Ideologies and conflict in the post-Cold War

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this article is to apply a re-worked definition of ideology in order to account for cultural and political dimensions of contemporary armed conflicts.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper analyzes communiques, press releases, magazines, pamphlets, speeches, interviews and other communicational media produced by insurgent organizations in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Colombia, particularly in the post-Cold War, in order to assess the characteristics of their ideological platforms. The extensive use of these primary sources aims at revealing the way the organizations see themselves, and how important ideological warfare is in their overall strategy.

Findings – In the post-Cold War, and even in the early twenty-first century, armed guerrillas persisted in linking their armed struggle to ideological platforms, though in more flexible versions. Nationalism, fundamentalism and socialism are functional to their tactics and strategies, and have tangible effects at strategic and tactical levels.

Research limitations/implications – Three sample cases have been revised exhaustively, but that methodology impedes the examination of a wider spectrum of post-Cold War insurgent organizations, which may balance the results here presented. However, the high relevance of the ideological component in contemporary armed conflicts, as shown in the Afghan, Congolese and Colombian cases, demonstrates the need for further academic works on this topic.

Practical implications – Re-defining ideology, as the paper proposes, turns it into a powerful conceptual tool to be used in academic research, given that precisely the absence of comprehensive categories of analysis has prevented scholars from providing a full picture of the political and cultural dimensions of contemporary armed conflicts.

Originality/value – As economic-focused researches on armed conflicts have dominated the field since the 1990s, the paper underlines the need for scholars to approach a broader scope in peace studies.

Keywords Ideologies (Philosophy), Conflict, National cultures, War, Congo, Afghanistan, Colombia

Paper type Case study

Introduction

What is the role of ideologies in post-Cold War internal armed conflicts? Have economic motivations completely sidelined ideological and political ones? The absence of a deeper understanding of the role of ideologies in the post-Cold War has undermined the ability of scholars to explain coherently the dynamics of contemporary armed conflicts. This highly problematic shortcoming of scholarly research affects negatively the chances of success of international and governmental conflict resolution policies, as it leaves unaddressed a key component of modern insurgencies. This paper will argue that ideologies play not only an important but fundamental role in explaining the dynamics of contemporary armed conflicts, though I do not claim this is the case of every armed insurrection. While authors like Francis Fukuyama and Paul Collier have greatly influenced the understandings of post-Cold War conflict by

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minimizing the role of ideology, I present evidence from three major societal conflicts pointing in the opposite direction, which has implications for research in Social Psychology, Sociology and Political Science, and in the practice of conflict management and resolution.

Between 1989 and 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, scholars began to think that ideologies might have become a thing of the past. After defeating monarchy, fascism and communism, wrote Francis Fukuyama famously in 1989, liberal democracy might constitute the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” (Fukuyama, 1989). He described the collapse of the communist utopia as a global coming back to senses, asserting that “the collapse of Marxist ideology in the late 1980s reflected, in a sense, the achievement of a higher level of rationality on the part of those who lived in such societies, and their realization that rational universal recognition could be had only in a liberal social order” (Fukuyama, 2006). Not seeing any other global-reach ideology to compete with liberal democracy, he declared it the solitary winner of history’s ideological struggles, overlooking the multiple projects that would emerge throughout the decade as merely localized phenomena doomed to pass.

In general, the global discredit of ideologies as a useful category to account for war in the post-Cold War led some researchers to search for new explanations on why armed conflict did persist into the 1990s, and many focused particularly on the economic motivations (Fitzgerald, 2001; Ballentine, 2003). Among the most influential academic works aimed at describing the nature of armed conflicts in the 1990s was that conducted in Oxford by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler. As a result of their statistical analysis, they concluded that 79 major conflicts between 1960 and 1999 could be explained in terms of greed and grievance: in other words, conflict surged when financial opportunities to build a rebel organization – geography, lootable natural resources, donations – existed, in a context of inequality, deprivation and/or ethnic religious divisions (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). While this work has shed important light on the understanding of post-Cold War conflict, it has led to a dangerous underestimation of political and cultural dimensions of insurgencies. “Motivations for rebellion”, wrote Collier, “generally matter less than the conditions that make a rebellion financially and militarily viable” (Collier, 2003).

While Fukuyama’s philosophical propositions and Collier’s economic explanations persist as point of reference for scholar debate, this paper offers the weight of theoretical and empirical evidence against the idea of a de-ideologized world, and aims at calling attention on the outstanding failure on Collier’s work to account for a critical piece of the puzzle. I demonstrate that ignoring the importance of ideological warfare impedes a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena of armed insurgencies in the 1990s and reinforces an incomplete view that in turn undermines the chances of finding a realistic approach to put and end to the human tragedy of war. Assessing the crucial impact ideologies have in prolonging and fueling violent conflict should be part of a realistic course of action not only to understand the nature of internal warfare since 1989, but to devise formulas aimed at quelling them.

Many authors from various disciplines have already taken on Fukuyama’s assertions about a world without ideology. For some critics, the idea of an end of ideologies, prophesized since the 1960s and heralded by Fukuyama in 1989, became in itself “an expression of the ideology of the time and place where it arose” (McIntyre, 1971). Globalization of liberal democracy, in terms of Ulrich Beck, constituted “another
attempt at exporting Western modernization beyond its spatial and temporal confines” (Beck, 2000). In the same line, Susan Willett argues that the proliferation of liberal democracies since the late Cold War is not a shift determined by this model’s superiority, but it has been “ideologically motivated” (Willet, 2001).

Rival ideologies to liberal democracy in the post-Cold War may not have a global appeal, but that does not mean they are irrelevant: in fact, their existence is linked to movements of social transformation, some of which resort to illegal and armed means. Susan Willett points to liberal internationalism as “one of the major structural causes of current patterns of violence and conflict” given its failure “to deliver more equitable patterns of development to large parts of the world”; as a result, while root causes of conflict lie in institutional failure to respond to “basic human needs, population pressure, distributional injustice, the depletion of natural resources, environmental degradation and ethnic tension”, ideologies become “accelerating” or “triggering” factors of armed violence, along with the abuse of political and military power, proliferation of small arms, and struggle for natural resources (Willet, 2001).

The vision of a world without ideologies, Fukuyama’s vision, may well be an appropriate context for Collier’s explanations on contemporary armed conflicts. But if the former’s vision is challenged, what is the effect on the latter’s? This paper assumes that economic-roots theories of conflict do not provide a full description of the dynamics of contemporary armed conflicts.

In the recent past, different disciplines have contributed to bring new perspectives aside economic consideration. Social Psychology, for instance, has stressed on the importance of symbols used by political leaders to mobilize masses (Hewstone and Cairns, 2001). Theories such as Symbolic Politics, Identity Politics and Manipulative Elites have contributed to a broader understanding by analyzing elements such as identities and the mentioned psychological considerations to account for violent conflict. However, these narrow categories of analysis have prevented them from providing a solid and comprehensive account of the dynamics of war. Symbolic, identity politics and manipulative elites approaches, though they explain partial processes, fall short of providing a well-rounded complement to the prevailing economic emphasis.

