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THE ROLE OF CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURES IN COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS

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ABSTRACT: The establishment of a safe, secure and predictable environment combined with a capable legislation and operational key infrastructures is the only possible way for COIN forces to permanently isolate the insurgents from the populace and to gain their support. This can only be achieved through the combined and simultaneous utilization of skilled and proficient security forces and by administrative, economic, social development.

KEYWORDS: asymmetric, insurgency, COIN, innovation, critical infrastructure, normative system

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of written history there have been numerous conflicts and small wars that were not waged between two states, but between a state and a non-state actor. Since in many cases there were huge inequalities between the belligerents' relative military and combat power, the warring parties were forced to use significantly different tactics and strategies to defeat their opponents thus as an outcome these conflicts were asymmetric in nature. If we take a good look at the proportion of symmetric and asymmetric wars of all armed struggles in the second half of the 20th century and in the first seventeen years of the 21st century, we can clearly identify that most of the conflicts were asymmetric (Vietnam, Cuba, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Nigeria).¹ By analysing the asymmetric conflicts throughout the last 200 years, the following tendency can be seen. For the entire 200 years, it can be stated that 70.8 percent of the asymmetric conflicts were won by the stronger (the state) warring party. But by dividing the era into 50-year intervals the result is a lot more diversified. Between 1800 and 1849 88.2 percent, between 1850 and 1899 79.5 percent during the 1900-1949 period 65.1 percent and between 1950 and 1998 only 45 percent of the asymmetric conflicts were won by the stronger party.²

Based on the above analysis it can be unambiguously stated that the closer we are to our present day, the less successful the stronger party has become in achieving its' strategic goals and the more successful the weaker party has been in asymmetric conflicts. The decreasing

¹ Read, D. "Airpower in COIN: Can Airpower Make a Significant Contribution to Counter-Insurgency?". *Defence Studies* 10/1-2. 2010. 126. DOI: [10.1080/14702430903392828](https://doi.org/10.1080/14702430903392828), Accessed on 20 December 2010.

² Arreguín-Toft, I. "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict". *International Security* 26/1. 2001. 96-97. <https://web.stanford.edu/class/polisci211z/2.2/Arreguin-Toft%20IS%202001.pdf>, Accessed on 04 January 2018.

success of the nation states is what makes it extremely substantial to draw the attention of politicians, military leaders, and scholars to this type of armed struggles. Therefore, military leaders and scholars must constantly analyse these asymmetric conflicts, to draw new conclusions, and to come up with new ideas and theories how regular armies combined with special operation forces and civilian advisors can efficiently combat this irregular enemy.

There are many theories, books and even military doctrines written about how our military power should be used to defeat an enemy that uses insurgency, terrorism and guerrilla methods as their primary tactics. The leading doctrine for the US Military Forces on how to operate against an insurgent force – the *2007 United States Army and Marine Corps Field Manual (FM) 3-24 Counterinsurgency* – whose making was coordinated and overlooked by General David Petraeus and David Kilcullen mentions two different types of approach to defeating insurgencies. With the enemy-focused approach, which mainly concentrates on hunting down the insurgents, COIN³ forces are not able to accomplish their assigned tasks most of the time. Instead of killing the enemy the focus should rather be on isolating the insurgents from the population and on improving their living standards. In opposition to Maslow's hierarchy of needs – which states that the most important necessities for mankind are the physiological needs – in COIN operations the emphasis should rather be focused primarily on the security of society.

