A Four Dimensional Model of Insurgency and the Centrality of ‘Perception and Polarization’ to Strategic Success

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Author’s Note

This article is a working paper designed to present the early findings of my research to the field, particularly the model of insurgency which is still in its early developmental stages. I look forward to receiving any feedback from the Small Wars Journal readership (haroro.ingram@gmail.com).

Editor’s Note

An earlier draft of this paper was first presented at the 2012 Australian Political Science Association annual conference (September 2012).

Abstract

This paper presents a four dimensional model of insurgency/counterinsurgency that identifies military, structural, functional and ‘perception and polarization’ as the major pillars of an insurgent movement or counterinsurgency strategy. While the four pillars are distinct, the more interdependently they operate the greater the likelihood of holistic strategic success. This article argues that at the heart of ‘small wars’, partnering a quest for authority via mastery of the military, structural and functional dimensions, is a battle to shape the perceptions of a population in crisis by manipulating three critical factors – uncertainty, the breakdown of tradition and the Other – in order to polarize support towards themselves (e.g. the insurgency) and away from the other actor (e.g. the counterinsurgency). This paper contends that strategic success will go to the actor who can most effectively harness and channel military, functional and structural initiatives to successfully addresses the ‘perception and polarization equation’ by (i) attributing feelings of uncertainty and the perceived breakdown of tradition to the Other actor, while (ii) increasing certainty and helping to reinforce traditional socio-cultural dynamics in the target population. This article concludes by drawing this study’s major contentions into a brief analysis of the conflict in Afghanistan.

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partnering a quest for authority via mastery of the military, structural and functional dimensions, is a battle to shape the perceptions of a population in crisis by manipulating three critical factors – uncertainty, the breakdown of tradition and the Other – in order to polarize support towards themselves (e.g. the insurgency) and away from the other actor (e.g. the counterinsurgency). This paper contends that strategic success will go to the actor who can most effectively harness and channel military, functional and structural initiatives to successfully addresses the ‘perception and polarization equation’ by (i) attributing feelings of uncertainty and the perceived breakdown of tradition to the Other actor, while (ii) increasing certainty and helping to reinforce traditional socio-cultural dynamics in the target population. This article concludes by drawing this study’s major contentions into a brief analysis of the conflict in Afghanistan.

Introduction

For countries such as the United States and Australia, the central politico-military concern in the coming decades will be how to balance a global power shift to the East, with all this implies for the recalibration of ‘conventional’ military capabilities to the Asia-Pacific region, and the reality that engaging in insurgencies will remain a perpetual concern for ensuring both regional and global stability. The globe’s dark corners of instability will inevitably witness insurgencies wherever the authority of the state is perceived to be either weak or illegitimate. These ‘small wars’ will, as they have throughout the 20th and into the 21st centuries, act as cancers of instability that can threaten entire regions and, as actors leverage intra- and inter-regional alliances, even influence the global political landscape as ‘power blocs’ jostle for influence. Recent history has demonstrated how states strategically provide support to insurgent actors, both overtly and clandestinely, to influence the intra- and inter-regional political landscape. On the dawn of the ‘Asia-Pacific Century’, counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine and practice must continue to evolve and build upon the lessons of the recent and distant past. This paper seeks to contribute to this process via two objectives.

Firstly, this study presents a four dimensional (4D) model of insurgency arguing that each dimension – military, structural, functional and ‘perception and polarization’ – represents the central pillars of both an insurgent movement and the four strategic pillars of a successful COIN strategy. The first half of this paper explores the key features and implications of the 4D model arguing that, in contrast to the first three dimensions, the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension remains comparatively underdeveloped in COIN doctrine and practice. In contrast, insurgent movements have regularly demonstrated a nuanced appreciation of not just the importance but the centrality of the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension to strategic success.

The paper’s second major objective is to explore the nuances of the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension. It argues that a major focus of counterinsurgency initiatives must be to guide the perceptions of populations in crisis in order to drive their polarization towards support for the counterinsurgent/central authority and away from the insurgency. The model of polarization in this paper provides a paradigm through which it is possible to examine not only how populations in crisis interpret events and issues around them, but dictate how their allegiances are directed. The paper concludes with a brief assessment of the Afghan conflict framed by this study’s key findings.

