



U.S. Special Operations Forces participated in exercise Jackal Stone 10 with special forces from several European countries

U.S. Army (Donald Sparks)

# Counterinsurgency Not a Strategy, But a Necessary Capability

By T. X. HAMMES

**F**acing major budget cuts, the Department of Defense is entering the first phase of what will be a bruising budget battle. With U.S. participation in the war in Iraq essentially over, and the war in Afghanistan winding down, a central issue will be what capabilities the United States requires in its future force structure.

As Frank Hoffman noted in April 2009, the force structure discussion has developed four schools of thought:

- Counterinsurgents, who emphasize the high likelihood and rising salience of irregular adversaries
- Traditionalists, who place their focus on states that present conventional threats

- Utility Infielders, who balance risk by striving to create forces agile enough to cover the full spectrum of conflict

- Division of Labor proponents, who balance risk differently by specializing forces to cover different missions to enhance readiness.<sup>1</sup>

The structure and, to a certain degree, size of U.S. forces will depend heavily on which of these schools of thought guides the Pentagon's decisionmaking. Each school has its own proponents. The decisions will impact hundreds of billions in investment over the next decade and will shape the thinking of a generation of defense leaders.

However, it is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate these schools of thought. Rather, the discussion is limited to why the current U.S. approach to counterinsurgency is failing, why the United States will nevertheless have to conduct counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in the future, and what COIN approach has worked in the past. Finally, the article closes with suggestions for how future force structure can incorporate a COIN capability at a reasonable cost.

Does counterinsurgency even have a future in the U.S. military?

The concept of COIN strategy is being questioned. In July 2010, Michael Hirsh of *Newsweek* wrote "the [COIN] strategy

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that [U.S. Army retired General Stanley] McChrystal championed and [U.S. Army retired General David] Petraeus virtually invented may be fatally flawed, at least as it's practiced in Afghanistan."<sup>2</sup> Hirsh is only one of the voices questioning whether the "COIN strategy" now in use by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan can succeed.

Despite the sharp criticism, ISAF has a number of vocal supporters of its COIN strategy—not the least being General Petraeus and U.S. Marine Corps General John Allen. These supporters state that, prior to 2009, ISAF was not using a COIN strategy and therefore was losing. They contend that General McChrystal's adoption of COIN strategy fundamentally altered ISAF's approach and is the route to success. These proponents point to the recent progress in raising and training Afghan National Security Forces; the increasing presence of U.S. advisors with those Afghan forces as the Afghans take the lead; the expansion of security to larger segments of the population; the improvements in U.S. intelligence efforts that allow extensive targeting of Taliban leaders; and some improvements in the capacity of the Afghan government.<sup>3</sup> They state these efforts reflect a genuine COIN strategy. More precisely, it is population-centric counterinsurgency.

Unfortunately, this conflation of COIN techniques and strategy by participants in the discussion is not helpful.

### Why Counterinsurgency Is Not a Strategy

Any discussion of future force structure must recognize that counterinsurgency is not a strategy, but merely one possible way in the ends-ways-means concept of strategy. Thus, the discussion of a COIN strategy is misleading. The very phrase *COIN strategy* confuses a method or way of fighting with a complete strategy. Counterinsurgency is not a strategy but rather a range of possible ways in the ends, ways, and means formulation of strategy. Furthermore, *population-centric* counterinsurgency, as documented in Field Manual 3–24, *Counterinsurgency*, is only one possible approach to counterinsurgency. Unfortunately, the United States seems to have taken one doctrinal approach to a specific problem—insurgency—and elevated it to the level of strategy. A disturbingly large portion of the discourse within the U.S.



U.S. Special Operations officer briefs Armed Forces of the Philippines soldiers on information operations during Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines

U.S. Navy (Roland A. Franklin)

Government simply accepts FM 3–24's recommended best practices and accepts that, if applied as a package, they create a strategy. Yet by nature, best practices in counterinsurgency are essentially tactical- or, at the most, operational-level efforts.