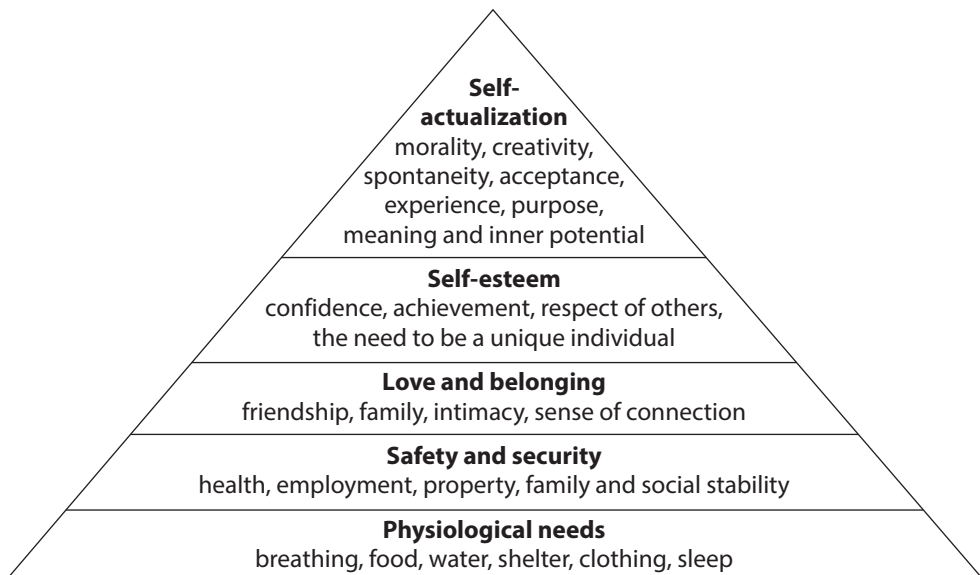


Figure 1: *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*⁴

Foremost the security of the populace must be guaranteed and only after that – or parallel with it – can the emphasis be put on the development of critical infrastructures such as healthcare, road-system, public utility, communication systems and good governance which is free from corruption.

³ Counter Insurgency

⁴ "Needs for Lifestages". <http://needsforlifestagesmhs.weebly.com/maslows-pyramid4.html>. Accessed on 24 January 2018.

SOME VERY SHORT CASE-STUDIES

On September 10, 2009, a patrol was sent out from the American-led Jalalabad⁵ PRT⁶ in Dara-i-Nur District, Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan to handover a hydro plant to the locals in a remote area of the district. On the way, back from the ceremony the US convoy was ambushed by RPGs⁷ and small arms fire. It did not require a great effort from the attackers to choose the location of the ambush since the Afghan hills and the sparse road network made the movements of the Americans predictable and forced them to use the exact same road whenever they wanted to get to and from their base to this part of the district. Still, the site of the attack did not help the accomplishment of a successful ambush, because it was too far from the road for the RPGs and for the machine guns to lay down an effective fire on the MRAPs⁸ or on the dismounting soldiers. The execution of the attack was also half-hearted and lacked professionalism because the attackers did not make serious effort to block the road or to blow up the bridge to halt the American convoy. They chose firing positions on the forward slope of the mountain making their own withdrawal nearly impossible and giving away their own positions by the dirt that the RPGs kicked off by firing them. Most of the soldiers travelling in the convoy and their military leaders believed that the Taliban was responsible for conducting the attack, but deeper analysis revealed that this was not the case.

Dara-i-Nur district, where the ambush took place has never been supportive towards the Taliban not even during the era when they were in power throughout the country. Furthermore, no Taliban activity had ever been reported or observed by any coalition, allied or local forces and indigenous inhabitants in the region before this attack happened. This district is inhabited mainly by Pashai people who are not supporters of the central government⁹ but they do not provide support for the Taliban either, which is mainly Pashtun. Locals did not tolerate outsiders in their area and it was almost impossible to for the Taliban to operate in this region without the knowledge of the locals. It would have not made any sense either for the Taliban to insert some forces to the region since there were only a couple of weeks left until winter season arrived which would have locked them in this zone isolated from their base areas or safe havens in Pakistan. In conclusion, all the evidence collected and analysed by the investigators suggested that the ambush was not conducted by the Taliban so they turned their attention towards the mission that the PRT personnel were conducting that day.

The main objective of the mission was to hold a handover ceremony where the engineers and US military personnel from the Jalalabad PRT would officially put in operation a hydro plant which could provide electricity for half of the village. The intent of this construction was not only to improve the living standard of the locals but also to give them work opportunity on the construction site with which the goal was to provide alternative revenue streams to farmers other than growing and selling poppy. Next to the hydro plant another

⁵ Capital of Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan

⁶ Provincial Reconstruction Team – the first PRT emerged in an ad hoc way but a couple years later PRTs were common throughout Afghanistan and they were all part of a multinational reconstruction effort. PRTs included civilian and military specialists responsible for providing guidance for the provincial leaders in order to facilitate nation building and economic growth and good governance.