A solution to this theoretical fragmentation comes with a revisiting of the very concept of ideology. Since the eighteenth century, this term has been used in different contexts to denote different meanings, but this paper uses it in a three-dimensional form: political-psychological-sociological. Drawing from these three perspectives, ideology could be defined as a set of beliefs based on ideals (i.e. equality, power, justice), which is turned into a project aimed at achieving social perfection by managing social relations (Minogue, 1993; Sowell, 2002). Ideologies are considered here as overarching cultural systems that nevertheless maybe influenced or shaped by power and economic relations.

Ideology needs to be contrasted with the concept of identity. Mary Kaldor explains that “identity politics is about labels – and the right to political power and personal security on the basis of those labels” (Kaldor and Luckham, 2001). Ideologies create and re-create these labels by making use of myths -collections of stories that become their emotional core (Tismaneanu, 1998) – and using them to convey to the masses a sense of belonging to a “chosen” group (Elsenhans, 2001). Therefore, I assume the challenge of testing the concept of ideology as a broader, more useful category than identity, symbols, myths or leadership, all ultimately encompassed in it.
I state the existence and importance of ideology as a hardcore essential component in post-Cold War insurgencies after the analysis of evidence collected on three sample cases, dispersed geographically and culturally, and affected by structural violence and organized insurgencies all throughout the post-Cold War to the present. An analysis of internal documents, communiqués, public statements and interviews with insurgent organizations in the 1990s Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (former Zaire) and Colombia shows that, in spite of a worldwide discredit of ideologically motivated conflicts, their success in holding on to an ideological core made them viable as political actors, independently from the existence of economic and military considerations.

I explain how the insurgencies in Afghanistan, D.R. Congo and Colombia managed to survive as historical projects adapting their ideological stances during the 1990 and beyond the threshold of the twenty-first century by recreating a more flexible and adaptable set of beliefs. This paper suggests that armed conflicts since the 1990s are cross-cut by three major ideologies: nationalism, socialism and religious fundamentalism, in versions characterized by flexibility and adaptability. Some scholars have acknowledged the potential of nationalism and religious doctrines as “organizing ideologies” in post-Cold war politics, while political agendas like human rights and environmental protection fall into a lower ideological category of the post-Soviet order (Rienner, 2002; Fukuyama, 1989). Added to nationalism and religious fundamentalism, and in defiance of theoretical interpretations of revolutionary socialism as an unrealistic option after the demise of the Soviet bloc, strong evidence demonstrates the high levels of commitment towards socialist utopias among insurgent groups in countries such as Colombia, Congo, Nepal, Spain, Venezuela, Ecuador, Mexico or Iraq. The reemergence of revolutionary socialism as a credible ideology can be explained by a fundamental change undertaken by socialist dogmas after 1991. Not only have they gained in flexibility to adapt to the new world context, but they have successfully combined with nationalism. In the case of Afghanistan, the Taliban Movement founded in 1994, which has been fighting a Civil War until the present day, created, expanded and adapted an indigenous ideology that combined nationalism and religious fundamentalism. And an historical examination of the insurgency led by Laurent Désiré Kabila since the 1960s in the Democratic Republic of Congo (former Zaire), particularly his military victory in the 1990s and his rule until 2001, shows how a careful historical examination demonstrates Kabila’s lifetime commitment to a socialist ideology, long after the chances of undertaking a national socialist revolution waned in former Zaire. In the Colombian case, particularly the four-decade insurgency of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), apparently anachronistic fidelity to Marxism-Leninism and a nationalist liberation myth.

But the existence of reinvigorated discourse, however, does not represent by itself solid evidence of real political commitment. How relevant is the ideological discourse in the insurgents’ tactics and strategy? As a second argument, I state that the insurgents’ organic structure and political agenda are mainly determined by doctrines associated with ideological principles rather than economic or autocratic interests, and argue that ideological platforms are aimed at producing both tactical and strategic gains. The insurgents’ commitment to particular forms of the State, economy and legal order demonstrates revolutionary zealousness emerging from the leadership, and flowing down to the ranks, challenging the notion of contemporary rebels as being merely
economically driven. But if ideology only provides them with a long-term vision and an organizational template, it may well become simply a background justification for their military plans, and the need to achieve practical economic and military gains would reduce the political dimension to a discursive level. But on the contrary, the hardcore indoctrination of guerrillas in a particular religious school (in the Afghan case) or socialist models (in the Congo and Colombia) served to maintain internal cohesion and discipline, while nationalism played a crucial role in providing these organizations with a vehicle through which to convey their political stances to national audiences. At the international level, in turn, the studied insurgencies demonstrated their ability to create linkages that not only reinforced and informed their own ideological orientation, but also drew practical and tangible support for their subversive campaigns.

**Afghanistan: building the nation of the pure**

In Afghanistan, the Taliban's nationalist-fundamentalist ideology served to create an army characterized by superior discipline when compared to those of other Afghan factions in the Civil War, thereby gaining the respect of the masses. Besides, its ideology provided first a platform to address a national audience, as the Taliban evolved from a tribal militia, and then a model of State structure and a government style aimed at enforcing its values in Afghanistan's day life, as it imposed its rule for most of the 1990s.

In the early 1990s, the Taliban organized itself around a new discourse that offered to purify the Islamic practices in Afghanistan and to fight against corrupt Muslims. These ideals, based on a fundamentalist religious ethic, were quickly projected into a nationalistic project that advanced and grew more consistent along with the Taliban's military gains. Finally, in the late 1990s, the Taliban adapted its ideological discourse, which until then had focused on the internal enemy, to position the Movement in strategic opposition to the USA and in alliance with anti-Western Jihadist and revolutionary elements.

For seven years (1994-2001) the Taliban developed a powerful ideology fed principally by nationalist and fundamentalist-traditionalist conceptions that not only helped it to take over territorial power and grip it, but later to survive again as an insurgency, incorporating jihadist and revolutionary elements into its struggle. Starting from a tribal pashtun and traditionalist view of ideal society, the Taliban successfully rallied support to wage a war against the ineffectiveness and perceived corruption of the ruling Islamist government of the early 1990s. “We were fighting against Muslims who had gone wrong”, explained the mullah Mohammed Omar, top leader of the Taliban, shortly after taking over Kabul in 1996 (Burns, 1996).

