

OBSERVATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS: COUNTERINSURGENCY AS A COMPLEX OPERATION

BY

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ABSTRACT

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The primary consideration in counterinsurgency (COIN) is providing security and support to the local population, who are the center of gravity (COG). Achieving this, however, is significantly more difficult than recognizing the requirement. In order to achieve appropriate levels of security and support for the local population, the military's role and functions must be properly understood in the context of the strategic situation and the "art of the possible" in the specific case. This paper explores COIN as a complex operation, and specifically addresses the dynamics of supporting local populations. This paper further explores pressing strategic challenges presented by insurgencies and seeks to establish some strategic clarity, as well as indicate some opportunities and solutions at both the strategic and operational levels. Specific issues covered include the nature of COIN, with a focus on the "indirect" approach; the importance of understanding Unconventional Warfare (UW) as a basis for understanding COIN; explores the concepts and roles of "functionaries and warriors" and of a "New Heroic Age"; includes the importance of Security Force Assistance (SFA); covers the challenges and benefits of multinational operations; and presents several conclusions and recommendations for doctrine, training, and educational development of personnel.

OBSERVATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS: COUNTERINSURGENCY AS A COMPLEX OPERATION

Introduction and Thesis. The Italian title of this paper (*“Il Ruolo dei Militari nel Sostegno alla Popolazione Locale nell’Operazione di Controguerriglia”*, or “The Role of the Military in Support of the Local Population in Counter-Guerrilla Operations”) comes from a requested research topic at Italy’s Center for High Defense Studies (CASD). This subject of the paper is counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, of which counter-guerrilla operations are a part. There is no lack of theories, doctrine, case studies, articles, and research papers on COIN, particularly since COIN became “fashionable” again several years ago, given the situations in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, there is still a need to focus on and capture a wide range of observations, lessons learned, and recommendations on the aspects of COIN most relevant to practitioners. Given the complexity of COIN operations, and the likelihood of these operations remaining at the forefront of the national and international security agendas, this paper’s most appropriate title is “Observations for Practitioners: Counterinsurgency as a Complex Operation”.

A portion of the material in this paper was developed for an article for the NATO Defense College’s 2010 Forum Paper on “Complex Operations: At War and on the Margins of War”. That article focuses on the concept that the ascendancy of the human dimensions of war, coupled with the lethality of irregular and asymmetric threats in current and future operational areas, leads to the observation that even with the presence of high-technology systems, the world is seeing the emergence of a “New Heroic Age” in warfare. As that article was based on research conducted during the U.S. Army War College Fellowship at the CASD, and is highly relevant to the subject and intended audience of this paper (particularly given the nature of the current war, and U.S. and Italian participation in it), certain observations, conclusions, and recommendations from that article are included in this paper.

PART I: THE PROBLEM AND THE PLAYERS

Strategic Context: Complex, Anarchic Environments

Counterinsurgency (COIN) operations are highly complex. COIN's complexity stems from the coexistence of the elements of power (e.g. diplomatic/political, informational, military, economic; "DIME") as variables at all levels (tactical and operational as well as strategic) at all times. As the presence of a complex problem indicates the need to simplify it, understand it, and then work on multiple levels with multiple variables to solve it, meeting the challenges of COIN ultimately requires a sophisticated mindset, great skill, and strategic vision. The first step in understanding the complexity of COIN and meeting its challenges is accepting that operational and strategic environments are, in fact, anarchic.

Although the home environments of modern democratic states are stable and essentially orderly, the world as a whole is still best characterized as the "anarchic international environment" of **realist** literature, particularly classical realist literature, although the forms and means of wielding power evolve. Power counts, in all of its forms; those who have the elements of power, to whatever degree they have them, count. These include states and non-state actors (NSAs) that are hostile to the interests and values of established powers and the "international order". Although the world as a whole has always been this way, many powers are just now beginning to comprehensively focus on how to deal with the full range of these challenges in a way consistent with both our collective interests *and* ideals. This is an exceptionally positive and long overdue development.

I believe it is impossible to understand complex operating environments without understanding the **power dynamics** of the anarchic international environment, and indeed of the anarchic *internal* environments of the locations where complex operations take place. Those who have spent most of their service in the undeveloped/developing world—where virtually all of the conflicts are—will not find this as a surprise. In these areas, where **the**

key terrain has always been the human terrain, what I have seen is less a “clash of civilizations” than a clash of civilization (writ large) versus barbarity. This occurs in anarchic environments where power groups struggle for either absolute or relative supremacy, or just for a “piece of the pie.” Those who have not participated in or focused on the difficult grey-area operations against malicious and predatory elements¹ in the most unstable parts of the world are often stunned at the complexity of the situation on the ground. Welcome to the real world, where nothing is, or has ever been, simple.

The real world is complex because it is imperfect. In this all-too-human world there is no reliable, compellent supra-national enforcement authority to effectively confront the malicious and predatory, **although in this vacuum stronger nation-states and alliances try to play the role**. In the post-Cold War, post-9/11 context, what has changed is an increase in the collective will to get on the ground and effectively deal with these complex problems, with the imperative to actually produce positive results. Simply put, if modern states and international organizations are to live up to their ideals and codified visions of justice, and protect our interests, they must be prepared to take action—effective action. Talk is seldom effective, and economic sanctions by themselves are rarely effective or productive. Therefore, effective action for the most complex and vexing problems ultimately requires the credible threat or use of force, in conjunction with political, economic and informational efforts.

Unfortunately, our intentions, no matter how well-meaning and when in line with our ideals, will always be suspect in an anarchic world; hence, there is a particular need to **ensure legitimacy** during operations, and legitimacy is largely about perceptions. Ultimately, within and among modern democracies there will always be a tension between the need to use force to counteract the malicious and the realm of ideals. Therefore, in exercising power in the

¹ These are often characterized as “evil” by more a range of writers over the last two millennia. My purpose here is not to enter a debate on values, whether juridical, ethical or theological, but rather to point out that value judgments must be made. Refer to the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD), St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), and Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) as examples.

complex world, modern states and international organizations must avoid the extremes of the naïveté born of utopianism and the cynicism born of the naked pursuit of self-interest devoid of legitimate purpose. **Balancing** actions between these two extremes requires **rigorous reflection and analysis, although not to the point of paralysis**. This is most important in the case of military force, which further requires an intuitive understanding of its uses and limitations, particularly in achieving desired political endstates vis-à-vis the human terrain.

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on observations and recommendations that are most relevant to NATO member states and to the Alliance itself, as the Alliance contains most of the most powerful modern democracies, and is clearly being drawn into more complex operations in an anarchic world. These complex operations include COIN. If NATO or its members are successful, there is a tremendous opportunity to advance the cause of stability with justice in an anarchic world. If not, the consequences will be severe.

COIN in the Complex Contemporary Environment

Modern democracies are already conducting complex and remarkably challenging **COIN operations, most significantly in Afghanistan**, and will continue to do so in the future. These are occurring against a backdrop of tensions with Iran and Russia, a strengthening China, NATO expansion, renewed interest in Africa, unease in Latin America, economic instability, demographic change, and the growth of more complex transnational organized crime, terrorism, and insurgency. Although contemporary complex operations occur against a background of tension vaguely reminiscent of the Cold War, they occur within a new and less clearly defined context than in the former era of bipolarity. Although the U.S. remains a superpower, the world is not unipolar and appears headed towards increasing multipolarity in a world of growing, interconnected threats.

Therefore, either modern democracies face the fact that there are and will be perennial, unacceptable challenges to their interests, status, and values, or they will ultimately

withdraw, decline, and “lose”. This does not mean looking for conflicts to get into, as **hubris** will lead to overextension, and the squandering of both legitimacy (measured in **political will**) and strength (measured in **blood and treasure**). However, there are and will be many complex crises that we cannot ignore, and also many opportunities to advance the agenda of a more stable and acceptable world situation. Effectively using these opportunities in turn requires a realistic **vision that is nonetheless rooted in our ideals**, and which enables us to **visualize the endstate** and the various intermediary steps on how to get there.

Ultimately, we must confront the daunting and complex challenges of a ‘brave new world’ in which the interplay of the elements of national power are tightly interwoven into all levels of all operations. This fact, once accepted and internalized, leads the prudent observer—whether academic, decision-maker, or practitioner—to evaluate the emerging requirements and consider changes to **doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities (DOTMLPF)**². Clearly, a critical examination of the elements of complex operations is required, and the most complex of the challenges we now face is COIN.

EXAMINING THE PROBLEM, THE THREAT, AND OURSELVES

Succeeding in contemporary complex operations requires first understanding the nature of complex operational problems, which requires an examination of certain fundamental dynamics to establish a framework. Within that framework, it is then possible to focus on the specific case of **COIN**. Once established, it is essential to use that framework to further examine the protagonists: the evolving threats (enemies actual and potential), friendly forces (i.e. ourselves), and a separate—decidedly more nebulous—category of “other

² The DOTMLPF factors are widely accepted as the basic elements of military institutions. Changes in the operational environments must be reflected in updated DOTMLPF for military services and the governments they support to be effective.

players”. This then leads to a series of conclusions that must be considered before making the required changes to DOTMLPF.

The Problem: Think of it as “War”

A complex problem that will involve military forces needs a frame of reference. Call it “conflict” or something other than “war” if needed for political or legal necessity, but it is best **to think of complex operations such as COIN in terms of warfare**. Failure to do so obscures the danger inherent in complex operations and robs the practitioner of a conceptual framework for using power to achieve a desired endstate. This is a highly significant point, and one that has frequently been ignored in practice by policymakers and practitioners, frequently for political expediency or because of a strategic misdiagnosis.

Literally as ancient as human history, warfare is complete with certain enduring fundamentals and logic, yet always adapts to contemporary circumstances and means. Warfare is an art, one which makes use of science as its practitioners can. It is very much an “art of the possible”, with violent and non-violent components combining in a myriad of ways to affect an opponent. Therefore, we must consider the enduring interplay of forces, as well as the changing factors of the contemporary and future operational environments. This point deserves closer consideration.

Simply put, if a situation has a violent component and requires the use of military forces, it is best to think of this phenomenon as “war” and treat it as a “war”—a complex undertaking that must eventually be “won”. Whether considered a “zero-sum” or “non-zero-sum” undertaking from a Game Theory perspective, there is no acceptable alternative to winning. However, despite the obvious desire to unambiguously “win all” in a zero-sum game, complex operations are much more likely to resemble a “non-zero sum game”. The bad news is that non-zero sum games and outcomes can be frustrating, as they tend to be non-linear and the outcomes not complete; the good news is that even a “non-zero sum game” can

be “won”. Winning, in this case, may be simply achieving an imperfect but acceptable outcome.

Achieving an acceptable outcome (the “ends”) requires effective and creative application of the available elements of power (the “means”). However, it is not sufficient to apply the means available in a simplistic or mechanical fashion. Warfare is an art, not a science, although it makes use of science as its practitioners can. Very much an “art of the possible”, it combines violent and non-violent components in myriad ways to affect an opponent. Therefore, practitioners must consider the dynamic interplay of forces and select, develop, and apply the appropriate operational approaches.

Key to Succeeding in Complexity: the Indirect Approach

Complex operations, like all warfare, involve an array of means and both direct and the indirect approaches, but the indirect is likely to be the dominant required form. This is a problem for modern democracies and international institutions, because despite a rising tide of discussion about employing “**the indirect**” there is actually little cognitive understanding of it and even less **sense or intuition** on how to apply it in practice. The “indirect” does *not* mean simply the non-violent, and is not necessarily synonymous with “non-lethal” or “soft” power. This is a surprisingly common misunderstanding. Rather, the “indirect” means the application of whatever means available “indirectly” against the enemy. This describes how the elements of power and their various means are applied, not simply which elements are applied. An effective and imaginative practitioner (which includes our enemies) will use a combination of lethal and non-lethal power in direct and indirect (most easily understood as obvious and non-obvious) ways to shape the environment. This is where it gets complicated in practice.

