SWP Research Paper

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Counterinsurgency and Its Discontents

Assessing the Value of a Divisive Concept

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Counterinsurgency and Its Discontents: Assessing the Value of a Divisive Concept

Few military doctrinal publications have had as immediate and far-reaching an impact as the US Army's and Marine Corps' Counterinsurgency Field Manual of December 2006. Released against the backdrop of a raging civil war in Iraq and the gradual resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the new doctrine represented a milestone in American military thinking about counterinsurgency – an approach to warfare it was hoped would bring some form of salvation to the two ongoing campaigns. Between the lines, the doctrine criticised the conduct of US operations in Iraq at that time and detailed a new, more community-oriented and population-centred approach. Specifically, it proposed that US troops involve themselves directly in creating local security, in providing essential services, and in enhancing the legitimacy of the central government, and its capacity to take over following an eventual transition to local control. For a military that had foresworn counterinsurgency since at least the Vietnam War, the publication was itself a radical departure from previous thinking. Yet the buzz surrounding the manual would probably have been short-lived had its lead author, Gen. David Petraeus, not been in a position, only months after its publication, to implement some of its core precepts in Iraq – and to oversee a dramatic turnaround in that country's security situation as a result.

The successes of the so-called surge in Iraq added credibility to the concept of counterinsurgency and elevated those associated with it. With time, the idea of counterinsurgency spread also to Europe. In 2009, the British Army published its equivalent to the US Counterinsurgency Field Manual and, the following year, the French armed forces followed suit. Elsewhere, various European governments for the first time began talking about 'counterinsurgency' – a term hitherto avoided due to its ill-fated association with the Vietnam War – and discovered that its nature and needs differed from earlier experiences with peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. The faith in counterinsurgency was such that when newly elected US President Barack Obama announced a 'surge' for Afghanistan, many thought that the new-found understanding and application of this concept would help

turn this campaign around too, much as it had done in Iraq.

Since then, these hopes have been severely dented, as has faith in counterinsurgency. Contested from the outset by a vocal guard of sceptics, the backlash against counterinsurgency escalated as its attempted implementation in Afghanistan stuttered and, to many observers, failed. NATO forces will undoubtedly retain a presence in Afghanistan for years to come, as will US forces in Iraq, but there is no great enthusiasm anymore for the *concept* of counterinsurgency – among governments and their militaries – or hope that its associated theory may help either in Afghanistan or elsewhere. Perceived as necessary and innovative only a few years ago, the concept has fallen out of grace and is now in danger of being flushed out before even taking root.

A crossroad has thus been reached where what has been learnt over the last decade is either rejected or consolidated. To some, the opportunity to integrate counterinsurgency fully as a military priority is matched in magnitude only by the cost of failing to do so: the argument here is that unfamiliarity with counterinsurgency contributed to the operational setbacks experienced in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and that modern militaries must learn so as not to repeat these same errors. Yet to its detractors, counter-insurgency is little short of a dangerous myth, en-couraging politically naïve governments to take on over-ambitious exercises in state-building, in areas of the world they do not fully understand and cannot possibly hope to control. On each side of the debate, the imputative danger is that we repeat the mistakes of past campaigns, either by failing to learn from them or by learning the wrong lessons.

Against this backdrop, this article seeks to explore the value of counterinsurgency – as a concept to be studied and as a priority to inform policy. It concludes that the value ascribed to counterinsurgency as a con-cept depends crucially on what is expected from it. Counterinsurgency does not provide a strategy for military intervention or a campaign plan for deployed soldiers – and it will fail if mistaken for more than what it is. Counterinsurgency offers a collection of insights and guidelines collected from past opera-tions, which, if used and adapted in a manner sen-sitive to local context, can help in the design and execution of a specific campaign plan.

Counterinsurgency's real value, however, lies in challenging some of the misconceptions about military intervention that have dominated strategic thinking, both in Europe and the United States. The ascendance of this term and its associated theory has brought a more informed understanding of what it means to deploy armed forces into foreign polities, to reinforce a new political compact, and to bring stability to a country fractured by war. These insights need to be retained and should inform the policy decisions of those governments and militaries that are likely to engage in armed intervention. Yet it is this article's final conclusion that to fully integrate the lessons of recent years, it may in fact be necessary to take the discussion beyond 'counterinsurgency' – a semantically problematic and inevitably divisive term – and to speak more plainly about the requirements of war-fighting, of peace-building, and of war-to-peace transitions.

Assessing Counterinsurgency: The Definitional Dilemma

The first and most basic problem in assessing the concept of counterinsurgency is that it lacks an agreed-to definition. The most common definition comes from US military doctrine, which describes counterinsurgency as "those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency."[1] This definition is very inclusive, so much so that it fails to exclude any practice from its remit, and therefore ends up being far too broad. In effect, literally any action can qualify as counterinsurgency, so long as 'defeating insurgency' is its purported purpose. Even the nature and *effectiveness* of such action seems irrelevant to the use of the term, as the definition centres on intent rather than outcome. Beyond this sole and problematic criterion, there is nothing to help distinguish counterinsurgency from any other type of operation.

This is a dilemma for those seeking to discuss and critique counterinsurgency. One attempt to gain a more narrow definition of the term was through the introduction of modifiers, like 'population-centred' and 'enemy-centred' counterinsurgency, which were then used to distinguish between competing views of how these operations should be conducted.[2] Analytically speaking, these are awkward and highly unsatisfying terms; if counterinsurgency is to be 'centred' on anything, it ought to be neither on people nor on enemy but on achieving campaign objectives. Similarly, there is a temptation to talk of 'good' and of 'comprehensive' counterinsurgency so as to differentiate between those who 'get it' and those who do not. The vagueness inherent to these statements is testament to the lack of specificity in the discussion as a whole.

The reason there is no better definition is that counterinsurgency is a fluid concept that is dependent on circumstance. As counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen points out, "there is no such thing as a 'standard' counterinsurgency … the set of counterinsurgency measures adopted depends on the character of the insurgency."[3] Yet from an analytical standpoint, this is also highly unsatisfying, particularly when scholars of counterinsurgency are asked to define their terms. 'Counterinsurgency' then emerges as a convenient shorthand used to describe something that is impossible to define; one can only hope that those who talk about it all mean the same thing.

