

**Transformation Under Fire
Counterinsurgency as a Litmus Test
for the German Federal Armed Forces**

by Dr. Henrik Heidenkamp

„Guerrilla warfare is a form of operations above all things to be avoided. The whole spirit of the art of conducting small wars is to strive for the attainment of decisive methods, the very essence of partisan warfare from the point of the enemy being to avoid definite engagement.” (Callwell, Charles E. (1906): Small Wars, S. 125.)

Although more than a century old, in light of the deteriorating security situation and the 26 German soldiers killed in Afghanistan this caution by Charles E. Callwell (1906) is today more than ever of major importance to regular armed forces like the German Federal Armed Forces. Both their strategic and operational approaches have to be transformed according to the requirements of successful counterinsurgency (COIN) operations: a task that has to be accomplished „under fire“.

However, looking beyond the Hindu Kush experience and taking into account the state in global warfare, COIN has become an integral part of the transformation of the German Federal Armed Forces. The majority of global armed conflicts in the 21st century are determined by the clash of state and sub-state actors¹, which, due to their diverse socialization, have different preferences regarding the type of warfare². From the state actor's point of view this form of “irregular warfare” presents itself as counterinsurgency.

Therefore, it needs to be discussed, if the German Federal Armed Forces will pass the COIN litmus test and if they will ensure the capability of the German security policy to act. In this context the capability to adapt to the operational needs of effective COIN in the short-term as well as to develop and implement a comprehensive, multilateral coordinated and socially supported COIN-strategy in the mid-term need to be addressed.

To answer these questions the stress relation between the requirements for successful COIN and the limits of the German security policy context has to be examined. As a first step the basics of insurgency need to be studied.

¹ See Daase, Christopher (1999): Kleine Kriege – Große Wirkung, p. 91.

² Mitchell, Christopher R. (1991): Classifying Conflicts, p. 30f.

Foundations of insurgency

Insurgency is an armed effort to effect a revolutionary, at least radical and decisive change of the established political system by violent force.³ The insurgents are seeking to erode the power, control and legitimacy of the government and at the same time to improve their own base of power, influence and legitimacy.⁴

A major advantage of an insurgency over external actors is the social affiliation of most insurgents with the local population. As natives they receive a certain degree of support by the local population and can quickly change between roles as local residents and insurgents. Their knowledge of the customs, most urgent problems and language of the local population as well as of the topography in the area are first hand.⁵

The insurgents can quickly change between the organization, activation, expansion and end phase of irregular warfare⁶ and respectively adapt their strategies and operational tactics⁷. The more successful they are in their endeavors, the faster will they pass from a phase of latent and sporadic actions to a phase of guerrilla warfare and finally to a phase of mobile warfare. Defeats on the other hand may force the insurgents to fall back to an earlier phase as well.⁸

The “accidental guerrilla syndrome”⁹ identified by David Kilcullen (2009) highlights the interaction between insurgencies and international terrorist networks as another important problem of COIN at the beginning of the 21st century. Kilcullen concisely argues, that due to the lack of an intrinsic incentive of the international terrorist networks’ ideology to most traditional societies in the Muslim world, terrorist actions do not automatically find broad support with the local population. Therefore the terrorist networks establish their presence primarily in remote, ungoverned and conflict torn regions where alliance building with regional authorities is possible.¹⁰

On this basis violence is exported globally by terrorist networks, eventually resulting in indirect or direct interventions by Western states in their sanctuary areas. Using the insurgency of local forces opposing the intervention terrorist networks then pursue their superior aims with the support of the local population. If the government and the external actor fail to capture the support of the local population, the intervening forces may contrary to their previous intentions to protect the population against the extremists have to fight against the local population as well.¹¹

The main problem of COIN was coined by Henry Kissinger as early as in 1969: “the guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win.”¹² In the words of the insurgents: “You may have the watch, but we have the time.”

This nature of irregular warfare puts enormous pressure to act on the state actor. However, if he fails to align his COIN-approach with the national and international rules of warfare, the “social integrity of the state”, being the “conditio sine qua non” of the state’s capability to act, might be endangered¹³. The more the state actor adopts the approach of the sub-state actor in irregular warfare and the more he distances himself from the rule of law, the faster decreases

³ Krepinevich, Andrew F. (1986): *The Army and Vietnam*, p. 7.