Complex operations require both powers that persuade and powers that compel, and they are used directly and indirectly. However, borrowing from the law of physics which

says that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, for every theory and operational approach there is a (somewhat) equal and opposite approach. For every tactic there is a counter-tactic, for every combination of the elements in operational design there is a complement which can negate it. The very nature of this yin-yang balance leads to “infinite combinations” or “inexhaustible permutations” that Sun Tzu wrote about. This point is essential to understanding and practicing the operational art in a complex environment.

Strategic Review of COIN

“Anciently the skilful warriors first made themselves invincible and awaited the enemy’s moment of vulnerability...invincibility lies in the defense, the possibility of victory in the attack”³ Sun Tzu

COIN deserves particular attention as a complex operation. Despite a recent surge of attention, unfortunately there is limited understanding throughout western democracies on the true nature of COIN,⁴ and on the challenges and opportunities presented by a multinational approach to it. This is significant, as there is a critical need to understand and develop effective, supportable, long-term solutions on how to deal with it. Therefore, a review of the basics is in order.

COIN is ultimately a **strategically defensive** operation. It is useful to think of it as a defense in depth that occurs across the elements of power and other variables.⁵ Significantly, because of this, the defense becomes more complex than the offense. This is the opposite of much conventional thinking. Simply put, offense implies “taking” something; defense implies holding it, and then presumably doing something with it. Although the military component of offensive operations can be exceedingly complex, it is in the defense where the already complex military component more fully intertwines with the other elements of

³ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, ed. By Samuel B. Griffith. Oxford University Press: NY, pp.85-86.

⁴ Author’s notes from Afghanistan, particularly 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009. The collective failure to overtly identify the operations in Afghanistan as “COIN”—which they clearly were—reinforced the “strategic ambiguity” the enemy sought to achieve.

⁵ Such as the “operational variables”: political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical terrain, and time (PMESII-PT). See U.S. Army Field Manual 3-0, Operations. February 2008.

power—and does it over a longer time, usually in a manner that is open to more public scrutiny. Failure to understand this will lead to ultimate failure.

It is commonly understood that the prime focus of the defense is defending key terrain, however **in COIN the “key terrain” is the people. They are strategically the center of gravity (COG).** Unfortunately, this simple truth is not easily translated into a successful COIN campaign. *How* to approach the problem is not easily reduced to a simple formulaic approach, as the specific local conditions and power dynamics are always at play. Although we can generalize about the enduring needs of a civilian population (e.g. **security**, food), the “key terrain” is not always the same, even within a single country or operational area. Cultural and political dynamics matter; in some cases these will be obvious, in others not. Those that are not so obvious, but which are crucial for the COIN practitioner to note, include the role to which local values are concordant with such international values as ‘international human rights’ (as expressed in the UN Charter, for example); the nature of social/influence networks; and the role and form of patronage in the culture(s) of the operating area. This last point is particularly difficult for many Western personnel to understand, because it is often complicated to the point of being byzantine.

Given that the population is the COG, and the tremendous need for **legitimacy** for any successful COIN operation, there must be a specific focus on the **role of protecting and supporting the local population** in the area of operations. This is because credible and enduring protection is essential to developing and maintaining **popular support** for the effort, and **popular support is the best basis for legitimacy**. This is all the more critical for operations conducted by the forces of modern democracies, who are answering to political concerns both in the area of operations and in participants’ home countries. However, on the ground, protection ultimately requires a true commitment with credible forces to securing the local population for the long term; it does *not* equate to simply “showing the flag” with little

real action and “giving them things” in the hope that they will be grateful. Likewise, it does not equate to simply targeting enemy leadership or to conducting large unit sweeps to “clear” with no effective “hold”.

While attacking and reducing enemy strongpoints, leadership, and sanctuary areas are both critical and necessary tactical and operational methods in themselves, how it is done as part of a larger, integrated strategy is key. Too frequently the net effect of many operations is to enter and leave an area only to return again, frequently in a subsequent rotation, with different units, to do the same thing again. This produces a **net negative effect**, as the local populations (and the enemy) see this for what it is: the lack of a commitment to provide necessary long-term security and development, and the lack of an integrated approach aligning tactical, operational, and strategic elements. With no real progress on the ground, or worse yet a reversal of progress, home country constituencies become disillusioned, leading to a loss of political will—exactly what the enemy wants.

Therefore, failure to provide real, credible security equates to operational and strategic failure. Fortunately, although challenging, there are a variety of ways to establish security over time. In COIN it is critical to gain the initiative and get the enemy to react to you. This is done through indirect and direct approaches, with a primary focus on that which affects the population’s security. Therefore, using the methods above is necessary, but ultimately, the most effective way to provide credible and enduring protection is to develop, train, and advise indigenous security forces with the capability and legitimacy to provide the critical element of security. A significant part of this ultimately becomes **Security Force Assistance (SFA)**, which is rightfully becoming a major interest for NATO and its member states, and is covered in later sections of this paper.

In sum, COIN is a complex and nuanced form of war, but is best thought of as war nonetheless. The art of war applies completely in COIN; the science of war is used as

applicable. While certain portions of a COIN operation in a given region may be less belligerent, and can appear to be “on the margins of war”, it is a serious mistake for the practitioner to consider direct participation in COIN—which requires taking siding with a government in an existential fight—as anything less than participation in a war. Doing so seriously undercuts chances of success the ability of those charged with successfully resolving the problem, and discounts the remarkable, even heroic, efforts of those who are most effectively confronting the problems on the ground. Once undercut, there is a corresponding drop in the morale of the troops and officials involved and in their capability to solve problems at all levels. This drop in confidence and capability is then reflected by the media, creating a vicious cycle that threatens to separate the legs of the “**Clausewitzian Trinity**”⁶—exactly what the enemy wants. Understanding and communicating the real dynamics at play and the specifics on the ground is the essential to stopping this. In the murky, complex world, this is hard, and it is only worsened by wishful thinking and erroneous assumptions.

The Enemy Gets a Vote

Given the need to examine complex operations through the prism of warfare, and that in warfare it is critical to understand the enemy, complex operations require a holistic look at how **the enemy thinks, acts, and organizes**. In the contemporary context, this starts with a review of irregular, asymmetric, and unconventional threats. In addition to being able to study and understand the thoughts, writings, and case studies of the irregular enemies we now face (after eight years of war) and those we have faced in the past, it requires a more fundamental understanding **of insurgencies themselves, which in turn requires a look at Unconventional Warfare (UW)**. UW is important because it covers how to conduct an insurgency using a wide variety of means, and there is already a significant base of doctrine,

⁶ Refers to the Army, the Government, and the People. See Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. By Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1984, p.89

training, and organizations that NATO members can use. The ability to understand UW gives tremendous insights into how irregulars organize and fight, but more importantly *how* they think, coerce, and influence with their actions and words. Fortunately, we have a significant **UW doctrinal base**, as well as training and organization to use to develop our models for future success.

Understanding COIN through a UW Lens

Clearly, the COIN practitioner must understand the nature of an insurgent enemy, and it is therefore essential to examine the fundamentals of how an insurgent enemy organizes and operates. A brief summary of key UW factors must include the components of the insurgent organization and the general phases of an insurgency, and the COIN practitioner must understand the enemy organization and operational methodology throughout each phase. Properly done, this enables the practitioner to get inside the enemy's decision cycle and rob them of the initiative. Importantly, this must be done at all levels—strategic, operational, and tactical—and include the range of factors that influence the insurgency and its strategies, operations and tactics. These include endogenous environmental factors such as demographics, geography, climate, as well as exogenous factors like external support.

The basics begin with the three fundamental components of an insurgency, as well as two additional elements. The first component is the **underground**, a compartmented, cellular organization that conducts operations in areas inaccessible to their principle armed force (guerrillas), providing intelligence, counterintelligence, propaganda, and specialized support (e.g. IEDs, smuggling, etc.). The second component is the **auxiliary**, composed of local population members providing clandestine support on a part-time basis, using their position in the community. Although ideally placed, they are most expendable element, and generally are only useful for specific support in a specific area. The third component is the **guerrilla** force, the overt military component of an insurgency. The two additional elements

frequently present in an insurgent organization are the **shadow government** and **area command**.

Successful insurgencies pass through common phases of development, although not all insurgencies experience every phase, and progression through all phases is not a requirement for success. The same insurgent movement may be in different phases in separate regions of a country. A common failure of insurgencies and counterinsurgencies is the inability to adapt tactics when transitioning from one phase of a strategy to another.

Phase I is the Latent or Incipient Phase, when the resistance develops a *clandestine supporting infrastructure*. This is a critical first step to gaining control over the local population and weakening the power of the government, and often sees the development and implementation of an effective area command organization. **Phase II is Guerrilla Warfare**, focused on undermining and attacking the government's security apparatus. Of note, as the size of the guerrilla force grows, so must the clandestine support mechanisms; although this means greater power and momentum, it also paradoxically presents a vulnerability that can be exploited. Typically during this phase, the insurgent movement (through the shadow government) seek legal or political status to enhance their claims of legitimacy. **Phase III is War of Movement**, which is the most difficult. Ideally, this culminates in the overthrow of the established government, and thus leads to the institutionalization and recognition of the political power of the insurgents in the form of a new government. However, as the insurgents become more overt in Phase III, they also become more vulnerable.

The basics of insurgent organization, methodology, and phasing can be seen in numerous COIN case studies, including those reviewed in this paper. However, these common threads are often overlooked or misunderstood. Clearly, it is imperative to have COIN practitioners grounded in these basics. Once that is done, using UW doctrine as a

framework for understanding the basics of an insurgency, it is then necessary to review unique aspects of the current threat.

The Dynamic Contemporary Enemy

As with warfare, the enemy is dynamic. Therefore, while important to review case studies of irregular forces current and past, it is imperative to note that the threat evolves over time. Currently, we see that the centripetal forces of globalization spawn centrifugal forces to counter them. The evolving threats that emerge become decentralized, and willing to throw virtually anything at their opponents in novel combinations and over time. This phenomenon is now often referred to as “hybrid threats”. Although recognition of the hybrid nature of many threats is helpful, it is not a completely novel dynamic. There have always been hybrid threats. In fact, the very nature of UW, when used as part of a larger campaign, is to present hybrid internal and external threats to the opponent regime, combining as many elements and means of power in novel ways. Those charged with performing UW for NATO throughout the Cold War⁷, for example, were fully aware of this. Then as now, hybrid threats could be thought of as “clever, adaptive, surprising and dangerous threats”, “not necessarily linear threats” and “I will figure out every way I can to damage you” threats. The point here is that this is not necessarily as new a concept as it appears from the current literature, which in turn implies a process of rediscovery, updating, and internalizing, and not starting from zero.

In the current context, then, it is worth reviewing some basics. In complex operations the threat will use the **asymmetric, irregular, and indirect means available** to strike at our weaknesses in support of their **strategic (political) goals**. The enemy seeks to find and exploit the “seams” between our efforts, whether physically (e.g. the political and operational boundaries in Afghanistan) or conceptually (e.g. political alliance seams, as with different

⁷ The defense of Europe included planned guerrilla/partisan operations against Soviet rear echelon and occupation forces. Going further back to World War II, many nations that are now members of NATO had significant experience with these types of operations.

national caveats). The enemy seeks to create “strategic ambiguity”⁸ for us while maintaining strategic clarity for them. To accomplish this, the enemy uses lethal and non-lethal means in an indirect manner, harnesses them into information operations, and seeks to present us with ethical, political and operational dilemmas.