This can and has provided for a very ambiguous and unproductive discussion, yet there does not appear to be an easy alternative to this endemic vagueness. Instead, the approach taken by the community of counterinsurgency theorists and experts has tended towards that of historian Hugh Seton-Watson, who in the introduction to one his books noted that while his chosen subject "undoubtedly lacks neatness", this is "inevitable because the subject itself is not neat."[4]

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1 US Department of the Army and US Marine Corps, FM 3-24/ MCWP 3-33.5. *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: US Army, 2006), 1–1.

2 US Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, *Interim Progress Report on DoD Directive 3000.05: Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2006), p. 4.

3 David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 183.

4 As cited in Mats Berdal, *Building Peace After War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 27.

Assessing Counterinsurgency by Its Praxis

In the absence of an agreed-to definition, counterinsurgency is commonly understood and judged according to how it pans out in the field, when implemented. But because there is no set criteria of what constitutes a genuine counterinsurgency operation, it is also difficult to establish a shared practice towards which to point as a valid representation of the theory. In turn, any operation conducted in Afghanistan, Iraq, or elsewhere against insurgents can rightly be called 'counterinsurgency', and the concept is then assessed according to all or any of these experiences.

In these conditions, counterinsurgency rarely shines. Instead, the concept tends to be dismissed for precisely the same reason for which it was first brought on-board, namely the difficulty of overcoming insurgency. While interest in counterinsurgency typically stems from unanticipated adversity in combating 'rebel' or 'guerrilla' groups, the reasons for rediscovering this approach to operations are usually forgotten by the time the engagement turns protracted and costly, as they often do. At this point, whatever initial appeal the concept may have had is quickly drowned out by heartfelt exhortations to withdraw, to abandon the imperial pretensions of 'state-building', and to return the military to its traditional duties. A similar trend is apparent today. Whereas instability in post-invasion Iraq prompted the US military's initial rediscovery of counterinsurgency, the eventual demise of the concept is likely to spring from its perceived failure, in Afghanistan, to manage the problem it is ostensibly intended to address – or to do so at an acceptable cost. This tendency also accounts for the cyclical abandonment and rediscovery of counterinsurgency as a military priority and area of research.

Judging counterinsurgency by its praxis appears to make intuitive sense. Yet, because counterinsurgency is rarely easy, this approach also leads to a very one-sided appraisal. By this logic, counterinsurgency can quickly emerge as nothing but a myth, periodically restored from the historical wastebasket, promoted by a new generation of enthusiasts, and returned to whence it came once it is found to bring nothing but despair and disappointment, all at a terrible cost. This is a temptingly simple conclusion but it is also too hasty, suffering as it does from three serious shortcomings.

First, there is a need to differentiate between counterinsurgency theory and its implementation. The term may lack a set definition, but greater awareness of the scholarly literature and military doctrine reveals distinct divergences between how the theory proposes these campaigns be run and the manner in which they are prosecuted in practice. Both in Iraq and Afghanistan, several prerequisites for a successful counterinsurgency campaign – highlighted in doctrine as well as in theory – were conspicuously absent: troop numbers have been a constant concern; the needed cultural, political, and linguistic awareness has been patchy; civil-military coordination has been found wanting; host-nation partners have typically been less than cooperative; and broadly speaking, these large-scale interventions have also lacked a clearly defined end-state.

In Iraq, the shift to a counterinsurgency-informed strategy was able to compensate for some of these deficiencies, but even then the 'surge' was a belated and short-lived affair that did not, and could not, address the political fractures of the Iraqi state or the host of vestigial security concerns that still threaten the country. In Afghanistan, what can only be described as 'counterinsurgency lite' has fared less well and must now contend with the limited timelines that most troop-contributing countries have imposed in return for their participation in the campaign. Beyond the difficulties of raising troops for the mission, of controlling the country's borders, or of eliminating havens, the campaign is further undercut by the illegitimacy and unaccountability of NATO's host-nation partners and by the lack of clarity as to the campaign's objective, which shifts errantly between state-building, counter-terrorism, saving NATO's reputation, and satisfying the United States (a prime concern among European troop contributors).

Of course, a concept that only works in ideal conditions is of no great use; what is sought is a concept that can help *overcome* unforeseen obstacles, not wish them away. Even so, the Iraq and Afghan campaigns were marked by an unusual lack of planning, of resources, and of strategic thinking. It would be nothing

short of miraculous if a few years of counterinsurgency, unevenly applied, could compensate for such inauspicious starting points. For this reason, these campaigns may not be the most helpful test cases on which to judge the concept of counterinsurgency. Instead, the argument could be made that the US military and its NATO allies are simply ill-structured and ill-prepared for these types of large-scale interventions, which is reason enough for further institutional change and for greater caution when considering future military activity.

The attempt to separate theory from practice has caused some critics of counterinsurgency to liken its defenders to die-hard Marxists, in that both insist on the infallibility of their cherished doctrine while blindly ascribing its highly problematic track record to poor implementation. It is a powerful charge, as a concept that survives only on paper has no real worth. The redeeming point about counterinsurgency is that its theory has, in fact, shown practical value, albeit typically on an operational and tactical rather than strategic plane. Indeed, virtually all Western land campaigns against insurgents, guerrillas, and other non-state armed groups have reaffirmed the general validity of what are often referred to as 'counterinsurgency principles': these touch upon the importance of achieving a nuanced political understanding of the campaign, of operating under unified command, of using intelligence to guide operations, of isolating insurgents from the population, of using the minimum amount of force necessary to achieve set objectives, and of assuring and maintaining the perceived legitimacy of the counterinsurgency effort in the eyes of the populace. Most important, perhaps, is the exhortation to adapt and arrive at a tailored response rather than fall back on template solutions.[5]

That these principles have shown practical utility is not wholly surprising, as they are also in large part commonsensical. For instance, there is nothing militarily controversial about linking good intelligence to effective strike operations, and it is also clear that in a foreign environment where adversary and civilian look alike, obtaining good intelligence will require a special understanding of and with the local popula-

tion. Similarly, it is difficult to find fault with the notion that a greater understanding of the environment, its people, and its structures will present external actors with more and better options, or that controlling and influencing key populations will first require that they are adequately isolated from the intimidation, threats, and coercion of others. As to the focus on the legitimacy of the intervention itself and of the actors it seeks to support, this is a fairly obvious corollary from the need to establish political and military control over select populations. The validity of these premises is such that they have also been found relevant to other types of operations conducted to help stabilise war-torn lands, be they termed stabilisation campaigns, pacification, or 'robust' peacekeeping. Indeed, in his survey of two decades of "post-conflict peace-building", Mats Berdal identifies "three broad priority tasks" for outside forces: "providing a secure environment; stabilising governing structures; and ensuring the uninterrupted flow of basic, life-sustaining services" – a list of priorities similar to those advanced in counterinsurgency doctrine.[6]

