These final two chapters, Chapters 8 and 9, are concerned with the opportunity variable of the insurgency calculus and with applying an environmental approach that views insurgents’ opportunity as a product of their local environment. The physical, political, military and social aspects of a band’s local environment can each be viewed as a separate environment. Each of them also presents a particular type of opportunity, such as a political or military opportunity, which when added together constitute the overall opportunity variable of the insurgency calculus. This chapter will examine the physical, political and military environments, especially the very local military-political environments known as ‘operational zones’ and their relationship to insurgents’ support bases; the next chapter will focus on the social-political environment that may or may not provide the political support needed to expand and/or strengthen insurgents’ support bases.

A feature of the opportunity variable is that it often has the effect of negating or counterbalancing the motive and means variables by being too weak to give the insurgents any chance of achieving a significant degree of success. To take a recent and prominent example, the Iraqi insurgents of 2003–6 probably had the strongest capability of any post-Vietnam insurgents, thanks to a) the number of trained personnel provided by the disbanded armed services and security services of the former regime; b) the amount of equipment available in the numerous ammunition dumps and weapons caches left behind by the former regime; and c) the adaptability shown by the insurgents at strategic, operational and tactical levels. Yet they were unable to expel the US military or to bring about a partial withdrawal of US forces because from 2007 onwards their military environment – the military measures being taken to counter their insurgency – gave them no opportunity,
not even a weak opportunity, to be even a partially successful expeller insurgency. Another example, in this case more general and hypothetical, is that any revolutionary insurgency is bound to fail in a democracy because the political environment gives these revolutionaries no opportunity of achieving any success at all. In the famous words of Che Guevara: ‘Where a government has come into power through some form of popular vote, fraudulent or not, and maintains at least an appearance of constitutional legality, the guerrilla outbreak cannot be promoted, since the possibilities of peaceful struggle have not yet been exhausted’.

However, there are also many examples of the local environment providing a strong opportunity for insurgents or at least sufficient opportunity not to negate or counterbalance their strong motivation and/or effective means. For example, a democratic political environment does not negate the possibility of a separatist rather revolutionary insurgency achieving some degree of success. And the local physical environment may actually provide a strong opportunity for insurgency through such advantages as extensive mountainous terrain or proximity to another country offering sanctuary or a safe haven. In fact there is often a need for a net assessment to be made within the opportunity variable – adding together the strength and weakness of the various types of opportunity – before any lateral net assessment can be made of the opportunity variable versus the other two variables of the insurgent calculus.

The other complication with the opportunity variable arises from the fundamental, ‘ontological’ fact of life that local environments change in time as well as place. Mao’s distinctively environmental conception of war included the historical changes that occur in any local environment as it changes from one era, generation, decade or year to the next:

Thus the different laws for directing different wars are determined by the different circumstances of those wars – differences in their time, place and nature. ... In studying the laws for directing wars that occur at different historical stages, that differ in nature and that are waged in different places and by different nations, we must fix our attention on the characteristics and development of each, and must oppose a mechanical approach to the problem of war.

For example, there was a historical or temporal change in the local military environment of Iraqi insurgents in 2007 when the US corrected its earlier counterinsurgency failings and thereby substantially weakened the insurgents’ military and overall opportunity for success.