⁷ Rocket Propelled Grenade

⁸ Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles

⁹ Almost no tribes or inhabitants of any districts were supportive to the central government this deep in the country. Most of the time these tribes lived separated from all other tribes and they only wanted and still just want to be left alone.

project – the building of a slaughterhouse – was also ongoing further increasing the living standard and job opportunities of the local inhabitants. Neither of these projects were done in the central area of the province but in a peripheral zone and the attack did not happen near the construction sites. Since the ambush site was close to the district centre and tactically it was not performed in a professional manner made the analysts think that the attack was not conducted by a well-organized insurgent force like the Taliban but rather by local inhabitants unsatisfied with the fact that a certain part of their province gets infrastructures that improve the living standards of the nearby populace while leaving the central area of the province completely out of the development process.¹⁰

A similar incident happened in Helmand province where the security guards of a road construction were attacked and killed by locals just because the constructors did not consult them whether they needed the road or not and because they did not hire local workers and security personnel from the surrounding villages but they got the job done by foreign workers. Besides there was a Taliban opposition to the construction of the road too since developed road systems and well-maintained high-speed avenues of approaches make it easier for bigger armies to manoeuvre and by this, roads make defeating insurgency and governing a lot easier. So, insurgents and locals had a common interest in this case which made them cooperate to stop the construction.¹¹

A third incident to underline my point happened in Wanat where a US PRT intended to build a road into a valley. This valley was a traditional buffer zone between two hostile population groups the Nuristanis and Safi Pashtuns. In this case the locals and the Taliban also had a shared interest since the locals did not want the road to be built because it kept them isolated from their historical enemies and helped them keep their autonomy from the central government while the Taliban opposed this avenue because it would have brought ANA¹² and US troops in striking distance to their major infiltration routes to and from their bases.¹³

From the above-mentioned examples, it can be stated that critical infrastructures or the lack of critical infrastructures may have a significant role in COIN operations. On the one hand, for a weakened or not yet properly operating central government – with the primary mission of nation building – or for an occupying force the creation and maintenance of systems like a well-maintained road network, healthcare, public utility, communication systems and corruption free governance are vital to win the support of the population. On the other hand, for an insurgent group opposing the power of the central government the destruction or the prevention of improving these systems may go hand in hand with success. As in Helmand province and in the city of Wanat the Taliban did not want the roads to be built because they would have made high speed avenues of approaches for highly mobile mechanized government units with enormous firepower which would or could have resulted in catastrophic consequences for the insurgents. By the government being able to send and successfully use extremely mobile forces in great number, the freedom of movement and the capability to execute attacks would have been seriously limited for the insurgents. It is also not favourable for rebellious forces to let COIN forces build any other kind of infrastructures – such as hydro plants – because as the government improves the living standard of the population the inhabitants would slowly but

¹⁰ Kilcullen, D. *Out of the Mountains, The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 3-10.

¹¹ Kilcullen. *Out of the Mountains*. 10-11.

¹² Afghan National Army

¹³ Kilcullen. *Out of the Mountains*. 11-12.

surely turn away from the guerrilla forces. The long-term objective for the government or the COIN forces is to assume full responsibility and accountability for the vital services.

From the inductions derived from the Jalalabad, Helmand and Wanat examples it can be stated that the defeat of an insurgency does not always primarily depend on the number of insurgents killed in kinetic direct actions but also on how the government or COIN forces can improve the living conditions of the population.

“A REVOLUTIONARY WAR IS 20 PERCENT MILITARY ACTION AND 80 PERCENT POLITICAL!”¹⁴

There are two main kinds of approaches to counterinsurgency operations. One – which by most of the field manuals, essays, and books is referred to as the enemy-centric counterinsurgency approach – puts the focus on the elimination or killing of hostile guerrilla forces. The other – and in most of the cases the more effective way of fighting insurgency – is a more indirect method which is usually referred to as the population-centric approach.

The primary goal of every COIN force is to make an area – which may be part of a country, or even an entire county – free of insurgents. If a COIN force has a sufficient number of troops, then it is a relatively easy task to drive away, kill or capture the key leaders, the hardliners, and the fighting elements or cells of an insurgent movement. The challenge has always been in keeping the cleared area free of insurgents and in preventing the guerrillas from re-infiltrating, so that COIN forces may move to other areas – or in case of a third party to withdraw to their own countries – and to hand over security tasks to local police forces.

