

## Transitions While Conducting Counterinsurgency Operations

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### Introduction

Transitioning is critical to the success of any operation. However within a counterinsurgency (COIN) operation where the interaction between military and inter-agency efforts intertwine with Host Nation dynamics managing transition takes on a degree of complexity that far out paces the conduct of conventional operations on a linear battlefield. Counterinsurgents do not manage transition in a linear fashion like their conventional partners during the conduct of offensive and defensive operations; there is a great deal of doctrine available describing phasing for these actions. Unfortunately we have very few resources or studies that go into any detail on the methodology a COIN force (the military and civil elements deployed to the HN) uses for determining what comprises the conditions that determine a transition under non-linear conditions. Those in the field are left to determine where they are conceptually and what conditions, if adequately accomplished, would allow them to transition responsibility and authority to the Host Nation (HN)-the endstate of most contemporary counterinsurgent efforts. Based on his experiences in Algeria and the Far East David Galula also identified the challenge of transition in a COIN environment:

*The army officer has learned in military academies that combat is divided into distinct phases...For each phase he is taught that there is a standard deployment and maneuver in accordance with the current doctrine. Therefore the intellectual problem of the field officer in conventional combat consists in identifying which phase in which he finds himself and then applying the standard answer to his situation. Such a process does not exist in counterinsurgency warfare. How much time and means to devote to tracking guerillas or, instead, to working the population, by what specific actions and in what order the population could be controlled and led to co-operate, these were questions that the sous-quatier commander had to answer by himself. One can imagine the variety of answers arrived at and the effects on the pacification effort as a whole.*

--Galula, *Pacification in Algeria*, 1956-1958, 1963

There are several external factors that impact on transition such as political will, coalition partner's agenda, and world opinion. This article will not focus on those issues but rather on the COIN force's action internal to the HN. There are three areas in which transitions must occur with a degree of predictability and control for counterinsurgents to be

successful: security (to include Host Nation forces), legitimacy of the provincial/regional government (with respect to providing essential services), and the strength of the local economy. This article explores the inter-dynamics of non-linear transition within these three areas and their importance in successfully establishing the legitimacy of the HN government.

### **COIN Transitions Defined**

Prior to beginning a discussion on transitions in a COIN environment we should have a common understanding of the term. Webster's Dictionary defines transition as passage from one state of conditions or criteria to another state of conditions. However, current civil-military jargon offers very little information on the definition of either the noun or verb. Manuals written at all levels (tactical, operational, etc) offer little in the way of insight into the manner which elements transition from one type of operation to another when dealing with an unconventional situation. The Army's Field Manual (FM) 3-0 Operations discusses what transitions require and why they are important to sequencing and synchronizing assets, but little is mentioned in the way of a definition and no detail is offered for developing conditions and criteria that would signify a transition should commence. Lines of operation are discussed in both FM 3-24 and FM 3-0 but not to the extent that they can be applied at the operational or tactical level within a non-linear environment. The fact that we must transition from one condition or state, at a tempo that we dictate, to another is necessary if the COIN force eventually desires a return of responsibility for security and governance to the HN. Therefore, in a COIN environment transition can be defined as a series of near-simultaneous actions that produces conditions allowing the improvement of overall security, development of HN military and police, and the eventual establishment of the legitimacy of the local government.

### **COIN Transitions-Security (COIN Force and HN)**

There are some specific descriptions of security-type transitions within the Army and Marine Corps' current doctrine (FM 3-24, Counterinsurgency). Here, you can find some fairly robust discussions of transitions that occur during the initial period of counterinsurgency operations, namely Clear-Hold-Build. Security, or lethal, transitions must be paramount and take priority initially over governance, essential services, and other non-lethal transitions; clearance is predominately the responsibility of the COIN force's military element. Any HN security forces capable at the time of assisting should be enlisted to do so. As a unit conducts clearance type tasks and then subsequently hold and build tasks it meets certain criteria that signal a need to transition. For security clearing tasks, insurgents are killed or captured, caches uncovered, or intimidation is reduced. However, there is no set number of insurgents killed or captured that, when reached, would indicate that the clear phase is complete and it is time to begin holding. This is gauged by the reaction of the population and the ability to physically dominate an area through sheer numbers and brute strength. A number can be associated with that; however, it is an equation based on friendly force capability and the size of the area that the force is attempting to control. There are also some qualitative criteria that leaders apply to the equation based on their experience and what they observe as they move

throughout the area. Once the COIN force reaches the goals associated with the criteria, it can transition to holding and begin full spectrum operations by employing elements to begin work on government legitimacy and economic development.

