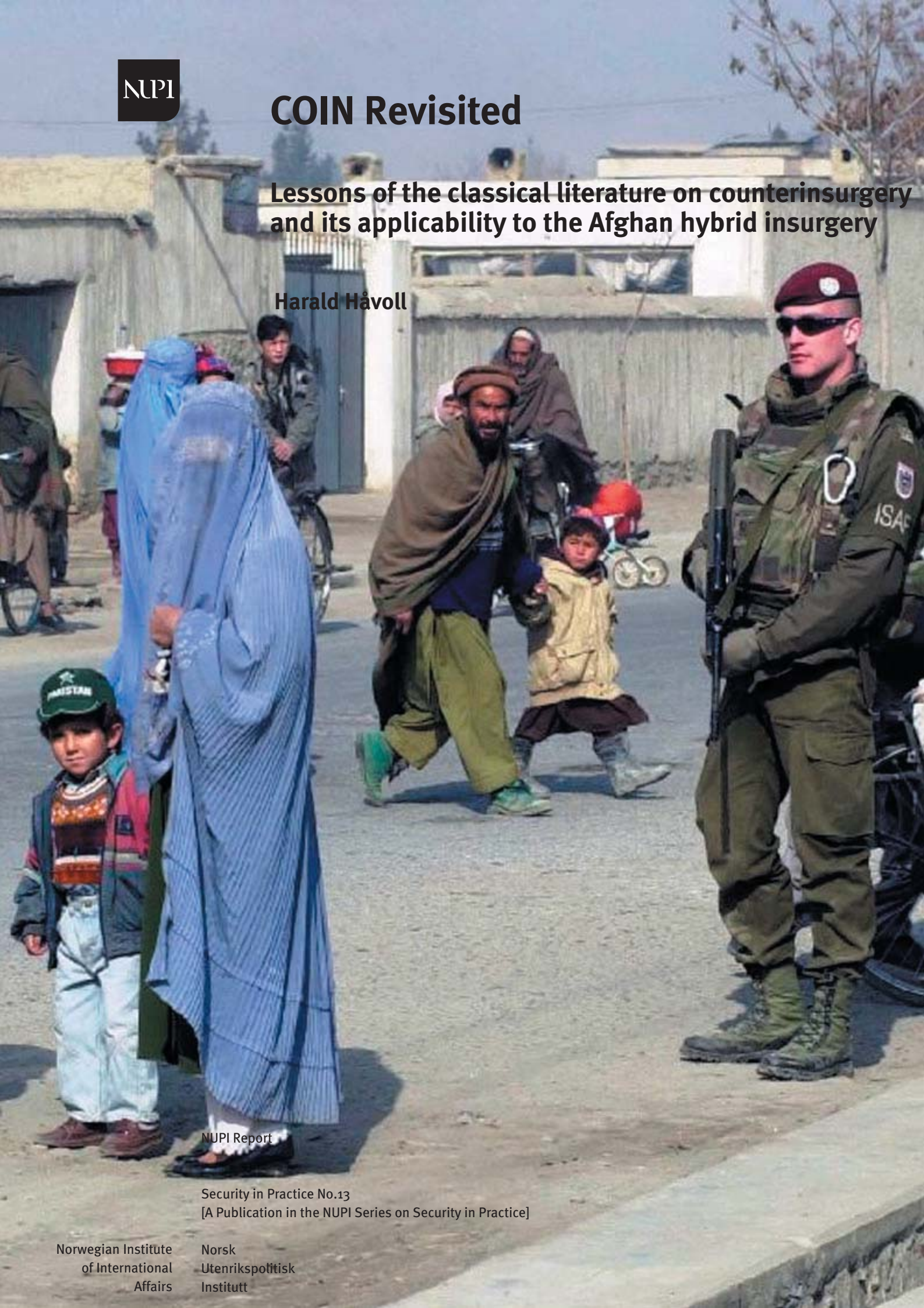


COIN Revisited

Lessons of the classical literature on counterinsurgency and its applicability to the Afghan hybrid insurgency

Harald Håvoll



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By

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[Summary] Prior to the US-led intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, little attention had been paid to counterinsurgency (COIN) in the USA and Europe, despite the considerable literature and experiences with this form of conflict since 1945. The limited focus that existed was primarily military in nature, despite the insistence of the classic literature on the political and civilian primacy of COIN. Experiences in Afghanistan since 2001 and in particular in Iraq since 2003 have put the focus on COIN. Combined with a renewed reading of the classics on COIN, this has resulted in a new and updated COIN Doctrine within the US Military: the FM 3-24. This report shows that the conflict in Afghanistan, although far more complex and thus to a degree qualitatively different from the insurgencies of the mid-20th century, can still be informed by the lessons and recommendations from the classic era. Greater attention to these lessons in the earlier phases of the conflict would probably have put the COIN Coalition in a better position than today. However, the situation in Afghanistan is grave, but not hopeless. Applying some of the lessons from the classical literature reviewed in this report, in particular Unity of Effort, might help to make the situation more manageable for the Afghan government, and improve the prospects of the Afghan people in the long run.

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Introduction

In December 2006 the United States issued a new official Counter Insurgency (COIN) doctrine, a joint US Army and US Marine Corps (USMC) doctrine known as FM 3-24 in the Army and MCWP 3-33.5 in the USMC. This doctrine is unique in several aspects: firstly the fact that it is common to the two services; secondly it is the first official COIN doctrine since 1966; thirdly it ranks higher in the US doctrine hierarchy than any previous doctrine related to irregular warfare (see Kronwall 2007: 6); and finally, its content signals a significantly new and more sophisticated approach to the phenomenon of COIN.

Otto von Bismarck once said that fools learn from their own mistakes whereas smart men learn from other peoples' mistakes (quoted in Waltz 1959: 220). It is clear from reading the doctrine that the USA has learnt not only from recent experience in Iraq and Afghanistan but also from experience going decades back. In addition, the comprehensive reference literature shows that the USA has been willing to learn from the experiences of others as well. What impact this doctrine will have on procurement, training, organizational culture, and ultimately on practical results in the field, in particular for the Army, remains to be seen. It also remains to be seen whether this will have any effect on the traditionally military-heavy approach to COIN and whether the US civilian authorities will take it as seriously as the US military appear to have done.

This report inquires into the origin of COIN by studying some of the 'classical literature' (the literature on the insurgencies and the 'revolutionary wars' of the mid-20th century) and then analyses the current conflict in Afghanistan in light of these findings. This will be done with reference to two questions:

1. What features characterize classical 'revolutionary war', insurgencies and counterinsurgencies?
2. To what extent is the current conflict in Afghanistan a classical insurgency and to what extent is it something different, and to what extent are the lessons from the classical era applicable?

The report looks into the counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan in general, to see whether the recommendations in the classical COIN literature (and the FM 3-24) are being followed in this conflict. More specifically, it will discuss to what extent following these recommendations might enhance the COIN effort.

The term 'war' will in this report be used only in its most narrow definition (except when in reference to the literature). Firstly, when a term is used so very broadly, covering all aspects from thermonuclear war to 'war' on drugs, it loses its analytical applicability; secondly, by calling something 'war', at least in the Western world, attention is drawn towards a problem that is seen as primarily of a military nature and requiring a military solution. Therefore, usage of the term 'war' is here limited to a conventional *interstate* armed conflict of medium to high intensity.

Insurgency is a form of *irregular conflict*. 'Irregular conflict' is a broad term defined by what it is not: it is 'everything but' a conventional interstate armed conflict (war). It is an *intrastate* conflict where at least one of the actors is a sub-national or non-state actor and involves the use of organized armed violence of low to medium intensity (not necessarily continuously throughout the conflict but at least in some phases).¹ Insurgents, militias, terrorists and organized crime are types of irregular actors, and guerrilla and terror possible methods or tactics used by such actors.

What is an insurgency?

Insurgency is an internal conflict – a form of 'civil war', but with the marked difference that in a civil war a nation is normally split into two or more parts, each occupied by different groups and armed by the remnants of the state's former armed forces. As noted by Galula (2006:2–3), the ensuing fight soon resembles a conventional (regular) war. Nagl (2002: 24) as well as FM 3-24 describe insurgency as a form of 'revolutionary war'. Galula uses the two as synonyms in his book, but with the evolved form of insurgencies we see today it is more correct to say the converse: that 'revolutionary war' is a form of insurgency. O'Neill (2005) states this clearly: '*Not all insurgencies are revolutionary wars*'.

An insurgency involves a group challenging the local ruling power that controls the administration, police and armed forces. The objective is to topple the existing government and seize power. An insurgency is therefore about regime change, and this is what distinguishes it from other forms of irregular conflict like organized crime and transnational terrorism. The insurgents have a *strategy*; they have clearly defined political *objectives*, and have at their disposal some *means* that they employ in certain *ways* in order to reach their goals. Organized crime, by contrast, is purely parasitic, with little or no sense of serving a constituency other than its own members, and no other goals than self-aggrandizement. (Cf.

¹ *Intensity* is here taken to consist of three elements: level of violence, frequency of the violence and scope (geographically or in resources spent)

Metz 2007: 29.) Insofar as the conflict contributes to these ends, perpetuation of the conflict is in their interest.

Insurgencies can also be classified by their founding motivation. The UN's *Manual on Humanitarian Negotiations with Armed Groups* operates with three categories of armed groups based on the underlying motivation: *reactionary* (reacting to some situation or something that the members of the group experienced or with which they identify); *opportunistic* (seizing on a political or economical opportunity to enhance their own power or position); or *ideological* (political ideology, ethnicity, religion etc.). The classical insurgencies of the mid- to late 20th century ('revolutionary wars') were primarily of an *ideological* nature, while today's organized crime is *opportunistic* and most militias are *reactionary* or *opportunistic*. Ideological groups may, however, engage in criminal activity in order to finance their struggle.