With the enemy-centric approach where COIN forces focus almost exclusively on killing guerrillas, the goal of keeping an area free of insurgents permanently is almost unachievable.¹⁵ It is not feasible because while it is relatively easy to disperse and to expel insurgent forces from a certain zone, it is almost impossible to destroy their political organizations and their ideology and to rally the bulk of the population by purely military actions.¹⁶ Political organizations may be temporarily destroyed by intensive police actions, but it is still impossible to prevent the return of the guerrillas and to prevent them from re-establishing their political parties unless the population cooperates with and provides support to the COIN forces. If most of the population sponsors and assists the insurgents it is preposterous for COIN forces to believe in success. Therefore, guerrilla forces focus on obtaining and keeping the support of the populace by either coercive or non-coercive means. As Mao Zedong said guerrillas cannot operate without the help of the population:

It is only undisciplined troops who make the people their enemies and who, like the fish out of its native element cannot live.¹⁷

Therefore, the focus should be on draining the sea,¹⁸ which means that the main objective for COIN forces – just as well as for insurgents – should be the population. This

¹⁵ Resperger, I., Kiss, Á. and Somkuti, B. *Aszimmetrikus hadviselés a modern korban*. Budapest: Zrínyi Kiadó, 2013. 225-226.

¹⁶ Galula. *Counterinsurgency Warfare*. 52

¹⁷ Zedong, M. “The Political Problems of Guerrilla Warfare”. In Zedong, M.: *On guerrilla warfare*. Maoist Documentation Project, Mao Tse-tung Reference Archive, 2000. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/1937/guerrilla-warfare/ch06.htm>, Accessed on 23 March 2018.

¹⁸ Zagorski, P. W. and Harmon, S. A. “The War on Terror: Separating the (Star) Fish from the Sea”. *Freedom From Fear Magazine*, issue 5. <http://f3magazine.unicri.it/?p=419>, Accessed on 22 March 2018.

objective can only be accomplished through the population-centric counterinsurgency approach which puts the emphasis mainly on the protection of the population and on the fulfillment of their necessities. The easiest way to describe the basic needs of the commonwealth is through critical infrastructures – the existence of an operable healthcare, road-network, public utility, and communication system and a corruption free governance is vital to win the support of the populace. But even if the most advanced infrastructure system is run in a certain area, even if the inhabitants live in an outstandingly developed milieu, the most important aspect of meeting the needs of the population is a safe, secure and predictable environment. Progress in building support for the host nation government requires protecting the populace. Thus, an effective political and economic action on the population must be preceded by military, secret service and police operations against the guerrilla units. If the population is not convinced that COIN forces have the will and the capabilities to defeat the insurgency, counterinsurgent forces will not be able to win the support of the populace. People who do not believe that they are secure from insurgent intimidation, coercion, and reprisals will not risk overtly supporting COIN efforts.¹⁹ A permanent victory can only be achieved through the physical (military, police actions) and the psychological (counter propaganda, development of key infrastructures) isolation of the insurgents from the population and by addressing and eliminating the root causes of the insurgency. Military and police forces can compel obedience and secure areas, however, they cannot by themselves achieve the political settlement needed to resolve the situation. Thus, COIN operations should combine offensive, defensive and stability operations to achieve a stable and secure environment needed for essential governance, essential services, and economic development.²⁰