A second shortcoming in judging counterinsurgency on its practice is that conducting counterinsurgency will always be difficult, no matter how good the theory might be. It is relatively easy to derive priority tasks from past operations, yet knowing how to sequence, prioritise between, and then implement these is a far more challenging proposition. It should not surprise, therefore, that while past campaigns reveal the *general* validity of a number of broad principles, the campaigns themselves were not always so successful. Some argue that this is reason enough to reject counterinsurgency as a failed concept – an understandable yet hasty conclusion. Indeed, such a line of argument belies an expectation for military doctrine to provide a silver-bullet solution to the problem of armed intervention. Instead, the theory and principles of counterinsurgency provide mere guideposts in how to formulate a response to a problem that will itself never be easily solved. And while such guidance may be very helpful in the design and execution of an effective *campaign plan*, that plan must itself – as the theory clearly states – be adapted for specific circumstances; certainly, it must be closely tailored to the causative factors of violence, which will in each case be unique.

Furthermore, refusing to study and prepare for counterinsurgency on the basis that these operations are difficult to conduct will not in itself reduce the

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5 For some enumerations of these principles, see Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1966); Frank Kitson, *Bunch of Five* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977); or more recently, Eliot Cohen, Conrad Crane, Jan Horvath, and John Nagl, "Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency", *Military Review* 86(2) (2006).

6 Berdal, *Building Peace After War*, pp. 95–96.

need for the associated skills and capabilities. So long as expeditionary ambitions persist, the operational difficulties associated with counterinsurgency are unlikely to disappear, and we would then need a new concept to grapple with these endemic challenges. A better approach would be to *deepen* the study of counterinsurgency and of military intervention, so as to make better decisions in the future.

This leads to a third difficulty with judging the concept of counterinsurgency on the basis of its implementation: counterinsurgency provides operationally oriented theory, not strategy. In other words, counterinsurgency theory does not encourage foolhardy campaigns to stabilise war-torn countries or to defeat insurgencies wherever they may rear their head. If anything, a strong note of caution regarding the requirements of such interventions can be parsed from the field manuals and main texts. It could even be argued that it has been the lack of awareness of such doctrine and texts that have necessitated their rediscovery: witness the gradual introduction of counterinsurgency principles and practices following the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001, of Iraq in 2003, but also following the initial failures to grapple with incipient insurgencies in the Philippines at the turn of the nineteenth century, in Malaya and Algeria in the 1950s, in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, and in El Salvador in the 1980s. When, as in these cases, a commitment is made to assist an insurgency-threatened government, the theory and principles of counterinsurgency can provide useful guidance in meeting this strategic end, but the latter is always decided upon and defined at a higher level and will itself be more or less realistic.

This last point is frequently missed in current discussions of counterinsurgency. Because of the overbearing backdrop of the Afghanistan campaign, counterinsurgency is commonly judged on its ability to achieve the *strategic* aims set for this particular campaign. This is an odd and inauspicious test for the concept, not only because of the difficulties of conducting 'state-building' in Afghanistan, but because the link between the stated strategic objectives there (to 'disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda') and the operational tenets of counterinsurgency is very difficult to discern.[7] The country's terrain, size, geo-

strategic location, and past make foreign occupation a fraught endeavour. Even then, al-Qaeda is constrained neither to Afghanistan, nor to Pakistan, and would subsist even if the counterinsurgency campaign were successful and the region radically transformed. To many observers, 'counterinsurgency' is therefore an ill-suited and grandiose response to the problem of al-Qaeda and is judged accordingly, as a bad policy option for Afghanistan, rather than as a collection of principles and best practices, detached from any one campaign and operating below the realm of strategy.

This tendency is in part the result of an unfortunate conflation between the operational and strategic levels of war, one that relates intimately to a common misunderstanding of counterinsurgency today. The absence of a clear and viable strategy – more obvious in Afghanistan, but arguable also in the case of Iraq – has resulted in counterinsurgency, which is an operational concept, being leaned upon as strategy in its own right.[8] This has also been the tendency of some counterinsurgency proponents who – in the absence of a clear strategy to work with – confuse the catchwords of counterinsurgency (population security, governance, legitimacy) with strategic ends and try to pursue them all at once, with no clear end-state in mind. Missed in this hurried embrace of newly rediscovered theory is the need to adapt its premises and principles to meet specific political goals. "Strategy", Eliot Cohen writes, "is the art of choice that binds means with objectives. It is the highest level of thinking about war, and it involves priorities (we will devote resources here, even if that means starving operations there), sequencing (we will do this first, then that) and a theory of victory (we will succeed for the following reasons)."[9] Plainly, a counterinsurgency field manual is unable to address these difficult questions or to resolve the attendant trade-offs, though, importantly, it may provide valuable guidance and insight when it comes to tying carefully defined strategic aims to the design of operations.

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7 President Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan", Washington DC: Office of the Press Secretary, 27 March 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-a-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/.

8 Hew Strachan, "Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War", *Survival* 52(5) (2010): p. 168.

9 Eliot Cohen, "Obama's COIN Toss", *Washington Post*, 6 December 2009.

Counterinsurgency as a Valuable Antithesis

By scaling back the expectations of what 'counter-insurgency' as a concept can do, its value may be more fully appreciated. Counterinsurgency doctrine does not envisage or allow for painless foreign interventions, it does not provide a formulaic solution to the problem of political violence, nor does it constitute a comprehensible *strategy* with which to tackle insurgencies, al-Qaeda, or the threat of global terrorism. Finally, to value the theory and doctrine of counterinsurgency is not necessarily to support the notion of a NATO counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, or elsewhere for that matter.

