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On Counterinsurgency: Thoughts on the Re-write of Field Manual 3-24

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I would like to offer a synopsis of my thoughts on what the re-write of FM 3-24 should encompass. These thoughts take their cues from my own intellectual journey through lessons the military supposedly “learned” about Vietnam, other examples of COIN operations, my peers’ stories about Iraq and other places, and my own experiences in South America and Afghanistan. I hope to learn more from people’s comments to this, as I do not pretend to know the answer to all counterinsurgencies or the solution in Afghanistan- this is my surely-flawed understanding of the phenomenon.

The bottom-line up-front: The COIN manual should attempt to avoid limiting itself to the current American political and cultural environment, to a small sliver of historical COIN examples that seem to fit the current environment, and to implying wholesale social, cultural, political, and economic change and efforts. Instead the COIN manual should stick to historical examples of local efforts that have worked and haven’t worked and stressing the importance of crafting strategies (and changing them constantly) to take into account regional power politics, changing U.S. attitudes, and the capability of our nation to continue to support our efforts. We should stress that COIN can be very small and simple efforts that are not expensive or even noticeable in many instances, and that the military should subordinate itself to the top civilian in-country or to the National Security Council when conducting COIN. The COIN manual should point out the possibility that building a force that mimics the insurgents in many ways might be beneficial. Lastly, we cannot stress enough in the manual that the military has to monitor the domestic political environment- not to influence it- but to make sure at all times that our military actions are synched with the will of our own populace.

On Definitions:

- On the definition of “insurgency”: I think our definition for insurgency- *Insurgency: an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict*- relies too much on the Westphalian concept of a nation-state, ignores unorganized movements that still have the same effect as an insurgency, and do not describe all activities that insurgents engage in. I would change it to read: “organized and sometimes unorganized movements aimed at supplanting the de facto system of governance or existing or traditional social order in an area or among a subset of a population group through the use of subversion, armed conflict and/or other, more subtle methods (such as using alternative systems of services more commonly known to emanate from or reside in a governmental organization, etc.).”

- On the definition of “counterinsurgency”: Likewise, I think our definition for counterinsurgency- *Counterinsurgency: military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency*

- ignores local, unorganized, and decentralized efforts taken to counter insurgent activities. It also ignores the example wherein an external entity fights insurgents for a host government- which, although I think our doctrine should advise against, should be noted in the definition. I would re-word to capture a more generic concept thusly: “any actions taken by any group to counter the activities of another group to supplant the existing or traditional social order of an area or population group.”

These definitions would allow us to apply COIN in local areas (or, preferably, support local areas in conducting their COIN) or apply UW in the instances wherein the local area is governed by an order that is outlawed by a country or found to be in our interests to supplant. This takes away the confusing situation wherein we say we are conducting COIN in an area simply because the de facto ruling group in that area is attempting to overthrow the national government. Conducting COIN against the de facto government makes no sense- instead we would need to conduct UW in those cases (it makes COIN and UW a local call instead of one delineated by nebulous political borders).

- On historical case studies (in consideration of the limitations of the adoption of techniques such as massive resettlement of the population and the application of overwhelming firepower): When talking principles- I don't think we should limit ourselves to current US policy, attitudes, and the contemporary media environment and thus ignore COIN examples that we would not be able to stomach today. This gives us a skewed perception of insurgency and COIN and limits our understanding of the forces at work in these situations.

For argument's sake- even if one were to limit oneself to only those examples that may have been more "humane" from today's perspective, it would be a mistake to think that we would want to apply the resultant principles in every situation that calls for COIN- we would need to conclude that there may be instances wherein NOT using the less humane (from our perspective) practices would render us wholly ineffective, and therefore we should advise against applying our way of conducting COIN- and instead come up with a non-military or non-COIN method of approaching the situation or don't approach it at all.

In other words, I wouldn't limit COIN case studies at all, but simply note that whatever the reason for us conducting COIN and the attitudes of the day may rule out some methods of conducting COIN that were relatively successful in the past.

