

## Modernizing U.S. Counterinsurgency Practice: Rethinking Risk and Developing a National Strategy

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While the updating of U.S. Army counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine is long overdue, its imminent arrival is cause for celebration. The reality, however, is that the military doctrine won't fully address two challenges that remain critical for its ultimate success. One—altering approaches to risk—confronts an inhospitable politico-military culture and institutional history. The other key issue—the need for all components of the U.S. Government (USG) to develop shared assumptions and expectations in COIN—is above the pay grade of military doctrine. If the United States expects to be engaged in COIN in the future—and some would argue that the Long War is essentially countering a global insurgency—it had best address these issues rather than assume that forthcoming military doctrine resolves them.

### I. Military Doctrine Review

In February 2006, an odd fraternity of experts diligently combed through a revision of Field Manual-Interim 3-07.22, *Counterinsurgency Operations*. It was an unusual crowd of veterans of Vietnam and El Salvador, representatives of human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations, academic experts, civilian agency representatives, journalists, and active duty U.S. and foreign military. At the behest of Lieutenant General David Petraeus, Commanding General of the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, the assembly sought to make decades-old Army and Marine Corps doctrine freshly applicable to the contemporary insurgencies. The doctrine needed obvious updating to account for modern technologies, military capabilities, and operational concepts; to create a new breed of forces equipped to engage a global terrorist network; and to better address modern political and normative realities.

Perhaps more critically, the doctrinal update required reckoning with the enduring truths and dilemmas facing any counterinsurgency. These reflect lessons from prior British, French, and other foreign-power operations as well as from America's war in Vietnam. Ironically, perhaps, it is these persistent truths about COIN that pose the greater challenge for U.S. forces. Two points in particular stand out. The first is the counterintuitive need to accept greater physical risks to personnel in order to achieve political and military objectives. This is a particular challenge for the American military, which, as Russell Weigley showed, has spent decades developing a style of warfare that institutionally minimized those risks. The second point is the need for an integrated government strategy in an era when the military is often both the first tool and last resort of U.S. policy and many intra-government efforts fall short of the mark.

**Breaking the conventional paradigm.** For decades, the U.S. Army in particular had discounted the need to prepare for counterinsurgency—a messy, hydra-headed conflict that can, by its very nature, only be won incrementally. One reason for ignoring the challenge was that, as Vietnam so painfully underscored, COIN is hard to do well. A related but deeper factor is that effective counterinsurgency efforts confront core American predilections. American culture and U.S. military doctrine prefer a technological solution and the overwhelmingly decisive blow. Americans have a penchant for black-and-white clarity and have historically shown little patience for complexity and extended commitment. We Americans also like to win on our own terms. And, with the major exception of Vietnam, the United States has been remarkably successful in modern warfare.

Accordingly, much of the U.S. military's post-Vietnam efforts focused on neat, linear, and decisive concepts of warfare. Taking refuge in the Powell Doctrine, the armed forces prepared to fight and win conventional conflicts. Large massed formations, heavier weapons employed at increasing distances, and overwhelming force at the strategic and tactical level were the hallmarks of U.S. planning. Unconventional war, if it reared its head, was relegated to the subculture of U.S. special operations. But wishing away messy, multidimensional, and lengthy conflicts has not been an adequate solution.

Having so diligently shaped their units and strategies for the conventional fight, our forces were ill-prepared for operations that didn't fit that paradigm. After Operation Desert Storm, however, that's what U.S. ground forces have faced. During the 1990's, the Army and Marine Corps dutifully labored through small-scale stability operations from Haiti to Kosovo. Since 9/11—except, perhaps, for the first month of the Iraq invasion—it has all been messy, multidimensional counterinsurgency for American forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, and beyond.

**Institutional and cultural challenges.** The U.S. military has belatedly recognized the need to address the COIN challenge. Enormous energy is now being devoted to the “engines of change”—revising doctrine, revamping training, restructuring organizations, adding elements (e.g. Special Forces, intel units, infantrymen, military police, etc.), introducing new equipment, and even dramatically adapting schoolhouse curricula—all informed by a robust effort to capture insights and lessons from ongoing operations. Much of this version of transformation is the antithesis of the information- and technology-centric transformation

touted within the Beltway. The process of change relies heavily on the vision and leadership of key individuals in the Army, including Petraeus and Lieutenant General Peter Chiarelli, Commander of the Multi-National Corps, Iraq. Having experienced the realities of Operation Iraqi Freedom, these leaders have recognized a responsibility to prepare troops to meet the wars that call them, not the wars they might prefer to fight.