The undeniable popularity of the Movement, which promised to bring security and purity to Afghanistan, let it conclude a bloody but relatively swift campaign that overthrew a besieged government. The rigid indoctrination received by many Taliban combatants in the religious schools was a crucial factor in creating a cohesive military unit, while the further refining of a nationalist-fundamentalist ideology gave coherence to the process of mass conscription and building of political alliances that let it take over most of the country. In military terms, the Taliban discipline translated into a more consistent willingness to sacrifice, not only for the sake of the Movement itself, but for ideological reasons. The political-religious training in the madrassas had a strong military component (Nojumi, 2002). The result was a unique and terrible army
of martyrs. In the words of a young Taliban fighter about the battle for Kabul in 1996, “we plunge ourselves wave after wave until we have humbled the enemy” (Ved and Ved, 2000). The Taliban’s strict codes prohibited fighters from looting, although exceptions occurred. Overall, it was clear that the Taliban fighters were subject to the strictest discipline (Rasanayagam, 2003) and definitively appeared “orderly and much more disciplined than the other Afghan factions” (US Embassy in Islamabad, 1995). An American witness to the Taliban takeover of Herat in 1996 characterized its troops, which he estimated at 3,000 to 4,000, as “extremely well behaved” (US Embassy in Islamabad, 1995). A 1997 report in the British *Daily Telegraph* pictured the popular embracing of the Taliban: “One reason the Taliban swept through two-thirds of Afghanistan so quickly is that they did not pillage”.

While the Taliban’s indoctrination into values of purity and order provided it with tactical gains of recruitment and popular acceptance, its growingly nationalist discourse enabled it to build a credible political vision that ensured the transition of the organization from a tribal militia into a national government. The systematic re-creation of Afghan identity and the appeal to religious and nationalist myths and symbols not only re-affirmed the Taliban’s grip on Afghan society but let it project a vision of nation and State that materialized between 1996 and 2001.

The Afghan identity and popular perception of the nation, which was severely damaged and fragmented after 16 years of civil conflict, motivated the Taliban to re-create the sources of Afghan identity as it waged its military campaign. In the early stages of its campaign, its idea of nation was more a projection of tribal experiences than anything else. But the Movement explicitly engaged in a process of nation building, initially defined by a fight against foreign corrupt influences. In fact, the nationalist idea of “purifying” the nation from alien interference was as important as its self-imposed religious duty of purifying Islam in Afghanistan.

Nationalism, defined not only as an expression of tribal customs but as a rejection of foreign influences, gained ground among the Taliban, while the group’s core value, purity, was expressed both in religious and nationalist terms. Some scholars explain Taliban rule as a rejection of Western lifestyles, and consider it “above all an anti-modernist movement” (Ewans, 2002; Misra, 2004). Along with communist heritage and influence, the Taliban aimed to get rid of all pernicious western influences. It asked students and working women to stay home, made them wear the purdah, or destroyed cinemas where western movies were projected (Ved and Ved, 2000). Radio Sha’ria once announced the arrest and condemnation of 28 people for having given young men a Leonardo Di Caprio haircut. The Taliban had issued a fatwa or decree of death against the actor and his co-star, Kate Winslet, should they ever come to Afghanistan, because they appeared in a movie said to celebrate love out of wedlock (Latifa, 2001). But Taliban’s ideology did not reject merely what was perceived as modernist, but outright foreign. A Taliban spokesman told the press in October 1994 that it believed in the formation of a national council of tribes, known as Loya Jirga, to accord peace to the country, while they concentrated on eliminating the Wahabbi and Salafi influence in the region; these two interpretations of Islam were disliked by most of Afghans precisely as foreign creeds (US Consulate in Peshawar, 1994). Building on this rejection of alien interferences, anti-Pakistani comments were not rare among the Taliban, since “Afghans are proud people who do not like the Pakistanis always trying to run things and place the Afghans on a lower level” (US Embassy in Islamabad, 1995b).
As the war advanced, the tribal Taliban incorporated more nationalistic elements into its discourse. That helped it to forge an idea of national unity, identifying itself with one of the less disputed symbols of Afghan unity: the memory of the national hero and Father (Baba), of the Nation, Ahmed Shah Durrani. “The rehabilitation of Ahmed Shah Durrani’s mausoleum and sprucing up an inner city monument to martyrs of the jihad show that the Taliban have some civic and national awareness” (US Embassy in Islamabad, 1997), commented the US Embassy in Pakistan in a secret memo. The prominence of Durrani’s image in Taliban’s nationalist discourses became consistent in time, and by 1998 the Movement had renamed Kabul’s main square from the narrowly tribal “Pashtunistan square” to a more national inclusive name: “Ahmed Shah Baba square” (Adamec, 2005).

Durrani was not the only symbol used by the Taliban to promote its nationalistic project. Under the Taliban rule, starting in 1996, the national flag was redesigned to bear an Islamic kalmia, the first pillar of Islam that claims the oneness of God, written in green, on an immaculate white background, sealing the newly regained unity of the Afghans under Islam and a nation. The Afghan map, as presented by the new government in Kabul, depicted not an abstract religious community but a territorial body clearly defined by national frontiers. “The Taliban took five months to capture one province but then six provinces fell to us in only ten days”, commented Omar in clear recognition of the historical political-administrative borders of the country. “Now we are in control of 22 provinces including Kabul. Inshallah (God willing) the whole of Afghanistan will fall into our hands” (Schofield, 2003). In the years to come, the Taliban revived mass concentrations in the Kabul stadium to celebrate the Afghan independence from the British rule, as it was used in times before the civil war, playing with a national sentiment that appealed to all ethnic groups: Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras as well (Ganon, 2005).

One of the most significant mythological stories about the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan illustrates the intertwining of religious and nationalist symbols in its discourse: On April 13, 1996, right after his forces took over Kabul and overthrew the first post-Soviet government, the Mullah Omar asked the keeper of a temple in Kandahar permission to see the kherqa, reputedly a piece of the Prophet Mohammed’s cloak. The kherqa had been trusted in the eighteenth-century to the Afghan hero and Father of the Afghan Nation, Ahmed Shah Durrani. After his death, it was kept in a mausoleum right next to his tomb. A gathering of 1,500 mullahs, a congregation not seen for 60 years, had been organized. Omar went out of the temple with the cloak, and reaching the top of one of the city’s main mosques, showed it to an ecstatic crowd, with his hands slid into its sleeves. The crowd of mullahs started to shout “Amir-al Mumimin!” (“Commander of the Faithful”). Thereafter, Omar pursued the conquest of the rest of Afghanistan as his personal legitimate duty (Onishi, 2001).

