



Counterinsurgency and warfare in a dense urban environment. (U.S. Army illustration created by NCO Journal Staff)

# COIN

## Don't Trade Blood for Knowledge

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**N**oncommissioned officer (NCO)-led counterinsurgency (COIN) operations will remain prevalent in every major conflict in the foreseeable future. An insurgency is an organization that uses violence and sedition to attain or destroy political control in a region (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021). COIN operations are a broad set of actions with which the U.S. government attempts to bolster security, economic, political and development activities within a host nation (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021).

The U.S. government uses elements of its national power to empower a host nation government, while simultaneously trying to weaken the local insurgency (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021). This matches current national security strategy in two principal areas: sustaining U.S. military advantage and adversary aggression deterrence in support of vital interests (Mattis, 2018).

One of the main elements that sets the U.S. apart from most of the world's militaries is its superior NCO corp. The U.S. built a system that not only allows but requires its NCOs to make intent-driven decisions to carry out intricate tactical operations across the globe (Department of the Army, 2020). As the U.S. military transitions its focus to large-scale combat operations (LSCO) by 2028, NCO-led COIN operations will remain a vital part of the overall mission set.

### **LSCO: Preparation and Action**

The U.S. military traditionally engages in LSCO against peer or near peer enemies. Military operations vary in scope, purpose and intensity across a range that extends from military engagement, security cooperation, and deterrence activities to crisis response and limited contingency operations (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018).



As the U.S. government navigates through the shape, deter, seize, dominate, stabilize and enable civil authority phases of the joint combat operational model, it uses the fundamentals of COIN operations consistently (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018). While LSCOs take place primarily during the dominate phase, COIN missions appear throughout every phase. They are pivotal in the competition against near-peer adversaries and help the U.S. strengthen alliances throughout the world (Department of the Army, 2014). The most common phase employed by the U.S. military is the shape phase, which features several COIN operations.

**Phase 0: Shape**

Shaping activities encompass most of the U.S. government's engagement with networks in key regions across the globe. Joint doctrine classifies these networks as friendly, neutral or threats (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021). Engaging with these networks allows the U.S. to shape situations and future interactions linked to national interests. These activities are often long-term projects like security cooperation missions and aid programs.

Joint U.S. doctrine defines security cooperation as either foreign internal defense (FID) or security forces assistance (SFA) operations (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018). From a COIN perspective, the U.S. government uses these tactics to build partner capacity and capability which can then bring about more stability in the region (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018). Both actions rely heavily on NCO support.

NCOs are the lead trainers in the U.S. military and conduct the bulk of training for FID and SFA events. FID training focuses on law enforcement and those tasked with border security, while SFA involves training or supplying foreign military personnel (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018). Both are vital to extending influence with partners and allies. They also demonstrate to competitors what the world's most advanced military can do and the faith and trust they place on the NCO corps. These COIN-centric actions will help the U.S. military succeed in future LSCOs, if needed.

**Phase I: Deter**

The U.S. military defines the deter phase as preliminary actions that show adversaries

a willingness to use force if needed (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018). During this phase, the U.S. military must effectively show the enemy its capacity and willingness to defeat them in LSCOs (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018).

A geographic combatant commander may appoint a joint force commander to exercise mission command for an operation (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018). Although the joint force commander has many options available, some are dependent on whether U.S. forces have conducted COIN operations before within the joint area of operations.

If the U.S. military was engaged in security forces assistance and/or FID operations, it would be easier to gain relevant intelligence and isolate the enemy within the region. In addition, if the joint force commander uses a flexible deterrent option or a flexible response option (both of which include U.S. troop deployment), the SFA missions may have already laid the groundwork for logistics and mobility support (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018).

**Phase II: Seize Initiative**

To seize the initiative, joint force commanders analyze all available capabilities. Within LSCO, this may include starting either offensive or defensive operations as soon as physically possible, so the enemy is unable to achieve its goals (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018).

If a U.S. military rapid response force is needed, the joint intelligence preparation of the operational environment which includes all relevant information for a given region is a crucial factor (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020).

