Are Some Militaries Better at Counterinsurgency than Others

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Dr. Colin Jackson 00:05
I think we systematically overstate our agency, our degree of influence in these conflicts and we think more or less implicitly, sometimes explicitly, that our influence is proportional to our firepower or our manpower. And I think that that's not true. Because we're a big blind giant most of the time.

Dr. Austin Long 00:24
I think the watchword has to be humility, right. So you have to be humble in what you can achieve. And the corollary to that is endurance is more important than rapid effect. So in conventional conflict, you want to achieve decisive victory as quickly as possible. Because so much of what matters in these conflicts is informational, staying in power is more important.

Kyle Atwell 00:28
Welcome to Episode Nine of the Irregular Warfare Podcast. Your hosts today are myself Kyle Atwell, and my co-host, Nick Lopes. In today's episode, we discuss what characteristics of military organizations influence success in counterinsurgency warfare.

Nick Lopez 01:06
Our two guests start by framing where counterinsurgency falls in current national security priorities. They then move on to debate whether some military organizations are more effective at counterinsurgency than others, what characteristics support learning and influence accessing COIN, and what lessons we can derive from recent COIN experiences for how to organize for, and how to fight counterinsurgency warfare in the future.

Kyle Atwell 01:30
Dr. Colin Jackson is chairman of the Strategic and Operational Research Department at the US Naval War College, an officer in the United States Army Reserve, and the former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia. He earned his PhD from MIT and has both extensive practitioner and research experience focusing on counterinsurgency.

Nick Lopez 01:51
Dr. Austin Long is currently a senior policy adviser in the Department of Defense. Previously, Dr. Long was an assistant professor at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. He published "The Soul of Armies: Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Military Culture in the US and UK", which will serve as a foundation for today's discussion.

Kyle Atwell 02:13
You are listening to the Irregular Warfare Podcast, a joint production of the Princeton Empirical Studies of Conflict Project and the Modern War Institute at West Point, dedicated to bridging the gap between scholars and practitioners to support the community of irregular warfare professionals. Here's our conversation with Colin and Austin. Colin Jackson and Austin Long. Welcome to the Irregular Warfare Podcast and thank you for joining us today.

Dr. Austin Long 02:42
Pleasure, thank you for the invitation.

Dr. Colin Jackson 02:44
Good to be here.

Kyle Atwell 02:45
So our conversation today is focusing on why some militaries do counterinsurgency better than others. The topic of your book, Austin, and I'd like to start by asking, what motivated you to write this book and why do you think it's an important national security issue?

Dr. Austin Long 02:59
Sure. So I'll give a little bit of backstory on the book. As an undergrad at Georgia Tech, I thought I wanted to design nuclear weapons, which has nothing to do with this. But I picked up a book called "The Army in Vietnam" by Andrew Krepinevich, just was on sale at the US bookstore. And I was like Vietnam, we didn't cover that much in high school classes. I've seen "Apocalypse Now," that's probably not entirely historically accurate. So maybe I should learn something about it. And the, the punchline of that book is the US Army was full of hubris, and was basically stupid in Vietnam. And that's why the war went the way it did. And I spent the next couple of decades sort of chewing on that. And the answer I came to is not quite the same answer. But why is it important for national security? It's important for national security, because the kind of conflicts that whether you want to put it under the rubric of counterinsurgency or irregular warfare, these are conflicts the United States, more or less, serially finds itself in and there may be shorter or longer breaks, there may be higher or lower intensities, but United States, given its global ambitions ends up in these conflicts and how we conduct the conflict, how we fight those wars is extremely meaningful. But I think also beyond just the counterinsurgency/irregular warfare rubric, thinking about why organizations approach that problem, the way they do tells us something about how they try to solve problems.

Dr. Colin Jackson 04:12
I would echo a lot of the things that Austin's had to say. I mean, I think I would sharpen it a little bit. I, not only do we find ourselves in these straits frequently, we generally don't choose to become involved

in this category of problem. And I think they're the sort of fairy tales we tell ourselves recently that, boy, we learned our lesson from that, well, we'll never do that again, right, just as we did sort of tell ourselves the same story after Vietnam. I'm less convinced, I think we're going to be here again, in some way, shape, or form. And that's why it's important to actually care about this stuff. Two other sort of downer observations. One is that not only are we slow to learn as military organizations, we generally learn the wrong things. We draw flawed inferences from our experiences. And then what is more, even when we do sort of in the final minutes of the fourth quarter stumble on answers that are semi-helpful, we purge them pretty quickly in the, in the wake of these conflicts, we may be entering a phase like that right now where all of the, all the sizzle in the defense community is the National Defense Strategy, returned to large scale conventional operations and more or less trying to cut the cord on small wars, irregular wars, civil war, whatever you want to call it. I don't think we'll get that choice. I think we'll be back here again, I think that these things will continue to simmer in a lot of areas. And while we may not want to have the bulk of our defense effort or attention focused on this problem, we're going to have some part of it focused on this problem for a very, very long time.

