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Counterinsurgency: possible, not recommended

Best-Practice Counterinsurgency

The Afghanistan and Iraq examples demonstrate that if we *must* engage in large-scale counterinsurgency campaigns, then there are certain techniques that can work when properly applied in support of a well-considered political strategy. Indeed, drawing together our observations from Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as Timor, Thailand and Pakistan, it is possible to distill a series of principles for effective counterinsurgency. These are neither original, nor unique to current conflicts, or to the United States: historically, all successful counterinsurgencies seem to have included some variation on them. But current counterinsurgency campaigns are occurring in traditional, often tribal societies, and under resource constraints that make classical counterinsurgency methods (particularly the traditionally-recommended force ratio of 20 police or military personnel per 100 local people)ⁱ simply unrealistic. Nevertheless, the field evidence suggests that effectiveness improves exponentially when counterinsurgents apply eight “best practices” (discussed in more detail below):

1. A **political strategy** that builds government effectiveness and legitimacy while marginalizing insurgents, winning over their sympathizers and co-opting local allies;
2. A **comprehensive approach** that closely integrates civil and military efforts, based on a common diagnosis of the situation and a solid long-term commitment to the campaign;
3. **Continuity** of key personnel and policies, with sufficient authority and resources to do the job;
4. **Population-centric security** founded on presence, local community partnerships, self-defending populations, and small-unit operations that keep the enemy off balance;
5. **Cueing and synchronization** of development, governance and security efforts, building them in a simultaneous, coordinated way that supports the political strategy;
6. **Close and genuine partnerships** that put the host nation government in the lead and builds self-reliant, independently functioning institutions over time;
7. Strong emphasis by coalition forces on **building effective and legitimate local security forces**, balanced by a willingness to close with the enemy in direct combat while these forces are built; and
8. A **region-wide approach** that disrupts insurgent safe havens, controls borders and frontier regions, and undermines terrorist infrastructure in neighboring countries.

Political Strategy. Building the political legitimacy and effectiveness of a government affected by an insurgency, in the eyes of its people and the international community, is fundamental. Political reform

and development represents the hard core of any counterinsurgency strategy, and provides a framework for all other counterinsurgency programs and initiatives. This requires a genuine willingness to reform oppressive policies, remedy grievances and fix problems of governance that create conditions extremists exploit. In parallel, the political strategy is designed to undermine support for insurgents, win over their sympathizers to the government side, and co-opt local community leaders to ally themselves with the government.

Comprehensive Approach. Best-practice counterinsurgency closely integrates political, security, economic and information components. It synchronizes civil and military efforts under unified political direction and common command-and-control, funding and resource mechanisms. This requires a shared diagnosis of the situation — agreed between civilian and military agencies, coalition and host nation governments, and updated through continuous, objective situational assessment.

Continuity, Authority and Resources. Key personnel (commanders, ambassadors, political staffs, aid mission chiefs, key advisers and intelligence officers) in a counterinsurgency campaign should be there “for the duration”. If this is not possible, they should serve the longest tour feasible. Key personnel must receive adequate authority and sufficient resources to get the job done while taking a long-term view of the problem, so that a consistent set of policies can be developed and applied over time.

Population-Centric Security. Effective counterinsurgency provides human security to the population, where they live, twenty-four hours a day. This, rather than destroying the enemy, is the central task. It demands continuous presence by security forces that protect population centers, local alliances and partnerships with community leaders, the creation of self-defending populations through local neighborhood watch and guard forces, and small-unit ground forces that operate in tandem with local security forces, developing pervasive situational awareness, quick response times and unpredictable operating patterns that keep the enemy off balance.

Synchronization of security, development and governance. Timeliness and reliability in delivering on development promises is critical in winning popular support. This requires careful cueing of security operations to support development and governance activities, and *vice versa*. In turn, counterinsurgents must synchronize all these activities to support the overall political strategy through a targeted information campaign.

Partnership with the host nation government. Best-practice strategy puts the host government genuinely and effectively in the lead, via integrated “campaign management” planning and consultation mechanisms. These apply coalition expertise to cover local gaps, build the host government’s capacity, respect its sovereignty and leverage its local knowledge and “home-ground advantage”.

Effective, legitimate local security forces. Effective counterinsurgency requires indigenous security forces that are legitimate in local eyes, operate under the rule of law, and can effectively protect local communities against insurgents. Building such forces takes vastly more time and resources than is usually appreciated. While these forces are being built, the coalition must be willing to close with the enemy in direct combat, thereby minimizing insurgent pressure on local institutions. Direct combat (not remote engagement) is essential to minimize collateral non-combatant casualties, ensure flexible responses to complex ground environments, and allow rapid political and economic follow-up after combat action.

Region-wide approach. Because of the active sanctuary insurgents typically rely on in neighboring countries, and the support they receive from trans-national terrorist organizations and cross-border criminal networks, an integrated region-wide strategy is essential. This must focus on disrupting insurgent safe havens, controlling borders and frontier regions, and undermining terrorist infrastructure in neighboring countries, while building a diplomatic consensus that creates a regional and international environment inhospitable to terrorists and insurgents.