On COIN Principles

- On the principle of “Legitimacy Is the Main Objective”: The first “principle” implies too much importance for the populace. Although the discussion of this principle does note that some governments gain legitimacy from coercion, it later asserts that governments that have to use coercion are inherently unstable. This is a skewed, Western vision of how societies work. Instead, it might be just as plausible that certain populace's traditions and divisions make one government in one country attaining a marked legitimacy to be improbable, and thus, any efforts away from coercion are bound to lead quickly to more instability. Further, the entire manual, but especially this part, assumes universal principles for all population groups. This assumption, stated as fact in our doctrine, if false- which I believe it is- would undermine a lot of what we do now, and thus we need to entertain the notion that it could be based on our own flawed understanding of the world. If the Arab “Spring” has taught us anything it should be that the drive towards legitimacy can be bumpy and filled with *more* instability, not less.

I would instead emphasize in the first principle that the main objective is different in every locality, and concentrate our studies on what possibly makes different population groups within the subject country to come to a relatively peaceful balance that enables some kind of governance. It may just be that if one group is *not* treated unfairly, then civil war, general violence, and even genocide can breakout. In that case, talking about that group giving a governing entity legitimacy is completely counterproductive.

- On the principle of “Unity of Effort Is Essential”: Unity of effort is tricky. I would argue that in many instances, unity of effort manifests itself into centralized and top-down control and micromanaging of COIN campaigns. Unity of effort should be gained through the 2 things: the host nation owning the effort and all external military forces being subordinate to the highest civilian in country (U.S. ambassador or presidentially-appointed special consular). Coordinating all actions at the highest levels may be impossible and even unnecessary. What we do want to avoid is the military running the campaign. If 80% of COIN really is political, then why shouldn't the military subordinate itself to the civilian authorities while conducting COIN?

- On the principle of “Political Factors Being Primary”: This makes sense to the American brain, but I'm unsure if this helps us fundamentally understand the insurgent environment. Everything is political and many don't see a separation. I'm not sure this is good as a principle except that it should stress to the military mind that we shouldn't be the lead in COIN.

- On the principle that “Counterinsurgents Must Understand the Environment”: This is most likely impossible, but nevertheless, since it is an important goal- it should stress us to structure our personnel system, policies, and our own structure to take advantage of those who understand the environment more and ensure they are used in key positions during COIN.

- On “Intelligence Driving Operations”: Yes- leave it in. But this should imply that we have to be out collecting that intelligence as opposed to sitting in FOBs. Human intelligence in COIN should be the majority of the intel that drives ops. If, due to political realities or something else, we are unable to get out from a defensive posture, FOB-like existence, then we need to describe the difficulties of our operations in that kind of environment and the implications. How do we run operations with little to no human intelligence?

- On the principle “Insurgents Must be Isolated from Their Cause and Support”: This is not a good principle. Sometimes this is impossible. This black-and-white understanding of people is too simplistic and it might imply a requirement to conduct wholesale cultural change of population groups. Instead maybe note that in some instances, wherein there are easily apparent differences between the insurgents and the rest of the population, it would be preferred to isolate the insurgents. In other instances, it should be noted, this may be impossible, and thus we must admit that and stop wasting our time chasing after an impossible objective.

- On the principle “Security Under the Rule of Law is Essential”: This is not a principle, but a U.S.-centric concept. Legal systems do not always need to be established- and definitely should not be established by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps. Many countries see no difference between the military and the police forces. Intimating that eventually major combat operations will be replaced by law enforcement is a U.S. understanding of how criminals and insurgents should be treated that has no grounding in other population groups' understanding. Instead, I would highlight the importance of a group having the monopoly on the use of force in an area. In Afghanistan, for instance- what “rule of law” will we support? Sharia? Tribal tradition? U.N. mandates? NATO-influenced GIRoA laws? None of these would be essential to keeping the Taliban from rising to power or Al-Qaeda from returning to Afghanistan, why should we pretend they would?

- On the principle “Counterinsurgents Should Prepare for a Long-Term Commitment”: This is a terrible principle- I urge us to take this out or re-write it to be more focused on the host nation. It does not have to cost a lot of resources to do COIN. It does not have to take standing headquarters and decades of support. COIN can be conducted on the cheap with small teams of SOF. This can be sustained indefinitely. COIN can be conducted with hundreds of thousands of conventional forces and hundreds of billions of dollars-

but it would seem to me that in 99.99% of all situations it would be against the U.S.'s interests to do so. And the language urging selling the locals and the U.S. on further U.S. action is terrible. If the locals do not support the U.S. being there- we should leave (THAT would be population-centric COIN...) and if the U.S. people have to be sold on an effort- then we shouldn't be there. Put simply- the attitudes of the local people and the U.S. people should drive our involvement, not the other way around. If we have to sell anything, then legitimacy isn't there and our nation's interests aren't at stake.

