

Strategic Aspects of COIN

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Insurgencies arguably are the most agile, sophisticated form of conflict. Opportunistic practitioners with infinite persistence and unstructured approaches to problem-solving thrive on chaos that they deliberately engender. Skilled craftsmen gain leverage from second-, third-, even fourth- and fifth-level effects that unfold unpredictably. Trends toward ever greater complexity are evident.

—John M. Collins¹

AFTER THE FALL of the Berlin Wall and end of the Cold War, new debates began at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, about the changing nature of the threat environment. What would the 1990s bring in the form of strategic threats to America? The War on Drugs? Transnational crime? Asymmetric warfare and fights in the urban environment? The next “big one?” Not much debate occurred on irregular warfare, however, because the military still existed in a bubble of denial about its Vietnam War experience. Those who sought to learn about theoretical warfare areas other than Clausewitzian trinitarian warfare found but one elective on the subject of irregular warfare and could only learn about indirect war by reading Sun Tzu.

Conventional military strategists did not hold counterinsurgency (COIN) and irregular warfare acolytes in high esteem. In fact, strategists marginalized COIN and irregular warfare, never regarding irregular warfare as worthy of strategic-level discussions. This attitude hindered the formulation of an unconventional warfare (UW) theory and kept irregular warfare out of strategic wargaming scenarios. In fact, strategists viewed counterinsurgency as a discipline with tactical and operational components that did not lend themselves to strategic consider-

ation. Ironically, strategists continued to believe this even as all of the ingredients for a national security debate and the elevation of this form of war to a strategic art were forming around them.

True strategic thinking on the subject of COIN and irregular warfare should consider time and space and the long strategic view. What will the critical areas for the global war on terrorism (GWOT) be in the near future? One day we will find ourselves out of Iraq and Afghanistan with our force postured for the next crisis. What strategic direction will we take, and what should we be prepared to accomplish?

COIN and the Three Levels of War

As we transform the Army to face 21st-century irregular warfare enemies, we can still use the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war as guidelines for professional military development. Our acumen is probably the strongest at the tactical level, where our forces have by necessity adapted the time-honored principles of counterinsurgency and foreign internal defense (FID) doctrine to local circumstances. Lessons-learned databases and emerging tactics, techniques, and procedures abound within doctrinal and professional literature. The experience level of our forces in this environment steadily increases (as a result of multiple deployments), and a new generation of Soldiers and leaders now know the fundamentals of tactical actions in irregular warfare. But we will not win if the COIN campaign degenerates into a solely tactical fight.

The last 3 years have changed our thinking at the operational level of irregular warfare, primarily in the COIN domain. At this level, combat commanders

translate strategic concepts into viable plans within theaters of war. Joint Special Operations University Report 05-2, *Operationalizing COIN*, captures current thinking on how we are to analyze insurgencies during the 21st century; guides joint force commanders in overall campaign design, effects-based operations, and logical lines of operations; and updates COIN principles within the context of the current enemy.²

We have begun other initiatives to increase our knowledge at the operational level of war as it pertains to irregular warfare and counterinsurgency. Numerous strategy sessions, seminars, think-tank articles, and new courses and centers throughout the Department of Defense (DOD) enhance our knowledge of how to defeat these types of threats, and the Army will soon update COIN doctrine to aid in these endeavors. This brings us to strategic considerations.

Strategic considerations. Winning the GWOT and eliminating its spawn of insurgencies requires policymakers to have a will and determination unprecedented in recent history. A grand strategy—employing the elements of national power to achieve national security objectives—requires a coalition of global partners who agree that the GWOT is the first and foremost security issue affecting their national interests. Their alliance with the United States depends on their appreciation of the threat and their ability to participate in the GWOT.

As we transform our way of war, from state-versus-state warfare to transnational and global irregular warfare characterized by competing ideologies, we must develop an understanding of the deep ideological and cultural differences that arise from radically different religious practices. Our new strategic way of thinking should also consider the use of international and local law-enforcement capabilities, and this sea change should be anchored in the correct appreciation of the nature of our enemies.

