



Boat crewmen with Maritime Safety and Security Team Los Angeles–Long Beach conduct tactical boat maneuvers 31 July 2012 during an exercise in San Pedro, California. The exercise was designed to test the unit's ability to protect a ship docked at a pier as well as underway using four Coast Guard small boats. (Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Adam Eggers, U.S. Coast Guard)

An Underutilized Counterinsurgency Asset The U.S. Coast Guard

Daniel E. Ward

Low-intensity conflict and insurgency are not only the most prevalent emerging threats globally but they are also those most likely to shape the world construct over the next decade and beyond. As one considers how to deal with such conflicts, it should be highlighted that many of the world's unstable areas most likely to be affected by insurgency are located in coastal nations.

Consequently, the extensive experience of the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) in conducting littoral missions, coupled with that service's duality as both a military and a law-enforcement force, should make the USCG a logical choice as a key component of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. However, its capabilities in that capacity have been seriously underappreciated and underutilized.



COIN operations require a full spectrum of forces to address the numerous aspects associated with battling an insurgency and supporting a host-nation (HN) government in its efforts to achieve security and stability. The four military branches residing in the Department of Defense (DOD) have an entrenched role in COIN, both in academic and operational constructs. However, a vital asset is often overlooked: using the USCG during a COIN operation to complement DOD forces.

COIN involves employing elements of “soft power” (persuasion without force or coercion), engaging with HN personnel, and building security forces suited for missions that often include law enforcement and border control. The USCG habitually performs in these areas as it conducts its primary missions. Additionally, the USCG has a history of overseas engagements in which its unique capabilities—those not found within other branches of the military—were leveraged. Examples include port security and management of navigation aids in Iraq, instruction in countersmuggling and fisheries enforcement measures in Latin America and Africa, and liaison with partner nations whose maritime missions are more closely aligned with the USCG than the U.S. Navy. For these

Maritime Enforcement Specialist 3rd Class Jorge Lopez-Centellas, a U.S. Coast Guard law enforcement detachment member, conducts escort training with Cameroon sailors aboard USNS *Spearhead* 29 February 2016 in the Atlantic Ocean. (Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Amanda A. Dunford, U.S. Navy)

reasons, the USCG should be brought more closely into the “COIN fold,” thereby increasing its operational tempo with regard to supporting nations against insurgents, as deemed necessary by U.S. government policy.

This is already occurring at some levels, but at a rate that, basically, amounts to window dressing. The USCG is often underutilized, in part because of misperceptions about its deployability and its blue-water capabilities, as well as inherent “inside-the-box” thinking on the part of strategic leadership that does not allow consideration of the smallest armed service as a COIN asset. Simple security principles dictate that we should address threats at a distance, vice allowing them to come into the homeland. Hence, we should push our borders out, and in this case, our coasts. By leveraging the USCG as a COIN asset, we can effectively enable partner nations to exert more

control over their own waters, create linkages between U.S. and HN military services, and gain information on the operational capacity and capabilities of our partners. Elements of COIN strategy have specific applicability to USCG mission sets, and there are particular areas in which the USCG is better suited than the DOD for such tasking. This includes securing maritime borders, meshing of law enforcement and defense functions within a single service, and building relationships with the populace from a constabulary vice defense posture.

Martin N. Murphy noted in *Proceedings* that today, “maritime insurgency presents a far greater challenge to world naval forces than random acts of terrorism at sea.”¹ This challenge must be addressed, not simply through direct action, but by building, supporting, and establishing capable maritime security forces—a mission ready-made for the USCG. In large part, this is because the USCG’s duality as a military and law enforcement organization gives it unique capabilities and insights not readily available within the DOD components. When assessing tools needed for COIN, one must recognize that

in a country seriously threatened by insurgency ... the simple two-tiered (police and military) model to which the United States is accustomed will not work. Instead, there is a need for sophisticated paramilitary internal-security forces organized, trained, and equipped to function either as police or as combat units, or as a hybrid of the two in tricky circumstances.²

Essentially, this defines the USCG.