What, then, does counterinsurgency do? If the theory is only 'useful guidance' – much of which is commonsensical – what is its worth? The key lies partly in what precedes counterinsurgency dialectically; the thesis to which counterinsurgency provides the antithesis. In the last half-century, what counterinsurgency principles have done is illustrate the full complexity of intra-state violence and its distinctiveness from the 'conventional' types of military campaigns for which most Western armed forces are structured and trained.

In the US context, this pattern is particularly clear: interest in counterinsurgency has tended to spike when senior civilian and/or military leaders realise the limitations of 'conventional' military force in managing the security problems of the day. In the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy grew concerned that the dominant US policy of 'massive retaliation' was too inflexible to address the rising threat of political subversion (then viewed as a Soviet Union-orchestrated phenomenon). Reacting to the ascendance of communism in Vietnam and in Laos, the instability of decolonisation in Africa, and the successful communist revolution in Cuba, Kennedy pushed the US armed forces to adapt, by learning the basic principles and practices of 'counter-guerrilla' warfare.[10] In the following few years, the US military developed new tactics and training exercises and

expanded its special operations capacity, as well as its understanding of counterinsurgency.

This was, in Douglas Blaufarb's words, a "counterinsurgency era" for the US military, though the reforms were often all too limited and superficial to have a sustained effect.[11] In any case, this was also an era that came to an abrupt and unhappy end in Vietnam – another instance in which a traumatic operational experience torpedoed a still incomplete leaning process. In the aftermath of America's withdrawal from Vietnam, counterinsurgency was deliberately eliminated from US military doctrine, as the armed forces turned their attention to the Central Front and the prospect of an armoured confrontation with the Soviet Union. There were good reasons to concentrate on Europe at this time, but the fact that this shift comprised a simultaneous and total neglect of counterinsurgency reveals the US military's particular reading of its experience in Vietnam and its view of counterinsurgency. Generally, the senior US military staff felt that in Vietnam "the Army had lost a generation's worth of technical modernization while gaining a generation's worth of nearly irrelevant combat experience."[12]

The deliberate neglect of counterinsurgency following Vietnam meant that the concept needed to be 'rediscovered' in the 1980s, when the United States again grew concerned about intra-state instability in the Third World. As it happened, the late 1970s did not feature the anticipated showdown in Europe against the Soviet Union. Instead, the United States witnessed the ascendance of left-learning regimes in several countries, including many former US client states: Ethiopia (1974), Mozambique (1975), Angola (1976), Grenada (1979), and Nicaragua (1979). The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Iranian revolution that same year, and the subsequent hostage crisis further demonstrated the volatility of international order and the vulnerability of US partners

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10 Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Counterterrorism, 1940–1990* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), chap. 6.

11 Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: US Doctrine and Performance 1950 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977).
12 Cited in Paul Herbert, "Deciding What Has to Be Done: General William E. DePuy and the 1976 Edition of FM 100–5, Operations", *Leavenworth Papers* 16 (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, 1988).

without its support. As in the 1960s these developments were perceived through the lens of the Cold War and as offering opportunities to the Soviet Union. The conclusion drawn within the US government was that the Cold War would be fought globally, requiring greater worldwide deployability and the capability to conduct 'low-intensity' operations – a new term for counterinsurgency and other types of 'irregular' campaigns.[13] In the 1980s, therefore, the US military again began to 'learn counterinsurgency': it issued new doctrine, adapted training exercises, and opened new centres and commands (notably the Special Operations Command). The activity was such that some spoke of the 1980s having once again "ushered in a new counterinsurgency era."[14] This time, the new knowledge was put into practice in El Salvador – a testing-ground for a vicarious form of counterinsurgency, fought with advisers rather than combat troops.

The US military's most recent "counterinsurgency era", which began following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, was also motivated by a previous failure to grapple with the political complexities of war.[15] Throughout the 1990s, a highly conventional and apolitical understanding of war marked US military thinking, as epitomised by the transformation programmes later developed in the Bush administration by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Resistance to the peacekeeping operations of the Clinton-era dovetailed perfectly with a growing fascination with information technology and precision-strike capabilities. The future of war lay not with the infantry – rotating in and out of seemingly endless peace operations – but with airstrikes, drones, computers, and satellites, dispensing force swiftly, precisely, and decisively. 'Military operations other than war', or MOOTW as they were termed, did not feature in the literature on transformation or were presented as amenable to the precision-strike toolkit offered through the 'information revolution'.

It was against this backdrop that counterinsurgency experienced its most recent peak. Having deposed the Saddam Hussein regime and triggered an insurgency against the Iraqi government installed in its place, the US military reached out to counterinsurgency theory as a means of understanding and responding to the escalating violence. Meanwhile, this theory also dismantled some of the assumptions that had held sway during the 1990s about the strategic utility of force and of modern technology, and helped broaden the US military's mindset, culture, and understanding of war. In that sense, the study of counterinsurgency again brought a welcome departure from prior misconceptions: it was a much-needed antithesis to a thesis that had not withstood its encounter with practice. Specifically, the concept instilled the idea that while wars are easy to begin, they are difficult to end, and that doing so requires a firm understanding of what causes violence to begin with. In reaffirming the political essence of war, it also forced a greater understanding of the local population and recognition of social context, which in turn brought concepts such as legitimacy and governance to the fore.

The introduction of counterinsurgency has played a corrective function in Europe as well, whose armed forces also tend to train and prepare for a type of warfare that is militarily decisive and far removed from the complexities encountered in ongoing campaigns. As importantly, counterinsurgency has served a *second* antithetical function in Europe, in challenging the particularly European understanding of what role foreign forces should play in assisting war-torn countries in their transition towards sustainable peace. On the basis of several peace operations during the 1990s, doctrine and planning for these types of interventions began to stress the importance of 'neutrality' and of 'impartiality' in what were thought of as 'consent-based' operations: the intervening force was in the affected country by invitation, not to impose its will, and did not pick a side, other than the side of peace.[16] With years of experience in these types of operations, it was thought that a similar approach and assump-

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13 See Richard Downie, *Learning from Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1988).

14 Sam C. Sarkesian, "Commentary on 'Low Intensity Warfare': Threat and Military Response", *Proceedings of the Low-Intensity Conference* (Ft. McNair, Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 14–15 January 1986), p. 38.

15 For more on this process, see David H. Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the US Military for Modern Wars* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009).

