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ARTICLE

Counterinsurgency Since 9/11 and its Future

ANDREW T.H. TAN

Recent US experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has proven that COIN, however revised and updated to fit the globalised era in which we live, is a problematic and ineffective solution to the irregular warfare waged by insurgents. The United States and the West in general will have to accept the chastening lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan lest they repeat it: that they are not good at waging COIN and must try to avoid getting involved in such costly campaigns again. If intervention abroad has to be undertaken, it will have to fulfill a set of demanding conditions. Nonetheless, while COIN in its contemporary guise has failed to deliver long-term, tangible results, thinking about how to counter asymmetric challenges, including the waging of irregular warfare, cannot be ignored, given the likelihood that external interventions will continue to be required in the future. Moreover, while COIN as the basis of a grand strategy is unrealistic, some of its basic principles are useful in orientating future approaches to insurgencies and terrorism towards comprehensive and collaborative approaches, as opposed to merely hard security operations unilaterally undertaken by States, which fail to address the underlying fundamental causes of political violence and which undermine long-term legitimacy.

The United States responded to the seminal terrorist attacks in 11 September 2001 (or 9/11) by declaring a Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), which included invading Afghanistan in late 2001 and Iraq in early 2003. But various mistakes led to the emergence of violent resistance to the US military occupation. The distraction of the Iraq campaign and occupation in 2003 resulted in the relative neglect of Afghanistan which in turn enabled the Taliban to regroup and launch an insurgency against US-led forces and the Kabul government led by Hamid Karzai.

In Iraq, various mistakes made by the occupation authorities, such as the dismantling of the Iraqi armed forces and the Ba'ath Party governing apparatus, removed the glue that held Iraq together. The result was chaos

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due to the breakdown in governance, and a steady descent into violence between and among the Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds. The minority Sunnis, in particular, feared that they would be disenfranchised and marginalized in the new post-Saddam Iraq, as it was obvious it would be dominated by the majority Shiites which Saddam Hussein had suppressed.

Moreover, the governments that the United States imposed on both Afghanistan and Iraq following their invasions and occupation lacked legitimacy. Coupled with the breakdown in governance, rampant corruption, sectarian violence, a breakdown of law and order, and the behaviour of US military forces which acted like an occupation force, it was, in hindsight, unsurprising that the response was a strongly nationalist one of taking up arms to oppose the invader. Militant Islamist elements emerged to become part of the opposition, with the main Sunni insurgent group in Iraq co-opted and renamed Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and Arab and other international volunteers arriving to help fight against the US invader.[1] In Afghanistan, the Taliban fled across the porous Afghan-Pakistan border to regroup among ethnic Pashtun kin in the Northwest provinces of Pakistan and then launched a deadly insurgency in Afghanistan against US-led forces and the Kabul government.[2]

By 2005, it was obvious the United States was bogged down in worsening insurgencies in both theatres. This led to much soul-searching and the promulgation, led by General David Petraeus, of a new counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy. Its apparent successful implementation in 2007 led to relative stability and paved the way for the US to withdraw in 2011. While it has been less successful in Afghanistan, the United States is committed to withdrawing its forces in 2014. Other advocates of COIN have gone further. Arguing that what has been missing has been a grand strategy against global terrorism, they have advocated that COIN should underpin such a grand strategy. Essentially, this meant COIN writ large into a global counter-insurgency (GCOIN) strategic approach by the United States, the objective of which is to prevent a networked global *jihad* linking up and posing a systemic threat to international order.[3]

This article examines the emergence of COIN strategy in dealing with the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in countering global terrorism. It explains what this strategy is and how it came to underpin the US approach in both theaters. It also examines the subsequent decline of COIN, and why GCOIN is not a realistic proposition. The article concludes with an assessment of the future of COIN. It argues that while COIN in its contemporary guise has failed to deliver long-term, tangible results, thinking about how to counter asymmetric challenges, including irregular warfare, cannot be ignored. The likelihood that external

interventions will continue to be required in the future makes this imperative. Moreover, while COIN is not likely to become the basis of a grand strategy, some of its basic principles are useful in orientating future approaches to insurgencies and terrorism towards comprehensive and collaborative approaches, as opposed to unilateral hard security operations which fail to address the underlying fundamental causes of political violence and, in the long-term, undermine legitimacy.

