

27 May 2014

Best Practice or Best Strategy: Can New Counterinsurgency Doctrine Win Future Wars?

If counterinsurgency theory supposedly succeeded in Iraq, why did it fail in Afghanistan? For David Ucko, the answer is clear — theory is no substitute for practical strategies that appreciate the ‘nature and grammar’ of real conflicts.

By David Ucko for ISN

Two weeks ago, the United States Army and the Marine Corps updated their counterinsurgency doctrine, last published in November 2006 before the ‘surge’ in Iraq. The publication of the new doctrine has raised fresh questions about the role of counterinsurgency in campaign planning and strategy. Was the 2006 field manual in some way responsible for the subsequent stabilization of Iraq? If counterinsurgency succeeded there, why did it not meet expectations (some might say ‘fail’) in Afghanistan? And will the doctrine published last week allow for better results in campaigns to come?

Counterinsurgency and strategy

These questions suggest two fundamental points. First, as the most recent counterinsurgency manual states, ‘counterinsurgency is not a substitute for strategy’. Counterinsurgency theory offers a collection of insights collected from past operations, which, if adapted to local context, can help in the design and execution of a campaign plan. To the degree that counterinsurgency theory worked in Iraq, it was because it was tied to a campaign plan informed by the specific contextual enablers relevant to that operation: the Sons of Iraq, the Anbar Awakening, and splits within the main Shia political structures. Counterinsurgency was then implemented in Afghanistan, but without an appreciation of these contextual enablers, which explains why the same approach produced such different results. Best practice is not best strategy.

An important reason for the success of counterinsurgency in Iraq was the cooperation of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who during the surge recast himself as a national rather than sectarian leader. Of course, the Iraqi leadership was far from perfect. For example, US support for Sunni tribes and former insurgents was not accompanied by the support of the central government, and this has complicated the reintegration process for the Sunni forces that fought against al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Nevertheless, in broad terms, the Iraqi leadership compared favorably to that in Afghanistan, which has proved either unable or unwilling to move against the warlords who have established themselves

(often with coalition assistance) in recent years.

Furthermore, in Iraq the coalition was far more invested in reforming the ministries that had been penetrated by Shia radical elements, transformed into sectarian fiefdoms, and used to target Sunni communities. Ministerial reform is an under-appreciated aspect of the surge, but speaks to America's leverage and familiarity with Iraqi politics at the time. Equivalent efforts in Afghanistan came too late and were insufficient, partly due to the absence of a host-nation partner and the desire of NATO to withdraw just as the shift to counterinsurgency was announced. Thus, the government is still largely corrupt and illegitimate, which has fueled the insurgency.

Another factor was the ability of the U.S. military in Iraq to exploit the emerging rift between AQI and the Sunni tribes of Anbar province. The coalition has found no similar partner in Afghanistan, meaning that its local counterinsurgency operations have had to be conducted in isolation. Attempts to create Afghan equivalents to the Sunni Awakening and Sons of Iraq have stuttered because, whereas the latter were based on preexisting structures with their own interests, the Afghan 'replicas' were manufactured from scratch. This means that these local defense forces lack the necessary unity of command, training, and purpose, which has in turn resulted in poor discipline, accountability, and effectiveness.â©

There were important differences between the two cases in the level of Western commitment and in the underlying financial realities, but the difference in unity of command was particularly significant. In Afghanistan, three separate operations with different requirements were being conducted simultaneously: the American-led counterterrorist effort against al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters, the NATO-led ISAF operation to provide security and to enable a third mission led by the UN and devoted to political and economic development. The issue of counternarcotics overlapped with these missions, especially after 2009. This multitude of objectives made the ability to prioritize among them and tie long-term aims to a resourced campaign plan indispensable for effective warfare. These were areas where NATO fell woefully short.

The lack of a clear strategy behind the campaign resulted in the elevation of counterinsurgency from the operational to the strategic level. In parallel, the doctrinal best practices of counterinsurgency - 'population security', 'good governance', and 'legitimacy' - were confused with strategic ends and pursued simultaneously. In practice, these were not adapted to specific problems and objectives and remained little more than slogans.

