

Worthless COIN? Why the West Should Keep Studying Counterinsurgency

Description

This Irregular Warfare Initiative article was originally posted through our partner organization, the Modern War Institute at West Point.

The US Army has lost interest in counterinsurgency training. Over the past year, the withdrawal from Afghanistan appears to have drawn a line under COIN's modern incarnation, while escalation in eastern Europe has focused policymakers' minds on the possibility of major combat operations against a near-peer adversary. As [US forces forward deploy](#) across Europe, bureaucrats are leveraging Ukraine to pitch [revolutionary training centers](#), doctrine rewrites, and advanced technology platforms, while commanders across NATO seek to fulfill the technocratic [vision of modern multidomain operations](#). COIN and irregular warfare more broadly is out of fashion.

The US military has been here before. In the wake of Vietnam, US military planners [purged](#) the Army's intellectual and organizational COIN capabilities with tragic ramifications for readiness and expertise as US forces went on to engage in a succession of insurgent-based conflicts in El Salvador, Colombia, Lebanon, and Somalia, to name a few, culminating in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Today, military strategists may be making a similar mistake. Understanding COIN remains of crucial relevance for military planners and practitioners. After all, Western involvement in Ukraine—which primarily involves providing external support to a resistance campaign or insurgency—is as irregular as it can be. The US Army's multidomain operations concept, meanwhile, highlights the use of irregular warfare, including providing support to insurgents and countering an enemy's proxies, to undermine and erode adversary capabilities from within. More broadly, as the West's experience in Ukraine should make clear, near-peer conflict is likely to involve all the forms of military activity that some hope were left behind in the counterinsurgency era. As the anniversary of the Afghanistan withdrawal approaches, it is worth reflecting on how the continued study of that conflict, and of insurgency and counterinsurgency more broadly, remain fundamental to understanding modern warfare.

Fear and Loathing in the Study of Counterinsurgency

Is the Western tradition of COIN a discredited concept? [Some would claim so](#). The convergence of several factors—the [antediluvian character](#) of colonial-era writings on counterinsurgency; the post-

Afghanistan rejection of nation building and liberal interventionism; the prospect of interstate war with near-peer enemies; and a perceived [change in the nature of insurgency itself as a form of political action](#)—seems to support these claims. This skeptical view of COIN’s relevance increasingly manifests itself in professional military education courses from [Shrivenham](#) in the United Kingdom to [Fort Leavenworth](#) in Kansas, where its prominence as a form of political-military action during the era of decolonization, and in the more recent wars of liberal intervention, appears to be of markedly decreasing interest to mid-career practitioners. Defense of empire and ambitious state-building projects are unlikely objectives of future interventions, the thinking goes, and so lessons learned from such campaigns have little to offer those operating in a vastly changed strategic environment.

Insurgency’s Enduring Centrality

That argument is misguided. From 1945 to 1999, [civil wars comprised 127 of 152 conflicts](#) that killed over one thousand people. Significantly longer in duration than interstate conflicts, they produced far greater refugee flows and resulted in five times as many deaths. The predominance of insurgency-based conflict has continued in the twenty-first century. Western practitioners can focus intently on interstate war, but they remain far more likely to fight in, or provide external support to, civil wars. The very existence of an [Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy](#) is a tacit acknowledgment that conventional overmatch will drive strife between near-peer adversaries to irregular warfare in third states, where great powers will seek to undermine competitors’ interests and influence while protecting their own. [As one analyst put it](#), the future “battlefield of Sino-U.S. military competition is more likely to be Venezuela or Myanmar than the South China Sea.” Indeed, the British defense secretary recently shared a similar view, observing that [British challenges to China might be focused on Africa](#) rather than the Asia-Pacific region.

The point to emphasize is that while concerns over a theoretical high-intensity war with China or Russia are entirely justified, low-intensity conflict still matters. Western military deployments in various parts of Africa and the Middle East in the form of [UN commitments](#) and [security force assistance programs](#), and the presence of [special operations forces](#) for other missions, are de facto acknowledgements that political instability in these regions remains of strategic importance. In Africa, a range of increasingly destabilizing conditions hold significant implications for [European security in particular](#). [Light-footprint counterterrorism strategies have been ineffective](#) against jihadism in northwest and central Africa, contributing to a [creep into the littoral states](#). Circumstances might dictate more robust involvement in the future. Military organizations ignorant of insurgency risk being [intellectually unprepared for what they will face](#). What form would Western-backed Ukrainian efforts take in a Russian-occupied Donbas? What techniques would Russian irregulars and their local proxies adopt in a reintegrated territory? How would Russia or China seek to politically stabilize captured

territory? Our partners and adversaries continue to think hard about insurgency and counterinsurgency. So should we.

