willingness to accept its authority and representation. In most cases, empty areas and nonconforming sectors face this challenge for several reasons, such as demographic scarcity, the presence of minority ethnic or religious groups, geography that hampers direct access due to long distances from nuclear cores, or topographical obstacles such as mountains. As Kaplan demonstrated, mountains have frequently served as a refuge to non-integrated groups (guerrillas, for example) resisting foreign or central powers, a situation that continues even today (Kaplan, 2013: xiii). It is not rare for the non-integrated groups in those areas to pursue irregular warfare to sustain their dominance and/or influence over those territories, undermining

the position of central governments or of foreign invaders in those territories. Nonconforming sectors are normally physically distant from central governments; however, there are exceptions, and there is a challenge to address in that these groups also may appear, in some of the biggest urban environments worldwide, near to these centres of governmental representation. These types of resistance groups may present difficulties to the establishment of law enforcement and authority.

It is fair to say that most current conflicts, at least at this point, are related to those asymmetrical aspects of irregular warfare, with only a couple of exceptions. The United States Department of Defense defines “irregular warfare” as a “...*violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations. Irregular Warfare favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary’s power, influence, and will*” (DoD, 2007). During the First Chechen War, the Chechen insurgents knew they could not defeat the Russians in a direct conflict due to being largely outnumbered and lacking heavy equipment. Instead, they chose to fight against the Russian army’s strength in the city, denying the army a clear front line and also using their network of contacts abroad, mainly in Middle East and Turkey, to acquire equipment. Between 45 and 95 thousand Russian soldiers were defeated by only 15 thousand Chechens insurgents. During the conflict, the insurgents used their well-developed human intelligence, based on their network in the city. They dressed very few of their personnel in military uniforms, easily disguising themselves within the local population. This urban environment was used as a cover for ambushes against Russians, mostly by applying “hugging” techniques within 25 to a maximum of 100 metres of Russian positions to avoid artillery, rocket and air support from the Russian Army (Speyer III, 2001). In 2006, a patrol of American soldiers in the mountain valleys of Uruzgan in Afghanistan fought against a large ambush of Taliban fighters that was later augmented by the participation of the local natives. While the military scenario faced by Russians in Grozny was mostly urban, the Afghan theatre faced by American soldiers was mostly rural and mountainous (Kilcullen, 2009: 39). In both cases, there was major external involvement with such insurgent groups. Creating an additional obstacle to fighting against them, the social capital of these groups, in general, enables them to establish vast networks that are not centralized but web-based, allowing these groups to be fluid, malleable and dynamic.

I do not want here to establish a *cliché* discussion about how porous boundaries are “these days”, or even worse, about how borders would be outdated in a “globalized world”. This is especially the case because there is an overreaction about this, and the power of those borders would vary according to several factors. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that borders are more or less weak now than in the past; for example, the mujahedeen in Afghanistan during the 80’s were helped by neighbouring nations Pakistan and China (Shichor, 2004: 120) as well by the United States, the Partisans in Yugoslavia during World War II were supplied by the United Kingdom

(Arquilla, 2011:201), and the Giap's Militias in Vietnam flowed through the border with Laos (Idem:227). There were even older non-integrated actors, such as the Brazilian *Cangaceiros* in the XIX century or the *Praedones* and *Latrones* in the Roman Empire. Indeed, there are obvious differences of context between those old groups and current non-integrated actors, but all of these groups possess enough similarities to be included in the same asymmetrical systems of engagement and political resistance to central governments or authorities. In fact, the irregular fighter is not something new or a larger issue today than in the past.

### **Addressing Non-Integrated Actors: Did Colonial and Old Empires Succeed Where Most Current Nations Fail?**

Contrary to the common impression, during the colonization period, the European Empires based their expansion on violent military takeovers of native populations and colonial powers frequently operated their administrations by depending on the support of local leadership for the obvious reason that local leadership would have had more identity legitimacy and better-established social capital with local populations. Furthermore, those collaborators would possess better knowledge concerning the geography of their own territories; something that would be useful in conflicts with rebel groups or with other foreign invaders. In some cases, such as in Southeast Asia, the extreme amalgams of different, unfamiliar religious and ethnic groups, plus the different social distinctions based on birthright, were hard for most European conquerors to understand. However, among all of those socially explosive environments, the Chinese population was the most problematic for colonial administrators because they comprised the biggest non-native population in most of the countries in the South China Sea (Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand) as well as maintained several underground connections, working as "*shadow bridges*" between the islands and the main continent, thanks to social capital built by the many Chinese secret societies.

In Singapore, the British administration relied on local lords connected with the Triads to control the Chinese population and to obtain the revenues provided by taxes collected from the Chinese. In many cases, the governments had absolutely no means of communicating with the lower-class Chinese, a duty that was mostly transferred to the Triads. In general, the acceptance of the Triads' and other secret societies' presence and their services as interlocutors with the Chinese immigrants posed no problems to the colonial administrations at all. In fact, those groups were able to bring some stability to the region, facilitating European rule (Studwell, 2007: 10), at least when they were not challenged. The British Empire also worked with Indian warlords to sustain its commercial interests in the coast of India, choosing carefully which ones they should support and feeding intrigues among them when unable to confront such warlords themselves (Panikkar, 1959: 77).