According to Galula, the classical, or revolutionary, insurgency can take one of two forms: the *orthodox pattern* and the *bourgeois-nationalist pattern*. The orthodox (or communist) pattern is almost identical to Mao Tse-tung's 'people's war' concept. Mao formulated the concept of a protracted ideological struggle based on three phases, while Galula's orthodox pattern consists of five steps. Mao's three phases are, however, fully incorporated in Galula's five steps:

1. creation of a Party
2. united front
3. guerrilla warfare
4. movement warfare
5. annihilation campaign

Both Mao and Galula stress that the areas affected by the insurgency may not be in the same phase or step at the same time and that a reversal to a previous phase might become necessary when an unavoidable setback is faced. Indeed, this happened to Mao as well as to the other prominent practitioner of 'people's war', Ho Chi Minh, in the two Indochina wars. A further interesting point with these theories is that Galula as well as Mao (and other authors included in the literature studied) unequivocally state that a guerrilla movement cannot win an armed struggle, and that a conventional force has to be built by the insurgents. Mao's phase 3 and Galula's steps 4 and 5 include the forming of a conventional military force that defeats the counterinsurgents in conventional battle.

The *bourgeois-nationalist pattern* is a 'shortcut' bypassing the long and demanding work of building a solid platform in the form of a party, an armed wing and solid support from the population. In this pattern a small group, or cadre, of insurgents engages in blind and random terrorism soon after establishing the group. The idea is that random bombings, arson and assassinations conducted in a spectacular fashion by concentrated, coordinated and synchronized waves will attract publicity for the cause and recruit new members. This phase of blind terrorism is followed by one of more selected terrorism. If successful, this pattern will then rejoin the orthodox pattern at step 3. (See Galula 2006, ch. 3.)

This pattern also covers what is called 'focoism', a term associated with Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Where, in the orthodox pattern, the mobilization of the masses makes possible the subsequent employment of violence, the 'focoists' claim that initiating violence will work as a catalyst and mobilize popular support, and much more quickly. Except for Castro's success in Cuba, history shows that this approach, however plausible, is not effective. Mao and Ho Chi Minh would have said that 'foco' violence, rather than catalysing revolution, would instead expose the revolutionary movement at its weakest moment to a counterattack, as happened in Bolivia. Shy and Collier (1986: 850–51) claim that 'focoism' is a product of the Latin temperament, and of the classic arrogance of young intellectuals to the real needs and grievances of the impoverished peasantry.

Characteristics²

Even though most insurgencies develop in much the same way, each insurgency is unique.

The significance of the *context* was underlined by Mao:

- *The laws of war – this is a problem that anyone directing a war must study and solve.*
- *The laws of revolutionary war – this is a problem that anyone directing a revolutionary war must study and solve.*
- *The laws of China's revolutionary war – this is a problem anyone directing a revolutionary war in China must study and solve.*(quoted in Galula 2006:xi)

Some characteristics common to most insurgencies are:

1. Political primacy of the struggle

In a conventional 'Jominian' war, politics will act as an instrument of war. Diplomacy, propaganda and economic actions support the military operations, which represent

² This section is based on Galula 2006, chapter 1.

the main effort. In an insurgency, the converse applies: the violent actions undertaken by the military arm of the insurgency are not the main effort but merely actions executed to support the propaganda effort which in turn contributes to the overall political struggle. Rupert Smith (2005: 167) calls this 'the propaganda of the deed'; a strategy where the primary role of the armed actions is to provoke (over)reactions on behalf of the counterinsurgents he calls 'a strategy of provocations'. A classical insurgency is first and foremost a political struggle, so all actions must be evaluated against their political effect before undertaken.

2. The population is the objective

As a corollary of the above, in a political struggle the population becomes the objective. It would be stupid for the insurgents to confront the government in a conventional attack before the balance has shifted to their advantage. According to Mao, the first two phases in a 'revolutionary war' are about changing the correlation of forces in the insurgents' favour. Common sense therefore indicates that an alternative 'battlefield' more in the insurgents' favour has to be found. This battlefield is the population. If the insurgents succeed in alienating the population from the government, controlling them physically and winning their support, then the insurgency will eventually succeed. The fight is *for the people* and as Rupert Smith would say: *amongst the people*.

The support of the population thus becomes the *sine qua non* for both insurgents and counterinsurgents. The insurgents need the support for food, shelter, information and sometimes weapons. The insurgents make full use of their ability to 'dissipate' into the populace, something Mao described being able 'to swim like fish in the water'.

The counterinsurgents are totally dependent on reliable intelligence in order to defeat the insurgents, and only the population can provide this. But the people will not provide this information unless they feel safe from reprisals from the insurgents. The dilemma for the counterinsurgents is that they need this information in order to win the conflict, but people will not provide this information before the counterinsurgents can prove that they are at least beginning to win the fight (Nagl 2002:3). In order to achieve this they will have to separate 'the fish from the water', as the British

succeeded in doing during the Boer War of 1899–1902 and the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s. This strategy was also pursued by the French in Algeria.³

Support from the population will vary in degree, from active participation to passive acceptance. The population as a whole will consist of a small group of active supporters on the one side and small group of active opponents on the other opposite. In the middle the largest group is to be found – those that either passively support one of the sides or are disengaged observers. The struggle is first and foremost over this last group

The insurgents will employ a combination of 'sticks and carrots' to gather necessary support. Force will eliminate the open enemies and intimidate potential ones into submission. Persuasion brings a minority of supporters – they are indispensable – but force rallies the rest. (Galula 2006: 34)

3. Role of propaganda

The insurgents will build their rhetoric on a *narrative* that explains the origin of the struggle, its objective and purpose. The narrative need not overlap completely with the cause as long as it serves its purpose: to gather support from the population and to undermine the government narrative (if it has one!). This narrative is distributed and transmitted by *propaganda*. As noted, earlier armed actions tend to support the propaganda rather than the other way around, as typically is the case with traditional Western military campaigns.

4. A protracted struggle

An insurgency is a methodical and painstakingly long and often slow process of rallying support and building strength. Mao's fight against the Chinese nationalist and the Japanese occupation took 22 years (if 1927 is taken as the starting year); Ho Chi Minh's struggle against the French, Americans and the South Vietnamese took 30 years; the Malayan Emergency lasted twelve years and the Algerian insurgency eight. In the first phases when the political platform and the organization are being built by cadres, it is imperative to avoid confronting the strength of the counterinsurgents.

³ The Malayan Emergency is regarded as one of very few successful counterinsurgency operations in history. In Algeria the French succeeded to a large degree in separating the FLN from the population, but this required the presence of 750,000 French troops. Eventually the tactical successes of the French amounted to little when de Gaulle, despite these successes, decided to grant sovereignty to Algeria in 1962.

Thus, only sporadic hit-and-run actions will take place, aimed at rallying support and undermining the image of the counterinsurgents by showing that they are not able to provide security for the population. In the beginning the insurgents' operational objective will be to *avoid defeat*, whereas what the counterinsurgents need is an *early victory*. As time passes without any decisive results, the insurgents will grow in force and combating the counterinsurgency will become harder and harder. One of the insurgents' primary assets is patience, while impatience is the counterinsurgents' liability.

5. Asymmetry in resources and motivation

The relationship between insurgents and counterinsurgents is from the outset characterized by an asymmetry that will gradually be reduced as the insurgency gains support and resources. From the outset the counterinsurgents will have at their disposal an overwhelming advantage in tangible resources: formal diplomatic recognition (international legitimacy) as well as control of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of national power; control of the administration and police; financial resources; industrial and agricultural resources; control of transport and communications facilities; and command of the armed forces. In terms of intangible resources, however, the situation is reversed. Here the insurgents have a formidable asset – the ideological power of their *cause*. The counterinsurgents have everything but a cause, while the insurgents have nothing but a cause. The insurgents' strategy is to turn their intangible assets into concrete ones, while the counterinsurgents' strategy is to prevent their own intangible liabilities from weakening their concrete assets (Galula 2006: 3–4)

6. Asymmetry in organization

A classical insurgency will normally be built around a core group or cadre of very dedicated members organized centrally and hierarchical. The actual armed struggle, however, will be conducted by small and independent units operating outside of direct and continuous control from the political leadership. They are guided in their actions by a common idea or vision. The counterinsurgents – consisting of the government, the administration, the police and the armed forces – are normally rigid bureaucracies. When these receive external support it will generally come in the form of conventional armed forces. These rigid forces, often doctrinally based on the conventional military wisdom of *mass*, will have great problems in defeating the more fluid and networked insurgent organization that very quickly can disperse into the population or into rough terrain. Large military units present a larger 'footprint' in the

engagement space: they tend to be slow, noisy and highly visible, thus presenting themselves more as targets than as an efficient counterinsurgent force.

'It takes a network to defeat a network', so the counterinsurgents must either seek to reorganize according to this wisdom or find other ways of reducing the negative effect of their organization.⁴

Prerequisites for a successful insurgency

David Galula holds that there are two necessary prerequisites for a successful insurgency: a *cause*, and a *weak state*. In addition, other factors will influence the outcome, like the *environment*, *outside support* and the presence of *sanctuaries*.

A cause

A solid and lasting *cause* is required in order to attract as many supporters as possible at the outset, while alienating as few as possible. The ideological foundation of the classic insurgencies serves this purpose better than the motivation for the opportunistic and reactionary groups. In addition to the political ideologies of the mid-20th century, today's ideologically-based insurgencies also include nationalism, ethnicity and religion.

