



Developing a National Counterinsurgency Capability for the War on Terror

John Hillen, Ph.D.

THE WAR ON TERROR pits the United States and its allies against violent ideologues who would replace secular governments or (to their minds) apostate states with theocratic regimes hostile to the values upon which inclusive democratic societies are based. Our enemies' strategies and tactics collectively amount to a global series of insurgencies, competing for the right to govern in predominantly Muslim nations around the world. In many ways, we can usefully characterize the war as a counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign against an ideologically driven collection of insurgents who act transnationally, are highly networked, and, like cancer, are adapting and metastasizing. If we are to prevail in the long war, we must mobilize and synchronize all elements of our national power—diplomatic, military, economic, social, and informational—to develop antibodies to and eventually find a cure for this new and dangerous kind of enemy.

Our national security system provides us with overwhelming capability to defeat conventional, state-based threats, but it is not organized to deliver the coordinated support to political, economic, civil, and educational institutions that our foreign partners need to prevail against locally based insurgents. During the Vietnam War, General Creighton Abrams said to a group of diplomats that “in the whole picture of this war, battles don't really mean much.” This was an exaggeration, but only a slight one. National security and defense communities around the world agree that successful counterinsurgency is primarily political in nature, focusing on ameliorating or counteracting conditions that lead to popular support for insurgency, support without which no insurgency can hope to succeed.

Despite its inherently political nature, COIN theory has been almost entirely developed within military circles. This work, such as the new Army-Marine Corps COIN field manual, recognizes that every insurgency has a specific geographic, political, and social context, but all insurgencies have characteristics in common. Every insurgency originates in a competition for governance and/or resources, the perpetration of real or perceived injustices by a governing entity, competing visions of social and cultural equities in the affected society, or some combination thereof. Any effective COIN campaign, therefore, must address the political, economic, and social problems that gave rise to the insurgent movement in the first place. Although direct military action against insurgent leaders may be necessary when an adversary perpetrates destabilizing violence and does not respond to other means of engagement, military action in and of itself is not likely to result in redress of the local conditions that gave rise to the insurgency.

Dr. John Hillen is the Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs. The bureau he heads is the principal link between the Departments of State and Defense and provides policy direction in the areas of international security, security assistance, military operations, humanitarian assistance, and defense trade. A former Army officer, he served in reconnaissance and airborne units and was decorated for his actions in combat in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Dr. Hillen received his B.A. from Duke University, his M.A. from King's College London, his doctorate from Oxford, and an M.B.A. from Cornell University.

It is a potentially crippling irony that the parts of the U.S. Government best suited to deliver essential COIN capabilities are those least engaged in current efforts to frame COIN policy and doctrine. This must change; the civilian departments and agencies of our government must make a deliberate, concerted effort to apply COIN principles to their policies, plans, programs, and operations where their missions and competencies can make a difference between success and defeat in the various battles of this war.

That's not to say our agencies aren't trying to adapt to the world in which we operate. Indeed, several seem to have contracted COIN fever, although that is not the term of art by which they refer to their efforts. The Department of Defense's *Quadrennial Defense Review* Building Partner Capacity and Irregular Warfare Roadmaps and the State Department's new Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization and Director of Foreign Assistance all seek to build what arguably could be considered COIN *capacity* in Defense and *capability* at State. The U.S. Agency for International Development has created a new Office of Military Affairs and is rethinking its strategic approach to development, clearly understanding that development is key to building and protecting responsible governance in underdeveloped regions of the world.

Moreover, in our efforts to realign and reform institutions, we should all be seeking to contribute resources and capabilities to President George W. Bush's National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (NSCT). This comprehensive document elaborates in great detail what Executive Branch departments and agencies must bring to the fight against terrorism. Enormous amounts of intellectual capital and other resources are being devoted to implementing the strategy in our individual and collective venues. A national COIN strategic framework would complement and further the NSCT by allowing us to knit together various instruments of national power *on an operational basis* in specific national, regional, and local contexts. A national COIN framework would serve our national goals in real and immediate ways, in places plagued by or at risk of destabilizing insurgencies.

