

**Beyond Sheer Force:  
Stability in Authoritarian Counterinsurgency and  
Russia's Strategy in Chechnya**

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*“To plunder, butcher, steal these things they misname empire: they make a wasteland and call it peace.”—Tacitus (Dialogus Agricola Germania, 31).*

This is how Tacitus describes the ruthless Counterinsurgency (COIN) measures that the Roman Empire implemented to suppress the tribes resisting Rome's occupation of Britain during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. While today's liberal democracies consider the Roman style of COIN warfare as repugnant, Rome's strategic legacy endures in the military toolkit developed by authoritarian counterinsurgents. The similarities between Rome's "scorched earth" strategy and the authoritarian ways of dealing with popular uprisings are consistently underscored by Western scholars, who often discard authoritarian COIN operations as nothing more than shameful displays of indiscriminate violence and brutal repression (Paul et al 2013: 180). Although the extensive use of force constitutes a crucial component of authoritarian modalities of COIN warfare, Rome's "crude" counter-guerrilla procedures have been substantially refined, expanded, and perfected by contemporary authoritarian counterinsurgents.

In an effort to go beyond the conventional conjectures on the authoritarian model, this study explores the mechanisms utilised by authoritarian counterinsurgents to curtail popular support for rebel movements and engender acquiescence for the established authority. Challenging the mainstream literature, this study argues that authoritarian counterinsurgents can achieve long-term stability *in spite* of their reliance on draconian measures. To corroborate this assessment, the paper identifies three mechanisms of political control in authoritarian COIN – namely co-opting local elites, subduing the civilian population, and seizing control over the national economy – and demonstrates how Russia utilised these tools to suppress the Chechen insurgency and strengthen the local government's authority during the Second Chechen War of 1999-2009.

The paper is structured around six main parts. After introducing the concept of stability in COIN operations, the state of the literature on the authoritarian model is critically assessed to identify the gap addressed in this study. The following section outlines the principal differences between democratic and authoritarian approaches to COIN warfare, contextualising the analysis to the three mechanisms utilised by authoritarian counterinsurgents to engender compliance for local incumbents. While the fourth section empirically examines the Russian COIN in Chechnya, the fifth builds upon the previous and provides three recommendations for Western strategists. The paper concludes by underscoring that researching on the authoritarian COIN repertoire contributes to enrich the collective understanding of strategy in the age of asymmetric warfare.

## **1. Introduction to Stability in Counterinsurgency Warfare**

In 2006, Lieutenant Colonels Cohen, Crane, Horvath, and Nagl drafted a list of “principles, imperatives, and paradoxes” of COIN warfare later to be encompassed in the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24 (FM 3-24)* issued to the Coalition forces deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq. Among these observations, noteworthy is the maxim stating that “the best weapons for Counterinsurgency do not fire bullets” (Cohen et al. 2006: 52). This is particularly true for endeavours centred on strengthening political stability, one of the “strategic principles of war” regulating the conduct of COIN warfare (U.S. Gov. 2018: A-4). Nearly absent in early versions of military doctrines on asymmetric conflicts,<sup>1</sup> the concept of political stability – defined by the *FM 3-24* as “the acceptance of an authority by a society” (U.S. Gov. 2014: 1-8) – was progressively elevated to guiding principle of action following the confirmation from scholars and practitioners that weak state governance intensifies civil unrest (Jones 2017: 26; Siroky 2011; Weinstein 2007; Fearon & Laitin 2003). Because a population that no longer perceives the government as a credible and resilient authority constitutes “the lifeblood of rebellion,” succeeding in COIN warfare is largely contingent on re-building a political machine capable of effectively depriving the insurgents of their popular mass base (Jardine 2012: 264; Galula 2006: 47).