Yet there should be no illusions about the simplicity of the task. There is a reason that T.E. Lawrence likened fighting guerrillas to “eating soup with a knife.” It remains counter-institutional within the armed forces—and countercultural within the United States—to think and prepare seriously for this form of warfare. COIN, like the broader struggle against terrorism, ultimately requires Americans to think differently about conflict.

## II. Risk in COIN

COIN demands that intervening forces accept greater levels of risk than they would in conventional conflicts. The concept of risk employed in this essay differs somewhat from its most common use in operational planning. In the military lexicon, risk is the probability and severity of loss linked to hazards to personnel, equipment or mission. Risk management requires balancing risk and mission benefits. In 2003, U.S. commanders proved willing to accept risk by sending relatively small numbers of ground forces into the heart of Iraq without waiting for air power to degrade Iraqi units; the daring of the thunder run into Baghdad was another instance of risk acceptance.

COIN demands a different form of risk tolerance. In counterinsurgency, there is a direct relationship between exercising restraint in the use of force and achieving long-term mission success. The tension between risks to men and mission accomplishment cannot be resolved through additional firepower, mass, or speed. What might be a strategic advantage in a conventional conflict can be a liability in COIN. Successful commanders recognized this fact. In Iraq, some imposed more restrictive rules of engagement than common conceptions of self-defense would deem prudent (e.g., respond

only to accurate fire, and only if the shooter can be identified). Consider the example of Lieutenant Colonel Chris Hughes, commander of the 2d Battalion, 327th Infantry, whom President Bush praised for defusing a potentially explosive clash with Iraqi townspeople in Najaf. Hughes responded to growing violence from an angry crowd of hundreds by commanding his soldiers to kneel and point their weapons to the ground. His was an effective but unconventional response. Consider, too, the instances in which U.S. Soldiers and Marines have used nonlethal methods or a calculated additional moment to avoid turning a checkpoint incident into a tragedy. There is no question that the restrained use of force can, certainly by individual incident and in the short term, equate to increased physical risk for counterinsurgent forces. Yet counterinsurgency demands increased acceptance of physical risks to forces in order to enhance the prospects for strategic success.

This is an operational requirement—not a normative preference. It must be factored into the design and conduct of counterinsurgency operations. The risk differential helps explain why COIN appears to require counterintuitive thinking and actions on the part of military forces, particularly with regard to the emphasis given to force protection. Failure to understand why and how risk levels must differ in COIN can undermine the prospects for mission success.

Risk tolerance is reflected at the strategic and operational levels during campaign planning when forces and capabilities are allocated. At the tactical level, guidance regarding the escalation of force and specific rules of engagement play a larger role in shaping degrees of risk. U.S. forces assume different force-protection postures based on a variety of factors, including political objectives, threat assessment, and nature of the mission. By law, policy, and doctrine, U.S. forces generally seek to minimize risk to the maximum extent possible.

COIN is a particularly dynamic, decentralized, and three-dimensional form of warfare because the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of operation are more interdependent than in typical conventional operations and because the end-state cannot be achieved strictly by military means.

Both the level of threat and focus of tactical effort may differ dramatically among sectors and over time. Moreover, political considerations—the most overarching of which is the need to create and support Host-Nation (HN) legitimacy—must have primacy. For these reasons, a short-term focus on minimizing risks to counterinsurgent forces can ironically increase the risks to the larger campaign, including the longer-term vulnerability of U.S. forces.

Of course, many insurgent groups exhibit different attitudes about risk—risk to their own forces and risk to the civilian population—further complicating the challenge for U.S. forces. Cultural, political, religious, or other factors often imbue insurgencies with significant casualty tolerance. The United States was slow to accept this fact in Vietnam. U.S. forces today struggle with an enemy willing to execute suicide missions and invert the laws of war by routinely targeting and placing civilians at risk. These insurgent attitudes and tactics not only undermine “rational” approaches to risk, they vastly complicate U.S. responses on the battlefield.

Enhancing the safety of U.S. forces has involved both concepts and actions (including passive and active measures). Operational concepts and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) may variously emphasize risk assumption or minimization. Passive measures include improved intelligence, body armor, and heavily protected vehicles. Active measures frequently equate to greater reliance on the use of force. This reliance has several dimensions, including the speed/frequency of employing kinetic versus non-kinetic means, the routine application of greater levels of force, and the application of force from greater distances and/or with less definitive target identification.