Counterinsurgency is armed politics. This means that it must be informed by a strategy that is sustainable, resourced, feasible and responsive to the situation at hand. Although doctrine can be valuable in tying carefully defined strategic aims to the design of operations, it cannot be allowed to replace strategy. For strategic purposes, the estimate of the particular situation is a critical starting point because it reveals the threats, opportunities and challenges that can be exploited within a specific response.

The contribution of counterinsurgency

This leads us to the second point: if counterinsurgency doctrine fails to defeat insurgencies, what good is it? Historically, the modest yet crucial value of counterinsurgency doctrine lies in the challenge it poses to many of the preconceptions about war that have dominated Western strategic thinking. Specifically, counterinsurgency provides a corrective to the view of war as militarily decisive and apolitical. In essence, the principles of counterinsurgency touch upon the importance of achieving a nuanced political understanding of the campaign, of operating under unified command, of using intelligence to guide operations, of isolating insurgents from the population, of using the minimum amount of force necessary to achieve objectives, and of maintaining the legitimacy of the

counterinsurgency effort in the eyes of the populace.

To the casual observer, these principles will appear self-evident. Nonetheless, they illustrate the unique logic of counterinsurgency and its distinctiveness from the 'conventional' types of war for which most Western militaries train and prepare. For military institutions that regard the utility of force as a 'stand-alone' solution, the principles of counterinsurgency are an important corrective.

Similarly, counterinsurgency also challenges the traditional peacekeeping mindset and its expectations of 'impartiality' and 'consent' in largely non-violent operations. Whereas these terms are appropriate in certain 'permissive' environments, they are inadequate for contested settings, which is where the military is typically deployed. In these settings, adherence to peacekeeping principles has resulted in interventions so unobtrusive as to be negligible; elsewhere, their limiting effect on the intervening force has been deftly exploited by wily and versatile adversaries. In contrast, counterinsurgency doctrine emphasises that a permissive operational environment cannot be expected to obtain but must be actively *worked towards* and *sustained*. Similarly, the consent of the local population is not a function of how much force is used, but of *how* that force is used and *why*. Political influence is not achieved through acts of kindness, but by maintaining security and a firm monopoly on the legitimate use of force. The contribution of counterinsurgency theory, then, is to elucidate the common requirements of working towards and sustaining a secure environment, of engaging with some local actors against others, and of using force – in parallel with other means – to achieve a particular, rather than a general, peace.

Can we win next time?

Will the further study of counterinsurgency help Western nations in their future interventions in war-torn countries? The question is timely, given the likely rejection of the term following the troubled campaign in Afghanistan.

The modest contribution of counterinsurgency is to provide a corrective to our understanding of war and warfare. It reinforces the need for political primacy to address what are fundamentally political problems and the need to couch military activity within a broader strategy. This contribution is modest because the principles and guidance counterinsurgency provides are often banal, even if they represent an improvement over traditional military thinking on war. Careful study and research is needed to determine how best to apply these principles to future operations, and it is fair to say that the theory is better at raising the right questions than in providing the answers.

In learning to answer these questions, there must be fewer assumptions about the nature of insurgency. Rather than accepting slogans like 'winning hearts and minds' or 'population control', future counterinsurgencies must craft strategies based on the local context, grievances and politics – and their exploitation by specific groups. The indispensable starting point is a strategic assessment of the situation: where does the insurgent organization gain its strength, how does it operate, and why will it win? Only through such an assessment and through a clearer understanding of our own interests and objectives will the fortunes of future campaigns improve.

David H. Ucko, PhD, is an associate professor at the College of International Security Affairs and an adjunct fellow at the Department of War Studies, King's College London. He is the author of *Counterinsurgency in Crisis: Britain and the Challenges of Modern Warfare* (Columbia University Press, 2013) and of *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U.S. Military for Modern Wars* (Georgetown University Press, 2009).

Publisher

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

Creative Commons - Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?id=180195&lng=en>

ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland