



Revaluing Our COIN

Moving British counterinsurgency forward in the 21st century

By Dane Vallejo

Executive Summary

- Failure in Iraq and slow progress in Afghanistan have led many to conclude that British COIN is outdated, that the nature of insurgency has undergone fundamental strategic shifts and that COIN in general is no longer efficient or viable. This paper challenges all three sentiments.
- Insurgency has undergone characteristic shifts yet there have been no fundamental changes to the nature of insurgency. There are aspects of modern insurgency which require new tactical and operational means of countering but the strategic context of insurgency remains constant.
- Accordingly, the 'British way' in COIN – cultivated through a rich history from Malaya to Northern Ireland - involves a number of principles and modes of practice which remain strategically relevant in the 21st century.
- The failure in Iraq and the troubles in Afghanistan were not due to an understanding of insurgency that is fundamentally wrong. Instead, basic strategic ineptitude at the highest level is to blame.
- This lack of strategy has forced shortcomings in British COIN to the fore. Most significantly that the British army is critically under-resourced. It simply does not have the manpower to put its own COIN principles into practice in the 21st century.
- The way forward for British COIN therefore relates to efficiency maximisation. Achieving efficiency will come through a combination of four broad actions; one – increase army efficiency and institutional memory; two – increase civilian efficiency and utility; three – increase the efficiency and robustness of multilateral operations; and four – cradle these three actions within the confines of sound strategy.
- Finally, it is imperative that these issues are addressed and that the importance of unconventional capabilities is reflected in the organisation of Britain's forces. If Britain wishes to maintain its position as an expeditionary force with a global reach, that can protect its strategic interests at range as well as promote and harbour the virtues of democracy and liberty world wide, then its security apparatus must be organised accordingly.

The difficulties experienced by the British in Helmand Province and in Iraq's Multi National Division (South East) (MND-SE) have lead many to conclude that the 'British way' in COIN – cultivated through experience from Malaya to Northern Ireland - is outdated.²

British counterinsurgency (COIN) historian, Thomas Mockaitis once argued that the United Kingdom has much to teach a world increasingly challenged by the problem of internal war;¹ then came along the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. If ever there was a way to spoil one's resumé, these two conflicts were seemingly it.

The difficulties experienced by the British in Helmand Province and in Iraq's Multi National Division (South East) (MND-SE) have lead many to conclude that the 'British way' in COIN – cultivated through experience from Malaya to Northern Ireland - is outdated.² Moreover, it has been argued that the nature of insurgency has changed to such an extent that it has forced the strategic context of COIN to change with it; something British forces have supposedly failed to grasp.³ Some have even gone as far to suggest that COIN is no longer an efficient concept worthy of pursuit.⁴ All three sentiments are, by and large, mistaken.

While the character of insurgency has inevitably changed over the course of the last century, its nature has remained constant. Put simply, despite operational and tactical alterations, insurgency remains an unconventional pursuit of power, conducted by irregular forces that seek to overthrow the existing form of authority. Accordingly, the nature of COIN, which by its very definition

must mirror insurgency, has remained constant also. It continues as a specific blend of military and political action which serves as a long term enabler for, and a short term provider of, security, governance and development for the population of the affected state. Combined, the security-governance-development trinity creates the conditions for success by creating a comprehensive track through which the hearts and minds of the population can be won.

COIN is therefore distinct from conventional warfare. The latter



is overwhelmingly dependant on military power and has traditionally focused on enemy forces as its centre of gravity. Owing in large part to the influence of Jomini's theorising, the complete destruction of an enemy nation and its army

has traditionally been considered the most effective means to the end of victory in war.⁵ Within this line of thought, any consideration of reconstruction or development has typically come once conflict has ceased. For example, the Marshall Plan, implemented to help boost the redevelopment of Europe at the end of WWII, did not start until 1947, some 22 months after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Diametrically opposed to this paradigm is COIN in which reconstruction and development are fundamental aspects of an effective approach and equal with - if not of greater importance than - kinetic military operations. Under these circumstances, the centre of gravity shifts from enemy forces to the target population since indiscriminate use of military power is actually counterproductive and invariably loses hearts and minds. Victory can only come through equilibrium in the security-governance-development trinity.

British failure in Iraq and the difficulties experienced in Afghanistan are therefore actually best explained by reference to a lack of strategy, resources and political will and not an obsolete understanding of COIN. If the nature of COIN has remained constant over the turn of the century, then the British army is aware of what it needs to be doing; it just has difficulty getting it done in the 21st century. To remedy the problem, a combination

of heightened army efficiency; increased and better quality civilian input; and effective navigation of multilateralism in COIN operations must be reached under the guidance of sound strategy in order for Britain to move its COIN approach forward. And more to the point, it is critical for Britain to do just that in an era in which internal conflict in weak or failing states represents a major strategic challenge.

‘Old’ insurgency

Classically, insurgency has been popularly interpreted as a protracted asymmetric struggle for power in which the insurgent force compensates for its inferior military muscle by avoiding head-on conventional battle with the counterinsurgent. Instead, the insurgent will conceal his or herself in the natural terrain and within the population of urban centres; blurring the lines of distinction between combatants and non-combatants. Conventional fighting will occur sporadically but only when suited to the insurgent and often in the latter stages of the insurgency when the existing political power is perceived as ripe for overthrow.⁶ Living amongst the population, an insurgent force extracts its strength from the people by obtaining shelter, sustenance, sponsorship and even new recruits. It is for this very reason that Mao described the population as the sea in which the insurgent lives as a fish, that is, the sea is required for its survival.