Dr. Austin Long 05:38
And I'll just pick up there and say, Colin's point about the fact that we tell ourselves a story, well, damn, that was stupid, I'm not doing that again, that I think it's going to be perennial. And it's really problematic because it means we not only kind of forget, but we almost actively burn out brain cells that we spent learning these lessons. I spent the 1990s studying counterinsurgency. And when I would tell people that, they would look at me like I said I was studying hoplite warfare, right? They were like, yeah, well, that was some great Cold War stuff, we're not doing that again. And then you know, post 2001, suddenly, you can spell COIN, you're likely a genius, right? Because you actually kind of have looked at this before. That's kind of my concern to Colin's point, I'm fully on board with the National Defense Strategy and reorienting to great power conflict. But you don't generally get to, I mean, in a weird way, you do get to choose these conflicts, right. I mean, we could have chosen not to participate in Vietnam, we could certainly have chosen not to invade Iraq. But the, but Colin's basic point that if you want your society, your state to assume a certain role in international politics, almost every state that tries to assume the kind of role the United States had these past 70 years ends up in some form or fashion or these conflicts.

Kyle Atwell 06:49
Austin, you're working in DoD in kind of a different capacity now. But do you see an actual lack of interest in pivot as far as DoD leaders' interest in irregular warfare?

Dr. Austin Long 07:01
I mean, I think the National Defense Strategy has become totemic, right. And it's certainly understandable on one level where you want organizations to fall in line behind your national strategy, but it has also become just the thing you conjure by, whether it's resources or why I'm doing this or justification to senior leaders. And to, you know, credit to the to the authors of the NDS I mean, Elbridge Colby, who was the DASD at the time is a good friend. I mean, there was an explicit choice of, we're not going to try to rush these missions, we sort of understand that we still have these commitments, but we're going to try to rebalance. I think part of the issue, though, is it's really hard to rebalance. Right? When you have things like Colin's talking about in terms of what organizations want to do, you have

finite resources, you have finite senior leader attention. So what's, you know, in theory of rebalance becomes a, great power competition is all we care about. Right? And that's, I mean, I think that's the fact of what you end up with, even if that was maybe not the intention of any individual senior leader, who have to divide their time including with COVID, right, which when the NDS was written, nobody sort of anticipated that we'd have pandemic as a national security threat. But that's where we are.

Dr. Colin Jackson 08:14
Yeah, so I was there at the tail end of developing the NDS, and I walked into this meeting, it was early in my time in the Pentagon, and foolishly when they asked for comments around the table, I actually preferred my input. And then there was like, stunned silence afterwards. And the issue was precisely this, I went through the document and the NDS draft that I was looking at mentioned Afghanistan twice, twice in the entire document. And I said, well, this is the largest war we're running and not to be parochial about it but everyone who has half a brain wants to unlock the annuity that's currently allocated to something it's secondary in importance. I grant that argument. However, it is one thing to say one thing is more important than the other, it's an entirely different problem to say, how are we going to disengage from problems of secondary importance? Or how are we going to manage problems of secondary importance, which don't have easy endpoints? And stunned silence around the table. You know, it's like, okay, well, can we get back to talking about China and Russia? And I do feel vindicated. I then sat for two years watching this process, and boy, is it sticky, these problems, right. Syria and Afghanistan, everybody can stand up and say they want to get out of these things. But right as they get to the 11th hour they're like, oh, but there are consequences. What does completely disengaging mean? Oh, I have a residual interest here of some proportion? How might I guarantee that in efficient way? And so this is why these things are to some extent, my opinion not going to go away, whether you define them as terrorism problems, failed states, civil wars dot, dot, dot, dot dot.

Kyle Atwell 09:49
Austin, your book asked the question why some armies are better at fighting counterinsurgency than others and you compare the US Army, the US Marine Corps and the British Army performance in different counterinsurgency campaigns. What did you find in your research?

Dr. Austin Long 10:04
So the punchline of the book is that organizations, military organizations in particular, have formative experiences, which I call the first war, but it could be a series of wars, but it's how the organization comes to think of itself as a professional military. And so I argue that for the United States Army, it's really the Civil War. The Civil War is really the first total war, it doesn't have all the industrial accoutrements of World War One and World War Two, but it's mass mobilization, this fundamentally reorients how the army thinks of itself. The United States is great for social scientists, in that we functionally have two armies, we have this other thing called the Marine Corps, which is basically a second land army and a third Air Force and all these other great things. The Marine Corps ends up looking a lot more like what the US Army probably would have looked like, had we not had the Civil War experience. Its formative experiences of professional military are sort of the Banana Wars that comes out of, the Navy becomes professional, the Marine Corps has to find a mission, the mission is doing things a mass mobilization army is not really great at. So you end up with these two armies that look like what I call archetypes of conflict. One is this mass mobilization army that's very small in peacetime,

but gets very big very quickly to apply industrial power. And then you have this other thing that's focused on small units interacting with the State Department and other sort of non-military organizations. And this is what the British Army ends up looking like, it too has this sort of colonial constabulary experience. And so what you end up with is organizations that think of themselves and other organizations differently, how they interact with them, et cetera. I will stipulate that the book started out, why are some organizations better at COIN than others? And it really ended up at why did they approach the problem differently? So Austin, in talking about your research, I'd like to take a step back. So what makes counterinsurgency a unique problem set? And how is it a unique environment for organizations to adapt to? For me, the big challenge of COIN is it's such an ambiguous information environment for military organizations, right? If you're fighting World War One, and not had any clue about how machine guns and barbed wire and rapid firing artillery gonna work, but this, the environment will teach you pretty quickly or you're out of the war. So that's a very strong information signal. Like, why do our guys keep getting slaughtered? Right, it's these things.