⁴ See Bard E. O’Neill (2005): *Insurgency & Terrorism*, p. 15.

⁵ See U.p. Army (2009): *Tactics in Counterinsurgency*, p. 2-24.

⁶ See Freudenberg, Dirk (2008): *Theorie des Irregulären*, p. 188.

⁷ See Sembritzki, Jared (2005): *Einflussfaktoren bei speziellen Operationen gegen irreguläre Kräfte*, p. 10.

⁸ See U.p. Army (2009): *Tactics in Counterinsurgency*, p. 2-19.

⁹ See Kilcullen, David (2009): *The Accidental Guerrilla*.

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 34.

¹¹ See *ibid.*, p. 38.

¹² Kissinger, Henry (1969): *The Vietnam Negotiations*, p. 214.

¹³ See Daase, Christopher (1999): *Kleine Kriege – Große Wirkung*, p. 102.

the social cohesion, deteriorates the political legitimacy and fades the tenuous civil-military balance away.¹⁴

To quote Frederick W. Kagan (2009) the main challenge for regular armed forces in counter-insurgency can be described as:

„We do not need to become irregular warriors to defeat irregular warriors – and we could not do so in any case. We do need to continue creatively to apply our strengths against our enemies’ weaknesses and to succeed by being our self, only better.”¹⁵

The German Federal Armed Forces and the German security policy have to ensure, that their COIN-approach reflects the nature of insurgencies and conserves the social integrity of the state at the same time. In order to do so the strategic planning as well as the operational tactics have to cover three requirements for successful COIN-operations¹⁶.

Requirements for successful COIN-operations

First, in COIN the center of gravity is the population.¹⁷ If people can be protected and believe they are protected, then COIN-forces are well on the way to success, if not outright victory.¹⁸ Since the most important area of operations is the mind of the public and the overriding priority is the protection of the people, the kinetic combat between regular forces and insurgents is of less strategic significance.

The COIN’s objectives are neither the insurgency’s forces nor, with a necessary reservation, the territory they occupy and use. When success is possible regular forces win over a public that they have persuaded will be protected and provided a better future.¹⁹

Second, the key to operational advantage in COIN is timely, reliable intelligence.²⁰ The regular forces must have information that can come only from the local residents or defecting insurgents. If the people feel that they are protected, that they have a better future with the established authorities, and that the authorities are going to win, then the intelligence problem should solve itself.²¹

If insurgents lose in the minds of the people, then they will lose the actual battle. Insurgents survive only by remaining elusive, by hiding in the sea of the people or in remote areas where they are ineffective.²² A hostile, even unsympathetic, public translates as a social context non-permissive for irregular warriors.²³

Third, all of the instruments of persuasion, coercion, and influence need to be employed. To beat an insurgency, when that is feasible, the regular forces must organize and direct a strict unity of civilian and military effort, with a single chain of command and a political authority unambiguously in supreme command.²⁴

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁵ Kagan, Frederick W. (2009): *Counterinsurgency and Irregular Warfare*, p. 7.

¹⁶ See Kilcullen, David (2009): *The Accidental Guerrilla*, p. 265-271.

¹⁷ See McChrystal, Stanley A. (2009): *Commander’s Initial Assessment*.

¹⁸ See Gray, Colin S. (2008): *National Security Dilemmas*, p. 184.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 186.

²⁰ See Freudenberg, Dirk (2008): *Theorie des Irregulären*, p. 370.

²¹ See Petraeus, David (2009): *Schießen und Tee trinken*.

²² See Gray, Colin S. (2008): *National Security Dilemmas*, p. 185.

²³ See Freudenberg, Dirk (2008): *Theorie des Irregulären*, p. 180-181.

²⁴ See Gray, Colin S. (2008): *National Security Dilemmas*, p. 187-188.

While all warfare is political, irregular warfare is the most political of all. Therefore military action has to be subordinated to political priorities. COIN can only be successful when the military instrument is employed as part of a comprehensive approach that is determined by political judgment and privileges real-time intelligence gathering.²⁵

Summing up, counterinsurgency is a proactive approach involving all elements of national power; even down to the tactical level. In a counterinsurgency, Host Nation forces and partners like the German Federal Armed Forces operate to defeat armed resistance, reduce passive opposition, and establish or reestablish the legitimacy of the Host Nation's government. The challenge is to „synchronize security, development and governance“²⁶.