While the common wisdom on COIN warfare signals that an insurgency deprived of popular support will subside and eventually “wither away” (Plakoudas 2015; Paul et al. 2010: 41), scholars have increasingly lamented that the mechanisms of political stability in COIN operations continue to remain “under-theorized, over-generalized, and misunderstood,” with the consequence that Western counterinsurgents lack an in-depth understanding of how state governance contributes to overpower insurgent movements and de-escalate social conflict (Gawthorpe 2017: 849). In an effort to enrich the available knowledge on stability in COIN warfare, this research takes an “unorthodox” perspective on the topic and, departing from the mainstream literature’s focus on the precepts advocated by Western military doctrines, proposes an analysis of the instruments utilised by authoritarian regimes to enforce political stability and quell popular uprisings.

## **2. Stability in Authoritarian Counterinsurgency: An Overlooked Research Area**

According to the criteria utilised by Western democracies to assess the effectiveness of COIN operations, authoritarian COIN efforts should constantly result in mission failure (Paul & Clarke 2016; 3; U.K. Gov. 2009: 4-22). Yet, quantitative research carried out on the impact of regime type on asymmetric conflicts contradicts these predictions. For instance, drawing upon a dataset of 286 COIN operations carried out between 1800 and 2005, Lyall finds no evidence supporting the assumption that a specific regime type is more prone to experience defeat in COIN warfare (Lyall 2010: 188). Despite this evidence suggesting that authoritarian regimes might be as proficient as liberal democracies in confronting insurgent groups, the

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<sup>1</sup> See the famous “Small Wars Manual” issued to the U.S. Marine Corps in 1940, in which the term “stability” rarely appears throughout the 500-pages long document.

scholarship has thus far overlooked the authoritarian toolkit of COIN measures, discarding authoritarian endeavours as patently ineffective. The ongoing debate on stability in COIN warfare sees the scholarship divided into two camps, both of which only marginally touch upon the experience of authoritarian counterinsurgents.

Advocates of the “American way of warfare” consider spreading democracy as the linchpin for building a resilient society. Conceptualising electoral processes as the hallmark of legitimacy, Chiarelli and Mechaelis argue that the high voter turnout in Iraq “proved to the world” that spreading democracy is the most effective strategy to secure political stability in war-torn societies (Chiarelli & Mechaelis 2005; 4). This position is further advanced by Hammes, who argues that “the fundamental weapon in counterinsurgency remains good governance,” implying that coercion is incompatible with the typology of stability operations that should be performed in COIN warfare (Hammes 2006: 21). Reiterated by Patterson (2016) in his study on the effectiveness of democratic states in asymmetric warfare, this line of argumentation rejects as flawed any strategic approach clashing with the guidelines provided in Western COIN doctrines.

In contrast, an equally sizable body of research contends that espousing kind-hearted approaches can be “dangerously misleading” for Western counterinsurgents (Cohen 2010: 75-76). According to this school of thought, the brutal nature of COIN warfare cannot be sanitised, and political stability can hardly be achieved by promoting the “free and fair election” formula (Etzioni 2012). Questioning the reliability of ballot boxes as a way to boost stability in insurgency-affected localities, scholars such as Cohen (2014) and Greene (2017) scrutinised the electoral processes carried out in Afghanistan and Iraq, demonstrating that poorly managed national elections fanned the emergence of perverted forms of democracy in which “access to weapons and illicit financial support drove results” (Greene 2017: 570). Despite Western counterinsurgents being criticised for the self-inflicted decision of discarding coercive approaches, this scholarship has equally failed to examine authoritarian blueprints, plausibly under the assumption that Western counterinsurgents can draw no meaningful lessons from the experience of autocratic regimes (Gentile 2010).

Although the mainstream literature neglected to scrutinise the operational dynamics of authoritarian COIN endeavours, a small pool of researchers recently started codifying the techniques employed by autocratic counterinsurgents to enforce the incumbent’s control over society. Criticising the Western democracies’ fixation for winning the population’s approval, Hazelton (2017) argues that reaching proficiency in COIN warfare requires more “authoritarian-like” approaches, among which co-opting elites constitutes a war-winning practice. This argument builds upon positions similar to the ones advanced by Ucko (2016) and Byman (2016), who submitted two of the most up-to-date studies on the authoritarian paradigm of COIN warfare. While Byman establishes that military prowess constitutes the mainstay of authoritarian stability, Ucko further suggests that maintaining exclusive control over the nation’s economic resources forces the population to accept the incumbent as the only entity capable of effectively restoring a resemblance of normal life.