Necessary but not preferred

Iraq in 2007, and parts of the Afghan campaign in 2006-8, demonstrated that counterinsurgency can work when done properly. But we must recognize that, against the background of an AQ strategy specifically designed to soak us up in a series of large-scale interventions, counterinsurgency in general is a game we need to avoid wherever possible. If we are forced to intervene, we have a reasonably sound idea of how to do so. But we should avoid such interventions wherever possible, simply because the costs are so high and the benefits so doubtful.

In my view, as discussed already, the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was an extremely serious strategic error. The task of moment is not to cry over spilt milk, but rather to help clean it up: a task in which the surge, the comprehensive counterinsurgency approach, and our troops on the ground are admirably succeeding as of late 2008. This method thus represents the best approach to ending the Iraq war. When I went to Iraq in 2007 (and on both previous occasions) it was to help end the war, by suppressing the violence and defeating the insurgency: to *end* the war, not abandon it half-way through, leaving the Iraqis to be slaughtered. When the United States and the coalition invaded Iraq in 2003, we took on a moral and legal responsibility for its people's wellbeing. Regardless of anyone's position on the decision to invade, those obligations still stand and cannot be wished away merely because they have proven inconvenient.

Still, like almost every other counterinsurgency professional, I warned against the war in 2002-3 on the grounds that it was likely to be extremely difficult, demand far more resources than our leaders seemed willing to commit, inflame world Muslim opinion making our counterterrorism tasks harder, and entail a significant opportunity cost in Afghanistan and elsewhere. This was hardly an original or brilliant insight. Rather, it was a view shared with the rest of the counterinsurgency community: one would be hard-pressed to find any professional counterinsurgent who thought the 2003/4 Iraq strategy was sensible.

The issue for practitioners in the field today is not to second-guess the decisions of 2003, but to get on with the job at hand, which is what both Americans and Iraqis expect of us. In that respect, the new strategy and tactics implemented in 2007, and which relied for their effectiveness on a population-centric strategy and the extra troop numbers of the surge, *are* succeeding and deserve to be supported. As described in Chapter 3, in 2006 a normal night in Baghdad involved 120 to 150 dead Iraqi civilians, and each month we lost dozens of Americans killed or maimed. In 2008, a bad night involves one or two dead civilians, U.S. losses are dramatically down—to levels not regularly seen since 2003—and security is beginning to be restored. Therefore, even on the most conservative estimate, in the eighteen months of the surge to date the new counterinsurgency approach has saved 12,000 to 16,000 Iraqis and hundreds of American lives. And we are now, finally, in a position to pursue a political strategy that will ultimately see Iraq stable, our forces withdrawn, and the whole sorry adventure of Iraq cleaned up to

the maximum extent possible so that we can get on with the fight in other theaters—most pressingly, Afghanistan.

On the ground, in both Iraq and Afghanistan over several years, I have fought and worked beside brave and dedicated military and civilian colleagues who are making an enormous difference in an incredibly tough environment. I salute their dedication —Americans, allies, Iraqis and Afghans alike— and I hold all of them in the highest possible regard. These quiet professionals deserve our unstinting support. Besides having the courage to close with and finish the enemy, (an enemy capable of literally unbelievable depravity and cruelty towards its own people) they have proven capable of great compassion and kindness toward the people they protect. The new tactics and tools they are now applying —protecting the people 24/7, building alliances of trust with local communities, putting political reconciliation and engagement first, connecting the people to the government, co-opting anyone willing to be reconciled and simultaneously eliminating the irreconcilables with precision and discrimination—these techniques are the best way out of a bad situation which we should never have gotten ourselves into.

My personal position on counterinsurgency in general, and on Iraq and Afghanistan in particular, could therefore be summarized as “never again, but...” That is, we should avoid any future large-scale, unilateral military intervention in the Islamic world, for all the reasons already discussed. But, recognizing that while our conventional warfighting superiority endures, any sensible enemy will choose to fight us in this manner, we should hold on to the knowledge and corporate memory so painfully acquired, across all the agencies of all the coalition partners, in Afghanistan and Iraq. And should we find ourselves (by error or necessity) in a similar position once again, then the best practices we have re-discovered in current campaigns represent an effective approach: effective, but not recommended.

The strategic arithmetic of local security forces

As mentioned, one of the ways in which current counterinsurgencies differ markedly from those of the classical era is in force ratio: that is, there are simply insufficient western troops available to conduct traditional counterinsurgency with anything like the necessary troop numbers. But the events of the Sunni Awakening in Iraq in 2007, and especially the tribal revolt against AQI, suggest a strategic arithmetic of local partnerships which could be very significant in future campaigns.