The Rise in Counterinsurgency (COIN)

By 2005, the insurgencies in Iraq, and increasingly in Afghanistan, had worsened to such a degree that it was clear that US strategy was in need of a thorough revamp. The number of US and allied troops killed in Iraq totaled 2,383 from the start of the invasion in 2003 to the end of 2005, with violence peaking in 2007, when 961 coalition troops were killed in that year alone. In Afghanistan, the scale of fighting was somewhat less, but 331 coalition troops had been killed since 2001, with 131 killed in 2005, a doubling compared to 2004. This continued to escalate until it reached 711 in 2010, the deadliest year in the insurgency, and this despite a decade of COIN.[4] While the numbers are historically low compared to major conflicts of the recent past, such as the Vietnam War where 58,000 US troops were killed, the numbers are a shock to a world linked through instant communications, and contemporary Western publics with a low tolerance for casualties as well as possessing little appetite for long-drawn out wars. While the number of military deaths has been a sensitive political issue in the West, the number of civilian deaths has been much higher, particularly due to significant sectarian violence. In Iraq, this was estimated by one source to be around 40,000 from the start of the invasion in 2003 to the end of 2005, with a peak of 29,000 civilian deaths in 2006 alone.[5]

That the revision in US strategy would begin by examining classical counterinsurgency should come as no surprise. It was an inevitable line of thought, given previous Western experience, albeit chequered, in waging COIN during the colonial era, in places such as Vietnam, Malaya and Algeria. However, it was British experience in counterinsurgency, particularly its defeat of Maoist-inspired communist insurgency in Malaya in the 1950s, which invariably attracted the most attention from strategists. Its lessons thus form the starting point for any contemporary revision to COIN. British COIN principles, the result of over 100 years of imperial policing, are well-summarized in contemporary British Army doctrine. According to the British Army Field Manual, COIN principles are part

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of a comprehensive approach which consists of the following: primacy of political purpose; unity of effort; understand the human terrain; secure the population; neutralize the insurgent; gain and maintain popular support; operate in accordance with the law; integrate intelligence; prepare for the long term; and learn and adapt.[6]

Although military action is required, 'the principal security task is to secure the population from violence … by securing the population and stabilizing the situation, governance can be re-established for the benefit of the population.' The reason for this population-centric approach lies in the fact that 'the success or failure of an insurgency is largely dependent on the attitude of the population'.[7] Thus, since the population is the prize, apart from the provision of security, complementary efforts have to be made to improve governance and carry out development as part of a broader stabilization campaign. The ultimate objective of stabilization is 'to prepare the host nation to take responsibility for its own security, development and governance'.[8] British COIN doctrine recognizes that legitimacy 'is the central concern of all parties directly involved in a conflict'[9] Thus, COIN is basically a struggle for the hearts and minds of the population over who has legitimacy, the COIN forces and host government, or the insurgents. Thus, a wholly kinetic military focus is misplaced, although it is accepted that the provision of security will inevitably be the main effort at the initial stages of a COIN campaign. What is most important is the shaping of the subsequent narrative and the perceptions of the population, in order to win their hearts and minds. Indeed, 'the narrative is central to the COIN effort', since the objective is 'to strengthen the legitimacy and build the authority of the indigenous government in the eyes of the population'.[10]

US military doctrine in 2005 contained no such sophistication in the understanding of the non-military aspects of COIN. US strategy has always been predicated upon the overwhelming application of kinetic military force in order to achieve victory over an adversary. This conventional 'Big War' approach has been described as the American Way of War, and has its roots in the massed armies and wars of attrition that the United States carried out in previous wars, such as in the previous two world wars, and the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam.[11] The advent of precision munitions and the communications revolution in the 1980s also led to expectations of an emerging Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), in which the United States would adopt a new way of waging conventional war. This would involve the precise application of firepower based on superior surveillance capabilities and real-time battlefield awareness, as well as the use of a systems of systems approach which would enable

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complex high-tempo operations to be conducted continuously under all-weather conditions and over a much wider battle-space.[12] This new form of warfare was demonstrated to deadly and devastating effect in both Gulf Wars, when the Iraqi armed forces folded in the face of superior US conventional might.

In 2005, when the Iraqi insurgency broke out in earnest, COIN had not been taught in US military academies for decades, and the US Army COIN manual, a product of the failed Vietnam War, had not been revised for over 20 years. The revival in COIN has much to do with the personality and intellect of General David Petraeus, who topped the intensely competitive US Army Command and General Staff College class of 1983 and then completed a doctoral thesis on the Vietnam War at Princeton University. With experience in Central America and Bosnia, he witnessed firsthand the complexities of modern irregular warfare and understood why a new approach was required. In 2003, he was sent to Iraq as commander of the famed US Army 101st[t] Airborne Divisione. Stationed at Mosul, he enacted a comprehensive 'hearts and minds' campaign on his own initiative and succeeded in restoring relative calm to the area under his command. This achievement brought him to the attention of Washington.[13] Indeed, the population-centric approach he practised in Mosul was later adopted by the entire US Army in Iraq.

His ideas on waging COIN are best summarized in his widely-read article in *Military Affairs* published in October 2006. Petraeus made 14 observations arising from his experience in Iraq. The first was a reiteration of a point made by T. E. Lawrence in 1917, that it would be 'better the Arabs do it tolerably than you do it perfectly … it is their war and you are to help them, not win it for them'. Thus, Petraeus noted that empowering Iraqis to do the job themselves must be the essence of US strategy. In fact, increasing the number of local stakeholders in the country's success is a key priority.[14] More importantly, he was at pains to stress that 'success in a counterinsurgency requires more than just military operations'.[15] He thus cautioned against a trigger-happy approach, stating that 'we should analyze costs and benefits before each operation'. Operations should in fact be carried out in a way that minimized the chances of creating more enemies than were captured or killed. Intelligence is therefore the key to success, as it precludes large sweeps that prove counterproductive.

