

Book Review: Unconventional Warfare in South Asia: Shadow Warriors and Counterinsurgency by Scott Gates and Kaushik Roy

Unconventional Warfare in South Asia takes a close look at the organization and doctrines of the 'shadow armies' and the government forces which fight them. **Scott Gates** and **Kaushik Roy** make use of a wide range of empirical and testimonial material to carry out their research, from first-hand interviews to military memoirs. This is an insightful collection, finds **Ram Mashru**, and will be of interest to those studying civil wars and insurgencies in South Asia.

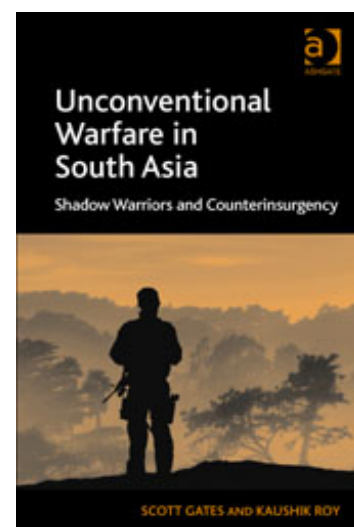


Unconventional Warfare in South Asia: Shadow Warriors and Counterinsurgency. Scott Gates and Kaushik Roy. Ashgate. February 2014.

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In 1999, as the Kargil conflict threatened to escalate into all-out war between India and Pakistan, [Bill Clinton described South Asia](#) as "the most dangerous place in the world". For many, Clinton's infamous remarks have been vindicated by the events the region has witnessed since: Bin Laden was discovered in Pakistan, the region's nuclear-armed states continue to expand their arsenals, and the resurgent Taliban threaten to tip Afghanistan back into civil war. But as [Scott Gates](#) and [Kaushik Roy](#) argue in their new book it is "unconventional war", and not nuclear fallout or civil strife, that is the region's greatest challenge.

The authors, two academics and researchers at the Peace Research Institute Oslo, pose three questions: (1) Why do marginal stateless groups rebel? (2) How do states repress them? And (3) what consequences does this violence and counter-violence have in terms of peace building? To answer these questions they explore seven case studies – covering India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan – and analyse some of South Asia's most intractable conflicts, including the Naxalite (Maoist) insurgency in north-east India, the Sri Lankan civil war, and waves of insurgency and counter-insurgency from the soviet period to the US invasion in Afghanistan. The majority of the book is dedicated to these case studies and the conflicts are charted historically from 1947, when present-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh gained independence.



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The book's structure reflects several important analytical choices: it is organised by region and then theme (guerrilla warfare, communist insurgency, jihadist insurgency and civil war), and by adopting a historical approach Gates and Roy comprehensively chart the evolutionary course of each conflict. The questions the authors pose are also significant. Questions (1) and (2), which relate to the actions and motivations of non-state groups and government forces respectively, allow Gates and Roy to analyse violence from "both sides". The state/non-state dynamic in South Asia is a crucial area of study because of the [region's "sorcerer's apprentice" problem](#): Pakistan, for example, is now fighting against various militant outfits that it once funded and facilitated.

The book begins with a chapter-long survey of counter-insurgency theory, and ends with a detailed 20-page study of the "tools and theory" of counter-insurgency in the India and Pakistan contexts. Security-studies theory is fascinating particularly because fundamental concepts – such as insurgency, terrorism and guerrilla fighting – are contested. When applying theories to South Asia, a dearth of evidence and data adds further layers of complexity. As the authors note, there is "not much analysis" of the counter-insurgency campaigns of South Asian states, and the little literature that is available is "thin". This is unsurprising: action related to national security is highly politicised and often controversial, and information related to it is therefore closely guarded. As a result Gates and

Roy are forced to rely on “open source analysis”, making use of a wide range of empirical and testamentary material – from first-hand interviews to military memoirs – to carry out their research.



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We only need to look to the crises in Libya, Syria, and Ukraine to gain an idea of what “unconventional war” is. So called “new wars” and “shadow wars” are subtly varying conceptions that refer to a set of irreversible and unmistakable trends: conflict increasingly involves adopting new strategies and adapting to new technologies to face ever-proliferating agents of war. Conventional state militaries now face countless new actors that are ideologically, materially, geographically and ethnically distinct. In South Asia the agents of war include various Marxist, jihadist, national, tribal and communal groups. And these groups and conflicts have transnational implications. As is well known, the instability in Pakistan and Kashmir “is linked [directly] to the Afghan imbroglio”.

The opening, theoretical pages that are specific to “unconventional war” in India and Pakistan provide numerous insights. India’s army, for example, remains oriented towards conventional warfare, limiting its effectiveness at countering terrorism. We learn that Pakistan’s counter-insurgency capabilities are similarly hindered by a “fire-power intensive” approach and this is exacerbated by the enduring rift between the country’s military and its civilian government. And the book makes the alarming point that for all of the states in the region, the greatest threats to territorial integrity and internal stability are not external but internal: home-grown insurgency and terrorism.

Throughout, Gates and Roy maintain a persuasive two-pronged central argument. First, they argue that there is nothing new about the “new wars” in South Asia; and second, they argue that South-Asian states will ultimately succeed against these various uprisings. The latter point reflects a widely held but plainly problematic normative assertion: that governments *should* crush insurgencies. Gates and Roy make this argument by invoking some of the core claims of “Western” political theory: the “ultimate function [of the state] is providing security,” they insist, adding that state sovereignty is, at its core, a measure of how well states can be “the sole provider[s] of security”. The difficulty with making these assertions, however, is that they obscure much of the moral complexity of the region’s conflicts. Naxalite (Maoist) insurgents, who are rightly condemned for waging a bloody and brutal war against the state and civilians, fight in large part out of frustration over chronic under-development and persistent neglect by the Indian government. Similarly, the insurgency in the contested state of Jammu & Kashmir that began in 1989 includes jihadist militants and has been propped up by shady elements in Pakistan, making it a legitimate target for Indian state violence. But the uprising is also a product of Indian state repression and is a reaction to the denial of the right to self-determination.

South Asia has long been afflicted by “unconventional warfare”, and the book’s central observation is that, despite

this, sub-state conflicts remain a pressing challenge. What's more, as Gates and Roy explain, conventional "humanitarian intervention" – of the sort that the world saw in Bosnia – is unlikely to succeed against these "new wars" where the aim is not to secure control but to pursue a cause. This observation has import beyond the region – there are many that think placing boots on the ground in Syria would solve the crisis there. In terms of unconventional warfare, South Asia serves as a regrettable example to the rest of the world, making this book both timely and relevant.

Ram Mashru is an author, journalist and researcher specialising in the politics, development and human rights of South Asia. *Human InSecurity*, his first book, was published in December 2013 and explores India's contemporary human rights and security challenges. He read Law at the University of Cambridge before obtaining an MSc in Area Studies from the University of Oxford. [Read more reviews by Ram.](#)

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