When force protection is of paramount concern, the resulting decisions and actions can produce a myriad of unintended negative effects. For example, commanders might require that troops operate only in large numbers with heavy firepower, they might rely on airpower instead of infantry where the latter is more appropriate, or they might direct vehicles to move routinely at high speeds. Sometimes these courses of action are entirely

appropriate. However, each of these examples can have broader second-order effects. The large-convoy requirement may impede flexibility and intelligence gathering, privileging airpower could result in more intense applications of firepower than necessary for specific objectives, and speeding vehicles can inadvertently antagonize or injure civilians. These results are inconsistent with the principles of effective counterinsurgency.

In fact, the short-term tolerance of casualties is directly linked to strategic success. This central paradox is noted in the new COIN manual: the more you protect your force, the less secure you are. But this point is not yet widely understood or accepted within U.S. circles.

**Strategic value of risk tolerance.** Increased assumption of risk is implicit in the following objectives, each of which is critical for enhancing HN legitimacy and overall COIN success:

- *Minimize civilian impact and backlash.* COIN must restore security and normalcy for the population and be conducted in a manner that enhances HN legitimacy. Attaining passive or active indigenous civilian support hinges in large measure on the degree of confidence that the HN, not the insurgents, can provide a more secure future. Frequent and swift reliance upon force, or routine application of maximum allowable (versus minimum required) firepower can cause unnecessary civilian harm and thereby antagonize the local population. Such actions can crucially affect the attitudes and motivations of sympathetic or neutral civilians, which can dry up local information and cooperation and create sympathy, support, and recruits for insurgents. Unless U.S. military operations are conducted with significant risk tolerance, they may create more enemies than they eliminate.

- *Facilitate integrated operations.* Higher risk acceptance often proves essential for creating a greater level of security for the nonmilitary partners needed for a broader counterinsurgency effort. The military alone cannot provide economic reconstruction, political reform, and social assistance on the scale or for the duration that most COIN requires. Nonmilitary actors, to include other USG agen-

cies, contractors, international and regional organizations, host nation agencies, and NGOs must be able to operate safely and effectively on the ground. The precise nature or degree of security required for different types of actors and organizations has not yet been clearly defined, and the military needs greater clarity on this point. Yet it is self-evident that the more secure the environment, the more numerous and significant in scale nonmilitary efforts can be. In the absence of adequate security, the nonmilitary aspects of counterinsurgency efforts cannot take hold and the prospects for strategic success are greatly reduced.

- *Show American values.* Restraint on the part of U.S. forces can enhance positive perceptions of the United States and, by extension, the HN itself. Closely controlled use of force and greater risk tolerance demonstrate an American commitment to the highest ethical, moral, and legal standards. In addition to avoiding harm to U.S./HN reputations, such restraint offers the local population (and HN security forces) a clearly preferable model of conduct. U.S. officials frequently bemoan the inadequacy of the government's communications efforts in both ongoing wars and the broader fight against terrorism. U.S. actions are likely to prove the most effective communications tools. When U.S. actions are consistent with American values, information operations can more effectively contrast U.S./HN values and actions with those of the insurgents or terrorists. Concrete and consistent examples, coupled with the civilian population's personal experiences, are the most powerful route toward countering insurgent propaganda.

- *Demonstrate U.S. resolve.* Greater risk assumption, when understood and accepted in the United States, can also signal the strength of the U.S. commitment to mission success. U.S. forces continue to suffer from a worldwide perception that casualties will erode domestic support for military operations. Low risk tolerance—particularly outside the spectrum of high-intensity conventional conflict—only strengthens that perception, which in turn increases risks to all Americans.

Therefore, even where the intensity of violence is high, it is often

counterproductive to use force in a manner that—while fully consistent with conventional doctrine and training—could undermine the strategic purpose of counterinsurgency. The emerging emphasis on escalation-of-force measures in Iraq reflects a growing awareness of the problem.

In sum, while acceptance of greater risk alone will not guarantee success, it remains a necessary ingredient in any COIN strategy. Because more risk is likely required to achieve both military and *nonmilitary* success, increased risk tolerance may be the linchpin on which COIN success ultimately hinges.