Most people would prefer the absence of violence to active participation in an armed struggle, so motivation for the latter must be strong. Ideology alone is seldom sufficient to stir up a mass mobilization, because ideology is often associated with an elite (Rekkedal 2004: 8). Insurgents will therefore seek to supplement their ideological cause with something that can resound more deeply among the target population, such as a strong sense of falling victim to injustice, the presence of foreign 'occupiers' or on deep-felt grievances. The cause does not have to be static but may be dynamic. The movement may manipulate, even create causes as the struggle progresses if this serves their ends. (Tomes 2004: 27).

A weak state

Insurgencies appear almost exclusively in weak or failing states. After all, the definition of a strong state is that it holds the monopoly on the legitimate use of organized armed violence internally and externally, and that it can meet the population's basic needs like security, shelter, medical care and sustenance. Attempting an insurgency in a strong state means courting failure, as support from the people will not materialize and thus the counterinsurgency forces will have little problem crushing the insurgents. By contrast, in a weak state, the widespread grievances and injustice needed for the insurgents to augment

⁴ 'It takes a network to defeat a network' is one conclusion found in the 1996 RAND Corporation Monograph: *'The Advent of Netwar'* by John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, p.81

their ideologically founded cause will often be present. Insurgencies are bottom–up movements; an administrative vacuum at the bottom, the local level, caused by incompetent and corrupt public servants, will play the population into the arms of the insurgents (Galula 2006: 19).

Other factors

Other factors that influence the outcome include the *environment*, which is made up of geographic factors, demographic factors and economic factors; *outside support*, which can take the form of moral, political, technical, financial or military support; and the presence of *sanctuaries*, either within the disputed territory or in neighbouring states, thus becoming part of *outside support*. Both insurgents and counterinsurgents might come to rely heavily on external support, whether occasionally or throughout the struggle.

To sum up the potential influence of these other factors: the ideal situation for an insurgency would be a landlocked country with the approximate shape of a blunt armed star, with large swaths of jungle, swamps and/or mountainous terrain, particularly in the border areas; in a tempered zone with a large and dispersed rural population (a concentrated urban population is easier to control); a primitive economy; and with outside support available.

The territory in question can be divided into three zones: the 'white' zone is where there is a high support for the government and where the insurgents are severely restricted in their operations. In the 'pink' area, support for the two sides is reasonable evenly distributed and the insurgents will be able operate, albeit with caution. This is the transit and support zone for the insurgents. The 'red' areas are the insurgents' strongholds, with the majority of the population either actively supporting them or at least acquiescing. This is where the insurgents' safe havens or sanctuaries are found.

Counterinsurgency in the classical era

Provided that Galula's prerequisites are correct, the most efficient way to fight an insurgency would either be to fight its cause and/or to strengthen the state. The active and correct use of propaganda that undermines the insurgents' narrative will contribute to the first of these. However, propaganda alone will seldom suffice, as the insurgents' narrative is normally stronger (in the view of the population) than that of the government.

Another very efficient strategy would be to co-opt the insurgents' cause. In practice, this is rarely a viable course of action as it usually would mean that the government relinquishes the very power it is fighting for. In those historical cases where this approach has been followed,

however, it has proven highly successful. When General Sir Gerald Templer was appointed High Commissioner for Malaya and Commanding Officer of the Armed Forces in Malaya in 1951 he was given an in-brief in Whitehall which began with: ' *The Policy of Her Majesty's Government in Great Britain is that Malaya should in due course become a fully self-governing nation*' (Nagl 2002: 88). The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) had adopted a nationalistic rhetoric in order to augment their narrative but when the British co-opted this nationalistic rhetoric the MCP was left with only the political ideology. The majority of the Malayan population were traditionally conservative peasants, intuitively sceptical to a radical ideology like communism, so the MCP lost much of its recruitment base.

It can be equally difficult to strengthen a weak state. Such a state is weak for a reason. However, allocating the limited resources available into the stricken areas combined with political reforms will contribute to the counterinsurgency effort. It is important not to focus solely on re-establishing the monopoly on armed violence but also to improve the state's ability to alleviate the suffering and grievances of the population, as the insurgents' narrative is closely related to this.

Normally co-opting the cause is not an option and the limited will and resources available for strengthening the state will not be sufficient to quell the insurgency. If the insurgency has reached the stage where it has grown strong and is employing guerrilla forces, a broader counterinsurgency effort is required. Depending on the weight and role of the military component, this effort can take two forms: a *direct* or an *indirect* approach. These must be regarded as ideal types and will not appear in their purest forms, but the major characteristics will be evident: the direct approach is predominantly a military effort guided by military logic, while the indirect approach is predominantly a civilian effort, civilian-led and dominated by a civilian (political) logic.

The Direct Approach

The logic behind this predominantly military approach is that '*a war is a war is a war*' (Col Harry Summers, quoted in Nagl 2002:27). Thus an insurgency is just another variant of war and is best approached with conventional forces that seek to defeat the opponent on the battlefield, or as Eisenhower once said: '*If we have the weapons to win a big war we certainly can win a small one*' (quoted in Nagl 2002:49). This approach is based on employing massive and overwhelming firepower against the armed insurgent groups, as without its military arm the insurgent's *will* to fight is irrelevant. This approach is equivalent to the attrition approach in conventional war. One seeks to avoid civilian casualties – not because the population is the objective, but as a means to an end; civilian casualties tend to

undermine the counterinsurgents' legitimacy. This approach may include other activities than military ones, but these are secondary and serve to back up the military effort. The campaign is military-led and the military effort is regarded not only as a necessary but indeed a sufficient condition for success.

The problem with this approach is that it is very costly and that it deals with the symptoms rather than the root causes of the insurgency. This has traditionally been the American approach to these types of conflicts (pre-2003). Although the historical record does not support this approach, the main opposition to the new COIN doctrine has come from proponents of this tradition. Dr. Conrad Crane, lead author of the FM 3-24, listed some of the criticisms against the doctrine during a COIN seminar in October 2007: the doctrine is wrong-headed because only brutality can quell an insurgency; the doctrine should focus more on the enemy; and the doctrine undervalues the contribution that technology can make to COIN. (See Wipfli & Metz 2007).

Whereas the indirect approach takes full account of the importance of winning the 'hearts and minds' of the people, the direct approach is more about 'sticks' than 'carrots' and can best be illustrated by a comment the 'Sir Jim Hackett' character delivers in the final scene in one of the episodes of the brilliant British comedy series 'Yes, Minister: *'If you got them by the balls – their hearts and minds will follow!'*

The Indirect Approach

The indirect approach takes into account the civilian and political nature of an insurgency. The population is regarded not just as a means to an end, but as the end itself. A marginalized insurgency is in the worst case merely a law-and-order challenge and not an existential problem for the government and an insurgency without popular support remains marginal. The challenge consists of separating 'the fish from the water' without alienating the 'water'. In this approach the military effort is both necessary and important, but it is not the dominating and controlling instrument. The effort is civilian-led and as many instruments and actions as possible are integrated under this leadership. Together with the military effort this approach involves an extensive police operation, an intensive propaganda effort as well as a broad social programme (Trinquier 2006: 37). According to Galula (2006), a good counterinsurgency campaign is 80% civilian effort and 20% military.

The main guiding principle is *Unity of Effort* (alternatively *Unity of Purpose*). An integrated, comprehensive or 'whole of government' approach is a recurrent theme in all the literature on

COIN since the 1960s. Within the military, Unity of Effort is normally achieved through *Unity of Command*, but where this is not possible some level of unity of effort can be achieved by sharing a common vision and by sharing information on plans and intentions. Information ('hearts and minds') campaigns become as central to the effort as kinetic force. An alternative to Unity of Command can be something like what the British introduced in Malaya – a committee system.

The expanding ink spot

Based on their experience in the Boer War and the Malayan Emergency, the British developed a concept dubbed 'the expanding ink spot'. Seldom will the counterinsurgents enjoy the luxury of having at their disposal enough forces (military and police) to secure the whole territory at the same time.⁵ With limited forces available, the worst tactic would be to establish secure 'islands' in an 'ocean' of insurgents and hostile population. During the Malayan Emergency, the British established a defensible secure area to where they relocated about 400,000 Chinese squatters into 400 so-called New Villages. To reduce the inconvenience inevitably associated with this, the British ensured that these New Villages had a functioning local administration, their own schools and hospitals and sufficient supplies to sustain the population. Static military forces provided external security for the villages, while police provided internal security. Initially, a strict curfew was enforced, adding to the inconvenience but aiding 'the separation of the fish from the water'. During the curfew it could be assumed that anyone moving in or out of the villages was either an insurgent or an insurgent supporter. Eventually a local home guard was established which gradually took over responsibility for security as its members gained competence and proved loyal. This freed the static military forces for other tasks like helping to expand the area under government control. As the people in the villages felt secure and had some of their needs fulfilled, the word spread to people outside the area under control, easing the task of expanding the ink spot. Intelligence also began trickling in when the locals felt secure from the insurgents. Acting on this intelligence, the mobile forces could put pressure on the insurgents and thus aid the ever-expanding ink spot.

Use of force in an indirect approach

Despite Galula's recommended 80–20 distribution between the civilian and military effort in an indirect approach, the relationship is almost opposite when it comes to the focus of the literature studied, measured in scope of the text. One explanation might be that most authors who have written on the subject are military or ex-military, augmenting the tendency to a military-heavy focus in COIN.

⁵ Galula also indicates an ideal force ratio of 10–20 soldiers/police per insurgent

Some central characteristics of COIN and some guiding principles are as follows:

- learning and adapting
- minimum use of force
- focus on static forces, particularly the police
- empowering the affected nation's security forces, institutions and capacity to govern.