COIN operations bolster the U.S. government's



A 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) Officer distributes food and school supplies during a civic village engagement at the Counter Insurgency Jungle Warfare (CIJW) school in Nepal, Oct. 14, 2021. The course allowed an opportunity to work with the local populace to perform real-world operations, and to learn tactics to surviving in a jungle environment. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by 1st SOG)



These weapons, munitions, and homemade bomb-making materials were discovered northeast of Tikrit, Iraq, during Operation Dallas Oct. 5, 2006. As U.S. forces work to bring back essential services, insurgent organizations work to sabotage them, while blaming the host nation government for delays. (U.S. Army photo by 3rd BCT, 82nd Airborne Division)

relationship with host nations and allows substantial intelligence gathering opportunities to bolster the joint intelligence preparation of the operational environment.

Intelligence should focus on social, military, economic, infrastructure and local information sharing capabilities, which is invaluable for joint force commanders who must determine the best courses of action to meet strategic goals.

Two of the joint force commander's goals during this phase are gaining access to host nation infrastructure and degrading enemy capabilities (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018). This information may be gathered during previous COIN operations (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018).

**Phase III: Dominate**

The dominate phase focuses on breaking the enemy's will to resist or, in noncombat situations, to control the operational environment (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018). This phase includes LSCOs.

During this phase it is unlikely that the joint force commander will focus on COIN operations due to the complexity involved in conducting LSCOs. One COIN mission that will persist throughout phase three is the collection of weapons technical intelligence (WTI) (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021). WTI is an essential COIN mission that analyzes enemy weaponry to enable the joint force commander to fully understand the capabilities and weaknesses (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021). There is no way for the U.S. military, even with its extensive intelligence gathering capability, to fully understand all aspects of the enemy's tools of war; however, these COIN operations will prove invaluable providing valuable intelligence to U.S. military leaders as they face a near peer threat with advanced weapons of war. Once major combat operations cease, the U.S. military must set conditions to

bring some sense of normalcy to the war-torn area.

**LSCO: Stabilize and Transfer Power**

The U.S. military thoroughly trains and equips its forces to fight and defeat any current near-peer competitor on the world stage. Unfortunately, it may be more difficult to train the same Soldiers for the steps that follow. These phases (stability and civil authority enablement) require more subtlety, forethought and training beyond traditional missions.

Within one joint area of operations a brigade could work well with the local populace, while another brigade is in the fight of its life against a dedicated insurgency. These differences create

problems for strategic messaging, which works directly in the enemy's favor. NCOs must train and prepare their Soldiers to effectively move between lethal and less-lethal modes of engagement to reach strategic goals. Each misuse of lethal force works against stability operations.

**Phase IV: Stabilize**

Once the U.S. military moves from LSCO to a more stability-based focus, the joint force commander will look to reestablish a safe and secure environment for host nation citizens (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018). To carry out this task, the commander should assist the host nation government in providing essential services, key infrastructure reconstruction and humanitarian aid (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018).

These objectives reinforce support for the host nation government and from its citizens, which adds to overall region stability. Unfortunately, once LSCO cease, so does the U.S. military posture in the area. The chaos that accompanies combat operations does not lend itself to the work of insurgents. Historically insurgent organizations strive to use the destruction LSCO causes for political influence against the current regime. In doing so, they can gain support from the populace.

Per current doctrine, just twenty people per one thousand provides enough personnel to support an insurgency (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021).

While the U.S. military works to bring back essential services to local populations, insurgent organizations can work to sabotage these operations, while blaming the host nation government for delays. This becomes a pivotal point during any campaign because as the insurgency gains support, attacks on both U.S. and host nation forces will rise.



The civilian populace may interpret the attacks as lack of governance by the host nation. This is not the time for the U.S. military to begin a relationship with the host nation security forces.

If the U.S. government previously conducted SFA and FID operations within the host nation, the joint force commander will find the transition to COIN within this phase to be far more manageable.