Of these, the ethical dilemmas are the most insidious for modern democracies. In this case, the enemy seeks to use our own ethical sensibilities against us by creating “radical asymmetries” and distort perception of reality, particularly in who is *responsible* for ethical dilemmas.⁹ The purpose of this is to negate the use of our military strengths (e.g. firepower, particularly airpower); the tactic is to dramatically distort facts. This cynical approach can be remarkably effective, as idealistic but gullible audiences fall prey to enemy (and other) information operations “spin doctors”. As captured in the Italian proverb “*L’innocente crede ad ogni parola*”¹⁰ (“The innocent [i.e. naive] believe every word [i.e. anything]”). The fact that the enemy uses the “**big lie**” **propaganda technique** should not surprise anyone, but the way it is done often does. The best counter to this is ultimately to have credible, ethical, responsible personnel representing friendly forces both on the ground and in the media, and to effectively deconstruct both the lies themselves and the techniques the enemy uses.

In a dynamic operational realm against this type of enemy, adaptability is essential, and nothing is ‘business as usual’. Complacency in the face of ever-evolving tactics, techniques, procedures (TTPs) and operational approaches of a networked yet decentralized threat is dangerous, and arrogance is irresponsible and self-defeating.

⁸ Max G. Manwaring, “Managing Globalization: Lessons for Constructing a Strategic Bridge to the Future”, p.39, in *The Search for Security: A U.S. Grand Strategy for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. By Max G. Manwaring and Edwin G. Corr, and Robert H. Dorff, Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT, 2003.

⁹ Michael Walzer, “Responsibility and Proportionality in State and Non-State War”, *Parameters*, Spring 2009, p. 51

¹⁰ *Dictionary of 1,000 Italian Proverbs*, ed. By Peter Mertvago. Hippocrene Books, NY. 1997, p.59.

“Other Players”: the Grey Area

As mentioned earlier, in a classical (and neo-classical) Realist view anyone with power counts to the degree that they have power. Power is fungible, and must be evaluated across all of its elements (e.g. DIME) particularly insofar as those who wield it have the intention to use it. Given the demonstrated historical importance of **external support** in developing and expanding an insurgency, this can have significant implications for COIN.

These simple observations should not be surprising. As previously stated, ultimately all conflicts (insurgencies and COIN included) are about who will exercise power and how. Although almost always justified by and cloaked in ideology, conflict is ultimately a very human search for power, whether in concrete political, military, or economic forms, or even for less clearly defined (yet very human) desire for “status”. Despite the obvious presence of irrational, radicalized fanatics in complex conflicts, we still see **more rational** actors in this sense, and examples abound. Across the world, narcotics smugglers, criminal gangs, and any disenfranchised group with limited or no prospects for power take up arms in a cause that they may have an affinity for, but ultimately gives them the prospects for more individual and collective (tribal, ethnic, religious, nationalist group) power. This is most obvious in the anarchic ungoverned or undergoverned parts of the world.

Clearly, this takes myriad forms. In the case of the current war, it is largely in the context of a **super-insurgency** within the Islamic world. The true danger and nightmare scenario, of course, is that the regionally-based super-insurgency (i.e. militant Islamic fundamentalist movements) may link up with other insurgencies, such as those in Latin America or Africa, or with sponsoring states. This may occur despite the lack of common ideological ground, and be based more on the highly rational search for allies in a search for power that challenges the existing order. Given the nature of modern communications, this type of networking is always a possibility. Strategically, it makes sense, de facto creating

multiple geographical and conceptual fronts for the world's legitimate governments, particularly for the U.S. and its allies, to confront.

The struggle to gain support across regions and across the elements of national power (e.g. DIME) focuses on the full range of players in the world. Therefore, instead of simply placing the players in a complex operation like COIN into two simple, black-and-white categories such as friendly and enemy, there is a need for a third category. This third category is the grey area of the "others", those that have power and/or influence and who may be swayed into directly or indirectly supporting one side or the other at various times. While this may seem simple enough, the implications are very significant. Taken from a Game Theory perspective, for example, the presence of an ill-defined, grey area category of players who may influence the conflict in various ways at various times, implies that a complex operation is not, in fact, a "zero-sum" game. Although an in-depth development of this argument is beyond the scope of this paper, there are a few basic points worth noting about what I will refer to as the Grey Area Players (GAPs).

Since the GAPs are generally not directly involved in the conflict, they should be further divided into subcategories such as pro-cause, neutral, and anti-cause, with the cause being the friendly position. Regardless of the subcategory, since GAPs are not directly involved, their influence should be evaluated across the elements of expanded elements of national power, minus military. Simply put, if we use for example the "DIMEFIL" (diplomatic/political, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement) elements, and remove the military aspect, we have the basics of a useful matrix with which to strategically evaluate the GAPs. Of these, it appears the most relevant pieces center around the ability of GAPs to provide resources and funding, as well as to provide "legitimacy support" to one side or the other.

GAPs may be virtually any political or social entity, such as nations, alliances, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), major religious institutions, multi-national corporations (MNCs), media outlets, or civic organizations. The key is identifying those relevant to the conflict, evaluating them, and then engaging them as appropriate. Ignoring them is tantamount to losing their support, which they may then passively or actively, wittingly or unwittingly, give to the other side. The resulting loss of support in an individual case may not be significant, but in the aggregate can be devastating. Likewise, gaining momentum from GAP resourcing or legitimacy support may be the foundation of broad-based support over time. Therefore, a power ignores the GAPs at its own peril.

After evaluating the GAPs, certain strategic assessments can be made on *how* or *where* to focus efforts on engaging them. As much is already written on using various media and cyberspace to “get the message out”, I will focus briefly on the obvious yet overlooked aspect of engagement in a geographical area. In some cases this may be obvious, such as with the “G-8” countries, China, Russia, or even the U.N. In this case, the respective Foreign Ministries or Department of State engage those countries in their home capitals. However, in many cases this is not so obvious, and a power must take care to focus efforts where they can have the greatest effect. In this case, a particular effort must be made with the means available in a particular location.

Two examples immediately come to mind: Brussels and Rome. Brussels, already the capital of Belgium, is also the seat of both NATO and the European Union, the most powerful alliance and the most comprehensive supra-national entity in the world. Rome is more subtle, but highly significant. The capital of the Italian Republic, which is a major industrialized state and G-8 member, it is also the home of a variety of highly influential organizations and entities, not to mention one of the most popular tourist destinations in the

world. The opportunities to engage GAPs in Rome is exceptional, a fact that is frequently overlooked by many—particularly U.S.—observers, despite the fact that the U.S. Embassy in Rome is important enough to have three fully accredited U.S. Ambassadors: to Italy and San Marino, to the U.N.’s Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), and to the Vatican. This last case is highly interesting, as the Holy See is not only highly influential in itself (as the Vatican City-State is the seat of the world’s single most populous religion), but attracts an extraordinary amount of international attention on issues of legitimacy. Indeed, the very essence of many legitimacy arguments flow from the *jus ad bellum* / *jus in bello* theories developed from Roman Catholic Canon Law. Likewise, the host of other religious, cultural, charitable, and social organizations based in or represented in Rome merit attention. If the “**soft power**” topic reviewed in Part II of this paper is given its appropriate attention, it is logical to focus efforts on Rome and similarly influential locations.

Examining Ourselves: Enabling Success in Complex Operations

The imperative in all military operations is to be effective and ultimately successful. Complex operations such as COIN, with their intertwined DIME facets from the highest to the lowest levels, are difficult enough on the ground, but become exponentially complicated when a practitioner fails to apply an appropriate operational approach using the proper means. In practice, the most common means are military. Therefore, any nation or alliance undertaking a complex operation must have a realistic and accurate understanding of the suitability of its forces for an operation. If something requires change, then it must be identified and developed. This requires the clarity that comes from critical and honest introspection.

Introspection: Of Machines and Men

Introspection is difficult enough within a given nation’s forces and government, but can be exceedingly painful within the political confines of an alliance. Regardless of the

discomfort, it is necessary for facing emerging challenges, staying relevant, and succeeding at matching actions to lofty goals and rhetoric. One useful piece of introspection is to note that NATO members over-focused on the technologically-driven “Revolution in Military Affairs” (RMA), and correspondingly over-did the certain changes in the DOTMLPF factors. While technology drives military “science”, it became a focus to the detriment of the military “art” and its human dimensions. RMA theories ultimately implied a move away from the importance of the individual soldier on the ground across the operational area, in which systems of systems removed the complexities associated with the “fog of war”. True, the systems associated with the RMA significantly changed some aspects of combat. However, RMA enthusiasts took this reasoning to a *reductio ad absurdum*. This led to the belief that the military element could “win” virtually by itself, particularly by focusing on the “direct” approach. Logically, this implies a possible separation of the military element from the other elements of power, and leads to an almost exclusive focus on the direct approach—the exact opposite of what is needed in complex operations. Therefore, it is useful to view the RMA as a dramatic military-technological *evolution* that can enhance our operations, but one that does not revolutionize operations *vis-à-vis* the human terrain on the ground.

Interestingly, there were and are significant technological developments with military and police applications that were overlooked and which should be incorporated in DOTMLPF changes for a complex environment. In the belief that the RMA produced quick and decisive victories, many overlooked a wide array of technologies available for effective and creative application in such fields as population and resource control and tactical or sensitive site exploitation. These benefit, for example, from the burgeoning fields of forensics and biometrics, which are particularly useful for helping to identify the members and supporters of threat networks, and provide reliable means of identifying people in a world on common-usage and false names. Much of these are commercial off-the-shelf (COTS)

technologies, which means that they can be used by all alliance forces and also during operations ‘by, with, or through’ local, indigenous forces. Such technologies are not a panacea for the murky world of complex operations, but used creatively and effectively can be tremendous force multipliers for professional, well-trained troops on the ground. Again, this becomes a case of science aiding the military art.

Re-Emphasizing the Human Element

A complex operation, like warfare, is a quintessentially human undertaking; it is conducted by people, and it must address human needs and concerns. Humans are complex, and it is not easy to separate passions from intellect, the rational from the irrational, or to understand an individual or community’s complex web of interests and calculations of interests. However, it is useful to make certain generalizations. For the purposes of this paper, there are two aspects of psychology that are highly relevant to more profoundly understanding complex operations.

First, it is clear from a wide range of literature and experience that Maslow¹¹ basically got it right. In the Hierarchy of Human Needs, “the safety needs” are second only to bodily functions¹². In the context of complex operations, safety needs translate most directly into **security**, which balances physical security with a sense of justice. Put another way, as seen in the case of the COIN, securing a population is the most important aspect in a complex operation; experience in Iraq and Afghanistan confirm this, as do a myriad of other cases. However, **“security” includes the broader elements associated with “a sense of justice”;** **indeed, upon closer analysis, particularly at the operational level, the COG for the local population itself is “enduring security with justice.”** This in turn implies a stronger

¹¹ Abraham H. Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Psychological Review 50(4) (1943):370-96. <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm>, accessed 04 JAN 09.

¹²Maslow, p.377 “*The safety needs*...we may then fairly describe the whole organism as a safety-seeking mechanism. ...we find that the dominating goal is a strong determinant not only of his current world-outlook and philosophy but also of his philosophy of the future. Practically everything looks less important than safety...A man, in this state...may be characterized as living almost for safety alone.”

requirement for understanding and addressing what that sense of justice means in each operational environment.