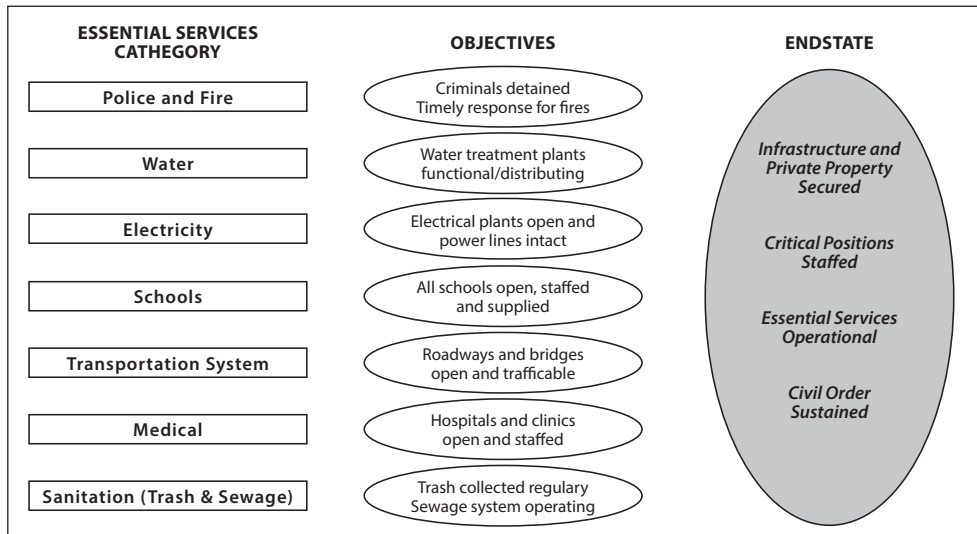


Figure 2: Essential services and their objectives²¹

¹⁹ “Counterinsurgency”. Headquarters Department of the Army. December 2006. 5-20. <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/Repository/Materials/COIN-FM3-24.pdf>, Accessed on 16 December 2017.

²⁰ “Counterinsurgency”. 5-2.

²¹ “Counterinsurgency”. 5-15.

“POLITICAL POWER GROWS OUT OF THE BARREL OF A GUN”²² ... BUT!

Most of the time there are several groups who contest for the control of a community. Even when we talk about the different parties in democratic states trying to win the elections, or about warlords, guerrillas or insurgents fighting against each other or against the central government, there is always one thing that is common. It is almost never just one party, one group, band, gang or any kind of non-state actor struggling to gain the upper hand over a certain part of the population, but several or at least two. That armed actor that the populace sees as the most competent to establish a resilient normative system²³ by which this actor can provide security, project full-spectrum control over violence, control, conduct or even improve economic activities is most likely to prevail in gaining control.²⁴ In other words, this means that whoever sets up rules that is correlated with a set of consequences with which the group can maintain a resilient system of control that gives people the sense of security, and a predictable and safe environment, is going to gain the support of the population. The emphasis here is on the “*resilient, full-spectrum control*”.²⁵ Though for the groups fighting to gain the control over a certain populace being armed is critical, indispensable, and a priority it is not a sufficient characteristic. A very good example of it is Iraq in 2006-2007. Al Qa’eda in Iraq could enforce their will on a large number of inhabitants only by coercive means, but it did not prove to be long-standing. As soon as the Coalition Forces increased their presence in the insurgent-ruled area and the inhabitants realized that the foreign forces could protect them from the atrocities committed by the insurgents, moreover, they even provided social justice, work opportunities, a running healthcare, school and a workable public utility system they turned their back on Al Qa’eda in Iraq and started supporting the Coalition Forces. During this period the number of Al Qa’eda fighters and followers dropped significantly and the organization almost ceased to exist. This was the case up until the President of the United States publicly announced that he was going to withdraw forces from Iraq. From that point on the locals knew, that the most competent group that would stay permanently in their region is Al Qa’eda in Iraq, which resulted in the loss of support for the Coalition Forces and slowly but surely helped the evolution of the Islamic State. In conclusion, it can be stated that every time when different groups struggle for the control over the population the actor that creates a better normative system of competitive control is likely to dominate the target audience.²⁶

CONCLUSION

Military doctrines, books and articles written about counterinsurgency mention two different types of method to fight against insurgents. The one which puts the emphasis primarily on killing the enemy and does not deal with the securement and the improvement of living standards of the population is usually not as effective as the population-centric counterinsurgency approach. The later tactic stresses the importance of meeting the basic and essential

²³ Alchourron, C. and Bulygin, E. *Normative Systems*. New York: Springer Verlag, 1971. 53-59.

²⁴ Kilcullen, D. *Counterinsurgency*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 152-154.

²⁵ Kilcullen. *Counterinsurgency*. 152.

²⁶ Kilcullen. *Out of the Mountains*. 133.

necessities that individuals and communities need and which has long been identified in Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

The establishment of a safe, secure, and predictable environment combined with a capable legislation and operational key infrastructures is the only possible way to permanently isolate the insurgents from the populace and to gain their support. This can only be achieved through the combined and simultaneous utilization of skilled and proficient security forces and by administrative, economic, social development.

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