Victory or defeat in irregular warfare is about the beliefs, attitudes, and consequent behavior of the public. Everything that intervening regular forces and their local allies do to combat the insurgencies has a strategic effect, positive or negative, on the minds of that public. They are the stake and the battle space in irregular warfare.

Caveats of the German security policy context

However, these elements of effective counterinsurgency are in opposition to various caveats of the German security policy context.

The fundamental principles of the German security culture – the “culture of military restraint”²⁷ and the “primacy of diplomacy”²⁸ – set extensive restrictions to the operations of the German Federal Armed Forces. Although the changes in the German security policy since the beginning of the 1990 “lifted the taboo on military action”²⁹, the “peace axiom of the German security culture” was not diluted.

Still Germany primarily turns on the civilian instruments of its security policy to protect its interests, whereas the German Federal Armed Forces are regarded as a subordinated instrument of the national security policy. Therefore COIN-operations pose a special problem for the normative groundings of the German security policy. The majority of the German public rejects the participation of the Federal Armed Forces in warlike situations and does not accept dead German soldiers or even a bigger risk of injury for them.³⁰

Furthermore, the „insufficient strategy-making capability“³¹ within the German government and parliament limit the development and implementation of a comprehensive COIN-approach. A politically specified grant strategy, which identifies the overall goals of COIN-operations as precisely and comprehensible as possible by setting priorities and balancing risks, and determines the triad of goals, ways and means as coherently as possible³², does not exist. Therefore civil and military means and capabilities are not sufficiently aligned.

Finally the inadequate German defense spending exacerbates the COIN-capability of the German Federal Armed Forces. The allocated financial resources continuously decline and are not effectively spend. Hence important transformation projects, like the revision of the

²⁵ See *ibid.*, p.187-188.

²⁶ See Kilcullen, David (2009): *The Accidental Guerrilla*, p. 266.

²⁷ See Schlotter, Peter et al. (2008): *Berliner Friedenspolitik?*, p. 17.

²⁸ See Staack, Michael (2000): *Handelsstaat Deutschland*, p. 52.

²⁹ Schröder, Gerhard (2001): Interview mit der ZEIT vom 18.10.2001.

³⁰ See Kümmel, Gerhard / Leonhard, Nina (2005): *Casualties and Civil-Military Relations*.

³¹ See Noetzel, Timo / Schreer, Benjamin (2008): *All the way?*, p. 211-221.

³² See Riemer, Andrea K. (2007): *Strategie Wofür?*, p. 65.

force structure and the training procedures cannot be accomplished, have flattened or are adjourned indefinitely.³³

These strategic derogations also have a direct impact on the tactical level. Especially the limited availability of „inter-cultural advisers“ and interpreters, whose work is a fundamental precondition for a comprehensive understanding of the realities in the area of operation, prevents effective COIN-operations. Other points of concern are insufficient troop numbers on the ground, ill adjusted training procedures to prepare the soldiers for COIN reality, inadequate surveillance equipment, lack of close air support, transport and attack helicopters.

Consequences

In consequence the limits of the national German security policy context impose serious restrictions to the development and implementation of a German COIN-strategy. Due to the inadequate integration of the requirements for successful COIN the German Federal Armed Forces may at least in the short- and medium-term not pass the litmus test of COIN.

This incapacity in modern COIN has a severe impact on the effectiveness of the German military contribution in Afghanistan and on the soldiers' operational reality on the ground. Furthermore it directly affects the relevance of the German Federal Armed Forces as an instrument of the German security policy as well as an ally to NATO- and EU-partner states. Finally it puts the overall capability to act of the German security policy into question.

In light of the complex challenges in the multipolar world and the continuities and changes in global warfare the implementation of a „balanced force structure“³⁴ is an imperative for the German Federal Armed Forces. To accomplish this goal its transformation process has to reflect both the strategic and operational requirements of regular as well as irregular warfare with special regard to COIN.