**Moving from principle to practice.** The new COIN field manual, to its great credit, acknowledges the need for greater risk tolerance. Yet it is one thing to state the point; gaining widespread acceptance of this principle and then transforming it into practice will prove far more difficult. Increased risk assumption has obvious implications across the spectrum of routine and pre-deployment training, doctrine, and education. It must also be factored into operational design and anticipated troop-to-task ratios across the spectrum of capabilities, to include logistics and medical support. For example, some of the most successful units in Operation Iraqi Freedom swapped firepower for additional intelligence specialists and conducted more frequent but smaller patrols. It is worth noting that civilians in government must similarly address questions of increased risk tolerance if they are to be effective partners in COIN.

There are many reasons for both conceptual and practical resistance to rethinking risk. First, for decades conventional doctrine and training have stressed the primacy of firepower and technology in operations and have increasingly emphasized the importance of force-protection measures. Force protection has also been a priority at the lower end of the spectrum of operations, such as during stability operations in the Balkans. The broader risk aversion of American society generally has helped create a political-military culture that, in *relative* terms, has been shielded from risk.

Furthermore, the inherent nature of COIN poses additional barriers to assuming greater risk in practice. For one thing, the successful conduct

of COIN requires empowering lower level commanders with maximum flexibility to adapt to local conditions and opportunities. While decentralized responsibility is essential for adaptive operations, it can create additional psychological barriers to reducing the emphasis on force protection.

The problem is amplified by the apparent absence of immediate and concrete advantage in assuming greater risk. Simply put, COIN success is elusive and difficult to measure. Instead of a radical and lasting tactical military or political victory, success often lies in simply mitigating counterproductive effects (avoiding the foul). Yet justifying decisions is easier when, at the end of the day, the hill is clearly taken, despite the losses that may have been incurred. When greater risk simply avoids harming overall operational objectives—without providing measurable progress—risk assumption may prove harder to sustain. Again, this is likely to be particularly acute in decentralized operations where the bigger picture is harder for a unit commander to assemble. Calculated in a strictly military context, the cost/benefit analysis of force protection can produce an equilibrium that does not meet the larger political campaign goals most effectively.

For all of these reasons, it may be necessary to appear to overstate the risk-assumption requirement in doctrine and training in order to induce the requisite changes in Soldiers' understanding and actions. COIN confronts an institutional history, practice, and set of assumptions that run in the other direction. There are obviously risks that such an overemphasis will be perceived as straying from prudent force protection. Therefore, just as the standing rules of engagement reiterate the self-defense requirement, so must any risk reorientation for COIN emphasize the continuing centrality of self-defense even as the escalation of force is to be more tightly controlled.

Central to any sustained change, though, is an expanded appreciation of the relationship of risk assumption to mission success and a COIN exit strategy. This is the logical conclusion of emergent efforts to define and implement escalation-of-force measures. To avoid creating more new enemies than a given operation eliminates; to demonstrate the pro-

fessionalism, moral distinction, and commitment of U.S. forces; and to enable non-American and nonmilitary actors to assume ultimate responsibility for the COIN effort, military forces must tolerate higher levels of risk in the conduct of COIN operations.

Equally important, civilian leaders must endorse and explain this operational requirement and ensure that the American public accepts the risk corollary of counterinsurgency. Our democratic system of government and the voluntary character of our armed forces require all Americans to grapple with the risk requirements for successful counterinsurgency. In turn, greater risk tolerance must be factored into all aspects of COIN, most critically any national command authority decision to commence a counterinsurgency campaign. While the risk corollary may be difficult for American leaders and citizens to accept, it is vital for the United States' ability to fight the Long War effectively.

### III. A National COIN Strategy

Given the relative paucity of official thinking and writing on counterinsurgency during the past four decades, there is insufficient USG understanding of COIN among both military and nonmilitary actors. In an effort to fill the vacuum of knowledge across all levels of the USG, the draft field manual shifted uneasily between strategic guidance and the minutiae of tactics, techniques, and procedures. The authors recognized the danger of depriving Soldiers of a workable field manual, but at the same time they understood the document's potential role in helping orient a broader and higher level USG audience toward COIN principles and requirements. The interrelationship between political decisionmaking on the one hand and military requirements and execution on the other is glaringly apparent in COIN. And while the military desire to plug USG knowledge gaps is understandable, ultimately the civilian leadership must take responsibility for creating a counterinsurgency "meta-doctrine."