In fact, there is no general COIN strategy, just as there is no antisubmarine or antiaircraft strategy. One does not develop a strategy against an operational technique. Rather, each specific conflict requires the development of a strategy that includes

With this level of understanding, they will be ready to start the difficult process of developing coherent ends, ways, and means; prioritizing and sequencing their actions; and developing a theory of victory. Only then will they have a strategy that is appropriate for the actual conflict.

With this clarification, it is possible to move on to a discussion of why the United States requires a COIN capability and how it can achieve that capability at a relatively low cost.

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assumptions, coherent ends-ways-means, priorities, sequencing of events, and a theory of victory. And any strategy must be designed to be flexible enough to respond to the innumerable changes that are an inherent part of any conflict. A strategy devised for Iraq simply will not work under the very different political, social, and economic conditions of Afghanistan.

Rather than unquestioningly accepting that COIN strategy is the correct solution to a conflict, planners must start by first understanding the specific conflict. Since it will be impossible to know everything necessary to develop a strategy, they must next think through and clearly state their assumptions about that specific conflict.

### A COIN Capability Is Needed

While one might think the discussion of the validity of counterinsurgency as a concept will lose its importance as the United States withdraws from Afghanistan, the question has enduring relevance. One of the critical issues facing the Pentagon is building the appropriate force structure in the resource-constrained, post-Afghanistan period. The United States must balance the risk of not being prepared in some mission areas against the ongoing cost of maintaining readiness across the spectrum of conflict. If the COIN skeptics prevail, then the United States may choose to severely reduce or eliminate the capabilities necessary for fighting an insurgency. In short, the Pentagon could choose the





ISAF special operations forces provide secure checkpoint at Afghan construction site in Tagab, Afghanistan

same route it chose in the late 1970s, which left the country unprepared for the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

However, the discussion of COIN strategy is problematic because it clouds the real issue. Rather than arguing about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of a nonexistent strategy, we need to be discussing more fundamental questions. Does the United States need to maintain COIN capabilities in its national security tool kit? If so, what should such capabilities focus on? Answers to these questions are an essential part of answering the larger question concerning future U.S. force structure.

Much like after the Vietnam War, the presence of a potential peer competitor strongly reinforces the argument that counterinsurgency is not an appropriate mission for resource-constrained armed forces. Many defense analysts see China as the primary threat and wish to focus U.S. defense efforts on a naval and air campaign in the Far East. Advocates for this position believe the decade of COIN operations in Afghanistan and Iraq has starved the Navy and Air Force. They feel that investment post-Afghanistan must focus on ensuring we maintain our edge against the rising threats in these arenas—and that, with pending budget cuts, the United States must focus its decreasing assets against China. In short: hard times mean hard choices.

### Drivers of Insurgency

As much as the American military would like to turn away from its bitter experiences with insurgency, the fact remains that insurgents, in a variety of forms, will threaten U.S. national interests and thus our forces must be prepared to respond. However, in thinking about what forms this response will

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take, U.S. planners must understand that over the last 60 years the primary drivers of insurgency have changed. The initial major driver—anticolonialism—has obviously passed. Colonial powers have been driven out. Their withdrawal led directly to the second major driver of insurgencies—conflicts over who will rule the state the colonists established and left behind. A clear example of this motivation is the long war over who would rule Angola: the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola or the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola.

A third driver has now emerged—the desire to change the colonial borders that were drawn without any consideration of

local ethnic, cultural, and religious networks. We are seeing an increase in conflicts in regions where colonial borders artificially divided much older cultures. The Pashtuns and Baluch of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran are prime examples. They join the Kurds of the Middle East in struggling against the colonial boundaries. We are also seeing the emergence of transborder separatist movements in several nations in Africa. The different drivers have dramatically changed the character of the insurgencies, their organization, and their approach to gaining power. It has not changed the fact that they will use force to achieve their goals.

Inevitably, whether the conflict is over the control of existing borders or the need to change borders, some of these conflicts will impact the strategic interests of the United States. Whether through destabilizing important allies or impinging on world energy supplies, these conflicts will be important to the United States. Some parties to the conflicts will also provide either sanctuaries or safe havens for terrorists who are focused on striking the United States or its allies. In short, U.S. interest in insurgency and, of necessity, counterinsurgency will continue.

