



U.S. Army 1st Lt. Jared Tomberlin, second from left, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, U.S. Army Europe, speaks with village elders during a key leader engagement in a town near Forward Operating Base Lane, Zabul, Afghanistan, March 5, 2009. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Adam Mancini)

# Rethinking Counterinsurgency

## Part 1

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NCO Leadership Center of Excellence

**O**n April 19, 1775, Colonial militiamen clashed with British regulars at Concord, Massachusetts, firing what Emerson (1837) described as the “shot heard around the world” (para. 1). Although America was born from armed insurrection, it has struggled to counter similar uprisings throughout history. While it has evolved into an exceptional counterinsurgency (COIN) force, the recent emphasis on near-peer adversaries undermines this expertise. It is imperative that the U.S. Army reverse this trend, as COIN will represent the majority of future U.S. foreign military interventions, and success in these operations is contingent on small unit actions led by a competent, educated, and lethal Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Corps.

### Historical Precedent and Future Trends

The numerous large-scale campaigns fought by the U.S. Army shape its contemporary identity. However, most conflicts fought by the Army since its inception have been irregular in nature. In fact, since the mid-19th century, the U.S. has participated in dozens of irregular conflicts representing about 70% of all U.S. Army campaigns (Kilcullen, 2013). While each conflict differs, they often served to defeat insurgencies, which, according to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (2018), are “the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region” (Chiefs of Staff, p. I-1).

Although historical precedent argues in favor of a continued emphasis on COIN operations, over the last



U.S. Army military policemen with the 571st Military Police Company, take defensive positions during a dismounted patrol as part of counter-insurgency training at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California, Nov. 5, 2011. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Mark Miranda)

## COIN Operations Re-Examined

While the U.S. has participated in numerous COIN operations, it was not until recently that it adopted a coherent and logical doctrine to guide its operations. Until the latter half of the 20th century, an absence of doctrine and strategy often marred COIN efforts. Despite a steep learning curve, the U.S. Army evolved to become the world's preeminent counterinsurgency force. This contemporary expertise is attributable to three conflicts.

Change initially came about following America's involvement in the Vietnam War, which continues to resonate in U.S. military history. During this conflict, military planners failed to understand the nature

of the conflict and concentrated their efforts on body counts and other meaningless metrics instead of influencing the population. Nagl (2002) describes the U.S. Army as inherently unprepared for the Vietnam War, having focused "on the idea of fighting decisive conventional conflicts despite the fact that most of the wars it actually fought were limited wars for political objectives" (p. 218). Regardless of the cause of failure, for a nation unaccustomed to losing, the defeat in Vietnam provided the impetus to develop doctrine and do better.

decade, the U.S. military has shifted much of its focus to countering near-peer adversaries. While America cannot discount the threats posed by an increasingly antagonistic Russia, nor the expansionist agenda of China, the future of American foreign involvement will largely continue to be COIN related. However, unlike previous insurgencies, which largely took place in rural areas, four global megatrends (population, urbanization, coastal settlement, and connectedness) are changing the global operating environment (Kilcullen 2013; Leyk et al., 2020). As a result, Kilcullen suggests tomorrow's irregular conflicts will take place in large, poorly governed coastal megacities where populations compete for increasingly scant resources. These changes will ultimately lead to increased global instability, setting the conditions for increased violence between state and non-state actors (Kilcullen, 2013).

Yet doctrinal improvements were slow to come, and it was not until after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and ensuing occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan that the U.S. gave the matter considerable thought. Unlike their Vietnam-era predecessors, military planners in Iraq and Afghanistan realized that neither seizing ground nor killing insurgents could result in lasting victory. Instead, they concentrated their efforts on influencing the population to support the legitimate government. While the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq were not without considerable setbacks, the Army demonstrated itself to be a learning institution. It codified many lessons into perhaps the most complete set of doctrine on insurgency and counterinsurgency.

Of the many changes to U.S. COIN doctrine over the last two decades, two concepts are most profound. First, the U.S. military recognized that the local populace is the center of gravity. This concept, described by Kilcullen (2013) as the theory of competitive control, sees the population side with the local armed actor, which it "perceives as best able to establish a predictable, consistent, wide-spectrum normative system of control" (p. 126). While attempts were made during the Vietnam War to sway local populations, they were often misguided and ultimately failed.

In addition to these demographic and societal changes, other recent developments will fuel an increase in irregular warfare. Nuclear proliferation creates situations where opposing nations increasingly rely on proxy forces to attack and disrupt their enemies. While technically terrorist events, both the Iranian backing of Hamas against Israel and the 2008 Pakistan-sponsored Lashkar-e-Taiba attack on Mumbai are indicative of this trend (Levy, 2021; Macander, 2021).

Furthermore, the technological revolution and information age have given non-state actors an ever-increasing ability to conduct multi-domain operations. Insurgent forces no longer need to rely on crude, improvised methods as seen in Vietnam, the Middle East, and elsewhere. They can now conduct attacks in the cyber domain. Given that the future will see an increase in complex and urbanized irregular warfare, as well as the expansion of these conflicts into multiple domains, is the Army sufficiently prepared to prevail in this future fight?

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The second important doctrinal change to arise in recent years is the recognition that “effective COIN requires the integration of host nation (HN) and supporting national civil and military efforts into a single holistic approach” (Chiefs of Staff, 2018, p. VII-20). Commonly referred to as a whole-of-government approach, this theory accepts that insurgencies cannot be defeated solely on the battlefield and necessitate serious investment in the HN’s security apparatus, system of government, and civil society. COIN, therefore, must constitute a “blend of comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes” (Chiefs of Staff, 2018, p. III-3).

Given the importance of both joint and interagency coordination, the U.S. military has created a joint doctrinal framework for its branches. This document, Joint Publication 3-24: Counterinsurgency, provides a common operating picture for all U.S. military COIN operations and forms the basis for subordinate military publications (Chiefs of Staff, 2018). Understanding that COIN requires a whole-of-government approach to

marginalize the insurgents and influence the population, Army doctrine recommends an operational framework that forces shape-clear-build-hold-transition (Department of the Army, 2014). Although this revised doctrine provides a theoretical approach, its effective implementation necessitates effort by stakeholders. While these stakeholders encompass the operational, strategic, and national levels of both the U.S. and HN, COIN is predominantly a tactical fight and success is contingent on capable Soldiers and leaders at the unit level.

## Conclusion

The threat of near-peer rivals is relevant and shouldn’t be underestimated, but neither should COIN operations and warfare, which have been consistently present throughout U.S. history. With the rise of four current megatrends (growing populations, urbanization, coastal settlement, and connectedness) the future of warfare will most likely be irregular and located in overpopulated megacities. It’s important that the U.S. doesn’t lose sight of its roots and is able to wage war both at the LSCO and COIN levels utilizing well-trained and highly developed NCOs. ■

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