16 See Permanent Joint Headquarters, *Peace Support Operations: Joint Warfare Publication* 3-50, (Northwood: PJHQ, 1998), para. 303. Similar language was adopted in the Swedish Armed Forces, *Joint Military Doctrine: Peace Support Operations*, Oct. 1997, and in French doctrine for *restauration de la paix* (see Thierry Tardy, "French Policy Towards Peace Support Operation", *International Peacekeeping* 6(l) (Spring 1999): pp. 55–78.

tions would hold in Afghanistan and Iraq.[17] Oftentimes, these 'post-war' operations were understood as just that: military efforts to support a grateful liberated population, who needed just some external support on their way to sustainable peace. Instead, protracted engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq has demonstrated the severe limitations of the peacekeeping principles and the complexity of bringing peace to war-torn lands.

The gap between doctrine and practice hit the British armed forces first, following their occupation of Basra province in Iraq in 2003. In the absence of plans or strategic guidance for the 'post-war' phase, the British forces instinctively fell back on principles derived from various peacekeeping experiences in the 1990s, in Northern Ireland but also in the Balkans.[18] To maintain the goodwill and consent of the population that they had come to liberate, British troops adopted a light footprint, eschewing checkpoints, curfews, and other population-control measures. On a tactical level, this hands-off approach may have prevented a far greater and immediate inflammation of the Iraqi south, yet the failure to establish security and control the now leaderless province led to mass looting and criminality and ceded the initiative to various sectarian militias. Absent a more robust engagement framework, the British forces' sporadic patrols, wearing of berets rather than helmets, and their softly-softly approach to operations were all tactical solutions to a much larger problem.[19]

This mismatch between doctrine and practice would later confront the German military force deploying to Afghanistan. Stationed in what was a relatively peaceful part of Afghanistan, the German soldiers adopted a similarly unobtrusive approach to operations. The German government, sensitive about the use of force by its soldiers, expected that this hands-off and non-violent approach would forestall undue confrontation and make for a less politically difficult mission. Thus, the use of force was authorised only for defensive purposes; helicopters were not allowed to fly at night; dismounted patrols were prohibited; and troops were barred from more contested

areas.[20] Yet, rather than ingratiate themselves with the local powerbrokers or avert violence, the German troops found themselves unable to engage with the local population or to assert themselves, which left ample leeway for various destabilising elements to do so in their stead.

Much as engagement in counterinsurgency has challenged the 'conventional' view of war that is prevalent in many Western militaries, it is also forcing a major rethink of the peacekeeping principles of the 1990s. The lesson to be learnt here is that while the principles of impartiality, of consent-based operations, and of not using force except in self-defence *can* be germane to *some* 'benign' or 'permissive' environments, they have proved inadequate for the task of building peace in more contested settings. And rather problematically, these contested environments are precisely where most military interventions occur: after all, it is typically because of a lack of security that military forces are deployed. In these settings, adherence to various peacekeeping principles has resulted in interventions so unobtrusive as to have negligible impact on the ground; elsewhere, their strictly limiting effect on the latitude of the intervening force has made them "dangerously susceptible to manipulation by the parties to a conflict" and, in many cases, untenable.[21]

In contrast, the principles and practices of counterinsurgency are in these environments helpful in designing a campaign plan for sustained stability. Counterinsurgency doctrine emphasises that a permissive operational environment cannot be expected to obtain or to last but must be actively *worked towards* and then *sustained*. Similarly, in a counterinsurgency environment, the consent of the local population is not a function of how much force is used, but of how it is used and why. Popular and political influence is not achieved through a light footprint and kind acts, but by maintaining a presence and a firm monopoly on the legitimate use of force, so as to set the conditions for sustained security. The contribution of counterinsurgency theory, then, is to elucidate on the common requirements of working towards and sustaining a secure environment, of engaging with some local actors against others, and of using force – in parallel with other means – to achieve set political

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17 Media reports and official addresses leading up to European engagement in Afghanistan repeatedly referred to the forthcoming mission as one of 'peacekeeping'.

18 Peter Mansoor, "The British Army and the Lessons of the Iraq War", *British Army Review* 147 (Summer 2009): p. 11.

19 For a longer treatment of this case, see Ucko, "Lessons from Basra: The Future of British Counter-insurgency", *Survival* 52(4) (2010): pp. 131–58.

20 See Thomas Rid and Timo Noetzel, "Germany's Options in Afghanistan", *Survival* 51(5) (2009): pp. 71–90.

21 Berdal, *Building Peace after War*, p. 101.

ends.[22] These tasks present formidable conceptual and operational challenges to Europe's armed forces, many of which cut their teeth on the peacekeeping settings of the Balkans and take pride in their approach to peacebuilding and conflict resolution.[23]

22 For a greater elaboration on this point, see Ucko, "Peacebuilding After Afghanistan: Between Promise and Peril", *Contemporary Security Policy* 31(3) (2010).

23 It presents more fundamental dilemmas yet for the United Nations, whose attempts at "robust peacekeeping" have had to overcome deep political differences on the Security Council and the reticence of member states to provide troops and capabilities for such missions. See Thierry Tardy, "A Critique of Robust Peacekeeping in Contemporary Peace Operations", *International Peacekeeping* 18(2) (2011): pp. 152–167.

'Counterinsurgency is Dead; Long Live Counterinsurgency'

The (re)discovery of counterinsurgency represents a step forward from the conventional narrow-mindedness that dominated American defence thinking in the 1990s, and from the optimistic assumptions and principles that many European peacekeeping nations derived from their experiences in the Balkans. Despite this important function as an antithesis – one that is still being served – it looks almost inevitable that the term 'counterinsurgency' will fall out of use. One reason for this is the uncertainty about this semantically vague and divisive concept.[24] A more obvious factor will be the gradual drawdown of NATO troops from Afghanistan, which will remove the primary impetus for studying and preparing for counterinsurgency. Those wishing to justify a continued focus on this form of warfare will then need to appeal to the possibility of future counterinsurgency campaigns, which will strike most audiences – whether governments, militaries, or electorates – as a singularly unattractive proposition. Counterinsurgency has not been an altogether positive experience for NATO and there will be no desire to prep for an *encore*.