Reviving the myth of a national origin in the Ahmed Shah Durrani’s rule, and appealing to the foundational principles of Islam, the Taliban engaged in process of re-foundation of the Afghan society. The tribal pashtun laws and customs served as the basis for a process of national reconstruction based on five pillars: territorial sovereignty, multi-ethnicity, Sunni Deobandi principles, anti-communism and anti-Western cultural influence. The Taliban’s nationalist and fundamentalist ideology gave birth to a particular political structure, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which had its legal, historical and moral basis on the foundational myths of the Afghan nation and Islam itself.
The Taliban’s fundamentalist-nationalist ideology became more important as the military gains forced the Movement to assume governmental duties. During his rule, Durrani established a government whose main body was a council of nine Afghan chiefs “who shared the responsibility of decisions but left all real authority with the young king” (Adamec, 2005). Following that model, Omar’s Taliban initially created a provisional authority based on an eight-member Kandahari high shura (council) and a 22-member lower shura, composed of religious students (maulavis and mullahs), with Omar as the ultimate authority. The shuras used to summon tribal elders, ulema, military commanders and governors to coordinate important decisions. Later on, after ousting the previous regime, the Taliban’s State became more complex and in 1999 Omar ordered the formation of “hundreds of Islamic councils to supervise judicial and administrative affairs in the provinces” (US Embassy in Islamabad, 1995b).

While the Taliban’s nationalism reorganized the State according to a tribal-historical tradition inspired by the Durrani rule, the style of government was informed by the Prophet Mohammed’s reign of the seventh-century. As “Commander of the Faithful”, Mullah Omar viewed his own role as that of rightful successor to the Prophet in Afghan lands, a role reinforced with symbols like his personal use of perfume believed to be the same as Mohammed’s (Evan, 2002; Cole, 2003). The Taliban government made clear that material progress would come second in importance to spiritual progress, and thereby it revived public executions as an exemplary measure to educate society in virtue. In Kandahar, on February 28, 1998, three men accused of sodomy who were sentenced to die were put against a wall, and then a bulldozer tore it down over them. One man reportedly survived and was set free. This “bizarre and labor-intensive form of execution” was attended by Omar, to whom was attributed the punishment that a contemporary of Prophet Mohammed recommended for this crime (Goodwin, 1998).

The mainly ethnic pashtu Taliban invited other ethnic groups to join their national project. In order to placate the minorities’ fears of pashtunization, the Taliban opted to include, and even over-represent, minorities in the governing shuras (Misdaq, 2006). Although widely seen in 1994 as a movement of “nationalists and pashtuns” (US Embassy in Islamabad, 1994b), the Taliban invited other ethnicities to join its national campaign “as long as they do not engage in ‘anti-Afghan’ politics” like autonomist claims (US Embassy in Islamabad, 1995). But the fact that the most prominent leaders of the opposition to the Taliban and their supporters were Tajiks, Panshjiris and Uzbeks, made these ethnic groups victims of the Taliban’s campaign to reunify the country. And even though ethnic hatred was used to prompt military operations and massacres against the rebel Hazaras, the open warfare between Taliban and them was always described by the former in nationalist terms (US Embassy in Islamabad, 1998).

The Taliban’ ideology emerged in the early 1990s out of the core value of purity and a strict rejection of corrupting foreign influences. But after 1998, when the western world seemed to reject the Taliban’s style of rule, the Movement’s response was to radicalize its nationalist puritanical policies and project them internationally. Later in 2001, when confrontation with the US seemed inevitable, it decided to incorporate pan-Islamic revolutionary ideals. The Taliban’s realization of the impossibility of forging friendly relations with the West, and finding a place in the West-ridden international order, had as a result a radicalizing effect. By adoption of the revolutionary ideals of Osama Bin Laden, the Taliban redefined itself as antagonist to
the West, and particularly to the US, considered earlier by the Taliban as “an important and unbiased friend” (US Embassy in Islamabad, 1995b). When returned to guerrilla warfare, the Taliban’s fundamentalist-nationalist discourse seemed to be downplayed by a newly incorporated revolutionary consciousness, under Bin Laden’s influence. “The current situation in Afghanistan is related to a bigger cause - that is the destruction of America”, explained Omar to the BBC (BBC News, 2001). A report of the U.N. Secretary General to the Security Council on December 2001 explicitly referred to Mullah Mohammed Omar’s decrees and statements, highlighting the fact that they had evolved “from concern with just Afghan issues to notably greater support for a global jihad, as promoted by Bin Laden” (Annan, 2001).

The re-establishment of an Islamic structure of government inspired by Mohammed’s seventh-century empire, legitimized by a revalidation of the nation’s first government in the eighteenth century, and fused with tribal laws, created a society centered in purity as the main indicator of development, and a promise of material improvement once the ongoing civil conflict was won. The Taliban obtained specific military tactical gains out of the strict ideological indoctrination given to its members, and turned its nationalist and fundamentalist ideals into physical structures of power that enforced its values and shaped Afghan society, especially after 1996. Its ideological adaptation from strategic engagement with the West to outright confrontation with the US provided it with a renewed sense of mission, once it returned to guerilla warfare.

D.R. Congo: vision of an African China
While the Taliban defined itself with a nationalist-fundamentalist ideology built upon the core value of purity, the Democratic Republic of Congo’s Laurent Désiré Kabila led a revolutionary struggle that lasted four decades, in which he consistently advanced a nationalistic discourse inspired by the Soviet and Chinese communist models. Evidence shows that between 1964 and the late 1980s Kabila consistently advanced a political project of national reach to build a socialist State based on the Chinese model. Between 1989 and 1991, with the fall of the communist regimes in the Soviet bloc, an ideological crisis spread among revolutionary insurgencies worldwide, and Kabila’s reduced group was no exception. However, his socialist discourse was toned down in the early 1990s as his nationalist anti-Mobutist identity remained at the forefront, and that discourse helped him to galvanize political and military support that resuscitated his revolutionary plans. Evidence suggests that he succeeded in projecting himself as a credible nationalist anti-Mobutist leader in order to lead the various armed rebellions that erupted against the government in the 1990s. Once in power, however, he turned back to his hardcore socialist discourse.

Since the late 1960s, with most armed insurgencies in the country discredited or defeated, Kabila remained as head of a small armed socialist group known as the Parti pour la Révolution des Peuples (PRP), founded four years before to engage in low intensity guerrilla warfare against Mobutu’s government. Since 1967, this group had established itself in the Sud Kivu province, north of his homeland, between the towns of Fizi and Baraka, where it established an autonomous rule financed, among other sources, by illegal trade across the border with Tanzania. Some historians conclude that at that point Kabila had decided to drop his revolutionary commitment, which in any case had never been very great, and turned to self-enrichment. Argentinean
revolutionary Che Guevara’s disapproving comments about Kabila in 1965 are shown as evidence of his poor revolutionary spirit. On the contrary, Marxist historian Ludo Martens argues that in 1967 Kabila had just emerged from a period of political-military training in China, returning to his country as a renewed revolutionary. Citing a witness of those years, he explains that “Kabila and his men came without money, but they had clear and right political ideas” (Martens, 2004). In October 1967, Kabila officially launched his socialist republic (Afoaku, 2005).