As a consequence, the key to victory for either side has traditionally been viewed as the population of the target state. For the insurgent, who seeks power, victory rests upon the tacit or explicit consent of the people, or if failing that, at least their enforced compliance through intimidation.⁷ For the counterinsurgent, victory rests upon the ability to separate the insurgent

from the people - to separate the fish from the sea – and win the hearts and minds of the population for themselves. Hence, the centre of gravity in COIN, where it is won and lost, is not the opposing force but instead, the population.

Accordingly, COIN is inextricably resource intensive, both in terms of material and human cost. In order to win the population, the counterinsurgent must provide three basic building blocks which interrelate as a dynamic trinity; security, development and governance. Yet, the latter two simply cannot come without the overriding assurance of the former since security is a necessary condition required for development

For the counterinsurgent, victory rests upon the ability to separate the insurgent from the people - to separate the fish from the sea – and win the hearts and minds of the population for themselves.

and governance to prosper and mature. In order to beat an insurgency, security is therefore a central imperative and ensuring security for a population of millions requires a significant number of troops with a force-population ratio of 1:50 often seen as the benchmark figure.

What is more, it is inadequate to deploy troops for the purpose of undertaking short routine patrols who will otherwise reside in fortified forward operating bases (FOB). Security must be an omnipresent condition; it must be felt in the day as well as throughout the night and during the run up to elections as well as on the everyday walk to school. If the counterinsurgent abandons the population at night, for example, they leave the population vulnerable to insurgent

manipulation and coercion. Quite simply, they are leaving the door open for insurgent victory and the counterinsurgent must therefore be amongst the population 24/7. Accordingly, the strain on resources is ever greater. Not only must lines of communication be maintained to replenish FOBs, but inherently complex logistical support systems must also be maintained to replenish the soldier providing security on the street. *There are no short-cuts in COIN.*

‘New’ insurgency?

It has become popular to talk of ‘new’ insurgency as a distinction from the classic ‘Maoist’ model outlined above. Within this

argument, it is contested that globalisation has played both a supportive and driving role in the emergence of an altered brand of organised violence that has a unique strategic context.⁸

On the one hand, globalisation has increased the

transnational flow of money, people and information and on the other, it has raised the expectations of individuals thereby fuelling their desire to challenge existing political authorities that are seen to be unresponsive to their personal aspirations. In other words, it has both facilitated violent entrepreneurs to be able to practice their craft and has also propelled others to commit acts of political violence.

Resultantly, there have been four main developments in contemporary insurgency and small irregular wars. *First*, there has been an eruption of network-centric organisations which avoid the need for a mass base making them more suited to the urbanised areas increasingly prevalent as the setting for COIN.

Traditional insurgent forces, such as the Main Force Units of the Viet Cong/People's Liberation Armed Forces in Vietnam, were often subdivided into battalions, companies and so on, much like the hierarchical conventional forces that they were facing. However, loosely affiliated organisations, for example, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) have replaced the former and now operate within systems where no single node is necessarily vital for the network to exist. Central direction may still come on certain issues such as finance (as has been the case with the Taliban in Afghanistan which remains rigid and hierarchical when it comes to collecting provisional and regional taxes and so on) but delegation to the local level is more common when it comes to combat operations.

Second, with the erosion of state power has come a substantial rise in new forms of identity politics, specifically ethnicity and religion as opposed to political ideology as sources of conflict. Again, a comparison of the Vietnam War and today's irregular conflicts provides a helpful narrative in tracing this shift. Where as the Vietnam War was rooted in an ideological communism-anti communism cleavage, many of today's irregular wars have been rooted in ethnic tensions, for example the Yugoslav Wars (where Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks fought a series of bitter and bloody campaigns), or in religious differences as was, in part, the case with the insurgency in Iraq (where Shiite and Sunni militias were involved in violent attacks rooted in years of tension).

Third, the rapid development of mass communications has altered the tactical emphasis of insurgency.

It has done so by facilitating better communication as well as more effective strategic terrorism and "propaganda of the deed" thereby allowing modern insurgent forces to bypass the conventional military phase of insurgency. Examples of this shift are abundant within the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq where the internet, laptops, mobile phones and hand held video camera's have all played transformative roles in the tactical behaviour of insurgent



movements. What is more, modern media continues to play a pivotal role in "propaganda of the deed", that is, acts of terrorism which draw their strategic value from perception and media coverage as opposed to the actual physical damage caused. Examples are plentiful with the most recent, at the time of writing, found in the AQI bombings of some 60 Iraqi police recruits in Tikrit on 19 January 2010 and of 14 Iraqi police officers in Baquba on 20 January 2010 which were reported across the globe.⁹

Fourth, there has been a marked decline in material support for insurgent movements from nation

states. In turn, this has led to greater interconnectedness with other entities such as criminal organisations and to a culture where survival, profitability or at best market domination is the ultimate goal as opposed to the overhaul of the state.¹⁰ This trend is most apparent in Afghanistan where opium produced in the country's southern provinces accounted for roughly 80 percent of global supply in 2008, some 7,700 metric tons. Of these 7,700 metric tons, 98 percent came from the south-eastern regions affected (and to an extent controlled) by the Taliban who maintain close links with Afghan drug traffickers. Astonishingly, the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that the Taliban's combined profits from *ushr* (a religious tax claimed on poppy growth), tax on refined heroin and morphine, and money and material supplies earned through armed protection for drug traffickers total in the region of half a billion dollars annually.¹¹

At the operational and tactical level, therefore, insurgency has evolved to some extent; its *character* has changed. Logically, in overcoming these new developments, counterinsurgent forces must develop new tactical and perhaps even organisational means which will be explored in greater depth below.