The second point concerns our expeditionary forces, those striving to set the conditions to establish that security, across intertwined dimensions of power. In complex operations, there are socially based “wicked problems”¹³ that require work by **dedicated, talented people** who know what they are doing and why they are doing it. Returning to Maslow, he described the characteristics of a person needed to perform these tasks. They are essentially self-motivated problem-solvers who see the world as it is, and who have a very strong ethical sense.¹⁴ These are people who can **simplify** the ‘complexity’ and make order out of the chaos, and both design and execute far-reaching solutions to the problems at hand.

Since the RMA theses drew us away from the very human aspects of the military art which are fundamental to complex operations, it is time to reassess the human dimensions in the light of the developing requirements of complex operations. Specifically, there are two basic observations that bring up two fundamental premises with the potential to significantly impact NATO’s DOTMLPF. The first concerns the possibility that we have entered a New Heroic Age in the middle of a highly technological age. If true, this brings in to question how to develop personnel models for the New Heroic Age, which are best described as “functionaries” and “warriors.”

Complex Operations=A New Heroic Age?

Edward N. Luttwak describes the era of the RMA as a “post-heroic” age¹⁵, because advanced technology led to the ability to conduct operations from a distance. This implies a

¹³ Horst W. J. Rittel, “On the Planning Crisis: Systems Analysis of the ‘First and Second Generations,’” *Bedriftsøkonomen* #8 (1972), pp. 392-393. Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973), pp. 161-167. As cited in U.S. Army TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5-500, Version 1.0, 28 January 2008, p.9.

¹⁴ Whereas described the basics of “self actualization” in Maslow, p.383, the themes relevant to this article are covered in a later work, see: Maslow, Abraham *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper. 1954

¹⁵ Edward N. Luttwak, “Toward Post-Heroic Warfare”, *Foreign Affairs*, 74, May/June, 1995. Also in “A Post-Heroic Military Policy”, *Foreign Affairs*, 75, July/August 1995. Most recently, in Part 4 “Post Heroic Warfare”, *The Virtual American Empire: War, Faith, and Power*, Transaction Publishers, Brunswick, NJ. 2007

de-emphasis of the role of the individual in conflict. However, in complex operations such as COIN, every individual on the ground counts. The role of the “strategic corporal”¹⁶ and the daily events in Afghanistan and Iraq highlight this development.

This is a logical and positive re-balancing in the evolution of militaries that have come to rely too heavily on machinery and technical solutions. Although this reliance stemmed from the rational desire of modern democracies to limit losses of blood and materiel in combat, it had the effect of turning friendly troops into “cogs in the wheels” of that machinery. Coupled with risk aversion on the ground, this often leads to a “bunker mentality” of troops in ever-larger bases, detached from the real work on the ground. However, in operations in which the requirement for success is to have personnel, military and civilian, face-to-face with a heterogeneous foreign population, military and paramilitary local forces, enemy fighters and support networks, in a fluid and frequently lethal environment, in the support of a legitimate cause—we have entered (or re-entered) an age that should be thought of as **“heroic.”** This is not a glorification; it is a reference to real conditions and required mindsets, particularly the closer one gets to the problems on the ground. This has very significant implications.

“Functionaries” or “Warriors”?

Are the challenges of a return to the “heroic” too complex, too hard, for our troops? The answer depends on a number of factors, including the adaptability of our military institutions and the political will as represented by their governments and societies. Simply put, it depends on all three legs of the Clausewitzian trinity. The raw material must be “good troops”—good people—properly assessed, selected, trained, educated, and led. Although our troops can do it, and have done it, there still must be significant institutional change to allow these individuals, units, and organizations the room to develop the skills and mindsets

¹⁶ Charles C. Krulak, “Leadership in the Three Block War”, Marines Magazine, January 1999.

required, and the flexibility to apply creative solutions to complex, ill-structured, and wicked problems.

Significantly, in a complex environment most of this work is done on the ground among the human terrain, which increases personal risk dramatically. Despite the danger, there are significant benefits to this approach: it is not boring or meaningless, which has a great psychological effect on troops (current and potential), as well as on home populations, providing that the efforts are seen as worthwhile, necessary, and successful.¹⁷ It is also an opportunity for the dedicated, talented problem solvers to practice the art of the possible in new and remarkable ways. For example, complexity allows the possibility of **‘grand design’—normally in the strategic realm—at the operational and tactical levels**, because conditions require it. There are plenty of examples of this from the recent battlefields,¹⁸ particularly those COIN operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

This leads to the requirement to address something of a dichotomy in modern professional military approaches and mindsets, which I will categorize as those of the “functionaries” and the “warriors”. Although it may have different connotations in different languages and cultures, the term “functionary”¹⁹ indicates a role akin to bureaucrats performing roles of some authority, as in a civil administration in a home country. Closely associated with this is the tendency to prefer overly **technocratic** solutions²⁰. At an extreme, functionaries follow a careerist path focused on personal advancement, which is self-serving and can ultimately be detrimental to mission success. In contrast, there is a subtle reluctance

¹⁷ Consider the following “A war to protect other human beings against tyrannical injustice; a war to give victory to their own ideas of right and good, and which is their own war, carried on for an honest purpose by their free choice,—is often the means of their regeneration.” John Stuart Mill, “The Contest in America,” *Dissertations and Discussions*, vol. 1, p. 26 (1868). First published in *Fraser’s Magazine*, February 1862.

¹⁸ Author’s notes while a Task Force CDR in Afghanistan, 2007.

¹⁹ Author’s notes, 1999, 2004, 2009; I have heard the term “functionary” in four languages to describe the role of the military. Accounting for linguistic and cultural nuances, the term still stands in contrast to those that describe “warriors”, “fighters”, “combatants”, “field troops”, and a variety of more appropriate terms for military forces facing the challenges of complex operations.

²⁰ Lew Irwin, *Filling Irregular Warfare’s Interagency Gaps*, Parameters, Autumn 2009. P. 70

to use language associated with the role of the “warrior”, and to describe that role, most likely owing to political, historical, cultural, and even legal sensitivities.

However, this does not change the fact that we need warriors, and should clearly identify what it means to be an ethical, professional, modern warrior. This should start with the acceptance of a simple and non-controversial **warrior ethos**.²¹ A warrior ethos is ultimately about honing and harnessing a very human aspect, **the spirit**, and is an aspect often overlooked. The warrior spirit, guided by an ethical warrior ethos, is a key component in facing the daunting challenges of complex operations such as COIN. Individually and then collectively, the human spirit responds positively to challenges and strives to overcome them. This requires discipline and sacrifice, and produces the pride that comes from doing something “real” for a positive purpose in the face of intense adversity. In the sense of the **Italian proverb “Dove non c’è pericolo, non c’è Gloria”**²² (“where there is no danger, there is no glory”), using the power of the human spirit—the hallmark of the warrior—to overcome adversity in a dangerous and complex environment is a powerful factor in achieving success.

Bridging the cultural and professional gap between the functionaries and the warriors is fundamental to future success in complex operations. Fortunately, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as there is a role for both. However, it is far easier to develop functionaries than to develop the kind of warriors we need for complex operations, because while we can produce functionaries through education, it is difficult to imbue the **physical and moral courage** indicated by a **warrior ethos**. Likewise, the level of training required to move, survive, and operate effectively in the operational areas is significant.

In short, turning functionaries into **ethically-based and operationally effective warriors** is at the very heart of the possibility of a new “heroic” approach. This is not the swaggering “heroism” of a braggart or amateur adventurer; it is the way of the quiet

²¹ For example, the U.S. Army’s Warrior Ethos is simply stated as follows: “I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit. I will never leave a fallen comrade.”

²² Dictionary of 1,000 Italian Proverbs, ed. By Peter Mervago. Hippocrene Books, NY. 1997. P. 90

professional who is confident and competent as a problem-solver in an arduous and enduring mission. This situation becomes more heroic the closer to the messy and complex realities on the ground. Of note, people respond to the “heroic” in others and respect it, and this is certainly true in the places where complex operations occur. Local populations from tribal to advanced societies despise those seen as weak, detached, oppressive, and self-serving, but admire those showing strength (of character as well as arms), concern, and justice. They also admire those who are not only *against* something (like the enemy), but *for* something.

If these positive aspects are then passed on to others, for example to other military and police forces through Security Force Assistance (SFA) efforts, then we create a virtuous cycle. This cycle can have a multiplier effect in the troubled areas, which ultimately benefits us and meets our goals of providing stability with justice.

PART II: STRATEGIC CONCEPTS FOR COIN

Examining Friendly and Enemy Centers of Gravity in COIN

The fundamental point that the “population” is the COG is already clear, however the critical strategic dimensions of this are more complex than that simple observation might imply. In any strategic situation, there are complex and even counterintuitive aspects; in the case of COIN, with the host of players (friendly, enemy, and “GAPs”) vying for power and the support of the local populations, this requires further examination. As difficult as they may be to discern, each player has a COG, and a host of forces act upon it. Since COIN is a form warfare (as established in PART I of this paper), and the art of war has its enduring set of principles and fundamentals—which essentially indicate how to affect the COGs through the levels of war—the practitioner must identify the COGs at play and then the **offensive and defensive measures needed to either attack or protect those COGs.**

In the contemporary, complex strategic environment, these measures will take place physically and conceptually across three key categories of “battlefields.” Those are: 1) on the ground in the Theatre of Operations, concerning the actual conflict; 2) in the home/allied countries, concerning sustained support for the operation; and 3) among the “other”, “third party”, or GAPs. This third category in particular occurs across real space and cyberspace, in and among the GAPs, wherever they are. Likewise, this is important to the degree that any GAP has a degree of power or influence relative to the operation.

The practitioners involved must understand how these relate in a given case. Ultimately, this is essence of practicing strategy, as the practitioner links “means” available through the “ways” possible to the “ends” desired *vis-à-vis* each COG and across each “battlefield. Clearly, the successful COIN practitioner must be astute and broadminded enough to discern the dynamics at play (e.g. DIME), knowledgeable and attentive enough to identify emerging threats, and practical and skilled enough to develop effective

countermeasures and gain the initiative and develop momentum. Throughout all of this, the practitioner must always assume that the enemy is swift, adaptable and opportunistic, and would do well to act in the same way across all the applicable “battlefields”.

Certain observations concerning the first two of the “battlefields listed above deserve special attention.

In the Theater of Operations

In the section of PART I entitled “*Re-emphasizing the human element*”, the practitioner sees that the **COG for the local population itself is “enduring security with justice.”** This can be exceptionally difficult, given the Hobbesian reality on the ground, where life is often “nasty, brutish, and short”. In order to achieve enduring security with an acceptable measure of justice, the practitioner must adapt to local conditions in each area, and remember that, as the old American political adage goes, “**all politics are local.**” Although an insurgency may be the result of global networking, and it is logical and advisable to disrupt this networking to the extent that this is possible, the only way to win a COIN fight is to do it **locally**, in the places where it most threatens friendly interests, and quite frankly, where we have a reasonable chance of success. That chance of success, as in any conflict, depends on a number of factors, including the political will of the friendly participants, particularly those that dedicate the most national blood and treasure to the fight. This means the situations will vary from location to location within the theater; it also means that artificial boundaries or internal borders are unlikely to properly show realities on the ground.

Ultimately, the enemy’s aim in the Theater of Operations is destabilization, achieved by undermining the confidence and faith the local populations have in the local and national government, as well as in those that support them. Just as we seek to separate the insurgents and their supporting infrastructure from the local population, the enemy seeks to separate us from the civilian population—to ensure we are alienated from them. They seek to gain the

momentum, and force us to react to them. Dangerously, in the modern context this approach extends out of the Theater of Operations, to the political realm of those that support the COIN effort of the national government.