Nick Lopez 12:25
Feedback loop's instantaneous.

Dr. Austin Long 12:27
The feedback loop is very tight. And it still takes a while to learn. But people start learning, right? The signal is just kind of hitting you in the face. For counterinsurgency, particularly of the kind we're talking about which is sort of expeditionary counterinsurgency, fighting an away game, the selection pressure isn't that high, right? There's some things that are really highly kinetic, and whether it's in Baghdad during the surge, whether it's during the Tet Offensive whenever, but then there's lots of signal that's not that violent. It's more assassinations, and roadside bombs and who hates who in my neighborhood, and why do they hate each other and these things that are awfully murky. And there in the information environment, what you want to pick up on is really strongly filtered by what your organization thinks is important. So if your organization thinks doing focus is important, then that's what you're going to focus on, right. And you're going to want to take down targets, whether it's through sweep and clear kind of operations, whether it's through night raids, however you want to do it, if your organization is sort of focused on other things, there's plenty of that going on as well, that you can kind of key in on. So I think that's the real challenge is that the environment is so ambiguous, once the environment becomes less ambiguous, most military organizations, they can kind of figure some solution out. And they you know, if they don't figure it out quickly enough, they may lose the war, but they'll get there if they have time.

Dr. Colin Jackson 13:41
I agree completely with Austin, that militaries struggle primarily because they can't really interpret feedback in a coherent and effective way and translate it into action that gets them closer to what I would say is their goal in almost all of these things, which is to restore sort of organized political submission at an acceptable cost in terms of resources and manpower. Typically, in expeditionary COIN, the name of the game is to sort of not only put the lid on it, but to see it sort of gel enough that you can walk away without the thing imploding. I would quibble a little bit with ambiguous. Ambiguous is one way of putting it, I think there's a selective misinterpretation of noise that's signal and signal is noise. In other words, a lot of the things that you see that are symptoms of small-scale warfare, you know, ambushes, bombings, all these kinds of things. A military organization is primed with its existing

sort of apparatus to interpret those as familiar events, things that are consistent with the way that they think about war as battle in a Clausewitzian sense, and they lock on to those things. They say, okay, this is the essence of the problem. The essence of the problem is the violence. That's to misunderstand what's going on here. The what's really going on here is a competition for all the marbles, and it's among locals. The locals are renting muscle from contending forces, but at the bottom line this is about, you know, Laswell's comment "politics is who gets what, when, and how." And that's what the whole war is about. The firecrackers going off all over the place are symptoms of that underlying struggle. But militaries typically lock on to the symptoms and say, okay, I'm in symptom suppression, I'm measuring my performance in terms of those symptoms, not in terms of what is the nature of the struggle going on here in the civil war? What are the combatant parties? And what's their game? My sort of puzzling on this both as a, as a scholar and as a practitioner has been, why is it that the things we do as military organizations tend to obscure this larger game rather than clarify it? And so I think Austin's exactly right, that the signal processing is torqued up here. I'm even more pessimistic, I think that it's not "some armies are good, and some are better." I think most of them are terrible, particularly if left to their own devices. And that doesn't mean that there can't be individual learning. It's not a dangling people individually, it's not because military officers aren't smart, or adaptive or whatever, quite the opposite. It's that smart people indoctrinated into these systems of implicit beliefs that have a very, very hard time suppressing what are understandable reflexes that are appropriate in conventional war and totally inappropriate in some instances in civil war. So my punch line is like, why do militaries struggle? Because they misunderstand the politics of civil war.

Dr. Austin Long 16:23
So I would say, you know, the thing that I would point to that I do think is different between militaries is the extent to which they're willing to engage with, in a very substantial way, outside organizations. You know, the Marines were called, at one point, the State Department's army, right, they, because they interfaced with it so much in these overseas expeditions. The Brits are, you know, their army knows it's an arm of the Foreign Office, essentially. Both of them are highly reliant on other militaries for what they do. So the Marines rely on the US Navy, the British Army, if it wants to get anywhere, it has to rely on the British Navy to some extent, right. And so the, they're, they're just these networks of, yeah, we're comfortable operating with and being the action arm of these other entities in a way that the US Army, which as I said, it's experience was total war, there was nobody else that was going to solve the Civil War for the US Army. There was nobody else that was going to solve World War Two for the US Army. They needed the Navy to get across the ocean. But once they were across the ocean, they got this, right. And so it's just a very different view of what your interactions with other organizations are. And you know, look, the other organizations can be frustrating. They can be, they can be annoying, they often have fewer resources, certainly than the mobilized US Army. But they do bring a different perspective, as Colin was sort of alluding to, and your willingness to interface with that perspective and work with it, I think does matter. If none of that is there as the Brits ran into in Basra, right. The Brits sort of showed up in Basra in 2003, 2004, and were like, okay, we're gonna do what we did in Northern Ireland. Well, where's the Constabulary? Where's MI5? Where's the foreign- oh, none of that stuff's here. And they end up sort of doing, running the Northern Ireland playbook with none of those things. And the result is they empower warlords and militias. And it all goes to hell in a handbasket. So, even when you're an organization that's "good at counterinsurgency," I think a lot of it is you're good at taking

things and taking opportunities that may be available. If none of those opportunities are available, it's gonna be a hard road to hoe regardless.

