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LT. COL. SÁNDOR FÁBIÁN: IRREGULAR WARFARE. THE FUTURE MILITARY STRATEGY FOR SMALL STATES

Wroclaw: Amazon Fulfilment, 2012. 349 p. ISBN 978-1508490524

As already told by the title the book, privately published in 2012, deals with a unique idea. Irregular warfare is usually seen as an auxiliary solution if used by state actors, but in this case the author promotes the idea as a clear nod to his tutor John Arquilla as a main course of action for small states. To support his argument the author defines different areas such as effectivity, budgetary reasons, as well as military ones for the creation of a “professional irregular defence force” (p. 8.). The first and emphasised starting point of the book is the classic idea that strategy, especially grand strategy, must focus on decreasing the social costs of warfare. The second initial assumption is that a weaker state is willing to risk everything in order to survive even through bringing the objective of the struggle to an irrational level. Judging from the above it is easy to see how ambitious goals the author set for his writing.

Surmising that by smaller states the author is likely but not exclusively to mean his native Hungary, the book discusses very shortly (pp. 33-35) how the term could be interpreted. Possible grand strategies for similar countries are discussed in detail, and between pages 36 and 53 there is a neat summary to be found about the possible four major defensive strategies such as: imitating bigger states’ military capabilities, forming of alliances, declaration of neutrality, and obtaining weapons of mass destruction. Yet as the author correctly points out most of these are either not available, or only through disproportionately huge efforts. Who would like to have a member in an alliance, which relies on other countries’ spending? Not to mention the fact that neutral states spend a higher percentage of their GDP on defence. Acquiring WMDs (and their means of delivery) requires serious technological and financial investments, not to mention the international communities’ obvious resistance, so we can agree with the author that most of these are not a viable solution for small states.

The major strength of the book is the presentation of irregular forces by state actors through case studies. (pp. 53-325.) The American war of independence, Boer wars, the lesser known struggles of the German colonial troops in German East Africa in WWI, the Yugoslav partisan war, the first Chechen-Russian war, or the second Lebanese war, all provide excellent background and arguments for the official use of irregular troops.

In the last part of the book the author summarizes the previous chapters and offers solutions for an irregular defensive grand strategy at official level. And this is the point where he definitely reaches the limits of the concept. Even though the author identifies and emphasizes (pp. 328-329.) the importance of political unity as a requirement for pre-planned territorial losses, or even the complete loss of sovereignty, the reviewer finds it hard to believe that any political player would risk a defence strategy which intentionally refrains from defending major parts or horrible dictu the whole country. If the plans of abandoning certain parts of society became known to the public or any whistleblowers, it would definitely mean the

political death for the supporting political parties. An operational or tactical, strictly military that is, retreat from certain areas is acceptable, but pre-planned surrendering of population and territories, not to mention sovereignty, is for sure beyond any real support. Not to mention the fact that reconquering is usually more difficult than defending. The problematic is posed by the third point as the physical battlefield is closely related to lightly equipped units and irregular warfare. In order to successfully employ guerrilla hit-and-run tactics against a superior foe, in the words of Clausewitz a “difficultly accessible” terrain is a must. Pripjat marshes, the dry Spanish meseta full of caves and hills, the hills in the former Yugoslavia, or the huge forests of the Baltics (see *Forest Brothers*) are ideal for such warfare. In Hungary such terrain features are almost non-existent or too small in size, so coming back to the previous point it is politically unacceptable to let the aggressor into the cities, among the civilians without a fight, thus enabling urban warfare and the granted huge number of civilian casualties and the whole sale destruction of built up areas.

On the other hand the reviewer regards the novel idea of promoting mobility at the expense of firepower an excellent concept. Not only is it in line with Hungarian military tradition, but also corresponds to recent experience. Classical prebuilt defence structures such as bases and barriers are easy targets for modern precision weapons. But forming light infantry units offers a number of advantages. Such units are easily formed even with limited resources, allowing a bigger portion of the population to receive at least basic military training. Using 4x4 vehicles, even technical, by (reservist) units would bring local support and low cost together for an increased deterrent military capability. Recent experience in Syria has led Russian forces to experience with a light infantry/professional irregular unit.¹ Of course for such deterrence a well trained and equipped traditional army is also a must. For irregular warfare local, reservist units with good local knowledge are probably the most suited, which are able to make a possible occupier’s life miserable. With General Spanocchi’s notion, written during the Cold War, neutral Austria laid out the contours of such concept. As its further development, the Iranian concept of passive resistance offers an even more sophisticated, decentralized system where the state’s functions are overtaken by an underground organization. Yet describing the principles of such an integrated, law enforcement/military, and civil service organization is way outside the scope of this current review.

Using an analogy from the animal world small states’ military doctrine should look like the approach of the African honey badger, also known as ratel. The small sized, distinctive black and silver furred predator is well known for its toughness, fearlessness, and creativity. Even though the average size of a ratel is only 80 cm and its weight is only 10-15 kg, thanks to its thick skin and ferocity even large predators like lions evade the badger. One story told in a 2011 National Geographic documentary a ratel has killed a 800 kg African buffalo, by bleeding him dry, while hanging on to his nose. One zoo specimen has escaped from his new place by cleverly using two tree branches, and returned to his old cage to take it back from the new residents – a lion couple. In the morning, the zoo crew found the heavily wounded, but still breathing ratel beside the lions. The fame of the ratel is characterized by the 2007 case from Basra, Iraq. Fake news was spread about the British forces stationing there, to have

¹ Marjanovic, M. “Russian Army forms a battalion equipped with technicals”. Checkpoint Asia. 13 August 2017. <http://www.checkpointasia.net/index.php/2017/08/13/russian-army-forms-a-battalion-equipped-with-technicals/>. Accessed on 15 Oct 2017.

released a man eating version of the native ratel to intimidate to population.² This approach is well represented in a recently published RAND report about the Baltic States' vulnerability to hybrid warfare "*If somebody without any military insignia commits terrorist attacks in your country you should shoot him . . . you should not allow them to enter.*"³

In the reviewer's opinion a small state's defence concept must show the above resolve, toughness, and ferocity supporting the image that a possible aggressor has much more to lose than it could gain in a conflict.

To summarize the above, the reviewer recommends the book to all those who are professionally or otherwise interested in irregular warfare adding that certain parts, and observations require further research.

² "British blamed for Basra badgers". BBC. 12 July 2007. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6295138.stm, Accessed on 18 June 2017.

³ Radin, A. "Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses". RAND. 2017. 25. http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1500/RR1577/RAND_RR1577.pdf, Accessed on 10 July 2017.