



(U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Micah E. Clare)

Rethinking Counterinsurgency

Part 2

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In continuing our series on rethinking counterinsurgency (COIN) operations and strategies, this article examines shaping operations, small unit actions, building host nation capabilities, and preparing the noncommissioned officer (NCO) Corps for future COIN scenarios. Success in these operations relies on small unit actions led by a competent, educated, and lethal NCO Corps.

Shaping Operations: Local Derived Intelligence

Timely, accurate, and relevant information is critical to the success of military operations and permits commanders to “make informed decisions about the application of combat power and achieve definitive results” (Department of the Army, 2019c, p. 5-2). COIN operations are no different in their requirement for timely information; however, intelligence collection and analysis present unique chal-

lenges. While traditional intelligence gathering is generally the scope of specialized enablers, during COIN, the most effective intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets are the low-level counterinsurgents.

Kilcullen (2010) describes this phenomenon, stating that most intelligence-driving operations will not come “as a product prepared and served up by higher headquarters” (p. 31), but rather from the tactical-level unit itself. This stems from the asymmetric nature of insurgent forces who do not subscribe to established rules of warfare but rather disguise themselves among populace, making it difficult to map out enemy force strength, disposition, and intent by using conventional ISR platforms. Instead, individual Soldiers become intelligence sensors who gather information while patrolling and interacting with local communities. This reality necessitates that all

Soldiers be well-versed in the organization's priority intelligence requirements (PIRs).

Not only does COIN represent a change in how information is collected but also requires intelligence different from conventional operations such as cultural and human intelligence. The complicated tribal networks and alliances of places like Afghanistan are deeply rooted in their history and interwoven into their civil society. This makes it difficult for outsiders to discern. Understanding that COIN is a contest to sway the opinion of the native population, foreign forces often find themselves at a disadvantage compared to local insurgents. Reducing this gap requires the organization's collection plan to include both cultural and human intelligence PIRs.



A U.S. Army Soldier with 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, provides security around a helicopter landing zone at Pohakuloa Training Area, Hawaii, Oct. 18, 2021. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Rachel Christensen)

Small Unit Action to Clear and Hold

Decisive action within the Army's operational COIN framework predominantly consists of clearing insurgent forces from an area and subsequently holding ground to prevent adversaries from exerting influence over the populace. Fighting is largely limited to actions at battalion level or lower, which is why Kilcullen (2010) describes COIN as a "squad and platoon leader's war" (p. 33).

During COIN operations, contact with the enemy is often close range and fleeting, and often led by a junior NCO or officer. Given the fight's decentralized nature, it is imperative that low-level tactical leaders have freedom of action to respond to situations rapidly. Mission command philosophy, defined in doctrine as "the Army's approach to command and control that empowers subordinate decision making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation" (Department of the Army, 2019b, p. 1-3), enables this freedom of action. Given the potential consequences of misjudgment, however, tactical leaders should understand how their unit and actions fit into the operational environment (Department of the Army, 2014).

Building Host Nation Capability Integration and Training of Local Forces

One of the hallmarks of irregular conflicts is an ineffective local security structure. This can develop over time due to regional instability or from systemic institutional corruption, both of which were the case with Afghanistan (Srivastava, 2021). Conversely, it may also arise quickly due to revolution or popular uprising like the one that threw Syria into disarray ("Why Has the Syrian War Lasted 10 Years?", 2021). Regardless of how it develops, the lasting defeat of an insurgency is achievable by creating effective security forces. While military and paramilitary forces can destroy insurgents, the host nation (HN) security establishment ultimately enables success by creating

the conditions necessary for a functional government supported by the populace. As such, HN army training and professionalization often produce the most tangible results (Department of the Army, 2014).

As the Army's trainers, NCOs play a pivotal role in this line of effort. From Iraq to Ukraine, NCOs have improved the skills of countless foreign soldiers. Building HN capability/competency; however, can be relatively challenging. In addition to language barriers, differences in skill level, equipment, and cultural aspects can hinder the effectiveness and efforts of Army trainers. Kilcullen (2010) suggests military trainers and embedded advisors need a "deep knowledge of language, ethnography, geography, and history" (p. 223) if they are to succeed.

While the Army is adept at training conventional Western tactics and doctrine, impressing these concepts on foreign forces has been problematic. Rather than implementing a curriculum that sees HN forces adopt Western models, Kilcullen (2010) suggests "local forces should mirror the enemy" (p. 42). To employ this approach, the U.S. Army recently created security force assistance brigades that are disproportionately manned and trained by enlisted leaders (South, 2021). While this construct will undoubtedly serve the Army well in future conflicts, the Army must optimize its entire NCO Corps to succeed in large-scale COIN operations.

Optimizing the NCO Corps for COIN Operations

Although the Army must be prepared to counter near-peer threats, it would be detrimental to allow the lessons learned in blood and resources in both Iraq and Afghanistan to fade from collective memory. In virtue of the fact that irregular warfare may constitute the majority of future U.S. military intervention, the Army must not only preserve this knowledge but continue to develop it. For the NCO Corps, this will entail two key elements.

First, commanders must balance training to prepare for both the conventional fight and irregular warfare. While maneuvers at the squad and platoon level remain relatively comparable during all spectrums of conflict, the Army must retain tactical and technical expertise related to improvised explosive devices, intelligence gathering, and patrolling garnered during the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. Maintaining these competencies will necessitate that they remain regular fixtures in unit training plans. Additionally, the Army should ensure all validation exercises at the tactical level incorporate COIN training. This should include intelligence-driven operations supported by forensics, biometrics, etc.

The second way the Army can enable success in COIN is by continuing to invest in NCO education and professional development. Given that COIN will continue to constitute a low-level tactical fight, the Army will require enlisted leaders who are not only tactically and technically proficient, but also capable of understanding the COIN environment. Intelligent, critical-thinking NCOs will become tactical-level leaders who can “reason analytically, critically, ethically,

and with cultural sensitivity” (Department of the Army, 2019a, p. 4-1). These attributes enable both disciplined initiative and strategic restraint, which are vital when trying to influence the populace. Failure by tactical-level leaders to protect the population generates resentment and can cause otherwise neutral individuals to take up arms (Kilcullen, 2017).

Conclusion

While there was considerable emphasis on COIN operations during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is a risk that recent shifts in strategic policy will see discourse and training for COIN fall by the wayside, leaving the U.S. military unprepared for future conflicts. Given that the asymmetric threat posed by insurgencies will most likely increase in the future, it is imperative the Army not only maintain its proficiency but improve upon it. It must invest in not only the development of specialized units but also in the backbone of its organization, the NCO Corps. By educating enlisted leaders in COIN fundamentals, the Army will meet the challenges of an increasingly uncertain and complex future. ■

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