Foundations and Doctrine

Within the scope of COIN, stability operations are a critical foundational function. Stability operations include

various military missions, tasks, and activities conducted outside the United States in coordination with other instruments of national power to maintain or reestablish a safe and secure environment, provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian relief.³

Stability operations are primarily where USCG forces can serve to augment existing constructs. The long-term overarching objective for COIN is that a country and its governing bodies will provide stability and security as well as effective governance to the population. As

noted by Heather Gregg, “a counterinsurgency campaign requires the creation of a functioning state, a government that can stand on its own, provide for its citizens, and promote regional and international stability.”⁴

So, why is the USCG not already a major player in COIN? Operations such as maritime patrol, law enforcement, fisheries regulations, and port control are integral to many developing nations’ security and stability. However, even though the USCG is mentioned or theoretically conceptualized with foreign internal defense (FID), it is often underutilized or not considered at all. At issue is the ability to see how the USCG can be an asset when compared with its larger, more overtly military cousins. When thinking about low-intensity conflict, “U.S. preparation for maritime small wars is stuck between two longtime tendencies,” one being a preference “to focus on big conventional wars” and the other a dismissal of the “maritime domain as a matter of little strategic importance” when planning for low-intensity conflict.⁵ Hence, if the environment is not given its due regard, one of the best tools for the job is not at the forefront of leadership’s thinking.

Many authors, in the analysis of current COIN operations, have noted that “while the military has been an unparalleled expeditionary warfighter, our diplomatic, information, economic, and governance efforts have failed to fulfill stability operations.”⁶ This does not negatively reflect on the military personnel who put their lives at risk every day on such operations. However, instead of expecting forces trained primarily for close combat to conduct stability operations, maybe forces already geared for a similar mission should be employed.

The USCG is especially experienced in the control of maritime, coastal, and riverine environments, which are key for COIN success. Examples of such COIN environments include the struggle for control over waterways in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, which “were key pathways for the movement of insurgent supplies and personnel.” Similarly, control over

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waterways is integral to counterinsurgency in Iraq, where “movement of arms and IEDs along the country’s estuaries and rivers” is a basic insurgent technique.⁷

COIN becomes even more complicated in other areas where “piracy flourishes ... with poorly guarded ports and underpaid security personnel.”⁸ The factor of piracy could be greatly alleviated through applying USCG expertise in the establishment of functional patrol forces.

In an overarching analysis, David Sterman points out that “we will continue to see maritime insurgent networks and maritime counterinsurgent forces play important roles in irregular warfare.”⁹ If that is the case, we need better application of COIN tools to address this issue, many of which are intrinsic to the USCG, where there is already a foundation upon which to build, both empirically and academically. For example, USCG units that are operationally tasked with deployed law enforcement and security missions “also conduct a significant amount of FID by training foreign forces and operating with them in a ‘technical assistance’ capacity.”¹⁰ And, within governing documents such as Joint Publication (JP) 3-22, *Foreign Internal Defense*, the DOD already notes that “the ability to handle evolving scenarios as a

A Coast Guard Cutter *Stratton* boarding team investigates a self-propelled semisubmersible interdicted 19 July 2015 in international waters off the coast of Central America. The *Stratton*’s crew recovered more than six tons of cocaine from the forty-foot vessel. (Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class LaNola Stone, U.S. Coast Guard)

federal law enforcement agency or an armed force is a unique characteristic of the USCG” as the USCG acts as a “maritime constabulary force.”¹¹ This capability gives the USCG inherent knowledge, skills, and abilities not found or not exercised as a primary function within the other branches of the military.

There are several factors that illustrate the necessity of using USCG assets vice reliance on DOD units. For example, the U.S. Navy’s blue-water focus does not align with the majority of the world’s maritime forces, but working alongside those HN forces realistically falls more in line with the USCG’s littoral footprint; USCG mission sets are more closely associated and share commonality with many foreign maritime forces.

To a large extent, stability operations and FID are forms of constabulary activities aimed at establishing

domestic order, security, and effective governance. Chapter 12 of *Small Wars Manual, U.S. Marine Corps (1940)* describes the need for a “constabulary” force that is “the national-defense force of the country concerned and also performs police duties and civil functions,” meaning this organization is three-fold in military, law enforcement, and regulatory functions.¹² While this system may be somewhat foreign to the other branches of the U.S. military, these three areas basically describe the architectural concept behind the composition and structure of the USCG. And, while this model may not be the norm from a purely U.S. military perspective, the USCG structure can serve as a foundational model for many emerging nations, especially with those trying to coordinate and present a united front against an insurgency. So, to train a constabulary force, we should use our own to set the example and do the training.

