



The Allure of Quick Victory

Lessons From Peru's Fight Against *Sendero Luminoso*

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FOURTEEN YEARS AFTER a powerful rebellion spread fear and destruction throughout the nation of Peru, the commanding general of the Peruvian Army, Otto Guibovich, provided the ominous warning: "If we don't do something they will grow and we will realize we have our own FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia)."¹ Sendero Luminoso (SL) conducted a violent campaign of rural guerrilla war and urban terrorism from 1980 to 1995; however, its growth and expansion seemed to vanish in an instant with the capture of its leader, Abimael Guzmán. The rapid disintegration of SL was cited as an example of successful counterinsurgency, but now rising casualties and violence caused by the formerly dormant group have called those conclusions into question. While the importance of the capture of SL's leadership is incontrovertible, recent events indicate that the underlying problems that fueled the Sendero insurgency remain. The Peruvian government must use a combination of enemy- and population-focused strategies to defeat SL and produce lasting stability.²

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

The Emergence of Sendero Luminoso

The environment that spawned SL is similar to that which produced numerous other insurgencies. Like other nations in Latin America, Peru had acknowledged the need to conduct land reform. In the 1960s, it began an extensive program to redistribute land to peasants from the previous *hacienda* system.³ The Peruvian highlands, however, did not receive much support from these initiatives. The government largely neglected the Ayacucho Department, which would become the heart of the insurgency. By 1980, the annual per capita income there was as low as \$60, and three of its provinces were among the poorest 15 percent in the nation.⁴ Additionally, Ayacucho contained a majority indigenous population that had never fully integrated with Peru's coastal regions, and its inhabitants maintained the use of their native Quechuan language. The disconnected, impoverished region suffered under an antiquated social-economic structure and was ripe for revolution.

Revolutionary action sprang from the Communist Party. A splintering of the Communist Party of Peru in the 1960s gave birth to the Communist Party of Peru in the Shining Path of Mariátegui (*Sendero Luminoso* in Spanish).⁵ Its leader, Abimael Guzmán, was a devout follower of Mao Tse-Tung and his

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PHOTO: Peru landscape, Small mountain lake in the Andes (courtesy of Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*)

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(AFP Photo / Diario Ojo)

Police arrest a protester injured during the riots in Ayacucho, 600 km southeast of Lima on 1 July 2004. Prime Minister Carlos Ferrero claimed that the Shining Path terrorist group was behind acts of violence in Ayacucho where a faction of SUTEP (Single Trade Union of Education Workers of Peru) burned several public buildings and clashed with police, leaving about 40 injured during protests against the privatization of education.

philosophies of guerrilla warfare. Mao's highly influential book, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, set the tone for the beginnings of SL. Mao advised that "success largely depends upon powerful political leaders who work unceasingly to bring about internal unification."⁶ Shining Path began this process of unification at the University of Huamanga, in the city of Ayacucho, where Guzmán was a professor. Guzmán and other members of SL were able to dominate the faculty and student organizations of the university during the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁷ During this time, they indoctrinated the largely indigenous student body with a Maoist ideology that highlighted the vast disparity of wealth in Peru. In 1974, SL lost control of the university, but it had already succeeded

in creating a "revolutionary consciousness" in the population of Ayacucho.⁸ Other Latin American communist movements followed Che Guevara's *foco* method and brought their ideologies to rural areas.⁹ Guzmán's followers were not foreigners or crusading children from the urban middle class, they were a part of the impoverished rural population already. Sendero Luminoso did not need to build bonds with the population; they were the population.¹⁰

Having created a powerful support base among the people, Guzmán organized them for active insurgency. Mao Tse-Tung devoted a considerable amount of time in his writing to "organization for guerrilla warfare," and provides explicit instructions to aid "students who have no knowledge of military affairs."¹¹ Mao provides a description of a highly structured organization with clear command and control mechanisms. Following this example, highly organized Sendero units functioned autonomously at the tactical level. All elements operated under the direction of the "central committee" and Guzmán himself.¹² The intense devotion of its followers and its hierarchical organization enabled Shining Path to launch a devastating campaign of violence and terrorism against the Peruvian government. However, Shining Path's structure also proved to be a key vulnerability.

Smothering the Shining Path

The Peruvian government was in an outstanding position to defeat an insurgency when SL began to form. While Ayacucho was a poor and neglected region, a large portion of the country had been satisfied with land reforms and changes in the former hacienda system. Additionally, 1980 marked a return to free elections for Peru, which included participation by Marxist political parties.¹³ Under these conditions, Shining Path had difficulty expanding its brand of communist ideology outside of its cultivated support base in Ayacucho.