The struggle between insurgents and counterinsurgents is a fight over who learns and adapts the quickest. FM 3-24 states: '*Learning organizations defeat insurgencies; bureaucratic do not*' (p.x). In high-intensity manoeuvre wars, the one that can collect information, make decisions and act the fastest will win. But outpacing the enemy's decision cycle (the so-called OODA loop) is irrelevant in COIN, since it is a low-frequency conflict. What is relevant is who can outpace the other's 'learning cycle': who has the best learning organization that can rapidly implement changes in strategy, organization and tactics based on recent experience.

This is a Darwinian and asymmetric competition. Those insurgents that survive the first encounters will have learnt and adapted: those that failed to learn will have perished. The surviving insurgents will continuously learn and adapt, thereby becoming more and more competent in the deadly struggle that characterizes some insurgencies. The counterinsurgents, however, and in particular their external support, rotate their forces frequently. As soon as the individuals and units have begun to grasp the complexity of the situation including the local environment, the local culture and the insurgents' tactics, they are rotated, and new inexperienced forces take their place. These will have to start almost from scratch. By contrast, the insurgents are able to stay in the area over a long time, continuously acquiring new experience and adapting accordingly.

This imbalance can be compensated to a certain degree by institutional learning and producing relevant doctrines. Experience shows that doctrines, tactics and training are most efficient when developed and conducted locally, because a centralized process will take too long. This can, however, remedy the learning lag in relation to the insurgents only to a limited degree. The lag will inevitably grow with time, and in order to compensate for the insurgents' faster learning cycle the counterinsurgents should not have shorter rotations than 12 months; they should develop local training and doctrine centres and reorganize similar to networks, at least for their mobile forces.

In order not to lose the support of the people, the counterinsurgents must exercise *minimum use of force* and concentrate the bulk of their forces on protecting the population (Nagl 2002: 30). Most of the military forces should be employed in a *static role*, as local patrols and perimeter defence of villages and hamlets. The more capable forces will be employed as mobile forces operating in small, agile units which seek out and engage the guerrilla. The static forces should not be quartered in fortified bases separated from those they are meant to protect but rather live and operate among the local population.

The mobile forces will harass the guerrilla and force them to be constantly on the move, thus preventing them from recovering, gaining force and planning new attacks. A guerrilla on the move is also more susceptible to detection and subsequent attacks, at the same time as they are prevented from approaching the population for support and intelligence, or from intimidating the local people.

The static (defensive) as well as the mobile (offensive) units are necessary contributions to the overall effort but only when employed in concert. The one is inefficient without the other. It is the synergy that produces the desired effect. The static forces are the most important contribution, but without the mobile forces the insurgents will be able to continue their operations unabated and may eventually wear down the counterinsurgents.

A counterinsurgency is a police mission more than a military mission. As soon as an area or village is cleared of insurgents by the mobile forces and static forces have taken up defensive positions on the perimeter, police forces should be employed within the cleared and secured area. This police force should be indigenous, preferably locally recruited. Local police have a better understanding of the local conditions. Moreover, because they symbolize local ownership, they stand a better chance of collecting actionable intelligence from the population. The police's *modus operandi* is also more in line with the *minimum use of force* principle so crucial in COIN.

The insurgents are criminals, not legitimate warriors. Leaving as much as possible of the security operations to the police will support the labelling of the insurgents as petty (albeit armed) criminals with the local population and thus undermine their narrative and legitimacy.

With time, also the static military forces should be replaced by locally recruited paramilitary or home guard forces. This can give the local population a stronger sense and share of their

own security – as was so successfully done by the British in Malaya.⁶ The static military forces can then be released for more demanding tasks elsewhere, thus contributing to expanding the ‘ink spot’.

The long-term goal is to leave a government able to stand by itself. In the end, the nation affected by the insurgency will have to win on its own. Achieving this requires the development of viable local leaders and institutions. External forces and agencies can help, but local elements must assume responsibility in order to achieve real victory. While it may be easier for external military units to conduct operations themselves, it is better to work to strengthen local forces and institutions and then assist them. Eventually all foreign armies are seen as interlopers or occupiers: the sooner the main effort can be transferred to local institutions, without unacceptable degradation, the better (FM 3-24:para. 1-147).

The special nature and characteristics of an insurgency and the discussion above can be illustrated by the nine paradoxes of COIN listed in FM 3-24 (1-26 and 1-28):

1. *Sometimes, the more you protect your Force, the less secure you may be*
2. *Sometimes, the more force is used, the less effective it is*
3. *The more successful the Counterinsurgency is, the less force can be used and the more risk must be accepted*
4. *Sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction*
5. *Some of the best weapons for Counterinsurgents do not shoot*
6. *The Host Nation doing something tolerably is normally better than External Forces doing it well*
7. *If a tactic works this week, it might not work next week; if it works in this Province, it might not work in the next*
8. *Tactical success guarantees nothing (understood as tactical military success)*
9. *Many important decisions are not made by Generals*

⁶ Ibid. The British first gave some of the locals they trusted the most some training and equipped them with shotguns only. Once their competence and loyalty were proven, they were better equipped and their numbers increased, eventually taking full responsibility for the security of their own village.

The Afghanistan conflict and the relevance of classic COIN

Nature of the Insurgency

In addition to the critique of the FM 3-24 noted above, Dr. Crane mentioned some other factors at the same seminar: the doctrine reflects 20th-century insurgencies more than contemporary ones; and the doctrine is irrelevant because contemporary internal wars may include elements of insurgency, but are not insurgencies, strictly speaking. The natural question relating to today's situation in Afghanistan thus becomes: is it a classical insurgency or is it something different? And if it is something different, does this necessarily mean that the lessons learned from the classic insurgencies are irrelevant?

Most of the modern literature on insurgencies and irregular conflict uses the term 'insurgency' to describe the situation in Afghanistan, but with variations in the degree to which this term is associated with the classical form. Many authors seem to hold that it is an *evolved* form of insurgency, but they differ as to whether it is an insurgency of a different *kind* or is merely different in *degree*.

Some hold that the considerable increase in variables – with many actors and their sprawling motives – makes the Afghan insurgency different in nature from the monolithic, black-and-white national insurgencies of the revolutionary wars or the classic insurgencies of the 20th century. Despite their unconventional and irregular nature, these conflicts were relatively clear. It was basically a question of two kinds of actors opposing each other: the government and its supporters against the insurgents and their support. Today's insurgents in Afghanistan, however, consist of a plethora of actors ranging from the Taliban, via a multitude of militias and criminal gangs, to al-Qaida and its global jihad. In addition, the counterinsurgent camp consists of a multitude of actors with sometimes varying degrees of commitment and different motives and understandings of the conflict. All actors within each camp are interconnected and interdependent (sometimes across the camps), making the increase in complexity exponential. A holistic point of departure would support the conclusion that the Afghan insurgency is an irregular conflict of a different kind than the classic form.

The Taliban's fight against the Afghan government and its external support bears many similarities to a classical insurgency. The Taliban has an ideologically (religious) based *cause*, augmented by a nationalistic rhetoric ('expel the foreign and infidel troops') to form a *narrative* that resounds at least among parts of the population (in particular among the Pashtuns). They have a *strategy* in which the political *objective* is to oust the Karzai

government and the foreign troops, and to re-establish their own government. The *means* they are employing is a propaganda campaign supported by terror and guerrilla warfare in a fight with the government and its supporters, mainly the ISAF and OEF. The struggle is first and foremost a *political* struggle for support from and control over the *population*. It seems to be a *protracted* fight (more than six years so far with no end in sight) characterized by an *asymmetry* in resources and organization. Afghanistan is a *weak state* with limited capacity to control the use of violence and to alleviate the grievances of the population. Incompetent and corrupt public servants further compound the grievances and injustice felt by the local population. This adds up very close to a classical insurgency, with the small difference from the 'revolutionary wars' being that Taliban has already been in power but was ousted and is now fighting to regain power.

Another factor that makes the Taliban insurgency different from the classic form is that the first phase in Mao's 'Peoples War', the slow and methodical building of a party and an organization, is long past. The second of Mao's phases seems to fit with the present situation, with an armed guerrilla struggle at its core; however, phase three will probably never materialize. It is not likely that the Taliban will organize as a conventional army to face the Afghan Army and NATO in a traditional battlefield setting – and why should they?⁷ Today's insurgencies do not seek a military victory (cf. Hammes in Terriff et al. 2008: 109). That would be to play to the counterinsurgents' strength. Patience is the insurgents' greatest asset while impatience is the counterinsurgents' liability – and this is particularly true with regard to external support from Western countries. With their current approach, the Taliban seem to be winning by not losing. Because of the impatience and risk aversion expressed by domestic media and among the home audience of countries providing foreign support, the counterinsurgents may lose by not being seen to be winning.

Thus, at the core of the conflict in Afghanistan lies an approximately classical insurgency, but there are also a wide range of other actors with greatly differing objectives and motivations. The Taliban insurgency is only one part of the Afghan conflict, albeit a significant one. In addition, the Afghan insurgency is 'embedded' into the global jihadist insurgency run by al-Qaida. For al-Qaida, Afghanistan is but one of several 'battlefields' in their struggle to reinstate the 'Caliphate'. Their objectives and means overlap to a large degree, both sharing the same world view and the same objective for Afghanistan. Their means and methods include guerrilla operations and terrorism to support an intensive propaganda campaign

⁷ Not least because of their experience in 2001, when they as government forces had reorganized from a Mujahedin guerrilla to something more akin to a conventional army – which then was utterly destroyed in the field by US airpower and Northern Alliance ground forces.

aimed at the local and global audience alike. To complicate matters further, many different militias and criminal organizations make up the insurgent camp. These groups are a heterogeneous lot with differing objectives, motivation and means at their disposal.

