Heisenberg and Mao Zedong: The Occupier Effect

By Daniel R. Grazier
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Daniel Grazier

What could a German theoretical physicist and a communist revolutionary possibly have in common? On the surface, nothing whatsoever. Dig a little deeper though, and they shed light on an unavoidable reality of modern conflict. As the United States emerges from the two longest wars in its history and attempts to absorb the lessons learned, perhaps the biggest lesson is the one Werner Heisenberg and Chairman Mao combine to teach us. For years, during both the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, commanders struggled to find methods to decrease the level of enemy activity. This they always seemed to do without considering how their mere presence in the battlespace drove insurgent activity. Before we embark on our next foreign adventure, Americans need to remember one simple fact: as long as we accept the moral responsibility for ungoverned spaces, insurgent forces will attack us. Acceptance of this simple truth should drive our nation’s cost-benefit analysis in light of perceived national interest.

The reader is no doubt asking, “What does this have to do with Werner Heisenberg and Mao Zedong?” Werner Heisenberg was a theoretical physicist who first recognized the Uncertainty Principle. This is closely related to the observer effect. Quite simply stated, the observer effect describes the changes the mere act of observing a phenomena has on the behavior of that phenomena. A zoologist observing a pride of lions will affect the behavior of that pride. For a physicist to observe an electron, a photon will first have to interact with it, changing the path of motion for that electron. As the Uncertainty Principle and observer effect are often confused and the particulars are germane in a strategic sense, I simply refer to the work of Heisenberg colloquially.

This relates to counterinsurgency and stability operations in that it is impossible to properly evaluate the security status in a given theater of operations without considering the presence of the outsiders. As Americans, we are loath to ever view ourselves as occupiers. Our opinion does not count in these matters, though. We must be able to step back and view ourselves from the indigenous population’s perspective. Regardless of the foreign soldier’s moral attitude, he is carrying a weapon through their neighborhoods, making him an occupier. Whatever the circumstances that placed the soldier there, his presence will eventually be viewed as an outside intrusion into their affairs. This intrusion will breed resentment and given enough time, resentment will boil over into violence.

The desire to purge foreign invaders can be strong enough to bring even the most implacable enemies together. By 1936, Mao Zedong’s Chinese Communists and Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist forces fought each other over control of China for nearly ten years. In response to an outside threat, these two formed a
temporary alliance to expel Japan from their homeland. Mao and Chiang Kai-shek were able to cooperate for four years, culminating in the 1938 Battle of Wuhan. A strategic Chinese victory there prevented Japan from launching another large-scale offensive in China until 1944.[ii]

Mao Zedong’s On Guerrilla Warfare is highly enlightening in the way it reveals the thinking of a revolutionary insurgent commander. At the time he penned it, Mao was not yet the leader of the largest nation on the planet, but an insurgent leader in a deadly struggle against one of the fiercest military machines the world has ever seen. Imperial Japan possessed vastly more military power than the Chinese forces. Mao believed the Chinese could prevail with the use of mobile, decentralized operations executed on a timeframe dictated by his forces, not Japan’s. Victory would be achieved by surviving, not allowing themselves to become decisively engaged, and extending the war indefinitely until the Japanese lost the will to fight.[iii]

Such a concept is all too familiar to any veteran of Iraq or Afghanistan. The key feature throughout these conflicts was the elusive nature of the enemy. The 2003 invasion of Iraq is often looked upon with fondness today, while the successive years and their frustrations are memories most would rather forget. It was this type of frustration Mao sought to foment among his enemies. Mao wrote the book, in part, to encourage the people to continue their guerrilla campaign for as long as necessary to secure victory over the Japanese. As long as Japanese forces occupied China, Mao would continue attacking them. The insurgents of Iraq and Afghanistan operated in similar fashion to Mao’s tenants. Once the initial shock of invasion dissipated, there developed a phenomena which can be aptly named “The Occupier Effect”. Despite claims of strategic goals regarding stability operations, nation-building, and free elections, coalition forces remained in place largely due to the lack of security. No matter what coalition forces did, the insurgents continued to launch attacks. No one seemed to realize the insurgents were fighting because coalition forces were still in their countries. The Occupier Effect creates a deadly loop of actions that can be summed up thusly: Coalition commander, “We can’t withdraw because there is still an active insurgency.” Insurgent leader, “We must not rest so long as the invaders remain on our sacred soil!”

