

British Counterinsurgency in the post-Cold War World

Written by Ross Hall

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ROSS HALL, SEP 1 2011

It is an often made claim that the 'British approach' for conducting counterinsurgency (COIN) operations can act as guidance for how to achieve the best results. This approach has been honed through Britain's unique experience of empire policing and conduct in several small wars spanning over 150 years. Britain has taken part in 72 military campaigns since the Second World War (73 including current operations in Libya), of which 17 are COIN operations, and 7 of these can be classed as successes (Rigden 2009: 8). This approach is a reflection of the way in which the British army and military in general had developed and responded to both foreign and domestic pressures. However, the fact that the British approach has been a result of individual experiences and developed before and during the Cold War years has resulted in it coming under attack for its utility in the contemporary conflict environment.

The argument against its application claims it is not useful in contemporary situations as the environment in which it was developed no longer exists. This argument has developed as a result of the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan that have witnessed a protracted insurgency which is not defined by ideology in the same way as past COIN operations have been, with arguably little success in the way of preventing it and sustaining law and order.

The contending school of thought claims that the British model is still useful in post-Cold War operations, but it should not be seen as a panacea. This does not necessarily mean that it needs to be seen as any less effective as it is claimed that when it has been applied, it has been met with considerable success.

Perhaps the most famous summing up of the British COIN doctrine is Templar's argument that 'the answer [to the uprising] lies not in pouring more troops into the jungle, but in the hearts and minds of the people'. He also claimed that 'the shooting side of this business is only 25 per cent of the trouble and the other 75 per cent lies in getting the people of this country behind us (Dixon 2009: 361-362). This approach has emphasised a multifaceted approach to fighting an insurgency that identifies the centre of gravity as the people, rather than the enemy forces and sees the political aspects of an insurgency as the most important. This view is not shared by all and has been argued to be a British response to British experiences.

Prominent actors within the British military such as Sir Robert Thompson, General Sir Harold Briggs, and Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templar served to sculpt the British approach to COIN. They stressed the importance of many different areas of policy that must be taken into account if an operation is to succeed. One such policy is that no matter what form the COIN takes, the political aim must be prime. This must also be made in conjunction with coordinated government machinery. By placing politics at the heart of the COIN, rather than simply using kinetic military operations, it is possible for security forces to gain legitimacy from the local population. It is also imperative to separate insurgents from the population as this is where they can gain support, as this is where they can gain material support and have both an ideological and a physical effect. When separating insurgents from the population, it is necessary to do this in a way that makes use of a minimal use of force as this can serve to alienate the population that the security forces are there to protect, therefore undermining the entire operation. This is necessary as it must be seen that there is no purely military means for defeating an insurgency. As General Sir Frank Kitson argued; 'there can be no such thing as a purely military solution because insurgency is not primarily a military activity' (Dixon 2009: 357-358). After separating the insurgent from the indigenous population, thus removing their support, it is necessary to then neutralise him, by killing, capturing, marginalising or reconciling him, controlling the level of violence and securing the population. Alongside this, it is necessary to 'clear and hold' and land that is necessary within the campaign (British Army 2010).

There is no argument that the American military machine is not adept at war fighting, but this is done by conventional

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military means. As Ollivant and Chewing state, 'the Army fights and wins America's battles through land dominance, not by establishing civic, security, and economic institutions in failed states (2006: 51). This has resulted in the ascendancy of the use of force in American COIN operations and has come under considerable fire from its coalition partners. It must, however, be remembered that military prowess is not a reliable indicator for likelihood of success. Cases such as Algeria, Cyprus, Aden, Morocco, Tunisia, Indochina and Vietnam show that small, determined forces can defeat big powers which hold overpowering conventional military forces (Cassidy 2005: 54).

It has been claimed by UK officials, especially following the application of force by the US in Fallujah and Najaf, that the Americans have a heavy-handed approach that can fuel opposition to coalition operations and resulted in them losing popular support (Rangwala 2007: 300-301). Some senior American officers have been trained with a traditional model of defending the nation on European plains, or the deserts of the Middle East. As Chiarelli and Michaelis (2005: 9) recall, they were trained for 'large sweeping formations; coordinating and synchronizing the battlefield function to create that "point of penetration"... to achieve a decisive manoeuvre against the armies that threatened the sovereignty of my country". This army is not designed to fight prolonged COIN campaigns where kinetic manoeuvres form only 25% of operations. A deeply ingrained warrior ethos and a 'can do' attitude are designed to fight conventional warfare, rather than operations where there are very few, if any, decisive victories with quantifiable results.

While American forces are familiar with British COIN doctrine, it has simply not been implemented in a consistent manner, which would enable it to have a definite effect. The integrated civil-military approach to COIN is crucial to success. Civilians must remain in control and command the continuing political strategy as having military figures in these positions tends to place an emphasis on military means.