Although these works considerably expanded the available knowledge on the authoritarian model, no study has so far outlined how these combined mechanisms engender political stability in contexts of COIN warfare. In an effort to fill this gap in the literature, this research conceptualises and illustrates the ways in which co-optation, repression, and economic development impact political stability in authoritarian COIN operations.

### **3. Pillars of Stability in Authoritarian Counterinsurgency: A Theoretical Outline**

In conceptualising co-optation, repression, and economic development as the “three pillars” of stability in authoritarian COIN, this section directly builds upon Gerschewski’s (2013) research conducted on the foundations of political stability in non-democratic states. Synthetizing into a digestible framework the main arguments advanced in the literature on the mechanisms of regime resilience, Gerschewski demonstrates that the concept of authoritarian stability can be broken down into three major constituents. Sharing this author’s intuition that a well-balanced combination of co-optation, repression, and economic development can assist authoritarian rulers in prolonging their dominion over society, this project transfers Gerschewski’s work to the field of COIN studies and argues that stability in authoritarian COIN operations rests upon a similar strategic rationale.

#### *First Pillar: Co-optation*

According to Western COIN doctrines, stability cannot be achieved until the majority of the population voluntarily repudiates the rebels and willingly accepts the incumbent’s rule. Expressing the belief that COIN warfare corresponds to a “competition with the insurgent for the right and the ability to win the hearts, minds, and acquiescence of the population” (Kilcullen 2010: 29), the *FM 3-24* contends that acquiring the support of a small section of the populace is not enough to obtain stability, as “a solid majority is often essential” (U.S. Gov. 2006: 1-20). While persuading a large part of the population to support the incumbent is a desirable aim, the experience of authoritarian counterinsurgents shows that winning the nation’s gratitude does not constitute a necessary precondition for achieving success in legitimacy-building endeavours.

Instead of striving to obtain the population’s approval, authoritarian regimes seek the cooperation of selected social elites, such as defected insurgents and local politicians. Conceptualised by Gerschewski (2013: 22) as “the capacity to tie strategically-relevant actors to the regime,” co-optation constitutes a strategic approach to legitimacy-building designed to deprive the rebellion of a valid leadership capable of mobilising the population against the authority. Realising that only few individuals within society have the power and skills necessary to deprive an organised rebellion of popular support, authoritarian regimes focus their efforts in co-opting only those actors capable of effectively bringing about socio-political stability (Moyar 2011: 6).

By co-opting loyal elites and putting them in charge of the local state apparatus, authoritarian counterinsurgents acquire information and tools necessary to target political dissenters, deter civil disobedience, and dissuade the population from supporting the

insurgents (Josua 2011). Once the society's capacity for collective action has been largely suppressed by the co-opted local elite, authoritarian counterinsurgents signal regime invincibility and force the population to accept the incumbent as the only entity capable of monopolising the "legitimate use of physical force" within the national territory (Holdo 2019; Reuter et al. 2016; Weber 1946: 77). When a loyal elite is identified and endorsed, authoritarian counterinsurgents proceed to assist the local ally in wielding the sticks and distributing the carrots that consolidate stability in autocratic settings.

### *Second Pillar: Repression*

From the perspective of Western counterinsurgents, a responsible nation-builder should "cultivate genuine compassion" towards the local population and utilise coercive measures only in the most drastic circumstances (Perez 2009: 29). Stressed by the *FM 3-24*, which contends that "the more force is used, the less effective it is," this line of argumentation has been shared by a vast scholarship criticising brutalisation as a counterproductive strategy of COIN warfare (U.S. Gov. 2014: 7-1; Pampinella 2015; Kilcullen 2009). Despite Western COIN doctrines associating the use of unrestrained force to certain mission failure, the function of repression as the "hallmark of autocratic governance" suggests that coercive measures can and do find application in stability operations (Frantz & Kendall-Taylor 2014: 332).

