Linking Doctrine to Action:
A NEW COIN CENTER-OF-GRAVITY ANALYSIS

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PHOTO: U.S. Marine Corps LTC Mark House, right, the commanding officer for 4th Reconnaissance Battalion, speaks through an interpreter to Iraqi men in Al um Waz, Iraq, 6 April 2007. (DOD, Cpl. John M. Odette, U.S. Marine Corps)

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Just as there is no one weapon that guarantees superiority in conventional warfare, so there is no silver bullet when it comes to counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. The recently issued Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, provides a firm doctrinal foundation, as corroborated in Battle Command Knowledge System chat rooms, training at the U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center and the Taji Counterinsurgency Center for Excellence, and field experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, but there is still a gap between doctrine and tactical results in COIN warfare. This article seeks to fill that gap by introducing what we believe is a useful planning tool: the COIN center of gravity (COG) analysis, integrated as the culminating step of COIN intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB). COIN COG analysis translates theory into practice from the bottom up, exposing insurgent lines of operation (LOOs) and suggesting possible counters to them. Rather than thrusting objectives from the top down that may or may not apply to a given situation, it balances counterinsurgent efforts and provides metrics. Links between COIN IPB and the root causes of a conflict, and between COIN COG analysis and tactical actions, are analyzed to figure out how to preempt insurgent activity instead of merely reacting to it. The process approaches COIN from the dual perspective of the nature of the population and the nature of the insurgent, not from the perspective of the counterinsurgent.

A New COIN IPB and COIN COG Analysis

Our aim is to understand the enemy's specific strategy, get inside his decision cycle, and predict his likely actions. To accomplish this, we use the four steps of COIN IPB:

O Understand the environment.

O Determine how the enemy is using the root causes of conflict to generate or heighten popular discontent and thereby manipulate the population.

O Discern the insurgent's strategy and his likely actions.
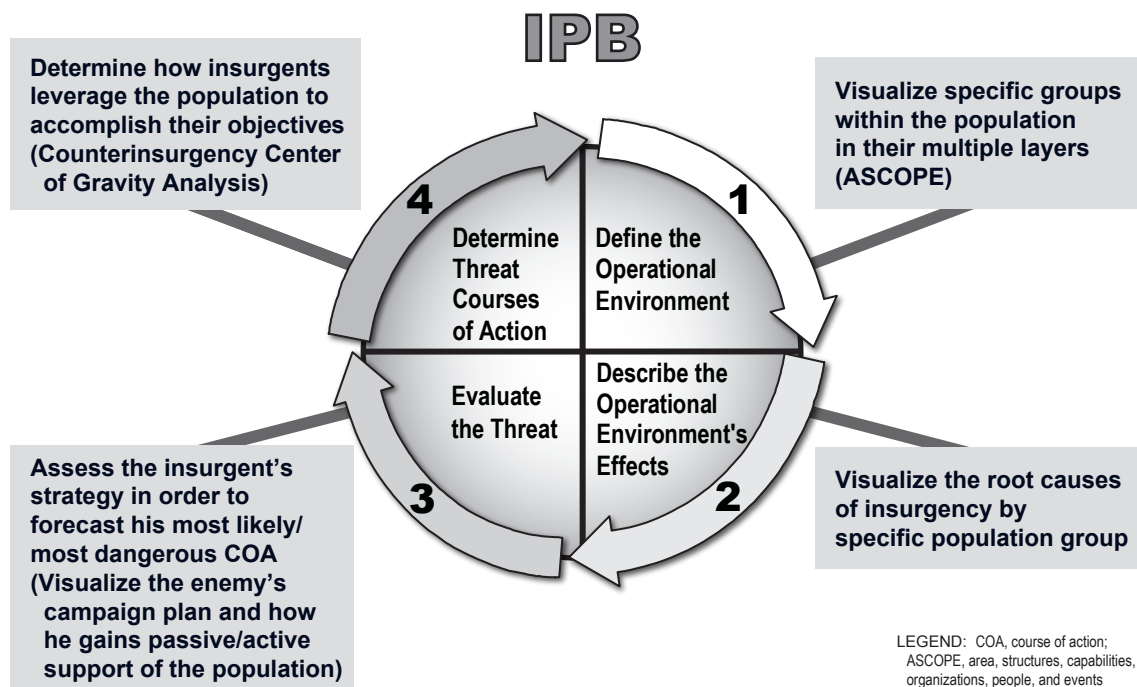
O Culminate steps 1-3 with an analysis of the COIN COG.

