

**Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse** by Paul Staniland, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014, pp. 312, INR 6000

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Insurgency and rebellion are often common lexicons appearing in scholarly works on conflict. Perhaps the reason for this could be the possible magnitude of impact of such events on overall humanity. The capability of rebellions to lead to collapse, destabilisation or change in the prevailing regimes has been elaborated innumerable times in the narration of human history, but how far are the dynamics of such phenomena understood. Paul Staniland's book, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, is an attempt to bridge the gaps in existing research. The book begins by challenging the very 'process of understanding' which exists in studies on conflicts. Staniland argues that after the end of the Cold War, a significant amount of academic attention was riveted on scrutinising the 'resource and finance' aspects of wars, which also influenced the analysis on insurgent groups. He argues that such attempts, though effective, are mostly partial due to the improper importance accorded to the social and organisational characteristics of the insurgent groups. Staniland contends that an increasing number of academic contributions have provided prescriptive counsel to the state for handling rebels, thereby creating 'the problem of causal heterogeneity [that] leads to platitudinous policy' (p. 229). The book emphasises three

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general problems of existing research: (a) failure to conceptualise the distinctions between insurgent groups, and the impediments created by this in comparative studies; (b) problems which arise due to a minimalist approach towards studying pre-war politics; and (c) the inadequate focus on understanding the change in the social dynamics of insurgent groups over the course of the insurgency or rebellion.

The author states that the first step to explain the patterns of rebel organisations is to identify the structural differences among groups. Staniland draws inspiration to define insurgency from Jack Knight, *Institutions and Social Conflict* (Cambridge University Press, 1992) and Jon Elster, *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). He defines an insurgent group as a collective organisation with a designate name, which is made up of formal structures of command and control, with the intention to seize political power using violence. The insurgent groups are categorised in the book based on different blends of pre-war networks as integrated, vanguard, parochial and fragmented. These politicised social networks are based on certain sets of horizontal and vertical ties among leaders and sympathisers. Groups with leadership unity and discipline at their core, and high levels of local compliance on the ground, are called integrated groups. Examples of such groups include the Viet Cong, Hezbollah and the Provisional Irish Republican Army. The vanguard groups also have a strong leadership core, but can be differentiated by their fragile local control; for example, Al Qaeda in Iraq since 2004, Naxalites in West Bengal between 1960–70 and the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917. If the local control is strong and central discipline is weak, the groups are labelled as parochial groups. The Pakistani Taliban and the anti-Qaddafi military opposition in Libya during 2011–12 are among the few actors considered by the author as parochial groups. Staniland identifies the fragmented groups as the weakest due to their weak centre and local control. The low survivability of fragmented groups appears to be the reason for the dearth of immediately observable examples to fit to the description of this group; but the author identifies Italy's Red Brigades in the 1970s and Irish National Liberation in Northern Ireland as examples of this category.

Even though Staniland stresses on the importance of classifying groups on the basis of their organisational structure, he sensibly proposes that a particular organisational structure need not always achieve the same political outcome. The political outcome is dependent on subtleties

that subjectively lead the group to evolve or devolve from one structure to other during the different phases in a conflict. According to the author, it is important to accept the relevance of history to understand the dynamics of insurgency, both during the stage of its conception and in the phase of evolution or disintegration. One such attribution highlights how the initial organisation of insurgent groups is anchored on the networks and institutions of its leaders prior to violent mobilisation. Staniland argues that the extent of violent mobilisation is bound to be dependent on the groups' erstwhile connections of trust and commitment over ideological cohesion, mass support or material resources. He argues that not all forms of 'collective actions-led social base' are keen for a violent mobilisation; for example, bowling leagues or alumni groups lack the political incentive to rebel against the state. This is again the case with pro-state social bases that are created to foster violence against a state's opponents. The author identifies pre-war opposition political parties, underground revolutionary groups, dissident student activists and few other politically motivated social bases as being the most capable executors of a rebellion.

Concluding his overall position, Staniland emphasises 'authority' in the book through a personal narrative of his field experiences and observations. The book's structure consists of a precursor chapter followed by three sections. The author attempts to validate his arguments by citing comparative models within South Asia, and probes further using cases outside South Asia to fortify his assertions. The process-tracing technique is used in the book to evaluate the arguments. Staniland conveys and explains upfront the instances where his theory is inapplicable, for example, in cases where non-state armed groups work in collusive relationships with the state's counter-insurgent forces. Staniland's admission of accepting the presence of contradictions, and keen inclination to not cherry-pick the examples, gives this book an unprejudiced character to some degree.

According to the author, his book not only addresses counter-insurgency institutions but would find an audience amongst the groups themselves. He shifts his stance from a purely normative discourse by indicating the feasibility of his work to study current and future insurgents; on how social-institutional aspects and collective action play a major role in a favourable outcome of a conflict. In the contour of a subtle prescription to state counter-insurgent institutions, the author does argue for the need of adapting strategies based on the type of the insurgent group. The argument may seem irrelevant since an integrated group is

already recognised by the author as a major political and military player. A resource-sufficient state can always mould its strategies proficiently enough to terminate even the strongest integrated group. These strategies, although an overkill, should be ample when used against other weaker groups. To strengthen the argument, the author could have explained the destructive capabilities of each of the categories of insurgency groups separately and as a parameter for analysis. It cannot be taken for granted that integrated groups always possess greater destructive temperament. Weaker groups whose existence is threatened can retaliate with much greater vigour, and could pose a greater threat, and therefore the need for precise strategies is warranted.

The book argues how most insurgent groups are principally different with regard to the challenges they face, irrespective of their ideology, resource endowment and subjected state policies. The arguments in the book are relevant. They provide the theoretical knowledge for understanding the characteristics of pre-war social networks, as well as the capacity of each network at the beginning of insurgency. However, the absence of explanations on the adaptive usage of darknet and social media by the interest groups discussed in the study is a major lacuna. The negative side of social media is an important topic for even scholars in the security studies discipline. The proliferation of ideas and recruitment of new aides through social media platforms by radical activists, insurgent groups and terror outfits is understood as a common phenomenon in the current eon. Apart from the popular notions on the impacts of social media, the fast-paced advancement in the global information technology (IT) sector, with an unevenly distributed blanket of security, has created digital safe havens for crime to proliferate. These networks are often called 'darknet', where anonymity can be ensured through a simple web browser such as 'Tor' (Onion Browser) through the nexus of felonious services and equipment, the financial payment for which can be conducted through digital currencies such as Bitcoins. These technological adaptations have the capability to change the dynamics of group structure and function in the contemporary nature of latent and advanced stages of conflict, whereby groups can anonymously reach out to the targeted people and also procure arms and ammunition to spread violence or as means for self-defence.

Staniland does mention that the leadership base of a parochial group, in most cases, is geographically distant from its vertical layers. A scrutiny on how the networks and social bases are impacted by another state,

with or without vested interest in the conflict, along with addressing the changes in the dynamics of conflict network with the influx of foreign fighters could have intensified the arguments of the book. Apart from these few permissible weaknesses, the book is good for assimilating further knowledge on the social-institutional aspects that shape the insurgent groups, and thereby its influence over the conflict. As hinted by the author, the book can provide noticeable, thought-provoking ideas to both parties of a state and non-state conflict.