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In the beginning, like many governments facing domestic threats, the Peruvian government failed to recognize the seriousness of the situation and struggled with the challenges of counterinsurgency warfare. After some early setbacks, the Peruvian military initiated a more balanced counterinsurgency approach by integrating lethal military action with population security and development. Sendero aided the new strategy by inflicting intense violence and abuse on many Peruvian villages. The government integrated many villages into a local security program called Rondas Campesinas. Under this system, villagers were armed and given authority to defend their villages from SL influence.¹⁴ At the time of Guzmán's capture, Sendero was already reeling under the effects of the new strategies. However, instead of attempting to return to the countryside and win back the population, Guzmán shifted his efforts to Peru's capital city, Lima, to try a shortcut to victory. Guzmán believed that Peru's government had been sufficiently weakened, and that extensive terrorist attacks would cause a mass exodus of rich and powerful Limeños with their financial resources. This would cause a run on the banks, economic collapse, and a call for foreign intervention. Shining Path could take up the banner of a nationalist movement against foreign intruders and regain widespread popular support.¹⁵

On 12 September 1992, Guzmán was captured along with several other SL leaders in a raid by DINCOTE (Dirección Contra Terrorismo), an elite group of Peruvian national police that had received extensive support and training from the United States.¹⁶ Following his capture, Guzmán made statements in support of a cessation of hostilities with the government. The importance of Guzmán's capture cannot be overstated. Sendero's highly structured organization was thrown into chaos. In the 18 months after his arrest, 3,600 Shining Path guerrillas turned themselves in or were captured, and political violence decreased rapidly.¹⁷ Shining Path was reduced to a minor nuisance and was believed to be utterly defeated, until recently.

In the aftermath of Sendero's disintegration, the Peruvian government began to dismantle its intelligence agencies in response to accounts of atrocities by some of their operational units. The Barrios Altos massacre by the Grupo Colina, a group backed by now-jailed Vladimiro Montesinos, former head of

SIN (Sistema de Inteligencia Nacional), the Peruvian state intelligence organization, proved to be the most powerful motivation for a weakening of agencies once seen as essential in the fight against SL. In addition, the focus on development in disconnected regions of the country lost urgency with the rapid decline of violence.

Sendero Luminoso's Return

Today, after a period of relative calm, there are concerns about a resurgent SL growing in power and influence in Huallaga and the Valley of the Apurimac and Ene Rivers (*Valle de los Rios Apurimac Ene* abbreviated as VRAE). On 9 April 2009, Shining Path guerrillas ambushed two Peruvian army patrols in the VRAE, leaving 15 dead.¹⁸ On the morning of 2 August 2009, a reported group of 50 insurgents attacked a fixed police outpost in San Jose de Secce, leaving three police and two civilians dead.¹⁹ On the afternoon of 2 September 2009, long-range fire brought down a Peruvian helicopter on a mission to evacuate three soldiers wounded during a firefight with SL forces in the VRAE. The crash left two dead and one severely wounded.²⁰ Such attacks indicate a more sophisticated level of operations and are a troubling sign for the region.

Perhaps most disturbing is the change in strategy being employed by SL. Following its collapse in the 1990s, SL conducted a 5-year study of its failure and codified its findings in a 45-page summary that became Sendero's new strategy. Within the document, SL renounces many of its former practices including extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, blackmail, and occupying homes.²¹ Shining Path concluded that violence against the population was the critical failure of the rebellion. It is now reportedly providing potable water, building sports fields, and painting schools to garner popular support.²² Victor Quispe Palomino, the leader of the VRAE elements of SL, stated that SL would not target transnational businesses or nongovernmental organizations but rather only the "armed forces, police, and those that take part in the so-called fight against terrorism and narco-trafficking."²³ Such statements by SL leaders and large-scale attacks on army and police units indicate that the belief that SL had transformed into little more than a security element for cocaine production was incorrect. Shining Path remains a communist insurgent organization and has now adopted

(AFP Photo / Pavel Ugaz / Peru Imágenes Epesa-Out



Peruvian soldiers assist Colombian national Jairo Giraldo, near Toccate, Peru, 10 June 2004. Giraldo, in charge of the pipeline for the Techint engineering company Camisea gas project, had been held hostage almost 36 hours with 70 other workers by Shining Path guerrillas.

a FARC-like strategy in which it uses profits from narco-trafficking to fund purchases of equipment and supplies, pays its fighters, and gains the support of the population.