The 'regular' actors include the COIN forces comprising the government with all its aspects, and the international support in the shape of international organizations like the UN, NATO, the World Bank and the EU, as well as national actors (the USA and many of the nations comprising the ISAF play national roles as well). The presence of neutral actors not counted as COIN forces, like NGOs and the international media, further contributes to the Afghan mosaic. Moreover, the population of Afghanistan is heterogeneous and fragmented by a tribal structure with a range of ethnicities and languages. These people do not have a tradition of loyalty to a central government, but identify with those with similar kinship ties or patrilineal descent. (Jones 2008: 32)

This wide variety of actors with their broad range of motivations and activities certainly makes Afghanistan something else than a classic insurgency – but is this a question of *degree*, or in fact a different *kind* of irregular conflict? The answer to this question has implications for how one approaches the conflict. If it is a difference in *degree* only, then the recommendations from the classical counterinsurgency literature should be applicable and sufficient. If, however, it is a difference in *kind*, a totally different approach might be needed. Some of the recent literature (e.g. Metz, Hammes) tends to favour the view that it is a new kind of conflict, but their motivation for doing so seems more to provide a wake-up call to shake the traditional US military (direct) approach to COIN and force a rethinking within the US establishment, rather than promoting a totally new nature of insurgencies. They still call it 'insurgency' and their understanding of contemporary irregular conflict seems to be more along the lines of an evolved form of insurgency. Their recommendations for a rethinking of insurgency are similar in kind to what in this paper has been described as an indirect approach. The compromise position, and one that seem to overlap to a large degree with most commentators, is that it is a *hybrid* form of insurgency: it contains major elements of the classical form, but is also qualitatively different because of its complexity. Knowledge of, and lessons learned from, the classical form are necessary but not sufficient to understand the nature of the insurgency and to choose courses of action for managing it.

Contributing to the complexity facing the counterinsurgents are the different understandings and uses of the term 'insurgency' and 'counterinsurgency'. Several commentators and the media tend to apply the term 'insurgency' exclusively to the armed operations of the insurgents and 'counterinsurgency' exclusively to the security (military and police) operations

of the government and its supporters. This usage should be discouraged. According to the majority of authors writing on insurgencies (including the classics), 'insurgency' and 'counterinsurgency' are umbrella terms for the whole range of operations, instruments and actions undertaken by each side. They stress the importance of understanding an insurgency as mainly a political struggle, and the primacy of political and civilian measures in a counterinsurgency. This reflects the problem alluded to earlier in this report: most authors and commentators on COIN have been military or ex-military, contributing to this misunderstanding. This link between the terms and the military tends to reinforce a military-heavy approach despite these authors' recurring emphasis on the political and civilian nature of an insurgency. Their use of the words 'war' and 'warfare' in connection with 'insurgency' and 'COIN' (as in COIN warfare, 4th generation warfare, irregular warfare etc.) further contributes to this confusion.⁸

The following case study of the Afghan insurgency is based on the assumption that it is an evolved and complex form of insurgency, *a hybrid insurgency*, containing elements of a classical insurgency but only to a certain extent. The lessons and recommendations from these insurgencies are a necessary prerequisite for understanding and conducting a successful COIN campaign in Afghanistan, but they are not sufficient in themselves. Bearing this in mind, the following discussion will focus on these lessons and recommendations.

The Afghan hybrid insurgency

The earlier the better

The earlier the government and its supporters recognize the presence of an insurgency and understand its nature, the greater the probability of success for the COIN forces.

Understanding the nature of the conflict makes it easier to choose the right strategy, and acting early before the insurgency has had the time to mature and grow strong increases the possibility of this strategy being effective. Today's problematic situation in Afghanistan for the COIN effort stems from not meeting these two requirements from the outset.⁹

The initial campaign for the predominantly US forces was counter-terrorist in concept and physical and military in focus, and the main military effort was dominated by a 'direct approach' in the form of the OEF's terrorist hunt (Mackinlay & Al-Baddaway 2008: 2).

⁸ This is also true for the most recent study of the Afghan insurgency from the RAND Corporation by Seth G Jones; see e.g. pp. 1,4,5, 7. The military heavy focus of this study can to a certain degree be attributed to the fact that it was prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD).

⁹ Kai Eide, the new UN envoy to Afghanistan, stated at a seminar in Oslo in May 2008: 'Today's problems in Afghanistan stem from the way we entered the conflict'.

Crushing the Taliban regime was seen as a necessary part of this campaign – a means to an end – since the Taliban regime had provided support to al-Qaida’s global jihad in the form of a sanctuary for arming, training and deployment of terrorists world wide.

Nation-building was not, however, initially regarded as a necessary part of the international campaign (Barno 2007). As recently as October-November 2000 President Bush stated in several pre-election speeches and TV-debates that US Armed Forces should not be involved in nation building.

“Let me tell you what else I’m worried about: I’m worried about an opponent (Gore) who uses nation building and the military in the same sentence. See, our view of the military is for our military to be properly prepared to fight and win war...” (Speech in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Nov 6 2000).

The Weinberger-Powell doctrine was still dominant, according to which US military force was to be employed in an intervention only as a last resort, with clear political backing and overwhelming force, and with the aim of getting the work done quickly and then pulling out. This all pointed towards a 'light footprint' approach from the international community, including the UN. This has provided the insurgents in Afghanistan with a head start, as they were given time to recuperate and reorganize with impunity, mainly in Pakistan. Moreover, the lack of social and developmental support to the impoverished Afghan people has made them more susceptible to the Taliban narrative and cause than necessary. The conflict soon became transformed from a war of regime change and terrorist hunt into a full-blown insurgency, but without the new Afghan government and the international community recognizing this initially.¹⁰

The USA entered the Afghan conflict with no updated and valid doctrine for counterinsurgencies.¹¹ The new US COIN doctrine (FM 3-24) is a product of the errors (and successes) made initially in Afghanistan and Iraq, together with the lessons from the insurgencies of the Cold War. Reading the FM 3-24, it seems the experiences of Afghanistan and Iraq have validated most the recommendations put forward in the classic literature on COIN. With hindsight, a better reading and implementation of these lessons prior to 2001 would most probably have resulted in a better situation in Afghanistan from the COIN perspective.

¹⁰ Barno dates the change in recognition to October 2003 (see the paragraph on Unity of Effort below).

¹¹ This was (and is) even more true for the other members of the Coalition, with the possible exception of the UK.

The heavy-handed, military focused, direct approach did achieve some of its more limited tactical objectives of capturing and killing terrorists and insurgents. However, that culturally insensitive approach has probably created more insurgents than it has captured or killed. In particular, the limited focus on the population typical of the direct approach has contributed to making large parts of the Pashtun population more attentive to the insurgent cause and narrative.

By mid-2003, concurrent with the fall of the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the growing insurgency there, the Coalition was starting to recognize the real nature of the conflict in Afghanistan, and a new approach and strategy began to emerge. Today (2008) there is little doubt among observers of the conflict that it is an insurgency and that an indirect COIN approach is a better remedy. However, executing such an approach in theatre has proven difficult, partly due to the initial mistakes made.

The Actors

The greater numbers and types of actors are what distinguish classical insurgencies from modern (hybrid) ones, also according to Steven Metz (2007). Insurgencies during the Cold War involved mainly what he calls 'first' forces (the insurgents and counterinsurgents themselves) and sometimes 'second' forces (other states that supported either the insurgents or the counterinsurgents). Modern insurgencies are made much more complex by the inclusion of 'third' forces (armed elements other than the 'first' forces, like militias, criminal organizations and private military companies) and 'fourth' forces (unarmed elements which affect and shape the conflict, like IGOs and NGOs, multinational corporations and international media). Afghanistan, as a hybrid insurgency, involves all four types of forces.

The Insurgents

On the insurgency side, the 'first' forces consist mainly of the Taliban. Other states actively supporting the insurgency (second forces) are hard to identify, but Pakistan is said to be implicitly supporting the insurgency by not fighting it hard enough on its own territory. Some studies even claim that high-ranking officials within the Pakistani administration have actively supported the Taliban insurgency and al-Qaida's global jihad indirectly as well as directly (Jones 2008: 56–57). The 'third' forces consist of al-Qaida, the militias and armed criminal gangs. These actors vary in their organization, motivation and strategy (ends, ways and means)

In Afghanistan the militias operate predominantly as private armies for the warlords and clan leaders. They are normally more hierarchically organized than the Taliban or al-Qaida, and their ambitions are usually not on the level of state control. They are content to enhance the conditions for their constituency and own members by taking local control and power. Examples of militias are Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami, who are Pashtuns and strong supporters of the insurgency, and the Haqqani network, which also is part of the insurgent alliance. Other militias, however, are of different ethnicity and religious zeal than the Taliban/al-Qaida/H-i-I alliance, and their level of motivation and support for the insurgency varies considerably. In accordance with their sub-national focus, they might shift loyalty if that is perceived to benefit their leader or their group.

Criminal organizations are generally purely parasitic, focused on self-aggrandizement and profit for their members. In Afghanistan, criminal organizations are mainly concentrated around the drug traffic.

Fluid delineations

The delineation between these groups can be fluid and blurred. For example, the Taliban can be described as a militia for the Pashtuns fighting mainly for the interests of this group against the other peoples and tribes of Afghanistan (the Durranis, Tajiks, Hazaris, etc). Furthermore some militias operate in the border zone between criminal activity and constituency support, making delineation fluid and sometimes irrelevant.

Unified front

One of Mao's principles for his 'people's war' was the necessity of combining all forces fighting the government (Chiang Kai-shek) or the occupiers (Japan) in a United Front dominated by his communist forces. In today's Afghanistan, what binds the different actors together on the insurgent side is their common goal: to expel the 'occupiers'. The actors all have different motives and ways and means to achieve this:

- For the Taliban, this is a necessary objective in order to seize national power and to change the society according to their values.
- For the militias, the COIN forces and increased government control inevitably mean reduced local power and control for the warlords. They do not necessarily seek a different government – only a weak one. External forces are seen to strengthen the government.