A Four Dimensional (4D) Model of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency

Before presenting the 4D model of insurgency, it is important to broadly define the term ‘insurgency’ (for more, see Kilcullen 2009; US Army/Marine Corps Field Manual 3-24; Kilcullen 2010; Taber 2002). Rather than get stuck too deeply in a frivolous semantic argument, this paper contends that an ‘insurgency’ is a multidimensional campaign, typically embarked upon by non-state actors that strategically use violence often against state actors, that is designed to influence, if not completely change,
the mechanisms and structures of power that exert influence over a ‘contested population’. This multidimensional campaign is characterized by four key strategic pillars: functional, structural, military, and ‘perception and polarization’ dimensions. It follows that ‘insurgents’ either engage in or actively support the use of irregular/asymmetrical military operations and strategies against their opponents as part of a broader multidimensional strategy. However, a transition to conventional military operations and strategies is almost inevitable as military equilibrium is gradually reached between the insurgent and counterinsurgent forces. An ‘insurgent’ may engage in or provide support to activities in one (e.g. military), some (e.g. functional) or all four dimensions of an insurgency.

Figure 1 diagrammatically illustrates the model of insurgency by placing the functional, military, structural and ‘perception and polarization’ dimensions on a spectrum. This representation is designed to simultaneously show both the distinctions and interdependencies of the four strategic pillars. It is noteworthy that the four dimensions are reflective of both the mechanisms and symbols of state power and this underscores the central purpose of any insurgent movement: the execution of power and influence over a contested population whether at the state, provincial or village level. Conversely, it follows that these four dimensions represent the major strategic pillars of an effective COIN doctrine and strategy.

Figure 1: A Four Dimensional Model of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency

The four dimensions are defined as follows:

**Structural**: This refers to the ‘infrastructure’ of the state or insurgent authority. This dimension recognizes that any established central or aspirant ‘governing’ mechanism will devise and implement frameworks that order legitimate socio-cultural, political, coercive, economic and developmental action. These structures can include, for instance, a constitution, legal/judicial system, financial markets and law enforcement agencies. Structures are the infrastructure responsible for functions.

**Functional**: This dimension concerns the processes by which an established or aspirant authority maintains order in a target population. These are the ‘mechanisms’ that guide and drive processes of legitimate socio-cultural, political, coercive, economic and developmental action. The functional dimension may include, for example, the collection of taxes, mediation of civil disputes and the use of coercion to maintain order in a target population.

**Military**: The use or threat of violence to coerce actors – either opposing agents or the contested population – towards or away from engagement in or commitment to an established (e.g. state) or aspirant (e.g. insurgent) authority. A state’s use of force is typically an expression of legitimacy while a non-state actor’s (e.g an insurgent’s) use of force is typically designed to erode the state’s monopoly on legitimate
violence (see Weber 1968).

Perception & Polarization: This refers to the ability of an actor to effectively shape how a population interprets and understands events and issues (perception) in order to drive the allegiance of the population towards themselves and away from the other actor (polarization). Acute perception of crisis psychologically primes individuals and groups for changing their cognitive perceptions; the more acute the crisis, the greater the potential for those changes to cognitive perceptions to be significant. Contested populations in insurgencies are in a state of crisis and this renders them especially susceptible to their perceptions of events and issues being shaped by the actors who effectively leverage three critical factors: uncertainty, the breakdown of tradition and the Other. These are the defining drivers of ‘perceptions of crisis’ and the actor who can effectively manipulate the way a population perceives these three factors will shape how that population interprets military, structural or functional initiatives. The perceptions of the population will largely be shaped by the actor who can achieve the following: (i) attribute uncertainty and the perceived breakdown of tradition to the Other (e.g. insurgent) actor, while (ii) increasing certainty and helping to reinforce traditional structures in the target population through their own (e.g. counterinsurgent) actions. In other words, attribute perceptions of crisis to the other actor while simultaneously tying the solution to oneself. Leveraging identity fault lines plays a central role in facilitating the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension because it is these complex identity paradigms that provide the ‘lens’ through which individual and collective cognitive perceptions in a society are shaped.