On COIN Imperatives

- On the imperative "Manage Information and Expectations": This should be changed to "tell the truth- and be brutally honest, refuse to give projections- especially rosy ones, and always under promise".

- On the imperative: "Use the Appropriate Level of Force": Instead of this imperative- how about replacing it with "out-insurgent the insurgent". Become like the insurgent. Train and equip host nation forces like the insurgent and not like us. I would assume that if a COIN campaign is long, then the cheapest and most effective organization we can set up will be rewarded with more population support (not to mention it will be sustainable by the host nation...). Of course, this assumes that our population supports our efforts in a pragmatic way. If we are following our principles, then we shouldn't be faced with the environment wherein we have to worry about lethal operations and collateral damage- but, if we are faced with that environment and we still are ordered to conduct COIN, then we should be up-front about our limitations to the politicians and understand ourselves that we will be limited in terms of what we will be able to accomplish.

- On the imperative: "Learn and Adapt": I think this should be broadened to describe Senge's learning organization- which stresses changing one's structure and rewarding those who take risks and improve themselves and ways which are successful.

- On the imperative: "Empower the Lowest Levels": I think this is the second most important imperative- and should be expounded on and highlighted elsewhere- because this is the one in my experience we have failed miserably in.

- On the imperative "Support the Host Nation": This is THE most important imperative- and one we have failed in as well. I don't understand why we fight our own COIN fight and try to get the host nation to support us instead of the other way around.

On COIN Concepts and Narratives

- On the relevance of Mao to today's insurgencies: Irrelevant. Mao talked of people's wars that had a lot to do with his time and place- post-WWII and post-imperialist systems. A better one to study for the current day, in my opinion, would be the Jewish revolts against the Roman Empire. In other areas and times- Mao might be better. In still other areas it doesn't make sense applying most- if not all- historical examples. In the future we should look at all historical examples, not accept any simple reasons they were acceptable or conventional wisdom about them, and work on being adaptive learners.

- On applying ratios of troops to population: I would take out the ratios all together. They rest on a mountain of assumptions that might or might not be applicable to future scenarios. Does it also conclude how many kills we should have per month? This engineering/formulaic approach just doesn't work with complex systems.

- On Galula's concept of COIN being 80% politics and 20% military: Clausewitz said war was another form of politics. I think applying a wholly Western concept of a separation of the political and military does us no favors. I think the idea is valid: that we can't rely on tons of military actions, but that has been

twisted into a meaning that implies the military should only do military things 20% of the time, and the other 80 the military should be building governments and supporting economic opportunities. I think the idea should be that we should only use the military 20% of the time- and other things (not done by the military) 80% of the time...

- On "Fairness": we should not talk about "fairness". Insurgents don't fight "unfairly". If anything- we fight unfairly since we use massive amounts of air support, travel by rotary wing and in up-armored vehicles, and wear body armor! Take all that out- insurgents simply fight effectively and inexpensively. We should mimic that- not try to copy ourselves or compare others to how we think everyone should fight.

- On "Our nation's capability/capacity": We should add in that the military should at all times take into consideration our nation's capability and capacity to support- both politically and fiscally- our efforts, and craft our strategies around those realities. This implies constantly keeping abreast of those measures and adjusting as the situation changes. Ideologies and worldviews held by the majority of the military and military commanders CANNOT trump the will of our people and the capacity of our nation.

- On "our nation's interests": In alignment with the last point, the military should constantly ensure all operations support the nation's interests. If it is difficult to sell what we are doing to our people in terms of our interests, we should end the campaign or change our operations. Staying wed to one worldview about what is best for our country is dangerous and to some could be equated to disloyal to our civilian authorities.