We look to the *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)* for strategic shaping of our security structures to answer the irregular warfare challenge.³ The *QDR* addresses irregular warfare, counterinsurgency, and stability operations as the most probable and salient scenarios in which we will be involved in this century. The *QDR* will drive the transformation of our military, force structure, and

strategic concepts to address insurgencies. These will, perhaps, be followed by a joint operational concept for irregular warfare that will leverage U.S. asymmetric and indirect warfare capabilities and not be based on maneuver warfare. Attrition in this context will mean adopting the perseverance to outlast the transnational, global aspect of the irregular warfare challenge.

Strategic COIN concepts. Military scholar John M. Collins defines strategic concepts as “judgments concerning ways armed forces might best perform respective functions and accomplish assigned missions, taking relevant theories, facts, assumptions, and policies into account.”⁴ Counterinsurgency is one of those “respective functions.”

Strategic concepts drive strategies and strategic objectives (deny, defeat, deter, enable, and so on). A correct analysis of our adversary’s end state leads to correct strategic concepts. For the GWOT, our national strategy and the nature of our international alliances guide our strategic concepts. Strategic concepts are venues for coordinating interagency, international, and intertheater efforts. A global campaign requires a global strategic concept. A strategic concept focuses the elements of national power into a cohesive whole.

What are strategic concepts for counterinsurgency? Given our national security strategy of preemption, we would rightly expect forms of maneuver such as strategic attacks or strikes (countervalue operations), intervention operations, or preventative FID. Preventative (or preemptive) FID analyzes failing-state metrics to predict where ungoverned space might set the preconditions for terrorism and insurgency. In cooperation with allies, preventative FID involves crisis resolution to preclude deteriorating situations so the elements of national power can reverse negative metrics and deny adversaries freedom of maneuver. European Command operationalizes a version of this strategic concept in the PanSahel initiative.⁵

Another strategic concept is using UW proxies to attack irregular challenges, just as our enemies use this strategy against us. With memories of the Contras still fresh in our minds, this is probably not a popular option, but it is a viable tool that several regimes have used as a strategic concept over the last 25 years, including Iran in its support of Hezbollah. Proxy wars also serve as economy-of-force

measures to tie down our enemies while we fight on other fronts. Proxy wars should have sabotage and subversion as tactics.

The United Kingdom has employed two other strategic concepts (management and containment) against the Irish Republican Army and during Israel's struggle against the Palestinians. Management is a form of persistent deterrence combined with preventative FID. Containment combines an isolating function characterized by reluctance to escalate (limited war); reactive, not proactive elements; and some form of deterrence (in essence, an aggregate of strategies to produce synergy in the overall effort). These strategic concepts require taking the long view geopolitically, and they must be buttressed by a strong national will and by great patience and perseverance.

We have practiced management and containment in Operation Enduring Freedom. Arguably, after 4 years, we have succeeded in holding the security line of operation in Afghanistan by overthrowing the Taliban government and keeping follow-on actions in the low stages of insurgency, thus allowing political, diplomatic, and economic elements of power to do their work. We are now conducting COIN as limited war in Afghanistan in the hope that the enemy will give in to the ongoing political process.

Insurgency Strategy

Modern insurgencies are networked, amorphous, headless, transnational, and criminal, and their doctrine is a complex gray stew. Today's insurgent borrows from various terrorist, guerrilla, and insurgent theorists and, on any given day, can be operating off one or all of these strategies. Our COIN strategy must overmatch the insurgent's capabilities and operating concepts, perhaps blending many COIN strategies into a new counterstrategy. The point is that we must correctly ascertain insurgent and terrorist strategy to formulate appropriate counterstrategies, or the campaign plan might be an operational mismatch that could place unrealistic requirements on the military.

