Will Culture Defeat Strategy? The British Military And Irregular Warfare After Afghanistan And Iraq

Description

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

In their recent introduction to the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Jacob Shapiro and Patrick Howell propose that a combination of Russian revanchism and Chinaâ??s increasingly muscular global ambitions provides ample opportunity for friction to occur in a range of contested spaces, and thus for the re-emergence of irregular warfare (IW) as a persistent operational requirement for Western forces. The authors warn pointedly against mimicking the post-Vietnam era, when IW was abandoned by the US Army in favor of a renewed focus on major combat operations against peer and near-peer enemies. Responsibility for this lesser form of warâ??counterinsurgency in particularâ??was devolved to special operations forces (SOF) alone. This institutional and intellectual apartheid, the authors argue, was instrumental in dictating that the bulk of US conventional forces would be largely unprepared when eventually required to engage again, at scale, with the demands of IW in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is interesting from a British perspective to ponder these warnings. On the first point, and at face value at least, the British governmentâ??s recent flagship integrated review of security, defense, development, and foreign policy displays a willing appetite to recognize irregular warfare as a core mission for UK forces. Talk of persistent engagement in hostile environments populated by a range of violet nonstate actors and the likelihood of state-on-state competition in the so-called gray zone has resulted in the formation of a new special operations Ranger Regiment. The regiment is designed to function specifically in such environments and to operate alongside local allies and proxies. The UKâ??s 6th Division and its component 77th Brigade promise to deliver information operations and unconventional capabilities for operations conducted below the threshold of war while the Royal Marines have given notice of their intent to recast themselves (in part) as gray zone operators. But these are all specialist formationsâ??a combination of tier-2 SOF and other niche units. The broader British Army remains untouched by such innovations or taskings.

This is where Shapiro and Howellâ??s substantive point in relation to the mistakes of the post-Vietnam era is particularly germane. The US Armyâ??s broader institutional willingness to sideline thinking about irregular warfare over the course of the four decades following Vietnam is held to have

undermined that organizationâ??s subsequent performance in the counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. But what of a Western army that approached its missions in Iraq and Afghanistan having suffered no similar trauma during those preceding decades? One that was, conversely, supremely confident in its expertise in counterinsurgency, which considered itself to have a deeply entrenched institutional memory that would allow it to navigate irregular warfareâ??s specific complexities and thus greeted the prospect of counterinsurgency with some relish?

That was the British Army. And the question, of course, is a rhetorical one. An organization that considered itself well suited to the demands of IW in the form of counterinsurgency and stabilization operations instead encountered great difficulty in understanding how to approach a war where military supremacy counted for little, and which furthermore demanded an uncanny ability to conceptualize violence and politics as being fundamental components of the same operating space. In this way the chastening experience of the British Army in places such as Basra and Helmand from 2003 to 2011 raises questions as to the extent to which it can function as an effective actor in those forms of irregular conflict that dislocate its basic understanding of how war works.

Irregular Warfare: Visualizing Counterinsurgency as Armed Politics

The comforting Clausewitzian paradigm of war proposes that military actions create the space for a political victory. Enemy forces are held or defeated, enabling a political settlement to be reached or imposed. War is fought for political objectives certainly, but the prosecution of politics (i.e., compromise, negotiation, and bargaining) ordinarily sits outside of the realm of military activity. Militaries appear comfortable with this construct, but counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan reflected for the British and indeed everyone else a different sort of reality. Military commanders in both arenas found themselves inhabiting a space infused by multifarious actors and audiences, many of which were prone to adopt constantly shifting identities. Insurgents, host-government forces and their political sponsors, local religious figureheads, tribal communities, economic and political opportunists; ethnic, sectarian, or militant groupings allied to rival regional actors, local civilians, other government departments: all sought to exert influence on the outcome of events. It was, as Emile Simpson describes, a â??patchwork quiltâ?• of a battlespace whereby military and political considerations were one and the same, and where violent and nonviolent forms of action were required to be undertaken in parallel.