To win over the population, 'money is ammunition' since if it was spent effectively and quickly, it could achieve measurable results. This was particularly relevant in the case of Iraq, since the focus after the collapse of the Saddam regime was clearly reconstruction, economic revival

and the restoration of basic services. Above all, Petraeus asserted that 'everyone must do nation-building' and that there is the pressing need to 'help build institutions'.[16] Petraeus also observed that for COIN to work, cultural awareness was important. Mindful of the need to build legitimacy for COIN forces and the host nation government, he also stressed that 'setting the right tone ethically' is a hugely important task. According to Petraeus, 'if leaders fail to get this right, winking at the mistreatment of detainees or at manhandling of citizens, for example, the result can be a sense in the unit that anything goes'.[17]

From late 2005 to early 2007, Petraeus served as Commanding General of Fort Leavenworth (which included the Command and General Staff College) and also headed the US Army Combined Arms Center there. It was during this time that Petraeus and General James Mattis gathered together an eclectic group of experts which led to the publication of the revised Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24 in December 2006. This group included some of the brightest military officers available, many with PhDs. They included, for instance, John Nagl, an armour officer and a former Rhodes scholar who obtained his doctorate at Oxford, and is author of the celebrated book on COIN, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*; and H. R. McMaster, who obtained his PhD from the University of North Carolina and is author of the award-winning and provocative book *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Chief, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam.*[18]

The revised Counterinsurgency Field Manual was written with the objective of overturning the US predilection towards the sole application of overwhelming kinetic military force as a solution to foreign policy problems. As the quotation from President John F. Kennedy on its preface noted, '(military professionals) must know everything you can know about military power, and you must also understand the limits of military power … you must understand that few of the important problems of our time have … been finally solved by military power alone'.[19]

The Manual emphasizes the point that 'military actions by themselves cannot achieve success in COIN'. Indeed, it points out that 'insurgents that never defeat counterinsurgents in combat may still achieve their strategic objectives'. Thus, 'tactical actions … must be linked not only to strategic and operational military objectives but also to the host nation's essential political goals'.[20] The overall political objectives must thus always be kept in focus. Indeed, the Manual advised troops to try 'not to be distracted or forced into a series of reactive moves by a desire to kill or capture' insurgents, since 'provoking combat usually plays into the

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enemy's hands by undermining the population's confidence'. Instead, the Manual advises that it is better to attack the enemy's strategy. Therefore, 'if the insurgents are seeking to recapture a community's allegiance, co-opt that group against them'.[21]

The Manual makes clear that the population is the prize, pointing out that 'the decisive battle is for the people's minds'. Indeed, 'COIN is a struggle for the population's support.' Thus, 'the protection, welfare, and support of the people are vital to success'.[22] The Manual makes clear that COIN forces are responsible for the population's well-being, including the provision of basic economic needs, essential services such as water, electricity and medical care, and the sustenance of key social and cultural institutions.[23]

The Manual also summarized and reiterated the key lessons of past COIN campaigns: legitimacy is the main objective; unity of effort is essential; political factors are primary; counterinsurgents must understand the environment; intelligence drives operations; insurgents must be isolated from their cause and support; security under the rule of law is essential; counterinsurgents should prepare for a long term commitment.[24]

Adopting a hospital analogy, the Manual postulated a three-stage progression in the application of COIN. The first stage is to 'Stop The Bleeding,' which involves protecting the population, breaking the insurgents' initiative and momentum, and setting the conditions for further engagement. The second stage is 'In-Patient Care – Recovery', in which the objective is achieving stability and recovery, primarily through the development of relationships with the host nation. The third and final stage is 'Outpatient Care – Movement to Self-sufficiency,' which aims to expand stability operations to all contested regions, while transitioning responsibility for COIN operations to the host nation. After this, the host nation would ideally reduce the need for foreign assistance as it builds the capacity to provide effective government and security for its citizens, thereby enhancing its legitimacy and isolating the insurgents.[25]

Iraq, COIN and the Surge

The Manual appeared to point the way forward to ending the Iraqi imbroglio, with a roadmap towards eventual disengagement from the increasingly unpopular war. In early 2007, Petraeus was sent back to Iraq as commander of all US forces to implement the comprehensive 'hearts and minds' strategy as set out in the revised COIN Field Manual. Petraeus was assisted by David Kilcullen who was his Senior

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Counterinsurgency Adviser. Kilcullen, author of another celebrated COIN tome, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, was a former Australian Army officer with a doctorate from the University of New South Wales, and has since become perhaps the most prominent of the new breed of COIN analysts to arise out of the chaos of Iraq.[26] Petraeus was also helped by the arrival of an additional 30,000 troops as part of the troop surge advocated by conservative analyst Frederick Kagan, who argued forcefully that they were needed in order to turn an increasingly dire situation around and achieve 'victory'.[27]