Kyle Atwell 18:21
So it sounds like you have somewhat different answers to the question of why or even whether some military organizations are better at COIN than others. If I'm keeping up, Austin, argues some organizations are better at COIN in part due to their openness to working with other organizations. And Colin argues, all military organizations are essentially similar and work through the same processes when they're put into a COIN environment.

Dr. Colin Jackson 18:46
Yeah, so this is one of these classic ones were like John Lewis Gaddis would call it a distinction between a lumper and a splitter argument. You know, I think Austin's argument, it's more of a splitter one, where he's seeing on balance, substantial variation in terms of, you know, the openness, as he's saying, of some armies or services to integrating with non-military organizations. I look at the same data set, and I'm like, they seem to, to my eye to share more in common, than they differ. So I started on the same puzzle. And I was interested in this question of are the British good at counterinsurgency. So I look at this and I see not only within the British tradition, tremendous variation in terms of their performance, which I think, you know, Austin fairly alluded to in the, in the Iraq case, but I also see a lot of commonality between the militaries that people wouldn't normally associate. Between the American and British militaries, the British and French militaries. So I just see less variation on that dimension. I would agree with Austin wholeheartedly that the ability to work and play well with others is a key determinant of whether you're going to do well in these sorts of political competitions and civil war.

Nick Lopez 19:49
Colin, I'm interested to know if you see a, another explanation as to why some armies are better at conducting expeditionary COIN and some are just not.

Dr. Colin Jackson 20:01
I would look to a different sort of explanatory variable which is implicit in his comparison Marine Corps and Army. I think scale matters and scale hurts. The bigger the Green Machine is, the less it wants to listen to partners or other departments or agencies. And that's I think the thing that bedevils the army more so than its foundation experiences, because I think that the control is, as the army got smaller, let's say in Afghanistan, dramatically smaller, I think it also became, by necessity, more innovative in certain dimensions. And to me that that is part of the sort of overarching theory here. I think these military organizations start to be creative when they must be creative, when they don't have enough Schlitz to do what they want. And that is very heretical, right? Because when you hear most people talking about these things, senior military commanders are like, hey, I can win the war for you in fill in the blank. But you got to give me more men, more time, more resources. What I found, both in my research and in my practical experience is often it's the opposite. And that hurts, right? Because that's not typically-

Dr. Austin Long 21:06
Are you, are you saying surges don't help win these things? It sounds like that might be what you're saying. And that's a lot to talk about. So I'll say this about scale. I, the reason I think the organization's view of itself in war matters is if you look at the US Army, in the sort of post-Civil War through World War One period, it's tiny, right? It's 10s of 1000s of guys scattered across the entire country. The Marine Corps in Vietnam is more than an order of magnitude larger. And yet the Marine Corps in Vietnam with nearly 300,000 men under arms, thinks of itself in the way that I sort of described, which is, agh, we're focused on small units and doing small stuff and interfacing and blah, blah, blah. Whereas the Army of the post-Civil War, pre-World War Two period thinks of itself as we're the nucleus that will blow up like a, like a balloon full of missiles, right, where we're going to grow to be a huge total force that will be ready to fight a mass mobilization war. And so even when they're small, they think of themselves as going to be big. And even when the Marines get big, they think of themselves as "small." So that's why I think the organization's view of itself matters.

Nick Lopez 22:13
Colin, earlier, you mentioned that some militaries struggle with expeditionary COIN, because they, they have trouble understanding the local politics and those dynamics involved. Can we dig into that a little bit more?

Dr. Colin Jackson 22:27
An old student of mine at the War College, a battalion commander out of Ramadi, in the 05 timeframe told us this great story. And you know, he was living the dream in Ramadi where every time they rolled out the government center, they would get blown up, you know, attack, complex ambush, IEDs, all this kind of stuff. And they would go to weekly engagement meetings in Ramadi, and they'd show up, it was always the same guys. And the conversation would go something like this: Marines would say, well, you know, we're here to help you, but we can only help you, if you let us help you. This violence is preventing us from doing all these positive things for you out here, dot, dot, dot, why can't we get along? And the answer from the Greek chorus week after week was essentially well, this is really unfortunate how you get blown up every time you roll out the gate. But this really isn't about us. This is people from out of town who are doing it to you. And we wish we could help you but we really can't. And one day they walk into the engagement meeting and this is late, I think it's like in December of 05, and they walk into the engagement meeting. And it's a totally different set of people completely. Same meeting, different folks. And they're looking around the room. And it's a bunch of people from Target folders, people they think who are in Syria, senior Imams, the whole thing. And they're like, what's going on here? And instead of the same story back and forth, the Iraqis open and they say, what are we going to need to do to get you guys to leave? And the conversation goes on for some time. But what becomes clear in the course of the conversation is that's not exactly what they mean. What they mean is we're willing to work with you to get rid of these out of towners, but only under the following circumstances. And we want to work with you on that. And my buddy's comment on this was in the acne of humility, and I think the mark of really successful people in counterinsurgency is frequently intellectual humility. He goes, we didn't go from being idiots to geniuses overnight, something changed. The reason I tell this long story is I would locate what is changing in Iraq. What is changing at various times in Afghanistan as much or more in the, the core to the locals as it is in terms of doctrinal innovation, right? Because my students' observation of the battalion commander was look, I'm doing