As the COIN force's military progresses into holding and building, it begins to focus on the capability and capacity of the HN Security Force. Its role must continue to expand as the COIN Force transitions to its endstate. The HN must meet several criteria before it can accept security responsibilities. First, the HN military must be capable of defending itself. This means it is trained, equipped, and led as well as, if not better than, any of its neighbors especially if one of those neighbors has been supporting the insurgency. This entails setting and meeting measurable short and long term goals—other than assigned strength versus present for duty strength—and must be comprehensive, to include conventional units as well Special Forces, Air Force, and Navy, when applicable. The HN military units must meet standards for individual tasks, like weapon qualification, and collective tasks, such as deliberate attack. Without quantifiable conditions and criteria, there is no way to objectively determine if an HN military unit is ready to transition to overwatch and accept responsibility for security in a given area. The counterinsurgent must also be able to accept risk in one province as it focuses its security and HN military transition efforts in another; rarely are there enough resources to apply equally in all areas and rarely do all areas in a province transition at the same pace.

Transition of the security force does not just occur at the tactical level. It must also occur at the operational level as well. As HN companies, battalions, and brigades are developed, the HN military has to establish the bureaucracy required to support and sustain itself both in garrison (for training) and in the field (during combat). It needs a training base that allows it to remain within a given band of excellence as compared to its neighbors. The host nation requires specific criteria for the development of its military's material management sustainability. Equipment purchasing and repair capacity, spare parts acquisition, and munitions management capabilities are critical to the HN's ability to sustain itself and require set conditions that indicate when a transition is realistic at this level. Well-trained small units are important, but they won't last long without supplies of bullets and water that a military bureaucracy provides. But most importantly these systems must be created and managed in such a manner that fits within the HN's culture and society. Forming them in the image of any other nation risks collapse upon the redeployment of the COIN Force but at the same time makes developing transition criteria. At all levels, COIN force transition teams are critical to a successful progression to an overwatch position as they can provide an assessment of the unit; assist in its training; and, through reporting, maintain their higher HQ's situational awareness. At department or ministerial levels, experts in acquisition and logistics must act as transition teams evaluating their counterpart's ability to meet the criteria necessary for transition: budget management, contracting, program development, etc. Without these skills, the military industrial complex will be insufficiently developed to support its military in the field.

Once the HN military has met its criteria, a police force must be ready to assume responsibilities for security within the nation's borders. This implies that the violence

has reached a level that is acceptable within the HN's culture and has become predominately criminal in nature and can be dealt with by a police force rather than a military force; though in some situations, the line between the two can be blurred. This implies that the COIN Force has already dedicated assets to assist in the establishment or re-establishment of the constabulary. Sir Robert Thompson also saw the importance a police force provides with regard to intelligence collection and security:

*The police force is a static organization reaching into every corner of the country and will have had long experience of close contact with the population. If it can be possibly avoided, the army should not be responsible for internal security intelligence.*

--Thompson, Robert, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 1966

Enforcement of the rule of law within a country falls to the police, not an element of national power, such as an army, and effective development of this force is critical to the COIN Force's ability to transition to overwatch. Nothing says this cannot be done simultaneous to the military's development, and it would be recommended to limit the time that the counterinsurgent force is required within the HN, provided the trainers are available in sufficient numbers. The set of criteria for the police force will differ from the military forces' as the police require a skill set normally associated with crime fighting. Subsequently, police transition teams, justice experts, and other crime fighting specific (forensics, SWAT, etc) personnel are needed to assist the HN with attaining proficiency in these tasks. Criteria in these areas should include a set number of police trained and adequately equipped per capita, sufficient jail space and guards trained to man them, a requisite number of judges and lawyers to handle case loads, sufficient border police, etc. A key aspect with respect to the police is that they are under the control of the governor and not the military or a national level department. While there may be a national police force, it is separate from the regional and has a limited jurisdiction focused on federal law. This should be the final criteria for transition to occur. When the HN has police capability at the provincial and national level and an effective military that has reduced insurgent violence to a "criminal" level, then the COIN force's military can transition to an overwatch position.