The effect on the ground appeared dramatic. The surge and the new COIN strategy appeared to have worked a miracle in Iraq. Within months, Petraeus was able to report to US Congress that 'the military objectives of the surge are, in large measure, being met,' and that Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) as well as Shia militia extremists had been dealt severe blows. Petraeus also stated that the United States would be able to reduce its forces to the pre-surge level within a year without jeopardizing these security gains.[28]

However, the surge had coincided with favorable developments on the ground. Before the surge took place, Sunni tribal leaders, alienated by AQI's deliberate flouting of local tribal customs, its attempts at imposing an alien and austere form of fundamentalism, and its casual brutality, decided to revolt against AQI by working with US forces, in what has been dubbed the Anbar Awakening.[29] Supporters of the surge asserted that the improved security as a result of the arrival of additional troops convinced the Sunnis to abandon AQI and work with US forces.[30] Doug Ollivant, another bright US officer (with a doctorate from Indiana University) who took a prominent part in the planning of the surge, argued however that the surge had not in fact worked.[31] According to Ollivant, the Sunnis realized that they were losing the civil war against the majority Shiites and decided, before the surge took place, to defect to the US side against AQI, in the hope of obtaining a better deal in the new Iraq dominated by the Shiites. Thus, it was fundamentally Iraqis who found a solution to the insurgent-driven civil war.[32]

As Fred Kaplan observed in his article in *Foreign Affairs* in 2013, while the 2007 turnaround in Iraq was remarkable, 'it was not due entirely to the surge, or to counterinsurgency or to Petraeus personally'. Kaplan noted that the Anbar Awakening had preceded Petraeus (and the implementation of his revised COIN strategy) as well as the surge, and it had been initiated by Sunnis, not the United States. Nonetheless, Kaplan noted that it would have remained a local phenomenon if not for Petraeus and his new COIN approach.[33] Indeed, Petraeus quickly co-opted the

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insurgents through financial incentives and embraced them in reconciliation. He was able to do this despite the fact that the insurgents had previously attacked and killed US troops, as a result of the new COIN strategy, which emphasized reconciliation and the winning of hearts and minds, not the single-minded elimination of the insurgent adversary through military and security action. By the end of 2007, some 80,000 Sunnis had joined government-sponsored militias, leading to a changed strategic situation on the ground. Deprived of local support and bases, AQI attacks fell and a relative stability was restored in the western and northern parts of Iraq, including in Baghdad.[34]

A report to the US Congress on Iraq in mid-2008 however, acknowledged that the situation remained 'fragile, reversible and uneven'.[35] This was due to the lack of reconciliation between Sunnis and Shiites, the weakness of institutions and the continuing violence from AQI and Shiite extremist militias, problems which continue to exist in Iraq today. Thus, Kaplan correctly concluded that 'the surge and the switch to COIN can be seen … as mere tactical successes at best.'[36] Clearly, US strategic objectives of a democratic, stable and pro-Western Iraq able to underpin regional order have not been met.[37] While the relative stability after 2007 enabled the US to withdraw its troops in 2011, its government has continued to be racked by corruption and governance issues, with sectarian violence and terrorist attacks still claiming many civilian lives.[38] Worse, the major political players are not only predominantly Shiite but have strong ties with Iran, thus making Iran the major beneficiary of the US invasion of Iraq and the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime.

Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan

In the United States, the change in political leadership with the presidential electoral victory of Barack Obama in 2008 had an impact on the future direction of the US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama had earlier written an Op-Ed (opinion-editorial) in *The New York Times* in July 2008, in which he declared that it had been 'a grave mistake to allow ourselves to be distracted from the fight against Al- Qaeda and the Taliban by invading a country that posed no imminent threat and had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks.' He declared that on his first day in office, he would give the military a new mission: ending the war in Iraq, and focus on dealing with the resurgent Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[39]

By the time Obama was inaugurated in early 2009, the surge and the relative stability had paved the way for a face-saving exit from Iraq by the

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United States, which took place in 2011. More significantly, the departing Bush administration had left Obama with a revised COIN strategy, seemingly validated in Iraq, to take to the Afghanistan and Pakistan (or 'Afpak') theatre. Obama swiftly repeated the Iraq surge complete with additional troops and the new COIN strategy in Afghanistan. General Stanley McCrystal, the former Special Forces commander, was given the task in 2009, with some 40,000 additional US and NATO troops. McCrystal was also accompanied by David Kilcullen, who served in Afghanistan in 2009–10 as COIN Adviser to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). McCrystal however, lasted only a year, and was fired by the President after his comments critical of the Obama administration were published in the *Rolling Stones* magazine.[40] The natural candidate to succeed him was General Petraeus, who was tasked with replicating his previous success in Iraq. In 2010, Petraeus took over from McCrystal but left a year later in 2011 to take up a new appointment as head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The constant changes at the top and lack of coherence has been compounded by the fact that Afghanistan has proven unsuitable for COIN, as it neither had effective government to deliver on development, nor political authority that the population regarded as legitimate. Moreover, the ethnic and tribal fissures and complexities are far deeper in a country that has never been a functioning unitary Westphalian state. The Taliban also have sanctuaries among ethnic Pashtun kin in Northwest Pakistan and there is little prospect of the equivalent of an Anbar Awakening, as the Pashtun-Taliban dominate the insurgency, not its ally, Al-Qaeda, and the Pashtun people have had a long history of fighting imperialist invaders.