the same thing. I'm like a model of consistency. And then one day they walk in, and they want to play ball, what change, right. But the bottom line was, it was a change in calculations on the Iraqi side, among groups that had been insurgents, who had been in the gray zone, who knew who the AQI guys were, it was a change in their calculation that led them to switch sides.

Nick Lopez 24:57
So this is interesting in, if I understand correctly, you know, what you're saying is that the fundamental challenge is that the local political context is the biggest challenge. And even changing the approach or the amount of resources that are thrown at the problem set, that may not necessarily impact local dynamics, as much as what, you know, one would want or one would think.

Dr. Colin Jackson 25:25
right? Well, yeah, so that's, one is that we don't understand the whole game and probably never will, in any of these places, in part, because it's so complicated, in part because of language barriers. But in part because the locals want to obscure it for us, right, they want to they want to play their game and tell us the story we want to hear. But it's worse than that, there was a very, very interesting speech given by General Odierno to the Heritage Foundation, and it's called "The Surge a Year On," he's trying to explain why things got better in Iraq. And his story is essentially, the nation gave us more resources. We learned a lot of things about doctrine, by implementing a different doctrine, getting more resources, getting more manpower, and not giving up, we essentially forced the turn here. And the story I got from friends who were there, and certainly this resonates with a lot of other examples in other theaters, tells a slightly different story, which is that we have been doing a lot of important things more incrementally over time. A lot of the TTPs we ascribe to the surge, or the counterinsurgency doctrine were present in some form or fashion already. And what happened was there was a huge shift in calculation by various groups inside Iraq. And the puzzle then becomes well, why did they change? There are a lot of candidate explanations that aren't increased troop levels, aren't all these other things. That said, I don't want to diminish the credit that General Petraeus, General Odierno ought to get for getting behind success and reinforcing it violently, a willingness to be completely heretical, in the use of money, the recruitment of locals, etc., etc., and a willingness to take risks. Without those elements. You could have had something break our way, but we didn't exploit it. But my point is that the hinge here may have been something that occurred in the minds of the locals, and only secondarily sort of changes in our mindset or our approach.

Dr. Austin Long 27:18
No, no, I agree completely. So there's an article from a few years ago by a longtime US government counterinsurgency analyst who's now retired named Lincoln Krause, and the title is "Playing for the Breaks." And that's a lot of what Colin's talking about is you have to be prepared to exploit something when it breaks your way. But the reason it breaks may only at best be secondarily about you. And I will say at a macro level, it's the big difference in outcomes between the surge in Iraq and the surge in Afghanistan. And this is why the lessons learned piece that Colin was talking about is really important. If you think the story of the surge is I need more stuff, and I need to be smarter and I can fix anything, then the surge in Afghanistan should have gone more or less like the surge in Iraq, we sort of go out we partner with people, things go great. When it turns out that there's not been the change in calculus of the locals, then you can show up with more stuff and more guys, and more money, and more whatever.

If there's not these entities to partner with that are willing to work with you, it's not going to matter. And so to me, that's the big difference. The surge in Afghanistan never got the traction that the surge in Iraq did, because there wasn't a change in local political calculus, despite having certainly the same tactics, right, many of the same leaders in General Petraeus, and General McChrystal, right, you have a lot of the band is back together, but you get a very different outcome, because it's a very different country. And we went into it saying, well, we know they're different. But I don't think people would internalize what that difference meant.

Kyle Atwell 28:41
Yeah, listening to what you're saying, you know, taking the similar approach, applying it to two different conflicts with very similar leadership. I guess my question is, do you think that the influence that the US military and any other external military can have is fundamentally limited in the first place? And what does that, what are the implications of that for how we should approach these conflicts?

Dr. Colin Jackson 29:04
I'll jump in. I think we systematically overstate our agency, our degree of influence in these conflicts and we think more or less implicitly, sometimes explicitly that our influence is proportional to our firepower or our manpower. And I think that that's not true, because we're a big blind giant most of the time and it's not because we're not smart. That isn't the issue. The locals do hold all the information. This is where the Kalyvas Civil War book is so good. Yeah, his argument is the locals have all the information, everybody else has muscle and then the locals manipulate the guys with muscle and I think that's consistent across both of these cases.