However, while such developments are clearly important, nothing has changed in the 21st century to alter the strategic context of what has been described above as 'old' insurgency. That is to say, there is no distinction between 'old' and 'new' where it matters most: the *nature* of insurgency. Insurgency remains, at its essence, a quest for power in which the population remains key. Regardless of whether an insurgent is seeking the complete overthrow of an existing political system for the

purpose of his or her own ascent to political primacy, as was the case in Vietnam, or, whether an insurgent is merely seeking to perpetuate a state of violence for his or her own criminal economic gain, as has arguably been the case with groups of violent entrepreneurs in post-Saddam Iraq, power remains the object and the people remain the centre of gravity. It is, as Clausewitz famously suggested, a continuation

of politics by other means.¹² The process where by politics, the way in which power is distributed in society, reaches a level of emotion that leads to organized violence as a continued forum for resolution.¹³ Power can therefore refer to economic or religious power as much as it can to political power. At its most simplistic level, insurgency remains the projection of ones will onto others.

As a result, the means of countering this phenomenon also remain fundamentally unaltered. The implication this holds for the future of British COIN is that no drastic revisions of doctrine are necessary in order to see through improvements. To be sure, it is necessary to trace the intricacies of the 'British way' in COIN so as to see how the 'British way' remains a relevant force against contemporary insurgency.

The 'British way' in COIN

The 'British way' refers to a combination of principles and practice; although, as we will come to see, in regard to British exceptionalism, the emphasis falls principally on the latter.

In terms of principles, British COIN is modelled on the following ideas:

- **Military operations must be subordinate to political direction.**
- **Civilian and military infrastructure must be integrated into a coherent campaign.**
- **Operations should be intelligence lead.**
- **Minimum force should be employed at all times.**
- **The insurgent must be separated from the people.**
- **Success will come through political settlement, not the destruction of enemy forces.**
- **'The people' are the centre of gravity.**

Those familiar with the theory of COIN will be aware that these principles are hardly groundbreaking. They are, in fact, in line with much of what is considered prudent practice. However, the substance of the 'British way' lies not in its content as much as it does in the way in which it had been consistently and uniquely applied throughout the 20th century:¹⁴ an achievement which is owing to the organisational culture of the British army.



A brief history of the British army's organisational aptitude for COIN

The British army has persistently demonstrated an aptitude for low-intensity, irregular warfare due to a culture that can be deduced by reference to several distinctive features.

First and foremost, the primacy of the Royal Navy in British national defence has meant that the army has traditionally fulfilled an expeditionary role instead.¹⁵ It has been small, mobile and widely varied in its experience since its role was gradually expanded to involve policing far-flung corners of the British Empire. As a direct result of this experience, an institutional appreciation for the principle of minimum force was bred given that policing subjects of the British empire and managing transitions to independent states which the British government hoped to keep 'on-side',¹⁶ ultimately required a 'don't shoot' policy.

Related to this point has been an institutional propensity for tactical flexibility. This development came as much out of necessity as it did out of design in that resources were typically focused toward the Royal Navy and the army was therefore often forced to 'make do'. Thus, tactics were developed

locally and were highly relevant to specific theatres which proved to be particularly beneficial when one considers the topographical variation of the campaigns British forces have been involved in. From the urban centres of Belfast, to the jungles of Malaya and to the critical role British forces played in the deserts of Oman, the British army was unrestricted by centralised doctrine which can often prove to be irrelevant in theatre sensitive COIN.¹⁷ To take an example, during the campaign in Malaya between 1948 and 1960, British forces created a unit called the "ferret force" which introduced locally relevant innovations such as native trackers, smaller patrol groups and the inclusion of interpreters and natives into operations.¹⁸ Not only did this ease the burden of limited resourcing, but it also brought the population into the fold and ensured that operations were culturally and locally sensitive.

Finally, British forces have also been decisively successful in recognising the primacy of politics in COIN and working closely with civilian agencies so as to integrate non kinetic activities, such as those political and economic, into its COIN efforts. In Northern Ireland, early emphasis on weapons seizures, the employment of internment, and interrogation in depth all served to alienate the Catholic population which reached a climax with the Bloody Sunday incident when 13 Catholic

demonstrators were shot dead.¹⁹ At this point, there was no "coherent counterinsurgency strategy, no unified command, little civil-military co-operation, and no effective hearts and minds campaign."²⁰ However, this situation was redeemed via shifts in policy, for example, the introduction of direct rule on 24 March 1972 and the creation of the Northern Ireland Office which eliminated the divided command structure.²¹ As a result, tighter civil-military cooperation allowed a broader-based political strategy to be successfully employed. Thus, in part because of its expeditionary role and in part because of the influence of British scholars such as Basil Liddell Hart (who advocated an indirect approach to war²²), the British army has traditionally made political settlement the focus of its COIN as opposed to the destruction of enemy forces.