Moreover, while COIN operations in Afghanistan have been dominated by the United States, it has been a much more collaborative endeavour compared to Iraq due to the presence of European and other allies under the NATO-led ISAF. Many of these allies, however, did not understand the new US Army COIN approach, and some were clearly doubtful about the prospects of the whole enterprise in Afghanistan. Indeed, many US officers and troops themselves did not appear to understand what the comprehensive 'hearts and minds' approach really entailed, so used were they to utilizing kinetic military force in dealing with problems. In 2012 alone, there were a string of unsavoury incidents involving US troops which shocked and infuriated Afghans. They included a video showing US Marines urinating on dead Afghans, photos showing US troops posing with corpses, and US troops burning Korans. A US soldier also mentally snapped and rampaged through an Afghan village, killing 17 civilians, including women and children.[41] Clearly, the

chain of command had failed in 'setting the right tone ethically' as Petraeus had suggested was important.[42]

Operation 'Enduring Freedom' from 2001 had initially been regarded as an unqualified success as the Taliban and its Al-Qaeda allies had been swiftly ejected from power, but the subsequent inattention to the Afghan theatre has proved costly. The Taliban regrouped in the virtually ungoverned northwest provinces of Pakistan and have since launched a stubborn and growing insurgency that has threatened the Karzai government in Kabul. Instead of frontal attacks, the Taliban resorted to terrorist tactics, such as suicide attacks, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), kidnappings and ambushes, which took a toll on ISAF as well as Afghanistan government forces.

In January 2008, the Afghanistan Study Group Report chaired by General James Jones and Ambassador Thomas Pickering reported that 'the mission to stabilize Afghanistan is faltering …. the long road to reconstruction, reconciliation, and institutional development has grown hazardous'. More seriously, 'many Afghans are uncertain about the direction of their country and are losing confidence in the ability of their army and NATO forces to protect them from the Taliban … they are also increasingly frustrated with the failure of President Karzai's government to extend its authority and services throughout the country and by the lack of improvement in their daily lives …'. The Report thus concluded that 'the Taliban have been able to exploit the Karzai government's shortcomings to their advantage'.[43] This has happened despite continuous development and security efforts since 2001, in a country where, unlike in Iraq, the international community including the United Nations and NATO has backed the US-led invasion and occupation.

The weakness of state institutions, problems of governance and deep corruption which has affected Afghanistan were reflected in the widespread electoral fraud that accompanied Hamid Karzai's re-election as President in late 2009, which the International Crisis Group assessed has eroded the public's confidence in the electoral process and delivered a critical blow to his government's legitimacy.[44] The inability of the Karzai government to govern effectively or legitimately has undermined US and Western objectives in Afghanistan, which are to establish a functioning unitary state with democratic institutions, effective control over its own territory and the ability to provide for its own security. In hindsight, the US-led effort to construct a Westphalian state with all the necessary institutions and systems of governance was an ambitious, even presumptuous undertaking, in view of the tortured history of Afghanistan, its historical

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rejection and hostility to foreign interference and control, and the deep tribal and ethnic fissures in the country.

As the International Crisis Group assessed in 2010, 'successive US administrations deserve much of the blame for this state of affairs … from the start the policy was untenable; selecting some of the most violent and corrupt people in the country, stoking them up with suitcases of cash and promises of more to come and then putting them in charge was never a recipe for stability, never mind institution building'. Thus, after a decade of US engagement, 'Afghanistan operates as a complex system of multi-layered fiefdoms in which insurgents control parallel justice and security organs in many if not most rural areas, while Kabul's kleptocratic elites control the engines of graft and international contracts countrywide'.[45]

The failings of the Western-imposed Karzai regime have resulted in the alienation of the Pashtun majority, which form the backbone of the Taliban insurgency. Thus, 'the Taliban's growing tactical advantage now rests soundly not only in its ability to operate freely in areas where Afghans have largely been abandoned by their government but in its ability to point to Karzai's, and the international community's, failure to deliver on the electoral process'.[46] Indeed, the United Nations Secretary-General warned in a report on Afghanistan in June 2012 that the military drawdown of NATO and US forces and an expected reduction in development assistance has given rise to uncertainty over the sustainability of the gains that had so far been made.[47] Further, the Secretary-General warned that 'the campaign of intimidation (by the Taliban) has been relentless, with targeted assassinations of influential political and religious leaders', with over half of such incidents occurring in the southern provinces, particularly in Kandahar.[48]