Nick Lopez 29:42
So we are the muscle when we conduct expeditionary COIN and the locals hold on to the information. Colin, you've spent a good amount of time either in Afghanistan, to include 2009 during the surge, or observing COIN in Afghanistan, as a policymaker in DC, how effective has the US been at developing an understanding of the local political context? And, you know, taking that understanding and that information and getting it to those that need it?

Dr. Colin Jackson 30:17
Yeah. Well, so 2009, I mean, that this was this period of time in which we had grabbed a lot of real estate in the east, but really had incredibly small numbers of Americans still there, it was very much the beginning of this surge. And so the question was, you know, what do you hold? Why do you hold it? And what can you accomplish? The Afghan National Army was pretty basic, during that period, able to do company level operations, maybe sometimes battalion but not really, in conjunction with us. In terms of information flows. I'm struck by, you know, something that Elliot Cohen observed a number of years ago, every one of the units that rotates through, if they don't go back to the same place goes through this curve of characterizing its own knowledge, it shows up and says, oh, my God, this is so much worse than it was in the survey visit, and we better, you know, stop the bleeding. And then they get halfway through their rotation, they're like, you know what, this was really bad at the beginning, but I think we're really making progress. By the end of it, they're getting ready for RIP/TOA, and they're like, we got it on like the five-yard line, and we're gonna hand it off, but you guys, there's no way you can't score, right. And then the new unit comes in, and they start right where the first unit did. So, I think most

of these units, and you can now talk to the alumni of eastern Afghanistan, guys who fill out on the same combat outposts, and light bulbs start to go off when they talk with each other because they're talking about the same locals, locals don't change the information structure of the area doesn't change. There are little things, you know, operations the enemy runs, operations we run, but it's our sort of repetitive ignorance of the details on the ground of who's who in these areas, who has influence, what the nature of the struggle is, that they're actively trying to prevent you from seeing I had a good friend out in eastern Afghanistan in 2009, he was up at FOB Bostick across from a village called Naray. And we were having a discussion before he deployed and I said, you know, the academic work I've been doing suggests that one of the interesting sets of questions to ask is who owns what. And so he tried this natural experiment, and I linked up with him in country in the summer, he goes, oh, this was the funniest thing, they were willing to have conversations with me about everything that's typically American: where's your police station? How many people have you trained? How many people you detained? When I asked them who owns the following plots of land, they like clammed up in a heartbeat. No one wanted to talk about who owned what, who really had influence, who had land rights, water rights. In other words, the real political game they didn't want to talk about because that was the real game.

Dr. Austin Long 32:48
So on the point of turnovers and local knowledge, I'll tell a little anecdote from my time interviewing Iraqis in 2007 timeframe. So the point of that project was just to figure out what was motivating people to participate in political violence by interviewing detainees. And so one of the outliers that I wanted to look at was a guy who had been detained four times by the United States and sent to a theater level internment facility. So in this case, Camp Bucca. So let me interview this guy. So this is Ramadan, 2007, sort of the fall, we're doing interviews at night, that's when the guides are awake, and also when I can offer them a cigarette. So we're sitting in a, in a trailer that has a rug in it, I've got an interpreter with me. And so it's just me, this guy and the interpreter. He's an Iraqi farmer, which means he's probably 40. And looks like he's about 60. He's very chill, you know, we have a very pleasant conversation about what's happened to him since 2003. And finally, at the end, as we're sort of wrapping up, I say to the guy, well, look, I just got to ask you something that's been on my mind: you've been detained, sent to these facilities, let go, detained, sent to these facilities , like, what's going on? Like you keep thinking you have to fight the Americans, what, why, explain to me what's happening. And so God bless him, he checks his watch to make sure it's before sun up, so you can have another cigarette, and he asked for another cigarette. Gave him another cigarette, takes a long drag on the cigarette kind of blows that out and says, look, when you guys came to my country, my neighbor joined the new police force that you guys set up. My neighbor and I had a dispute about some land. So when you guys came, and he joined the police, and we couldn't work out this dispute, he just told your American forces that I was a terrorist, and whoop, you grabbed me and took me away and took me somewhere. And then I talked to some people that look just like you and eventually they let me go. And I went home. And there was a new American unit there. And the new American unit talked to my neighbor who was still in the Iraqi police. And he said essentially, I don't know why your Americans at higher headquarters are stupid, but they have led this terrorist go, whoop, I am grabbed again. Rinse repeat. Every time it's a new American unit, every time his neighbor says he's a bad guy every time he goes away. Plausible story, but maybe it's not true. So I actually go back and look at his detention records. Kind of in detail, he was detained the time I spoke to him for allegedly shooting a mortar at Balad Air Base. Right, so north of Baghdad,

he's at Camp Bucca right now, which is at the very southern end of Iraq. At the time, he was alleged to have been shooting mortar at Balad, he was still detained for that third time at camp Bucca. So unless he broke out of Bucca, drove all the way through Iraq, shot a mortar at Balad, and then drove all the way back to camp Bucca and broke back into camp Bucca, there's probably some validity to his story, right? Somebody just like didn't even bother to look at dates, they just said, this is when he did it, it's fine. The Americans aren't going to check, I don't know if he was still detained or not. And thus, we end up with this guy who goes through this cycle of American learning or lack thereof during, during these turnovers. To me, it encapsulates that problem that Colin was talking about, about local knowledge, like people will use us to the extent that they can to solve their own local issues.