Dropping counterinsurgency, however, would be to forfeit the functions that the term plays: first, in grouping nominally similar types of operations into one helpful category, for insight, comparison, and analysis; and second, in providing the oft-needed antithesis to the type of thinking on war and peace that has tended to dominate within Western militaries. It will be important to consider how these functions will fare should 'counterinsurgency' – as a term and a priority – again be pushed off the table.

Upon further review, the first, 'grouping' function can be useful but is probably dispensable. Certainly, there are as many risks and dangers as there are benefits in bringing together operations from different epochs and geographical settings just because they share the epithet 'counterinsurgency'– a term who's meaning has evolved over time. Furthermore, the selection of operations for inclusion in this category is somewhat arbitrary, and excludes from consideration many interventions and armed campaigns that have relevant traits, but that were referred to by a different term: 'stability operations', 'small wars', 'robust peacekeeping' or 'post-conflict peacebuilding', to name but a few. Better to study past and current campaigns based on their shared attributes rather than by what they were called.

Indeed, as far as the study of counterinsurgency goes, the field may in fact benefit from going beyond this one term and considering a much broader canvas of military interventions. To date, scholarship on counterinsurgency has tended to be rather self-referential and inward-looking, rehashing the same case studies or obsessing over the intricacies of theory (such as the seemingly endless discussion of what is truly meant by 'hearts and minds'). Indeed, it would be fair to say that counterinsurgency fared far better as an antithesis – as a critique of what preceded it – than as a thesis. Partly as a result of this, and because of the quick rise of counterinsurgency as a mainstream topic, outsiders often come to view the whole field as something of a 'fad' and as unworthy of serious academic attention. Looking beyond the confines of counterinsurgency, and taking a broader interest in the dynamics of military intervention – also by actors other than Western states, and in places other than those now well covered – would provide fresh fodder for a field that has often been too narrow in its scope.

It is less certain whether the term's second function, as a useful antithesis, has been fully served. For that reason, abandoning 'counterinsurgency' would need to be done with two critical caveats in mind. First, this should in no way signify a return to the *status quo ante*, that is, to an understanding of war as 'conventional' and exclusively military and of the 'post-conflict' environment as uncontested and inherently benign. Both of these conceptual categories are deeply flawed.

On the former, the understanding of war as 'conventional' is historically and empirically suspect, assuming as it does a decisively military confrontation, occurring on an isolated, unpopulated battlefield. This archetype, entrenched in Western military thinking, stems from a grossly simplified recollection

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24 For more details, see Peter Rudolf, "Zivil-militärische Aufstandsbekämpfung: Analyse und Kritik der Counterinsurgency-Doktrin", *SWP-Studie* S2, January 2011.

of just a few wars that disproportionately shape our understanding of this phenomenon, predominantly the Second World War. Yet it is an understanding of war that is blind not only to the history from which it borrows, but to the real *purpose* of war, to wit, the consolidation of a political compact that is preferable to what came before and that is also somehow sustainable. What this means is that even predominantly 'conventional' wars will usually bleed seamlessly into a less 'conventional' phase, because the gains made in combat require consolidation through stabilisation, political support, capacity-building, or reconstruction.

As to the notion of a 'permissive' environment, where peacekeeping nations can ply their trade undisturbed, this is a fallacy not only because it does not apply to today's campaign in Afghanistan, but because the very notion of a 'permissive' post-conflict environment can rarely be said to have existed. Post-war environments – where peace-building activities are presumably most needed – seldom provide a clean slate on which a new order can be imposed, but a renewed competition over resources and political power, one that will often take violent forms. The term 'post-conflict' is, in this context, highly misleading, as it suggests a clean break from war to peace, with little continuity between the two.

Thus, the point of going beyond counterinsurgency would not be to take a step back, towards old conceptual relics that have proved too reductionist in their assumptions, but forward, towards a new understanding of military intervention that is informed by the experiences and campaigns of recent years but eschews the divisive and vague jargon that they have provoked. Ideally, this would also put an end to the bifurcation of wars as either 'conventional' or 'irregular' and of post-conflict environments as either 'permissive' or 'contested'. At first sight, such distinctions are helpful, as they rightly frame stabilisation and counterinsurgency as problems that require a different mindset and skills than pure combat or peacekeeping, and that deserve independent study. At the same time, the neat theoretical dichotomies also encourage an unspoken belief that these types of operations have rarefied equivalents in practice. In so doing, they suggest that states have that unlikely luxury of being able to pick and choose between conventional wars and counterinsurgencies, or between permissive and contested operating environments – and that they can tailor their forces and interventions accordingly. Missing here is an appreciation for war as a complex political phenomenon, one that typically

encompasses both irregular and conventional challenges and whose operating environment is rarely static but instead very difficult to control.

This gives rise to the second caveat that must be fully taken on-board before counterinsurgency is pushed off the table: eschewing the term does not mean that the operational challenges most closely associated with it will be avoided. Importantly, this remains the case even if we do not see another 'counterinsurgency campaign' or 'stability operation' in the near future. Indeed, it is virtually unavoidable that future land-based operation, whatever character they may take, will reproduce many of the challenges and tasks seen in today's campaigns. With the capture of territory, for example, comes the requirement to hold that territory and render it stable. With the global trend of urbanisation come future operations conducted in built-up environments, where the local population cannot be ignored but more often must be co-opted and therefore even protected against attack. And given the persistent attraction and apparent effectiveness of asymmetric tactics to militarily inferior adversaries; the frequency of operations aimed at building local capacity; and the perceived threat of ungoverned spaces acting as potential havens for terrorist groups, expeditionary land forces are also likely to confront insurgents, militia, and other 'irregular' threats in most, if not all, future operations. Couple all this with the near-inevitability of operating within a local culture and population with whom the foreign forces will enjoy, at best, transient legitimacy, and the broader relevance of experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan becomes very clear indeed.