Figure 1. The four steps of COIN IPB.

Top-left box: **Determine how insurgents leverage the population to accomplish their objectives (Counterinsurgency Center of Gravity Analysis)**

Top-right box: **Visualize specific groups within the population in their multiple layers (ASCOPE)**

Bottom-left box: **Assess the insurgent's strategy in order to forecast his most likely/ most dangerous COA (Visualize the enemy's campaign plan and how he gains passive/active support of the population)**

Bottom-right box: **Visualize the root causes of insurgency by specific population group**

Circle labels: **4 Determine Threat Courses of Action** | **1 Define the Operational Environment** | **Evaluate the Threat** | **Describe the Operational Environment's Effects** | **3** | **2**

LEGEND: COA, course of action; ASCOPE, area, structures, capabilities, organizations, people, and events

This approach focuses operations on eliminating the root causes of an insurgency. It accounts for host-nation cooperation across all LOOs, and it reconciles short- and long-term effects. Products from the process can help staffs prepare commander's critical information requirements (CCIR), devise means to nullify insurgent information operations, and forecast specific enemy actions. Critically, the process produces metrics that can help validate an adopted course of action. Altogether, COIN IPB/COIN COG analysis is an integrated, comprehensive process that flows from the perspectives of the population and the insurgent.

The People Are the Environment

Because the population is the key to success in a counterinsurgency, COIN IPB must start with the people and their issues. Both insurgents and counterinsurgents employ strategies to separate each other from the population while drawing the population's active or passive support to themselves. The people need to make choices in support of one side or the other; controlling their will is more important than controlling terrain. According to Clausewitz, a center of gravity is "the point against which all the energies should be directed."[1] For the counterinsurgent, all energies should be directed at

gaining and maintaining control over the population and winning its support. Power emanates from the people; without their support, neither the insurgent nor the counterinsurgent can win.

In Step 1 of COIN IPB, we assess the area, structures, capabilities, organizations, people, and events (ASCOPE) in an area of operation to identify the links between the physical environment and the people. In other words, we move from the *what* to the *who*. The human element is the important part here. The ASCOPE assessment helps the counterinsurgent understand the people and the cultural, social, and physical environment in which they live.

Addressing the Root Causes of Conflict

In COIN, the counterinsurgent's main thrust must be directed at eliminating the root causes of conflict. These root causes preexist the insurgent's arrival, and determining what they are is the essence of step 2 in COIN IPB. To use a medical metaphor, the root cause is a wound, the insurgency an infection stemming from the wound. The counterinsurgent must address the infection for the short term, but he must simultaneously treat the wound to heal the

patient and prevent re-infection.

COIN doctrine prescribes general treatment for the ills that cause insurgency, but the medicine prescribed for a particular illness must be more specific: the counterinsurgent must address the root causes indigenous to each area, ideally before an insurgency materializes. A counterinsurgent needs to do more than defeat an insurgent group to be successful; if he eliminates root causes that could spawn an insurgency, he attains his objective. The key is not to identify the insurgent's special tactics, but to understand the intent behind them—the insurgent's purpose or operational goals. The question to answer, then, is not whether an insurgency exists, but what is causing it. These causes will be sociopolitical—they will be the grievances of real people. The insurgent wants to use them for tactical gain. By addressing the root causes—the *way*—the counterinsurgent can achieve his desired *end state* of denying the insurgent the support of the population.

An accurate, detailed analysis and understanding of a specific operational environment is paramount for winning over a population. Such an understanding is achievable by tactical units down to platoon level; in fact, platoon-level is the best place to start. Still, although insurgencies are unique, they do have some common characteristics. At the core, three prerequisites are necessary for insurgency: *a vulnerable population* (one with social, political, economic, or security-related grievances), *leadership for direction* (a person, group, or idea), and *lack of government control* (a non-responsive and/or overly repressive government).[2] COIN COG analysis sets these prerequisites in the context of insurgent strategy and host-nation shortcomings.