This is the essence of David Kilcullen’s brilliant book, The Accidental Guerrilla.[iv] The book was assigned reading at Expeditionary Warfare School in 2012, but few people seem to really grasp the essential point. People will naturally resist outside invaders. Imagine any country invading the United States. If that country’s military somehow succeeded in defeating the American military and settled in for an occupation, how long would it be before American citizens began violently resisting the invaders? Any occupied country is an inherently destabilized region. Therefore, conducting stability operations is pointless because the “stabilizing force” is the primary source of instability. This bit of common sense seemed to be in short supply as coalition forces spent billions of dollars over the past decade plus building milk factories and recreation centers in the misbegotten belief it would quell the violence. The only way to stop the violence directed at coalition forces was to withdrawal them. This is exactly what happened when coalition forces departed in December 2011.

Afghanistan is a poor example because it is already an inherently unstable country being neither a nation or, in the eyes of the majority of its people, a legitimate state. The artificial nature of its borders, created as they were by western powers as part of Great Game politics in the 19th century, was doomed to create the instability the nation has experienced since its inception as a sovereign state.[v]

It is a stretch to describe Iraq as the model of a stable country due to the artificial borders drawn after World War I, and the resulting sectarian fault lines between Kurds, Arabs, Shiias, and Sunnis. But it has had periods of relative stability through the years. Saddam Hussein, while an unrepentant tyrant, was
actually a stabilizing force in Iraq. He said as much shortly after his capture by US forces in 2003 when he described himself to interrogators as “just but firm”. Hussein said the Iraqi people needed a tough ruler.  

For argument’s sake, we will proceed under the assumption of a fully justified case for war in Iraq: Saddam Hussein was a dangerous tyrant who violated numerous international laws and possessed the capability and desire to support global terrorism with arms and money. The 2003 invasion proceeded as it did, and coalition forces rapidly toppled the Hussein regime and the Iraqi military ceased to function as an effective military force. Now what? Under the guidance of Secretary of State Colin Powell, coalition forces were obligated to rebuild the country because, under the “Pottery Barn Rule”, if you break it, you bought it. So begins a lengthy occupation and a hugely expensive exercise in nation-building.

This course of action never seemed to be questioned. It was simply taken for granted that we had an obligation to stay and help the Iraqi people to put their country back in order. Did we though? The regime was only in power due to the tacit support of the Iraqi people. Every government exists either because the people actively support it, or they do not actively oppose it. For anyone who doubts this assertion, consider the Arab Spring. Governments in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, and Jordan among others were either overthrown or forced to make drastic socio-political changes due to popular uprisings beginning in 2010 and continuing through the time of this writing.

That being said, returning to Iraq in 2003 and assuming a fully justified case for war, the Iraqi people did bear some responsibility for the conduct of their government. This should absolutely not be taken as justification to commit atrocities against civilians. It does shed new light on the case for nation-building however. Basic humanitarian aid to prevent starvation and disease should be provided should the need arise. But is it our responsibility to rebuild the country’s infrastructure, especially when our forces go out of their way to avoid destroying it in the first place?

As we all know, coalition forces did stay in Iraq in an open-ended fashion and embarked on the drawn-out process of fighting an insurgency while conducting stability operations. Hardly anyone seemed to consider that the violence occurred for no other reason than that coalition forces were present. Fallujah is a prime example of this. Immediately following the invasion, Fallujah largely remained calm since it did not lie in the path to Baghdad and was thus free of coalition forces. Once coalition forces did arrive in the following weeks, suddenly it became one of the most violent cities throughout the rest of the war.