The costs of COIN in Afghanistan, the parlous state of the US economy and its finances, and the lack of results on the ground, have sapped US morale and willingness to sustain the fight. Direct spending on the war in Afghanistan totalled US$641 billion from 2001 to 2013, which Anthony Cordesman, the Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, described as 'an incredible amount of money to have spent with so few controls, so few plans, so little auditing, and almost no credible measures of effectiveness'. Worse, the bulk of the spending has been for Afghan security forces, not development. Cordesman, almost in despair, concluded thus that the end effect would be 'to sharply raise the threshold of corruption in Afghanistan, to make transition planning more difficult, and raise the risk that sudden funding cuts will undermine the Afghan government's ability to maintain a viable economy and effective security forces'.[49]

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A solution to the mess in Afghanistan was offered by David Kilcullen, who had the rare opportunity to brief both presidential candidates in late 2008, before the US presidential elections. Kilcullen's strategy is to try to remove all but the hard-core militants from the battlefield, through a combination of negotiations, buying off with financial incentives, sharing of power, or even just ignoring them. At the same time, the US must ruthlessly pursue Al-Qaeda and separate them from the Afghan population, while avoiding a serious backlash against the US in Pakistan through any heavy-handed military intervention. Kilcullen cautioned against over-escalation, but also warned against any premature pullout that would damage US interests. In other words, the US has to pursue a measured commitment in Afghanistan.[50]

By late 2012, President Obama had scaled back costly and time-consuming COIN operations. Instead, the United States has increasingly adopted the 'Counter-Terrorism Plus' strategy that Vice-President Joe Biden had strongly advocated.[51] This consisted of training the Afghan Army to eventually take over, and the adoption of the Israeli-style tactic of eliminating the insurgent leadership through targeted killings using drones and Special Forces throughout the Afpak theatre. In 2012, drone strikes had increased to an average of 33 a month, compared to just 74 drone attacks in the whole of 2007.[52] While this appears increasingly to be just the kind of economical strategy that would fit the times, the problem is that the over-reliance on targeted drone killings has led to criticisms of a lack of accountability, the creation of much resentment among the local population (particularly given the inevitable collateral damage in terms of civilian casualties), and has served to galvanize the militants to carry out their own targeted killings of Afghan officials collaborating with the US. Targeted drone killings have also led to less emphasis given to developing other approaches which could be more legitimate and thus sustainable in the long-term, such as greater collaboration with local host governments and negotiations.

The scheduled withdrawal picked up pace in 2013, with US forces preparing to leave by the end of 2014. This has meant that instead of joint operations, US forces have begun to push Afghan security forces to take the lead. US commanders have called this the 'tough love' approach.[53] The problem with this is that although the United States and its allies are scheduled to withdraw all combat forces from Afghanistan in 2014, the Afghan National Army (ANA) is simply not ready to take over all COIN and security operations. While it reached its planned strength of around 200,000 in mid-2012, it is still almost completely reliant on international support for logistics, intelligence, maintenance, artillery, air and armour.

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As at late 2012, only one of its 23 brigades can operate independently and effectively. With a substantial desertion rate, the ANA requires as many as 60,000 new recruits a year to maintain its manpower strength.[54]

Another major problem has been the gradual increase in the extremist challenge in Pakistan. Since the events of 9/11, Pakistan has become embroiled in the global war on terrorism, as the United States leaned on it to hunt down Al-Qaeda operatives. Although Pakistan, a US ally, has cooperated, it has also been complicit in maintaining links with the Afghan Taliban and with various militant groups involved in terrorist and insurgent attacks in Indian-held Kashmir, as these groups are useful in ensuring that a post-2014 Afghanistan would not be entirely under the sway of India, and also as a means of sustaining its claim to Kashmir.

While these moves have been prompted by the pursuit of the national interest by the state, the governing elite has failed to deal with the rising power of radical Islamist forces. The government's support for the US-led Global War on Terrorism meant that it had to conduct periodic forays into the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), where the fiercely-independent Pashtun tribes have provided sanctuaries to their ethnic kin from across the porous border in Afghanistan. This has led to an explosion of terrorist attacks across Pakistan mounted by the Pakistani Taliban. This included the seizure of the Red Mosque in the capital, Islamabad, in July 2007 by militants demanding the implementation of *sharia*, which resulted in army commandos storming the mosque.[55] This was followed by the spectacular assassination in December 2007 of presidential aspirant Benazir Bhutto, who had taken a tough stand against the militants.[56] Pakistan has reacted to the emerging threat from radical Islamism with denial, with the elite blaming the United States for the violence which they believed has been the result of Pakistan's involvement in the US-led Global War on Terrorism. The elite believe that if United States departed from Afghanistan and stopped drone attacks in northwest Pakistan against the Taliban, the terrorist attacks in Pakistan would somehow stop.[57]

The situation in Pakistan itself has clearly deteriorated, with the state increasingly challenged by radical Islamist elements. There are a number of radical Islamist organizations operating in Pakistan, such as the Lashkar-e-Tayiba (LeT) and the Jaysh-e-Mohammad (JeM), apart from Pakistani and Afghan Taliban groups, all of which have carried out terrorist attacks. The spread of *madrasahs* or religious schools all over Pakistan has also provided channels for the recruitment of thousands of militants. The constant political infighting amongst the civilian political elites as well as between them and the armed forces, in the context of a

dysfunctional state with serious governance issues and weak institutions, has left Pakistan unable or unwilling to respond to the challenges with any coherent strategy.