As we continue with this discussion, we must keep in mind that development of the HN's government and economy cannot be static and is a characteristic common to the complexity of waging a counterinsurgency. While it is difficult for the COIN force to develop these areas prior to establishment of security in an area by the military, once the conditions are met, teams must be postured to capitalize on the window of opportunity that adequate control of the population brings. From that point on, the COIN force is working a comprehensive plan where all its actions are interdependent. Only if the root cause of the insurgency is solely a lack of security can the COIN Force succeed with brute strength. However, rarely is the problem that simple and good insurgents have well developed narratives based on persuasive arguments that require more than security to counter. Consequently, while the COIN Force's military may transition to an overwatch position of the HN's Security Forces in a particular region, a transition to complete local control may not be wise; particularly if the regional government and the local economy

have not met a similar level of conditions or criteria. Therefore the insurgency still has justification for its cause that is supported by enough of the population for it to survive.

### **COIN Transitions-Legitimacy (Providing Essential Services)**

Nearly simultaneous to the development of the HN security forces, the COIN Force employs multi-functional teams that assist in the development of the regional/provincial government. As with the security force the government must also be moving toward meeting a set of criteria whereby it can be considered capable of sustaining capacity for essential services and, therefore, legitimacy. If counterinsurgent operations are population-centric then the local government's ability to provide for its citizens must be a precursor for a general transition to overwatch. This will begin with heavy support from the COIN force. During the Hold and Build stages, the focus on essential services is at a very basic level. Clean water, food, and basic medical care have to be available to the population as soon as possible behind the clearance of an area. The COIN force establishes conditions with regard to these basic needs as it transitions through to the hold stage, often initially coordinated and funded by the military, with reconstruction teams in support. A good deal of this may be independent from the local government's ability to provide these services, as not providing them could result in wide scale humanitarian issues and impede the security level gained by the military. However, these actions cannot remain a COIN force responsibility, and it must employ its reconstruction teams in a synchronized manner with its military that allows for the transition of essential service providing to the HN. The population will accept essential services provided by an external force for only so long; at some point the HN needs to accept this responsibility to be seen as legitimate within the eyes of the population.

For this transition to occur, government officials must have a budget and the training to use it, be able to assess the need for essential services within the province, be able to manage contracts to establish those services, and then develop departments to sustain them. If the government cannot accomplish these tasks, it cannot provide basic needs for its people, and transition to overwatch may not occur successfully. This could leave the root cause of the insurgency unsolved, especially if it involves the capability of the HN government to function effectively. If the government can provide security but not basic services then the insurgency still has a chance at manipulating the population against the government. During the 33-day war in Lebanon (2006), Israel attempted to defeat Hezbollah capabilities through military means alone. However neither they nor the Lebanese government could provide as effectively for the population in southern Lebanon as well as Hezbollah could. Once the fighting was complete and Israel removed its forces, the insurgents were able to fill the void (effective information operations also assisted) left by a local government incapable of sustaining essential services. As a result, Hezbollah not only maintained control over the population of Southern Lebanon, it was also able strengthen and expand its de facto government as well. (Fadi P. Kanaan, *Nasrallah Wins The War*, The Economist, 17 AUG 2006).

Transitioning to overwatch and local government control creates a counter-intuitive effect that limits the work reconstruction teams can accomplish in much the same way as the

transition limits the military forces' efforts. From that point on, the regional governing body (mayor or council) gains a degree of sovereignty that the COIN Force has to be careful not to violate or it risks turning the population, as well as the HN government, against them. Therefore, criteria must be set and assessed that allow the external COIN force to determine if the provincial government is ready to transition to overwatch. Managing transition is critical within this line of effort as the risk to losing gains made in other lines (security and economics) is high if the local government loses the perception of legitimacy. Key questions must be considered: Does it (the local government) have a budget that equals its civil responsibilities? Are the funds sustainable in the long term? Are there enough funds generated from within the province to sustain the province if national funds are withdrawn? Is there a system to provide oversight on spending? Reconstruction teams will normally bear the brunt of the work required to develop local governments, but the COIN military force must also participate, particularly if the security situation is not conducive to other governmental agency work. The civil activities of the military and the multi-functional reconstruction teams must be synchronized to generate the desired effect, particularly in areas with historically centralized governmental models (like most we see in Asia and the Middle East). While a centralized budgetary model may work in a dictatorship, it is much harder to maintain in a democracy, and, therefore, the province must take a larger role in providing services to the population.

Prioritization of the essential services should be based on the situation. However, it is best to start with something in line with Maslov's hierarchy of needs. Water, food, and medicine are preferred services in areas that are severely depressed. Electricity, clean neighborhoods, drivable roads, and education may be required for those that are a bit more developed. Providing first rate college education opportunities to people who are starving does little to curb the insurgency and establish provincial legitimacy. Managing a budget and providing services is the first step to provincial level legitimacy following the security line. If the population is secure and has essential services, then the insurgency has little room to maneuver, and the HN's provincial government would be ready to transition.