Importantly, this type of forecasting speaks not of 'conventional', or of 'peacekeeping', nor of 'counterinsurgency' operations, but relies on a broader conception of military intervention based on its political purpose and likely challenges. At the same time, what this analysis suggests is that the lessons learnt in recent counterinsurgency operations must be retained, even if the term falls into disuse. This would also involve exporting the principles commonly associated with counterinsurgency to a broader realm of military scenarios, where they are often equally applicable.[25] For example, while counterinsurgency operations are said to be primarily political, the same holds for all types of military operations. Also, the exhortation in counterinsurgency theory to understand the environment is equally critical in wars of terri-

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[25] I am grateful to William F. Owen for this insight.

torial conquest or in traditional peacekeeping oper-
ations – though what it means to understand the
terrain will naturally depend on its dominant
features, one of which is the absence or presence of
civilian populations. As to the emphasis in counter-
insurgency theory on the requirements for effective
interventions – in terms of troops, knowledge, and
time – this is something with far broader validity,
touching upon the need to support and resource
operations properly to meet set objectives. Similarly,
the emphasis on maintaining the support of the local
population should not be a concern lodged exclusively
within the domain of counterinsurgency, much as the
need to adapt and learn faster than your enemy is a
cardinal requirement for all warfare, not just oper-
ations conducted against 'irregular adversaries'. These
principles apply to military intervention writ large,
but it has taken the rediscovery of counterinsurgency
– and two very difficult campaigns in Iraq and Afghan-
istan – to give them new meaning.

Policy Implications and Dilemmas

A deeper appreciation of military intervention, informed by the lessons learnt in recent years, presents some disturbing policy dilemmas about the capability and commitment of intervening states to perform such missions. This is particularly the case where campaigns are conducted, as they often are, to produce and support a political order that is stable, self-sustaining, and deemed preferable to the *status quo ante*. Three challenges emerge as particularly urgent, yet while they are familiar to most observers, finding practical solutions has proved anything but easy.[26]

First, meeting strategic objectives in foreign campaigns calls for substantial diplomatic investment and civilian expertise, yet intervening governments have been reluctant to invest in such resources or deploy them on short notice or for long periods. Even the EU's 'supposed civilian power', a source of pride among European governments, has been critiqued as 'largely illusory'; a 2009 survey of EU civilian capabilities found that EU members would need "to make a serious effort to improve their civilian capabilities if their words … are to sound anything other than hollow."[27] In the United States, several initiatives have been taken – the Office of the Coordinator of Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS), along with the establishment of various civilian reserve and response corps – to provide civilian support to military activities abroad. However, to date, a combination of congressional disinterest, limited resources, and structural impediments have prevented the establishment of a civilian instrument on the scale needed to operate significantly and over the long term alongside the military, in the midst of conflict. Pending such an investment, the armed forces of intervening governments have, and will again, be tasked with various political and reconstruction tasks for which they are untrained and generally unsuited.

One solution to this dilemma, put forward in US defence policy, is to ensure that civilian agencies undertake civilian tasks *as far as possible*, but that the military, with its resources and deployability, retains ownership and readiness for those components that exceed civilian capacity.[28] This theoretically fills any capability gaps, yet raises several concerns: How thin can and should the military be stretched? Does the military's usurpation of civilian responsibilities deter the development of a civilian alternative? And how does this affect relations with NGOs, which typically resist working with military forces? It is a highly imperfect arrangement to a dilemma that is typical of military operations, and that will remain so until more capable and deployable civilian capabilities are developed.

Second, it is not clear that the armed forces are appropriately trained or prepared for the complex missions on which they are increasingly deployed. Beyond the set of civilian duties foist on uniformed soldiers, the military challenge of operating in the midst of civilian populations and in a politically volatile atmosphere is itself formidable. Sent to a foreign and unfamiliar land, intervening armies are asked to assume the functions that exceed the capacity of the host-nation government, all while building its capabilities so as to enable an eventual transition to local authority – all of this in an environment replete with irregular threats, criminal groups, and pervasive insecurity, and with few resourced civilian partners to lean upon. Furthermore, even if these challenges are met, the intervention and the local actors it supports will fail unless the local populace sees them as legitimate, requiring a nuanced understanding and engagement with local fears and aspirations, actors and structures.

Gen. (ret.) Sir John Kiszely captures some of the bewildering demands placed on soldiers engaged in what he calls "post-modern" operations: they must possess the ability to "apply soft power as well as hard…; work in partnership with multinational, multi-agency organizations, civilian as well as military…; master information operations and engage successfully with the media; conduct persuasive dialogue

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26 This section draws on Ucko, "Peacebuilding After Afghanistan".

27 Daniel Korski and Richard Gowan, *Can the EU Rebuild Failing States?* (London: ECFR, 2009), pp. 22, 73.

28 See for example US Under Secretary for Defense, *Instruction 3000.05: Stability Operations* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 16 Sept. 2009), p. 1.

with local leaders...; mentally out-manoeuvre a wily and ruthless enemy; and, perhaps most often overlooked, measure progress appropriately."[29] As Kiszely adds, these competencies require an understanding of "the political context; the legal, moral and ethical complexities; culture and religion; how societies work; what constitutes good governance; the relationship between one's own armed forces and society; the notion of human security; the concept of legitimacy; the limitations on the utility of force; the psychology of one's opponents and the rest of the population."[30] It is difficult to see how the needed attributes can be mass-produced, though the answer would doubtlessly lie in radically reforming military education, training, recruitment criteria, as well as the institutional culture of the armed forces.[31]

Compounding this issue for smaller states is the problem of capacity, as even a capable force must also be appropriately sized for its area of operations, so as to maintain influence and sustain security gains until local forces can take over. Studies of counterinsurgency suggest a tentative minimum of "twenty counterinsurgents per thousand residents", but this ratio is highly context-dependent and purely illustrative.[32] What is clear is that while deploying a large number of troops is never strategically decisive, the effects of undermanning a campaign are almost always catastrophic. In Basra, where Britain downsized from 46,000 to 10,500 troops in the three months following the initial invasion in 2003, they lost the ability to provide security directly or to oversee events in the province, and had to rely on a limited number of local security forces.[33] The resulting security vacuum led to looting and instability, prevented much-needed reconstruction and the delivery of basic services, all of which prompted discontent and provided space for various Islamist militias to establish themselves. The British never themselves regained the initiative. Similarly, a lack of troops in Afghanistan has forced coalition forces to retreat from cleared areas or to move on before accountable host-nation forces can be deployed. As Gen. Stanley McChrystal, former ISAF commander, has noted: "[O]nce you clear something and don't hold it, you probably didn't really clear it. It has no staying power. In fact, I would argue that it's worse, because you create an expectation and then you dash it."[34] The alternative – to disperse too small a force over too large an area – has typically produces a similarly suboptimal outcome.[35]

This unavoidable demand for ground forces represents a particular problem for European engagement in future operations, as few European states can comfortably sustain a presence abroad that exceeds brigade or even battalion strength. Of course, one answer to this problem is the effective use of coalitions, yet as also highlighted by the ongoing campaign in Afghanistan, coalition warfare brings drawbacks as well as benefits: differing approaches, dispersal of authority, diffusion of responsibility, uneven levels of commitment and exposure to risk, along with an approach to decision-making that often – due to the need for consensus – represents the lowest common denominator. At a deeper level, coalition operations also confront thorny questions about the unity of political purpose and the clarity of strategic direction required to sustain engagement in a potentially protracted and politically divisive campaign.