Counterguerrilla Operations

Counterinsurgents earn the loyalty of the people and deny insurgents their life support by supporting or undertaking legitimate initiatives that address root causes effectively. Tactical actions such as finding improvised explosive devices (IEDs), defeating IED networks, seizing IED materials, clearing areas, and destroying IED cells and their infrastructure are aspects of *counterguerrilla warfare;* as such, they are merely part of one pillar of COIN operations, not the ultimate remedy to the root causes of conflict. Without a long-term solution to popular discontent, counterguerrilla efforts will continue to strike an enemy that is capable of infinite regeneration. To be sure, the counterinsurgent must confront guerrillas and their tactics, but he must not lose sight of the need for a long-term antidote to a sociopolitical problem. Effective COIN operations aimed at root causes will create an environment that inhibits the enemy's ability to fabricate, transport, emplace, and initiate IEDs in the first place.

Insurgent Strategy versus Type of Insurgency

The type or nature of an insurgency (*what* they want) should not be confused with the insurgent strategy itself (*how* they intend to achieve what they want). To succeed, COIN operations must focus primarily on the enemy's strategy and how he sequences his actions in time and space—not on his ideology or desired end state. Misunderstanding the distinction between type and strategy at this level of analysis will skew our approach to counterinsurgency.

In considering the issue of nature or type versus strategy, it is worth noting that Kurdish separatist groups, Colombia's FARC, certain extremist Shi'a movements, Sunni Ba'athist cells, and Al-Qaeda all have distinct natures but can employ essentially the same strategy: for example "urban terrorism" as developed by such revolutionary leaders as Frantz Fanon in Algeria and Raúl Sendic, head of Uruguay's Tupamaros in the 1960s and 70s. These groups all attack the government to provoke retaliation and generate collateral damage among the local population. In this way they seek to separate the government from the people.[3]

By assessing the insurgent's strategy and what his capabilities will allow him to do, we can develop a good idea of what his operational goals might be. Examination of these goals and the insurgent's attempts to achieve them through guerrilla actions

> *…assessing the insurgent's strategy and what his capabilities will allow him to do… will…allow us to get in front of his decision cycle.*

will then allow us to get in front of his decision cycle.

The insurgent's operational goals may be overt and publicly championed, or covert. They may have immediate consequences, or delayed effects in consonance with long-term objectives. (Car bombings of a local population, for instance, may seem counterproductive because they incite immediate anger against the bombings and their perpetrators, but a sustained campaign of massive violence can have two longer term results: it can weaken popular support for the government, and it can make the population believe that the insurgents can protect them better than the government can.) Whatever the insurgent's intent is, if we approach the problem from the perspectives of the population and the insurgent campaign plan, we can interdict him on a number of levels. COIN COG analysis encourages the counterinsurgent to undertake tactical actions that address the root causes of conflict. It enables the counterinsurgent to achieve lasting effects that will survive successive unit rotations.

Insurgent Ends, Ways, and Means

The insurgent works in a premeditated fashion, in accordance with his strategy, to achieve his operational goals, his *ends*. COIN COG analysis translates these ends into insurgent LOOs (not to be confused with friendly logical LOOS) that can be grouped in four broad functions, or *ways*: political, military, social, and economic. The insurgent will seek to achieve freedom of maneuver by exploiting the root causes of conflict at the tactical level. He will attempt to provide, within his abilities, the needs of the population: governance, sustenance, a cause to belong to, and security. Because what works for the insurgent in one area may be futile in another, his specific course of action—his *means*—will be determined by the unique conditions of each demographic cluster (or groupings of people with enough similarities to have the same needs). The same holds true for the counterinsurgent.