- On "Regional politics": Having a naïve view of regional frictions and global implications does us no service. In Afghanistan we are involving ourselves not only in inter-tribal issues, but also inter-regional- the least of which is the struggle between Pakistan and India. Ignoring this is insane. We MUST take regional politics into consideration and either be willing to play the regional political game, or we should leave- or at least admit our limited capability if we stay and hard-headedly act Pollyannaish.

- On "causes of insurgencies": I see a lot of writings in military publications about formulaic ways in which to understand root causes of insurgencies and working on negating those causes. I think we should stay away from attempting to describe root causes of complex subjects. Oftentimes this is impossible and we either get it wholly wrong or we force an illusion of understanding that just isn't there on ourselves. Root causes often deal with multiple narratives that go back centuries and that are subjective, irrational, and bathed in value considerations. I couldn't imagine attempting to do COIN in Palestine and trying to address the "root causes" of the issues there. For every person who offers one up, I'm willing to bet another person has a 180 degree take on things.

- On addressing "complexity": The manual should keep itself to noting that most insurgencies are going to reflect complex characteristics and thus getting into the causes of insurgencies is problematic. Each insurgency should be treated as unique- and even though there are possible insights to be gained through the study of those in the past, the fact that whatever insurgency we happen to be dealing with is alive and well at the time should point to the fact that it has adapted and evolved into a wholly new and different entity. A few paragraphs describing the difficulties with complex systems (underlining complexity and systems theory as theories only and that we shouldn't limit ourselves to only using those theories to help build understanding) and possible ways to approach them may be useful.

- On addressing "criminal gangs, militias, and warlords": Categorizing these as things we must fight is wrong-headed: these entities should be looked at just the same as NGOs, indigenous groups, etc. All entities within the operational area should be looked at as opportunities instead of looking at everything in a Leave-it-to-Beaver style naivety.

- On “criminal activity”: We should rely on the host nation to make that call and support them only when we can easily tie our national interests to supporting that effort.

- On “legitimacy”: Legitimacy should be defined in terms of either the current ruling system/group or what the populace/powerbrokers would most likely support if things changed. This would take into account the most likely system that would develop after a power vacuum develops. It makes no sense to assume that only a system that has 51% of a population’s support is legitimate if the only feasible systems at one’s disposal will result in either a 30% support or a 20% support. One should aim for the 30% (in my example) instead of a 51% solution that will never be reachable.

The components of legitimacy should be two: local (as defined above) and U.S. legitimacy. Many times legitimate systems and groups that locals will support won’t be considered legitimate in the U.S. population’s eyes- even when there may be a clear connection to the need for action tied to U.S. national security. It is during these times that the U.S. military must ensure they are subordinate to the host nation, the U.S. civilian leadership, and be willing to quickly and almost constantly change operations (and thus the overall campaign strategy), to include possibly leaving the area for an extended or shortened timeframe until such time that the U.S. population (through its elected leaders) deems it vital to reengage.

They should be measured by taking into account the traditional legitimate groups and systems, the current cultural climate, outside factors, factors that could change things, powerbrokers in place now, most likely powerbrokers that could develop or move in once COIN starts/continues.

- On “population-centricity”: Population-centric should not mean anything more than trying to understand a population. Assuming that pop-centric should always mean securing and control leaves one open to huge problems if those assumptions are wrong. Just because a population wants something different than we think is a universal norm should not make us blind to the effects of our wrong-headedness. For example, the colonists in South Carolina during the Revolutionary War did not need protection by the British from the irregulars (insurgents), so it would have made no sense to attempt to protect them. But, the British probably would have been taking a chapter out of our current COIN manual if they indeed would have attempted to force whatever governmental system they thought was better than the one in place and chased Francis Marion around the swamps in order to protect the locals...

And, population-centric should mean that one attempts to understand one's own population as well (I avoid the use of the term “understand” as opposed to “attempts to understand” deliberately, since I think it has to be a continuous effort).

- On “metrics”: It should take into account time, money, national interests, and regional interests. Metrics for success should include continued support by the U.S. populace and some kind of metric should be used to show how disingenuous we find ourselves becoming in order to influence that support (in such a way as to discourage it).

On Doctrinal Concepts and Planning Tools

- On the “Center of Gravity” concept: I think the “center of gravity” concept does little to help us- unless you count the value of the analysis and discount the conclusions one draws. This attempt to simplify the complex is a waste of time if we are using it to target a “center” of anything. There is no center in complex systems: thus their complexity and resilience.