Evidence shows that the Fizi State was a political experiment modeled after Maoist structures that privileged the leader’s grip. In the complex political structure created by Kabila, he was regarded as “Founder and President of the PRP, President of the Republic, Supreme Commander of People’s Armed Forces, President of the National Assembly, Head of the Department of Foreign Affairs as well as President of the Revolutionary Military Commission” (Afoaku, 2005). The PRP set up an independent administration, while an armed wing, the Forces Armées Populaires (FAP), continued to attack governmental positions, extort from the local population, and protect the illegal trade activities that financed Kabila’s mini-State (Scott, 1999). The rule over the Fizi and Baraka population was, theoretically, in the hands of a Revolutionary Civil Administration led by another party member, Malaka Baudouin. From the beginning, the PRP implemented a comprehensive plan of military, social and economic indoctrination for his men and newly recruited members of the PRP (Afoaku, 2005). According to Sifa Maanya’s (Kabila’s wife) they continually offered and provided political sessions to villagers in their zones of influence (The Evening, 2006).

Far from being isolated in the remote Congolese mountains, Kabila counted on valuable contacts with other guerrilla leaders in the region such as Uganda’s Yoweri Museveni and Rwanda’s Paul Kagame (Afoaku, 2005), who became presidents of their respective countries later on. In Belgium, Kabila established closed relations with the Marxist scholar and politician Ludo Martens, who in November 1979 invited him to speak to the Maoist Workers Party of Belgium, today renamed PVDA-PTB (Digital Congo, 2001). Along with his political work in the Fizi area and abroad, Kabila prepared military operations, and between 1984 and 1985, his mini-State’s armed forces, the FAP, escalated their operations and briefly seized the port of Moba, before being driven off by Mobutu’s army. In the end, Kabila’s gamble resulted in failure. Instead of sparking a wave of resistance against the government, it attracted official military pressure that led the mini-State to a collapse around 1988.

Nationalism would offer him a way back. The 1991 political process opened by Mobutu’s regime, which was weakened after political and economic support from Western countries receded at the end of the Cold War, re-ignited Kabila’s hopes of a national armed revolution. Kabila’s and three other rebel forces joined in 1995 an umbrella organization called Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaïre (AFDL), bound by the common nationalist impulse to overthrow Mobutu. Independently of the origins and political incoherence of the 1996 rebellion, Kabila succeeded in presenting the ADFL as an indigenous movement fighting a corrupted dictatorship. And his nationalist and anti-Mobutist past served as credentials to allow him to present himself as its leader (Dunn, 2003).

Having thought his nationalist card had played its part, Kabila quickly returned to his hardcore doctrine. After his triumphal entrance to Kinshasa on May 20, 1997, Kabila immediately engaged in a process of “purification” of the country’s new...
leadership, just as Stalin and Mao had done before, in order to ensure that the revolution would go on. “Continuers of the Second Republic”, as Kabila branded those unwilling to support his project, aligning them with Mobutu’s rule, “had to be ejected from leading posts of the movement to save the democratic revolution” (Kabila, 1999a). A Maoist-Stalinist model of state, centered in a supreme leader, had been conceived and implemented by Kabila since his Fizi years, and since 1996 would be replicated at national level.

His ideological commitment to that project was reflected in his tangible effort to reorganize the Congolese State to resemble more Maoist structures. “We decided to take the People’s Republic of China like model for our country”, announced Kabila in 1997 (Agence Congolais de Presse, 1997). A new power structure centered on Kabila as supreme leader, and the widespread cult of personality he promoted, presenting himself as “Builder and Father of the Nation”, have been cited as evidence of Kabila’s egocentrism and craving for power, although this corresponded to a model similar to Stalin’s Soviet Union and Mao’s China (Kabila, 1998a). “We are not going on with the preceding regime”, he answered when asked for elections, “but creating a new state built on new values” (Dunn, 2003).

From 1997 to 1998, Kabila developed a series of concrete political transformations that reflected his socialist promises of creating a new type of society. One concrete example of power reorganization along Leninist principles was the creation of a myriad of organizations known as the Comités du Pouvoir Populaire (Committees of Popular Power (CPP)), which were grouped in Councils at the local level, and in Assemblies at regional level. The CPP were described by Kabila as “the executive body of the State assumed by the people” (Kabila, 1999a) and in a simpler way, “governments of the street” (Kabila, 1999b). The Committees would monitor schools, neighborhoods and workplaces to both defend the revolutionary process – and the central government as well – and effectively administer power at the local level on behalf of it (Kabila, 1999b). The reorganization of State power has been interpreted by critics as evidence of Kabila’s intentions to create an unchecked autocratic government and satisfy his power and economic ambition. However, Kabila’s ambition went beyond merely his rule: he wanted to transform Congolese society. Evidence of this is his plan to indoctrinate Congolese youth with socialist and nationalist values. To guarantee that his revolutionary plans would survive in the longer term, Kabila designed a plan to train Congolese youth for military defense and economic production. This plan, which explicitly intended “to train the Congolese man ideologically” and “to inculcate the true love for the Fatherland in every Congolese” (Agence Congolais de Presse, 1997) was rendered in the newly created National Service, through which youth would be indoctrinated economically and politically, as “the builders of the Fatherland” and the forgers of “the unit and the national cohesion” (Kabila, 1997). For him, the National Service truly became an obsession, and at the early stage of the program in 1998, around 6,600 young builders were targeted for indoctrination (Monthly Magazine of Connection & Information of the National Service, 1998b).

Since the economy would be controlled by the state, he announced the development of triennial plans through which he expected to see “multiplied by ten the productivity of the rural worker, whose working tools will necessarily undergo modernization”, mirroring what the Chinese had done since the late 1970s. As early as 1997, Kabila’s government declared a State priority the “promotion of domestic economy instead of
the [export-led] economy of the Second Republic, in order to produce the full blooming and true prosperity of the Congolese” (Agence Congolais de Presse, 1997). Heavy industrialization, as in the Soviet and Chinese models, laid at the core of Kabila’s economic development project.

Less than one year into his mandate, by November 1997, polls suggested the popular euphoria following Mobutu’s overthrow had waned, and Kabila’s government was very unpopular (Dunn, 2003; Afoaku, 2005). When the crisis exploded in the form of armed rebellion, in August 1998, Kabila made use once more of a nationalist discourse to galvanize support, this time adding an ethnic component not present in his previous discourses. In August of that year, a Tutsi rebellion erupted in the East: an armed organization known as the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie (RCD) supported the Tutsi-related Banyamulenge uprising, and, with Rwandan backing, started a national campaign to remove Kabila from power. Kabila’s response was to appeal to nationalism, successfully turning what seemed to be an internal conflict into a patriotic war of national defense.