The exceptionality of commitment to this principle of placing politics at the primacy of COIN is best highlighted in contrast to the conventional approach of the American army in COIN (prior to 2007 at least) which had been ineffective, inefficient and at worst, counterproductive. Following the Vietnam War, the American army took on a process of learning which was codified within the formulation of the Weinberger doctrine and which effectively led the erection of barriers to avoid fighting another COIN campaign.²³

Amongst other qualifications, the Weinberger doctrine spelt out that US forces should be sent to war only if vital national interests were at stake; if there was a clear intention of winning; if there were clear political and military goals in mind and room for a swift exit once enemy forces had been defeated; and if there was the support of the US public. In short, it advocated big wars and big victories; nothing in between and certainly no room for the reconstruction efforts associated with effective COIN.

The British army's aptitude for small wars and insurgencies has therefore been internationally respected throughout the 20th century. What is more, as we have seen, the strategic context of insurgency has remained constant over the same period.

Consequently, the body of theory and experience outlined above remains a suitable grounding on which to build contemporary COIN strategy and doctrine.

Amongst others factors it maintains an appropriately population-centric emphasis; it recognises the importance of governance and development in conjunction with security and the role civilian agency must play in this regard; and it promotes small scale intelligence lead operations as opposed to reliance on conventional firepower. Put simply, the British army's understanding of COIN is sound.

Yet, the international respect for the 'British way' in COIN has waned since the turn of the century. Put bluntly, this decline in international opinion has come about due to failure in Iraq and relative failure in Afghanistan (although there is now sufficient reason for optimism in the case of the latter). Given that the British army's understanding of COIN is sound, explaining the fate of British

policy within these two conflicts is, in fact, a matter of picking the bones out of the strategic direction from the highest level and making hard nosed assessments regarding the current resourcing of our forces.

Explaining Defeat and Difficulty

Given the historical exceptionality of British COIN, it may seem paradoxical that there has been so much friction and failure in Helmand Province and in MND(SE).

At the most fundamental level, failure in Iraq and long periods of confusion and quagmire in Afghanistan came about due to a simple lack of strategy. In fact, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the *wrong* strategy was employed altogether.

At the most fundamental level, failure in Iraq and long periods of confusion and quagmire in Afghanistan came about due to a simple lack of strategy. In fact, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the wrong strategy was employed altogether.

Strategy is a concept which is at once very simple, yet all too often misunderstood, misapplied and ultimately bypassed. It is the critical bridge that links military means and desired political ends. Formulating strategy therefore involves fundamental questions; what are our aims? How can we achieve them? What resources will we need to pool in order to achieve these aims? As a consequence, formulating strategy involves more than identifying what one hopes to achieve and, instead, involves the construction of plausible ways to achieve these goals.²⁴ Ultimately it is the art of creating power (political, economic, religious

etc.) using available military means, including the threat of force as well as its actual use.

Throughout the Iraq war and during the majority of the war in Afghanistan, the British government critically lacked a clear political aim or an overall plan. In short, it *lacked strategy*. During his address to the nation in 2003, Tony Blair remarked that the mission of British troops was "to remove Saddam Hussein from power, and disarm Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction."²⁵ This was the primary aim. However there was also talk of post Saddam Iraq, specifically to "help Iraq move towards democracy."²⁶

The problem with this vague aspiration is that this is all it was, an aspiration. As indicated above

strategy is more than an articulation of ones desired political goals. It requires asking difficult and incisive questions regarding how one might achieve these goals and is therefore bound to a degree of creativity. The British government failed chronically throughout the Iraq war to address these questions adequately beyond the military victory of removing the Hussein regime and in Afghanistan, progress

has been only a recent attainment with the introduction of a new, comprehensive strategy.

The confusion and misdirection which stemmed from an absence of strategy ultimately led to the British army being tasked in Iraq to maintain security and provide basic services in an environment lacking any form of governance or security framework. The Iraqi government and army were purposefully disbanded by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) meaning that British forces were essentially operating in schism of anarchy. Similarly, in Afghanistan, British forces were

required to provide security and some semblance of governance in a state where the newly installed government had little, if any, influence outside of Kabul.

The situations in MND(SE) and southern Afghanistan are directly contrasted to the environmental context of colonial COIN campaigns. Here, the role played by colonial administrations was invaluable, not only because they were the recognised pillars of authority in these colonies, but because they also provided precious assistance in cultural, lingual and political capacities and because they were a key foundation for integration into local security apparatus.

The British army's approach to COIN is therefore less effective than it was during the colonial/immediate post-colonial era due to significant changes to the *environment* in which insurgency is conducted.²⁷ Where the conditions of governance that were present in colonial contingencies are present no more, the British army has struggled accordingly.²⁸ Filling the security vacuum in this political void (as in Iraq or Afghanistan) has become a significant challenge for our army; a challenge that has been compounded by a lack of strategic direction from above.

