

On CT vs. COIN

Andrew Exum

In advance of the Obama Administration's forthcoming review of policies toward Afghanistan and Pakistan, much of the commentary has focused on whether or not the Obama Administration will adopt a long-term, hugely expensive population-centric counter-insurgency (COIN) campaign or whether the administration will instead opt for a lower-cost counter-terror (CT) strategy. Fred Kaplan, [in a typically well-informed piece for *Slate*](#), framed the debate as an either/or dichotomy in which the Obama Administration had to choose one or the other vis a vis Afghanistan.

The distinction between COIN and CT, however, is poorly understood. For one, there is no hard and fast dichotomy between the two – a fact that Kaplan and other longtime defense correspondents largely understand but which policy-makers must understand as well. If what Kaplan writes is true, and policy-makers are stuck thinking of their policy options as either/or propositions, we are in more trouble in Afghanistan than I thought.

When speaking of COIN versus CT, the difference is largely one of mentality. In the fall of 2003, for example, I was leading a platoon of Army Rangers in Iraq as part of a special operations task force searching for “high-value” targets. We had the mentality, in that phase of the war, that we had only to capture or kill a set number of “terrorists” or “dead-enders” for the security situation in Iraq to improve. We approached our missions with little regard for how many windows we broke or how many people we incarcerated in our single-minded quest to find the men who we believed were holding Iraq hostage.

Late one night, in December of 2003, I was with a small group of Rangers to the northeast of Baghdad when we were fired on by two men in a small hut. We attacked, as was our nature, and killed the two men. It was only later that we realized the two men were guarding the neighborhood generator and probably mistook us for thieves or some kind of gang. I have often reflected on that night and wondered how much more difficult I had made the lives of the conventional U.S. soldiers with responsibility for that sector of Baghdad – not to mention those that followed them. Had my men and I managed to make the security situation worse and not better?

As fate would have it, a friend of mine commanded a company of paratroopers responsible for that particular sector during the “surge” of 2007. We were trading stories last week, in fact, and I sheepishly apologized for the way in which we approached the mission in 2003. A platoon leader himself at that time, he understood and noted that mine wasn't the only unit with that mentality in 2003. By 2007, by contrast, the mentality was

now such that U.S. units in Iraq drew their security from close, personal, and non-stop contact with the indigenous population.

My experience in Iraq, though, had led me to the false conclusion that CT perhaps had no role in population-centric COIN. In London last year, I had dinner with a former and widely respected allied commander in Afghanistan and asked him whether or not direct action special operations forces – or “SOF”, the kind of forces best suited for CT missions – had a place in COIN.

The retired U.S. general looked at me quizzically and replied that of course they did. “SOF is how you play offense in COIN. It’s how you keep the enemy off balance.”

CT tactics and operations, then, are part of many effective COIN campaigns. Such operations, though, must be tied into the greater strategy. One thing the U.S. military did very poorly in the early years of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was to coordinate operations between the “general purpose” units and “vanilla” special operations forces on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan and the secretive counter-terror task force that was also active in both countries. By some accounts, only the close personal relationship between Generals Stanley McChrystal and David Petraeus led to greater cooperation between the Joint Special Operations Command and the theater commander in Iraq in 2007.

One thing most policy-makers seem to understand, though, is that a population-centric COIN campaign in Afghanistan would be long, messy, and expensive. Our NATO allies would no doubt tire of the inevitable rise in casualties before we do, and with the global economy in dire straits, it is worth noting that – largely due to issues of re-supply – an infantry brigade costs twice as much to operate in Afghanistan as it does to operate in Iraq. For this and many other reasons, there exists far less enthusiasm in the community of COIN theorists and practitioners about a possible COIN campaign in Afghanistan than there was for a COIN campaign in Iraq.

At the same time, though, an orthodox CT campaign is almost certainly destined to fail spectacularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Kinetic raids – whether by special operators or rocket-carrying drones – are universally unpopular in Pakistan and further alienate the very people in whose hands Afghanistan’s fate lies. What Pakistan needs to become an effective partner in the struggle against violent extremists is the subject of much debate. What is certain, though, is that Predator strikes – even when they kill militants – make the Pakistanis less likely to accept U.S. and allied support or advice.

Success, then, means getting past the COIN versus CT paradigm and thinking about which best practices can be imported from each discipline – and how the two mentalities can be fused with the realities on the ground in Afghanistan to offer policy-makers solutions beyond the usual models.

From COIN, we can take the emphasis on non-kinetic lines of operations: Afghanistan needs better governance, economic development, and security forces. COIN also stresses

the need to provide both security and essential services to the population. Whether U.S. and allied soldiers provide these services or whether we work through western aid organizations and Afghan partners is an operational decision.

From CT, we can take the incredibly sophisticated targeting framework developed by the U.S. military's elite CT task force over the past several years. All CT operations, though, should be undertaken with the utmost care. If that means we never kill Osama bin Laden, fine. Killing one man advances U.S. interests in no discernable way. And as we discovered when we killed Zarqawi and captured Saddam in Iraq, the removal of one leader does not necessarily lead to a reduction in violence.

Furthermore, only very few forces should be conducting direct-action SOF missions. The U.S. Army's Special Forces ("Green Berets"), for example, soldiers specially trained in languages and cultures, are better used training indigenous Afghan units than fast-roping into villages to arrest some tribal leader. The latter mission, while "sexier", is a waste of resources when performed by Special Forces.

In the end, whatever recommendations the administration reaches, our experiences thus far in operations from Iraq to the Philippines have taught us that the indirect approach is the best approach. Where we can partner with Afghan and Pakistani forces, we should. Such an approach, while rooted in principles of COIN, might allow us to pursue a more effective strategy in Afghanistan without the massive costs of a large-scale COIN campaign.

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