Under an evident threat of being overthrown and seeing his political project derailed, Kabila appealed once again to nationalism, and consistently insisted his government was fighting an “invasion, not a rebellion” (O’Ballance, 2000). Incorporating publicly for the first time an ethnic component to his war-making, he called on the Congolese to expel all foreigners and branded all Tutsi as such (Dunn, 2003). As a result, since August 1998, Kabila’s ethnicized nationalism made an anti-French and anti-Tutsi sentiment take over Kinshasa. Only two days after the Tutsi-related Banyamulenge rebellion started, a ministerial order spread through the capital to shoot “any foreign troops” (O’Ballance, 2000). The ethnicization of the conflict sharpened as soon as several Tutsi ministers deserted Kabila’s government and joined the rebels, bringing a dramatic escalation of government propaganda. According to Financial Times and The Guardian, Kabila issued a statement on Congolese radio encouraging the use of “a machete, a spear, an arrow, a hoe, spades, rakes, nails, truncheons, electric irons, barbed wire … to kill the Rwandan Tutsi” (Dunn, 2003). Although Kabila’s heavy hand was eventually supported militarily by external allies, a skillful use of nationalist discourse proved to be a key factor in turning the tide against the rebels, who seemed poised for victory at the beginning of the conflict (Afoaku, 2005).

Since Kabila’s assassination in 2001, the Congolese State and a variety of political, paramilitary and civil organizations have worked to preserve, recreate and promote his historical legacy in different versions, as a nationalist, pan-African and revolutionary inspirer. Finally, his enshrinement as part of a sacred trio of national heroes (next to Lumumba and Mulele) has encouraged radicals to believe that ways of armed revolution are not closed yet, and are therefore ideologically prepared to wage a new insurgency if the opportunity arises.

Colombia: from revolution to re-foundational epic
The Taliban’s vision of a pure Islamic society and Kabila’s dream of turning his country into an African China were mixed in both cases with an emotionally compelling nationalist discourse to successfully rally support and give armed insurgents a sense of mission. In Latin America, the socialist discourse of the Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) increasingly incorporated nationalist elements since the 1990s in order to help it to survive the
ideological crisis brought by the end of the Soviet Union and the new international context of the post-Cold War.

After 1991, scholars and researchers of the Colombian internal armed conflict, which dates from at least 1964, have tended to dismiss traces of a truly socialist commitment within the leadership of the main active guerrilla group in the country, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army (FARC-EP), even suggesting its slow degradation towards a rent-seeking criminal organization (Guáqueta, 2003; Rangel, 1998; Salazar and Castillo, 2001).

Authors like Román D. Ortiz have argued that given the general discredit of Marxist-Leninist theories in the post-Cold War, the FARC’s discourse has focused since then on promising not a socialist State but a “good government”, sidelining “any dogma that promises the achievement of some utopia, and giving way to a purely pragmatic strategy for gaining power” (Ortíz, 2002). Contrary to these interpretations of the FARC as an almost de-ideologized guerilla group, the FARC consistently advanced a political-military socialist project across the 1990s based on socialist and Marxist-Leninist principles. To do so, it made use of a nationalist and pan-regionalist discourse built upon the national independence hero Simón Bolívar. With a reinvigorated Marxist-Leninist commitment, the FARC has performed a consistent ideological effort to complement its military and logistical concerns and has adapted to a post-Cold War scenario by deploying its own version of nationalist Bolivarianism. This way, after three decades of trying to attract supporters to its socialist agenda, the FARC reacted to its political isolation after 1991 by calling on regional solidarity and national support from groups and individuals not necessarily attracted to Soviet-style socialism, but willing to contribute to a diffuse anti-imperialist agenda.

The FARC has used ideology in the post-Cold War era as an instrument to achieve concrete strategic goals on three levels: internal, national and international. Internally, the FARC submerged its members in a process of consistent indoctrination; since the end of the Cold War, the FARC’s fast-paced enlargement put at risk the group’s cohesiveness around political goals and a central political command, and therefore its socialist-Bolivarian ideological discourse became a crucial unifying instrument. Second, by associating its socialist political agenda with Bolivarian ideals, the FARC expected to ease the resistance among the Colombian people to see the group as a credible alternative to power, at a time when it started to develop a plan for local governance in territories under its control. Finally, the FARC has used ideology to build regional alliances with radical and leftist groups not necessarily attracted to rigid Marxist-Leninist conceptions; international Bolivarianism, while a flexible and adaptable ideology, implies a tacit recognition of legitimacy to armed struggle, an option the FARC was willing to support beyond the Colombian borders.

At the end of the twentieth century, Marxist analysis continued to be applied, and the FARC continued to explain the Colombian armed conflict as a product of the “class struggle” and its existence as an expression of the “proletariat class’ interests” (OSPAAAL, 2005). However, the end of the Cold War between 1989 and 1991 provoked an ideological crisis among socialist and communist insurgencies in Colombia. Interviewed by an Argentinean leftist organization, a FARC spokesman acknowledged the ideological crisis brought by the end of the Soviet Union. “The fall of the [Berlin] wall wasn’t a defeat for communism or socialism, but a defeat for a type of socialist model. At that moment we were left politically isolated; because of that, we were
branded as dinosaurs and that sort of thing. Today, time and facts prove us right. Socialism is more vigorous than ever, and this is the only real choice humankind has” (Ogando, 1998). Explicitly, the FARC considered the post-Cold War era a time in which an ideological confrontation was still being fought, denouncing “neo-liberal ideologies” for trying to “erase the question of class struggle” and “deny the existence of imperialism” (Red Resistencia, 2004). Proudly, an indoctrinated young FARC guerrilla rejected the demise of worldwide socialism: “We are Marxist-Leninists. This implies that we are internationalists before all. We are for the socialist revolution on a world level that progresses toward communism” (FARC, 2004).

Since the 1990s, the FARC’s discourse has made great efforts to distance itself from socialist political models prevalent in the Cold War years, while its proposed alternative remains diffuse, flexible and adaptable. “Lenin’s writings”, explained a FARC spokeswoman about failed soviet-style experiments, “were misinterpreted, leading many communist parties to become dictatorial, bureaucratic or corrupt” (Links, 1999). According to the guerrillas, a “Colombian style socialism” will supposedly draw on various models and learn from their mistakes, but so far it remains a system “yet to be decided”, one dependent “on which social sectors will accompany us in this process towards taking power” (Soto-Trillo, 2001).

The FARC’s post-Cold War socialism is characterized by a redefinition of the role of the State and a strategic opposition to economic imperialism. Since 1993, the FARC has explicitly proposed that “the State must be the main owner and administrator in the strategic sectors: energy, communications, public services, roads, ports and natural resources” (FARC, 1993). Also, it should control some key sectors of the economy not directly linked with production, and would assume basic welfare responsibilities such as providing “health, housing, education and drinkable water”, and the execution of “an agrarian policy directed against the large estate and the colonial remnants in some sectors of our countryside” (FARC, 2000). Unlike the Soviet case, according to one FARC spokeswoman, the State should oversee fundamental strategies but not to control production, “because this ends up with control over everything and then nothing works” (Links, 1999). The anti-imperialist component of FARC’s socialism is reflected in the State’s duties to restrict the participation of foreign firms in the exploitation of natural and biological resources, to renounce the “un-payable” external debt, and to turn Colombia into a more self-sufficient food producer, in order reduce dependency on those who control the international markets and exert “imperialism”. Socialism should not isolate the Colombian economy from the rest of the world. “We are not opposed to international trade. We are opposed, though, to international exploitation, which is called ‘trade’” (Links, 1999), explained spokesman Marcos Calarcá.