The 4D Model: Significant Observations and Their Implications

Prior to exploring the nuances of the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension, it is useful to identify several important observations which are pertinent to understanding this model and its conceptual and practical implications.

The distinction between structural and functional dimensions matters

The distinction between structural and functional dimensions is important in this model. Structures are the forums responsible for functions. In stable societies or states, both dimensions are typically interdependent (i.e. strong structures are functional). During insurgencies this is often not the case. A state authority may have many (if not all) of the structures of authority in place; however, these structures may not be functional. Conversely, insurgents may be perceived to be functionally strong by the contested population despite potentially having weak or even absent structures (see Kalyvas 2006; Kilcullen 2010). For example, state law enforcement structures may be present but perceived by the populace to be dysfunctional while the insurgent’s law enforcement capacity may be strong functionally without formal structures existing.

Functional or structural dominance in isolation is fleeting

While structures can be established but dysfunctional or, alternatively, functions are strong without formal structures, such conditions are inevitably unsustainable. For instance, present but dysfunctional structures will almost inevitably be superseded by informal functions without the presence of formal structures. Equally, strong functions will, in time, become formalized via overarching structures. This reality points to an inherent advantage to an insurgent movement confronted by a largely occupational counterinsurgent force whose resources and time is inevitably limited.

A failing counterinsurgency is not just being out-administered or out-governed, it is almost inevitably losing the ‘perception war’

Fall (1998), Kilcullen (2009), Kalyvas (2006) and Migdal (1988) assert that a COIN force that is losing an
insurgency is being out-administered or out-governed by the insurgent movement. However, functional
dominance is only half the story. Functional dominance is also likely to reflect a counterinsurgent force
that has been unable to effectively shape the perceptions of the contested population, probably reflecting a
misunderstanding of identity nuances in the populace, and thus an inability to drive polarization away
from the insurgent force. The second half of this article explores these dynamics in greater detail.

Symbolism matters, especially in the application or threat of violence

The symbolic power of all four dimensions can be leveraged to shape perceptions and polarize the
contested population. However, symbolism is particularly pertinent in the application of military force.
The use of violence, as much as a mechanism of coercion, is highly symbolic as a demonstration of
legitimacy and a derogation of the opponent’s claims to legitimacy. Military operations inevitably increase
perceptions of crisis in a population and may rapidly polarize a population towards one side or the other.
How a military action is perceived by a population will largely be reliant upon whether the
counterinsurgent or insurgent has the ascendancy in the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension. It
follows that the greater the impact upon the civilian population, especially in casualties, the more difficult
this process naturally becomes for the actor who does not have ascendancy in the ‘perception and
polarization’ dimension.

Changes in military strategy reflect deeper transitions in an insurgency

Insurgent actors will typically use irregular asymmetrical military operations in the early stages of a
campaign. An increasing use of conventional military strategies by an insurgent force almost inevitably
reflects a growing equilibrium between insurgent and counterinsurgent forces. Conversely, an increasing
application of asymmetrical operational strategy is most likely to reflect one or both of the following
dynamics: the growing ascendancy of the counterinsurgent militarily and/or an insurgent strategy designed
to maximize the efficiency of resource application driven by a diminution of resources, preparation for a
combat ‘surge’, or a ‘settling in’ to facilitate a long term strategy.

State-centricity will always hamstring COIN initiatives, especially when applied in tribe-oriented societies

The state-centricity of the counterinsurgent, both conceptually and practically, may unwittingly blind and
hamstring the counterinsurgent to the significance of highly localized grass-roots factors that are critical in
the efficacy of structural, functional, military and ‘perception and polarization’ strategies. One of the more
pertinent examples is the tendency for COIN practitioners to favor structural and military dominant COIN
strategies. Such approaches presume that an insurgency is best defeated by the application of military
force as a mechanism to provide a sense of security for the population, create ‘space’ for structures to be
established and ‘time’ for those structures to become functional. The underlying assumption is that these
structures will eventually provide symbols around which a shared collective identity emerges.[iv] The
harsh reality is that the mere presence of structures is never enough to achieve functionality or the
allegiance of the population around those structures as symbols of a new collective identity. Such an
approach is even less likely to work in tribe-based societies for whom the state is often seen as an alien
and disruptive apparatus. Often the tribe’s experience of the state is negative because the state, when it
exerts itself, is seen to impose on functioning tribal structures and catalyse the fragmentation of traditional
social hierarchies. This inevitably is seen to, at one level, drive broad societal breakdown while, at another
level, drive a perceived loss of identity. It is little wonder that many tribal societies often view the state as
an intermittently malevolent, but perpetually inept, force. Effectively overcoming this reality will require a
recognition of the interdependent relationships between the structural, functional, military and ‘perception
and polarization’ dimensions and channeling these into coherent COIN strategy, doctrine and practice.
The ‘perception and polarization’ dimension must act as the paradigm through which planning for the other three dimensions is analysed and assessed