### Range of Approaches

However, that does not mean we should look to the Iraq or Afghan campaigns when

considering the appropriate force structure. While FM 3-24 focuses on population-centric counterinsurgency, recent history has shown there are actually a wide variety of approaches that can be used. Some are not appropriate for a liberal democracy, but it is important that those thinking about counterinsurgency recognize that many methods exist.

Three methods not appropriate for a liberal democracy are deportation, ruthless suppression, and in-migration. In 1944, the Soviets deported the Chechens and Ingush from their native territory and spread them throughout the Soviet Union as “special settlers.” Although the Chechens and Ingush had not been disloyal, Stalin used this deportation as a preemptive measure. In Maoist terms, he drained the sea. It worked. Even after the Chechens were allowed to return in 1959, they did not revolt. It was not until 1994 following the collapse of the Soviet Union that they declared independence.

This time the Russians attempted ruthless suppression of the entire population in an effort to destroy the insurgency—it failed. This approach also failed in Afghanistan despite the Soviets’ willingness to kill more than 1 million Afghans. However, massive suppression and terror can work. For example, in 1982, Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad used this approach to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood. Backed by ruthless security agencies, this approach suppressed dissent for almost 30 years.

The Chinese developed a third approach in dealing with the Uyghur people. China provided sufficient economic incentives to encourage huge numbers of Han Chinese to move to Xinjiang Province. As a result, the Uyghur have become a minority in their home territory. Essentially, the Chinese changed the salinity of the sea.

While these methods are not palatable for democracies, others are. For insurgencies dependent on charismatic leaders, decapitation has worked. By capturing Abimael Guzman, the Peruvians crippled the Sendero Luminoso insurgency.

In addition, counterinsurgency that focuses on the enemy or population has been used repeatedly by democracies. Britain used this approach in Malaya, Kenya, Oman, Northern Ireland, and Aden. The United States has used it in the Philippines (1899–1902, 1946–1954, 2001–present), Vietnam, El Salvador, Colombia, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

While these campaigns are obviously of interest, the most important question is what approaches have worked best for the United States as an expeditionary power.

### What Has Worked?

When discussing the future of counterinsurgency for the United States, it is essential to differentiate between those approaches that worked for domestic counterinsurgency and those that work for expeditionary counterinsurgency. FM 3-24 drew most of its best practices from the domestic COIN efforts of the British in Malaya and Northern Ireland and the French in Algeria. In all three cases, the counterinsurgent was also the government. Thus, they could make the government legitimate by removing any person or organization that was hurting its legitimacy. This was also

kept the U.S. presence from distorting the local political and economic reality too badly. Second, it prevented impatient Americans from attempting to do the job themselves because they simply lacked the resources.

### Implications for Force Structure

Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan have demonstrated that using a direct approach to population-centric counterinsurgency is manpower intensive and actually reduces the political leverage the United States has with the host country government. In contrast, the Philippines, Thailand, El Salvador, and Colombia demonstrated that an indirect support can both drive a population-centric approach and provide greater leverage over the host government. If the host government refuses to make the necessary political

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the approach the United States used in the Philippines between 1900 and 1902.

However, in expeditionary counterinsurgency, it is much more difficult for the outside power to force the host country to make the necessary political changes. As the United States experienced in Vietnam and Afghanistan and the Soviets in Afghanistan, an outside power could not force the government to be legitimate. Even removing illegitimate leaders and replacing them with those picked by the expeditionary power failed.

That said, the United States has been successful at expeditionary counterinsurgency. U.S. efforts to assist the Philippines in the 1950s and again from 2001 to the present, Thailand in the 1960s and 1970s, El Salvador in the 1980s, and Colombia against its insurgents in the 1990s and 2000s have all been successful. In each case, the United States used an indirect approach. The indirect approach meant that U.S. personnel provided advice and support to host nation forces as those nations fought. While this support at times even included tactical leadership, the focus was always on assisting the host nation and not on U.S. forces engaging the enemy. In addition, these efforts were kept relatively small. This had two major benefits. First, it

reforms to generate popular support, the United States can disengage without a major loss of face. Host nation politicians understand this fact and thus have to deal with the real possibility of losing U.S. support. In contrast, when the United States has made a major commitment of its own troops and prestige, host nation politicians have repeatedly refused to modify their behavior, seeming to believe the United States could not or would not back out of such a major commitment. In fact, until the U.S. population grew tired of the commitment, it did not. Actually, the United States stayed well past the point when it was clear the host nation government was simply not going to make the changes necessary for population-centric counterinsurgency to work.