The American command failed to understand the political dimension. It missed a 'critical window of opportunity' following the successful invasion and toppling of the Ba'athist regime. It did not predict the growth of an insurgency or the scale of the civil disorders and looting that occurred after the fall of Baghdad (Hoffman 2004: 2-3). This was due in part to the lack of post-war planning, dubbed Phase IV, which would include the reconstruction of Iraq. This meant that there was a lack of cohesion between the Departments of Defence and State and insufficient support for the Organization for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA). The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) also made the decision to disband the senior levels of the Ba'ath party and the old Iraqi Army. This served only to disenfranchise the people that were able to mount an effective resistance. It also alienated an entire generation of the people that would have been able to aid in the reconstruction of Iraq (Aylwin-Foster 2005: 2).

The American planning apparatus did not conform to British doctrine in that there was no central command headed by an official that could unite all areas of necessary policy. When the contemporary British COIN doctrine was presented to senior American commanders, including General Sanchez in 2004, the British felt they simply did not understand it. It was also the opinion of British officers that even if the Americans had understood the doctrine; it would be unlikely to succeed as it would require the support of the CPA. This was problematic as Paul Bremner, head of the CPA, and General Sanchez hated each other (Chin 2007: 9). These individual relationships provided friction that prevented the appropriate planning apparatus from being employed.

On the British side, the post-war planning wasn't in any better condition. One senior UK official claimed that this was due to the then Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short, who opposed the invasion. In opposing the invasion, Short prevented her department, where the necessary resources and expertise were, from taking part in the planning. This prohibited any effectual post-war policy from being made, and few preparations were put in place to cope with the ensuing situation (Rangwala 2007: 294-295).

Even British security forces in Iraq have failed to grasp their own COIN doctrine effectively. Where the doctrine states that it is necessary for the insurgents to be separated from the population, there have been instances where this has not occurred. Where the American's viewed the Mahdi army of Muqtada al-Sadr as a threat, the British did little to prevent their recruitment into the Basra police force. When they did act on them, by destroying the al-Jamiyyat police station which they claimed was a Mahdi stronghold, due to their slow responses, they were faced by the Basra police force and the governorate council alongside the Mahdi army. During Operation Sinbad, which was largely aiming at removing the Basra police force from the militias and criminal networks, over 1,000 British troops were involved, but to little effect. The Basra police often didn't comply with British forces, and the governor continued to be unstable (Rangwala 2007: 297-298). This inability to separate the insurgents from the population, and more critically, the government institutions, resulted in the destabilising of Basra and therefore prevented the British forces in the area from achieving their goals. Had they prevented the Mahdi army from infiltrating the police force, it would have been

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easier to develop an independent force that could have served as a bulwark between civilians and the insurgents. This issue is, however, at least in part due to a lack of resources. Iraq is said to be a labour intensive COIN operation due to the scale of the territory that is needed to be covered and the length of the borders that need to be guarded. This immediately scales up the number of forces and equipment needed to properly secure the area. Before the invasion, planners believed that a large number of the Iraqi security forces would simply spend the invasion in their barracks and then return to build the new military and police forces with new leaders when fighting had ceased (Metz 2004: 27). This however did not happen and therefore left a security vacuum that destabilised the area and required larger numbers of coalition forces.

Due in part to the lack of locally generated forces, there were continuing difficulties in developing the numbers that are needed for a COIN campaign. British troop levels actually fell during the summer of 2003 from 26,000 to 9,000 even though they were tasked with covering four provinces. This fell further to 7,200 in 2005, resulting in a thin spread that was not capable of providing the kind of force projection that was needed to secure the area. An operation in 2003, designed to provide security in Maysan, which is the size of Northern Ireland, had only 1,000 troops. When comparing the COIN campaign in Iraq to that in Northern Ireland, the ratio of soldiers to civilians in Iraq was 1:370, compared to the 1:50 ratio in Northern Ireland (Chin 2008: 5).

To make a comparison to the Malayan campaign, the numbers are completely out of sync. At the peak of the Malayan emergency, the government had employed 40,000 soldiers, 45,000 police and 1.25 million Home Guards in order to combat the insurgents and protect the population. The insurgents on the other hand are said to have numbered only 8,000 at their peak. This therefore means that the insurgents were heavily outnumbered and with a population of six million at the time, the ratio of security forces to civilians stood at 1:2.5. This force reduced the 8,000 strong insurgents to fewer than 400 between 1951 and 1958 and forced the remainder across the border into Thailand (Stubbs 2008: 111-115). This also exemplifies the British COIN policy of having a locally raised military and police force which is both low cost, and far more legitimate to the population than foreign troops (Crawshaw 2007).

As the main objective is to establish a fully functioning government under the rule of law, it is necessary for coalition forces to construct governmental institutions that are accessible to the population. If it fails to do this, the government will appear to be unapproachable, especially if it is filled with members of the foreign forces. Also, key to this is the preservation of human rights. The former Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, Professor Brice Dickson, argues that the protection of human rights is essential to the effectiveness of any COIN operations (Dixon 2009:371). Rather than using minimal force for their operations and respecting the rights of civilians, due to mounting casualties, American military intelligence adopted a more brutal approach in its intelligence gathering procedures. General Sanchez estimated that in the first 18 months of the occupation alone, around 30,000 to 40,000 Iraqis passed through US detention facilities. Further to this, American intelligence estimates that around 90% these were innocent or had no relevant intelligence to justify the operations. (Chin 2007: 4). By violating social and human rights, the foreign forces only serve to alienate themselves from the local population.

