

Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century – Creating a National Framework

Our national security system is principally designed to deter and defeat state-based threats, which it does with great success. But it is precisely because of our overwhelming capability to overcome conventional threats that our enemies will attempt to defeat us through other means. That fact, along with the increasing danger of transnational, regional, and substate threats has made it clear that the most dangerous threats the United States will face in the 21st century are as likely to come not from other states but from within states, and principally from within weak or poorly-governed states.

The Westphalian world order is being challenged by a new form of insurgency – transnational, distributed, networked, and ideologically driven – that is most graphically represented by al-Qaeda, a global Islamist movement that seeks to replace secular governments with theocratic Islamic regimes hostile to liberal values and secular democracy. The War on Terrorism is a national response to high-profile violence conducted by small but potent movements of violent extremists seeking to destabilize and disempower national governments. Their targets are nations whose policies and presence in Islamic countries prevents the realization of their vision of a global ‘virtual Caliphate’ of Islamic governments in predominantly Muslim countries around the world. Other non-state organizations using terrorism or organized political violence for local or global ends that are inimical to US national interests adds to the challenge.

Disaggregating and defeating this global insurgency requires a national counterinsurgency strategy. This paper suggests that such a strategy and associated implementation plans could integrate our national efforts to strengthen legitimate governments’ efforts to defeat insurgencies and secure peace and stability within their borders and across their regions.

Classical counterinsurgency (COIN) activity spans centuries; military literature is rich in case studies of how governments have dealt over time with insurgent movements that threatened indigenous or colonial governance and terrorized civilian populations. Extant literature overwhelmingly concludes that military solutions alone are insufficient for successful COIN prosecution, and that COIN is “20% military, 80% ‘other-than-military.’” However, COIN concepts are largely absent from the literature, policy documents and directives governing the “other,” non-military parts of the U.S. federal government. Except in the military, there is no body of work to inform education and training curricula, or to capture and pass on institutional experience and lessons learned, with respect to COIN. The absence of any intellectual or strategic framework for civilian COIN operations means that there is no basis for organizational or curricula design that would support the development of successful COIN policies, programs and skills. As a result, every such intervention presents the same painful and expensive learning curve for civilian agencies of the Executive Branch.

It is a potentially crippling irony that the parts of the US government most potentially suited to providing the decisive capabilities in counterinsurgency challenges are the ones least engaged in the current efforts to frame COIN doctrine and policy. We seek to remedy that.

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Various efforts are underway by the Administration, by stakeholders in peace and security programs, and by intellectual institutions to develop innovative ways to address our lack of institutional wherewithal to conduct effective stability and counterinsurgency operations. What many of these proposals lack (or erroneously assume to exist) is a strategic framework for such operations. There is growing awareness in this community of interest, however, that civilian capacity to plan and conduct such operations does not exist in the government and therefore must be created. To build such capacity will require a shared understanding of the problem and agreement on approaches to solving it.

Military thinkers have resurrected COIN theory as a useful tool for dealing with contemporary threats to national security, the most notable of which is transnational terrorism. Counterterrorism (CT) activity is in some cases a necessary adjunct to COIN, and in others, effective COIN activity may set conditions that discourage the use or minimize the impact of terrorism as an insurgent tactic. Regardless of the relative prominence of CT vs. COIN activities in a given country or region, if properly orchestrated, they can be mutually reinforcing, or at least harmonized to ensure that they are not mutually disruptive.

The National Implementation Plan for the War on Terror (NIP-WOT) is a comprehensive interagency approach to defeating terrorists and their networks, but it cannot create mechanisms to address underlying political, social, economic, or developmental causes of the global insurgency. The Office of the Coordinator for Stabilization and Reconstruction in the State Department was created to orchestrate U.S. government efforts to help nations emerge from conflict and reestablish sustainable governance of and services for its people, but it is not equipped or empowered to address transnational insurgent movements seeking to destabilize governments and change the global order. The Foreign Assistance Reform Initiative seeks to better focus foreign aid on developing the capacity of recipient governments to govern responsibly and to meet the needs of their citizenry, but does not provide the means to focus political or military power on insurgent activity. The Quadrennial Defense Review yielded concrete plans of action for transformation of the Department of Defense and the Armed Services so that our military services will become more agile in dealing with irregular threats, including those posed by terrorists and insurgents, but DoD cannot direct or orchestrate the universe of non-military responses to these challenges.

While these and related efforts underway in the USG seek to address inadequate governance, poor security and underdevelopment, there is no overarching framework to help guide the USG's strategic planning or operations vis-à-vis transnational insurgent movements. COIN theory, with its discriminating, indirect and multi-pronged approaches, offers a useful lens with which to create such a holistic framework. To the extent that we can better orchestrate our political, diplomatic, economic, agricultural, commercial, financial, trade, law enforcement, public information, public health and public security policies and programs, we will be better able to disempower, de-legitimize, marginalize and eventually eliminate the kind of violent insurgencies that threaten stability, security, and peace in troubled regions of the world. To the extent that we can enlist, empower, or support international partners in the effort to reinforce sovereign exercise of responsible, accountable law enforcement and internal security practices, the greater will be our collective success in achieving peace and security.

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We propose that the Department of State orchestrate an interagency and multi-disciplinary effort, through a structured process of conferences and working groups, to produce an integrated national framework for countering insurgencies, with a specific emphasis on addressing transnational insurgencies. Such a framework, which could be institutionalized in the form of a National Security Presidential Directive, would create an analytical framework for COIN; identify the roles and missions of the Executive Branch departments and agencies; identify the resources and tools available to be brought to bear on COIN; and identify, if possible, the gaps in capability and capacity in the USG and international community to deal with destabilizing insurgencies. DoD doctrine will have much to contribute to this effort, but the bulk of the effort should be to illuminate COIN as a political, economic, informational, social, legal – i.e., civilian - discipline that is both relevant and important to countering transnational insurgencies.

To this end, the Political Military Bureau will bring together experts from government, the private sector, academia and think tanks, both domestic and international, in the fields of counterinsurgency, irregular warfare, homeland security, foreign policy, development, counterterrorism, information operations, public diplomacy, stability operations and conflict transformation. Taking into account the enormous body of intellectual capital invested in relevant efforts, these experts will help formulate an approach to development of a national counterinsurgency strategy and implementation plan that will enable the USG to dissuade and defeat the distributed, networked, lethal insurgents that threaten global peace and security in the 21st century.

In addition to strategy development, the Department of State will assemble and field in the near term interagency teams of experts to educate and train key foreign governments in counterinsurgency ‘best practices.’ These teams will work closely with leaders in both headquarters and the field to help shape and encourage strategies, operations and tactics that will undercut insurgent activity and gain support among the affected populations for counterinsurgent activities. In fielding these teams, the Executive Branch will grow capacity for deployable interdisciplinary counterinsurgency expertise in ongoing and future operations.