The strategic logic behind practices of civilian victimisation is best expounded by the scholarship applying rational choice models to the study of civil conflict. Assuming that individuals carefully evaluate the costs and benefits associated with specific behavioural practices, Kalyvas (2003: 102) demonstrates that counterinsurgents embrace a draconian posture to raise the population's expected costs of defying the authority to levels deemed unacceptable by even the most determined insurgent sympathiser. Defined by strategic studies experts as "deterrence by punishment," this technique promises to potential insurgents and civilian supporters that the cost of non-compliance will far outweigh the gains obtained by rebelling against the authority (Snyder 1960: 163). Relying on the incumbent's capability of performing acts of violent and highly personalised retribution against non-compliers and their close relatives, "deterrence by punishment" in the optic of authoritarian COIN constitutes a valid strategy designed to dissuade the population from even considering disobeying the government's rule (Pechenkina and Scott 2017; Kalyvas 2006). But because counterinsurgents cannot only rely on "heavily and overtly repressive methods" to control the population, the "second pillar" of authoritarian stability must be analysed in close relation with the ways in which authoritarian incumbents instrumentalise economic incentives (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz 2014: 73).

### *Third Pillar: Economic Development*

If there is one lesson that the COIN experience of the United States (U.S.) in Afghanistan and Iraq has taught to counterinsurgents is that popular support for the government does not spontaneously emerge in war-torn societies. As Berman, Saphiro and Felter (2011) provocatively suggest in their study on economic development in COIN operations, "hearts

and minds” are more frequently bought than won over by the authority. Defined by the U.S. Government as the provision of “essential services, as well as long-term programs to develop the infrastructure and capacity for legitimate agricultural, industrial, educational, medical, commercial and governmental activities,” economic development constitutes “one of the primary weapons” that counterinsurgents utilise to achieve successful mission results (U.S. Gov. 2009: 17; Ibid: 1). If liberal democracies strive to generate a virtuous cycle of bottom-up economic recovery to confront insurgency, authoritarian counterinsurgents deliberately prevent the population from achieving economic independence from state-owned enterprises (Kilcullen et al 2011: 106; U.S. Gov. 2006: 5-17).

By seizing exclusive control over the country’s essential services and appointing co-opted elites as the only authorized service providers, authoritarian counterinsurgents force the population to depend on the state for its economic well-being. As emphasised by scholars researching on the mechanisms of authoritarian resilience, the state’s pervasive presence in a nation’s economy acts both as a potent tool for stability and a functional inhibitor for political dissent (Forrat 2017; Durac & Cavatorta 2015). By compelling individuals to depend on the state for healthcare, education, food, and employment, authoritarian counterinsurgents weaponize economic inducements against the insurgents, which experience a drop in popular support as a consequence of the population’s propensity to accept the benefits offered by the state.

A good example of the authoritarian approach to economic development in action comes from the experience of the Chinese government in the rebellious province of Xinjiang. Among the measures used to suppress the small, but determined insurgency, Beijing improved the region’s standards of living by offering to local unemployed individuals a stable job and a modest income (Wayne 2012: 343). By providing people with better life conditions, the Chinese government bought over popular support for the incumbent, indirectly depriving the insurgents of crucial popular support (Liu 2019). A similar pattern characterises the strategic approach to economic warfare employed by the Syrian regime in the ongoing civil war. While Assad guarantees the provision of food and the availability of public services in government-controlled areas, the regime systematically destroys the bakeries and hospitals situated in territories under insurgent dominion (Martínez & Eng 2017). By making sure that the population living in rebel-controlled areas suffers extreme hardship while the one controlled by the regime enjoys unwavering welfare provisions, the regime “delegitimises its competitors and prevents the emergence of coherent alternatives” (Martínez & Eng 2018: 237). These repugnant, but nevertheless effective COIN measures are designed to demonstrate that living under the government’s rule has no viable alternatives: the population can either decide to submit to the incumbent and enjoy the associated benefits or die of starvation and disease in the futile effort of opposing its dominion.