Starting from a few hundreds in the 1960s, the FARC’s manpower increased at a dramatic rate, reaching one or two thousand members at the beginning of the 1980s, and then to 12,000 to 15,000 combatants spread over 60 war fronts in the late 1990s (Rangel, 2001).

This enlargement posed a two-fold threat to the organization’s internal cohesion. First, the successful financial effort made by the FARC to sustain such a large constituency is based on a decentralized system, allowing every front and bloc independently to collect income from all kind of legal and illegal sources (Gúaqueta, 2003). Second, the political motivations to join the armed struggle were being consistently undermined as communism was disregarded as a valid political model in
the post-Cold War era, pushing the illegal combatants to set new objectives for war, such as profitability. The FARC took this threat very seriously. As one of its instructors put it:

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the bourgeois ideologists and the great capital’s mass media have tried to weaken the revolutionary struggle... The fight in that field is very unequal since we can’t count on the media or the resources they have available. Our organization is now making a great effort to fight back on that front (Red Resistencia, 2003).

The FARC recognizes its guerrillas are constantly exposed to “psychological operations” launched by governmental forces aimed at making them give up their socialist war and considers this a major threat to their war strategic plan (Red Resistencia, 2003).

In 1998, a FARC spokesperson explained the importance of their recruits’ political formation before any military engagement:

The young person goes through a whole period of political-military, cultural and ideological formation. The first thing he learns is why we fight. We let him know the Guerrilla’s Agrarian Program, the Platform for a Government of National Reconstruction and Reconciliation which is the Bolivarian Movement for the New Colombia’s program. Once that stage is accomplished, we could say that he is ready to be part of the mass of our troops (Red Resistencia, 2003). But further than this basic ideological instruction, the importance given by the FARC to the ideological commitment of its members is expressed clearly in the creation of Colombia’s Clandestine Communist Party and the systematic introduction of a Bolivarian mythology that reinvents the guerrilla group’s identity as a historical actor. Modeled after Lenin’s doctrine, the FARC created in the late 1990s the Clandestine Colombian Communist Party (PCCC), which ensured the indoctrination of the FARC’s rank and file in Marxist-Leninist thought. As the FARC’s founder, Manuel Marulanda, put it, “we are, above all, communists” (FARC, 2006a, b). Following Leninist doctrine, the clandestine PCCC functioned as a vanguard party, not a mass-conscription organization, and was limited to those FARC’s members who were engaged full time in the armed uprising. “The squadron is the basic military unit, but in our organization each squadron is at the same time a political cell”, explained a FARC trainer. “The communist cell is for us vital in importance, because there we manage the quotidian facts of life, especially that which has to do with the cadres’ formation. It is in the cell where the combatant develops his political capacity. In the cell, the guerrilla fighter must study all documents of our conferences, from the Central Staff Plenary, those of political actualization, etc. It is there, in the cell, where we educate ourselves in revolutionary ideas” (Red Resistencia, 2003).

In the 1990s, the need to adapt its ideological platform to a decade of global skepticism towards revolutionary socialism pushed the FARC to use more prominently a nationalist element previously underdeveloped in its discourse. In 1993, the FARC redefined the vision it had of itself, “not denying Marxist-Leninist principles, but adding our Liberator Simon Bolivar’s thought, and all the Latin American revolutionary thought” (Red Resistencia, 2003). Making use of the figure of historical hero Simón Bolívar, revered in five countries as a major leader during the successful independence wars from Spain in the early eighteenth century, the FARC opted for decisively integrating a nationalist element to its socialist revolution. As one
young university student demonstrated when asked about the organization’s ideological base:

We carry Bolivar in our soul and heart. We are like Bolivar. Each guerrilla represents Bolivar because we fight for equality, fraternity. We are anti-imperialists. In practical terms, we want to continue the Bolivarian epic; we want to finish what Bolivar did not do (FARC, 2004).

The FARC’s Bolivarian nationalism served as a more flexible and appealing discourse aimed at reaching out the Colombian masses, who according to Leninist theory should accompany the armed insurrection led by the vanguard party, the PCCC (Links, 1999). Besides, it allowed the Colombian people to see the group as a renewed and credible alternative power in a time when the FARC had started to develop a plan for local governance in territories under its control. The FARC has been building structures of parallel government at the local level, using both political skills and violence to weaken the hand of official authorities in the territories under their control or influence (Ortíz, 2002). They called these structures “New Power” (Red Resistencia, 2003). But in order to ease resistance to his control, it created a broad Bolivarian Movement, whose target is those Colombians not fond of Marxism but willing to join a radical political change, since “not everybody who wants change in Colombia, who wants a new Colombia, a different country, agrees with communism or are Marxist-Leninists”, as a PCCC member explained (FARC, 2004).

The FARC’s Bolivarianism in the post-Cold War period was useful to place the organization historically in times of crisis, but also to connect with the anti-imperialist movement that sprang-up around the globe in the 1990s. The guerilla group’s international messages called for world solidarity based on the common anti-imperialist platform, reaching out to the Iraqi and Palestinian peoples in the Middle East; Africans, Asians and Europeans in general; and particularly Cubans, Venezuelans, Brazilians, Bolivians, Ecuadorians, Salvadorians, Peruvians, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Argentinians and Chileans in Latin America (FARC, 2003b).

Besides opening a new international political platform, the FARC’s Bolivarian discourse furthered its strategic goal of promoting armed revolutions on the continent, helping to make its own struggle more robust. Concretely, the FARC participated in the creation of two international organizations through which its war message could be conveyed: the Congreso Bolivariano de los Pueblos (Bolivarian Congress of Peoples) and the Coordinadora Continental Bolivariana (Bolivarian Continental Coordination). While the Bolivarian Congress of Peoples proposed political action based on the concept of resistance (FARC, 2006b), the Bolivarian Continental Coordination not only confers legitimacy upon violent methods, but it also suggests their use as part of an integral strategy to bring structural changes (Coordinadora Continental Bolivariana, 2005). The Coordination’s governing body signals as part of its main task the creation of diverse forms of organizations in each country of Latin America and the Caribbean, and the establishment of Bolivarian Internationalist Brigades composed of sympathizers from elsewhere. Besides Latin American groups, the Coordination declared the presence of delegations from Spain, Italy, Denmark, France, Switzerland, Turkey and Greece for the 2004 first meeting in Caracas (Coordinadora Continental Bolivariana, 2006).