Since it is not possible to identify the correct level of defense expenditures or which forces exactly should be acquired and when³⁵, the guiding principle of all endeavors to adequately balance the short-, medium- and long-term challenges of the strategic context at the beginning of the 21st century should be a „responsible readiness to assume risk“³⁶.

It follows from this insight and from the argument in much of this paper, that Germany should undertake little COIN-operations. It would be a strategic and political mistake to identify COIN as the dominant strategic theater. An excessive commitment to COIN will require larger and more capable armed forces as well as a comprehensive, multilateral coordinated and socially supported COIN-strategy, which both due to the caveats of the German security policy context will not be on hand in the near future.

However, as Timo Noetzel and Martin Zapfe (2009) applicably state, “operational pressure on the ground generating bottom-up innovation presents the most likely mechanism to initiate change in German politics regarding counterinsurgency.”³⁷ Such change should be based on five crucial judgments regarding future counterinsurgency operations to be made by the German security policy³⁸:

³³ See Sattler, Daniel (2006): Die Kosten der Bundeswehr, p. 278.

³⁴ See Donnelly, Thomas / Kagan, Frederick W. (2008): Ground Truth, p. 37.

³⁵ See Gray, Colin S. (2010): Strategic Thoughts for Defence Planners, p. 160.

³⁶ Lahl, Kersten / Sommer, Peter-Michael (2009): Schlusswort und Ausblick, p. 593.

³⁷ Noetzel, Timo / Zapfe, Martin (2009): NATO and Counterinsurgency, p. 150.

³⁸ See Kilcullen, David (2009): The Accidental Guerrilla, p. 297.

- Deciding whether the German security interests are best served by a direct intervention into a fragile region to abate the process of political and religious radicalization or instead by an indirect approach seeking to contain any spillover of violence or unrest into Western societies. This choice is a key element in framing the long-term implications of the German COIN-approach.
- Deciding how to allocate resources among military and nonmilitary elements of statecraft. The German government in coordination with the German parliament and advised by the German Federal Armed Forces needs to develop a comprehensive COIN-approach, which determines a balance between both dimensions of national power. The concrete emphasis highly depends on the judgment about intervention versus containment.
- Deciding how much effort, time and lives to spend on the issue of counterinsurgency. This will require a risk analysis taking into account the likelihood and consequences of terrorist attacks, the effects of fragile states and regions on the security and prosperity of the German and European societies and the impact of local, regional and global insurgencies on the international order. Such a judgment also has to consider how much can be spent on security and for how long, without imposing an unsustainable cost burden on the society.
- Deciding how to prioritize endeavors geographically. At present most effort goes to Afghanistan and much smaller amounts to other areas like the Balkans. Different choices on the military/nonmilitary and intervention/containment judgments might produce significantly different regional priorities over time. It follows that, each case being so unique, although there are some valid principles which should govern COIN, there can be no reliable template for all regional and local contexts.
- Deciding how to communicate the strategic and operational needs of COIN to the German public. Politicians in the German government and parliament must determine the relevance of security policy within public policy. Accordingly they have to shape the institutional strategy making capability to assure a coherent appearance of the German security policy in the public mind and to contribute impetus to the public debate.

Due to Germany's integration into NATO and EU and the complexity and transnational nature of counterinsurgency these judgments must be made on the basis of a multilateral consensus in NATO and EU and in close commutation with all other relevant actors. It is an essential task for the German security policy to develop a socially supported COIN-understanding and to integrate a comprehensive German COIN-strategy into a superior multilateral NATO and EU COIN-approach.

The bottom line is that the political elite in the German government and parliament must seriously exercise their political accountability for the German security policy and the transformation of the German Federal Armed Forces. However, with regard to the distinct persistency of the caveats of the German security policy context it remains questionable if a sustainable change will be initiated in the short- or medium-term and will be shaped in the long-term by the political elites.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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Henrik Heidenkamp

Dr. Henrik Heidenkamp studied political science and economics at the University of Mannheim from 2002 to 2006. In 2010 he finished his doctoral studies at the Helmut-Schmidt-University / University of the Armed Forces Hamburg. His current research focuses on the German security and defense policy, the development of the strategic environment with special regard to global warfare, as well as on the transatlantic relations and the development of CSDP and NATO.