The Seven Pillars of Insurgency

Doctrine has identified seven key aspects or dynamics of an insurgency: leadership, ideology, objectives, environment and geography, external support, phasing and timing, and organization and operational patterns.[4] The counterinsurgent can use these dynamics to assess insurgent strategy and predict insurgent courses of action. An assessment must be done for every distinct region, since an insurgency might use a different strategy and different phasing in different areas. This step (step 3 in COIN IPB, "Analyze the Threat") considers, in detail, how the insurgency and the population relate to the environment.

Enemy COIN COG Analysis

In COIN, the center of gravity is generally an aspect of the population (shared ethnicity, religion, or grievance discovered in COIN IPB steps 1-2) that the enemy exploits (step 3) to garner active or passive popular support. Enemy COIN COG analysis, AKA Insurgency COA Analysis (step 4) simply brings together the first three steps of IPB; it puts existing data into a context planners can use to visualize the complexities of the environment, and it integrates how the enemy uses the root causes of conflict to gain support of, or control over, the people. The analysis is predicated on understanding the links between the insurgent and the population. The root causes of conflict offer the opening for insurgent interaction with the population. The people in turn facilitate insurgent actions and sustain insurgent existence because they believe that the insurgents can best meet their needs, or inversely the government cannot—be they material, physical, cultural, spiritual, or ideological.

Enemy COIN COG analysis enables a unit to think and act unconventionally, to discern the enemy's strategy and operational goals, and to deduce how the enemy plans to achieve his objectives through tactical actions. The enemy COIN COG analysis construct differs from the one used in conventional COG analysis. Instead of *critical capability, critical requirement*, and *critical vulnerability*, it considers *COG, COG enabler, principal facilitator, counter facilitator,* and *friendly force course of action* (COA). (See figure 2 for an example of how an enemy COIN COG analysis might proceed.) This construct is applied to each insurgent LOO.

As aforementioned, the enemy COIN COG is that aspect of the population that the enemy exploits to achieve his operational goals. Insurgents exploit

Enemy - Iraqi Sunni Extremists
Former Regime Element (FRE)

"Regain Control / MNF-I Out"

POLITICAL | **MILITARY** | **SOCIAL** | **ECONOMIC**

POLITICAL
- Political Wing
- Infiltrate Political Leadership
- Disrupt Election

MILITARY
- Interdict MSR LANCERO
- Harassing Rockets Mortars
- Infiltrate IA

SOCIAL
- Tribal Class Division
- Religious Class Division
- Influence Education "Madrassa"

ECONOMIC
- Interdict Power lines
- Disrupt Construct. Effort
- Disrupt Supply Lines

Enemy / Friendly COG (repeated beneath each subcategory)

Friendly COG / Enemy COG

See figure 3 →

IA: Iraqi Army
PSD: Personal Security Detachment

* = Purchase material from local merchants

** = Purchase services from locals

Enemy COIN Center of Gravity → **Al-Dulaim Tribe in Vicinity MSR LANCERO**

Enemy COG Enablers

Tribal Leader Sheik Mohammad | **Imam Iban Hanifa of the Al-Bari Mosque** | **I/O Theme: "Crusaders helping local Shi'a"** | **Merchants (Business council)**

Enemy Principal Facilitators

- Provide generator
- Bribe
- Hire sons Rashad and Fiasa as auxiliary cell leaders
- Threaten to kill his family

- Make mosque improvements
- Provide food for internally displaced people (IDPs)

- Pass info tea shop grid 17S12345678
- Graffiti grids 17S12304560 and 17S87654321
- Use technicians to make DVDs and web site

- Pass info at market where merchants smoke and talk
- Extortion: provide "protection" merchant's vehicles

Friendly Counter Facilitators

- *Provide better generators
- Ensure area gets equal electricity
- **Start construction business
- **Help sons start PSD business
- **Hire sons' PSD business

- */**Hire Sheik's construction company to improve Mosque
- *HN provides food, medicine, school supplies, etc. to imam for IDPs

- Arrest insurgent mouthpiece
- **Post 'help wanted' notices in tea shop (PSD and construction companies"
- */**Hire sheik's construction company to beautify walls/ keep eyes-on for insurgents to repaint
- */**Hire imam to paint *Qur'anic* verses on walls
- */**Build business for techs (internet café). Use sheik's construction company and sons' PSD for security