This does not, however, mean that the British COIN doctrine of the pre-Cold War era is not relevant today. As has been outlined above, the policies were simply not implemented in a comprehensive way that would have allowed for its effective usage. The British military campaign in Helmand in particular went through several evolutions from 2006 to 2009, changing the focus of operations from hard power to soft effects. During this period, six British task forces were deployed in six month rotations. The first three task forces struggled with major kinetic operations and being under-supplied. The emphasis was, however, slowly shifted from kinetic operations to a population-centric approach focussing on influence operations, designed to secure and develop key areas. When 52nd Infantry Brigade deployed in October 2007, their plans revolved around the 'clear, hold, build' ethos. This was in contrast to past task forces as they were little holding and no building, therefore making it impossible to truly secure the population. This brigade understood the local population was the centre of gravity. Further to this, the brigade commander, Brigadier Andrew Mackay, stated, the Taliban body count was a "corrupt measure of success" (Farrell 2010: 13). This new approach suggests that the British model is still seen by some to be worth implementing in actual scenarios.

The American forces have also learned from their experiences with a difficult COIN campaign. This is in stark contrast to their past operations. For instance, after Vietnam, the American military effectively denied the existence of COIN as a matter of importance. This is shown by the 1976 FM100-5 Operations which completely omitted COIN from military doctrine (Betz and Cormack 2009: 319). Thankfully, Times have changed and COIN has once again

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been included in the 2006 FM3-24 which defines an insurgency as 'an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict'. It then goes on to clarify that an insurgency is 'an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control' (FM3-24 2006: 13). This is a useful definition as it was published in 2006, after more than four years of action in Afghanistan and three in Iraq. American officers had already claimed that "The Field Manual tells us what to achieve, but not what to do. It lays out the theory, but we need practical advice at company level" (Kilcullen 2010: 18-19). By this it is meant that while the doctrine can provide valuable insight into how to conduct COIN operations, it is still not wholly accepted by commanders, resulting in a lack of direction, therefore limiting its effectiveness in the field.

There are, however, exceptions to this. General Petraeus' 'Observations from Soldiering in Iraq' (2006) identifies 14 key points that need to be focussed on in order to succeed. These, more nuanced, points include 'do not try to do too much with your own hands'. This reiterates the early point of recruiting large numbers of local forces in order to gain a higher level of legitimacy while simultaneously securing and separating them from the population. The observations also state that 'success in a counterinsurgency requires more than just military operations'. The inclusion of this point illustrates that American forces have understood that the political sphere of policy is key to any COIN operation. These points also show that they have understood the importance of British COIN doctrine as many of the original policy areas have been included.

In 2003, General David Barno, the commander of the America-led coalition in Afghanistan, announced a new strategy that would focus on the expansion of military provincial reconstruction teams. These teams would be designed to 'provide reconstruction and humanitarian assistance as part of a concerted "hearts and minds" effort' (Hoffman 2004: 47). This move was in response to a growing feeling that coalition forces were not presenting themselves in a way that the local population were comfortable with. These teams would be able to provide a more permanent presence that the local population would be familiar with that while also collecting and acting on intelligence in a much smaller space of time.

Another example of certain American forces adapting to the COIN campaign comes from a report, from December 2003, which states that "Marine officers said they are also aiming for more restraint in the use of force and intend to limit the use of heavy weapons, using bombs and weapons as last resort. That contrasts with Army operations, in which air strikes and artillery were sometimes used to intimidate at the outset of confrontations" (ibid: 10). This difference in opinion between the Marine Corps and the Army illustrates that this is not a widely held belief within the American military. It does however show that there are certain aspects that are willing to observe and practice British approaches, which in turn means that these elements of the American forces believe that there is still value in the British model.

Contemporary operations in Iraq and Afghanistan both have much to learn from British COIN doctrine. It is not an outdated method of practicing COIN, and can deliver results when implemented in the modern world. One commentator claims that at least Iraq should be seen as being the same as the Cold War, colonial policing efforts because similar factors exist, in that there is a resistance to foreign occupation and there is also the problem of how to establish a legitimate government to replace the foreign forces (Peterson 2009: 10). Simply because it has not been used effectively does not mean that it can't be. As Aylwin-Foster notes, there are few who deny that the American forces in Iraq were more offensively minded than others within the coalition. This is in part due to the American rules of engagement which are much more lenient than others' (2005: 5). The differing rules of engagement, stemming from the weak acceptance of British doctrine in the higher echelons of the military, resulted in a less than widespread acceptance of the British model. This caused a heavy-handed approach, subsequently alienating the population from the coalition forces. But, as has been illustrated, there are certain areas that have accepted the code of conduct and have seen real results. If this were to be applied in a wholesale manner, there would be even greater results, and possibly even a successful COIN campaign in contemporary situations.

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