Kyle Atwell 35:55
I think it's important, because something we talked about earlier is that we can make statements like what are the characteristics of an army that makes it more or less effective in counterinsurgency. And the presumption there is that whatever we send there is going to have some influence on the outcomes of the conflict. But it seems like your argument, Colin, is that, you know, whatever we send should be understanding that our influence over the local population, the local politics, is going to be limited by what we know, essentially. And we can have an influence, but our influence, may be less determined by what we do, and more determined by our ability to kind of support the right actor and hope they do kind of things based on their local knowledge that advance our interests essentially.

Dr. Colin Jackson 36:38
That's right. And I think like, I'm going to abuse this metaphor, but it's like retuning your antenna. Instead of having your antenna tuned to pick up signals of gunfire, or bombs going off, these types of things. You got to retune your antenna to sort of understand what the underlying political struggle might be about. And so I said before that humility is like one of the determinants of success in counterinsurgency, I think at every level. I'd note various people who I think fell into this category. I mean, Scott Miller is an example Joe Votel, guys who were not afraid to be intellectually humble, even though they were super capable people, it was that combo, that was powerful. The other thing is empathy, can I actually put myself in the shoes of the locals conceptually. That to me, if you have that plus humility, plus some dwell time, then you'll at least have the possibility of understanding what the underlying game might be. And then many things are possible. If you come in with the opposite set of traits, highly intelligent, but not empathetic, it's all about me, give me more stuff, give me more time, I think you run a much lower probability of having meaningful influence or to have success in the setting.

Kyle Atwell 37:45
So this is a good point to pivot to our final question, which is, what are the implications of your research and experiences for policymakers and practitioners? If we have such kind of limited understanding or influence over local politics, what does that mean for how we fight the imminent stream of counterinsurgency threats that are going to show up over the next several decades?

Dr. Austin Long 38:07
I mean, so I mean, Colin has said it several times. But I think the watchword has to be humility, right. So you have to be humble on what you can achieve. And the corollary to that is endurance is more important than rapid effect. So in conventional conflict, you want to achieve decisive victory as quickly

as possible, combat power, etc. Because so much of what matters in these conflicts is informational, staying in power is more important. And there's, the sort of corollary to that is, therefore your burn rate of resources is really important. The reason small footprint matters so much to the extent that you can do it is that it means you can keep doing it indefinitely, right? And that has implications both for not only what you learn, but also how your adversary thinks about the conflict, right? The Taliban alleged anecdote of like you have the watches, but we have the time, that's only enabled by the fact that you think the Americans are going to quit and leave eventually, and we've stayed longer than they probably thought we would. But, you know, we're still looking at leaving, they're not. So to the extent which you can tell the story that I'm learning every day, we're staying, we're going to, you know we're going to mitigate the problems of RIP/TOA. But what we are going to do is stay and therefore you need to adjust your sort of theory of victory other side appropriately. I think that's what we can take away from this. The organizations that we have to fight with, I think are fundamentally the organizations that we have, I think Colin and I, whether, while we get there by different paths, we don't see a way to fix or change the professional military organizations that we have in a macro way. I don't think you're going to get to the sort of counterinsurgency Nirvana, but if you can by understanding the tools that you have, then come to understand how that means you have to prosecute the conflict. And I think that is, as I said, it's about humility and endurance, much more than brilliance and decisive effect.

Dr. Colin Jackson 39:54
I'd echo a lot of what Austin has had to say. I mean, I when people ask me this sort of generic advise, what's the bumper sticker for these conflicts? It's hang on until something breaks your way. And hanging on requires you to be small enough, sustainable enough both in terms of Homefront exposure, financial cost that you can hang around until something breaks your way. But as I'm hearing this conversation, I mean, one way to talk about this resources question is, you know, certainly my conclusion was that resources frequently are sort of soporific. They're an anesthetic to learning, right, like, so having lots of stuff leads you to do lots of things, but not think very much. And the timing with which you receive resources is critically important. So the story that Austin is telling, something is germinating in Anbar, it starts to break your way, and then the avalanche of resources shows up. That's why that's so successful. In the other instance, in Afghanistan, we assume that the causal agent is the resources and so we flow a lot of stuff in there, but that break, didn't proceed, certainly the arrival of the resources really doesn't flow from it. And so we may have gotten some really good substantial achievements in a classic snuff out the fire mode, places like Helmand and Kandahar. We sat on top of the population for 18 months, violence went down. But the problem was, is we uncovered after that violence reignited. So I think timing of resources are critical. I'll add one other sort of policy. So, I think we should expect, and I want to be wrong, I desperately want to be wrong about this. But we should expect some selective purge in this period, we may be in the middle of it, where we forget, or we burn out the things we were good at in the late stages of this counterinsurgency. Here's the you know, the new advisory model that we've used with tiny footprints, both in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, forget how important all of these information requirements are, forget how different civil wars are from conventional wars, we run a substantial risk there. So anything we can do to keep the eternal flame going is a good thing. And that's different than saying, you know, the NDS is wrong, and we ought to be plunking lots of money into this. I don't fight the NDS, I think it's a lot harder to execute than people think it is. And I don't think we should tell ourselves stories that we can choose which types of wars we'll end up in

because, again, we didn't choose the Iraq insurgency, we thought we were choosing Desert Storm, too. And we got a sequel. But anyway.