The ‘small war’ actor, whether insurgent or counterinsurgent, who effectively leverages the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension can potentially transform any event or action – including their own failures or even their opponent’s successes – to further polarize the population towards support for themselves. For example, ‘information operations’ are typically used by COIN practitioners to shape the way a contested population perceives structural, functional or military initiatives. In contrast, insurgent actors tend to use structural, functional and military initiatives to meet the objectives of their ‘information operations’. Given the centrality of ‘winning’ the support of contested populations during an insurgency, this paper argues that the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension needs to play a central role in strategic and operational planning at all levels.

Understanding the ‘Perception and Polarization’ Dimension: The Centrality of ‘Identity’ and ‘Crisis’

To examine the dynamics of the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension, it is useful to begin with definitions of several key terms. ‘Perception’ refers to the way individuals and groups view, interpret and understand events and issues. It follows that perception guides cognitive, emotional and volitional processes and thus shapes how individuals and groups respond to events, issues, the in-group and out-groups. The relationship between perception and contextual factors works the other way also. That is, contextual factors – such as events, issues and actor’s actions – inevitably help to shape the way an individual or group perceives the world. Identity also plays a critical role in individual and collective perceptions because it forms the cognitive paradigms through which perception occurs and is guided. In other words, identity paradigms are the ‘glasses’ through which the world is understood and actions legitimized. The second key term, ‘polarization’, refers to the process by which individuals and groups increasingly adhere to the ‘perception narrative’ of an actor/s over the ‘perception narrative’ of other actor/s. This may lead to individuals or groups within a contested population consenting or submitting to the authority of an actor over other actors. Both ‘identity’ and a milieu defined by perceived crisis are central features of understanding polarization.

‘Identity’ is defined here as that package of values, rooted in an historical narrative, strategically constructed in response to a socio-historically specific reality. An identity first and foremost represents values and characteristics that are pertinent to (i) who has adopted the identity, (ii) who is applying the identity and, of course, (iii) the historical context within which it exists (for more see Ingram 2011). It follows that the identity may represent very different values to different people dependent on these and other factors. Ultimately, identity is forged by two processes: identity formation and identity production. ‘Identity formation’ refers to the strategic construction of the in-group identity by the in-group while ‘identity production’ refers to the strategic construction of the out-group/Other identity by the in-group (see Figure 2). In societies characterized by complex familial, tribal, ethnic, religious, provincial, linguistic and national identities, with influences both within and between identities constantly shaping individual and group perceptions and behaviors, the context of war merely makes these processes even more complex and vital to survival.
Figure 2: Identity Formation and Production

Figure 2 illustrates the processes of identity formation and production. Both processes are critical in the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension as actors seek to strategically harness and shape these dynamics in the contested population. Three factors – the Other, uncertainty and the breakdown of tradition – are critical to the identity formation and production processes. Typically, these drivers operate in tandem and interdependently magnify their influence upon the perceptions of the individual and collective through a process of ‘cyclical cognitive reinforcement’ (Figure 3). For example, the prominence of the Other as a driver of identity construction is typically accentuated when (i) the presence of the Other is recent (e.g. a newly established central government apparatus), (ii) a disparity between the socio-cultural influence of the in-group and the Other is significant (e.g. one tribe having greater influence than another tribe), and (iii) there is an increased overt presence of the Other (e.g. an occupying military force). While the identity formation and production processes can be both positively and/or negatively driven, small wars are contexts that inevitably create the most extreme and acute perceptions of crisis in a population. If an actor can effectively shape a contested population’s perceptions of even one aspect of this complex dynamic (e.g. how the Other is perceived), this can then be leveraged to create cognitive openings through which the processes of ‘cyclical cognitive reinforcement’ can be strategically harnessed to shape perceptions and polarize support.