We see that “despite the clear potential for insurgents and terrorists to use the maritime space, the issue has received scant attention. For example, the Navy’s new *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* calls for a forward naval presence, but says little about the maritime small wars such forces might encounter.”¹³ Yet, we do not have to reinvent the wheel, because the basic doctrinal literature, such as JP 3-22, acknowledges that in consideration of COIN assets, “a common constabulary and multimission nature promotes instant understanding and interoperability and makes USCG a valued partner for many naval and maritime forces.”¹⁴

But, this simple statement is not enough. What can we demonstrate as a “platform for understanding” in order to show that the unique nature of USCG operations make this service aptly suited for stability operations? One argument is that

USSOCOM [U.S. Special Operations Command] has never had a maritime equivalent to the Army Special Forces [SF] and Civil Affairs teams that build ground force capacity overseas and carry out the increasingly decisive work in the civil–military realm. The maritime forces that can best perform such missions exist today in the U.S. Coast Guard.¹⁵

This is substantiated, because “while the U.S. Navy is arguably the world’s only global maritime superpower,” and a handful of other nations have substantial blue-water fleets, the “maritime forces—navies, coast guards, maritime police, etc. [of the rest of the

world]—most closely resemble the U.S. Coast Guard.”¹⁶ As a result, because of the nature of most foreign maritime forces, they “can best identify with the Coast Guard, rather than the U.S. Navy.”¹⁷

DOD doctrine found in JP 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, denotes potential maritime civil-affairs skill sets to include “maritime law; marine fisheries and resource management; port administration and port operations; maritime interagency coordination; port/waterborne security; customs and logistics; port/intercoastal surveys; and control of maritime immigration,” which are core missions of the USCG, not the U.S. Navy.¹⁸ These tasks, coupled with the additional responsibility of training HN forces to perform these tasks, are jobs that would arguably be better performed by those who are responsible for the same missions in their domestic capacity defending the United States.

Though it is true that a small USCG footprint already exists behind the scenes, it should be greatly expanded. Overseas training such as that provided by the USCG’s International Training Division is currently performed outside the scope of the COIN realm as stand-alone operations or often as a task subordinated under another construct, such as counternarcotics. The capability exists, but we must bring it into the COIN fold.

History, Hot Spots, and Obstacles

USCG forces have performed missions in nonpermissive environments, have engaged in combat, and have built a significant legacy of filling unique gaps and niches during DOD operations, so there is little reason not to embrace USCG capabilities when considering ongoing and future COIN matters. For example, training a HN coast guard should be assigned to the USCG as a primary task in COIN operations. This would include training HN forces, guiding the creation of command and control and administrative infrastructure, and mentoring through support of local operations.

In the author’s experience as a riverine advisor to HN forces in Peru and Bolivia from 2000 to 2003, the unique ability of USCG personnel to bridge the gap between traditional military roles and law enforcement served as an enormous advantage when establishing and working with similar constabulary-type forces. In addition, the USCG’s culture of being a small force that often had to “do more with less” while being seconded to other DOD components created, in an ironic way, a shared sense of

commonality between HN personnel and USCG advisors that was often a solid basis for long-term engagement. Also, the USCG culture of flexibility played a large role in allowing the teams with which the author deployed to focus on HN tactics, procedures, and technology, vice trying to push U.S. concepts upon HN forces that could not sustain the same resources as the United States or that would be limited due to localized restrictions on performing as “photocopies” of U.S. forces.

Essentially, “in much the same way as SF work with indigenous ground forces to shape the foreign security environment, Coast Guard special-purpose forces have long-term relationships with the maritime police and other counterdrug forces of Latin America,” which has created a cadre of capabilities that can be exploited in other areas of the world.¹⁹

Context

Since the inception of the USCG as the Revenue Cutter Service in 1790, its units have actively participated in many of our nation’s conflicts. This is an important note, as some may question using USCG forces as a COIN asset, thinking the USCG is simply a domestic law enforcement organization. However, this is clearly not the case. In Vietnam, “the U.S. Navy requested Coast Guard assistance ... because it then lacked a brown water capability,” and in July 1965, “the first elements of Task Force 115, Operation Market Time ... arrived for combat duty,” which included coastal interdiction, gunfire support, and raiding missions.²⁰ From the First Gulf War until the present, USCG assets such as law enforcement detachments, port security units, and patrol boats and cutters have actively addressed “U.S. Central Command’s requirements for unique Coast Guard capabilities in the Northern Arabian Gulf.”²¹