But a lack of strategy and a lack of colonial security apparatus are not the only sources of hindrance to Britain's forces in COIN. There is in fact one other significant shortfall in contemporary British COIN which has emerged in the political and security void found in both Iraq and Afghanistan and that is that Britain's army struggles to compensate

for limited resourcing. It is the contention of this article that this issue constitutes the single greatest obstacle to be overcome in order to move British COIN forward in the 21st century. In MND(SE) and Helmand Province, the army has struggled profoundly to spread its resources adequately so as to protect an adequate percentage of the population, for an adequate amount of time, with adequate civil services to match.

Unfortunately, a combination of lukewarm political will (which was ever cooling in unison with declining public support), blatant strategic



ineptitude at the highest level and a basic lack of means meant that further resourcing was less than forthcoming for troops in Iraq. The direct result on the ground in MND(SE) was to sacrifice the army's own principles (a trend that had been identifiable in Afghanistan also until the troop surge of 2009/2010.) For example, a lack of boots on the ground in Iraq instigated anomalies such as preference for air power and preference for force protection to compensate for an inadequate force density; both of which contradict much of what has proved successful throughout the history of British COIN. Inadequate resourcing, in other words, led to shortcuts being

taken which quite simply have not worked from Sangin to Basra. The result? Security could not be enforced and the subsequent necessary conditions of governance and development were found wanting also.

Contrastingly, when more boots have been available, more success has been enjoyed. Although beyond the scope of this study, in Afghanistan since the NATO troop surge at the turn of 2010, a previously desperate situation has been subject to considerable turnaround due, quite simply, to an increase in the number of boots on the ground and more effective ways of using them.²⁹ A renewed strategy has allowed British forces, operating under NATO, to place the population as the centre of gravity in its efforts as opposed to chasing the Taliban across the country. This shift is beginning to spur fruitful gains which echo the success enjoyed in Iraq where the US pulled something resembling victory from the gaping jaws of defeat by deploying 5 extra

brigades (over 20,000 new troops) and organising them around a new strategy. The message is clear: COIN requires extensive resourcing. To repeat a central adage, *there are no shortcuts in COIN.*

The Way Forward

We have seen therefore that British principles are sound, yet the implementation of these principles has proved problematic in the 21st century. What does this mean for the future of British COIN?

What is certain is that COIN cannot, under any circumstances, be disregarded as simply a resource

sapping effort. It plays, and will continue to play, a critical role in helping developing countries free the shackles of violence and suppression in pursuit of a better way of living. COIN is an enabler; employed effectively, it can ensure security for the population in a conflict over the short to medium term which then creates the political breathing space required for governance and development to mature. In the longer term, this process comes full cycle as strong governance and development help to ensure that domestic security forces can implement effective long term security. This, in turn, helps to secure the interests of the intervening state (the counterinsurgent,) specifically stability in the affected region.

Thus, not only are there moral obligations to consider in terms of aiding developing countries, but there are strategic factors too. Replacing COIN with a less expensive (both in terms of material and human costs) counter-terrorism strategy would be completely ineffective in a situation where the support of the population is required for success. Counter-terrorism is fundamentally different from COIN. It is far less resource intensive and places a large emphasis on airpower and remote strikes to break up terrorist activity, but it cannot produce results on the ground in terms of governance and particularly development.

The approach taken by US and British forces in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2009 is a prime example of how a counter-terrorism strategy is inadequate when applied in a contingency that requires winning hearts and minds. Once the Taliban had been ousted in the early stages of the war, the US-led coalition failed to switch its focus from chasing al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives across

Afghanistan's rugged mountainous regions to a population-centric program of redevelopment. In short, it continued to pursue counter-terrorism.

A huge offensive in the Tora Bora Mountains was followed by operation Anaconda in March 2002 which targeted the Shahi-Kot Valley and Arma mountains in the southwest's Zormat region. Both operations eliminated several hundred al-Qaeda and Taliban members, yet neither generated anything constructive in terms of development on the ground.³⁰ In fact, between 2001 and 2009, around only \$2 billion was pumped into the south and south east regions

Once the Taliban had been ousted in the early stages of the war, the US-led coalition failed to switch its focus from chasing al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives across Afghanistan's rugged mountainous regions to a population-centric program of redevelopment. In short, it continued to pursue counter-terrorism.

of Afghanistan (those most affected by the Taliban insurgency) compared to the \$5.3 billion spent developing the central zone in Kabul.³¹ The upshot of this policy was that the Afghan population, particularly in the south, were left with unclean water, poor sanitation, a lack of electricity, and little to compete for in terms of employment.

By failing to address the aforementioned dire conditions, coalition forces were not only ineffective and inefficient in their counter-terrorism approach, but in fact counterproductive. With little hope of realising their expectations under the status quo, many Afghan males were compelled to join the Taliban insurgency (an inviting

prospect given that some estimates place the wages of Taliban contract soldiers at \$150 per month in a state where police officers earn barely half at \$80 per month and the average annual income is below \$500³²) and many more were enticed by the prospect of growing poppy for the narcotics trade. Thus, not only did the prevailing counter-terrorism approach fail to achieve equilibrium in the security-governance-development trinity, but in some cases, it actually increased the level of insurgency.

COIN on the other hand, as we have seen, focuses exclusively on the security-governance-development trinity. The intense resourcing required to do so can make COIN an unfashionable policy with voting publics at home, but it is necessary if political goals are to be realised.