Home Country and Allied Political Arenas

Simply put, **the political will to continue the COIN conflict is the friendly COG**, in both the home country and within an alliance. Protecting the friendly COG requires understanding the issues. Politically, most modern democracies (particularly those of NATO) are most concerned about domestic audiences, and rightfully so, for several reasons. The two most salient reasons are: 1) democratic and cultural values, whether national, communitarian (e.g. E.U.), or “universal” (e.g. U.N.); and 2) budgets, as the institutional requirements for funding, and reluctant taxpayers and governments, are part of the equation.

Budgetary requirements to sustain COIN operations are a simple reality, and COIN-based funding often competes with other defense priorities for limited financial resources. Therefore, there is a permanent tension to financially sustain complex COIN operations, unless they are politically popular. Political support for COIN operations, in turn, often hinges on the perception that the effort is concordant with the dearly held values of the participating states and their populations. Many factors influence this, but the ability to sustain COIN and other complex operations often depends on the **political maturity and internal unity** of those participants, as they can affect **military and political synergy and effectiveness**.

In the values camp, Europe offers the most interesting case. For example, although European “nations”, are older than the U.S., Canada, Australia, and others, the simple fact is that virtually all European “states”, as defined by political organization around their respective constitutions, are not. In all cases, the European national constitutions currently in effect (the U.K. does not have one) are from the post-WWII period. In fact, what virtually all

NATO countries have in common is that their very forms of government (and political parties and associated with them) are from the post-WWII era, and are younger than the U.N. itself. In a number of cases, these nation-state governments, as currently formulated, are younger than most in Latin America. This is even more readily apparent in the case of the supra-national entity to which most allies belong, and others aspire to: the European Union, which is very much a project in the making.

While this should not be a surprise, it is a significant point that is frequently left out of the discourse. The implication of this relative political “youth” is that the political maturity and internal unity of many modern democracies makes for a potential point of weakness for an enemy to exploit. By contrast, using the same metrics, the U.S. as it is currently governed, is a firmly established and mature political entity that dates from the 1789 adoption of the U.S. Constitution. Despite actual and perceived political disunity or weakness, particularly following the Vietnam War, the U.S. has a strong degree of political unity that translates directly into advantages in synergy and effectiveness (even if its strategic vision is at times more simplistic).

These points are germane to the conduct of COIN as a form of political/military warfare (and to operations in Afghanistan in particular), most notably when one considers the enemy’s goals.

The Enemy Seeks to Divide Us

“Thus, what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy’s strategy; the next best is to disrupt his alliances...” Sun Tzu²³

The enemy’s approach in COIN is one of **Asymmetric Warfare**. The enemy specifically seeks to the friendly strategy, separate the members of an alliance, and within a participant’s home country, the enemy seeks to separate the legs of the Clausewitzian Trinity—the Army, the Government, and the People—from each other. Therefore, intra-alliance and civil-military relations are critical to defend the friendly COG. Failure to do so

²³ Sun Tzu, p.77-78.

will have ramifications beyond the COIN operation itself, as seen in the Vietnam War, in which U.S. leadership “**failed to defend US public opinion** against the full-scale media war²⁴” conducted by the communist enemy, and often aided by others domestically and internationally for ideological or concrete political reasons.

Defending the friendly COG is therefore imperative, and more difficult than it may appear. There are two main reasons for this. The first is based on the **rationalist fallacy** that the correctness—and indeed the importance—of the cause ensures continued support for it. The logic goes that since a democracy is using its DIME powers for good and necessary cause, and with good intentions, despite the costs the home populations will see this as worthy of enduring support. While this may work for an extended time, it is likely to waver and fold when the costs are perceived to outweigh the benefits. Added to this, democracies suffer from what has been described as a noted “attention deficit”, meaning that they will lose focus and refocus on something else. Unfortunately, if that leads to a perceived defeat, the nation or alliance will be perceived as weak and vulnerable, which in an anarchic world will lead to a vicious cycle of continued assaults across the elements of power, perhaps even against the home country itself.

Therefore, the practitioner must stay focused on achieving strategic success; this requires seeing clearly what needs to be done, and doing it. It is important to act decisively with the intent to follow through, so as to not be misunderstood by the local population, the home population, allies, and GAPS. This is the essence of credibility in COIN, and the way to avoid the vicious cycle of perceived weakness and ineffectiveness leading to decay.

COIN Approaches

At its base, COIN demands these unique skills and mindset of doing business at the grassroots level. Success is achieved village by village, town by town, from the bottom up.

²⁴ Manwaring, p. 65.

However, this still requires help and protection from the national center, which means a relatively strong and effective, although not overly alien or burdensome, central government is required. To this end, friendly force behavior with the local population is extremely important in developing and maintaining popular support, although there is an all-too-often overlooked aspect of this: more important than being “popular” (in the sense of being likeable or “kind”) is the requirement to be seen as strong and “just”—which means effective, credible, and acceptable. In an anarchic environment, power is important, and weakness is despised. Therefore, in an environment where “kindness” may be mistaken as weakness, it is highly important to be perceived as strong and just. An extension of this includes the important factor, seen repeatedly in COIN case studies, that the central government is well-advised to exercise control through local mechanisms, and to involve the local populations in these processes, including in their own defense.

Before covering the basics of the most effective ways to conduct COIN, it is helpful to review certain fallacies, several of which have gained adherents over the last decade. First, there is no “magic bullet” to end successfully end a COIN campaign. Therefore, the “decapitation” or “head of the snake” approach, which is focused on capturing or killing insurgent senior leadership, is highly useful and necessary, but not sufficient to win the COIN campaign. Ultimately, this approach ignores the “franchising” of operations and the lack of centralized control typical of most insurgent organizations. For example, even if Osama bin Laden was captured or killed, it is unlikely that Al Qaeda (AQ) would be destroyed, even if it were a significant victory. A similar argument posits that had the combined Taliban and AQ force defeated at Tora Bora in 2001 been completely liquidated, there would not have been an insurgency. Again, this argument shows a lack of understanding of the extent of the underlying causes and enemy structure still there along Afghanistan’s southern and eastern borders, and inside its southern and central hinterland.

Likewise, the simplistic argument that those supporting a COIN operation should simply “declare victory and go home” is unconvincing. Again, this is highly unlikely to equate to victory, given the likelihood that the threat will resurge again quickly and more strongly. For example, in Afghanistan, the project of creating and maintaining a viable allied state in strategically significant Central Asia, in a former communist domain, in an area rife with previously unchecked militant Islamic fundamentalism, is a project that is both achievable and worthwhile; simply declaring victory and going home, instead of consolidating and expanding the initial military victory, would lead to a defeat across all the other elements of power (most importantly political)—which means a strategic defeat. This is simply not acceptable, as it is myopic and naïve, and would ultimately lead to more instability in a strategically critical region.

Finally, the assertion that friendly forces should (or could) simply “buy off” the enemy is absurd, as one can never “buy off” the “true believers”, and the others will never be satisfied, and always want more. As pointed out throughout this paper, in an anarchic and complex environment, numerous and decentralized elements will eternally compete for power in a variety of ways, and a simple “pay off” will not suffice.

Having touched upon simplistic approaches in COIN that do not work, it is appropriate to review the multidimensional approaches that do.

“Smart Power” in COIN: Hard power + Soft Power = Smart Power

Hard Power

Despite a perception to the contrary, no known or credible authority has stated that it was possible to “kill or capture” our way to success in the current conflict, or in COIN in general. However, we must absolutely remember that providing security *includes* killing and capturing enemy **irreconcilables** to stop them from becoming strong both in physical reality on the ground and, more importantly, in the perception of the local population (and of our

home populations). The use of military forces and intelligence services to do this is often referred to as “hard power”.

Given that insurgents use clandestine networks, one of the keys to COIN is to develop and maintain an effective intelligence, analysis, and targeting capacity **to target those networks**. The intent is to penetrate insurgent cells and attack them from the inside out, which requires a robust intelligence structure, using both technical and human means, particularly including the development of local contacts and sources. This in turn requires close coordination with the security forces, and civil government, of the local area.

Forces and Capabilities: Aiming for the Multiplier Effect

Given the pressing requirement to succeed in COIN and other complex operations such as stability operations, significant capabilities are needed. As pointed out in the most recent U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), these require “**a portfolio of capabilities across the forces**”²⁵, meaning developing or significantly enhancing needed capabilities across the range of agencies and forces. For the military, this refers to **general purpose forces (GPF) as well as Special Operations Forces (SOF)**. In large scale COIN, large numbers of GPF are required, particularly infantry. However, there are notably increased requirements for specialty troops in COIN, such as Special Forces, Civil Affairs, and Psychological Operations on the SOF side, and intelligence, engineers, and military police on the GPF side. Likewise, in small scale COIN operations, particularly when foreign friendly forces serve in an advisory capability, these specialty troops are more likely to be used.

Ultimately, the most effective means of approaching this challenge is to improve host nation capability for Internal Defense and Development (IDAD), including the capability of conducting Population and Resource Control (PRC). Overall, the most effective way to handle this is through what is now more broadly referred to as **security force assistance**

²⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) February 2010, p.20.

(SFA) missions, which center on training, equipping, advising, and assisting (indirectly and/or directly) host nation forces. The reason for this is clear: “for reasons of political legitimacy as well as sheer economic necessity, there is no substitute for professional, motivated local security forces protecting populations threatened by insurgents and terrorists in their midst.”²⁶ This brings the possibility of developing a virtuous cycle in which allied efforts are multiplied exponentially across the operational area, thus achieving a “multiplier effect”. As local forces increasingly do this work themselves, it alleviates the need for massive foreign intervention that may be costly in blood and treasure, as well as politically untenable over time.

Soft Power

As stated earlier, information is an element of power, and **perceptions count across all key audiences**. The term “soft power” was developed by political scientist Joseph Nye, and describes the ‘powers of persuasion’ and influence (such as information), as opposed to the powers of compellance (hard power). While the influence of such soft power means as economic and financial instruments seem obvious, their influence is surprisingly overlooked and often underestimated, and their utilization and desired effects achieved are not planned into operations. This is a serious shortcoming, as using “money as a ‘weapons system’” can be very useful to supporting strategic and operational goals in COIN.

Likewise, the role of strategic communication (STRATCOM) is often underestimated, and STRATCOM efforts are frequently under-resourced, over-tasked, uncoordinated, and under-appreciated. This is ironic in COIN and stability operations, since local perceptions are fundamental to gaining the support of the population and thus securing the COG and mission success. Given that this occurs “where adversaries often enjoy the advantage of greater local knowledge and calibrate their activities to achieve sophisticated information

²⁶ QDR 2010, p.27.

objectives”²⁷, it is imperative to directly address this fundamental weakness in the operational theater.

However, soft power—the power of influence—must also be used ethically and honestly vis-à-vis home audiences and GAPs. Simply put, the friendly case for participation in and support of a COIN operation must be made in the “marketplace of ideas”. The STRATCOM message must be clear and convincing, properly reasoned, and also tied unambiguously to the defense or furtherance of the each audience’s *interests* as well as their *ideals*. An example of this is the need for open and accessible markets, as well as of the suppression of terrorism, both of which fit well into a more idealistic message of “freeing the oppressed” and expanding “stability and justice.” However, it is important to not overstate the case, as in the case of expanding “freedom and democracy” in areas where the cultural underpinnings work against them; overstating the case will lead to unrealistic expectations and frustration.

As with all types of power, the manner in which soft power is used is fundamental to determining whether it will be effective. For example, the role of development aid is generally understood to be necessary and helpful in COIN, and is considered a good use of economic and financial power. However, if it is not applied in conjunction with the appropriate political elements, as a means of achieving a realistic and worthwhile political goal, and properly framed within an understandable STRATCOM message (i.e. use of the informational element of power), it is likely to be a waste. This is a very difficult fact for many to accept, as there are many donors (governments, NGOs and even private donors) who want to have a positive effect, and it is counterintuitive to think that donating their resources to a good cause may be wasteful, or at worst counterproductive.