**Craft national doctrine.** The most startling feature of the field manual is the primacy it accords to the political. The manual purveys military doctrine, yet that doctrine recognizes that the military frame-

work and military tools have limited utility in the overall campaign. Political reform, communications strategies, economic development efforts, and other civilian activities are critical aspects of responding to an insurgency. It is axiomatic, therefore, that the ultimate success of COIN hinges upon the civilian conceptualization of the COIN challenge and the broader USG response.

How civilian actors carry out their responsibilities, or fail to coordinate or execute them, will of course have a significant impact on the ground. But unity of effort and competence in execution are meaningless unless unity of purpose has been collectively articulated and agreed upon. If military units individually achieve tactical goals with mutually contradictory results, we can hardly consider their efforts a success. Doctrine exists to provide conceptual coherence, supported by standardized and coordinated execution. Because of its ongoing responsibilities in Afghanistan and Iraq and its institutional reliance upon doctrine, the military has sought to fill the conceptual vacuum. Yet the primacy of the political in COIN demands that military doctrine flow from the creation of an integrated civil-military approach to COIN.

To conduct COIN effectively, though, much of what the military does on the ground should flow from clearly articulated U.S. policy guidance on everything from support of political reform to economic development, including related expectations of the host nation. In reality, though, such clarity does not always exist, in part because of unresolved tensions between the military and civilian sides and amongst civilian agencies. Even before issues of resources and roles are engaged, COIN operations can be hobbled by competing orthodoxies about achieving the general goals or the desired sequencing and prioritization of efforts.

The most basic elements of a COIN strategy still beg a myriad of questions. Take the goal of political reform. Is it necessarily synonymous with democratization? Do the local citizens and leaders shape that process? Will promoting national elections increase or decrease national unity or the security situation? How should the United States reconcile an American fixation on civil and political rights with the economic

and social needs that may be more pressing for the local population? The goal of economic reconstruction can be similarly deceptive. What principles should guide the effort? Meeting humanitarian need? Advancing the political process? Rewarding cooperation with the host nation? Three years into the Iraq war, the United States is still debating whether to focus assistance on immediate employment of Iraqi men to help stabilize communities and improve security or on broader economic reform and privatization, which can increase social dislocation, at least in the short term. Transporting unexamined U.S. policy orthodoxy into a COIN context can prove problematic.

In almost every arena (or line of operation), U.S. counterinsurgent efforts will struggle to reconcile American ideas and values with local traditions, culture, and history, as well as to define the limits of that compromise. These challenges should be articulated and analyzed closely. For example, what are U.S. expectations regarding local institutions' respect for human rights, degree of corruption, or enforcement of the rule of law? How should the USG respond when the host nation government or its institutions fail to meet those expectations? And at what point does T.E. Lawrence's admonition—that it is better for locals to perform a task tolerably than for outsiders to do it for them—simply no longer hold?

Without guidelines on these points, military and civilian counterinsurgent actors will send mixed messages and potentially work at cross purposes. If an Army captain is left to improvise, he may do remarkable work within his area of operation, but major disconnects are foreseeable: the political council he appoints may be vitiated by the national election strategy; the corruption or abuse he refuses to tolerate may simply migrate to a more forgiving district; the economic incentives he uses to maintain stability may be undone by the central government's shock therapy. Competing orthodoxies, standards, and priorities should be articulated, debated, and resolved collectively by the USG before individual actors are forced to address them in their areas of responsibility. Unity of purpose is a prerequisite for unity of effort.

**Know your capabilities.** After attaining greater conceptual clarity about COIN strategy, the United States can more usefully consider whether it possesses the expertise and capabilities required to implement that strategy. A COIN capacity assessment will rediscover many known deficiencies. Some harken from the early 1990's when the USG renewed its nation-building activities in peace operations: cumbersome and bureaucratic economic assistance processes; too few civil affairs units and translators; insufficient or nonexistent adaptive security capabilities—particularly those bridging police and military functions. Other COIN shortfalls will be unique or refinements of known shortfalls. For example, Iraq highlights the need to develop effective ministerial capacity to oversee the military, police, and intelligence services early in COIN operations. There must also be HN capacity in critical financial and economic sectors. Which U.S. agencies have that responsibility and are their capacities sufficient given the centrality of those functions?