### **Transition to Overwatch-Economy**

Similar to security and government legitimacy, the COIN Force must evaluate the capacity of the provincial economy before overwatch is declared. Unfortunately there is no doctrine providing a guide to the principles and methods for synchronizing COIN force economic development with the security and legitimacy lines and is current weakness in most western counterinsurgency operations (although the British do provide a fairly comprehensive approach and arguably the most advanced doctrine currently available). As Professor JRT Wood relates in his look at the Rhodesian experience,

*The Rhodesians developed 'Fire Force' or the use of helicopters as gunships and troop transports to envelop insurgent groups vertically and eliminate them. Fire Force was highly successful...however, there was no one to consolidate after Fire Force had won ground. The*

*essential economic development to sustain the parallel improvement in the life of the people flagged and political change was delayed too long.*

--Wood, JRT, Rhodesian Insurgency, MAY 1995

U.S. inter-agency and military cooperative doctrine is limited to what FM 3-24 calls "HANDSHAKECON;" A very informal, unofficial relationship that can easily result in uncoordinated and unsynchronized actions. In order to build effective essential services that the HN government can sustain criteria such as the value of the local currency; the level of inflation (an exorbitantly high rate would indicate instability); the capability of the banking system, or maybe even the simple existence of one would suffice; the development level of the private sector; and the output of the major industry within the province should be used as indicators that the province's economy is capable of sustaining itself once transition occurs and external assistance is removed.

Reconstruction teams from the COIN Force can do a good deal of work to assist in building sustainable capacity and meeting criteria/conditions that would allow for a transition to overwatch. The teams have access to a limited amount of funds that, in and of themselves, are not capable of rebuilding an economy. Therefore, a good deal of economic activity must be generated by private corporations that the reconstruction teams may assist the local government in soliciting for investment. The COIN Force focuses on training the local government to spend their, not the COIN Force's, money on improvements that can stimulate the economy and attract external funds. A critical criterion to assess is the local government's ability to effectively harness funds generated from within its borders and those funds provided from the federal government to improve infrastructure (roads, electricity, etc) that can attract foreign investment and further develop the HN's infrastructure and ability to deliver essential services to the population.

Civilian agencies higher in the external COIN force's bureaucracy must be enlisted to fully realize the comprehensive nature that economic transitions require, even at the provincial level. A comprehensive approach implies the full involvement of the entire civil-military apparatus to successfully transition through economic stages toward a desirable endstate. Few counterinsurgents are able to harness this capability completely, but even if a few key COIN force agencies (transportation, energy, state) can be enlisted, enough conditions can be met that would allow a transition to overwatch to occur.

The economic transition is difficult to commence before security and local government legitimacy is in place and, therefore, makes those two areas preeminent. Economic development is challenging to begin to prior to the COIN force's military reaching the build stage with the HN Security Force. Foreign investors are not apt to dedicate large sums of money to regions that don't have a solid handle on security. However, once the building process begins and the HN has its police force in place, the COIN Force can begin assisting with the solicitation of external investment. A healthy economy further separates the insurgent from the population; a healthy market, high wages, and a comfortable standard of living make it difficult for him to popularize his narrative. However, economic transitions require efforts from more than the military and

reconstruction teams from the COIN Force; they require other government agencies as well as private investment to be active within the province.

## **Conclusion**

Effective transitions are critically important when conducting counterinsurgency operations. A key to success is identifying the criteria and/or conditions that must be met with regard to security, local government legitimacy, and the economy prior to executing a transition. Furthermore, the COIN force must accept that transitions occur at varying times and locations based on the situation in a given area. Current doctrine and methodology does not provide sufficient guidance to capture the complexity of prosecuting these actions within a non-linear environment and until it does the actions of any COIN element will be unsynchronized. The COIN force has to closely manage the transition of each of these functions through the Clear-Hold-Build stages; ensuring progression to another stage is not premature. There must be an even greater effort made to successfully transition beyond these initial phases and into an overwatch position that eventually leads to mission success and withdrawal from the HN. This is true today in Iraq and Afghanistan. Transition must be based on qualitative and quantitative criteria supported by expert opinion or the coalition will transfer authority too quickly and provide insurgents with a fault line that could be exploited.

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