²⁷ QDR 2010, p.25.

Therefore, even soft power must be coordinated and applied in a synergistic and holistic manner. Keeping in mind that all actions are competing in the “marketplace of ideas”, with the ultimate political goal of winning popular support—particularly from the local populations—the way this is done is important. Properly done, it is very much like marketing, which in turn is largely based on the “branding” of goods and services. Hence, all applications of soft power must serve to strengthen the “brand” (in marketing terms) of the friendly cause, which in turn becomes critical in the effort to win “the hearts and minds” of the local population²⁸, GAPs, and even home audiences.

With reference to home audiences, there are other important elements that also deserve attention. One often under-appreciated aspect is the need to demonstrate that friendly forces are adhering to *jus in bello* concerns, acting professionally, bravely, and humanely in support of a just cause (which in turn stems from *jus ad bellum*). This then leads to moral and other direct and indirect support for the troops themselves, which is important for both the troops and for the nation(s) they hail from. This is not a superficial concern, and deserves more than rhetorical treatment; **troops should ‘feel’ the support, pride, and appreciation—dare I say “love”—of their nations.** When they do, *esprit* is enhanced, recruiting maintained, and a virtuous cycle of home nation popular support emerges. If not, the sense of frustration, can lead to a vicious cycle that undermines the operation. Two simple examples from the American experience suffice to demonstrate these dynamics: the negative experience in the latter phases of the Vietnam War, and the totality of the first Gulf War. Therefore, an important task for those developing and applying soft power is to strengthen or

²⁸ For example, on November 18, 2009, The Center for a New American Security’s Vice President Kristin M. Lord and other experts including Walid Phares testified at a U.S. congressional hearing “on the role of development and humanitarian assistance as a tool in the war on terror, and on the role that marking and branding U.S. assistance plays in winning over the hearts and minds of local populations in a global response to terrorism and extremism”, and “what considerations need to be taken into account to ensure that U.S. efforts are appropriate and maximized.” Accessed 08 December 2009 at <http://cnas.org/node/3608> : “Flag on the Bag?: Foreign Assistance and the Struggle Against Terrorism”.

forge those bonds with those who influence public opinion, which means focusing on the entertainment, cultural, religious, and/or civic bonds that count to each population.

Smart Power

Having reviewed **both hard power and soft power**, suffice it to say that both are necessary, although neither is sufficient enough by itself to enable a modern democratic nation or alliance to win in a COIN operation. Therefore, an approach that effectively combines both in a COIN operation is needed if the practitioner is to have the necessary means to the successfully practice the operational art. That approach is best considered as the “smart power” approach. The key to a smart power approach is for the practitioner to use both hard and soft power in concert, applying them as appropriate to the situation in both direct and indirect ways to influence all relevant audiences: local (in theater), friendly (home), enemy, and GPs. **This is an approach grounded in pragmatism, and guided by a certain idealism, and is focused on achieving a realistic strategic endstate.**

Although there is much to be written on how to employ a smart power approach, a few observations are helpful. In COIN, the initial analysis should identify the various fractures of the friendly government and society being aided (e.g. political, religious, ethnic) to identify where the friendly side is weak, and also where the enemy might be weak. Then, the appropriate combinations of hard and soft power are selected to defend and strengthen friendly weak points, and attack enemy weak points. In all of this, the security of the local population must be paramount, and every action must support the friendly “brand” as being both effective and just. For the purposes of this paper, there are two cases of approaching security and development that can serve as examples, one positive, and one negative. Both are applicable after an area has been “cleared” of overt insurgent forces.

On the positive side, there is the highly effective “**one-third rule**”, used extensively in Foreign Internal Defense (FID) / Internal Defense and Development (IDAD) missions by

the U.S. in Latin America and elsewhere for decades. The rule requires that for any development project in a COIN zone, participation should be: a maximum of one-third of foreign military forces (e.g. U.S.), and a bare minimum of one-third each of host-nation security forces and local civilians. The idea is to minimize the perceived role of foreign forces, maximize the role of the host nation government forces, and ensure a robust participation of the local population. The direct involvement of the local population in planning, developing, and executing the project is critical for several reasons. First, it ensures their “buy-in” to the project. Second, they will benefit from the work opportunity, including possibly learning new skills (e.g. construction, electrical wiring, plumbing). Third, it is the best way to ensure positive, sustained interaction between the government institutions and the local population. If the enemy opts to later destroy the project for symbolic or terrorist purposes, it will be a direct affront to the local population, as it was their project, built with their support and sweat. Properly handled, the local population will want to defend the project either directly (e.g. with local defense forces working with the government), or indirectly (by providing intelligence on the enemy).

The dynamics at play in this case are simple but highly effective, and offer the opportunity to further develop bonds with the local population. First, there is an opportunity to provide certain basic services, such as medical treatment, while the project is going on. This is an exceptionally useful opportunity to reach out to those who will most benefit from the project: usually, that is the local female population, and the youth. Even in the most conservative male-dominated societies (e.g. Afghanistan), the ability to win over the women is particularly helpful. Second, there is an opportunity to educate the local population on even the most basic things, such as hygiene and sanitation. While this sounds almost ridiculously basic, it can directly affect key health issues, such as infant mortality—a major concern of a poor population. Third, it offers an opportunity for presenting the government’s political

case in a supportive forum. In support of this, for example, is the chance to distribute small, self-powered (solar or hand-crank) radios for the locals to then listen to the government sponsored or independent (non-insurgent) radio stations.

Clearly, this is the use of soft power, however it is nested within the larger context of the military campaign against the enemy. If the enemy appears to threaten the project, it is a targeting opportunity. If the local people have information on the enemy, they will have ample, discreet opportunities to share that information. If there is a successful use of hard power against the enemy, it serves to reinforce the friendly side's strength and the enemy's vulnerability. This is an example of smart power at work.

For a negative example, there is the use of soft power within a larger military (hard power) operation that may appear to be “smart”, but fails to take into account basic human nature and realities on the ground. In this case, well-meaning but naïve elements simply try to “buy” the support of the local population, giving money or conducting development projects and assuming that the local will appreciate them, and that the donations will have the intended effect of helping the local population politically, economically, and socially. Naturally, the belief is that this will further strengthen the bonds between the local population and the host nation government, as well as with the donating nations.

Unfortunately, this simple logic does not always hold up, and the Italian saying “*La strada al' inferno é pavimentata con buoni consiglieri*” (“the road to hell is paved with good intentions”) applies. This is, in fact, an example of a rationalist fallacy, because it is no more possible to “buy” success in COIN than it is to “kill” one's way to success in COIN. The fallacy stems from the naïve logic: given that the local people are poor, and “we” have money and good will, transferring the money or building projects will lead to “our” side being seen as “good”, which in turn means the locals will *ipso facto* support the friendly side. However, simply giving money in an anarchic environment—that is, using the economic and financial

instruments in a manner divorced from the political, military, and informational—is a waste, and can be counterproductive.

This frustrating and counterintuitive dynamic has been observed, for example, by the eminent economist from Columbia University, Jagdish Baghwati, who recently wrote in a Foreign Affairs essay of the “Charity Trap”, describing that “even in reasonably democratic countries, the provision of aid creates perverse incentives and unintended consequences”, and highlighted “the mismatch between intentions and realities”²⁹. This observation is, of course, all the more pronounced in anarchic situations where cultural dynamics make the local population distrustful of all outsiders (regardless of good intentions), and the Hobbesian reality on the ground is exacerbated by an enemy who can simply enter or threaten a local population. Ultimately, the lack of enduring security and local engagement on the friendly side almost guarantees that the aid or project will not lead to the desired political result.

Smart Power in Action

Clearly, smart power requires that all actions be based on realistic assessments, and practitioners must be careful to manage expectations. As indicated earlier, smart power **is an approach grounded in pragmatism, and guided by a certain idealism, and is focused on results that support a realistic endstate.** However, the question remains on how to best develop and utilize smart power in practice. In COIN, the enemy uses irregular, **asymmetric warfare**, which indicates friendly forces must adapt and become more agile in the operational arena. Rather than being a linear and overly conventionally-minded force that simply reacts to the enemy, friendly forces must become flexible, imaginative, and highly disciplined problem-solvers. In many ways, this is the opposite of the old careerist models that “functionaries” needed to follow, yet fits in well with the “warrior” model described earlier.

²⁹ Jagdish Baghwati, “Banned Aid”, Foreign Affairs, January/February 2010, p.121, 124.

At this juncture, it is very useful to consider the outlook and approach of one of the friendly forces frequently involved in COIN worldwide that fit this model, specifically the **U.S. Army Special Forces** (SF, or “Green Berets”). The reason for this is not that the SF is the only model for a COIN force, because they are not; COIN generally requires a much larger approach in terms of troops, capabilities, and treasure. However, what makes the SF unique and particularly useful is primarily that **SF is the only branch that is founded upon and grounded in Unconventional Warfare**—that is, they are assessed, trained, and educated on how to “be guerrillas” and work with insurgent forces. This critical factor provides a radically different perspective to those who are “new” at insurgent warfare, such as those engaging in COIN who were not specifically developed for it.

The outlook of SF is based summarized by the **Special Operations Imperatives**³⁰, formulated decades ago. SF is focused on living and working with the local population, building rapport, trust and influence. SF’s organizational culture is highly adaptive, and focused on working by, with and through indigenous populations and forces. This requires a highly mature and culturally intelligent force that is effective in ambiguous and often austere environments. Although a highly skilled combat force, it is *influence*, not firepower, which is SF’s most powerful weapon.

Smart Power Opportunity and Challenge: Multinational Operations

COIN and other complex operations are already challenging enough given the situation on the ground, and become even more complicated when conducted by a multinational entity. However, for every challenge, there is a potential positive aspect. For example, COIN operations demand legitimacy, and multinational operations by their very nature can greatly enhance legitimacy. Likewise, sustained complex problems like COIN

³⁰The “Special Operations Imperatives” are: Understand the Operational Environment, Recognize Political Implications, Facilitate Interagency Activities, Engage the Threat Discriminately, Consider the Long Term Effects, Ensure Legitimacy and Credibility of Special Operations, Anticipate and Control Psychological Effects, Apply Capabilities Indirectly, Develop Multiple Options, Ensure Long-Term Sustainment, Provide Sufficient Intelligence, Balance Security and Synchronization.

require a breadth of capabilities and a depth of resources; therefore “burden sharing” in terms of human and material resources can be a tremendous positive. Closely associated to this is the ability to muster unique assets for the common cause. As in economics, certain nations have comparative advantages, whether because of resources, DOTMLPF factors, experience, national political will, or even reputation. The trick is to harness them for in a way that directly relates to solving the problems at hand.

International Entities and Regional Powers

In this regard, two categories deserve special attention: international organizations and alliances, and regional powers. In the case of international entities such as the UN, there is a strong advantage in providing political legitimacy and (to a degree) resources. However, numerous cases demonstrate a lack of effectiveness in facing the most complex and sustained challenges, and COIN is virtually always a complex and sustained challenge. Likewise, UN operations in the most difficult and complex operations are likely to lose political and even military cohesion. This is a highly significant point, often overlooked during the proposal, planning and initiation of operations: despite universalist rhetorical pronouncements, on the ground there has been a general failure of the “international community” to fully cooperate, and this is most clearly tied to a lack of common purpose and vision.