We must study insurgent strategies to understand the theoretical and intellectual foundations of asymmetric war. No practitioner of counterinsurgency will be successful unless he analyzes the motivation and strategy of the insurgents to discover how their various acts combine to achieve a desired end state.

This acutely important insight can serve as a basis to develop an appropriate counterstrategy within the direct-versus-indirect or indirect-versus-indirect UW paradigms (classic counterrevolutionary war, FID, war of attrition, focused guerrilla warfare, police action, and so on).

Twenty-first century global insurgency is extremely complex and problematic and poses challenges. Transcending political and ethnic warfare, it has mutated to global ideological warfare. The aim of our current counterstrategy must be to defeat the protracted global jihadist offensive, marginalizing radical, political Islam and separating it from moderate Islam. Our end state might not be victory but, rather, have as its strategic objective such desired effects as preemption, marginalization, security enhancement, and isolation. We must also keep the second- and third-order effects of these strategic objectives in mind and adjust the strategy as necessary.

Although religion certainly serves to motivate some insurgents, many have studied theories of traditional insurgency and guerrilla warfare. As well as seeing the influence of Sun Tzu, one can also deduce some aspects of Marxist-Leninist ideology, such as Osama bin-Laden's calls for mass mobilization of the populace to jihad. One can also see the strategy and tactics of Mao Tse-tung's revolutionary warfare and Che Guevarra's foco warfare.⁶

Key leaders and prominent religious extremists form the vanguard of the people. Religious extremism forms the core of the ideological movement to solve current societal problems by reverting to a previous form of society that was led by an Islamic caliphate. Religion has become an element of national power, and modern insurgents use it quite effectively as a façade behind which to hide criminal enterprises and brutal power struggles. Even so, when analyzing the will of the insurgents, we must acknowledge that ideology might provide them a built-in will that could outlast that of counterinsurgent forces.

Before 9/11, most insurgencies were internal to one state, but Islamic insurgents are no longer bound by this norm. The new space (or new sea to swim in) for these insurgents is global and includes the Internet, newly failing states, ethnic minority communities of developed countries, and ethnic Diasporas that take "sanctuary" in religious institutions and dogma. The new space also includes supranational

aid organizations that, presumably unwittingly, provide sustenance and support. The new form of dispersion for survival against conventional forces is to decentralize (but remain networked) by running proxy wars using franchises.

Any global strategy to counteract such Islamofascist insurgency will require patience and a strong national will. The answer to defeating this type of insurgency is to adopt a series of long-term measures similar to nationbuilding, cultural diplomacy, and police work (criminal business enterprise being the closest analogy to such threats). Basically, there are four actions to take:

1. Implement democracy and liberalism, backed by legitimate government and participation of the people in the political process (elections) to delegitimize the Islamofascists. Success will not look like a clear-cut victory. We might only be able to manage or contain the insurgency over time.

2. With the help of law enforcement, the military must assume a larger and broader role in separating the insurgents from the populace. The new paradigm might include combined military and police operations. We must have military and political forces capable of innovation, indirection, speed, and adaptation to match those of the insurgents.

3. Make every effort internally, externally, and diplomatically to shut down support for the insurgency. Even funds for charitable religious organizations must be stopped. Governments that espouse Salafist and Wahhabi radicalism must tone down the rhetoric and promote a more moderate religious dialog.