Finally, internal conflict in weak or failing states is fast becoming the norm. Since the Cold War drew to a close, Western utilisation of military power has largely involved irregular warfare and state building; from the Balkans to Iraq and now in Afghanistan, traditional displays of mass kinetic land power have become more of an anomaly than a regular feature of warfare. This trend is set to continue for two broad reasons. First of all, the potential for war between major states is currently limited to a handful of examples such as tensions between India and Pakistan and friction in the Korean Peninsula, rendering state on state warfare increasingly unlikely. And secondly, the dual-track fragmentary and integrating effects of globalisation have led to the aforementioned alterations to the character of war such as shifting identity politics, erosion of state power and an explosion of network-centric structures which have made

it easier for non-state actors to wage war. In short, the art of war has permeated below the level of state monopoly.

Consequently, British security and foreign development apparatus *must* be organised to reflect this truth. If we are to move British COIN forward in the 21st century, this is what must be done. How we do this is a topic of considerable debate, however, this author sees six possible options; *one* - avoid intervention in states with weak or no government infrastructure; *two* - heavily increase defence spending so as to reserve the ability to flood insurgency environments with boots on the ground; *three* – amend British doctrine so as to make existing forces more efficient; *four* – revise civilian input into COIN to boost the overall effectiveness; *five* - only undertake COIN ops multilaterally and improve coordination; and *six* – only undertake COIN ops within the confines of clear strategy.

The first option is unacceptable, not only for moral reasons but equally due to strategic considerations. Placing ones cards on the table, so as to say in advance where is and where is not a worthy subject for intervention, is a dangerous policy. Not only would it inhibit Britain's ability to act in regions of strategic importance, but it would potentially deny individuals necessary assistance against mass violation of human rights or despotic governance. More worrying still, it may even serve to encourage insurgency by providing reassurances that Britain will not intervene should individuals take up arms and challenge political authorities. If Britain wishes to maintain its position as an expeditionary force with a global reach, that can protect its strategic interests at range as well as promote and harbour the virtues of democracy, liberty and free market economics, then it must be provisionally willing to intervene where necessary.

The second option is unlikely at best. In fact, it has been directly countered

by the recent spending cuts announced by David Cameron whose government has slashed 5,000 Navy jobs, 5,000 RAF and 7,000 in the Army along with further cuts to military procurement. In times of austerity such as these, throwing more money at the problem is not only unlikely, but imprudent and perhaps even unnecessary.

Moving Britain's COIN forward in the 21st century can actually be achieved, in part, by adherence to options three, four, five and six as outlined above; ideally as a composition of all four.

Increasing troop efficiency

Within the third option, the army must look to improve on its ability to fill security vacuums, to learn from failures in Iraq and to improve its own institutional memory.

The first task will involve reaching consensus on more effective ways of countering new tactical and operational threats. More emphasis needs to be placed on cyber security for example; protecting domestic systems and using expertise to monitor and break up communication between insurgents. Similarly, the way in which insurgent movements obtain funding is another area which requires rethinking. In Afghanistan, for example, Haji Juma Khan - considered at one stage to be the third most significant member of the Taliban and his immense drug racket; one of its principle sources finance - was briefly arrested in 2001 only to be released after US Military intelligence deemed his illegal trade insignificant to the war that they were fighting.³³ In hindsight, this was a major error as Khan's funding maintained the Taliban's efforts over the next seven years until his eventual re-arrest in 2008. Looking more closely at ways to prevent criminal enterprise and at ways to break the links between criminal organisations and insurgent groups is therefore required in an era where conflict is perpetuated more by funding sourced in crime than state sponsorship.

At the strategic level, the first task will also involve closer adherence to the British army's own principles, despite a lack of resources. The temptation will always be present, when resources are scarce, to shift from body and resource intensive counterinsurgency to something closer resembling counterterrorism which is more of a cat and mouse game. Yet as we have seen, the latter, focused on firepower and enemy forces, will consistently fail to achieve the same results as population-centric counterinsurgency. For this reason, it is critical that even when resources are found wanting, the British army resists the attraction of entrenching itself in forward operating bases and of relying upon air power and short patrols. The British army has traditionally demonstrated a great deal of resourcefulness and flexibility and now is no time to bring this trend to an end.

The second and third tasks are, to an extent, one and the same. The British army ought to embark upon the kind of learning curve that its American counterpart undertook between 2006 and 2007 so as to ensure that these lessons pass on to tomorrow's army. The American process involved identifying weaknesses, reaching consensus on the best way of remedying these weaknesses and creating and diffusing doctrine (see FM 3-24, 'U.S. Army & Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual'), revising curricula in army colleges and adapting organisational structure accordingly.³⁴ This process is a good example of how institutions learn and such a learning curve is necessary if the British army wishes to progress as an institution and avoid the lessons of today dying out with our current troops.

Civilian input

The fourth option will involve more input from MOD, DFID and FCO as well as better coordination between the three. What it must equal is an improvement in the economic, civic and political aspects of British COIN.

The army cannot employ effective COIN alone.

We have seen that COIN is an enabler for governance and development and that effective COIN requires integration of different functions and agencies so as to achieve balance in the security-governance-development trinity. Thus, the army, reduced in numbers, must be assisted in non-kinetic activities such as digging wells, laying roads and distributing medicine. Such tasks are essential in winning hearts and minds and achieving equilibrium in the security-governance-development trinity and therefore, by extension, essential in defeating insurgent movements.