A similar strategy was employed in the Portuguese colonial territory in the current area of Brazil, dealing with the group known as *Paulistas Bandeirantes*, a mixed group of people of Portuguese heritage and Brazilian Indian ancestry, from whom the name of the people born in the current state of São Paulo originated. Because the *Village of São Paulo of Piratininga* (currently the city of São Paulo) was the most interior Portuguese settlement in the Brazilian colonial territory in the XVI century, the Paulistas were more or less forgotten by the Portuguese Empire. This fact led to the population learning how to survive and protect themselves not only from the exotic, unknown and dangerous wildlife of Brazil but also from Indian attacks, especially from the *Tamoios* tribes, who repeatedly attempted to burn farms, to raid warehouses and convoys, and, sometimes, to kill entire families (Doria, 2012: 44). The isolation and hard environment of São Paulo made for a stubborn population that frequently disobeyed and challenged the central authority of the Portuguese Empire. However, despite those differences, their relationship remained relatively stable, with a few or minor disagreements—largely because the Paulistas were regularly hired to perform dangerous services for the Portuguese Crown because of their expertise, toughness and knowledge of the region's geography. Although it was rare for kings to write letters to vassals, especially to ones so distant and isolated, the Portuguese kings did occasionally write letters to the Paulistas, seeking their help in search for gold in the remote backcountry and jungles or for their aid in fighting against foreign invaders such as the French, Dutch and Spanish— even, in the War of Palmares, against a community of African fugitive slaves, and during the Confederation of Cariris (also known as the War of the Barbarians), against a coalition of Indian tribes.

This cooperation with those groups, to control some part of the population and stabilize far regions of the empires or to fight against local powers and even other foreign invaders, is one the reasons why the Spanish empire was able to fight and subdue the American Empires, despite the mythology of just a few European soldiers being able to defeat huge and powerful empires such as the Inca and Aztec Empires. In fact, during the invasion of what today is Guatemala, the Spanish, with approximately 250 soldiers, counted on the support of five or six thousand native allies. For the invasion of the Capital of the Aztec Empire (Tenochtitlán), Hernán Cortéz was able to create an army composed of 200,000 native allies to subdue and occupy the city. Indeed, the Spanish played a secondary role in the war that led directly to the fall of the Aztec Empire. Similarly, with the conquest of the Inca Empire, when Francisco Pizarro arrived in Peru, the empire was already committed to a difficult civil war; eventually the Spanish Empire simply took the advantage of the divisions in the region, using them in its own favour. As Cortéz later said “divided they fall” (Restall, 2003: 44, 48).

Despite those collaborations with irregular groups or local warlords being, in most cases, related to the peripheral, far areas of those the overseas empires, some other cases also later happened inside the borders of some countries. Normally, these were in areas posing some difficulty to the central government

for establishing direct power and enforcement, such as in Brazil during the 1925 communist uprising of *Coluna Prestes*. The Brazilian federal government offered amnesty to Virgulino Ferreira da Silva (aka Lampião), a powerful bandit in the northeast of Brazil, in exchange for his help in fighting against the Coluna Prestes guerrillas; however, shortly after accepting the agreement, he gave up the mission. In other cases, the underground political world played a major role in fighting, with the connivance of the nationalist government, foreign ideas such as socialism and liberalism. The Yakuza of Japan, at the end of the XIX century and the rise of the XX century, played such a role.

### **The Indirect War: Stabilizing your Ground and Destabilizing Rivals**

Due to the capacity of those groups to conduct effective operations in areas where the central authority would not be able to perform its enforcement duties equally well, they can also be a very effective way to destabilize foreign powers within their own territory. The literature is filled with research on how the United States, Pakistan and China helped the Mujahedeen against the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and, more recently, the presumed involvement of foreign powers in supporting the Islamic State, among others insurgents, in Syria. In general, these studies focus on the terrorist organizations tied to the Nation-States sponsorship, but there is much less literature addressing exactly how these networks work and about what other types of non-integrated actors, such as organized crime or gangs, are being sponsored by Nation-States for the purpose of achieving strategic or tactical goals.