The UN is trying to remedy this shortcoming by developing its “Integrated Approach”; however, it is not yet working in any real sense because of “huge institutional and bureaucratic decision-making process.”³¹ The challenges here are, unfortunately, even more fundamental. UN efforts are not likely to be “realistic”—the approach needed in anarchic environments, and grounded in the classic sense of political “realism”—because the UN itself is founded on basic “neo-liberal institutionalist”³² assumptions that tie back to the

³¹ William C. Butcher, “The Incomprehensible Approach” , NATO Defense College Forum Paper *Operationalizing a Comprehensive Approach in Semi-Permissive Environments*, June 2009, p.158.

³² Neo-liberal Institutionalism is a major school of modern political thought in international relations, and stands in opposition to the “Realist” schools of thought.

order implied by the Westphalian state system. On the positive side, the UN can be helpful by correctly focusing on political legitimacy, which will resonate most strongly with the home audience and GAPs. On the negative side, by its very design, the UN is unlikely to be flexible, cohesive, and strong enough to be effective in a COIN operation, where the situation on the ground is highly unlikely to fit into the UN's conceptual framework. As a result, the local population is unlikely to benefit from a weak (albeit well-meaning) "international" effort to impose/enforce the most important necessary precondition for effective governance: effective security. Needless to say, those local (and non-local) powers that benefit from an endstate different from that desired by the UN will only be encouraged by the fractured, weak (albeit well-meaning) efforts of the UN.

Alliance efforts, such as those of NATO, are much more likely to succeed, although even NATO often suffers from a lack of common purpose and vision in specific operational cases, and this is perhaps most pronounced in the case of COIN. Fortunately, NATO is now developing a more holistic manner to deal with crises, particularly "out of area" crises. However, its Comprehensive Approach (CA) is developing "at a crawl...(and) the CA concept has yet to be translated for practical employment".³³ Even several years after NATO's assumption of territorial responsibility in Afghanistan, NATO's approach suffers from overly legalistic and non-realistic interpretations of the situation on the ground, and was clearly not prepared for the full realities of Afghanistan. While much more united and effective than the UN, too often NATO members wanted the situation on the ground to conform to a primarily western vision of peacekeeping and civil-military development; while it is certainly noble and humane to want to ease the harsh Hobbesian realities in Afghanistan, many nations do not generally want to do the ugly work of truly establishing security. Again, one significant part of establishing credible security involves hunting down and as necessary

³³ Butcher, p.158.

killing the “irreconcilables”, who are a major threat to both the local population and to the security forces (both local and international). Ultimately, failure to do this means failure, period—unless someone else does it. Ironically, however, simply allowing “someone else to do it” undermines the very credibility of one’s own efforts, and this frequently translates into a loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the local population—and a loss of their support.

Regional powers are the second case that deserves attention. Simply put, enabling or allowing regional powers to play a role is a good thing, although there are caveats to this. First, it is critical that the regional power(s) is not pursuing raw self-interest that is contrary to the desired endstate. Second, the presence of regional power forces must enhance, and not detract from, the legitimacy of the operation in the eyes of the local population. This last point is critical. For example, the presence of Russian or even Pakistani military units inside Afghanistan could undermine the overall effort. However, the presence of Chinese or Indian workers would not (although their military units would be problematic). In Latin America, Brazilian forces have played a very useful neutral but highly respected role in both conflict settlement (as in the 1995 “Upper Cenepa War”³⁴ between Ecuador and Perú), and indirectly in the management of COIN operations (e.g. in Brazil’s border areas with Colombia and Perú). In virtually all cases, regional powers can provide logistics, basing, and political support that serve a highly useful role.

In most cases, regional *powers* are likely to conform to an acceptable degree to the international norms suggested by the UN, NATO, or regional organizational charters. This enables them to play an important role strategically in establishing the political and economic conditions that can lead to a lasting, acceptable endstate. However, if they do not conform to the international norms, it is relatively easy to isolate them: after all, if they are regional *powers* (and therefore “haves”), they have more to lose than pretenders to power (presumably

³⁴ Author’s notes while serving as an observer on the first iteration of the Military Observer Mission Ecuador-Perú (MOMEPE), 1995.

“have-nots”). As their interests are ultimately at stake, and there is international leverage over them to maintain a productive posture, their role is very likely to remain positive.

Multilateral Challenges and Benefits

The challenges here include the obvious, such as a lack resources available in a given country (e.g. helicopters, vehicles, limited operational budgets). However, challenges also include more sensitive but absolutely critical elements, such as the level of military capacity. This category includes having the institutional (i.e. DOTMLPF) factors for a given operation. In this case, developing or adapting the appropriate doctrine is a *relatively* easy part, as troops can adjust, providing that they are professional, well-trained and well-led. More complicated is the array of challenges associated with **political will**. These challenges often manifest themselves in the form of “national caveats”, which to varying degrees affect the ability of an allied force to solve the complex problems on the ground. However, as a reality of coalition warfare, they must be respected, as they tie back to political support in the home countries.

Ultimately, the most daunting challenge is to achieve unity of command, effort, and purpose. Despite the obvious value of multinational institutions in enhancing political legitimacy, the recurring failure to achieve effective unity of effort must be addressed directly if there is to be any realistic chance of success. There are no easy answers or formulas here, but the bottom line is that success is the only acceptable outcome in military operations. Therefore, direct participation must be tied to a willingness and capability to do those things that enable success. While noble, participation itself is simply not good enough if we are serious about successfully achieving the endstate. Therefore, not everybody should “play the whole game”, as not all are up to all the challenges. However, in such cases political support is always welcome, as are extremely useful supporting roles, such as medical, logistics, financial, or developmental support outside of the non-permissive (most dangerous) areas.

Managing who does what and where must be based on realistic assessments; the danger of getting it wrong imperils more than just the operations on the ground.

However, if done right, the benefits to the operation, as well as to the individual contributing nations and alliance, are significant. The operation benefits from a broad range of unique skill sets, talent, expertise, organizations, and approaches. This may include, for example, deployable gendarme forces for stability operations; experience with internal and foreign subversion problems; and the **legitimacy** that comes from multilateral endorsement of an operation. In addition, despite the challenge of multiple voices, certain allies may be better at overall strategy in a given circumstance, which helps avoid the closed-minded “groupthink” phenomenon and short-sightedness. For example, it is a fair critique of the U.S. policy that it fell into the trap of having a “strategy of tactics” in Afghanistan and in Iraq from 2003-2006, and would have benefitted from a more strategic approach expressly involving strategic partners in an unambiguous manner.

Longer term, the benefits are potentially exponential. When done right, these operations strengthen military-to-military and international bonds because of the very human individual and communal response to shared hardship in a legitimate cause. As heard often in Afghanistan, the old saying “he who has bled with me is my brother” is more than simple rhetoric. Anyone who has participated in a “ramp side ceremony”³⁵ will know exactly what this means.

Specific Country Case: Italy

As this paper was written during a Fellowship with the Italian Armed Forces, it is logical to use Italy as a specific example of a multinational partner that brings unique advantages to a given operation. All nations have skill sets and historical experience to complement others, and often have unique and highly useful organizations that can serve in a

³⁵ Ceremony for fallen troops in the area of operations before repatriating remains. The presence of international forces alongside the national contingent of the fallen is a very powerful show of unity and honor.

COIN or stability operation. In this case, Italy has skills, experience, and organizations that deserve attention.

In terms of organization, Italy has a unique joint and interagency security structure, which lends itself to a “whole of government” approach. In addition to the obvious utility of Italy’s Army, Navy, and Air Force, the Italian armed forces include two dedicated forces that fulfil additional DIMEFIL functions (specifically economic, financial, law enforcement, and some intelligence functions) that are particularly relevant to COIN and the fight against transnational organized crime and terrorist networks. Italy has maintained those forces, the *Guardia di Finanza* (GdF, or “Finance Guards”) and *Carabinieri*, (a paramilitary police force) as integrated parts of the armed forces, while maintaining their focus on public order functions. The *Carabinieri* in particular are already actively participating in military operations (e.g. Kosovo, Afghanistan), and also are conducting SFA with gendarme forces from Africa and the Middle East at the Center of Excellence for Stability Police Units (COESPU) in Vicenza. The ability to utilize the GdF presents another set of unique advantages, given the complexity of the modern insurgencies, and the critical role that financing plays. The oldest armed force of the Italian State (founded in 1774, it pre-dates the Italian state by almost a century), the GdF has a specific role in disrupting activities associated with lawlessness, terrorism, and insurgency such as: counterfeiting, tax evasion, and money laundering. The GdF also monitors public funds spending and black market activities, both of which are essential elements in the fight against corruption in the countries where COIN operations are in progress. Clearly, there is a great deal of intelligence and prosecutable information that comes from these operations.

In terms of background and skills, Italy has a great deal of relevant institutional experience with internal operations against transnational organized crime networks (e.g. the Italy-based Mafia, Comorra, and ‘Ndrangheta) and internal terrorism and insurgency (e.g.

Red Brigades). Italy also has experience in foreign stability operations (particularly Bosnia, Kosovo, Lebanon, Iraq), and growing COIN experience in Afghanistan—particularly given Italian control over Regional Command (RC) West. The challenge for Italy now is to capitalize on these advantages, which in turn requires developing the **DOTMLPF factors associated with COIN**. Fortunately, Italy has started this process, both in conjunction with NATO's fledgling efforts and bilaterally with the U.S. The most evidence of this bilateral cooperation was the "COIN/SFA Seminar" held 05-06 October 2009 in Aosta, Italy, in support of Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLTs) deploying to Afghanistan. Certainly, much work remains to be done, however, Italy appears intent on developing a effective and useful Italian capability for complex operations such as COIN.

PART III: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategically, complex operations like COIN require “whole of government”³⁶ approaches, although this concept is actually better treated as a “whole of nation”³⁷ approach, making use of private sector support as well to achieve “unity of purpose” as well as unity of command and effort. In the case of multinational operations, this needs to be expanded to a “whole of alliance”. Although this may seem unrealistic for a group of pluralistic, democratic states that treasure the right of dissent, the salient point is that the Clausewitzian Trinity must have all three components in harmony if the operation is to be successful. This requires a clear strategic vision and communication of that vision in a way that it is supportable by most of the political spectrum. It implies bringing the political “left” in from the cold (especially if values they ostensibly treasure are at stake, such as human rights), and ensuring that the “right” is realistic about the ability to maintain legitimacy and achieve the true endstate: enduring security with justice.

However, to date there is little evidence of any earnest or effective attempt to mobilize the support to the level of “whole of” any political body. As civilian-military relations are critical, it is absolutely essential to strengthen or forge those bonds with the cultural, entertainment religious, and/or civic entities that count to each population. Mobilizing these soft power resources, which are voluntary, requires making the case in the marketplace of ideas. Doing so is a strategic imperative, as it involves strengthening the bonds of the Clausewitzian Trinity—which is a strategic target of enemy action. We must not allow the enemy to separate the Army (military and deployable interagency participating in the conflict), the Government (in the theatre and in home countries), and the People (writ large) from each other.

³⁶ See FM 3-07 Stability Operations, October 2008, p.1-4.

³⁷ David Grange et al., “Whole of Nation Engagement: Confronting Irregular Challenges in the 21st Century”, November 2008, McCormick Foundation, Wheaton, IL.

At the operational and tactical levels, we are fully capable of achieving success. Realistic assessments of complex problems, followed by imaginative and adaptable plans and actions, lead to success. Recognize what works, and use and adapt it; identify what does not work, and discard it. There is a simple truism: nothing breeds success like success. The corollary to this truism, though, is “you have to follow through.” Gain the momentum in tactical and operational activities, and do not foolishly squander it. Complexity is challenging, but we are up to the task if we are willing to adapt ourselves to it. Clearly, we have to prepare our people for these challenges.