Figure 3: Cyclical Cognitive Reinforcement: The Drivers of Identity, Perception of Crisis, and the In- and Out-Group Identity Paradigms

During small wars, perceptions of crisis are inevitably acute for contested populations. Uncertainty, far from an abstract existential issue, is experienced in not just the changes to day to day life but the perpetual struggle to survive in a conflict zone. The breakdown of tradition is explicitly showcased with the death of every village elder, the destruction of socio-culturally significant symbols from farmland to places of
communal meeting, or the encroachment of government structures that are seen to undermine functioning tribal structures. The awareness of one’s Other is perhaps the factor which causes the most angst for contested populations. An occupying force almost inevitably represents the latest, if the most despised, Other actor in a long list of Others whose threat ranges from mere nuisance (e.g. an aspiring familial rival in a patri-lineal tribal structure) to mortal threat (e.g. insurgent actor). It is little wonder that, in a context of such acute perception of crisis, contested populations are highly susceptible to ‘perception narratives’ that clearly and effectively tie the Other to uncertainty and the breakdown of tradition. As increased feelings of uncertainty fuel the perceived breakdown of tradition and accentuate awareness of the Other, perceptions of crisis increase and inevitably drive and accelerate the identity formation and production processes (see Figure 3).

To master the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension, the COIN actor must recognize these powerful forces and harness them by leveraging the identity fault-lines of the target population. Crisis motivates a search for certainty (defined as simplicity, stability, understanding and predictability) typically expressed in a narrative that draws heavily upon their most pertinent and central identity paradigm.

No individual is defined by a single identity. The reality is that an individual expresses a range of different identities often dependent on context (e.g. a group inevitably is an expression of a shared identity). For instance, within the context of the tribe, individuals will place centrality on their tribal identity. In other words, the ‘tribal identity’ reaches primacy (see Figure 4). Of course, outside of this context, that same individual may place primacy upon another identity over others. In the context of the family, it may be the ‘father’ or ‘mother’ identity; regarding financial issues, it may be the ‘occupation’ identity. Nevertheless, in societies in which ethno-tribal allegiances are central, the tribal identity which has reached primacy will often act as a mechanism for guiding the behavior of day to day life, especially regarding socio-cultural behavioral norms, economic practices and legal processes. Furthermore, at least in this example, the tribal identity is likely to guide behavior and actions in other contexts (see Figure 4). After all, the identity that has reached primacy often acts as a mediatory identity within other identity contexts (e.g. religion, occupation or nation). Figure 4 thus graphically represents the cognitive paradigm through which the individual and group perceives the world. By recognizing the identity that has reached primacy, as well as other significant identities, it is then possible to leverage these identity nuances to shape the target population’s perceptions and drive polarization.

![Figure 4: Primacy of the Tribal Identity](image)

Perceptions of events, actions and behaviors change as the cognitive interpretation of the individual is shaped and reshaped in accordance with shifts in the identity paradigm (for more, see Ingram 2011). For perception narratives to be effective they must shape perceptions of structural, functional and military activities by leveraging identity nuances in the population. Clearly, the worst case scenario for the COIN practitioner is the ‘insurgent’ identity reaching primacy in the contested population. However, it is
important to consider that the primacy of an identity is not permanent and can potentially change as (i) the values associated with the identity change and (ii) the socio-historical context changes. The overarching conclusion remains the same for success in the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension: (i) attribute uncertainty and the perceived breakdown of tradition to the Other actor while (ii) increasing certainty and helping to reinforce traditional structures in the target population through one’s own actions.