#### **4. Stability and Authoritarian Counterinsurgency during the Second Chechen War**

Having defined the three fundamental mechanisms of stability in authoritarian COIN operations, the rest of this study provides an empirical examination of the strategy utilised

by Moscow during the Second Chechen War to crush the rampant insurgency and consolidate the pro-Russian regime's authority. Selecting the Russian experience in Chechnya as an empirical case-study has two major advantages. First, the information available on the Second Chechen War is empirically rich and widely utilised by scholars of COIN studies. In addition to providing solid evidence for the mechanisms of authoritarian stability, this case-study facilitates the reader to better collocate this article's main arguments in the broader discussion on democratic and authoritarian approaches to COIN warfare. Second, the consistently low levels of insurgent activity registered in Chechnya ever since the withdrawal of Russian forces in 2009 signal that authoritarian counterinsurgents can succeed in delivering mission success (UCDP 2020). As such claims might result puzzling for the supporters of the democratic model, the evidence extrapolated from the Second Chechen War results appropriate for stimulating a critical discussion on the alleged ineffectiveness of authoritarian COIN practices.

### *First Pillar: Co-Optation*

The strategic co-optation of leadership figures within the ranks of the Chechen resistance constituted the trump card of Moscow's pacification efforts during the Second Chechen War. If the 90.000-strong Russian invasion force capitalised on its overwhelming firepower to conquer Chechnya's cities and disperse the resistance across the countryside, a more sophisticated approach was required to suppress an experienced insurgency determined to replicate the victories obtained during the war of 1994-1996 (Youngs 2000). Mindful of past failed attempts aimed at militarily annihilating the insurgency, Moscow opted for a strategic turnaround aimed at breaking the rebellion's backbone by pitting the splintered factions of the Chechen resistance against each other.

To successfully achieve this task, the Russians exploited the fissures emerged during the aftermath of the First War within the "winning" ranks of the Chechen resistance, divided alongside two major camps—the nationalists, guided by the newly elected president of the separatist Republic Aslan Maskhadov on one side, and the Islamists, led by insurgent commanders such as Shamil Basayev and Ibn al-Khattab on the other (Cohen 2014). Perceiving Maskhadov's government as non-Islamic and therefore illegitimate, many Islamists openly opposed his leadership and engaged in illicit activities, such as kidnappings, lootings, and extortions, in the effort to damage his reputation (Galeotti 2002). Struggling to maintain law and order, Maskhadov was forced to take a more resolute stance against the Islamists. As epitomised by the clashes occurred between Chechen troops and Islamist fighters around the town of Gudermes in 1997, the divide between nationalists and Islamists was bringing Chechnya on the verge of civil war long before Russia's intervention (Knysh 2007: 517). Quickly realising that such cleavages could be weaponized against the insurgency, Moscow promptly fuelled these frictions, gradually transitioning the war from a struggle for independence to an internal conflict within the Chechen leadership—a policy dubbed as "Chechenisation" (Ware 2009).



The co-optation of the Kadyrov clan was the first and most important step of this long-term project. As noted by Dannreuther and March (2008) in their account of Moscow's strategy in Chechnya, designating Ahmad Kadyrov – former Mufti of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and determined separatist during the First Chechen War – as the endorsed authority of the new, pro-Russian government was the “astute” way to engender popular support for the incumbent (Ratelle & Souleimanov 2016: 1294). Fiercely opposed to the Islamists' projects for Chechnya and disillusioned with the dream of a full-fledged independence from Moscow, Kadyrov constituted the perfect intermediary that the Russians could exploit to bring the moderate Chechen opposition to the negotiation table (Russel 2011: 1080). Leveraging on Kadyrov's ability to persuade insurgent commanders to lay down their weapons, the Russians were able to decapitate the insurgency's leadership, rallying the reconcilable moderates and liquidating the extremists refusing to compromise (Souleimanov 2017: 43).