- On our doctrine applying a “whole of government approach”: I think it implies that the military is in the lead and others are partners. While this sounds good in theory- in practice the military takes its orders from its COCOM- and the civilian agencies are steam-rolled. But, regardless, the military should be

subordinate to an in-country civilian entity- whether the ambassador or a special representative of the president's (since COIN is only "20% military...).

- On "unified command": For MOST COIN ops we should stress unity of command to mean that all military in-country answer to the civilian leadership of an embassy or civilian coalition body. How can you have 80% non-military if the military doesn't answer to any non-military??

- On interacting with other government agencies and non-governmental agencies: We must address this as a principle. In Afghanistan we walled ourselves off on huge FOBs and instituted policies which made it both impossible to bring civilians onto our FOB or for us to visit them. My answer? Make the military subordinate to the top civilian- and then they could order us to talk to them.

- On the six lines of operation for COIN operations (*Conduct information operations, Conduct combat operations/civil security operations, Train and employ HN security forces, Establish or restore essential services, Support development of better governance, Support economic development*): These are not lines of operation that the military should engage in. The first one should not be a line of operation- instead we should have an imperative to tell the truth- no matter the short-term fall-out. The second one should be conduct security operations in support and in conjunction with host nation forces. The third one is good. The fourth one should be that the military supports a civilian agency in supporting the host nation in essential services. The fifth one should be that the military supports a civilian agency in supporting the host nation in developing better governance. The last one should be deleted.

- On addressing COIN when the national government is itself considered a threat by parts of the population: In that case- again the highest civilian in country would make the call- but for the military it really would boil down to one of these options: leaving, supporting the host nation against the perceived will of the people because it aligns with our interests or because it is the best of several evils, supporting local efforts while distancing ourselves from the national government, or re-aligning ourselves with a group to conduct UW (if CENTCOM does not have a plan on the shelf for conducting UW with the newly revitalized Northern Alliance against a Pashtun/Taliban axis that threatens to overwhelm Pakistan and empower Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan...).

Conclusion

The U.S. arguably approached counterinsurgency in Vietnam with a conventional mindset that did not lend itself to building goodwill with the local populace. It is debatable, however, that even with a more "population-centric" approach we could have been successful in building support for the government with the people. Even with all of these issues, we still defeated the insurgency and all conventional force attempts to take over the South. In the end, however, we established a security force that could not defeat a Northern conventional attack without our support. The assumption that they would have our support was proven wrong when the U.S. Congress, due to a lack of a perceived connection between our ways in Vietnam with our ends at home (not to mention a massive credibility gap), withdrew all support to Vietnam.

Lessons: do not assume that we will always support a country; therefore from the beginning we should work on setting up a capability that will outlast fickle political support (i.e., maybe Vietnam needed an insurgent capability more than a conventional capability); don't try to sell your efforts to the U.S. populace- be honest with at least the politicians, if not the people too- if the U.S. politicians and/or populace (one would hope these would be synched) do not want us engaged in COIN in a certain country, then we shouldn't be; if one is going to support a government that has little or no legitimacy then one has just succeeded in making the situation very complex and the connection between one's efforts and the home populace's ends better be clear and supported by the people and politicians at home; and, finally,

that an insurgency can be defeated sometimes (most times?) at the tactical level by “old-fashioned” conventional forces conducting lethal operations (of course, assuming that one’s population will support what that entails: death and destruction), especially if the insurgents decide to mass in a conventional manner- but that tactical success can ALWAYS be undermined by strategic confusion and mistakes.

In Afghanistan we face a similarly weak government with little legitimacy (should that be a surprise, since we helped set them up just a few years ago?) and an insurgency with sanctuaries, but no conventional force threat. Unfortunately we also face a regional political complexity reminiscent of Lebanon perhaps, a tribal situation that rivals any heterogeneous area that I know of, and an insurgency that is both local and regional, religiously empowered, and fueled by multiple factors. Politically we are in the 9th inning and the crowd really doesn’t want to stay for extra innings. Our COIN doctrine needs to at least acknowledge the frictions inherent in these very different situations and not pretend the same tools and ways of framing our operations will still lead to success no matter the environment.

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