In both Basra and Helmand, the seductively simple mantra of separating the insurgent from the population while enhancing host-government legitimacy hid competing challenges and imperatives. Political measures were required to be drawn into the military sphere but, due to the inherent complexity of the operating environment, commanders were simultaneously denied any intuitive understanding of the relationship between the two. In combination with the targeted application of

lethal violence against a barely distinguishable enemy, soldiers were required to grapple with hidden and often invisible facets of the sociopolitical kaleidoscope that confronted them. They had to correctly sift and identify the predominant causes of conflict at a local level, locate powerful local elements whose support might be beneficial, and, using a variety of incentives, simultaneously engineer forms of direct and indirect influence in the face of powerful competing forces. These alliances, to be constructed amid entirely fluid circumstances, determined largely by local balance-of-power politics, were vulnerable to the vicissitudes of intrinsically complex civil wars that demanded the active interference of neighboring actors (Iran in the case of southern Iraq, Pakistan in the case of Helmand). All of this had to be done in such a way as to point toward the realization of potentially unfeasible political objectives set by distant policymakers in faraway capitals.

In support of these overtly political requirements, emergent counterinsurgency and stabilization doctrines sought to guide and direct military actors by adopting the language of politics. Doctrine now spoke of audiences and actors; of influence, narratives and legitimacy; and of governance and identity. It reminded commanders that their ultimate objective was to â??reinforce culturally appropriate political primacy within the context of host-nation systems.â?• As one senior coalition officer reminded his forces, military actors in places such as Afghanistan (and by extension Iraq) needed to understand the war â??as a political campaign, albeit a violent one.â?• All good stuff theoretically, in the sense that both doctrine and senior command appeared to recognize not only the complexity of the operating environment but the fundamental relationship of ground-level politics to the strategic objectives at hand, and the requirement for military actors to engage on that basis. Yet the significance of such language was less its belated grasp of reality than the assumption underpinning itâ??namely, that the responsibility for helping wage a form of armed brain surgery in somewhere as politically febrile as Afghanistan or southern Iraq was now the preserve of a professional military class that, for reasons of organizational identity and bureaucratic politics, brought with it into theater a thoroughly competing understanding of how things should be done.

The Military Operational Code: Counterinsurgencyâ??s Hidden Hand

Sherard Cowper-Coles, British ambassador to Kabul from 2007 to 2009, observed the rotation of eight brigades through Helmand during his tenure. Each of them, he noted, exhibited the same basic behaviors. First and foremost was the prioritization of combatâ??specifically offensive operationsâ??as the primary activity. There appeared to be little interest in recognizing stabilization or counterinsurgency as a political endeavor and even less interest in coordinating military operations with national political strategy. With military priorities firmly established, the brigade would then plan and mount a signature large-scale kinetic operation. Each operation would be lauded as critically important, yet each would achieve the same underwhelming result: the suppression of Taliban activity

for a time but without any discernible change to the political landscape.

What Cowper-Coles was witnessing was a surface manifestation of what has been described as the military operational code (MOC). An operational code is a set of normative beliefs about certain rules of action. These beliefs frame the actorâ??s perception and diagnosis both of the environment in general and of specific situations therein and provide guidelines for choices of action. In other words, an operational code shapes the actions and policies of an organization in predictable ways. The MOC proposes that, notable outliers notwithstanding, military behaviors in counterinsurgency are largely dictated by a set of core beliefs that reflect the dominant logic of the military profession, namely an inherent preference for the application of force in order to compel submission.

The MOC is a deeply complex phenomenon, but in basic terms it shapes military actions in counterinsurgency in certain critical ways. The first is that the symptoms of insurgency or rebellionâ??mass violence, armed opponents, and small battlesâ??lend the impression, near enough, of conventional war. Consequently, rather than considering the best (i.e., potentially nonmilitary) strategy to restore state authority, military commanders tend instinctively to assume that the military defeat of a designated opponent is prerequisite to dictating the desired political outcome. This encourages the immediate application of force before other nonviolent initiatives can take place. The tactical victories invariably won by the counterinsurgent create a sense of measurable success but only serve to obscure the lack of progress being made toward a durable political settlement. Additional resources have little effect in resolving this dilemma. Consequently, militaries begin to adopt more recognizably political methods (i.e., the use of psychological, informational, and financial or economic measures) to aid control over the behavior of both the enemy and the broader populationâ??the sorts of activities seen during the shift by British forces to more of a counterinsurgency mindset in Basra in 2007 to 2008, and in Helmand in 2008 to 2011. But problems remain. The inability to measure the political effects of their actions leads military actors to instead measure the political tasks they perform (e.g., the number of wells dug, roads built, villages resettled, etc). Reliance on measures of performance in turn lead them to overstate their success in the political dimension. More importantly, the adoption of such methods generally represents the limit of the organizationâ??s willingness to adjust behaviors in response to the political nature of problem. Unable to properly master the political domain, both as a consequence of a lack of real understanding as to how it functioned *in situ*, as well as a general distaste for the murky business of politics *per se*, militaries return to coercive methods in the hopes that some combination of population control and renewed offensives will deliver victory.