- Criminal gangs and drug lords are, as noted, purely parasitic, seeking only profit and self-aggrandizement. Chaos and limited government power will increase their room for manoeuvre and expand their profit-making potential.

The lowest common denominator is that the presence of foreign support to the Karzai government, especially security forces, is against the interests of all the above. This shared goal is, however, an operational goal, a means to an end – and not necessarily their strategic goals. The strategic goals, more often than not, differ among the various insurgent groups, and to a significant degree. Organized crime – like the drug lords – thrives in disorder and limited government control and therefore supports the fight against the counterinsurgents. The Taliban are also fighting the counterinsurgents, but their strategic goal is to remove the Karzai government and the foreign troops in order to install their own government, which then will impose strict control over Afghanistan – as they did when last in power. The Taliban and some drug lords have entered into a tactical 'marriage of convenience', but the Taliban's strategic goal is in direct contradiction to the interests of criminal gangs and some of the militias.

Consequently, if the insurgents' operational goal is achieved, heavy in-fighting will probably follow soon, throwing the country yet again into the kind of civil war that Afghanistan knows only too well. This fact, together with the shaky foundations of these 'marriages of convenience', should be exploited more by the counterinsurgency propaganda.

The counterinsurgents

On the counterinsurgency side, the numbers and range of actors are equally multifaceted. The 'first' forces consist of the Afghan Security Forces (ASF)¹² and the international security forces.¹³ The 'second' forces comprise first and foremost the individual states active in the area, predominantly the same states that constitute the Coalition. These states can be said to operate with two 'hats' – an ISAF/OEF one and a national one. In addition there are others, mainly neighbouring states, involved to a varying degree on the COIN side, among them Pakistan, India, Russia and Iran. The 'third' forces are some PMCs like the US DynCorp company, which is involved in training the ANP (Jones 2008: 69), and 'fourth' forces include a plethora of NGOs, the UN, EU and other IGOs, as well as the international media.

¹² Predominantly the ANA and ANP. An Auxiliary Police has been established, but has proven more of a liability than an asset.

¹³ Mainly ISAF and OEF

Summary

The conflict in Afghanistan has a classic insurgency at its core, but the sheer number and diversity of actors on both sides indicates that one should be careful in unconditionally applying the lessons from the classic COINs. Each recommendation found in the literature from these conflicts must be evaluated against the unique aspects of the Afghan insurgency – particularly the number and diversity of the actors on the insurgent side. The COIN effort in Afghanistan is further complicated by a similar diversity of actors on the COIN side and the fact that these actors are interdependent. An apt metaphor for the situation is a ‘mosaic’: in a mosaic, each piece does not make much sense in and by itself, but, when seen in combination with all the other pieces, some sense starts to emerge. In a system of interdependent actors, the actions and effects of these actions make sense only when seen in relation to the actions and effects of the other actors. (See Friis & Jarmyr 2008.)

The next section evaluates some of the lessons learned and recommendations of the classic literature deemed relevant to the hybrid insurgency of Afghanistan.

Lessons from the Classic COIN and the Afghan Insurgency

Political (and civilian) primacy of the struggle

The fallacy of the military focus

Despite the strong emphasis on the political nature and civilian primacy of counterinsurgency in the classic as well as recent literature, the international effort in Afghanistan has been predominantly military. There is also an overwhelming array of literature on the subject that is predominantly military in nature or written by people related to the military effort, and consequently focuses more on the armed activities of the insurgents than on the political, civilian and propaganda effort. Interestingly, most of these authors begin by underlining the political nature of COIN – and then go on to talk predominantly about the military effort.

In connection with the recent donor conference on Afghanistan in Paris, Al Jazeera aired a report on how the international money has been spent in Afghanistan (Al Jazeera, English edition, 12 June 2008). Local figures including academics complained that the money follows the security operations, i.e. the donors tend to invest their money with their military operations in order to support them. Ideally, it should be the other way around.

Galula’s claim of 80% civilian and 20% military distribution of the effort should also be made valid in Afghanistan. Further, within the 20% military effort, 80% should involve static defence

of the population and 20% mobile and offensive operations against the insurgents. In Afghanistan today the relationship is almost reversed.¹⁴ In fact, both efforts are necessary, and should be conducted in a coordinated manner, so that a mobile operation clears an area of insurgents while static forces take up positions to protect and defend the newly cleared area. Too often, military operations in Afghanistan have been uncoordinated actions where mobile forces have cleared an area of insurgents only to move on to a new area, without static forces to fill the void. The result has been an inevitable re-influx of insurgents shortly thereafter – with considerable resources having been spent on achieving nil. With too few 'boots on the ground', the priority among the military seems to be on the mobile forces, leaving an inadequate number of forces to fill the static defence role. The training of indigenous forces should focus more on this task than on making them an elite mobile force.

The training of the Afghan security forces by the international forces displays this lopsided priority. The ANA has received priority and focus among the Afghan Security Forces (ASF), resulting in a relatively competent military force employed in several offensive campaigns (Jones 2008: 73–75). Again the focus of the training and organizing the ANA has been towards mobile operations rather than static ones.¹⁵ The ANP, however, received less focus and resources for their training, resulting in an incompetent and underpaid force. The consequence is described in a RAND Study in the following words:

The available evidence suggests that ANP was corrupt and often unable to perform basic patrolling, conduct counterinsurgency operations, protect reconstruction projects, prevent border incursions, or conduct counternarcotics operations.(Ibid: 69)

A better understanding of COIN as primarily a police operation, as the classics emphasize, might have helped improve security in the rural areas. This view is also supported by the International Crisis Group (ICG):

An Army is by no means Afghanistan's foremost institutional need. A functioning judicial and policing system would have had far greater impact on daily lives by providing security to communities and mitigating the sources of local grievances, such as criminality and land disputes, which lead to conflict and impede development' (ICG 2008:6)

¹⁴ No statistical data on the exact distribution of emphasis between static and mobile operation have been studied. This claim is however, built on a general impression from the literature studied.

¹⁵ Probably from the logic that if one can undertake the more demanding high intensity mobile operations one can also do the less intense static operations. It is hard to improvise upwards on the intensity scale, but it is possible to improvise downwards.

It seems that the insurgents have grasped the importance of the police better than the Coalition has. In 2007 more than 800 police officers were killed by the insurgents, and the figures for 2008 so far indicate the same trend.¹⁶ It is the police that eventually must sustain the government's hold on territory, and this fact has not been lost on the insurgents. Together with the vulnerability of the poorly trained and equipped police forces, this adds up to the high casualty figures among the police.

A version of the expanding ink spot concept of the classics has been implemented with success on some occasions in Afghanistan under the military slogan of 'clear, hold and build' or 'clear, hold and expand' (Jones 2008:94). This concept should be included in the COIN strategy to a greater extent. Ideally this approach should comprise Coalition and ANA elite forces as the mobile element (under ANA leadership) clearing the area in question, the bulk of the ANA as static forces complemented by ISAF holding the cleared area, and with a revamped ANP ensuring the sustained security within the 'spot'. Once this has been achieved the mobile forces and the majority of the ANA static forces plus the international forces can be re-employed in expanding the 'spot'.

Among the other military concepts that have become truisms for fighting a conventional war but are less fruitful in COIN, we may note the concepts of 'victory; the 'objective-end state-exit' nexus; and 'mission creep is to be avoided at all cost'. Insurgencies and wars are, in many ways, mutually exclusive (Terriff et al. 2008: 92). What works and is logical in war might not be applicable in COIN. What constitutes victory in COIN is elusive. Insurgencies are managed to death; they are not 'won' (ibid: 93). Joseph Collins suggests: '*We still persist in defining desired end states in measurable and concrete terms rather than accepting that simply changing from an old **process** to a new **process** may be the best we can hope for*' (in Polk, ch. 10 in Cerami & Boggs 2007). The relentless search for a measurable end state to initiate the exit may be counterproductive, as it undermines the resolve to stay the course. This will encourage the insurgents to accelerate their efforts, as it implies that the external support is not willing to hold out.

Furthermore, the aversion to 'mission creep' is indicative of a rigid and inflexible force. Learning and adapting is the *sine qua non* for the military forces involved in COIN, and adapting not only tactics but also strategy should be the norm rather than the exception for COIN forces. Politicians tend to keep all options open for as long as possible in order to keep

¹⁶ As noted by Kai Eide at the NUPI seminar June 2008

their room for manoeuvre as broad as possible. This may lead to changes in policy. If one accepts the premise that COIN is first and foremost a political struggle, one must consequently also accept the political logic to dominate.

Engaging one's forces in operations they are not trained or equipped for is a sure way towards defeat. Modifying and adapting the organization, doctrine, training and mind-set of the military COIN forces towards greater mission flexibility should be a priority for most Western militaries.¹⁷

This said, it should be noted that in Afghanistan not all insurgents are seeking political power. For some, being part of an insurgency fills an economic and psychological need. It can also be a source of identity, belonging and influence for people who have few other such sources available. Without weapons, some insurgents are only poor, uneducated and weak youth without prospects for the future. The insurgency changes all this: it gives the same people some purpose and influence. For these, the insurgency is not part of the problem: it is the answer. (Metz 2007:10–11)

The population is the objective

In order to eradicate mosquitoes it is more efficient to drain the swamp than try to swat every individual insect. A direct and military heavy approach tends to focus on the enemy (the mosquitoes) rather than the surrounding swamp (the population). This seems to have been the case in Afghanistan at least during the first five years of the conflict. Even today, with an ostensibly more indirect approach, security operations still seem to focus more on fighting the insurgents directly, and less on providing protection for the population. The logic is that eradicating the insurgents will eventually provide security for the people. However, history shows that with such an approach it will take a very long time to achieve the desired level of security – if ever. Very few, if any, COIN campaigns have ever succeeded on the basis of such an approach. A central lesson from the classic era, and one still highly valid in hybrid insurgencies, is that the main effort should be directed at static protection of the population.

