

The Inadequacy of Counter-insurgency as ‘Strategy’

By Dr. John Bruni

Having read ‘The End of the Age of Petraeus’ by Fred Kaplan in the January/February 2013 edition of *Foreign Affairs*, I was left wondering why we don’t heed the lessons of the past.

General David Petraeus was the exemplar of counter-insurgency in the contemporary American context. His tactical successes in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated, albeit fleetingly, that so long as America stayed committed to these two states, and they in turn to their foreign-imposed polities, the population of both countries could enjoy some stability and the promise of a more peaceful life. Petraeus’ personal issues that brought him crashing down from his former position as Director of the CIA in late 2012, came uncannily at a time when the Obama administration drifted away from counter-insurgency as America’s primary post-9/11 strategy.

Counter-insurgency (COIN), as a strategic and operational art to ‘bring order’ to a restive population, has always been a failed policy option. Yes, it is all about understanding how to implement a desired political solution as much as it is about the application of firepower in the right areas and against the right enemy. The problem, one especially apt for countries such as the United States or other would be unilateral

interventionist states such as France, (as its current commitment to Mali will no doubt demonstrate), is that a foreign country, committing itself to rebuild or reshape another country’s political and social dynamics is a fool’s errand. As Afghanistan and Iraq have shown quite clearly, even a ‘hyper-power’ like the US, with deep pockets and a political elite largely unified in its objectives for ‘national reconstruction’, cannot identify with Afghanistan and the Afghani people or Iraq and the Iraqi people. Therefore, the long-term commitment necessary to ensure the conditions for national stability in beleaguered and fragile states can never achieve anything lasting. Look at post-Saddam Iraq, hardly the poster-child of Middle Eastern democracy and stability. Karzai’s Afghanistan, panicked by the emerging reality of an American withdrawal in 2014, is likely to exercise many non-democratic political options against the Afghan people in order to remain in power as US forces pack up and go home.

Stretching back to the Vietnam War, the legacy of US counter-insurgency has been poor. But we cannot be too harsh on the US. Other Western states have tried counter-insurgency measures and failed, most notably, and quite spectacularly, the remaining colonial powers of post-World War II Europe. Their clumsy, and in many cases brutal attempts at holding on to their African and Asian territories saw the end of the European imperial system. Perhaps one can make the argument that Europe’s failure to develop sophisticated counter-insurgency

policies led to ‘the end of empire’, and even France, whose experience in Algeria and Vietnam taught Paris the rough lessons of guerrilla war, did not deliver the ‘keys to success’. No modern developed state has ever ‘won’ a counter-insurgency war at a strategic level. Counter-insurgency advocates point to Britain’s success in crushing a Chinese-Malay communist insurrection in 1950s Malaya as evidence that counter-insurgent forces can achieve a victory. Britain’s other noted success in crushing the Mau Mau Rebellion in 1950s Kenya, is also put forward as an example of how these difficult and complex struggles can be won. However, we have to remember that these two tactical victories did not see the emergence of a stable democratic multi-ethnic/multi-sectarian state in either example. Only political authoritarianism in modern, independent Malaysia has kept a lid on long-simmering tensions between the country’s two major ethnic groups – the politically powerful Malays and the commercially powerful Chinese. Political authoritarianism in Kenya also kept the social dynamics of that country in check, albeit imperfectly. Britain’s COIN successes did not translate into either Malaya or Kenya remaining British colonial outposts, and if this were to have been the sort of victory that London ultimately ascribed to, then COIN failed strategically to keep these jewels in the British crown.

The problem with COIN warfare is that it often starts as a consequence of poor political decision making by the local elite of a developing country with little or no

commitment to civil society, good governance or strong state institutions (except perhaps for local law enforcement and the military). Ethnic and sectarian oppression by a dominant cultural elite against restive minority ethnic and cultural groups, and the injustices that flow from this internal state arrangement, give rise to the persecuted seeking external assistance for their cause, and if a minority group is highly organised, an insurgency against the national government ensues. If bad governance was the precursor to insurgency, and it often is, then only local authorities can deal with it, lest they be swept from power. Political evolution suggests that governments (whatever their leanings and make-up) should stand or fall on their political platforms. In autocracies this usually means civil war, revolution, terrorism or insurgency as the only means of political expression for the opposition. Ethically speaking, is it the West’s right to deny these natural political dynamics from occurring? Had an external power intervened and derailed England’s experiment with Westminster parliamentarianism while it was in its infancy and vulnerable, today’s world would look very different indeed.



