Counterinsurgency (COIN): The Post-9/11 Military Revolution and Its Consequences

After 9/11 and the identification of the asymmetric threat emanating from failed states or states of concern like Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, Western military thinking underwent a “cultural revolution.”

It assumed the form of a distinctive doctrine, namely, counterinsurgency – the attempt to confound organized armed challenges to established authority. It represented the external or outward and visible face of the internal Western response to the Islamist terror threat discussed in previous chapters.

Prior to the Afghan and Iraq Wars and their problematic aftermath, military thinking treated counterinsurgency (COIN) disdainfully as a secondary activity. Labels like “unconventional war” and “irregular war” permeated military and strategic discourse and inferred that insurgencies were abnormal and of lesser importance than actions that required force-on-force concentration. This prejudice persisted despite the fact that insurgencies and “low-intensity small wars” have, in terms of their incidence, constituted the norm of war – the convention – since 1945.

Thus, the revolution this chapter examines is the new military thinking about counterinsurgency that radically questions the prevailing military orthodoxy that favoured the concept of “major battle.”

In 2007, a senior British Army commander, Sir John Kiszley, summated the reasons traditional military thought evinced an ingrained antipathy towards insurgencies. Counterinsurgency, he maintained, comprises:

features with which the pure warrior ethos is uneasy: complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty; an inherent resistance to short-term solutions; problems that the military alone cannot solve, requiring
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cooperation with other highly diverse agencies and individuals to achieve a comprehensive approach; the need for interaction with indigenous people whose culture it does not understand; and a requirement to talk to at least some of its opponents, which it can view as treating with the enemy.

Such tasks, Kiszley argued, are often regarded as unmilitary, “hedged about with unfair constraints; over-tight rules of engagement, negating the use of its trump card – firepower.” Consequently, Western armies “tend to view counterinsurgency as an aberration, look forward to the opportunity of returning to ‘proper soldiering’, and see subsequent training as an opportunity to regain their warfighting skills rather than to learn the lessons of counterinsurgency.”

In the United States, the armed forces, scarred by memories of the Vietnam War, evinced an even greater reluctance to address these features of insurgency. The failure of military establishments as well as civilian academics and policymakers alike to apprehend the complexities of that war encapsulated Kiszley’s view that counterinsurgency was something to be thought of as unbearably problematic, from which no good thing could ultimately come. “After the Vietnam War,” according to General Jack Keane, “we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war.” As David Ucko explains, the essential flaw in the US military’s post-Vietnam “aversion to counterinsurgency and stability operations” was that it “confused the undesirability of these missions with an actual ability to avoid them.” The truth of this point was brought home in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks against New York and the Pentagon, which dictated a policy of pre-emptive intervention to forestall new threats to US security, resulting in, among other things, the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003.

It was, of course, the notable failure to stabilize Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion by the United States-led coalition that prompted the re-examination of traditional military priorities. The breakdown of civil society, the descent into lawlessness, the tenacity and brutality of organized resistance to both the occupying forces and the fledgling Iraqi government, and the consequent bloodshed on all sides has been thoroughly analysed and bears no reiteration here. Lt. Col. John Nagl notably encapsulated the problems of dealing with the evolving chaos in Iraq. He argued that the US Army did not possess “a common understanding of the problems inherent in any counterinsurgency campaign” because its institutional culture and orientation did not allow for such