During small wars, actors are constantly trying to either drive the primacy of identity in contested populations towards their own identity or leverage pre-existing identity nuances to drive commitment and allegiance to their authority. As a target population polarizes towards actor ‘a’ over ‘b’, communicating a ‘perception narrative’ that resonates with the population will become increasingly easier for the former and increasingly difficult for the latter. This tendency is best understood by reference to the process of cyclical cognitive reinforcement described earlier. As individuals and groups increasingly adhere to a ‘perception narrative’, a ‘cognitive domino effect’ occurs whereby the perceptions of the population begin to reinforce the ‘perception narrative’ espoused by that hypothetical actor ‘a’. The population’s sense of uncertainty and perceived breakdown of tradition will naturally begin to be attached to the Other actor as support shifts to the actor who the population believes is increasing certainty and helping to reinforce traditional structures. Of course, this is only possible if the ‘perception narrative’ and other stratagem in the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension both reflects and reinforces structural, functional and military realities as experienced by the populace. After all, even the most successful ‘perception and polarization’ initiatives are destined to fail if they are not effectively linked to structural, functional and military realities on the ground.

The Insurgent’s Inherent Advantage

Insurgent actors often enjoy significant advantages over their counterinsurgent opponents, especially in the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension. This model offers important insights into how insurgent movements can then potentially leverage these inherent advantages in the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension to maximize the efficacy of structural, functional and military activities. The following observations are especially pertinent:

An occupying COIN force as the major Other is an easy ‘sell’

The indigenous insurgent force will always find it comparatively easier to convince a population that the COIN occupying force is the major ‘Other’. It follows that it will therefore be far easier for the insurgent to tie the occupying COIN operatives to uncertainty and the perceived breakdown of tradition. The process of cyclical cognitive reinforcement will help to drive and solidify these perceptions. Even if the insurgent force is despised by the local population and their identity considered alien to the local identity, by comparison the population will often perceive the indigenous insurgent force and their supporters as a lesser Other than an occupying COIN force.

An indigenous insurgent force will have a nuanced understanding of the local population

An indigenous insurgency will be acutely aware of the identity fault-lines, their historical origins, local socio-cultural norms and societal structures, which places them at a significant advantage compared to the occupying COIN force (for more, see Kilcullen 2010; McNeil 2009). This nuanced knowledge of the indigenous population not only facilitates a leveraging of the identity paradigms that characterize the society but the social networks in the populace that can facilitate the spread, and if necessary the coercive enforcement, of their ‘perception narrative’. Conversely, the insurgent is also able to more effectively and efficiently communicate their narrative and do so at a more personal level by leveraging both their detailed local knowledge and social networks.
An insurgent force that represents the overturned government will often symbolize a period of comparative stability and certainty in contrast to the conditions created by an insurgency. An insurgent force that was the pre-insurgency authority will often symbolize a period of comparative stability compared to the acute perceptions of crisis that inevitably characterize small wars. This is the case even if the now overturned government was repressive and dysfunctional. Such an insurgent force would typically seek to play upon this comparative stability to undermine the COIN structurally, functionally, militarily and in the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension. While the central authority and COIN force must demonstrate good governance and stability, the insurgent merely needs to create an environment in which governance is impossible. To use Taber’s phrase, the insurgent’s raison d’être is, “…to create the climate of collapse” (Taber 2002: 21-22).

Military realities are likely to advantage the insurgent force’s ‘perception narrative’ until traction in the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension is achieved.

The harsh realities of warfare are more likely to advantage the insurgent movement’s ‘perception narrative’. This is largely due to the significant advantage the insurgent force is likely to have in the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension for reasons including those identified above. COIN military operations, even if they do not result in civilian casualties directly, will inevitably compound perceptions of crisis permeating the society and will be rapidly leveraged by the insurgent force to shape the populace’s perceptions and polarize their support. Appropriately demonstrating military strength is essential to increasing certainty in the contested population, attributing uncertainty to the other actor, and creating both ‘space’ and ‘time’ for structural initiatives to become functional. However, the interconnectedness of all these elements needs to be framed within the context of the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension to gauge the potential efficacy (or otherwise) of using military force.

Afghanistan: In Search of Clarity

The fluid milieu inside Afghanistan’s borders – epitomized by a complex human landscape of perpetually shifting identity fault-lines – is exacerbated by the tendency for its regional and global neighbors to use its lands as a theatre to pursue their own interests. After all, Afghanistan lies at a tri-regional gateway rendering it of critical strategic importance for both regional and global players. Populated by a mosaic of tribes who regularly respond with equal ferocity to the presence of a neighboring tribe as to a foreign occupying force, it is little wonder that the history of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan is one of slow grinding defeat at the hands of a heterogeneous insurgency destined to fragment post-conflict to again clash with one another. At the heart of an elusive solution to the ‘Afghanistan Puzzle’ is a lingering lack of clarity about the ‘Afghanistan Problem’ itself. After over a decade of conflict, the search for clarity continues.