One of the most useful COIN-based resources for a commander during stability operations is the U.S. agency for international development (USAID) office of civilian-military cooperation (CMC) (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021). The CMC facilitates cooperation between the military assets within a region and relevant civilian agencies (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021). The commander and CMC work together to develop key security infrastructure in the host nation via SFA and FID operations to local military and law enforcement (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021).

This transition is often problematic and insurgent organizations within the host nation can take advantage of the transfer to COIN. Just as the commander seeks to bring about a lasting peace, the insurgency will try to sow chaos. They may target key infrastructure, the U.S. military, host nation government officials and even civilians in the area. These attacks create a sense among the public that neither the U.S. military nor the host nation government have the power to stop their attacks.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, President George W. Bush declared the U.S. military mission accomplished on May 1, 2003 (Smith, 2010). More than a month later an insurgent killed the first U.S. servicemember with an improvised explosive device (IED). Less than six months later IEDs accounted for more deaths than any other enemy weapons system (Smith, 2010). Explosive ordnance disposal NCOs from every service led the charge to render these vicious threats safe.

Ultimately, the U.S. military transitioned from LSCOs but did not shift to true COIN operations in time. Iraq had little governance to speak of, and its citizens lacked basic human essentials. This proved to be fertile ground for an insurgency.

The U.S. military was surprised by the rising attacks and primarily sought to defeat the enemy militarily (Smith, 2010). While many contend that the best defense is a good offense, Hovatter (2018) makes the point that during COIN operations, the best offense is to gain the hearts and minds of the populace. This is not to say the U.S. military must be liked or welcomed by the host nation populace, but it needs to sincerely engage with them (Hovatter, R. P., 2018).

COIN operations require their forces to fully understand the populace to gain ground against the true enemy. The Iraqi civilians wanted food, water, jobs and safety. Instead, the U.S. military focused its considerable

resources on fighting insurgents and installing a new government that was not representative of the population.

They could have used COIN principles to recognize that local leaders should not come solely from the majority party, but should instead have ties to the economy, a religion or tribe (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021). These are inherently complex problems that were exceedingly difficult to solve without hindsight. If the U.S. military conducts COIN operations with proper forethought in key regions, it has a legitimate chance to achieve its goals.

Phase V: Enable Civil Authority

The joint force commander, working toward national security goals, must work to enable the host nation government as soon as possible. The commander can do this by entering into a status of forces agreement (SOFA) which details what the U.S. military can and cannot do within the host nation (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021).

In addition, a SOFA allows the host nation government to regain control as it achieves the ability to do so. The commander’s goal during this phase is to end or reduce U.S. military involvement in the host nation (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021).

In practice, the officer corps conducts planning and negotiations for this phase, but the NCOs on the ground will make the everyday decisions concerning mission accomplishment. In order to succeed, the U.S. Army must continue to produce and rely on its NCO corps.

NCOs in COIN

Because of COIN complexity, commanders cannot give specific orders for every contingency. To be successful, they must use mission command principles and allow NCOs at all levels to exercise disciplined initiative in the absence of orders (Department of the Army, 2019). NCOs must then make split-second, life or death decisions and ensure they fall within the commander’s intent (Department of the Army, 2020). This is only possible through rough, relevant and realistic training conducted by the Army’s exceptional NCO corps.

Conclusion

NCO-led COIN operations will always be necessary before, during and after every major conflict. The U.S. military is shifting focus to compete with near-peer threats by the year 2028, which meets national security goals (Mattis, 2018). It is imperative that NCO-led COIN training continue to ensure overall mission success.

Security cooperation operations will always be a mainstay within the national strategy, but it requires competent NCOs at every level to take the lead. They must continue to prepare their Soldiers with tough and realistic training, and commanders must allow them opportunities to take disciplined initiative throughout.

As outlined, COIN operations are an integral part of modern military operations along every phase of joint LSCO. The U.S. military cannot be surprised

during the next conflict, or it will once again find itself trading blood for knowledge. ■

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