- Arrest insurgent mouthpiece
- Provide police protection for vehicles/ **Use sons' PSD for added security

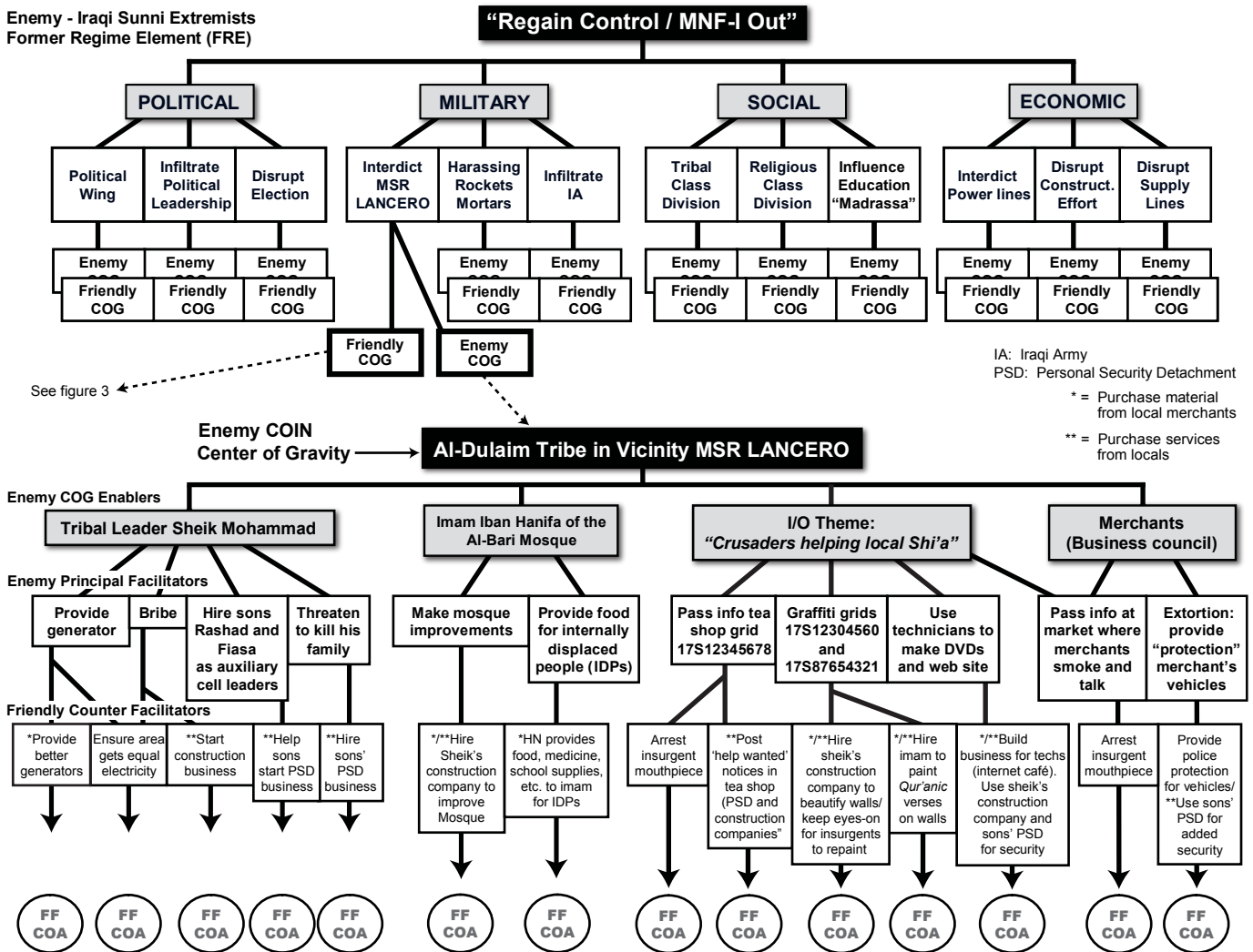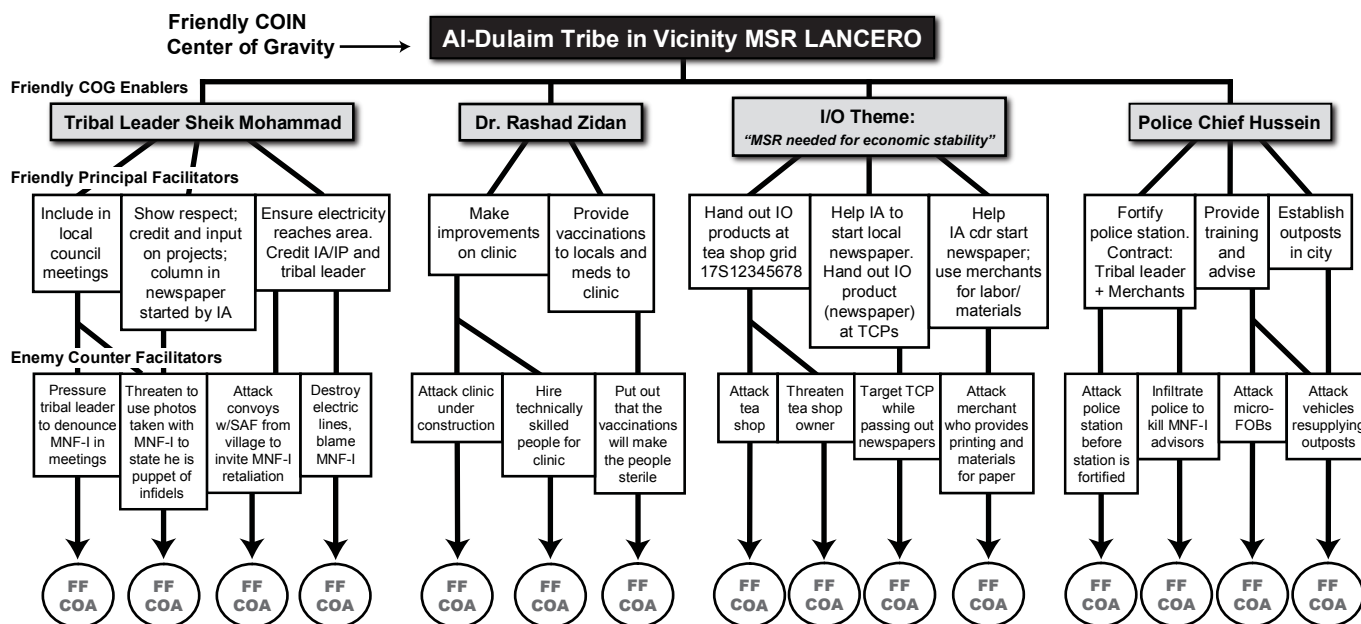FF COA (circles beneath each counter facilitator)