Despite recent shifts in COIN strategy significantly shaping the current situation in Afghanistan, many problems can be traced to the flawed politico-military principles that defined the first half decade of this conflict. The broader politico-military context of the ‘War on Terror’ inevitably shaped the military and developmental strategy of these early years. Coalition military operations rapidly overthrew the Taliban government after which strategic focus broadly shifted to establishing a national Afghan government built on democratic principles. Developmental projects were designed to not only extend support for and undermine Taliban support, the latter further augmented by continued military operations. A ‘patchwork’ of COIN initiatives reflecting the division of Afghanistan between Coalition partners, misguided developmental projects, interference by regional players, a central government increasingly perceived to be weak, and the opening of a ‘second front’ in Iraq were key contributing factors to these fragile foundations (also see McNeil 2009; Hagerott, Umberg and Jackson...
One of the most prominent ‘cracks’ in the early foundations of the Afghan conflict was the premise that Coalition forces would be welcomed by the Afghan population for overthrowing the despotic Taliban regime (for more, see Marston 2008). As in Iraq, early military successes (i.e. the overthrow of the ruling authority) may have exacerbated this strategic misreading and helped cast an assumption of inevitable success over proceeding politico-military initiatives. History and the 4D model suggest that a foreign occupier is almost inevitably viewed as an Other by the local population and typically only seen as a ‘savior’, and even then only fleetingly, if usurping another foreign occupying force. After over a decade of conflict, the national ‘patchwork’ remains, broader regional players continue to clash within Afghan borders via proxies, which further fuels insurgent violence, while a persistent Taliban central leverages a deteriorating milieu to pursue legitimate political influence.

COIN strategy in Afghanistan has been broadly characterized by a tendency to use military operations as a mechanism to create ‘space’ for structural and functional dominated population-centric initiatives. For example, as Coalition forces have sought to extend both their influence and that of the government, a ‘Clear, Hold, Build’ strategy has, at times, needed to be reversed to achieve operational objectives (i.e. ‘Build, Hold, Clear’). In other words, initially working with the local population to provide the foundation for engaging in targeted military operations against insurgents may often prove more effective than using military operations as the foundation to engage with the local population and implement development projects (also see Marston 2008; Connett and Cassidy 2011; McNeil 2009). While situational specific factors will dictate which approach is more likely to be effective, either approach must act as a mechanism through which to control the ‘perception and polarization equation’. These factors must play a similarly significant role in assessing the efficacy of the development and stabilization projects themselves.

Development projects, including those driven by non-government organizations, have sought to bring stability to the local population (and therefore support away from the insurgency) by improving living conditions (also see McNeil 2009; Marston 2008). The ‘patchwork’ of development projects across Afghanistan aside, these projects often tends to be based upon a largely ‘Western-inspired’ framework of developmental goals. It follows that these initiatives may not necessarily drive stability in local Afghan populations, especially in the short to medium term, but could actually increase perceptions of crisis if they are viewed or experienced as mechanisms of change that undermine tradition, facilitate the presence and growing influence of the Other and increase uncertainty. After all, a population’s sense of stability will inevitably be gauged by what they know as a ‘stable’ existence – typically a lifestyle characterized by traditional structures, functions and socio-cultural norms – that provides certainty over uncertainty and limited influence of perceived malevolent Other/s.

The establishment of political and economic institutions, especially those designed to extend the reach and influence of the national government, have often been central to COIN approaches in Afghanistan. For example, local economic schemes have sought to displace support for the insurgency while connecting local populations to the government. However, unless these schemes fit into a broader holistic COIN strategy, then ‘Taliban’ forces will either seek to establish competing economic structures and functions (e.g. narcotics) or fill the functional void in areas where COIN or government structures are dysfunctional (e.g. justice or law enforcement).