Local ownership

Only the Afghan government can address, in a sustainable way, the root cause of the insurgency, establish its legitimacy and remove or reintegrate the insurgents. The main thrust of external support needs to be guided by this imperative, but that is not always the case in

¹⁷ The latest version of the Norwegian Armed Force's Joint Operations Doctrine, issued summer 2007, is a good example of how the imperative of *flexibility* is included in doctrine. Available in English on www.mil.no

Afghanistan today. One reason for this is that the Afghan government and administration lacks competence and capacity to take full responsibility for the COIN effort. Helping the Afghans to build up this capacity in the areas of security, development and governance should be the highest priority with the Coalition. The more of the burden that falls on the international presence, the more it undermines the legitimacy of the Afghan government, and the more it plays to the insurgents' narrative.

Paradox number 6 of the nine paradoxes from FM 3-24 listed above states: '*The Host Nation doing something tolerably is normally better than External Forces doing it well*'. This applies as much to Afghanistan as to any other insurgency, but it is a double-edged sword. It is true only if the local government can in fact 'do something tolerably'. If it does it poorly, that will be worse than if the external forces should do it well. Inadequate competence and capacity on the Afghan side is a fact in several areas, so capacity building must therefore predate the handover of full responsibility within certain functional areas.

Particularly relevant in this regard is the role of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), as it reveals the dilemmas inherent in local ownership. The general impression is that the PRTs are doing a fairly good *tactical* job in extending the reach of the civilian and reconstruction/development part of the counterinsurgency effort.¹⁸ However, the PRTs have a negative strategic impact on the overall COIN effort: firstly, by representing the international community (i.e. 'the foreigners') more than the Afghan government, thus undermining efforts towards local ownership ('afghanization'); and secondly, with their predominantly national leadership the PRTs do not contribute to Unity of Effort.¹⁹ The International Crisis Group in particular has been sceptical to the role of the PRTs, claiming that they should focus on security matters like Security Sector Reform (SSR) and leaving reconstruction and development to more civilian-led approaches like those of the UN and others, as appropriate (ICG 2008: 18–19). By focusing on SSR, their mandates can more easily be harmonized. If the PRTs can be seen to be coordinating more with the Afghan government and its priorities, the negative strategic effects on local ownership and Unity of Effort could be reversed.

¹⁸ The performance of the different PRTs varies considerably, according to what national resources, priorities and capabilities have been available to them.

¹⁹ The PRTs are formally under the ISAF structure but are under national leadership, and domestic policy seems to have as much influence as ISAF. Of 25 PRTs 12 are US-led, 2 German and the 11 remaining are led by one individual country each. There is no body to coordinate the priorities and direction of the individual PRTs.

The role of propaganda²⁰

A powerful counter-narrative is needed on behalf of the COIN campaign. All actions should be planned and executed to support this narrative, and not the other way around.

Propaganda must be seen as an instrument in its own right and not as Information Operations (IO) supporting the military effort. It is also of utmost importance not to undertake actions and produce effects that can contradict this narrative – as has been the case only too frequently with the military operations in Afghanistan since 2001. At the same time as it buttresses the COIN legitimacy, the narrative and its supporting actions should aim to undermine the insurgents' narrative and legitimacy.

This narrative must build on the Afghan ownership of the conflict, stressing that the best way to end the foreign presence is through strengthening the Karzai government. Further, in order to undermine the insurgents' religious narrative, engaging with the moderate Muslim clerics of Afghanistan is the right approach. A number of Afghan Islamic clerics and the Ulema Council have on several occasions declared the Taliban and al-Qaida jihad un-Islamic and have issued fatwas that oppose suicide bombings (Jones 2008: 102)

The low support for the Taliban among the Afghan population²¹ and the recent experience of the Afghan people with the oppressive rule of the Taliban should also be exploited to further undermine the latter's narrative and cause.

As noted, the value of the propaganda of the deed overrides the military value of the deed itself – but just as importantly: it is the *interpretation* of the events rather than the events themselves that matters. How one presents one's actions and effects is as important as what these actions and effects are. The insurgents in Afghanistan have shown themselves considerably more sophisticated and adept at this crucial element of the insurgency than have the COIN forces. It seems that the Coalition is still ruled by a military logic where information operations are regarded as merely a supporting activity to kinetic operations. Propaganda (or an Information Campaign) is an instrument in its own right as important as the military, economic and reconstruction/development instruments.²²

²⁰ 'Propaganda' is the term used in the classic literature. Today this word has negative connotations, so a different term should be found.

²¹ According to the Asia Foundation, Voter Education Planning Survey, quoted in RAND Counterinsurgency Study, Vol. 4, only 13% of the Afghans had a favourable view of the Taliban.

²² During the development of the EBO, later the EBAO, concept within the MNE community and NATO there was disagreement between the US view and the British view on the role of the instruments of power, as epitomized in the acronyms DIME and DME respectively. The British view held that Information (the I in DIME) was not an instrument in its own right but a cross-cutting activity that supported the three other instruments. The cross-cutting and integrating role is valid also for COIN, but not the supporting role!

Legitimacy is crucial

The path towards winning the support of the population goes through legitimacy. The narrative is first and foremost about building and securing the legitimacy of the government and its supporters in the eyes of the 'vital' population.²³ Actions that run counter to the narrative thus will undermine the legitimacy of the COIN effort. The possible undesired effects of undermining the counterinsurgents' narrative and thus their legitimacy must take priority over tactical military gains when planning military operations.

Among the factors and actions that support or undermine the counterinsurgents' legitimacy in Afghanistan we may note:

- Corruption and incompetence on the government side undermines legitimacy.
- The impunity which seems to apply to corrupt politicians and administrators is also detrimental to COIN legitimacy. Co-opting rather than challenging the warlords and commanders, and embedding them in the new institutions in the early phases after the fall of the Taliban, initiated the culture of impunity seen today. (ICG 2008: 3).
- Local ownership enhances legitimacy, provided sufficient capacity is present with the local government and administration.
- Calling an insurgency 'war' and the insurgents 'warriors' supports the insurgents' legitimacy. Naming the increased insurgent activity that normally occurs each spring the 'Spring Offensive' likewise tends to link this to a legitimate type of military operation rather than the criminal activity it is.
- Actions by Coalition forces that contradict the narrative diminish both Government and Coalition legitimacy.

Role of external support

Volume 4 of the RAND Counterinsurgency Study puts considerable emphasis on the importance of external support to the eventual success (or failure) of the Afghan counterinsurgency, particularly in the form of sanctuary for insurgents. This is listed as one of three critical variables correlated with the success (or failure) of the counterinsurgency efforts of the 90 historical insurgencies studied. The role of external support is also mentioned in the classical literature, but only to a limited extent compared to the other factors noted in this report. When dealing with the issue of external support, the literature focuses mainly on support in the form of resources (arms, food, money etc). The importance of *sanctuaries* for the insurgents is also central to this literature, but they are mostly treated as safe havens within the disputed territory. In the case of Afghanistan, the importance of the external support for the insurgents in both forms (resources and sanctuary) cannot be overstated.

²³ For the external support this also includes their legitimacy with their home constituencies.

The classic literature strongly suggests that denying the insurgent sanctuaries is a critical success factor for the counterinsurgents.²⁴ Working with the Pakistani government to increase their efforts to clamp down on Taliban strongholds in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Baluchistan province along the Afghan border may prove decisive for the COIN campaign.

Unity of Effort

The factors treated so far might seem to have been presented in a random manner. The last factor is where these variables and recommendations all come together. Ideally they will all be translated into a coherent whole through a Unity of Effort (UoE).

There is one recurrent theme that runs through all the literature studied and on which all authors agree: Unity of Effort (UoE), alternatively Unity of Purpose, is critical to a successful COIN campaign. The need for an interagency or comprehensive approach (CA) in Afghanistan is also recognized by all observers: politicians, military, police, civil servants and academics alike. *What is needed in Afghanistan is a COIN-informed strategy that is executed through a CA.* Implementing and executing a CA is, however, a different story than producing theories and concepts.

A functioning interagency approach has been compounded by the well-known obstacles to coordination and cooperation: bureaucratic inertia, organizational culture and national caveats. The tendency for a bureaucratic organization like the military or government ministries when confronted with new and unknown challenges is to revert to their comfort zones, doing the tasks they were designed to do, and to protect the interests of their own organization – resulting in sub-optimal outcomes for the overall endeavour (Edelman 2007).

In addition to resistance from various different organizational cultures, the multitude of national interest and caveats further complicates coordination. In particular the national caveats stemming from the extreme risk aversion found among some European Coalition members is working counter to the overall effort in general and UoE in particular.²⁵ By not showing willingness to shoulder all the burdens, including physical risk, such national caveats serve to fragment the effort.²⁶

²⁴ A central conclusion also in Jones' RAND Counterinsurgency Study (2008).

²⁵ This argument has been put forward by several observers, among them the ICG

²⁶ Germany and Norway are quoted as particularly representing this attitude by the ICG.