Thus, although the United States must maintain a capability to intervene in insurgencies that threaten its vital interests, that does not mean maintaining a major portion of its force structure for that mission. Rather, it means studying the successful *expeditionary* COIN campaigns of the United States and other liberal democracies and developing a doctrine that uses those approaches. The quick analysis in this paper indicates that an indirect approach, with the United States



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limiting itself to training and advising local personnel in conducting a population-centric COIN effort, has the greatest potential. Further study is obviously required, but the cases noted indicate future COIN efforts will rely heavily on Special Forces (not special operations), trainers, and advisors. While this creates a significant demand for more senior personnel, it does not require a major portion of U.S. force structure. It does require updating doctrine, education, training, and personnel systems.

**Doctrine, Education, Training, and Personnel Tracks**

As a number of commentators have noted, it is time to update FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*. The authors did an exceptional job of rushing this doctrinal publication into print to support the effort in Iraq. However, there is now time to go back and complete the work. The manual must be expanded to include the range of COIN approaches that have worked. The design chapter must also be expanded to guide commanders in developing a true understanding of the situation so they can select an appropriate approach. While the United States has had the most success with indirect and small efforts when conducting expeditionary counterinsurgency, that approach should not be the default position. Instead, the design process must provide an initial understanding of the problem so the commander can select the appropriate response. He must make the choice with the full understanding that his forces' interaction with the problem will change it and, therefore, the commander and his political bosses must be prepared to change the approach.

In turn, the Services' educational institutions must ensure their courses deepen the student's understanding of insurgency and counterinsurgency. While the United States might not wish to be engaged in these conflicts in the future, there is a high probability that insurgency will affect areas of vital interest to the Nation. Counterinsurgency must remain a part of the joint community's repertoire. Course graduates must incorporate what they learned in the training cycles of the organizations they join.

Operationally, the U.S. Government needs to focus on providing effective advisors for those at-risk nations that are of strategic interest. The idea will be to prevent conflicts from maturing into full-scale insurgencies.

Clearly, this effort will have to be an all-of-government effort and will require a small training and education element both to prepare personnel for advisory billets and to maintain and update doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures.

With proper understanding, it becomes clear we do not need large conventional forces dedicated to COIN training. That said, some conventional forces will likely be necessary for a COIN campaign. Sufficient training can be integrated into the training cycle of designated units.

Perhaps the most important changes will be to the personnel system. Changes in doctrine, education, training, and even operations will not have major impacts unless the various government personnel systems recognize counterinsurgency and peacetime advisory billets as career enhancing. To provide the best possible advisors, personnel should first serve in a similar billet in U.S. forces before advising a counterpart in a host nation. Further, they must be appropriately rewarded for assuming these challenging jobs. Advising and the accompanying increased understanding of another culture must be recognized as a critical element in the path to flag or Senior Executive Service rank.

Our understanding of counterinsurgency has been clouded by discussion of "COIN strategy." We need to move past this discussion and develop the tools to analyze an insurgency, determine an appropriate strategy for that specific case, and then employ the proper elements of the U.S. Government. This does not require a large dedicated force structure, but it does require an understanding that insurgency remains a significant threat and the United States needs to be able to respond appropriately. **JFQ**

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Frank G. Hoffman, *Hybrid Threats: Reconceptualizing the Evolving Character of Modern Conflict*, Strategic Forum No. 240 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, April 2009), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hirsh, "Replacing McChrystal Doesn't Change Anything," *Newsweek*, June 24, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel Fick and John Nagl, "The Long War May be Growing Shorter," *The New York Times*, February 21, 2011, 19.