Universal Lessons of COIN

So how does a study of COIN in Iraq, Algeria, or Vietnam benefit those tasked with addressing a deteriorating security situation in the Horn of Africa or the Levant, or in the aftermath of near-peer friction elsewhere? COIN's continued relevance lies in the fact that it is at heart an activity that draws military actors into an uncomfortable operating space somewhere between political turmoil and outright war. This inherent ambiguity serves as a useful tool for observing how military organizations function in, and are limited by, complex operational environments. We point to three themes in this respect: *politics*, in the sense of understanding how one's actions function within the turmoil of competitive political strife in an alien environment; *agency*, in the sense of the interests of local actors and the enduring effects of these upon outsiders's designs; and *uncertainty*, in the sense of how militaries function when exposed to the often-indeterminate nature of irregular operational environments.

Local Politics

War, as everyone professes to know, is an extension of politics. This is a tidy paradigm, but one that tends to view politics as separate from the battlefield. In COIN, however, military actors engage with politics at ground level, in real time. They often become participants in the day-to-day politics of a given conflict, not only in pursuit of their own ends but also because their presence affects the calculations of the myriad actors and audiences that comprise the fabric of that conflict. This requires more than simple familiarity with politics in a given space. It demands understanding how politics functions in that unique environment. What does power mean in this particular society? Who holds it? How is it acquired and through what channels is it exercised? What purchase might outsiders have on the process, and through what methods? If one is seeking to out-legitimize the adversary, [then what exactly does legitimacy mean](#)? How is it gained, sustained, or lost? In a society home to various customary forms of authority, how does one incorporate the roles of disparate authorities into strategic designs? Alternatively, if designs exclude certain actors, how does that society compensate for their absence?

These queries highlight how external interventions in internal conflict place intervening military actors in arcane political environs. External actors struggle to comprehend how local society functions in a practical sense and consequently the effects of their actions within that context. Feudalism crippled US attempts at political reform in South Vietnam. Afghanistan revealed the impossibility of separating coalition actions from tribal and kin networks stretching from the village to the presidential palace.

Sectarianism, and indeed factionalism within Iraqi Shiism, remained a crippling force in Iraq's political struggle. Such complexity also matters in comparatively benign environments. For instance, the phenomenon of [ethnic stacking](#) has caused recent security force assistance programs in Cameroon to bolster that government's ability to oppress minority opposition groups, stoking interethnic tensions and raising prospects for long-term violence. In modern warfare, ground-level politics matters.

Partner Agency

Agency, or the ability of actors to exercise free will, matters when external interveners seek to mobilize local groups or elites. This cooperation, vital to maximizing scarce resources and wielding influence indirectly, remains fundamental to irregular warfare. But if such conflicts are inherently fought for both local and interventionist objectives then the external actor's interests will compete with those of partners fighting for hyperlocalized purposes. Time and again, attempts by outsiders to exercise influence with and through local actors have [exposed an inversion of the expected power dynamic](#) whereby the supposedly dominant power finds that its preferences come a distant second to those of local clients. In Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, local actors and elites—warlords, tribes, ethnic groups, militias, security forces, provincial politicians, or national leaders—proved adept at using Western resources for the pursuit of personal and parochial interests counter to those of their backers.

How might agency manifest itself in near-peer conflict? When parity or deterrence drives great powers away from direct conflict to proxy wars in third states, external actors will be forced to contend with the *surrogates' market* of modern intrastate war. This sellers' market is a place where local forces shop their services to a vast array of available partners, increasingly including [expeditionary nonstate actors](#), and where the Cold War narrative of [firm proxy control and manipulation seldom holds](#). What of interstate conflict? Bertil Dunne's foundational [study of proxy warfare](#) concluded that it "seems as if it is impossible to demonstrate a single example of a state acting as a proxy for some other state."• Despite the tendency to [sensationalize Western support to Ukraine as proxy war](#), Ukraine still prosecutes war at its own behest and for its own objectives. The same will be true of any near-peer conflagration in which a distant belligerent relies on regional partners. From the Baltics to the South China Sea, locals will exercise agency in war and in its resolution, often trampling the best-laid plans of external interveners.