The MOC is a compelling explanatory theory. Despite being based upon case studies drawn from the mid-1940s to the 1980s, it perfectly predicted the flow of events in Helmand from 2006 to 2014. From the initial deployment of British paratroopers in 2006 in which combat was the defining activity to the

rapid beefing up of numbers over the following three years where successive brigades simply â?? mowed the lawn,â?• the limited and ineffective adoption of political counterinsurgency failed to disguise a basic preference for kinetic operations. After 2011, any semblance of a population-centric approach was rejected in favor of prioritizing SOF â??kill or captureâ?• operations, while the broader combat effort was farmed out to Afghan government forces or locally raised militias. From beginning to end, the behavior of British and indeed US units faithfully followed the prescription laid out. Political behaviors (and language in the form of doctrine) were evident, after a fashion. But the techniques were deployed in such a way as to ensure their compatibility with the favored paradigm of a violent response to small war, and then eventually abandoned. In essence, political lip service masked a continued preference for violent action.

Going Forward: Organizational Preparedness for Irregular Warfare

The importance of the MOC lies in the way it filled the gap left by counterinsurgency doctrine, itself arguably a form of elite capture that not only failed to reflect the wider beliefs and preferences of the organizations to which it was directed but which at the same time failed to address key dimensions of the debate at hand. What is the instrumental role of violence in civil war, specifically? How do actors and populations trapped within such scenarios make their choices? What precisely does counterinsurgency theory mean when it talks of legitimacy? How does that legitimacy emerge, how is it sustained, how does it die? How does a soldier measure desirable forms of political progress? And what precisely is the metric used to judge whether a society is sufficiently stabilized? Even with doctrine to hand, military actors were unsighted as to fundamental considerations that shaped the operating environment, unable to perceive what genuinely mattered and what was truly dictating events around them. Trapped in the arcane and inherently ambiguous cosmos of ground-level politics amid alien and inhospitable societies, soldiers and Marines chose to understand such conflicts on their terms, in a way that reflected their competencies, their deep and inherent preferences, and their need to perceive a logic in what they were doing.

None of the above is designed to propose that Iraq and Afghanistan be used as the baseline guide as to the likely demands of any future irregular warfare scenario where the British Army is concerned. What it serves as, however, is an opportunity to ask some pertinent questions. While the integrated review appears to forge specific new IW capabilities, these are narrow and limited in scope, and predicated upon the documentâ??s willingness to exclude counterinsurgency or stabilization operations from its considerations, prioritizing a narrower counterterrorism role in their place. IW is by definition is a broad church, however. Thus the UK theoretically still requires an army able to function, in a combative sense, outside of high-end warfighting but still within complex and violent scenarios that require the application of military force.

The first question to mind therefore is whether the post-Afghanistan era will be Britainâ??s own post-Vietnam moment, as the new integrated review makes IW the preserve of select pockets of the British Army and Royal Marines to the exclusion of everyone else, robbing the wider force of the opportunity to think hard about the potential requirements for irregular warfare beyond a narrow Russian-centric focus. This is a particularly pertinent concern in view of the incrementally escalating British military deployment to Mali by mainly conventional, nonspecialist formations tasked with aiding the suppression of Islamic State affiliates. The second question is whether it actually makes any difference. Certainly, the willingness of the integrated review to completely sidestep the wider British Armyâ??s preparedness for the full range of potential IW missions is concerning. But questions need to go much deeper than the rights or wrongs of specific policy reviews. They should instead motivate us to examine how our militaries as a whole seek to cope with the problem of layered conflicts that purposely blur the lines between war and politics and which obscure the utility of military power. Can these problems ever be addressed by enhancements to training, education, or doctrine, or will the military approach to the demands of such missions always be driven by a narrow set of values, preferences, and competencies?

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