In order to push Britain's COIN forward, its civilian development, security and government agencies must therefore learn to work together and with the army to compensate for the lack of boots on the ground, leaving organisational rivalry aside.

To an extent, progress has indeed been made in this respect with the formation of The Stabilisation Unit (SU) which is a substantial step in the right direction. This organisation, which involves input from all three government agencies, aims to: co-ordinate and support cross-government stabilisation planning and execution; ensure the rapid and integrated delivery of targeted expertise in a cross-government approach; and lead on stabilisation lesson-learning and assist with implementation.³⁵

Especially pleasing has been the SU's creation of the Civilian Stabilisation Group (CSG) which involves over a thousand individuals who mix expertise in stabilisation, governance, the rule of law, strategic communications, economic recovery, security sector reform and other critical areas³⁶. The SU should look to increase the size of the CSG size

still and build robustness into its implementation and particularly cross-institutional coordination experience, yet it is clear that lessons are indeed being learned and weaknesses recognised and targeted through improvements in the appropriate areas.

Multilateral operations

The fifth option will involve working closely with allies. If the British government cannot support its forces with adequate resources, then it must spread the cost with those who share the same aspirations. Invading Iraq in 2003 was problematic, in part, because of the composition of the coalition which

In order to push Britain's COIN forward, its civilian development, security and government agencies must therefore learn to work together and with the army to compensate for the lack of boots on the ground, leaving organisational rivalry aside.

was disproportionately weighted towards the US and Britain. Future COIN efforts must therefore be genuine multilateral efforts in which broad political coalitions are matched by broad multilateral resourcing.

The implications of doing so, for British involvement in COIN, would be beneficial in numerous tangible ways. For one, it would allow for greater force density which, as we have seen, is critical for providing security in insurgency environments. It would also allow for better equipment and funding; both that of the technologically advanced variety needed to combat phenomena such as cyber warfare and strategic terrorism, as well as that of the traditional variety such as medicine, farming apparatus

and food provisions needed for development. Leading on from this point, multilateral operations also pool together civilian manpower and expertise. Linguists, economists, governance experts and the like are needed in abundance in post conflict situations to tie governance and development into the trinity alongside security.

Yet, it is imperative that coalitions are formed carefully with strategy in mind. Britain's allies must share with it a commitment to a unified vision of victory or else risk pulling in opposing directions. German forces in Afghanistan, for example, were restricted in their commitment to that particular campaign due

to an extensive list of rules of engagement prior to alterations in 2009. Before opening fire, German soldiers were obliged to express loudly, in English, "United Nations — stop, or I will fire," followed by a version in Pashtu and Dari.³⁷ What is more, these forces were inhibited by stipulations which dictated that no patrols were permitted without the presence of an ambulance chaperone. A cautious,

that is to say non discriminatory approach in COIN should of course be advocated at all times. However, overly restrictive rules of engagement provide just one example of the potential for fractures to occur in the unity of vision that is essential in formulating effective multilateral strategy. In short, a fragmented approach will only serve to confuse and hinder any COIN effort.

The most obvious way to protect against fragmentation and ensure unity of vision in strategy is through a body such as NATO which can serve as a vessel for effective multilateral COIN. NATO must, of course, maintain its ability to balance the traditional threats posed by China and Russia, yet it should also look at ways of developing so as to be better

prepared for irregular contingencies such as an insurgency.

Strategy

Leaving the concept of ensuring sound strategy till last should not reflect any sense of secondary importance. Rather, it should signify the overarching significance which

strategy plays in linking all of the above. A highly efficient British army acting in coordination with domestic civilian agencies and the security apparatus of allied states would nevertheless struggle without the direction of sound strategy.

Never again should British troops be deployed into a strategic void. True

of any war, but particularly acute in an insurgency environment, the object of war should not be limited to military victory as an end itself, but should be the realisation of political goals drawn out in advance. Without strategy, there cannot be any such goals. Without strategy, there cannot be victory.

Conclusion

The last twenty years have brought with them changes to the character of insurgency. Much has changed, yet the strategic context of the phenomenon has remained fundamentally unaltered. Accordingly, the British army is in a position where it has a rich wealth of experience and knowledge behind it as an institution to combat a problem which is fast becoming the most regular manifestation of war. Yet, despite this, the British army has struggled profoundly in its last two endeavours of this nature due in large to a complete lack of strategic guidance and an associated lack of resourcing. The time to despair and concede defeat is not yet upon us. By implementing the four policy suggestions outlined in this paper – heightened army efficiency, increased civilian input, better multilateral cooperation and the formulation of genuine strategy – British COIN can be refocused so as to allow it to live up to the reputation it has hard earned, once more.

By implementing the four policy suggestions outlined in this paper – heightened army efficiency, increased civilian input, better multilateral cooperation and the formulation of genuine strategy – British COIN can be refocused so as to allow it to live up to the reputation it has hard earned, once more.



The Henry Jackson Society is named after United States Democrat Senator, Henry M. Jackson. The Society is a registered charity for the understanding and articulation of democratic geopolitics—a proactive and principled foreign policy which differentiates between constitutionally governed countries and autocratic regimes.

‘In matters of national security, the best politics is no politics.’