So, in addition to its honorable history of participation in the nation’s conflicts, there is a modern basis for USCG operations in combat zones, not simply in permissive environments. When this experience is coupled with the maritime strategy in the aforementioned U.S. Navy’s *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, which notes specific USCG tasking in the Pacific and Middle East to include “work with regional partners and navies using joint and combined patrols, ship-rider exchanges, and multinational exercises” and building “partner nation

capacity for maritime governance,” one must wonder why the USCG is not already being more heavily used for long-term stability operations within the overall COIN and FID constructs.²² Whether it is risk aversion from USCG leadership, a lack of general recognition of USCG capabilities from senior DOD leadership, or both, the result is that the United States is not fully using a valuable resource. This degrades the ability to optimally support and develop HN maritime forces and at the same time places DOD forces into roles for which they are not ideally suited.

As it is established that the USCG can effectively serve as a COIN asset for incidents and conflict in the maritime arena, we must next decide if threats in this realm are actually relevant and warrant further U.S. attention using the USCG in these deployed theaters. In truth, there are numerous examples of areas in which, if the United States became involved, COIN would be the leading principle of engagement, and the USCG would be a necessary part of the team.

For example, in Asia, insurgent capability in the maritime arena was demonstrated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who “formed a naval subgroup, the Sea Tigers ... to perform the vital task of smuggling supplies” that later “expanded its operations and began targeting the Sri Lankan Navy.”²³ Others such as Jemaah Islamiyah and the Abu Sayyaf group have employed maritime assets in Southeast Asia to “escape across international boundaries and smuggle weapons to their target countries.”²⁴ Elsewhere, in Indonesia, the *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (Free Aceh Movement, or GAM) displayed insurgent maritime prowess by using “small boats to bring in supplies by ship and transport[ing] members out of Aceh by sea.”²⁵ And, in Africa, forces of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta “occupied” areas “by rebels with machine-gun equipped speedboats” and at one time “reduced Nigeria’s oil production by a quarter.”²⁶

To illustrate another area where COIN might be applied, in 2008, the Mumbai attackers “came by sea, sailing from Karachi on a Pakistani cargo vessel,” and then “hijacked an Indian fishing trawler.”²⁷ This attack, in particular, “highlighted India’s inability to effectively monitor its coastline—a condition that is common to many littoral states in both the developing and the developed world.”²⁸ Other hot spots that could potentially warrant coastal intervention



include Somalia, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Ivory Coast.

To counter insurgent use of sea and littoral areas, HN forces need an effective maritime presence—in effect, a functional, coastal patrol force. Even when larger conventional naval forces are dedicated to such conflicts, the results can be ineffective in addressing root issues because these forces are not geared for these operations. Off the Somalia coast, where piracy has become a maritime security matter, the *Global Policy Forum* noted in 2012 that if the United Nations Security Council “were really acting for Somalia’s ... wellbeing, it would have acted long ago to halt illegal fishing and dumping by speedily setting up a coast guard that could halt these crimes.” However, even though the “secretary-general proposed ... that the naval forces should take on the task of patrolling Somalia’s coasts against illegal fishing and dumping ... why should a heavily-armed and hugely expensive naval force do this work, when a lightly armed coast guard would serve the purpose much better?”²⁹ This analysis hits the proverbial nail on the head. All tools are not created equal. It is necessary to choose the right one for the job.

The crew of a U.S. Coast Guard twenty-five-foot transportable port security boat pauses 3 May 2003 during a patrol of the Khawr 'Abd Allah near Umm Qasr, Iraq. Crewmembers from PSU 311 include Machinist Mate 3rd Class David Slifka on the .50 caliber machinegun, coxswain Port Securityman 2nd Class Keith Caires, and M-60 machine-gunner Boatswain Mate 3rd Class Robert Shaw. (Photo by Public Affairs Specialist 1st Class John Gaffney, U.S. Coast Guard)

Murphy’s article in *Proceedings* acknowledged that while “naval forces have supported counterinsurgency campaigns around the world for the past fifty years,” most, including U.S. naval forces, have not “had to confront an insurgence presence on water or projected from the coast,” and this is exacerbated by the fact that “major navies are torn between the demands of possible major conflict against a near-peer competitor and the messy, ambiguous small wars for which their ships and operational methods are ill-suited.”³⁰