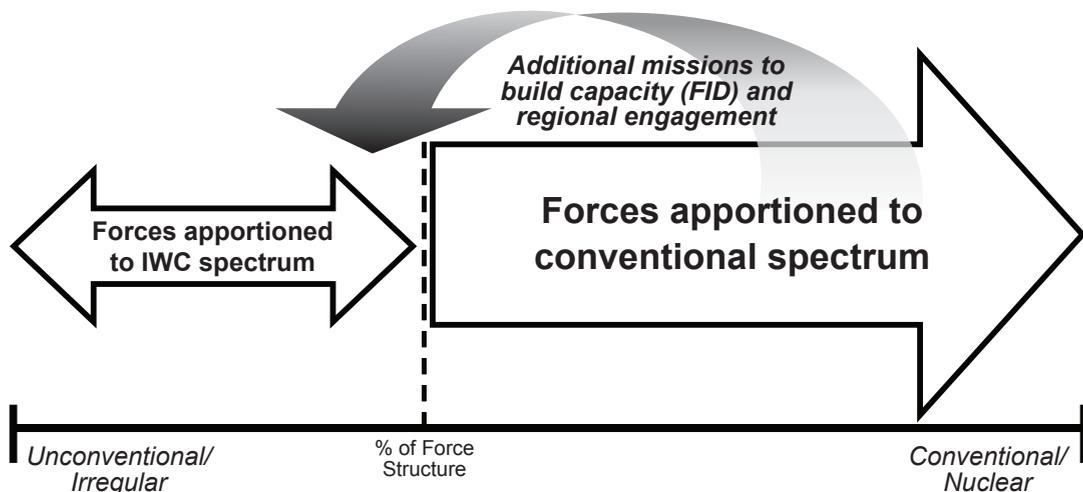
4. Provide a better truth message. This is ideological warfare. We must target insurgent organizations, motivations, and messages with information operations (IO) that serve to undermine insurgents' will. To counteract the effects of public beheadings, American "hope and opportunity" actions must be seen as indispensable.

Transformation of COIN Forces

If 60 to 70 percent of our available resources are tied up in counterinsurgency, the time has come to recognize that a contingency operation has grown into a major operation. We should translate COIN strategic concepts against global insurgency into operations plans, not contingency plans. We must modify the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (JSCP) to incorporate more interagency assets than previously considered. Our joint readiness reporting systems must also measure our ability to conduct these operations. We must elevate counterinsurgency to the realm of a major campaign and develop the expertise to plan global and theater campaigns. Our advanced military studies programs must prepare future strategists for this challenge.

To get things right at the strategic level, we must correctly shape our strategic forces' posture. The national military strategy we grew up with emphasized conventional forces for the high end of warfare (conventional, state-on-state, nuclear), but to respond to irregular warfare challenges, we might need to reshape our forces. (See figure.)

In the past, low-end forces (such as Special Forces, civil affairs, and psychological operations



Redistribution of force posture along the range of military operations.

[PSYOP]) could participate in conventional war as well as in irregular warfare, but conventional forces did not view this as a two-way street: They played no part in irregular warfare. Under the *QDR* and subsequent JSCPs, and to provide the versatility required in our national military strategy, we need more forces trained specifically for irregular warfare while heavier (conventional) forces assist.

The irregular warfare peacetime charter includes building a capacity in allied nations to preclude the threat's further expansion. We hone this force by means of regional engagement to build relationships and the trust we need in a war of a global nature. Forces challenged by irregular warfare inherently optimize their roles by building regional and cultural knowledge. They are multitasked units that maintain their ability to assist with larger, conventional security requirements, but their primary mission is to be ready and able to fight irregular wars.

The larger percentage of the force remains the Nation's sledgehammer for attacking the most serious threats, but it too must multitask and perform some irregular warfare challenge missions. We already see this as our combat formations transform to perform COIN tasks in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, these conventional forces reinforce the irregular warfare challenge and participate in regional engagement and FID activities more than before. We must drive strategic flexibility lower into expeditionary and brigade-centric formations, which might come to look like the Vietnam-era Security Assistance Task Force, with conventional, unconventional, humanitarian, civil affairs, irregular, and interagency forces under one command working with police and law-enforcement agencies.

Will the joint transformation be a technical one, or will it be a cultural transformation augmented with technology? Probably the latter: Strategically agile formations expert at indirect war will have a new agility and quickness enabled by technology. The greatest need for a technology enabler is in the arena of tactical air. We need COIN and FID air task forces to fight in gray areas and provide the appropriate assets to handle the emerging reality.