Figure 2. Enemy COIN COG Analysis: Culmination of steps 1 through 3 of COIN IPB.

that specific group's root causes to gain passive or active support. A *COG enabler* is an official or unofficial leader or specific information operations message or narrative that facilitates the insurgent's ability to exploit the COIN COG. *Principal facilitator* refers to an insurgent action designed to manipulate the COG enabler(s). Designed to play upon the root cause, the principal facilitator takes advantage of a vulnerability of the COG enabler. It is also the specific delivery method of the enemy's IO messages. *Counter facilitator* describes a counterinsurgent action designed to counter the principal facilitator. Defining effective counter facilitators is a part of the ongoing analysis and not a COA; it addresses *what to do* about the insurgent's attempt to coerce a COG enabler, not *how to preempt* the insurgent. And finally,

the counterinsurgent arrives at his *friendly force COA*. Each counter facilitator should elicit several possible COAs. Ideally, the different COAs will help build cooperation and interoperability between the counterinsurgents and the demographic cluster.

Enemy COIN COG analysis examines how to separate the insurgents physically and psychologically from the population. It proceeds like a war-gaming sequence, with consideration and assessment of actions, reactions, and counter-actions. The process helps planners grasp the complexities of the environment, effects, and threat, and it prompts consideration of specific counter actions to take for each threat action or reaction. It enables the counterinsurgent to develop more than just COAs that counter current insurgent operations; its emphasis on the root causes of conflict allows

Figure 3 Diagram

Friendly COIN Center of Gravity → **Al-Dulaim Tribe in Vicinity MSR LANCERO**

Friendly COG Enablers: Tribal Leader Sheik Mohammad | Dr. Rashad Zidan | I/O Theme: *"MSR needed for economic stability"* | Police Chief Hussein

Friendly Principal Facilitators:

Under Tribal Leader Sheik Mohammad:
- Include in local council meetings
- Show respect; credit and input on projects; column in newspaper started by IA
- Ensure electricity reaches area. Credit IA/IP and tribal leader

Under Dr. Rashad Zidan:
- Make improvements on clinic
- Provide vaccinations to locals and meds to clinic

Under I/O Theme:
- Hand out IO products at tea shop grid 17S12345678
- Help IA to start local newspaper. Hand out IO product (newspaper) at TCPs
- Help IA cdr start newspaper; use merchants for labor/materials

Under Police Chief Hussein:
- Fortify police station. Contract: Tribal leader + Merchants
- Provide training and advise
- Establish outposts in city

Enemy Counter Facilitators:

Under Tribal Leader Sheik Mohammad:
- Pressure tribal leader to denounce MNF-I in meetings
- Threaten to use photos taken with MNF-I to state he is puppet of infidels
- Attack convoys w/SAF from village to invite MNF-I retaliation
- Destroy electric lines, blame MNF-I

Under Dr. Rashad Zidan:
- Attack clinic under construction
- Hire technically skilled people for clinic
- Put out that the vaccinations will make the people sterile

Under I/O Theme:
- Attack tea shop
- Threaten tea shop owner
- Target TCP while passing out newspapers
- Attack merchant who provides printing and materials for paper

Under Police Chief Hussein:
- Attack police station before station is fortified
- Infiltrate police to kill MNF-I advisors
- Attack micro-FOBs
- Attack vehicles resupplying outposts

Each enemy counter facilitator leads to an **FF COA** node.

TCP: Traffic Control Point, SAF: Small Arms Fire, MNF-I: Multi-National Forces-Iraq

Figure 3. Friendly COIN COG analysis.

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the counterinsurgent to get ahead of the insurgent by conducting operations that build relationships with the local community across the logical lines of operation. Instead of focusing only on the IED or the network that emplaced it, enemy COIN COG analysis also considers the environment that enabled the network to arise and flourish in the first place.

Friendly Forces COIN COG Analysis

In COIN warfare, COG analysis doesn't stop with the enemy; it also has a friendly forces component. Whereas the former aims at denying the insurgent popular support, the latter helps identify the best COAs to draw the support of the population to the counterinsurgent, and thus the host-nation government. Using enemy operational goals and root causes to forecast how the enemy will react, it helps planners develop friendly initiatives. In friendly forces COIN COG analysis, planners must conduct COIN-specific war games based on the population and insurgency—conventional war gaming cannot predict insurgent actions. Figure 3 describes how a friendly forces COIN COG analysis might proceed.

Linking Bottom to Top

The understanding of the environment gained through COIN IPB benefits counterinsurgent operations on a number of levels. COIN COG analysis, once again as Step IV of COIN IPB, links bottom-up intelligence to enemy strategy to help commanders design operational concepts to counter enemy actions, mitigate the population's vulnerabilities, and make the people choose to support the host-nation government. Decentralized execution of COIN operations still requires that higher level commanders and staff coordinate efforts, cover seams and fill in gaps, and pass forecasts and assessments among operating areas. The analysis can help to accomplish these tasks as well.

Conclusion

As step 4 of IPB in a COIN environment, COG analysis is used to integrate our approach to operations. Undertaken from the perspective of the population and focused on the nature of the insurgency, it methodically builds detail at the lower levels and helps planners formulate CCIR that are truly crucial to achieving strategic goals. COIN COG analysis guides our identification of enemy initiatives and operations specific to an area. It—

O Highlights topics for discussion with community leaders, which in turn can produce information concerning the uniqueness and diversity of the population.