— Henry M. Jackson

©2011 The Henry Jackson Society

End notes

- 1 Mockaitis, T.R., *British counterinsurgency in the post-imperial era* (Manchester: University press, 1995), p.12
- 2 Mackinlay, J., 'Is UK Doctrine Relevant to Global Insurgency?', *The RUSI Journal*, 152:2, 2007, pp.34-39, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071840701349950>
- 3 Metz, *Rethinking Insurgency*, US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, June 2007, at <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub790.pdf>
- 4 Dobbins, J., 'Your COIN is no good here', *Foreign Affairs*, Oct 26th 2010, at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66949/james-dobbins/your-coin-is-no-good-here?page=show>
- 5 Olson, E.T., 'Some of the Best Weapons For Counterinsurgents Do Not Shoot', *The Letort Papers, U.S. Army War College*, Oct 2010 (Carlisle: US Army War College, 2010)
- 6 For a comprehensive overview see Galula, D., *Counterinsurgency Warfare – Theory and Practice* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006)
- 7 Galula, D., *Counterinsurgency Warfare – Theory and Practice* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006)
- 8 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars – Organised Violence in a Globalised Era* (Stanford: University Press, 2006)
- 9 'Baquba ambulance suicide bomber targets Iraq police,' *BBC News*, accessed at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12223573>
- 10 Metz, S. *Rethinking Insurgency*, US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, June 2007, at <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub790.pdf>
- 11 Peters, G.S., 'The Taliban and the Opium Trade,' in Giustozzi, A. Ed., *Decoding The New Taliban – Insights from the Afghan Field* (London: Hurst & Co, 2009)
- 12 Clausewitz, C.V., *On War M. Howard & P. Paret ed.* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1986)
- 13 Bassford, C., 'John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz', (1994), at <http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/Bassford/Keegan/> (Accessed on 20/12/10)
- 14 Betz, D. & Cormack, A., 'Iraq, Afghanistan and British Strategy', *Foreign Policy Research Institute, Spring 2009*, pp.319-336, at <http://www.fpri.org/orbis/5302/BetzCormack.IraqAfghanistanBritishStrategy.pdf>, (Accessed 21/12/10)
- 15 Mockaitis, T.M., *British Counterinsurgency, 1919-1960* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990)
- 16 Nagl, J., *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife – Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University Press, 2005)
- 17 Nagl, J., *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife – Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University Press, 2005)
- 18 Nagl, J., *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife – Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University Press, 2005)
- 19 Mockaitis, T.R., *British counterinsurgency in the post-imperial era* (Manchester: University press, 1995), pp. 102-104
- 20 Mockaitis, T.R., *British counterinsurgency in the post-imperial era* (Manchester: University press, 1995), p. 106
- 21 Mockaitis, T.R., *British counterinsurgency in the post-imperial era* (Manchester: University press, 1995), pp. 106-107
- 22 Hart, B.L., *Strategy 2nd ed.* (London: Penguin, 1991)
- 23 Krepinevich, A. *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p.274
- 24 Krepinevich, A. & Watts, B., 'Regaining Strategic Competence,' *Strategy for the Long Haul Series, Washington DC: Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2009* at <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA506833&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf>, (Accessed 21/12/10)
- 25 Blair, T., 'Prime Minister's Address to the Nation 20/03/03', at <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page3327>, (Accessed 20/12/10)
- 26 Blair, T., 'Prime Minister's Address to the Nation 20/03/03', at <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page3327>, (Accessed 20/12/10)
- 27 Chin, W., 'Why Did it All Go Wrong? Reassessing British Counterinsurgency in Iraq', *Strategic Studies Quarterly, Winter 2008* at <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA509458&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf> (Accessed 19/12/10)
- 28 Mackinlay, J., 'Is UK Doctrine Relevant to Global Insurgency?', *The RUSI Journal*, 152:2, 2007, pp.34-39, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071840701349950>
- 29 Grant, G., 'Succeeding in Afghanistan' *The Henry Jackson Society*, at <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/cms/harriercollectionitems/Succeeding%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf> (Accessed 18/12/10)
- 30 Grant, G., 'Succeeding in Afghanistan' *The Henry Jackson Society*, at <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/cms/harriercollectionitems/Succeeding%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf> (Accessed 18/12/10), p.10
- 31 Grant, G., 'Succeeding in Afghanistan' *The Henry Jackson Society*, at <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/cms/harriercollectionitems/Succeeding%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf> (Accessed 18/12/10), p.10
- 32 Peters, G.S., 'The Taliban and the Opium Trade,' in Giustozzi, A. Ed., *Decoding The New Taliban – Insights from the Afghan Field* (London: Hurst & Co, 2009), p.13
- 33 Peters, G.S., 'The Taliban and the Opium Trade,' in Giustozzi, A. Ed., *Decoding The New Taliban – Insights from the Afghan Field* (London: Hurst & Co, 2009), p.15
- 34 Nagl, J., *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife – Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University Press, 2005)
- 35 'About Us' *The Stabilisation Unit*, at <http://www.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/index.php/about-us>
- 36 'About Us' *The Stabilisation Unit*, at <http://www.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/index.php/about-us>
- 37 Boyes, B., 'New rules let Germans in Afghanistan stop shouting and start shooting', *The Times*, July 29 2009, accessed at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article6730996.ece>