



Sgt. 1st Class Chad Clark, assigned to 101st Airborne Division, teaches Afghan National Army Soldiers on weapons handling at Combat Outpost Fortress in Kunar province, Afghanistan, March 12, 2013. NCO leadership is vital for mission success, as collaborative training with our allies fosters a solid and enduring relationship of trust during counterinsurgency operations. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Jon Heinrich)

COIN Training Institution

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The U.S. Army will continue to face future counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) play a vital role in these environments. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan forced NCOs to take leadership roles directly influencing COIN operations.

The Army must invest in their leadership abilities by establishing a formal COIN training institution to succeed in future conflicts. Such an establishment would develop and enhance junior NCO leadership abilities and educational expertise in COIN planning, tactics, and operations.

Definitions

Terrorism

The U.S. government divides the definition of terrorism into international and domestic terrorist activities. The FBI's definition derives from Title 18 of the United States Code, section 2331. It defines *international terrorism* as "Violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups who are inspired by, or associated with, designated foreign terrorist organizations or nations (state-sponsored)" (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], n.d., p. 1).

The FBI maintains the same definition for *domestic terrorism*, but the designated influence originates from a domestic source of a “political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature” (FBI, n.d., p. 1).

Counterterrorism

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (2024) define *counterterrorism* as “activities and operations taken to neutralize terrorists and their organizations and networks to render them incapable of using violence to instill fear and coerce governments or societies to achieve their goals” (p. 46).

Insurgency

The Central Intelligence Agency (2012) provides the most comprehensive definition of *insurgency*:

Insurgency is a protracted political-military struggle directed toward subverting or displacing the legitimacy of a constituted government or occupying power and completely or partially controlling the resources of a territory through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations. (p. 28)

Counterinsurgency (COIN)

COIN is the combination of comprehensive military and civilian measures by a government to defeat, contain, and manage an insurgency’s root causes (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2012; Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018).



Soldiers assigned to 1st Battalion, 125th Infantry Regiment, 37th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, and members of the Afghan Uniform Police secure a route while on a mission to provide security for a human terrain team. In counterinsurgency operations, NCOs build relationships with locals to create trust, aiding in analyzing and predicting the enemy and populace’s actions. (U.S. Army photo by Maj. William Humes)

Definition Analysis

An insurgency is an intrastate (within a country’s boundaries) conflict to displace a government. Terrorism is an act of violence toward a civilian population, often associated with a political, religious, or other influential motive.

According to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (2018), “elements of an insurgency often use terrorism as a means to influence local, domestic, and international audiences. Thus, a [Joint Force Commander] JFC may be simultaneously conducting COIN operations and counterterrorism.”

The use of terrorism in insurgencies depends on variables during the conflict. For example, socioeconomic factors, the current level of political violence or perceived violence, and participating actors or groups.

Merari (1993) clarifies the use of terrorism within an insurgency, stating that terrorism is a “mode of struggle adopted by insurgents [that] is dictated by circumstances rather than by choice, and ... whenever possible, insurgents use concurrently a variety of strategies of struggle” (p. 213). NCOs operating in a COIN environment must have a fundamental and working knowledge of these concepts.

NCOs in COIN

There is a reason Army professionals refer to the NCO Corps as the “backbone of the Army,” and it revolves around their ability to produce results. Retired Command Sgt. Maj. John Wayne Troxell, senior enlisted advisor to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2015 to 2019, once said in an interview that “NCOs are the doers” (Garamone, 2019, para. 8).

NCOs take the commander’s intent and make it happen; as the article’s author said, they “apply agile and adaptive practices to defeat enemy threats, solve problems and accomplish missions” (Garamone, 2019, para. 3).

NCOs empower the commander to succeed on the battlefield. This “doer” NCO role expanded during COIN operations, and Army officers must use experienced NCOs in combat, conflict, and other engagements, and in mission analysis and planning.

NCOs understand the operational environment, the commander’s intent, and the reason directed to operate; thus, they can function as liaisons between senior leadership and the junior enlisted force.

Shurkin (2022) said, “Building positive relations with local populations is not just a question of morality or legitimacy but also an essential means of weakening support to insurgents” (p. 10). It is often NCOs on the ground who perform this task. Their leadership abilities influence COIN operations.

Leadership

The two principal schools of thought in COIN are the population-centric and the enemy-centric models; however, Moyer (2010) introduces a third.

The population-centric concept focuses on the population's "hearts and minds" and the socioeconomic variables influencing them to support the insurgent efforts. The enemy-centric concept seeks to kill or capture members of the insurgency. Moyer said research does not support just one model. U.S. forces and allies must apply a combination. Moyer presents that COIN's effectiveness correlates to the leadership quality variable.