With the success in locating and killing Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in May 2011, the Obama administration can now claim relative success, setting the stage for the US withdrawal in 2014. This is likely to be accompanied by a reduction in development assistance, as well as serious questions over how NATO and the United States would be able to find the estimated US$4.1 billion annually to sustain the Afghan security forces given the current parlous state of their finances.[58] Whether this will lead to a descent into chaos in Afghanistan, embolden militants in Pakistan to step up their efforts to challenge the Pakistan state, and lead to an even greater crisis requiring renewed US and Western intervention in the troubled Afpak theatre remains to be seen.

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Grand Strategy and COIN

COIN strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan could not, however, substitute for what some felt to be the lack of a grand strategic approach to the global terrorism waged by Al-Qaeda. What was missing was a grand strategy akin to Containment, which was adopted to deal with the worldwide threat of communism following the end of World War II, and which ultimately proved successful.

As early as 2003, Thomas Mockaitis advocated the concept of Global Counter-Insurgency (GCOIN) to deal with Al Qaeda's transformation into a generalized global threat that he felt was akin to that of a globalized insurgency. This strategy should focus on 'winning hearts and minds', similar to the one which defeated the communist insurgency in Malaya in the 1950s. In his formulation, COIN would be writ large on a global scale, utilizing the same COIN principles.[59] In 2006, Bruce Hoffman, one of the world's top terrorism experts, in testimony before the US Congress, also called for a new global strategy built around a comprehensive GCOIN approach to replace the military-oriented GWOT. According to Hoffman, 'such an approach would … knit together the equally critical political, economic, diplomatic, and developmental sides inherent to the successful prosecution of counterinsurgency to the existing dominant military side of the equation'.[60]

The question of how this might work has been suggested by David Kilcullen. He called his global counter-insurgency strategy 'disaggregation,' which focuses on the following: attacking the 'intricate web of dependency' – the links that allow the *jihad* to function effectively;

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interdicting links between Islamist theatres of operation within the global insurgency; denying the ability of regional and regional actors to link and exploit local actors; interdicting flows of information, personnel, finance and technology between and within *jihad* theatres; denying sanctuary areas (including failed and failing states, and states that support terrorism) within theatres; isolating Islamists from the local populations through measures to win hearts and minds, counter Islamist propaganda, create alternative institutions and removing the drivers for popular support to insurgents; and disrupting inputs (such as personnel, finance and information) from sources of Islamism in the Middle East to dispersed *jihad* theatres worldwide. Disaggregation would also involve regional campaigns in locations such as Southeast Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, the greater Middle East and North Africa, where the US would have to create a local security network by 'training, equipping and enabling partner states'. Kilcullen also makes clear that regional COIN would be required 'to reduce the energy level in the global *jihad*'.[61]

The objective is to prevent the dispersed elements of the *jihad* movement coalescing into a systemic threat to the global system. In other writings, Kilcullen also asserted the need for 'situational awareness' and the ability to control a complex 'conflict ecosystem', rather than the defeat of a single enemy.[62] These require a deep knowledge of the cultures present within a population. Indeed, he argued that 'conflict ethnography is key'.[63] While Kilcullen attempted to characterize his new formulation as different from classical COIN, it is undeniably derived from it, particularly given its stress on the comprehensive approach, the winning of the hearts and minds of the population, and the attention to underlying fundamental causes of conflict.

However, GCOIN was never going to work for a number of reasons. Given the enormous expenditure of resources in Iraq and Afghanistan coupled with the meagre and uncertain returns, and the war-weariness of Western publics which have become highly adverse to casualties due to instant media reporting, there has been little appetite for broadening COIN into a global COIN campaign. The enormous long-term debt and economic problems in the United States also mean that it does not have the necessary resources to intervene in every potential *jihadist* theatre around the world, especially when it entails an expensive comprehensive approach involving development as well as the training and arming of various local allies.

Moreover, the United States is no longer the dominant superpower that it was after World War II. With a declining share of the world's economy on account of the rise of Asia and peer competitors such as China,

the diffusion of military technology globally, and the erosion of its soft power as a result of its ill-considered invasion and occupation of Iraq, the United States is no longer in a position to adopt a global grand strategic approach, certainly not on its own. Moreover, there are few signs that its key allies are prepared to sign up to any global grand strategy led by the United States and which quite explicitly serves US national security interests, whether it be directed against global terrorism or another peer competitor.