In 2003, a British journalist source quoted Carlos, a member of FARC’s Bolivarian Movement in Lima, describing its presence not only in that country, but also in most of South America:
There is a core group of 20 members of the Bolivarian Movement working here. We also have cells in Argentina, Venezuela, Ecuador, Chile and Bolivia (Telegraph, 2003).

The international press reported growing linkages between the FARC and newly formed radical formations in Ecuador such as the Ejército de Liberación Alfarista (World Tribune, 2006). In that country, the first years of the twenty-first century saw the emergence of a series of political movements, at least two of them as legal parties, inspired by Bolivarian ideals. And the Venezuelan government, which has ruled since 1998, has declared itself Bolivarian, and has repeatedly refused to condemn the FARC’s armed insurrection, although it has avoided explicit endorsement (Guédez, 2006).

Conclusions
In this paper, I have shown how the three insurgencies examined, Afghanistan’s Taliban, D.R. Congo’s Parti pour la Révolution des Peuples, and Colombia’s FARC, consistently advanced an ideological discourse throughout the first decade of the post-Cold War era, which combined nationalism with either religious fundamentalism-traditionalism or else socialism-anti-liberalism, all in versions adapted to local needs and contexts. Post-Cold War ideologies, as it has been shown, are characterized by their flexibility. In the Afghan and Colombians cases, core values – i.e. purity, social justice – guard the insurgent organization’s identity, internal coherence and moral stance, while the nationalist discourse provide them with a vehicle to address the masses, a much larger and more heterogeneous political collective. In the Congolese case, nationalist and socialist discourses orbited around a vision, instead of a core value, that of building an African super-power.

Ideology played an extensive role in the post-Cold War insurgencies examined here, beyond the discursive level. Ideology served the rhetorical purpose of legitimizing armed struggles. But it also proved crucial to determine the insurgent organization’s internal structures and its apparatus of power in territories under its control, to shape their governmental policies, and to contribute to strategic and tactical gains on the battlefield. At the organizational level, the Taliban Movement’s nationalist-fundamentalist ideology materialized in specific State structures drew from historical models and a particular style of government based on religious and tribal customs. In the D.R. Congo, Kabila built a series of structures that resembled a Maoist-style State and aimed at implementing long-term plans for societal change, while concentrating the ultimate power in himself as the “Father and Builder of the Nation”. In Colombia, the FARC created new Leninist political structures in order to advance its insurgent war and implement a Soviet-style democracy in the territories under its control. At both strategic and tactical levels, ideologies ensured these movements’ internal cohesion as political-military entities, turned discipline into military advantage, and mobilized national and international political, logistical and military support for their armed struggles. In the three cases examined, the insurgent groups crafted identities based on rational and emotional values that differentiated them from other armed actors, favored their recruitment efforts, discouraged resistance among populations under their influence, and facilitated outreach.

If ideologies, as I have demonstrated, are a functional component of modern insurgencies and help to explain their reason for existence, why have they been so underestimated by scholarly research regarding armed conflicts in the post-Cold War period? Two factors can help to explain this phenomenon. First, the scholarly work
focusing on economics has come up not only with a sound theory to explain the emergence and protraction of armed conflicts, but has also increasingly provided statistical evidence that demonstrates a co-relation between economic opportunities and insurgencies, downplaying the need to account for the political and cultural dimensions. And second, alternative theories that may help to fill this vacuum such as Identity Politics, Manipulative Elites and Symbolic Politics, provide insightful explanations but nevertheless acknowledge nothing but a very narrow definition of ideology that discourages its use as a major category of analysis.

A narrow definition of ideologies, understood merely as the Cold War’s capitalist liberal democracy or Marxist-inspired socialism, excludes elements such as myths, symbols, ethnicity, nation and religion that play along with the more rational component to constitute whole cultural systems, which clearly shape political settings. Defining ideology as a cultural system based on beliefs that govern social relations and create collective identities (nationalism being one manifestation of the latter) creates a category of analysis capable of explaining in detail the full role of culture in armed conflict. The ubiquity of ideologies in the post-Cold War era, as shown in this paper, demands their study taking this broader perspective, in order to reveal new understandings that the logic of economics or statistical evidence may not provide.

This opens obvious and interesting new spaces to disciplines such as Social Psychology or Sociology, whose research methods and tools result more appropriate to approach complex linkages between economic and non-economic dimensions. While these academic fields have already made contributions to the field of conflict resolution, the incorporation of a re-worked concept of ideology will enable them to account for cultural systems as a whole.

Moreover, it is interesting to see the way in which an ideology that fits into the traditionally more narrow definition of ideology, socialism, seems alive in the post-Cold War period. The failure of a global-reach socialist ideological bloc between 1989 and 1991 has been interpreted as a failure as well of the localized smaller-scale socialist political (and sometimes military) projects that have demonstrated resilience enough to reach the twenty-first century and adapt to a more globalized world by creating international support networks bonded by ideological cores such as anti-imperialism. The existence of local political alternatives to liberal-democracy based on Islamic principles of diverse sort and the worldwide use of nationalist discourses add to the evidence that ideological struggles are, in fact, still fought at local and regional levels, and that liberal democracy continues to be heatedly challenged in many parts of the world.

The scholarly recognition that ideologies are a major functional component of some armed conflicts implies acknowledging the participants as political actors. Analyzing the existence and role of the ideological component of subversion is therefore a valuable tool to separate political insurgencies from other types of organized violence such as cartels, and rent-seeking criminal gangs, or to illustrate a combination of those. The recognition of an ideological component in armed organizations opens new alternatives such as the opportunity to explore political solutions from a more informed perspective. Understanding armed conflicts not only as economic-driven systems but also as ideological struggles is therefore indispensable to conflict resolution. The underestimation of the insurgents’ ideological incentives reduces the chances of success of any peace initiative or military action. Acknowledging the importance of ideological warfare will encourage political strategies to complement, or sometimes
replace, military operations. Resulting political gains may compensate, or even
surpass, those obtained by force and have direct effect on the military developments.

But how to win an ideological battle? A straight answer would be by fighting ideas
instead of people. Addressing those conflictive contexts that push people to look for
political alternatives, sometimes by violent means, may help to prevent insurgencies
from occurring or escalating. In that respect, effective communication strategies aimed
at demonstrating the comparative benefits brought by one ideology over another may
discourage the emergence of violent alternatives. Philosopher Thomas Sowell’s recipe
to outlaw wars includes “a muting of militant rhetoric” and “a de-emphasis of
nationalism or patriotism” (Sowell, 2002). But the proved impossibility of escaping
from ideological paradigms, even in the post-Cold War era, only leaves the hope of
making a positive use of them.

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Further reading


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