There is growing awareness in the national security community that civilian capacity to plan and conduct interagency operations does not exist in the

U.S. Government and must be created. This is easier said than done; it will require each agency to look beyond its own domain to a shared understanding of problems and then agree on shared approaches to solving them. The lack of a strategic COIN framework inhibits interagency coordination of responsibilities for COIN operations, undermines our ability to build partner capacities, and detracts from our ability to build international coalitions dedicated to defeating enemy insurgents. Until we create such a framework, we will have no basis for organizational or curricula design that would institutionalize lessons learned and support the development of the skill sets, tools, and policies that would make us successful COIN operators.

A national COIN framework would serve our national goals in real and immediate ways, in places plagued by or at risk of destabilizing insurgencies.

In his excellent article "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency," published in the May-June 2005 issue of *Military Review*, Kalev Sepp identified the key actions that must be taken in order to counter insurgency. These are—

- The provision of basic human needs, such as food, water, shelter, health care, and a means of living.
- Development of an adequately sized and trained police force able to gather and act upon intelligence at the community level, supported by an incorrupt and functioning judiciary.
- Enactment of population control to separate insurgents from indigenous support.
- Political and information campaigns that give people a stake in the success of their government and encourage the peaceful reintegration of insurgents.
- Deployment of military forces, both indigenous and supporting, organized and trained to support the police and fight insurgents.
- Adequate border controls to prevent the flow of foreign fighters and weapons that fuel the insurgency.

- Empowerment of a single legitimate executive authority that can direct and coordinate counterinsurgency efforts.

Clearly the majority of these efforts involve work we associate with “civilian” skill sets and even agencies—but the uniformed military is often placed in the position of having to undertake such activities. Moreover, many conventional military units and commanders do not consider some non-kinetic COIN tasks to be core competencies—and that’s not necessarily a bad thing.

We need to be able to field interagency teams of experts to assist and advise foreign governments and military forces in developing appropriate COIN strategies, operations, and tactics, particularly with regard to modifying local government behaviors that build support for insurgents and erode popular support for counterinsurgent goals. These interagency teams, whose members would be deeply experienced in their primary agency competencies (intelligence, policing, security sector reform, development, public information, and direct action), would be specially trained in counterinsurgency techniques and able to work in close concert with military forces in hostile or semi-permissive environments. In fielding these teams, U.S. agencies would strengthen their capacity for “jointness” and gain valuable, deployable expertise. To this end, we are developing COIN handbooks for use by both strategic planners and interagency field operators and will capitalize on existing programs to collect and disseminate lessons learned among current and future COIN practitioners.

Through advocacy and education, we must build support in the Congress for the authorities and funding that would create deployable capabilities and capacity in the U.S. Government to conduct COIN

operations. Such capacity would complement and reinforce the Civilian Response Corps being developed at the State Department by the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization. While stabilization and reconstruction (S&R) capacity building focuses on post-conflict environments, COIN capacity, by definition, would be engaged before or during conflict. Although there is certainly significant overlap between the skill sets required for COIN and S&R, they are not identical, and there will be great value in developing each community in tandem to avoid duplication and achieve synergy of effort.

As a first step, we are committed to establishing a national Center for Complex Operations that will work closely with entities, both inside and outside the government, that specialize in training and education on governance, development, rule of law, transitional security, S & R, and related issues. This center would help rationalize the many related and important, but currently uncoordinated, ongoing U.S. efforts to deliver COIN capabilities more effectively. State recently launched a COIN website, www.usgcoin.org, which we plan to expand to a robust information clearinghouse and virtual collaboration center for COIN professionals and public policy officials, perhaps under the sponsorship of the center.

In September 2006, the Departments of State and Defense co-hosted a seminal conference on “Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century,” bringing together experts in diplomacy, defense, foreign policy, media relations, foreign assistance, irregular warfare, homeland security, development, stability operations, and conflict transformation. We are planning a similar event in Europe in early 2007 that will focus on building an understanding among partner nations of our effort. Such an event will encourage other nations to adopt and enable a similar approach to our shared security problems. We are working closely on this effort with the government of the United Kingdom, with which we share a vision on how best to deal with our shared security challenges.

In summary, State has assumed leadership of this important new national security initiative, one grounded both in the study of history and in recent painful national experience. We will seek to encourage and support the development of a holistic, robust national capacity to engage and defeat enemy insurgents as we seek peace, security, and prosperity for all in the 21st century. **MR**

We need to be able to field interagency teams of experts to assist and advise foreign governments and military forces in developing appropriate COIN strategies, operations, and tactics...