There is also the problem of mission-creep with stability operations. Every commander arrives in an area of operations interested in making his mark. Especially in areas with lower levels of violence, the urge to do this is often manifested in construction projects. One such scheme involved modernizing the production of milk in rural Iraqi towns. Two centralized milk production centers were built in Mahmudiyah and Yusufiyah at a cost of several million dollars. Americans designed these projects without considering the nature of Iraqi dairy production. For centuries, Iraqis in such areas had kept a cow or two to produce milk for their own use and to sell a little to their neighbors. Large-scale dairy farms as seen in the United States simply did not exist, negating the need for milk collection centers. Set aside the obviously pointless nature of such endeavors, the consequences for the people must be considered.

A much better way of stabilizing a country, besides removing the primary destabilizing factor, is to allow the people to come together to build their own nation. Think of this in terms of a team-building event, but on a much larger scale. Shared effort, hardship, and accomplishment has the effect of bringing a group closer together because of the experiences they share. Coalition forces did not allow the Iraqi people to do
this through most of the occupation because we were constantly doing their job for them. Every time coalition forces rebuilt a water system, constructed a school, or built a milk plant, we denied the people the opportunity to accomplish such things on their own. The result was to diminish their capacity to do such things and increase their dependence on others. This is not the way to foster a strong nation.

An immutable aspect of human nature is that people will nearly always follow the path of least resistance. If someone else is willing to do the work, most people will stand aside and let them. They are particularly willing to allow others to pay the bills. This almost always runs counter to their best interests. People should always be encouraged to increase their own capacity for self-sufficiency. And therein lies the good news for American military planners.

The proper course of action in these circumstances would be for us to do nothing. Such a concept is a difficult one for members of the U.S. military who have been trained from their first day in the service to have a bias for action. In such matters though, often the best course of action is no course of action.

We should have stepped aside in Iraq and allow the Iraqis to work. At the very least, it would have turned many military age males into working aged males. Nearly everyone who patrolled the streets of Iraq and Afghanistan witnessed numerous clutches of sullen young men, seemingly with nothing better to occupy their time than resenting the presence of coalition forces. We often stole their opportunity to build a stronger country by undertaking the basic construction projects they should have been doing for themselves. Had we allowed them to do so, it is possible the security situation would have improved. To prosper and survive, many of the people fighting us would have been too busy improving their own situation to fire RPGs at us.

This is not to suggest such a course of action would have eliminated all violence. That brings us back to Heisenberg and Mao Zedong. When considering future conflicts, these factors must be considered from the very beginning. We may be greeted as liberators for removing a despotic regime one day and then told to leave the next. For those who do not remember, this happened almost literally in Iraq in 2003. No people, anywhere in the world wants to be occupied by a foreign power. There will always be resistance to such a presence. Decision makers must understand that so long as foreign troops remain, there will be violence directed at them. The only way to eliminate such violent acts is to leave. How many Americans are being attacked in Iraq now?

End Notes


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**About the Author**

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Captain Daniel R. Grazier USMC, is a graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in March 2005. Following The Basic School, he was assigned as an armor officer and attended the U.S. Army Mounted Officer Basic Course at Fort Knox, KY. He reported for duty to 2d Tank Battalion, 2d Marine Division in Camp Lejeune, NC in April 2006, where he served as a tank platoon commander. He deployed in April 2007 to Al Anbar province, Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Upon his return, he served as the AT-TOW platoon commander. In July 2008, Capt Grazier returned to Fort Knox. He served as a tactics officer in Hawk Troop, 2-16 Cavalry teaching armor tactics to newly commissioned officers. Capt Grazier was selected for career-level school and was subsequently assigned as a student at Expeditionary Warfare School in Quantico, VA. Following graduation, he was assigned to 1st Tank Battalion where he has served in a variety of billets including Headquarters and Services Company commander, Bravo Company commander, and assistant Operations Officer. He deployed to Helmand Province, Afghanistan in May 2013 for service with Regimental Combat Team 7 as senior watch officer in Support of Operation Enduring Freedom.


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