While the death of Ahmad Kadyrov in a terrorist attack carried out in Grozny, Chechnya's capital, in May 2004 risked jeopardising the effectiveness of this virtuous cycle of kinetic operations and legitimacy-building efforts, the political vacuum left by Kadyrov's death was quickly filled by his 27-years-old son Ramzan. (Falkowski 2015). Determined supporter of Putin, Ramzan proved to be a worthy substitute for his father and an invaluable asset for Moscow's strategy in Chechnya. Capable of persuading most of the remaining insurgents to join the *Kadyrovtsy* – the pro-government militia directly controlled by the Kadyrov family – through a series of generalised amnesties and personalised threats, Ramzan effectively divided and conquered the opposition to his rule, signalling to the population that the insurgents' ambition of overthrowing his regime stood no chances of turning into reality (Šmíd & Mareš 2015). With the consolidation of the Kadyrov family as the endorsed rulers of Chechnya, the Russians downgraded the insurgents' potential for collective action whilst securing the pro-Russian government's dominion over the local population.

### *Second Pillar: Repression*

In her courageous account of the tragedies suffered by the Chechen population during the height of the 2002-2003 Russian-led COIN operations, journalist Anna Politkovskaya (2003) best described Chechnya as a “small corner of hell”. During those years, the ferocious hunt for Chechen insurgents left no room for compassion towards the civilian population, which suffered atrocities of any sort inflicted by the Russian forces striving to kill rebel fighters and dismantle their network of civilian supporters (Kramer 2005). While the systematic brutalisation of the civilian population gradually de-escalated as the *Kadyrovtsy* replaced the Russian troops as the principal COIN force around 2005, the use of repression, torture, extrajudicial killings, and forced disappearances never ceased to constitute “the official state policy in Chechnya” (Souleimanov & Aliyev 2015; Gilligan 2010: 70).

The weaponization of fear against Chechnya's war-weary population by Ahmad Kadyrov initially, and by his son Ramzan subsequently can largely be held accountable for the decline in the levels of insurgent violence registered in Chechnya from 2004 to 2009 (UCDP

2020). To maintain control over society and dissuade the population from supporting the insurgency, the leadership figures of the pro-Russian government unequivocally warned their co-ethnics that the regime's retribution would have been brought upon anyone related to the insurgency. During a television interview broadcasted on a national TV channel in 2004, Ramzan Kadyrov promised that the families of suspected insurgents would have been held accountable for their relatives' crimes: "We will punish their relatives according to law...they say that they are helping their relatives, their brothers and sisters. No, they help bandits. We will punish them according to law." (quoted in Murphy 2010: 124). Kadyrov's threats continued to reverberate across several mass media platforms, growing in seriousness and consolidating the climate of fear exploited by the regime to control society. This progressive intensification of the threats directed against relatives of insurgents is epitomised by the following passage extracted from a 2008 discourse that the then-mayor of Grozny, Muslim Khuchiev, held during a national TV programme:

*"Today, we are not having a dialogue with you based on the laws of this state; we'll be acting in accordance with Chechen customs...You know very well what your relatives are doing. They're killing sons of other people whom those people love no less than you love your sons, and we cannot leave those killings without response. This cannot continue...In the future, if your relatives commit an act of evil, this evil will be brought upon you, your other family members and even your descendants." (quoted in Human Rights Watch 2009: 24).*

Endowed with credibility by the regime's willingness to perform highly personalised retributions, these open-ended threats ingrained into the social texture of the Chechen society the deeply rooted fear of the government's repressive apparatus (Lyall 2010). The long-term impact of this pervasive hunt for political dissenters and insurgent sympathisers has been well-documented by Western journalists visiting Chechnya after the consolidation of Kadyrov's dominion. While Human Rights Watch personnel reported in 2005 that the Chechen population was too terrified to condemn the human rights violations perpetrated by the regime, Seierstad witnessed during her ethnographic trip how state terror changed life in Chechnya: "there are certain families (associated with the insurgency) no one visits...former best friends no longer say hello. Having contact with these families can lead you into the darkness yourself." (Human Rights Watch 2005; Seierstad 2008: 152).