Kyle Atwell 42:25
That's a good point, though. So when you talk about how to pivot to great power competition, and the prospect of massive interstate conventional war, and yet we need to maintain the lessons learned, so we don't make the mistakes we did in Vietnam, do you think the military is taking some steps in the right direction? Or are there additional things we have to do? The immediate thing that comes to mind is the SFABS but more broadly? I wonder what your guys' thought are on that.

Dr. Colin Jackson 42:49
Yeah, I thought the SFAB as a concept was a really, really positive one, I watched the first three rotations of that go through Afghanistan. It is a huge leap forward in trying to export the idea of by with and through to the conventional force. So that's good. And I see applicability, particularly in the Pacific to sort of partner relations, how can we make partners better in a different type of conflict.

Dr. Austin Long 43:14
On the SFAB, I'm much more cynical about the SFAB than Colin is. I think it's a good idea. But it was a good idea that was executed principally to preserve army force structure in a post sequestration environment. If you look at what they are, they're basically army brigades, they don't have the stuff you would really want. So I'll just highlight once they don't have a huge counterintelligence or intelligence element, which is exactly what you need to do SFAB type stuff, right? So they have all these enablers that have to be hung on them to do what's their alleged job. So I'll put my cynicism out there and return to great power competition environment, I think the SFAB will look increasingly more like, you know, regular brigades rather than Security Force Assistance, they may still have the name, right. If the name is good, why change it, but I think increasingly, they will be what they always were, which is a way to preserve force structure that is notionally about this sort of learning environment, but it's really about how do we make sure we can continue to do what we do. Now, that said, you know, the last great shift back to Great Power competition, even though it wasn't called that, you know, at the same time, the US Army was exploiting technology to build the National Training Center and the Counter-mobility Training Center that Colin was, was at in Grafenwoehr, Germany and all of these other great things that made the army that won Desert Storm possible, even as that was happening, we were fighting a war in El Salvador, right? We were also fighting a sort of war in Honduras. We were involved in, you know, Angola, we were supporting irregular warfare in Afghanistan. I think, you know, as a nation, we probably can walk and chew gum at the same time. It just requires a lot of, a lot of discipline, intellectually to say this is the right tool for this problem, which is fighting the Warsaw Pact on the inner German border. This is the right tool for this problem. Which is supporting the sort of not very nice Salvadoran government and maybe, maybe making them a little less bad. This is the tool for Angola. This is the tool for Afghanistan. And understanding where the where you can apply the right tool, knowing that the right tool is the one that will allow you to exploit the brakes as we were talking about, not the one that will just come in and fix everything because it's awesome.

Dr. Colin Jackson 45:20
I think, I think Austin's points' a really interesting one, which ties up the title 10 piece of this as well, which is the services are quite frequently in a game of for structure, protection, and resource protection. And each one of them has a different bumper sticker for this, Carrier Strike Group, division or BCT, MAG-TAF, you know, like, everybody's got their thing. And there is a sort of a two-level game going on here. One is to preserve for structure and the other is to solve problems. And these two are often in tension. And I agree with Austin that if the world were simply a problem-solving exercise, what you'd be doing is tailoring force packages to problems. But what we see more frequently is services saying that but in reality, doing a mix of how can I use the problem to do what I want to do? How much of the problem do I need to solve to get what I want?

Kyle Atwell 46:12
So this is a good place to stop. I want to thank both of you for coming on the Irregular Warfare Podcast. This has been a great conversation.

Dr. Austin Long 46:19
It's been a real delight; I appreciate the opportunity to talk about this with you guys and also to rehash many old injuries.

Dr. Colin Jackson 46:27
Yeah, no, I echo Austin, great, fun, and super important topic. And you guys are awfully good to have us on the program and also to keep the flame alive on this stuff. This is a problem we won't be able to get unstuck from. That's my proposition. But for that reason, it pays for a lot of folks to take this stuff seriously, even if it isn't problem number one at the moment.

Kyle Atwell 46:56
Thanks again for listening to Episode Nine of the Irregular Warfare Podcast.

Nick Lopez 47:01
We release a new episode every two weeks. In our next episode, Dr. Sue Bryant and Brigadier General retired Kim Field talk about the human domain of warfare. After that, Joe Felter will join us to discuss the characteristics of an effective indigenous partner force based on both his doctoral research at Stanford, and extensive experience as a military and civilian practitioner in the Philippines.

Kyle Atwell 47:25
Please be sure to subscribe to the Irregular Warfare Podcast so you don't miss an episode. You can also follow and engage with us on Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn.

Nick Lopez 47:34
One last note, what you hear in this episode are the views of the participants and do not represent those of West Point or any other agency of the US government.

Kyle Atwell 47:45
Thanks again and we will see you next time.