In Algiers, the French achieved UoE to some degree through Unity of Command and the British even more so in Malaya through a Committee system. The French had a military commander as the highest command authority in Algeria, while the British Malaya campaign was under civilian command. Unity of Command is normally the default approach particularly for the military but also for the civilian bureaucracy – for the 'first' and 'second' forces, but not necessarily for the 'third' and 'fourth' forces. The challenges facing the French and British were fairly straightforward compared to the hybrid and complex insurgency in Afghanistan, as the former mainly had national and the local forces to deal with. The sheer number and diversity of actors on the counterinsurgent side make the challenge in achieving UoE in Afghanistan that much more daunting. Coordinating the effort of the 'first' and 'second' forces is a challenge in itself, but adding 'third' and 'fourth' forces to the mix the challenge becomes overwhelming, as has proven the case in Afghanistan. It remains to be seen to which degree the newly appointed UN Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ambassador Kai Eide, will be given Unity of Command. If not, an adapted form of the committee system should be considered in order to achieve UoE.²⁷

The crucial area for further work is the important middle level where policy and concepts are to be translated into concrete action – what the military call the operational or theatre level and some civilians (like the UN) call the country level. A Comprehensive Approach cannot be 'decreed' from the political level – it has to be built from above and from below, coming together at the operational level. This is where programmes like the MNE fit in – producing concepts, techniques and procedures (the tools) for the execution of a CA. One should, however, not wait until a complete set of tools has been developed but start working with what is at hand. The development of concepts, techniques and procedures is a parallel and iterative process with real-life experiences.²⁸

The USA has come far in its work towards interagency coordination since Presidential Decision Directive-56 of the Clinton administration. This was an attempt at 'decreeing' interagency coordination, and a good one as well. Unfortunately, it did not work to the extent it was supposed to. As John Troxell (2007) explains: '*PDD-56 and a host of follow-on adjustments and initiatives have done a good job of focusing on the challenge of better planning. But better planning without the capacity or capability to execute the plan is fruitless*'.

²⁷ Frank Kitson describes the British Committee system in Malaya in detail in his book listed in the References.

²⁸ Kai Eide was asked, when appointed Special Envoy, whether he would focus on finalizing the development of the CA concept. He replied that he would not, but would rather try to implement CA in practice. (Eide, NUPI seminar June 2008).

Particularly in recent years, a range of initiatives has been tabled in the USA, including the establishment of the State Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS); the work in progress for a government-wide approach to COIN,²⁹ and the various efforts undertaken through the Joint Forces Command (JFCOM) like the MNE programme and the NATO Comprehensive Approach. In addition there is an initiative underway towards a new attempt at 'decreeing' interagency through a 'Goldwater/Nichols' type of act.³⁰ Like the Goldwater/Nichols Act, this new act is intended to force interagency on a reluctant bureaucracy. The initiative is led by the chief architect of the original Goldwater/Nichols Act Jim Locher. (See Feil, ch. 9, and Polk, ch. 10, in Cerami & Boggs 2007.).

The problem of coordination in Afghanistan is multifaceted: there are challenges not only within and among the military (mil–mil coordination), but between the military and the plethora of civilian actors (civ–mil coordination); and within and among the vastly differing civilian actors (civ–civ coordination); and also between the Afghan government and its security forces and the international presence (local–international coordination). These problems and challenges are found at each level, albeit to varying degrees. There are examples of good interagency coordination on the lowest, tactical, level, as in the PRTs, but limited coordination on the next level, where coordination of the different PRTs is to take place.³¹

Writing in *The Military Review*, Lt Gen David W. Barno, Commander of Combined Forces Command – Afghanistan from 2003–2005, presents an excellent record of a COIN-informed strategy and a comprehensive execution of this strategy in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2005 (Barno 2007). This article is highly recommended reading for those interested in COIN and CA – particularly the combination of the two.³² Barno dates the change in strategy from an anti-terrorist to a counter-insurgency to October 2003. When he took up his command that month, he immediately started working on a new COIN strategy that was heavily influenced by the classics but still recognized the uniqueness of the Afghan situation (ibid: 34). The only main difference between that strategy and the recommendations in this report is Barno's view of Information Ops as a supporting activity to the other efforts.

²⁹ US Government: '*Counterinsurgency for U.S. Government Policy Makers – A Work in Progress*'. 2007.

³⁰ The Goldwater/Nichols Act of 1986 instituted the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the expense of the power of the service chiefs.

³¹ Lt Col Arne Opperud, former Commander of the Norwegian PRT, stated at a MNE seminar in Oslo in May 2008 that the PRTs were Comprehensive Approach (CA) in practice. It would be more correct to say that they were *interagency* in practice on the micro-level. CA must include the majority of instruments, actors, organizations and levels to be truly *comprehensive*.

³² The article was written on the basis of his personal experience, and his own role is central in the article. It should be read with this in mind.

Some of the traditional interagency obstacles were partly overcome through personal chemistry. The new US Ambassador, Khalizaid, took up office in Kabul about the same time as Barno. Barno and Khalizaid established a strong personal relationship and Barno moved his headquarters from the base 40 km from Kabul and into the embassy compound. Thereafter they had daily coordination meetings, and no military action was planned without the Ambassador's knowledge and approval: *'Through daily meetings of key players in the embassy, we developed a common view of the fight that further cemented the unity of our integrated effort. This shared view significantly shaped our unified interagency approach. It also had a major impact on the direction of our military efforts'* (ibid: 37).

In part, this was possible since the USA at that time was the major player in Afghanistan, much more so than today. That made its situation more akin to that of the British and the French in Malaya and Algeria respectively. According to Barno, statistics from the 2003–2005 timeframe support the success of their approach. Still according to Barno, this approach came to end when new ambassadors and commanders replaced himself and Khalizaid and NATO took command of ISAF. The lack of personal relationships and competence in COIN together with the more complex command relationship involving ISAF and OEF contributed to the fragmentation of the effort and breakdown of UoE. Statistics from 2006 and 2007 display an increase in insurgent activity and correlate with Barno's claims.

Other factors not focused in the classics but relevant to the Afghan insurgency

Negotiations

Some actors (mainly high-level British officials) have been talking about the potential of initiating negotiations with the Taliban. The International Crisis Group is particularly sceptical to this: *'Such ill thought-out approaches are dangerous'* (ICG 2008: 16). The classical literature supports this scepticism. In a struggle against insurgents with an absolutist ('black or white') goal there is no middle ground. Mao used negotiations instrumentally to further his cause, either as an interval to recover or to undermine the opponent's cause and resolve. Mao never intended to settle for anything short of absolute victory on his own terms.

The Taliban's cause and goals are equally absolutist and incompatible with the continued existence of the Karzai government. Negotiations will only serve the insurgent cause by giving the impression of weakness on the part of the COIN forces, thus providing the insurgents with an incentive to step up their efforts. The same message is sent to the population, giving them even less incentive to resist the insurgents and to support the

government (ibid). The advice from the classics is to undertake negotiations *only* from a position of strength!

Risk aversion

By putting heavy emphasis on force protection, the COIN forces might possibly reduce the number of own casualties and thus prevent their domestic legitimacy from dissolving. On the other hand, however, as paradox no 1 listed above states: '*Sometimes, the more you protect your Force, the less secure you may be*'. To this can be added: '*the more you protect your Force, the less effective you are in achieving your objectives*'. These two paradoxes can be explained as follows: by showing that you are risk averse you might attract attack from the insurgents, because you give the impression of limited commitment to the fight. The insurgents will always seek to attack the weakest link; attacking and inducing losses on the less committed might endanger the cohesion of the Coalition.

It is essential to recall that the people are both the end and a means to the end. Security for the people is both the ultimate goal and the way to obtain actionable intelligence in order to reach this goal. This can be achieved only if the COIN forces are seen by the people as sharing their security concerns. The people's security is the COIN force's security, and vice versa. Being overly concerned with protecting their own forces (quartering in 'fortresses' only to emerge in heavily armed convoys to do patrols; the individual soldiers bristling with weapons, body armour and cool sunglasses) marks one's distance to the local population and their grievances – and the less information will likely be forthcoming. Without intelligence the job cannot be done!

Conclusion

This report has shown that the insurgency in Afghanistan is a far more complex conflict than the insurgencies and 'revolutionary wars' of the classic era. Still, several distinct lessons and recommendations from the classic era remain relevant also for today's hybrid insurgencies.

These include:

- The political primacy of the conflict
- The people as the objective
- Local ownership
- The role of propaganda
- Legitimacy is critical
- The role of external support
- Unity of Effort

Unity of Effort is of particular importance, as it is the means by which the other lessons are to be joined into a coherent and effective COIN strategy. The value of a functioning Comprehensive Approach, particularly in COIN, cannot be overemphasized, and the two should be seen as complementary. As Ambassador Eric Edelman, US Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, said during a conference in March 2007: *'So if I slip during the course of my remarks and say "counterinsurgency", please just pretend that you heard "comprehensive approach."*' (Edelman 2007)

The situation in Afghanistan today may look grave in terms of the COIN effort. This is partly a result of not recognizing the real nature of the conflict in the immediate aftermath of the downfall of the Taliban government and therefore not implementing a COIN-informed strategy. Despite the errors made, the situation is not hopeless. A revised strategy more informed by the classic COIN lessons and executed through a comprehensive approach can still serve to render the insurgency manageable by the Afghan government and those forces supporting it.

Acronyms and abbreviations

ANA	- Afghan National Army
ANP	- Afghan National Police
ASF	- Afghan Security Forces
CA	- Comprehensive Approach
COIN	- Counter Insurgency
EBAO	- Effects Based Approach to Operations
EBO	- Effects Based Operations
FLN	- Front de Libération Nationale (Algeria)
IGO	- Inter-governmental Organisation
ISAF	- International Security Assistance Force
MCP	- The Malayan Communist Party
MNE	- Multinational Experiment
NATO	- North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	- Non-governmental Organisation
OODA	- Observation, Orientation, Decision, Act
OEF	- Operation Enduring Freedom
PMC	- Private Military Company
PRT	- Provincial Reconstruction Team
SSR	- Security Sector Reform
UoE	- Unity of Effort
USMC	- US Marine Corps

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