Acting as a forceful deterrent, the promise of a violent retaliation against the relatives of suspected insurgents not only dissuaded the population from challenging the government's political authority, but also contributed to force potential rebels to relocate outside of Chechnya and spare their loved ones from the government's wrath, as demonstrated by the outflow of insurgents either joining other Caucasian insurgencies or fighting in the Middle Eastern battlegrounds of global Jihad (O'Loughlin & Witmer 2012; Souleimanov 2014). With the insurgency weakened and the population frightened into

compliance, the Russians were ready to implement the economic measures constituting the last pillar of stability in authoritarian COIN operations.

### *Third Pillar: Economic Development*

Revitalising Chechnya's war-torn economy after that the country's principal infrastructures were flattened to the ground by the Russians' artillery and air force was no easy task for Moscow, which embarked since early 2000 in an unprecedented campaign of economic investments localised in the small, devastated republic (Basnukaev 2014). For the purpose of rebuilding the nation's infrastructures, including hospitals, schools, and residential complexes, the Russian government provided the Chechen regime with more than 30 billion dollars directly taken from federal coffers between 2000 to 2010, money that the Kadyrov family utilised to improve the population's living conditions (Alexseev 2011). In 2009, ten years after the start of the Russian-led COIN operations, Chechnya's economic landscape looked substantially different from the wasteland it was during the early 2000s: while the national health system was "almost back to the same level as before the wars," schools were quickly being rebuilt and the housing standard in Grozny was "rapidly changing for the better" (LandInfo 2012: 13; UNHCR 2007: 8). If the national economic recovery constituted a long-awaited milestone in the normalisation of post-conflict Chechnya, Moscow's "generous" financial contributions to the Kadyrov regime should not conceal the profoundly strategic purpose fulfilled by economic programmes performed in COIN operations.

Appeasing the population's desire for returning to a peaceful situation without decreasing the regime's pervasive control over society constituted the top priority objective of the influx of federal money into Chechnya. Although the population received enough money to operate small enterprises, such as cafes and small markets (Matveeva 2007), the regime systematically prevented the private sector from reducing the society's dependence on state-owned enterprises. As confirmed by Halbach in his assessment of the Chechen economy, "there are hardly any jobs in the private sector," and the only, largely underpaid jobs available can be found "almost exclusively in the state apparatus" (2018: 25). By keeping Chechnya among the regions with the lowest GDP per capita within the Russian Federation, Moscow prevents the population from accumulating wealth and seizing the means necessary to fight for independence (Dairabayeva et al 2016). Although the underdeveloped conditions of the private sector create resentment among the population, the lack of alternatives compels individuals into passively accepting the current situation, as revealed by a frustrated public worker during an interview: "and where, tell me, can you find another job in today's Chechnya?" (Sultanov 2007).

By denying to the population the possibility of obtaining economic independence from the state, the regime minimised the insurgents' potential for collective action, forcing entire communities to rely on the few jobs offered by the government as a means to secure their economic well-being. In Chechnya, this strategy greatly facilitated the consolidation of the government's rule. As Malashenko underscored during an interview in October 2003, the victory of Ahmad Kadyrov in the presidential elections of that year was likely to occur "even

without Moscow's meddling," as a large section of the Chechen society already associated "electricity, new schools, and (war) compensation with the name of Kadyrov" (Peterson 2003).

## **5. Lessons Learned for Western Counterinsurgents**

In his scrutiny of the Russian military operations during the Second Chechen War, Miakinkov stressed there is "little" that Western states can learn from the brutal measures that authoritarian regimes use to suppress insurgent movements (2011: 675). Disagreeing with this perspective, this study argues that the COIN experience of authoritarian regimes can generate insightful recommendations for Western strategists when accurately contextualised to the range of strategic approaches that liberal regimes are disposed to implement. From the analysis of the three pillars of authoritarian stability in COIN operations, this paper distils three principal strategic implications that Western military planners might consider as useful for the purpose of increasing the effectiveness of political stability in insurgency-affected societies:

*a) The enemy of my enemy is my friend.*

Although the scholarship signals that Moscow's co-optation strategy during the Second Chechen War was largely context-bound and unlikely to be applicable with the same degree of success elsewhere (Kim & Blank 2013), this case-study nevertheless signals that indigenous elites can constitute a game changer in legitimacy-building operations. Because rallied elites contribute to neutralise irreconcilable rebels and engender popular support for the central government, Western counterinsurgents could find more effective to prioritise the co-optation of insurgent leaders over endeavours aimed at securing the population's wholehearted support. As demonstrated in this paper, the authoritarian "divide and rule" approach aimed at turning foes into loyal friends speeds up the decapitation of the insurgency's leadership, depriving the rebellion of the charismatic component that catalyses the population's willingness to support the insurgents. Thus, bottom-up legitimacy-building processes should be implemented only after that the counterinsurgent has decapitated the insurgency's leadership and identified a competent local elite.