Conducting a global COIN would also require a fundamental reconfiguration of US military, security and other institutions. This is not likely to occur due to the lack of domestic consensus on such a costly and expansive strategy. Even if it wanted to, the US would also find it enormously difficult to re-orientate its military away from its deeply-ingrained military culture based on the American Way of War. It would also find it difficult to build the necessary whole-of-government approach to COIN which would have to involve an array of non-military departments and institutions, in a country notoriously renowned for its bureaucratic complexity, vested interests and infighting.

More fundamentally, the very premise of a global insurgency is questionable. Al- Qaeda's ideology may have found resonance among some of the alienated throughout the worldwide Muslim *umma* or community, but the very diversity of the Muslim world mitigates against an effective networked and coordinated radical Islamist threat that could seriously threaten international order. The chequered fortunes of AQI in Iraq should warn against that. Indeed, in almost every Muslim community in the world, radical Islamism has faced a stronger ethno-nationalist imperative which has often proven stronger, as in the case among the Sunnis in the Anbar Awakening in Iraq. Although Al-Qaeda had sought to link Muslim rebels around the globe to a global religious *jihad* against the West, many local Muslim rebels in fact do not see themselves as part of this fight. Instead, Muslim rebels in places such as Mindanao and southern Thailand are more concerned with local political, economic and social grievances than the global *jihad* against the West. Thus, the danger exists that a global COIN approach which treated Muslim alienation and rebellion around the world as a possible monolithic whole could lead to policies that would ultimately lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Indeed, the reasons for Muslim alienation and rebellion throughout the Muslim world are complex and multifaceted, and deserve the very deep understanding of the local conflict ethnography that Kilcullen had also advocated.

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Conclusion: The Future of COIN

Recent US experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has proven that COIN, however revised and updated to fit the globalized era in which we live, is a problematic and ineffective solution to the irregular warfare waged by insurgents. Classical COIN had rarely worked, and when it did in places like Malaya, it was because of favourable conditions and dynamics. Even then, the communists in fact achieved one of their key objectives: the British granted independence to Malaya in 1957. At best, COIN in Malaya was successful in a specific historical and geographical context, and thus cannot be transposed to the modern era with its different and more complex dynamics. Instead, historical and contemporary experience with COIN point to the fact that Western armed forces, particularly those of the United States, are simply not good at waging them. Calls to elevate COIN into a global grand strategic approach are therefore also unrealistic, even if the United States had the resources to do so. Besides, the days of a US-led grand strategic approach are over.

Yet, while COIN in its contemporary guise has failed to deliver long-term, tangible results, thinking about how to counter asymmetric challenges, including the waging of irregular warfare, cannot be ignored. As Kilcullen himself observed, 'Any smart enemy has watched what is happening in Iraq and Afghanistan and they would have worked out how to beat the West, so this kind of thing is not going to go away.' He also noted that 'until we demonstrate an ability to win this kind of campaign, any smart enemy is going to adopt these tactics'.[64]

The likelihood that external interventions may still be required in the future, for a variety of reasons such as in response to a humanitarian crisis or a significant threat to primary Western interests, makes this imperative. Moreover, while COIN is not likely to become the basis of a grand strategy, some of its basic principles are useful in orientating future approaches to insurgencies and terrorism towards comprehensive and collaborative approaches, as opposed to merely hard security operations unilaterally undertaken by states which fail to address the underlying fundamental causes of political violence and which undermine long-term legitimacy. What Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated is that insurgencies are complex phenomena and cannot be dealt with solely through the use of kinetic military force. Equal, if not more, attention, has to be paid to understanding their causes and dealing with the fundamental political, economic and social roots of alienation and rebellion, and in achieving the necessary political legitimacy that would undermine support for the insurgents.

What will this mean for the future of COIN? The United States (and the West) will have to accept the chastening lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan lest it repeat it: that it is not good at waging COIN and must try to avoid getting involved in such costly campaigns again. If it must consider intervention abroad, this intervention will have to fulfill a set of demanding conditions. All other possibilities, including diplomacy and negotiations, must first be exhausted and intervention must be as a last resort. Vital, primary strategic interests with direct implications and impacts on the United States and the West must be at stake. Even then, it must not repeat the mistake of Iraq; the US and its Western allies will have to seek broad legitimacy for any armed intervention, in accordance with the international laws of conflict, and in collaboration with regional allies. This is imperative in order to preserve the moral high ground of legitimacy, as ultimately, this is what would defeat the insurgents. Any armed intervention must also have clear, limited and achievable political objectives, and there must be a viable exit plan.

In addition, there must also exist a host nation possessing the minimum requirements for effectiveness, namely, a relatively functional government that could implement development, legitimate political authority that is respected by at least the majority of the people, and a political elite willing to take responsibility for solving its own problems, albeit with external assistance. Ultimately, the host nation must be prepared to take responsibility for its own stability and security, and the intervening Western powers must bolster the host nation government's legitimacy as well as the legitimacy of its own intervention, by avoiding the temptation to use a purely kinetic military approach from the outset. This includes the temptation to use drone strikes as a substitute for the much harder task of building collaborative approaches with the host government, and working to deal with underlying causes of political alienation and violence.

NOTES

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