Leader-centric warfare is dependent on improving leadership qualities. Moyer's analysis of leadership traits in COIN outlines 10 attributes for COIN leaders: initiative, flexibility, creativity, judgment, empathy, charisma, sociability, dedication, integrity, and organization. Moyer's thoughts on leadership support current U.S. Army doctrine, which says Soldiers must improve their leadership qualities and leaders must take the initiative to enhance their subordinates' leadership traits. Moyer's traits and reflections on leadership directly correspond with U.S. Army NCOs.

One of the more difficult tasks in COIN operations is to analyze and predict the enemy and local populace's course of action. NCOs on the ground attempt to build relationships with locals to provide insight and further the analysis for the command. This relationship-building process creates trust.

Violating this trust can happen quickly and is difficult, if not impossible, to repair. NCOs must display ethical and moral leadership during and after combat operations. Their ethical decisions and actions directly affect the civilian populations displaced from rising insurgent conflict and COIN operations. Protecting civilians in COIN operations increases allied support, while civilian casualties increase insurgents' support.

According to Aydin and Emrence (2021), "non-state actors are likely to extract concessions from governments with violence toward civilian populations" (p. 533).

COIN operations become increasingly difficult to balance for operational and strategic leaders during these phases as multiple stakeholders (such as U.S. military, insurgencies, religious groups, noncombatants, and neutral parties) push, pull, and manipulate the civilian population.

Insurgents will exploit the presence of the military as occupiers while U.S. forces provide protection and stability. They attempt to provide education, stability, and protection, competing against insurgent forces' indoctrination.

NCOs must acknowledge conflicting ideals, beliefs, norms, and traditions the local populace faces between comfort and safety. How they conduct themselves and display empathy fosters rapport

between the locals and U.S. forces.

Leadership actions are vital to mission success. Aydin and Emrence (2021) discuss how negative actions and harm toward the locals reduce tips and embolden the insurgency. Condra and Shapiro (2012) help establish this relationship in their study by showing a statistical relationship between collateral damage on civilians and insurgent attacks.

"Coalition killing of civilians predict higher levels of insurgent

violence and insurgent killings predict less violence in subsequent periods" (p. 167). NCOs on the ground may not have ordered the airstrike, pulled the trigger, detonated the improvised explosive device (IED), or participated in any of the actions that led to civilian casualties.

However, it is they who face the consequences. They must prepare to address situations where the civilian populace is hesitant to receive another military force, and the U.S. Army must invest in the appropriate training to prepare NCOs to succeed in this complex environment.

The Investment

Current research from subject matter experts like Moyer (2010) and U.S. Army doctrine supports the need for COIN education. The Department of Army's (2009) Field Manual (FM) 3.24.2 on COIN states, "In COIN, the side that learns faster and adapts more rapidly, usually wins" (p. ix).



U.S. Army Soldiers distribute care packages, provided by Spirit of America, to Afghan evacuees at Camp As Sayliyah, Qatar, Sept. 5, 2021. In counterinsurgency operations, how Soldiers conduct themselves and display empathy fosters rapport between the locals and U.S. forces. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Aaliyah Craven)

The more recent Department of Army (2014) FM 3.24 on COIN discusses the importance of military members first understanding the U.S. strategic context to successfully plan and execute COIN operations in the nation's interests.

As a measure of critical placement, the Department of Army (2014) states, "Despite its irregular nature and generally less intense level of combat, counterinsurgency may be just as critical to U.S. vital interests as conventional warfare" (p. 1-1).

The U.S. Army must invest in specialized training to acquire special qualification identifiers (SQI) and additional skill identifiers (ASI) for NCOs to develop and enhance COIN planning, tactics, and operations. U.S. Army NCOs still need specialized training during transition times.

With the deactivation of the Asymmetrical Warfare Group and the U.S. Army's transition from COIN to multi-domain operations (MDO) and large-scale combat operations (LSCO), it is time to implement a schoolhouse environment to capture and teach the lessons learned from the past decades of warfighting.

Subsequent combat operations will involve MDO and may involve LSCO; however, COIN operations will be relevant regardless of the operating environment. As U.S. Army doctrine stresses, it is imperative to educate junior NCOs.

According to the Department of the Army (2014), "Local commanders have the best grasp of their situations, but they require access or control of the resources needed to produce timely intelligence, conduct effective tactical operations, and manage intelligence and civil-military operations" (p. 1-21). NCOs allow the lowest-level commander to be effective in COIN operations. A future COIN school will preserve these hard-earned skills.

COIN Training Institution

A COIN Training Institution's (COIN-TI) mission would provide NCOs with an in-depth education and leadership experience in COIN doctrine. Ongoing global COIN operations using historical and contemporary references to defeat emerging threats and enhance multi-domain operations could support this education.

COIN-TI would provide leaders with the educational background and the fundamental principles that frame COIN.