**Develop the right people.** Any examination of the government's capacity is likely to conclude that a well-prepared cadre of personnel remains a key shortfall. COIN requires individuals with hybrid political-military sensibility, the ability to think and act across labels and stovepipes, a single-minded and empathetic focus on host-nation legitimacy coupled with an improvisational, results-oriented attitude. Through both experience and training, the armed forces have come to understand or even adopt many "civilian" roles and tasks (e.g., conducting negotiations, facilitating political activities, administering municipalities), whereas many civilian actors continue to view the military aspects of COIN as entirely other and apart. Cultural differences between military and civilian USG actors impede communication, let alone unity of effort. Some State Department personnel express discomfort with the term counterinsurgency to describe their efforts in Iraq and elsewhere. In 1962, the State Department fully embraced responsibility for coordinating counterinsurgency and foreign internal defense activities. There was no question about the need for familiarity with

and appreciation of all elements of national power. Our U.S. personnel systems, from education and training to promotion and assignment, must do more to familiarize civilians with military culture and operations and to integrate civilian and military personnel in professional-development activities related to COIN.

A related aspect of developing people with the right mindset and knowledge is the need to empower them to act effectively. There is a tension between the autonomy and flexibility required for effective decentralized operations and the accountability demanded of those responsible for dispersing significant funds at the local level. Should U.S. legal requirements regarding small-scale contracting, assistance, compensation, and other uses of funds be relaxed in the context of ongoing armed conflict? This is a different issue from preventing fraud and abuse by major private corporations, as proved problematic in Iraq.

Unless COIN actors, both civilian and military, can respond quickly to local need, they may find themselves irrelevant. Consider Hezbollah's immediate and small-scale provision of relief following the recent cease-fire in Lebanon. Congressional suspicions regarding the Commander's Emergency Response Fund program suggests unresolved larger issues and a lack of understanding of COIN requirements. Cumbersome procedures, however well-intentioned, may be inconsistent with the trust and flexibility COIN requires from USG personnel on the ground.

**Align responsibilities with capacity.** COIN capacity should also be considered in a broader context. What advantages does the U.S. Government have compared to other actors, such as private contractors, NGOs, allied states, or international agencies? There is a difference, of course, between the ideal division of labor and the actual partnerships that are likely to occur in a particular COIN operation. Indeed, this reality often prompts military commanders to advocate for some degree of United Nations or multinational involvement in interventions. Even as it develops contingency plans for acting without partners, U.S. national strategy should recognize and plan for the ideal of a shared effort.

In USG planning, agencies must confront the difference between

nominal responsibility and ability to execute. For the military, it matters little that the Justice Department is best suited to a particular task if it will rarely be in a position to carry it out. Obtaining greater clarity, not simply about which USG agencies “own” issues or tasks, but whether how and in what timeframe they can achieve those goals, is vital. This assessment would include not only resources, expertise, and legal authorities, but also a realistic appraisal of the availability of personnel to operate effectively in a COIN environment of increased security risks.

The underlying question is whether military forces must be prepared to take on *all* tasks in COIN or whether civilian actors can become effective partners in a low-intensity-conflict environment. There are few political incentives for addressing the questions, and thus the issue festers unresolved. If the civilian capacity can be effectively addressed, it makes more sense to enhance field capabilities where substantive knowledge and bureaucratic authority is already located. Should the government as a whole be unwilling to reallocate resources to enable the “right” actors or agencies to perform needed responsibilities, it had best reassign those responsibilities. Yet progressive militarization of COIN, or of U.S. foreign policy generally, would further undermine the likelihood of success in both arenas. Only when the USG faces the implications squarely is it likely to take the requisite action to enhance civilian capacity.

Even integrated political-military planning, a shibboleth of the USG for decades, remains a theory, not a practice. The creation of the State Department’s Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) offers hope of a home for civilian COIN planning and activity. The proof, however, lies in the pudding of decisionmaking and resource allocation. The planned \$100 million transfer from the Department of Defense to S/CRS is symptomatic of the underlying problem and not a lasting solution. The DOD “gift” is positive only if it never needs to be repeated because adequate funding will have been made available in future State Department budgets. A facade of civilian capacity, buttressed by stop-gap military actions, serves no one.

**Lines of authority.** Unity of command is a sacrosanct concept and practice within the armed forces. The primacy of politics throughout COIN, however, suggests a potential flaw in conceiving of independent civilian and military spheres of action. The uncertain ad hoc accords established between a U.S. ambassador and force commander certainly leave much to be desired. Yet the implicit requirement to subsume military command within civilian authority even at the operational level would challenge widely held military and civilian expectations and, frankly, most civilian abilities. At the same time, the model British colonial administrator, a military officer fusing civilian efforts into a holistic strategy, seems an icon of the past.