Persistent Uncertainty

Militaries like certainty, or at least the illusion thereof. Planners want to know who the enemy forces are, where they are, what they have, and what they intend to do with it. The fog of conventional war subverts fulfillment of these preferences. In the irregular warfare setting, however, uncertainty is

compounded due to the nature of the problems at hand. The operational environment becomes one where the enemy is often indistinguishable from the populace; where the defining challenges are political rather than military; and where fickle local partners, often perceiving intervening forces as a threat to their own political interests, can become hostile, spoiling elements. [Doctrine](#) compounds these ambiguities with further challenges. Can you cope with the upending of neat assumptions on the utility of force, and on the discrete, measurable relationship between your actions and their outcomes? Can you take responsibility for noncore tasks and lines of effort outside of your natural field of expertise? Can you, an expert in the application of violence, now become [skilled in the application of all the nonviolent techniques](#) that supposedly comprise successful COIN?

The study of COIN also provides an opportunity to critically examine key presumptions of dominant irregular warfare strategies. Do information operations actually [shape public opinion in the ways policymakers believe](#)? Does the injection of money into a fractured society bring desired political benefits? Does the [provision of public goods engender popular support](#) in conflict-ridden societies? Is the [good governance model](#), which holds that violence should take a back seat while interventions prioritize protecting the population and shaping loyalties through socioeconomic improvement, supported by evidence? Or does [targeted violence and territorial control](#) remain a more reliable determinant of a population's political loyalties?

Perhaps the true value of studying COIN is the required acceptance that there is no reliable formula for delivering influence and control in a setting of violent political rebellion. If the focus on near-peer conflict carries a subconscious Jominian bent for certainty, counterinsurgency does the opposite, forcing participants to contemplate war's inherent tendency toward unpredictability, lack of control, and counterintuitive outcomes.

Widening Perspectives, Narrowing Expectations

By extending military activity into the social, economic, and political dimensions of a conflict, COIN doctrine [chooses to meet complexity with complexity](#). History suggests, however, that the true utility of the military contribution to effective COIN lies in far narrower domains, including deterrence, the physical control of territory and the flow of goods and people, and the instrumental exercise of violence against selected parties. The ability of militaries to influence political loyalties through the provision of information, ideas, money, and goods is a far more fragile proposition. Instead of developing ever more ambitious doctrines whose complexity mimics that of irregular operational environments, perhaps Western militaries would benefit from greater introspection on the limits of their influence and control in insurgent-based conflicts.

The [Marine Corps experience in Helmand and Kandahar](#) is a useful case study. An organization that had contributed to and employed the nonviolent refinements of population-centric COIN nevertheless prioritized the application of violence against the adversary. This was partly a matter of organizational preference, but it also reflected an instinctive grasp of the fact that the political war against the Taliban had the best chance of succeeding if the insurgent group was denied the time and space to organize and act. The Marines' observable success from 2009 to 2011 resulted from a fundamental simplification of the problem, one that brought their formations' primary strengths rather than relative weaknesses to bear. That the success was temporary, or whether the case's implied prescriptions are correct, is to some extent a distraction. More important, arguably, was the practitioners' rapid and explicit recognition of the art of the possible.



COIN still matters. But it requires thinking beyond the obvious. The Malaya campaign is less about the hackneyed turn to hearts and minds than about the utility of robust military operations [in conjunction with political bargaining directed at powerful local political elites](#). A study of the Algerian Revolution should focus less on the brutal excesses of the French Army than on the way in which an intellectual clique within that army [willfully distorted its understanding of the problem at hand](#), with predictable results. A study of Iraq should be less about the pros and cons of COIN than the broader [complexity of local politics](#) and the sheer difficulty of manipulating local actors in the service of long-term strategic interests. And a study of Afghanistan might be less about hubris than the way in which the inherently reductive mantra of clear-hold-build [found itself unable to cope with the dynamics of civil war](#). Lastly, counterinsurgency offers not only a lens into how flawed assumptions and received wisdoms take root in doctrine, but also how powerful organizational preferences subvert that doctrine to [become the dominant shaper of military behaviors](#). These and other counterinsurgency-derived lessons on local politics, agency, and persistent uncertainty in modern war can benefit leaders on any battlefield.

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Main Image: U.S. troops and Afghan National Police visit a local village to survey its land for potential projects in Arghandab, Afghanistan, July 20, 2011. (Senior Airman Grovert Fuentes-Contreras, US Air Force)

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Date Created

2022/07/26