The Afghan insurgency is comprised of a heterogeneous mosaic of Talibans and leveraging these differences will be critical to breaking the insurgency. Far from a monolith, ‘Taliban’ is a term adopted by the ideologically aligned, the socio-politically disenfranchised, criminal elements and opportunists seeking to leverage the title for their own individual or collective objectives (see Kilcullen 2010; Karzai 2011; McNeil 2009). The opportunistic manipulation of the ‘Taliban’ title is, to varying degrees, a product of
what Kilcullen calls the “accidental guerilla” phenomenon (see Kilcullen 2009: Chapter 1) and it often reflects a perception in the population that established authorities are functionally weak. Perhaps even more significantly, the ‘accidental guerilla’ phenomenon is a key indicator of a failure to effectively compete in the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension. The ‘fault-lines’ running through the Taliban must be leveraged to drive disintegration on its periphery and force its central elements to exert greater influence over those elements that opportunistically use the ‘Taliban’ banner.

The Taliban’s political ascendency (i.e. political negotiations and establishment of political offices) and use of asymmetrical operations (i.e. single attacker methodologies) reflects both preparedness for post-withdrawal military operations and a cautious confidence regarding political influence nationally (also see Rashid 2011; McNeil 2009). Militarily, recent trends in insurgent activities in Afghanistan reflect the latter stages of a counterinsurgency campaign as practiced by a (predominantly) occupying force: a pre-withdrawal COIN surge is met by a period of growing asymmetry as insurgent forces prepare for a final ‘departing shot’ and/or a ‘domestification’ of the conflict (i.e. civil war). The complex mosaic of insurgents active in Afghanistan recognize that, in a relatively short period of time, conditions are likely to transition into a conflict resembling a civil war whereby major factions will increasingly use conventional military strategies while minor players apply asymmetrical methods to exert influence wherever possible. The Afghan government will need more than military strength to retain influence nationally in such a milieu.

**Conclusion**

This paper presented a four dimensional model of insurgency/counterinsurgency that identified military, structural, functional and ‘perception and polarization’ as the major pillars of an insurgent movement and/or counterinsurgency strategy. While the model is characterized by four distinct dimensions, in reality the four dimensions are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Indeed, achieving success in the functional, structural and military aspects is heavily reliant upon being aware of how those initiatives act as mechanisms for achieving ‘perception and polarization’ objectives. While this paper has focused on the ‘perception and polarization’ dimension, success in this dimension alone will also be insufficient for overall success unless those objectives are intimately tied to functional, structural and military initiatives. Ultimately, a counterinsurgency campaign that is able to address the military, functional and structural dimensions is likely to be destined for strategic failure if insurgent forces maintain dominance over the way a population perceives the world in which they live and thus are able to effectively polarize the population towards even tacit support.

**Author’s Note:** This article is a working paper designed to present the early findings of my research to the field, particularly the model of insurgency which is still in its early developmental stages. I look forward to receiving any feedback from the *Small Wars Journal* readership (haroro.ingram@gmail.com).

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End Notes

[i] ‘Contested populations’ are any group or groups of people for whom two or more actors are attempting to shape the populace’s perceptions for the purpose of influencing their actions and, ultimately, to win their support and consent/submit to the authority of one actor over others.

[ii] Hermans and Dimaggio (2007) define uncertainty as consisting of four elements: complexity,
ambiguity, deficit knowledge and unpredictability.

[iii] Certainty is defined here as simplicity, stability, understanding and predictability.

[iv] Perhaps Western COIN scholarship and practice is particularly susceptible to this approach (e.g. that a democratic constitution provides the structural component, with voting as one of its functional elements, which will result in a shared collective identity around its associated identity values.)

[v] Information Operations, also known as ‘Hearts and Minds’ campaigns, seek to establish and disseminate a narrative designed to not only influence the perceptions of contested populations and win their support but counter the narratives of oppositional actors.

[vi] Demonstrating military (coercive) strength for its own sake is the fastest road to defeat for any ‘small war’ actor despite possible short-term benefits. The application of overwhelming military force against an adversary is essential to successful COIN strategy. However, military operations are but one of four strategic pillars and, ideally, its application must be balanced based on its impact on the other three dimensions.

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About the Author

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