However, even with such logical arguments, many still dismiss the USCG. In 2008, the RAND Corporation published its study *War by Other Means: Building Complete and Balanced Capabilities for Counterinsurgency*, which highlighted coastal security

requirements that included “training and provision of patrol craft, radar, communications, and other equipment”; “augmenting local patrol with advanced maritime surveillance”; and “performing ‘blue water’ maritime patrol and intercept function.”³¹ All of these are *primary* functions of the USCG, to include blue-water patrols. The same study noted an “increasingly important” need for “‘green-water’ (near-coastal) and ‘brown-water’ (riverine) security capabilities” and recognized “securing a coastline, territorial waters, harbors and ports, and rivers is difficult and expensive.”³² However, the same analysis concluded that the U.S. Navy “does not have the numbers of assets to provide coastal security everywhere that there could be insurgent activity ... nor can the U.S. Coast Guard fill this need, given its domestic mission.”³³ To be blunt, members of the study are either expressing ignorance of the capabilities and real-world missions of the USCG, or their views are influenced by a “cultural” dismissal of the USCG’s ability to forward deploy.

Conclusion

Understanding how to use a tool does not always translate into the proper use or even actual implementation of that tool. Herein rests the obstacle that must be overcome in order to better and more effectively employ the Coast Guard within the COIN construct. Doctrine exists, and similar operations and training with HN partners are already ongoing to a limited extent. Therefore, the need is to augment usage. Additional forces in select areas would allow for better supplementation to COIN missions, but the skill sets and abilities are largely already in place.

In its doctrinal publications, the DOD makes statements such as “the USCG possesses broad authorities across the spectrum of military, law enforcement, regulatory, and intelligence activities in support of FID.”³⁴ However, this is countered by observations from the field such as “the United States does not have a national-level police force providing an expeditionary, sustainable, professional civilian law enforcement capability for use in a deployed environment.”³⁵

Consequently, current military culture and doctrine do not mesh because perception, even within the USCG, is a limiting factor. The same 2008 RAND study that dismissed USCG capabilities also states that any assessment of COIN options necessitates

“the assignment of responsibility for core COIN capabilities to those departments that possess the most relevant competencies.”³⁶ In order to make this a reality for the USCG, not only must we overcome a lack of external acknowledgment but also within the service, leaders must “drop old prejudices and inhibitions, and ... allow such forces to operate, train, and develop their capabilities beyond the constraints of conventional imaginations.”³⁷

So, our analysis comes full circle to the doctrine upon which much of our COIN operations are based. Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, contains a snippet that readily tells commanders that “the Coast Guard may also be of value, since its coastal patrol, fisheries oversight, and port security missions correlate with the responsibilities of navies in developing countries.”³⁸ Thus, we must take the next step and more fully integrate the USCG beyond simple engagements toward robust COIN support, in the form of stability operations focused toward coastal development of HN forces and the overall security and “winning of the populace,” which would empirically bring more strength to a COIN commander’s table. A key avenue of approach is for the USCG to be more forward leaning and proactive in seeking out missions in which it can offer its unique skill sets to the DOD vice being reactive to requests. Another element is education of joint services in the capabilities of the USCG, *as they can apply to COIN*. Lastly, the USCG and the DOD should actively work to give the USCG a seat at the “COIN table” before engagements occur, so as to better design, plan, and coordinate for the future.

The USCG has a wealth of capabilities that are directly linked to stability operations and missions, such as those within the civil affairs realm, with a particular emphasis on maritime, coastal, and riverine environments. These skill sets do not reside elsewhere in any DOD service or any other government agency. The USCG has experience and history operating as a proven combat force, integrated into DOD operations throughout the globe. And, the USCG has and does perform overseas HN training and infrastructure development with numerous foreign partners. The premise is not to argue that the USCG should be out front in conventional, large-scale maritime combat operations, nor that the USCG could replace or supplant the direct action and offensive capabilities of special operations forces. Since COIN is



based upon the “winning of the populace” by establishing functional HN security forces, creating sustainable government services, and providing stability, the USCG, in its uniquely dual civil–military and law enforcement role, is a tool that is currently wasted by not being more actively used in COIN operations. ■

The eighty-two-foot U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Point Comfort* inspects a fishing junk 8 November 1965 at Dương Đông, Vietnam. (Photo by Photographer's Mate Chief Petty Officer Frank Borzage, U.S. Coast Guard)

The views presented are the author's and do not represent the U.S. government, his employer, or an official position.

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