O Helps identify unofficial community leaders and their capabilities rather than simply identifying structures and features.

O Uncovers who the enemy's recruiters/mouthpieces are, where they operate, and how they interact with the population.

O Helps planners form tactical courses of action that can draw the enemy out and make him more visible.

O Identifies economic, social, and political reform projects for each community and provides insight about which local leaders to talk to and what we should talk to them about in order to further government initiatives.

O Underlines the links between insurgents, criminal organizations, and local support.

O Promotes interoperability between U.S./coalition military/political efforts and host-nation government elements, as this cooperation is necessary for the method to work.

COIN COG analysis stands in contrast to the "carrot and stick" approach, which focuses on short-term solutions to long-term issues and actually provides incentives for future violence.[5] COIN COG analysis maximizes resources, synergizes the staff, and improves interoperability. It provides specific messages tailored to the people's unique concerns through ways they normally communicate. Examining the COIN problem through the population and enemy perspectives, it enables the counterinsurgent to tailor resources to each specific area, and in a balanced and measured fashion.

Critically, by conducting COIN COG analysis within COIN IPB, we use the enemy's LOOs to shape our campaign to control the population and gain its support. To get in front of the enemy's decision cycle, we must understand how he plans on pursuing his operational goals. If we only think tactically (e.g., counterguerrilla operations), we will be forced into a reactive way of doing business (e.g., passing tactics, techniques, and procedures back and forth; doing pattern analysis; pursuing insurgents in their base areas). Looking across the spectrum of the enemy's operational goals and understanding his relationship to the people and his attempts to exploit them enables commanders to build proactive short-, medium-, and long-term counterinsurgency plans. This of course includes counterguerrilla operations, but only as part of the process and in the proper context.

COIN COG analysis is the comprehensive approach military forces and other government agencies need to operate effectively in an extremely challenging environment that typically takes years to understand. It "squares the circle" and facilitates the transition from descriptive COIN doctrine to prescriptive guidance. Currently, COIN COG analysis is taught to brigade combat teams on the road to deployment, and it is part of the curriculum at the COIN Center for Excellence in Iraq and among regular lecture topics at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. It has also been shared with various professional military education curriculum developers for specific programs, training centers, and allied militaries. COIN COG analysis may not be a silver bullet, but it is a useful tool, one developed in the field to help overcome the challenges of the unconventional environment we find ourselves operating in today.

For additional information about COIN IPB and COG analysis, or to request software, class plans, and graphics for use in COIN IPB (including COIN COG analysis), visit the USA/USMC COIN Center website at https:\\cacfunctions.army.mil. (This is a secure site.) Those using the process and wanting feedback on their analysis can contact Major Mark Ulrich (mark.ulrich@conus.army.mil) for a SIPR address. Those without secure access who desire further information on the process, other tools, perspectives, briefings, workshops, and training programs can contact the USA/USMC COIN Center at 913-758-3157 or via email (mark.ulrich@conus. army.mil).

NOTES

1. Carl von Clausewitz, On War, trans. and eds. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Indiana: Princeton University Press, 1984), 595-96.

2. Field Manual (FM) 90-8, Counterguerrilla Operations (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO] August 1986), Section II, 1-4.

3. The COIN campaigner should also take care not to pigeon-hole the insurgent group according to some historical precedent it seems to be following. Insurgents might begin with or borrow from one or more specific doctrinal models or theories (e.g., those of Mao Tse-Tung, Che Guevara, Abd el-Krim, Carlos Marighella, Frantz Fanon), but in time they will evolve into whole new manifestations of insurgency.

4. FM 3-07, Stability and Support Operations (Washington, DC: GPO, February 2003) A-2.

5. The carrot and stick approach, whereby a commander offers an insurgent or community leader an incentive (say, a well for his village) in exchange for neutrality or support (e.g., not allowing insurgents to fire mortars from his village into a coalition operating base) can actually invite violence: the leader might figure that once he gets his well, another outbreak of insurgent mortar fire might yield an irrigation project, more kilowatts, a new school. Coalition unit rotations that neglect good battle handover are particular targets for such stratagems.

Bios

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