Today, most of our rotary- and fixed-wing assets, including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and tactical UAVs, are designed for high-end, conventional war. Our existing Cold War systems of centralized air and airspace coordination lack the flexibility

and agility the ground force commander requires to augment his operation. The commander gets either a high-speed jet or an expensive helicopter, neither of which covers the 90 percent of air he actually needs in a COIN environment (the in-between dilemma). The U.N. and several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are far ahead of us in this area. A fleet of short-take-off-and-landing (STOL) and small-cargo fixed-wing aircraft service them around the world. Indeed, in Somalia, Special Forces rode on U.N. or NGO contingency aircraft to their assigned mission area because we lacked the right air assets.

The French Air Force transitioned to irregular warfare during the 1954 to 1962 Algerian War. They adopted a force posture and an operating style that suited the threat environment, and they used technology to enhance COIN operations. We should look to their example (as well as to lessons we learned with the Air Commando squadrons during the Vietnam War) to redesign our aviation force structure to better support our irregular warfare strategic concepts.

Cultural Ethics and Strategic Leadership

We must incorporate unconventional and irregular warfare more strongly into our professional ethos and develop strategic leaders in this arena. After 9/11, few within DOD understood the nature of the unconventional warfare and irregular warfare challenge. We had to climb a steep learning curve to get where we are today. But what will happen 5 or 10 years from now, after we have accomplished the task at hand? We cannot afford another episodic dip in our ability to conduct this form of warfare. We must establish a national strategic center for the study of irregular warfare in order to sustain our ability to conduct it, to professionalize the art of indirect war, and to inculcate a generation of warriors with its tradecraft.

The national and strategic center must work with civilian universities and incorporate members of our professional associations into a think-tank, or as a strategic reserve. Today, there is no one place where this occurs. We must take the time to look over the horizon and develop future combat leaders by improving on existing leader-development modalities. We accomplish nothing by developing a grand strategy without concurrently developing strategic leaders to formulate strategic visions of "what ought to be" in this global security environment.

Photo courtesy of CJSOTF-Afghanistan



Fighting asymmetry with asymmetry: In 2003, U.S. advisers employ and work with irregular forces alongside conventional forces during Operation Enduring Freedom.

Photo courtesy of Bill Robinson



During the 1993 Operation Continue Hope in Somalia, Special Forces assets used nonstandard STOL and rotary-wing aircraft when aviation assets were insufficient.

Developing COIN experts who possess the political and diplomatic skills to operate at the operational and strategic levels of war will take some time. They must be strategic theorists and strategic practitioners. If it takes years to build a competent battalion commander, it will surely take years to build a COIN diplo-warrior. We must first build the bench. We must identify leaders in the current generation who are learning the tactical and physical aspects of fighting irregulars and continue to develop them professionally in irregular warfare art and theory. We must identify leaders who are becoming 21st-century

irregular warfare experts and tap them for their observations, insights, and reflections to help us bridge the gap until a more formal developmental process matures.

We should also develop theorists and strategists. Only a small percentage of our military professionals will become strategic leaders, but they must have subordinates and staff members who can help them push strategic concepts down the chain of command. We can build a bench of qualified individuals, continue to develop their skills over their professional careers, and “bank” them for use when needed. We can identify qualified planners and commanders to educate and have these experts on hand when needed. Reflecting on his mission to recruit Arabs for irregular warfare against the Turks during World War I, T.E. Lawrence said: “For my strategy of insurgency, I could find no teachers in the field: behind me there were some years of military reading and writing.”⁷⁷

A leader must have the following attributes in order to practice counterinsurgency and irregular warfare at the strategic level:

- A vested interest in improving the military profession in the art of irregular warfare.
 - Diplo-warrior interpersonal skills and the ability to handle complexity.
 - A world view (expanding one’s horizons beyond just American interests).
 - A comprehensive cultural understanding of the operational environment.
 - An understanding of diplomacy and political theories.
 - Negotiating skills (because irregular warfare is a political form of warfare).
 - Experience in foreign countries or with foreign military forces (because foreign-language skills expand one’s mind and are clearly helpful in the GWOT).
- Other desired attributes might include—
- An understanding of media forms (such as IO and PSYOP).