Without an easy answer to the unity of command question, policy-makers default to promoting “unity of effort”—an idea more appealing in theory than effective in practice. The use of “handshake-con”—achieving informal understandings amongst various leaders of parallel efforts in the field—has been successful where U.S. military officials have had the vision and stamina to implement it. Such intense personal engagements offer an alternative to a formal chain of command or a pro forma but ineffective coordinating arrangement. But handshake-con may be better suited for foreign and local military forces than working across agency lines, and even then it is highly personality-dependent. This underscores the importance of developing that hybrid persona, the government professional familiar with both the military and civilian components of COIN and how the pieces must work together in support of the host-nation and COIN strategy. A cadre of such professionals will enhance the prospects for actually achieving unity of effort and might eventually allow consideration of unity of command.

**Next steps.** While revising military doctrine is essential, it is only a partial step toward crafting an effective national COIN strategy. To maximize U.S. success, military doctrine should flow from a political-military concept of operations. This would create greater understanding of the capabilities, assumptions, and appropriate synergies among military and nonmilitary capabilities

and policies than currently exists. Unity of concept must precede unity of effort.

It is highly encouraging, then, that the State Department is embarking upon an interagency effort to create a framework for COIN. With an initial meeting scheduled for September 2006, the stated aim is to produce a National Security Presidential Directive outlining an analytic framework, U.S. agency roles and missions, and capacity gaps. It will certainly be useful to bring together governmental actors in charge of various aspects of COIN in order to codify their operating principles and capabilities. Unfortunately, after several years of effort in Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. agencies are still disputing economic policies, the relationship of security to political reform, and the relative resourcing of civilian and military effort. This underscores the importance of first defining a unified strategy.

The challenge in any USG interagency effort is that the process tends to replicate the very stovepipes and capacity weaknesses at the core of the problem. Furthermore, interagency processes often reach nominal agreement by skirting central issues and finessing tough choices. The 1994 presidential directive on peace operations followed this pattern, and there is little reason to believe COIN, in all its complexity, will fare differently.

It therefore would be beneficial to create an outside group—a blue-ribbon commission or advisory panel—to bring a fresh, objective, and comprehensive approach to this topic. The commission would necessarily involve government agencies, but would stand apart in formulating an integrated strategy. It is particularly important, given the politics of the Iraq war, that the commission be bipartisan in composition and outlook. These days, it is unfashionable, and perhaps atavistic, to call for bipartisan efforts. But COIN is a challenge facing the USG for the foreseeable future, not a unique problem for the current administration. Even a sound presidential directive will lack the consensus and support needed to sustain it over the longer term. Since a national COIN strategy is a long-term proposition, building a unified and bipartisan approach is critical for the Nation.

#### IV. Final Thoughts

The forthcoming field manual on COIN remains a signal accomplishment: it articulates a modern approach to counterinsurgency while affirming COIN's enduring but decidedly counterintuitive principles. It would be a mistake, however, to believe that the updated doctrine settles the question of how the United States should prosecute its Long War or the smaller counterinsurgency campaigns within it.

In any struggle that ultimately hinges on winning over or neutralizing an ambivalent civilian population, those wielding force must do so with great care. Like it or not, the United States Armed Forces are held to the highest standard with regard to how they fight. Both the military and the broader public that supports them prefer to avoid considering the question of risk tolerance. Yet in counterinsurgency, U.S. unwillingness to assume risk may be the most severe

limitation on its COIN efforts. This is as great a challenge to the body politic as it is to the uniformed military, although only the uniformed military can effectively make the case for change in this arena.

The military must look to civilian authorities first, though, when it comes to the nonmilitary aspects of COIN. The U.S. Government as a whole must pony up to the demands of counterinsurgency. It's become vogue to cite a lack of interagency cooperation and civilian capacity in Iraq and beyond. Yet the prior failing is conceptual. It's difficult to codify process or build capacity in the absence of a universal doctrinal framework. More narrowly, even the extant military doctrine is on shaky ground when broader governmental assumptions, principles, and requirements remain unknown or ad hoc. Creating a common understanding of insurgency and the demands for defeating it remains a core challenge for the nation. **MR**

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