In Iraq in 2007, as already noted, we found ourselves with simply insufficient forces to secure the entire population and to be everywhere we needed to be. We did not have any additional U.S. troops available for the Iraqi theater, but even if we had, their impact would have been quite limited. For example, imagine we had possessed an additional 50,000 U.S. troops and inserted them into the Iraqi theater of operations at the beginning of 2007. Of those 50,000 troops, approximately 60% (30,000 personnel) would have been tied up in headquarters, forward operating base security, logistics, maintenance, communications, rear area security, guarding lines of communication, or other non-combat tasking. This would leave about 20,000 combat troops available for operations. On a 2:1 or 1:1 rotation model (since even combat troops need to rest, refit and recuperate between operations) this would translate into between 7,000 and 10,000 additional troops out on the ground, providing security or improving situational awareness, at any one time. The effect on the enemy’s recruiting base and deployed forces would be nil, since all these troops would come from outside Iraq. Thus, overall, for an

investment of an additional 50,000 U.S. troops we would gain a net improvement of 7-10,000 personnel in the available force ratio. To summarize:

Option 1 – insert 50 000 U.S. troops into theater

<i>FOB security, logistics, HQ, rear area or other non-combat tasking:</i>	<i>30 000 troops</i>
<i>Force available for combat tasking on a 1:1 or 2:1 rotation model:</i>	<i>20,000</i>
<i>Force actually out on the ground at any time :</i>	<i>7-10,000</i>
<i>Effect on enemy forces and recruiting base:</i>	<i>NIL</i>

NET EFFECT: 7-10,000 improvement in force ratio

Consider, however, an alternative approach. Instead of inserting an additional 50,000 U.S. troops into theater, we would attempt to win over 50,000 Iraqis into Local Security Forces such as neighborhood watch organizations, concerned citizens groups, local security guard forces, auxiliary police and the like. (In point of fact, as of mid-2008 there were approximately 95,000 Iraqis, mostly former Sunni insurgents or former members of local community or tribal militias, who were so employed by the coalition or the Iraqi government).ⁱⁱ In this approach, there is no requirement for headquarters personnel, FOB security, rear area or logistics support since all these recruits live and work out on the ground. For the same reason, there is no “rotation model” as such, since the full number of personnel are permanently in the field. Assuming a normal rate of sickness, absenteeism and rest, this means approximately 40,000 additional security personnel are out on the ground at any one time. Some coalition forces would clearly be needed for mentoring, supervision and support – approximately a one-in-ten ratio, worst case, giving an additional coalition overhead of 5,000 troops. But, most importantly, the act of recruiting these personnel has an enormous effect on the enemy’s recruiting base and available manpower, denying 50,000 fighters to the insurgents, while putting all these fighters’ families and local communities into the ledger on the government side. This gives a net benefit, in terms of force ratio, of 85-90,000, or eight to twelve times the benefit of inserting an equivalent number of western troops into theater. To summarize this option:

Option 2 – win over 50 000 Iraqis into LSFs

<i>FOB security, logistics, HQ, rear area or other non-combat tasking:</i>	<i>NIL</i>
<i>Force available for combat tasking on a 1:1 or 2:1 rotation model:</i>	<i>50,000</i>
<i>Force actually out on the ground at any time (ie net effect):</i>	<i>40,000</i>
<i>Coalition forces required for partnering, mentoring and supervision:</i>	<i>5,000</i>
<i>Effect on enemy forces and recruiting base:</i>	<i>-50,000</i>

NET EFFECT: 80-95,000 pax improvement in force ratio

(i.e. 8 to 12 times the value of inserting an equal number of coalition troops, even without counting families and local communities)

Clearly, there are issues of loyalty, motivation and reliability in recruiting so many local people into security forces, as discussed in Chapter 2. But these can be overcome through supervision, vetting, employment of forces on missions within their capabilities and skillset, and proper mentoring and advisory teams. Political measures to secure the loyalty of these personnel toward the national government are more difficult, but still feasible. And the strategic arithmetic of local partnerships is

inescapable: for an equivalent investment of personnel, the benefit gained by developing local partnerships with the community being protected is on the order of 10 times greater than what is achieved by inserting western troops into the environment. In addition to creating self-protecting communities, isolating extremists and vastly improving situational awareness by tapping into large-scale community networks, this approach dramatically reduces the number of coalition troops required to carry out a counterinsurgency mission. The 95,000 Iraqis now working with the coalition represent an improvement in force ratio of more than 200,000 personnel, an improvement without which the current security gains in Iraq would have been completely impossible.

Again: counterinsurgency is feasible, though definitely *not* preferred in the current strategic environment. But if we do need to engage in it, especially in traditional tribal societies, then an emphasis on local partnerships and local security forces that protect communities and guard against extremist presence is likely to be an essential component of such a campaign.

At a more strategic level, such local partnerships are also a key component in coping with the threat of transnational *takfiri* terrorism.

ⁱ For a discussion of force ratios in counterinsurgency and nation-building see Seth G. Jones, Jeremy M. Wilson, Andrew Rathmell and K. Jack Riley, *Establishing Law and Order after Conflict*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Ca, 2005.

ⁱⁱ Conversation with Iraq desk officer, National Security Council, September 2008.