- Knowledge of history and culture, as warranted (such as social anthropology).

- Experience in joint, interagency, combined, and coalition operations, as well as in unconventional operations.

- Knowledge of the art and science of irregular warfare.

- A disposition toward Coalition teambuilding and the enhancement of collaborative relationships.⁸

Self-development is a learning domain. Leaders can prepare themselves for the art of counterinsurgency and irregular warfare by—

- Traveling to a foreign country and immersing themselves in its daily life (as foreign area officers, exchange program officers, or security assistance staffers at American embassies).

- Learning and studying the language and culture of the country chosen or completing an advanced degree at a basic or advanced military school in another country.

- Pursuing a tailored professional reading program, which is an important component of developing strategic leaders for the irregular warfare challenge. Would-be strategic leaders should study examples of leadership in irregular warfare environments, research case studies on counterinsurgency, read books and other sources on irregular warfare theories, and expand knowledge horizons to include non-American press and literature.

- Attending courses such as Joint Special Operations University's courses in irregular warfare, FID, terrorism, cultural studies, and interpersonal skills.

- Obtaining degrees from civilian universities in national security and strategic studies or advanced degrees useful to this career path.

COIN practitioners and theorists must impart their knowledge and wisdom to the next generation, including professionals from other countries versed in this art. Ultimately, a network on the art of irregular warfare will require a Web-based platform to exchange ideas openly and allow bottom-up input. Such is the creative path to theoretical thinking; it is the road to developing strategic leaders for the irregular warfare challenge and the GWOT and to mentor and shape subordinates.

The Future

We cannot implement the new national military strategy or the designs of the 2006 QDR without

fully appreciating the strategic skills required to execute operations against irregular warfare adversaries. Irregular warfare challenges to implementing counterinsurgency do not require us to throw away the useful methodology of understanding and viewing war from its tactical, operational, and strategic levels. We are becoming experts at the tactical level and are getting better at the operational level for irregular warfare, but we need to work on the strategic level. The time has come to critically consider unconventional ways of thinking about irregular warfare and to refine our understanding of the GWOT and what constitutes the strategic art of war in this spectrum.

As a place to begin the process, I recommend that we—

- Adopt COIN strategic concepts as a precursor to the development of COIN strategies.

- Structure and posture a force to handle the challenges of irregular warfare adversaries.

- Develop strategic leaders trained in the art of this form of warfare. **MR**

NOTES

1. John M. Collins, *Military Strategy: Principles, Practices, and Historical Perspectives* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2002), 167.

2. COL Joseph D. Celeski, Joint Special Operations University Report 05-2, *Operationalizing COIN* (Hurlburt Field, FL: U.S. Southern Command, no date).

3. U.S. Department of Defense, *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 6 February 2006), on-line at <www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/QDR20060203.pdf>, accessed 16 February 2006.

4. Collins, 305.

5. The PanSahel initiative is an attempt to build capacity for good governance in northern and sub-Saharan Africa and forestall or respond to extremist and global jihadist threats.

6. A foco insurgency does not depend on furthering its cause through political indoctrination of a populace; rather, it employs small groups of guerrillas to harass state forces.

7. T.E. Lawrence, quoted in James J. Schneider, "T.E. Lawrence and the Mind of an Insurgent," *Army* (July 2005): 37.

8. Stephen A. Shambach, ed., *Strategic Leadership Primer*, 2d ed. (Carlisle, PA: Department of Command, Leadership, and Management, U.S. Army War College, 2004), on-line at <www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/dclm/slp2ndEd.pdf>, accessed 2 March 2006.

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