According to Fitzgerald (2013), "Defeat in Vietnam led the Army to consciously turn away from its experience there and discard what it had learned about counterinsurgency" (p. 2). COIN-TI would correct this oversight and provide NCOs the opportunity to think



Soldiers from 3rd Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, demonstrate mine sweeping at Forward Operating Base Zangabad, Afghanistan, Sept. 18, 2012. The U.S. Army must invest in a formal Counterinsurgency Training Institution to succeed in future conflicts, developing and enhancing NCOs' leadership abilities and educational expertise in COIN planning, tactics, and operations. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Ashley Curtis)

critically and operate effectively in COIN environments.

The course would last four weeks, divided into three sections: operating environment, insurgencies, and tactical operations. Each section builds upon the other, allowing students to develop and employ critical thinking and analytical skills.

Students would graduate with a comprehensive understanding of insurgencies and their environments. Discussion and classroom analysis would focus on the methodologies the U.S. used to counter insurgencies.

In the tactical operations section, instructors would facilitate open dialogue and debates on NCO roles and actions at the company and battalion levels. Students would also graduate with a thorough awareness of interorganizational partners, including host governments, nongovernmental agencies, multinational forces, and local populations.

The foundation for the curriculum and Program of Instruction (POI) would be three well-known COIN publications: the U.S. Army's FM 3-24 and Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5 Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies, U.S. Army FM 3-24.2 Tactics in Counterinsurgency, and the Joint Chief of Staffs' Joint Publication J.P. 3-24 Counterinsurgencies.

These publications serve as primary outlines for weekly instructional material. COIN-TI would supplement military doctrine with scholarly resources, guest speakers, and subject matter experts on insurgencies and COIN operations to maintain current on contemporary sociocultural variables.

Providing historical context with current events through various instructional methods would

reinforce the components of adult learning within the theory of andragogy, the science of teaching adults, allowing each of the three COIN-TI sections to get maximum student participation.

Operating Environment

Section one provides NCOs with the foundational framework of the operating environment and gives them the ability to challenge leadership decision-making, assessing the concepts of ends, ways, means, and risk. Instructors would focus on ways students can introduce and reinforce the importance of cultural capability and situational awareness in their units. The Department of Army (2009) defines *cultural capability* as:

The blend of individual competence in understanding the general characteristics and the characteristics of specific cultures, derived from a cumulative set of cultural knowledge, skills, and attributes to help forecast and favorably influence the behavior of the target group or society. (p. 1-18)

This topic emphasizes the vital role of NCOs through cultural awareness, cultural understanding, and cultural expertise.

It is important to emphasize the need to understand culture. The U.S. military and its allies failed this during the Global War on Terrorism, specifically in Afghanistan. Coalition forces should have acknowledged their shortcomings and realized that while they

excelled at reconnaissance and combat, they lacked cultural understanding (Gant, 2009; Johansson, 2017). Discussions in section one of COIN-TI would establish and build the foundational blocks required to analyze past and current insurgencies.

Insurgencies

Section two of COIN-TI would define and discuss insurgencies. Each of the three doctrinal publications provides insight into insurgency fundamentals. The Department of Army (2009) addresses “five elements of an insurgency, the eight dynamics of an insurgency, the six insurgent strategies, insurgent tactics, and the strengths and vulnerabilities of insurgents.” (p. 2-1).

Instructors would facilitate structured analysis and debates on the fundamentals of insurgencies. Section two would conclude with discussions on insurgencies’ historical and contemporary tactics, strengths, and vulnerabilities and lead into the final section.

Tactical Operations

COIN-TI would conclude with tactical coursework and analyses on planning and executing COIN operations. Students discuss the importance and methodologies for gaining the local populace’s support. They would analyze offensive and defensive operations, including civil security and civil control. Instructors would thoroughly deliberate on the significance of the host nation’s role in COIN operations. Students would conclude the course with a capstone presentation.

Conclusion

Subject matter experts and U.S. Army doctrine support the need for COIN education and leadership. The U.S. Army must invest in a formal COIN Training Institution to succeed in future COIN conflicts focused on developing and enhancing NCOs’ leadership abilities and educational expertise in COIN planning, tactics, and operations.

Insurgency and counterinsurgency need to be understood. Knowledge galvanizes the Soldier on the battlefield and is a vital force multiplier. NCOs who attend COIN-TI could apply technical and tactical expertise to meet the commander’s intent and ensure success on the battlefield.

NCO leadership remains vital to mission accomplishment. Preserving moral and ethical decision-making during COIN operations is a necessary leadership quality. Junior NCOs



Soldiers conduct radio checks while a clearing team looks for improvised explosive devices, near the village of Dande Fariqan, Afghanistan, Nov. 5, 2012. U.S. Army doctrine emphasizes educating junior noncommissioned officers to ensure their readiness for leading and supporting practical counterinsurgency operations. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Christopher Bonebrake)

must enhance their ability to operate in the COIN environment as a specialized skill set. Current U.S. Army doctrine supports the need for COIN education. The U.S.

Army must now implement a schoolhouse environment to capture and educate the lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan and further develop the NCO corps. ■

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