This leads to the third – and arguably most fundamental – dilemma concerning the seriousness with which states engage in expeditionary operations and the sincerity with which stated aims are pursued. Certainly, the lack of investment by most governments in the relevant instruments, the lack of strategic thinking going into these endeavours, and the low financing allocated to them suggest a low overall prioritisation of expeditionary interventions.[36] This raises the broader question of why modern states

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29 John Kiszely, *Post-Modern Challenges for the Modern Warrior* (Cranfield: Defence Academy, 2007), p. 8.

30 Ibid.

31 One good example of the types of changes needed is provided by Andrew Mackay and Steve Tatham, "Behavioural Conflict: From General to Strategic Corporal; Complexity, Adaptation and Influence", *Shrivenham Papers* 9, Shrivenham Defence Academy, 2009.

32 James Quinlivan, "Force Requirements in Stability Operations", *Parameters* (Winter 1995): pp. 59–69.

33 UK Ministry of Defence, *Operations in Iraq: Lessons for the Future* (London: Director General Corporate Communication, Dec. 2003), p. 70.

34 "Interview: Gen. Stanley McCrystal", *Frontline,* PBS.org, 13 Oct. 2009.

35 At the time of writing, Sweden has 572 troops spread across four Afghan provinces (Balkh, Samangan, Jowzjan, and Sar-e-Pul), which cover a combined 55,000 square metres. Together with the ca. 200 Finnish troops also in this area, this amounts to a force distribution of 20 troops per 60,000 residents; a far cry, even with local security forces, from the tentative ratios set out in various counterinsurgency manuals.

36 Drawing on conference remarks by Rahul Chandran. See *The Role of Economic Instruments in Ending Conflict: Priorities and Constraints,*" report on IISS roundtable, Washington DC, 6 May 2009.

engage: to answer to domestic pressures to 'do something' in the face of crisis; to establish a higher international profile; to demonstrate commitment to 'strategic interests', however defined; or, in fact, to help achieve certain carefully defined results on the ground? These motivations augur variable levels of investment, which may explain why commitment has so often fallen short of operational requirements. This in turn raises the issue of whether, and how convincingly, foreign military interventions are linked to the national interest of the states and governments engaged in the related activities. Further intellectual investment on this end may be the most useful first step in addressing the down-river problems of commitment, capability, and performance, and in transforming the armed services and other relevant government departments accordingly.

Conclusion

Counterinsurgency has experienced a rapid rise and an equally rapid fall in recent years. Much of the criticism behind this fall has merit, but it also tends to ignore two fundamental points. First, counterinsurgency theory does not advocate for ambitious interventions in foreign countries, but provides guidelines and principles that have worked in similar settings and that may again be leaned upon if and when soldiers are deployed to stabilise war-torn countries. Careful study and research is needed to determine how best to apply these principles to ongoing and future operations, and it is fair to say that the theory is better at raising the right questions than in providing the answers.

Second, counterinsurgencies are rarely optional and future interventions are therefore likely to occur, even after the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq draw down. This is not to say that these campaigns should be entered into carelessly, or that they would even take the form of a 'counterinsurgency' or 'stability operation' *per se*. Instead, given the nature of the contemporary operating environment, most land-based campaigns seem likely to reproduce many of the challenges faced in today's counterinsurgencies: that of operating in an urban environment, in the midst of a civilian population, in a different language and culture, all while countering irregular adversaries. In the face of this enduring complexity, the principles and doctrine of counterinsurgency still have salience and a role to play.

After years of operational involvement in counterinsurgency, many of these principles may seem commonsensical, if extremely difficult to honour in practice. Even so, they still appear necessary in illustrating the logic of counterinsurgency and its distinctiveness from the types of campaigns for which most Western militaries train and prepare. This touches upon the second function of counterinsurgency doctrine: its use as a powerful corrective to the unhelpful tendency in the US military – but also elsewhere in the West – to divorce military affairs from political considerations, either by treating war as a elaborate targeting drill or by failing to grasp their intensely and unavoidably political nature.

It is on these grounds that the decline of counterinsurgency would be regrettable, if through this process the associated knowledge and learning of the last few years is also forgotten. The one good reason to abandon the term, one that merits careful consideration, would be precisely because of its divisive and distorting connotations; the aim would then be to talk more plainly about the nature of war, of peace, and of war-to-peace transitions. This in itself would be a step forward, away from artificial delineations between 'conventional' and 'irregular' operations and towards a defence posture based on the purposes of tomorrow's operations and on the environment in which they are most likely to be conducted. It would signify the intent, at long last, to understand and study war and armed intervention on their own terms.

Regardless of how the term 'counterinsurgency' fares in coming years, the complexity of modern operations will remain. Whether or not counterinsurgency is the concept through which this complexity is understood, the policy challenges in the way of successful engagement remain formidable. Even with the right intentions and analysis of what is required, it is uncertain whether the states most enthusiastic about third-party interventions have the necessary civilian capabilities to support their armed forces, or are able to prepare their soldiers for the range of challenges encountered in theatre. Finally, while these issues could be addressed through deep-rooted reform, it is far from certain whether there is sufficient institutional and political interest in such changes, or in the associated operations.

Those actors and organisations that are likely to maintain an expeditionary role despite these difficulties face a stark choice: muddle through and wish these complexities away; adapt institutionally to the challenges faced in the field; or retrench, opting for a less ambitious list of commitments. Of course, most organisations try to do a little of all three, though the option of muddling through often wins out. A more enlightened response would be to limit where and when to commit, borne out of prior miscalculation or, even, some degree of failure. But because the need to intervene is unlikely to disappear, it is also necessary to prepare for the likely challenges of future contingencies, not through a reductionist lens, but on their own terms.