The reason Shining Path is gaining traction once again in Huallaga and the VRAE is the same reason Guzmán was able to develop the organization in the 1970s. These regions remain disconnected and disenfranchised, making them vulnerable to criminal and insurgent influence. Despite the lessons of the 1980s and 1990s, in Huancavelica, Ayacucho, and Apurímac, the average income remains from 60 to 89 percent below the poverty line.²⁴ Security in the city of Ayacucho has improved, but economic activity remains a challenge due to limited connections with major economic hubs like Pisco, Cuzco, and Lima.²⁵ Roads and infrastructure linking the poor highlands with the more prosperous coast remain in disrepair or are nonexistent. Lima, with its population of more than seven million, continues to dominate the national government's resources and focus.²⁶ The lack of legal economic opportunities has led

to continued production of coca. Peru remains the number two producer of cocaine in the world and, according to the United Nations World Drug Report, production has increased for the last four years.²⁷ The explosive combination of poverty, lack of government presence, and coca production makes the region fertile ground for Sendero.

Occurring in parallel with the continued poverty and coca production in the VRAE and Huallaga is the reduction of pressure by security forces. The degradation of the Peruvian intelligence community and lack of attention to the maintenance of military and police units has reduced their ability to destroy the remaining Sendero elements.²⁸ Furthermore, unutilized Rondas Campesinas units are now apathetic to counter Sendero's resurgence. Their leaders worry about the marginalization of Rondas Campesinas, who are not part of the security plan as they were in the 1990s. In addition, the national government has not provided medical benefits and benefits for widows and orphaned children as it promised during the terrorist crisis. Rondas Campesinas commanders

decided not to participate in an annual parade in 2009 because they were angry at the way the government treated them and because Shining Path had co-opted some of them. Many of the commanders are coca farmers who joined Rondas Campesinas units due to the violence brought by SL. Now with Sendero's change in strategy, they are less inclined to fight in support of an unappreciative government.²⁹

Currently, SL does not represent a threat to the Peruvian state as it did in the 1990s. However, the Peruvian government is recognizing that SL remains a problem. Following the recent attacks on military and police units, the government has begun increasing troop strength in the regions. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has shown some success with its alternative development program. Between 2002 and 2009, USAID invested more than \$110 million and completed 703 public works projects and 54,976 productive projects. Perhaps the most important aspect of the program is that it uses a multipronged approach to strengthen government, provide infrastructure, increase access

to markets, and increase access to health care.³⁰ Peru's Plan VRAE and Plan Huallaga, like USAID, are designed as interagency efforts. It remains to be seen if Peru will be able to manage a relentless pursuit of armed insurgents while extending the benefits of societal inclusion.

Lessons

The story of Peru's fight against SL is significant for the United States in the current "era of persistent conflict."³¹ The Sendero insurgency was and is a symptom of social inequity and lack of opportunity. Peru did not effectively address these underlying conditions after its defeat of Sendero in the 1990s. As the United States withdraws from Iraq and transfers control to Iraqi forces, it must be cognizant of latent dangers. Security gains are not ends in themselves. Depending on the region, underlying conditions for instability could include the lack of freedom of religion, and effective economic opportunity, and access to political power. Although the disengagement of foreign troops will remove one irritant, the legitimacy



Police arrest an injured protester in Ayacucho, Peru, 1 July 2004. Prime Minister Carlos Ferrero claimed that the Shining Path terrorist group was behind the acts of violence in Ayacucho.

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of the elected Iraqi government will be paramount. Equally important will be the final eradication of hard-line Islamists who are similar in many ways to the dedicated Maoists of Sendero.

Iraq shares one additional parallel with Peru: local security forces, the Sons of Iraq, have been critical to achieving security, like Rondas Campesinas. It will be essential for the Iraqi government to follow through on its promises and integrate these forces into government security forces or into civil society.

This same strategy is applicable to Colombia as well. As Colombia consolidates its gains against the FARC, a transition to government services in formerly lawless areas must occur. Colombia, however, may provide a roadmap for post-conflict consolidation. Colombia has developed the Policy for the Consolidation of Democratic Security (Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática).³² The

U.S. “Colombian Strategic Development Initiative” supports this policy.³³ Both plans focus on delivering enduring economic opportunity and government services to formerly lawless or FARC-controlled regions. Both plans shift resources from the primarily security-heavy efforts of the last decade, while maintaining extremely successful and unrelenting intelligence-based targeting of the FARC leadership. With continued U.S. support and Colombian political will, Colombia could prove to be an example of successful government consolidation following an internal conflict.