The French intervention into Mali is a typical example of how COIN goes wrong

very quickly. Lacking an institutional memory of its colonial policies, ‘next generation’ French political leaders believe



they can and must support the Malian government of Acting President, Dioncounda Traoré. Their aim is to assist the acting president in holding his country together against a collection of jihadists (including Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb – AQIM) who have seized northern Mali and declared their independence from Mali proper. To the Western mindset, the idea that jihadists, especially Al Qaeda, has successfully taken a new foothold, is alarming. If one believes the press, this is a clear case of a justified intervention. No one wants any branch of Al Qaeda to have a secure foothold anywhere. French President Hollande is surely on an electoral winner by siding with Traoré. Recent polling suggests that some 75 percent of French voters are in favor of intervention and it has bipartisan support among the French political elite. But

herein lies the problem. What was the root cause for secession?

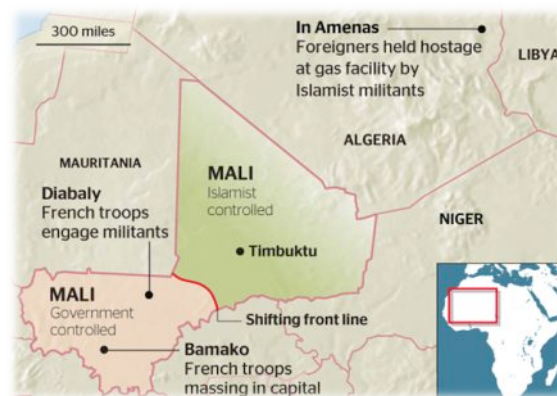
- A complex mix of ethnicity and lifestyle. The north of Mali is largely rural and the lifestyle, nomadic. It is a remote, harsh and unforgiving place and this largely explains why locals subscribe to an extreme version of Islam. It identifies them as strong – not just in the physical sense but also in the spiritual sense. Then there are the tribal and ethnic dynamics of the north to consider.
- The Tuareg ethnic group is the principle rebel group. Its fight for political autonomy against the Mande dominant cultural group has been long and inconclusive.
- The problem for any foreign intervention force is to recognize that the Tuareg are also a significant ethnic group in neighbouring Algeria and Niger. The war for Malian unity has already expanded into Algeria where dozens of Western and Algerian workers were, only a short while ago, held hostage at a gas facility.
- The national capital of Bamako in the more temperate south of the country is urbane, Francophone, ‘soft’ and to the jihadist separatists of the north – decadent.

The political fractures in Mali are significant, and even a successful French-led intervention will not heal them without a sincere local effort at politically integrating the Tuareg into the Mali nation. And this, only local Malians can achieve. Reaching for the ‘foreign gun’ will only exacerbate Mali’s long-term problems, perhaps pushing

the northerners to take unexpected and unwelcomed actions not just against Bamako, but against its Western supporters, through terrorism. In the end, French commitment to Bamako must be limited. Paris neither has the long-term will nor the finance to conduct COIN in Mali. It is also struggling to gain international partners – except for a collection of African states willing (for their own strategic reasons) to send in ground forces. But as the task of intervention becomes protracted, it is inevitable that French public sentiment will turn against this mission. Should this occur before the northerners are dealt the decisive blow, Bamako will be left to fend for itself and perhaps only then, will the Malian political elite develop the creativity to bring the two halves of the country back together.

The intervention of foreign powers and their support of existing corrupt, inefficient and ineffective national elite in Third World countries might buy those people some time, but what it actually does, is make the existing government stay in power longer, not by its own strength and merit, but by foreign assistance, such as counter-insurgency trainers and advisers (as the EU has recently committed to Mali). This dependency on foreign assistance essentially stunts local political evolution and cripples the will of the people in less developed countries to the extent that they cannot find a native narrative on democracy or liberalism by which they can live. They are condemned to abide to the rule of Western supported autocrats. Superimposed on this scenario is the fact that the staying power of foreigners in complex Third World struggles

is circumscribed by Western electoral cycles, media support/criticism of the mission at hand, and of course – money. Therefore, intervening in the political affairs of others is never a good idea.



Images Accessed: 18/01/2013

French soldier in Mali:

<http://static.guim.co.uk/sys-images/Guardian/Pix/commercial/2013/1/17/1358383734410/French-soldier-in-Mali-010.jpg>

Mali in Africa map:

http://original.antiwar.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/map_africa_mali.jpg

Mali divided map:

http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/multimedia/archive/00374/Mali_374720a.jpg