*b) Active deterrence is more promising than wishful thinking.*

The Russian COIN experience during the Second Chechen War clearly underscores that depriving the insurgents of their popular mass base is an arduous task, as disenfranchised people are unlikely to switch their allegiance from the insurgents to the government overnight. This observation suggests that implementing "kind-hearted" approaches centred on minimising the use of kinetic force might often fail to deliver substantial progress if unmatched with a coercive strategy designed to deter people from supporting the insurgents. While this study underscores that the criminal use of repressive measures by authoritarian regimes is deplorable, its findings suggest that building stability in war-torn societies requires the incumbent to demonstrate its capability of punishing individuals that act against the

restoration of public order. Challenging the mainstream wisdom on COIN operations, this study advances the claim that the principle of “minimum necessary force” adopted by democratic regimes *should* be harmonised with the repertoire of coercive measures regarded as morally acceptable by democratic standards.

*c) Short-term economic fixes contribute to solving long-term stability problems.*

Chechnya stands out as a clear example of a war-ravaged nation that entirely depends on the constant influx of monetary aid from the intervening COIN force for its economic sustenance. Given the drastic living conditions in Chechnya during the early 2000s, the population was likely to submit to any authority capable of providing essential means of survival. While the authoritarian approach to economic development results largely incompatible with the one advanced by liberal democracies, the Russian experience in Chechnya indicates that investments in public infrastructures compel the populace into accepting the government as the only entity capable of restoring stability. For Western counterinsurgents, this means that prioritising the short-term reconstruction of the public sector magnifies the local regime’s ability to garner long-term popular support, an end-goal hardly achievable by programmes centred on revitalising the private sector.

## **Conclusion**

Supported by theoretical and empirical evidence, this study demonstrated that political stability holds crucial strategic relevance in authoritarian COIN operations. After outlining the three principal mechanisms of political stability in non-democratic states, the study described how co-opting local elites, deterring the population from supporting the insurgents, and forcing society to economically depend on the state assisted Moscow in consolidating the local regime’s uncontested dominion over Chechnya.

These findings bear substantial relevance for Western strategists and decision-makers. In disagreement with the mainstream literature debating the (in)effectiveness of authoritarian COIN operations, this paper established that authoritarian counterinsurgents developed an oppressive, but effective set of techniques suited to enforce the regime’s authority in insurgency-affected societies. While the common wisdom on COIN warfare signals that the experience of authoritarian regimes is irrelevant for liberal democracies, this paper demonstrated that Western strategists can draw meaningful conclusions from the study of authoritarian COIN operations.

In challenging the intellectual foundations of democratic COIN blueprints, this study further encourages the scholarship to undertake a more pronounced effort in critically re-assessing the effectiveness of supposedly “best” or “worst” checklists of COIN practices. Continuing to ignore the authoritarian repertoire of COIN measures not only perpetuates an academic taboo that has no reason to exist, but also exposes military strategists to a progressive, hardly reversible loss of the ability to look at problems from different angles, a “strategic myopia” that Porch considers as affecting nowadays Western military circles (2013: 309). Sharing Porch’s concerns, this study urges Western scholars and practitioners to stop

seeing the world in “black and white,” “good and evil” dichotomies and rather embrace a more conscious, critical perspective on topics of strategy and warfare. As insurgent movements grow in operational effectiveness and consolidate their presence in the war-ravaged countries of the Middle East, thinking outside of the democratic toolbox of COIN measures constitutes a much-needed ability that scholars and practitioners should re-learn how to master. And the sooner, the better.

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