America’s support in Colombia and Iraq will be critical in the success of her allies. Follow-through is essential in the final phases of a government victory. The U.S. should heed the lessons of Peru’s long fight against its internal enemies. Peru’s success in the 1990s using targeting and a whole-of-government approach has not proven to be permanent. A failure to persist with the benefits of government services and a lack of pressure by security forces has allowed SL to regroup. To achieve a lasting victory, the government must address the social foundations of insurgency, the intransigent insurgent leadership, and the support of the population from which the insurgents obtain their intelligence, anonymity, and logistical support. **MR**

NOTES

1. “Si no hacemos algo tendremos unas FARC,” *El Comercio* (19 April 2009). The Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. “Established in 1964 as the military wing of the Colombian Communist Party, Colombia’s oldest, largest, most capable and best equipped Marxist insurgency.” At <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/farc.htm>>.

2. David Kilcullen, *Two Schools of Classical Counterinsurgency* (Discussion on Small Wars Journal 27 January 2007), <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/01/two-schools-of-classical-count/>>. An excellent analysis of population vs. enemy centric COIN strategies.

3. The hacienda system was a landed estate establishment created by Spanish colonists. These large tracts of lands became a source of social status and dominated small farms and indigenous lands. The system endured until reforms in the 20th century. Peter Winn, *Americas* (University of California Press, 2006) 48.

4. Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America* (Princeton University Press, NJ 1992), 245.

5. David Scott Palmer, “History Politics and Shining Path in Peru,” *Shining Path of Peru* (St Martin’s Press, NY, 1994), 14.

6. Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare* (University of Illinois Press, IL, 2000), 63.

7. Gabriela Tarazona-Sevillano, “The Organization of Shining Path,” *Shining Path of Peru* (St Martin’s Press, NY, 1994), 196-97.

8. A. Dirlik, *Marxism in the Chinese Revolution* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 132.

9. Ernesto Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Ocean Press, Australia, 2006), 1-2. The Foco Method is a guerrilla strategy developed by Che Guevara based on the concept that a small nucleus of revolutionaries can develop the conditions necessary for revolution, creating general insurrection.

10. Wickham-Crowley, 253.

11. Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 77.

12. John T. Fishel and Max G. Manwaring, *Uncomfortable Wars Revisited* (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman OK, 2006), 120.

13. Wickham-Crowley, 298.

14. See Fishel and Manwaring, 121-24, for a detailed analysis of the Peruvian strategy.

15. Interview with Enrique Obando (Lima, Peru, 16 July 2009).

16. Charles Lane, “Superman Meets Shining Path: Story of CIA Success,” *The Washington Post* (7 December 2000).

17. Palmer, “History Politics and Shining Path in Peru,” *Shining Path of Peru*, 3-4.

18. “Suman 15 los Soldados Asesinados,” *El Comercio*, 22 April 2009.

19. “Por lo menos 50 terroristas atacaron sede policial del poblado de San Jose de Secce,” *El Comercio*, 2 August 2009.

20. “Helicóptero Caído Cumplía Misión de Rescate de Heridos,” *El Comercio*, 3 September 2009.

21. Sendero Luminoso document, *Balance de la primera contracampana política y militar de la guerra popular democrática de resistencia nacional antiimperialista yanqui*, 42-43, <<http://www.larepublica.pe/files/image/2009/enero/08/Documento%20Narcoterrorista.pdf>>.

22. “Si no hacemos algo tendremos unas FARC,” *El Comercio*, 19 April 2009.

23. “Sendero Luminoso asume ataque del jueves contra Ejército que dejó 14 muertos,” *El Comercio*, 14 April 2009.

24. USAID Peru Project Chart (2009).

25. Interview with small business owners (Ayacucho, Peru, 15 July 2009).

26. Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, *Censos Nacionales 2007: XI Población y VI de Vivienda*, 2007.

27. UN World Drug Report (2010).

28. Enrique Obando, “Otra Vez Sendero,” *El Comercio*, 24 January 2006.

29. Interview with Rondas Campesinas commander (Ayacucho, Peru, 15 July 2009).

30. USAID Peru Fact Sheet (2009).

31. Term used in the U.S. Army, *Army Posture Statement* (2008), 1. Describes the current operating environment in which the U.S. military expects to face a “future of protracted confrontation among state, nonstate, and individual actors who will use violence to achieve political, religious, or other ideological ends.”

32. Colombian Ministry of Defense, Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática, <http://www.mindefensa.gov.co/descargas/Documentos_Home/Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática.pdf>.

33. Interview with USAID office (Bogota, Colombia, 17 July 2009).