Recommendations for Doctrine, Training, and Education

Practitioners must prepare for the complex challenges they will face. There is already a solid foundation of modern COIN doctrine (e.g. U.S. Army/Marine Corps FM 3-24, Counterinsurgency), however more attention on training and education is needed. The fundamental challenge in complex, ever-changing and unique operations like COIN is to teach personnel the **cognitive skills** of “how to think” and “what to think” (of which the former is more important). Without the appropriate cognitive skills, our leaders at all levels will not be able to “understand, visualize, describe and direct”³⁸ successfully. To this end, I propose several simple recommendations. These, though not all-inclusive, are meant to further discussion of preparation for COIN and other complex operations.

Doctrine

First, I propose some simple guiding principles for doctrine. Doctrine should be:

--holistic, because the problem set is multi-faceted.

--realistic, based on the imperfect human dimension in complex, anarchic situations.

--parsimonious. Get to the point; do not muddle, confuse, or bore operators, commanders, and staffs. Extensive studies are useful when there is ample time for thorough

³⁸ The elements of “Battle Command” in U.S. Army doctrine. FM 3-0, Operations. February 2008, Chapter 5.

academic study and reflection, but—like Sun Tzu—it is best to distil the wisdom and lessons learned for clarity and thorough absorption.

--balanced, focused on the operational art, together with the sciences. Likewise, focus on the complexities of the indirect approach, without neglecting the direct.

--forward looking. Look to future applications and technologies while remaining grounded in current realities.

--reviewed and revised, continually updated by talented, experienced people. As needed, issue “Training Circulars” and handbooks to continually update the force on the latest developments in enemy and friendly TTPs, without the full requirement of the doctrinal development process (which is normally 18-24 months long, as a minimum). Before beginning new doctrinal developments, it is particularly useful to review the existing (often forgotten, overlooked, or supposedly outdated) doctrine from those eras and forces with the greatest practical experience in COIN and SFA.

Training

The most obvious point about training for complex operations like COIN is that training scenarios must be complex themselves, as a reflection of the operational environments. The key is to be able to get to and effectively operate in the areas where the people are. Unique aspects include, but are not limited to:

--Mobility: as there are simply never enough helicopters for everyone, ground mobility is supremely important. As appropriate to the unit and mission, it is important to cover the full range of mobility, from horses³⁹ to motorcycles, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) to light and armored off-road trucks. Complete reliance on armored vehicles is neither wise nor sufficient, as the enemy will adjust to larger Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) as larger

³⁹ Author’s notes, Afghanistan, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007; Colombia 1996, 2000, 2006. Although not a replacement for vehicles, the advantages of horses include tactical mobility in virtually all terrain, and the significant fact that local populations (particularly rural populations) love horses and respect people who know how to use them. This novel yet ancient approach also presents excellent opportunities for positive information engagement, with both the local populations and with the media.

vehicles are canalized onto more limited movement corridors (terrain dependent). More flexible movement formations would include varied combinations of the means above, using modern combined arms cavalry techniques (air and ground) both on roads and off-road. The use of scouts, overwatch, and self-recovery is fundamental; the use of mobility-enhancing⁴⁰ assets is highly recommended.

--Combat Environmental Training: combat is the harshest of environments, regardless of where it occurs. Even if actual fighting does not occur, all personnel must be prepared for it. Replicate the physical terrain and conditions as possible; include cultural role-players and “grey-area” scenarios. Do not neglect rural training (like traditional patrolling), but emphasize urban combat training, as it is better for close combat (which is increasingly likely, given contemporary demographic trends).

--Combatives: build confidence and physical stamina, as well as the warrior spirit. The techniques chosen are less important than the fact that the training is done.

--Advisory and assistance training: local forces are ultimately the most effective way of securing local populations. A key part of SFA, personnel must prepare to operate alongside assisted nation counterparts. Of note, this is not about “putting a local face on” friendly operations, it is about enhancing *their* capabilities, getting *them* to do the operations, and ensuring *they* get credit for it.⁴¹

-- Key Leader Engagement (KLE) and Local Engagement Training: there is an art to conducting face-to-face (f2f) meetings with local populations and their leaders. As more units spread out among the key terrain (the people), this requirement increases exponentially. This is not just for the friendly leaders serving as spokesmen, but involves all personnel who will potentially participate in KLEs and meet with local people.

⁴⁰ In addition to engineers, canine (K9) explosive detection teams are extremely valuable to search for IEDs and to search suspect vehicles, cargo, and personnel for explosives, as at checkpoints.

⁴¹ This goes beyond combat operations, and includes Population and Resource Control (PRC) and civic action operations. There are numerous techniques for this.

--“SERE” (survival, evasion, resistance, escape) training: as above, with more civilian and military personnel f2f with local people, proximity to the enemy and their support networks increases; with it, the chance of capture increases. Therefore, even for rank-and-file members we have a responsibility to provide a degree of basic SERE training.

Education: *“It’s not rocket science...it is social science and art”*

Since complex operations like COIN are very human, the approach to them must be based on human behavior, and this essentially falls into the realm of the social sciences and liberal arts. Unfortunately, social science can at times devolve into sophistry, and this must be avoided by maintaining a realistic, pragmatic approach. Social science seems perennially caught between the Schylla and Charybdis: on the one hand, it often oversimplifies situations and dynamics in the name of achieving parsimony, which can lead to overgeneralizations; on the other hand it can hopelessly complicate understanding with endless datapoints, case studies, and theorizing. In its most modern form, this can lead to the “death by Powerpoint” briefings that—as well meaning as they are—are not ultimately helpful to the practitioner. What is useful is the balancing of these approaches, tempered with the wisdom required to understand and handle the “art of the possible”, in a given situation. Properly applied, the social sciences can help practitioners develop the cognitive skills to “understand, visualize, and describe” the complex problems they deal with.

Therefore, focus study on the study of power dynamics⁴², cultural and language expertise (including transcendent aspects of interpersonal and intercultural communication⁴³), information operations and engagement, and the essential elements of economics that are

⁴² Obviously a broad political-military field. I favor a return to a classic education concerning power dynamics. At a minimum, this should cover the basics of both classical and neo-classical realism (Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, etc., as well as Reinhold Neibuhr) and liberalism, as well as salient points covered by military-political philosophers and theorists, specifically Sun Tzu (only 13 chapters of a few pages each) and Clausewitz. This would also include, however, the basics of modern Game Theory.

⁴³ Author’s notes. Learning a foreign language and culture makes an individual better at cross-cultural communications in general, not just in the specific target language and culture. Hence, language and culture are not simply “technical” skills, but rather cognitive abilities that enhance the art of communication.

relevant for practitioners.⁴⁴ Likewise, a review of ethics is essential, as ethics apply across all dimensions of operations. All of this is best done holistically through an institutional approach that enables practitioners (SOF and conventional, tactical through strategic, and domestic and international) to come together for training and education in a secure location capable of supporting these activities.

This education must extend down to the tactical level. Fortunately, tactical personnel and units are already familiar with an array of handbooks, guidebooks, “leader books” and “battle books”⁴⁵ of key tasks and reference information that are straightforward, useful, simple to use, and portable. Troops and leaders carry, use, and sometimes create them. Not necessarily doctrinal publications, they are a tool to help shape and guide the understanding and vision of the operation. As summaries of salient points (like “Cliff’s Notes” or “Reader’s Digest Condensed” versions), they are extremely useful. I propose developing a concise handbook containing key issues from the cognitive skill subject matters listed above to further practitioners’ education. This is more likely to be read and understood and absorbed than exhaustive reading lists.

Intuition: the complex dimension of cognitive skills

Art implies reliance on intuition, and intuition is a very human phenomenon. Although exceedingly difficult to “teach”, it can, however, be developed. Although there is no replacement for experience, reflection and broad-minded study, there are games that can help develop a “feel” for recognizing and handling complex problems. All games have their limits, but some are very useful to developing intuitive thought processes. Ideally, computer algorithms could model intuition, allowing us to use them as training tools equal to a clever,

⁴⁴ Relevant concepts include supply and demand, comparative advantage, opportunity costs, role of micro-finance; problems with “giving away” money and illicit funds (market flooding, distortions, inflation). Also the friendly force non-lethal concept of using “money as a weapons system”.

⁴⁵ Guides and handbooks tend to be portable doctrinal publications relevant to specific mission sets; Leader Books and ‘Battle Books’ are normally created by each unit (down to detachment/ platoon level) that contain useful information about the unit and its mission, including mission essential tasks , training status, personnel.

adaptive human who may choose rationally or irrationally among the widest variety of strategic options—like a complex, irregular, and asymmetric threat. However, given the apparent impossibility of “modelling intuition”, institutions should encourage playing readily available yet complex games against human players. As humans have limits to their rationality and concentration, offer non-verbal clues, and often act on impulse, this is more useful for developing intuition than using computers. Like “mental combatives”, they help refine thought processes used for operational and strategic decision-making.

Chess is an excellent strategic game, but concerning complex operations has several limits. Chess is a linear game focused on one ultimate target, the opponent’s king. This is equivalent to a strategy of “decapitation”, which is not particularly helpful in contemporary COIN operations of networked, decentralized threats. These limits extend to the use of chess in analogies of complex operations. For example, it is commonplace to say “we play checkers, the enemy plays chess”, or refer to an operational area as a “chessboard” to convey a sense of complexity. However, a more appropriate analogy would be a four dimensional (4D) chessboard, with one level each for each of the DIME elements. As this may be interesting as an analogy, but unwieldy and confusing as an actual model or game, it is worthwhile to consider alternatives.

A simpler, readily available means to help develop **intuition** in complexity is the ancient oriental game of Go. Known in Chinese as Wei Ch’i (the encircling game), it most broadly focuses on the indirect, as the enemy does. Go is a more appropriate model of complex operations, in that there are no fixed sides, pieces or positions and minimal rules. In order to understand the complexity belied by its simple form, consider that computer models are still unable to master it, based on “the game’s sheer insolvability.”⁴⁶ Unlike games of linear and direct confrontation, Go is vague in terms of “profit-now” vs. “influence-later”

⁴⁶Peter Shotwell, Go: More than a Game, Tuttle Publishing, North Clarendon, Vermont, p.166: “the first 14 moves produce a search tree with ten thousand trillion leaves.”

assessments, and is remarkably “complex on the local scale.”⁴⁷ As Go is ultimately about controlling ‘territory’, the game requires strategic approaches that are more relativistic and less absolute, using calculation and intuition to play in local areas and across the whole board simultaneously. Interestingly, when using the game’s handicap system, even amateurs can win against professionals; this in itself is analogous to professionals versus asymmetric and irregular threats.

Summarized advice for practitioners

Complex operations such as COIN are multidimensional because they are a very human endeavor, and they represent a form of warfare to be won. Although the “direct” approach still applies, they largely rely on the “indirect”. COIN requires:

--Leadership down to the lowest levels, as every individual that operates in or influences the human terrain is important. Friendly forces operate tactically and operationally, but their actions have strategic impact.

--Warrior ethos, which implies both physical and moral courage. The moral courage must have a base in a firm ethical grounding, which is the cornerstone of building legitimacy.

--Cognitive Skills, including intuition. Understanding the problems at hand allows practitioners to apply the **innovation and versatility** required to succeed against current and future threats.

Complex operations such as COIN represent a challenge for dedicated, talented professionals who must succeed. Practitioners know that their nations and alliances, in addition to the affected local populations, deserve nothing less than success.

⁴⁷Shotwell, p. 164. In a commentary relevant to complex operations, Shotwell writes on “strategies for when conditions are chaotic” in Go: “the player whose stones or groups are not coordinated but have contradictory aims will always lose to the calm player who looks further ahead and has only one aim in mind.”, p.173.

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