History shows some examples of how such collaboration may potentially be useful, such as the cooperation between the Italian Mafia and the Allies in World War II. Don Calogero Vizzini provided “soldiers” who guided Allied forces in the mountains and rivers of Sicily as well as informed intelligence agents of the locations of Axis troops and their fortified positions (Nash, 2004, p. 549). Later, during the Cold War, the CIA hired the Italian-American Mafia to help them with logistics in Cuba, helping to maintain its Covert Operations on the island and also to contract some of their gunmen to assassinate Cuban President Fidel Castro (Benson, 2008:74). Because those criminal organizations normally already operate in areas where the presence of the state is weak, having a better local network with the local community and sometimes even a common identity not shared with the Central authority and their representatives, their effectiveness may be increased when a foreign power decides to supply them with proper equipment and cover for their financial operations and even shelter from fire fights. A smart strategy used by the Iranian elite forces, the Quds Force, that severely damaged American forces in the north of Iraq, was helping the Shia militias (Filkins, 2013).

On the other hand, there are still actual examples of governments using non-integrated actors, alongside government actors, to stabilize their own territories, in special, nonconforming sectors. While the first incursion into secessionist Chechen was a failure for the Russian army, after a severe clash

between federal troops and the irregular Chechen militias, the second incursion was more successful from a military point of view. However, to secure the presence of federal enforcement would require more than a military victory. For this reason, Moscow supported Ramzan Kadyrov and his complicated leadership, accused of systematic violence and corruption supported by a semi-independent militia force with 5 thousand soldiers. What resulted was a pacified Chechen territory with decreasing numbers of killings and disappearances (Sakwa, 2008:236). It is fair to say, at least at this point, that separatist demands are almost non-existent.

In addition to being an extremely unpopular and troubling idea, the policy of governments negotiating with criminal and terrorist organizations is even illegal in many countries. The fact is that even with these marginal organizations, the construction of Social Capital may prove useful under some conditions. A functional social order and a certain degree of cultural identification may build an internal coherence through Social Capital, resulting in economic growth. To Serageldin and Grotaerd (1998: 203), the East Asian economic "miracle" was in great part the result of the social conditions made by institutional arrangements and organizational designs that enhanced efficiency, facilitating the exchange of information while promoting cooperation between government and industry. They were probably not thinking of a connection between a national state and these irregular and criminalized actors; however, they also cited the example of Boosaaso in Somalia. In that case, soon after the central government fell in 1991, while most of the country was dragged into massive civil disorder, the city of Boosaaso was able to provide stability and economic revenue because a local warlord, supported by local residents, organized a security force and a council of clan elders.

This collaboration is not only politically and legally problematic but is also very delicate and hard to implement. If those non-integrated actors are, by definition, obviously non-integrated with state power, the government may have a problem in sustaining an alliance and in obliging this group to comply with any deals made. As previously presented, the Brazilian bandit Lampião did not fulfil his part and eventually fled from the conflict, letting the communist movement of Coluna Prestes escape. Furthermore, the CIA deals with the Italian-American Mafia to kill Fidel Castro were never fulfilled, and even worse, assistance to the Afghan insurgents eventually resulted in the creation of Al-Qaeda. The selection of which group of legal non-state actors (such as NGOs or companies) or non-integrated illegal actors (such as terrorists and criminal organizations) should be supported by governments is a rational and calculated decision (but not a foolproof one). Normally, such a decision is based in a confluence of interests around the same objective. The Iranian forces did not pick an insurgent group randomly, but chose a Shia group; the Chinese government did not negotiate with all Triad factions, but only enlisted the "patriotic Triads" of Sun Yee On to help with Hong Kong's transition from English rule to Chinese (Lo, 2010); the United States did not try to cooperate with all insurgents in Afghanistan involved in opium production, but they

chose the Northern Alliance because of its hostility towards the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

## **Conclusion**

Obviously, cooperation with such marginalized groups would have had a different social and political impact today than during the era of colonial empires. Historically, colonial empires were, in most cases (and sometimes only), concerned with the stability of commerce and maintenance of trade routes, rather than with the establishment of law or its enforcement. In fact, these factions were just another tool to help in dominating the native populations. Later yet, during the XX century, many acts such as this could be performed in the name of the national good and could be politically supported by invoking strategic goals. The fight against Nazi Germany or the ideological battles of the Cold War were events that could reasonably easily justify such agreements with insurgents and criminal organizations. However, today, such a situation would probably, in most cases, cause trouble with the population or the electorate if made public. If not, at least in many cases, these situations would cause embarrassment in the international arena.

Among the pros and cons, there will always be agencies and authorities willing to use these strategies, especially because they are very effective as well as relatively low in financial costs; it may be cheaper to pay the leaders of such groups than to sustain an entire army. Such an arrangement is cheap in human costs because the federal or central authority will not lose any direct assets; it is cheap in psychological costs because dramatic situations in which its own military forces are returned home in coffins or mutilated would be avoided. Furthermore, despite the already noted political risks, it is also socially cheap because these groups possess Social Capital among the local population, something that may legitimate the presence of these “foreign powers,” creating a feeling of integration.

I would say that this strategy, in empty areas and nonconforming sectors, would be an effective way for central authorities to buy time to develop the large-scale integration of these local populations with the main political system or at least enough time to strengthen its institutions in such localities, easing potential civilizational clashes and absorbing occasional shocks between the different groups and the main authority.

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