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Joint and Combined Operations in the History of Warfare
Les opérations multinationales et interarmées dans l’histoire militaire

ACTA
Tomo II
Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan
Approaching ISAF operations in Afghanistan within Galula's frame of counterinsurgency

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Introduction

When the Danish parliament chose to join the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, it was highly motivated by the principle of standing side by side with an alliance partner who had suffered an attack (9/11). Logically, both the strategic and the operational planning were left to the United States, which relied on the classic Clausewitzian center of gravity approach. This resulted in large-scale military operations against the enemy’s (the Taliban’s) strongholds – primarily the city of Kabul. At this point, the primary objective for the military operation was to overthrow a regime that sheltered the Al Qaeda terrorist leader responsible for 9/11 and secondarily to prevent future terrorist networks from forming and working on Afghan soil.

The primary objective was accomplished within a few months while the secondary objective was much more complicated than initially anticipated due to the fact that it could be addressed from several angles, for example the democracy project that characterized the period from 2003 to 2008. Despite the fact that NATO this is not a guiding principle in the alliance, it was nonetheless what decision-makers from the member countries claimed. Furthermore, the NATO ISAF forces carried out offensive operations in compliance with the center of gravity model, which was corroborated by analyses of the Danish and British military activities in the Helmand Province from 2003 to 2008. And though capacity building of both civilian and military institutions was carried out concurrently, the offensive operations against the insurgent groups remained a core element in the strategy.

In December 2006, the US military attempted to implement a strategy change in Afghanistan, going from an enemy-centric focus to a population-centric focus. The Counterinsurgency Doctrine was described in a US military field manual where work performed by a French officer decades earlier suddenly appeared in several references. This marked the beginning of a revolution for David Galula and his thoughts on the strategy of counterinsurgency (COIN).

This article will focus on the insurgency vs. the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan 2007-2013 based on the laws and principles of Galula’s theory as they appear in Counterinsurgency Warfare Theory and Practice.

Lesson Principles and Laws

The main principles of Galula’s COIN theory focus on the population and its division into three main groups: 1) the friendly minority, 2) the neutral majority, and 3) the hostile minority. According to the theory, both minority groups will seek to gain the support of the neutral majority in that group is the decisive factor for victory or defeat. From a COIN point of view, keeping groups two and three apart is a key ingredient in the recipe for victory, and the opposite is true for the insurgency. Furthermore, as civilian casualties should be avoided, the COIN forces will have to accept the limitations of conventional warfare and the fact that they cannot adapt the strategy of the insurgency as its aim is to create disorder where the COIN forces will be measured on their ability to provide security and maintain order.

According to Galula, the guiding principle should be that COIN approaches are based on four laws that are that are centered on the previously described support of the neutral majority of a population. Firstly, the support of the population is as necessary for the counterinsurgency as it is for the insurgency. Controlling an area and preventing the development of political insurgency cells requires support and active participation of the population. Secondly, support is gained through the active minority. All conflicts have a minority that supports the cause which the COIN forces need to localize and organize in order to mobilizing the neutral majority. Thirdly, it is important to emphasize that the support of the population is conditional. Finally, intensity of efforts and vastness of means are essential. Consequently, the focus of the COIN force should rather be local and intense than national and fragile. During the implementation of the laws, it is very important to show the population that the situation is better for the COIN forces and their cause is better - than for the insurgency. This is as another key principle.

Using Galula’s Theories in a Contemporary Conflict

Galula’s COIN Doctrine was rediscovered by the US Army in December 2006 and was attempted implemented by means of a Field Manual. A very important question is of course whether Galula’s theory can be used in a contemporary conflict almost four decades after it was conceived.

The fact that Galula’s theory was written for a COIN force fighting to stay is the opposite of Afghanistan where the foreign COIN force (ISAF) is fighting to leave following

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5. Galula makes four deductions in this law: a) effective use and show of force, politically as well as militarily, b) political and economic reforms are useless if offered in areas where the insurgency still operates; c) an early and convincing demonstration of will, means and ability to win; d) joining negotiations from a position of strength only. Galula and Nagl, pp. 54-55.
the proclamation of the exit date," which leads to another problem, namely the timeframe. Galula points out that a COIN force needs to "stay to the very end" which is difficult when the war is optional and depends on domestic political support. According to the COIN principles, the population needs to be convinced that the COIN forces will succeed. When the exit date was proclaimed, the mission focus changed from an objective for progress to an objective for time which undermines the basics of the COIN theory.

Also, unification of the Afghan society has proven to be highly complex and finding a single political cause is probably not possible which is not unique to a country in a state of war. However, the Afghan history of the last four decades is filled with different wars that terrorized the civilian population and created extreme conditions in terms of both security and political stability. The nature of the propaganda aspect, and hence the possibility of controlling information, has also been completely changed by the evolution of the internet and the cell phone, making unification far more complex.

Finally, there is the issue of safe havens. In Algeria, the French dealt with this by effectively sealing the border to Tunisia which eliminated the threat from safe havens and prevented arms smuggling to the insurgency. However, due to geography, it is not possible to seal the Afghan-Pakistani border completely.

With these caveats in mind, the theory still has a variety of elements with relevance to the contemporary conflict in Afghanistan and the mentioning of a COIN Doctrine in the American Field Manual provides an opportunity to view the operational framework through the "Galula perspective." The following analysis has two parts: focusing on the ISAF operation in the Helmand Province in Afghanistan and further illuminating the fact that while a COIN approach was found to be relevant and implemented, the actual events proved that the ideas of Galula were not tested as a strategy in Afghanistan.

Operational Framework: The Eight Steps

In the description of the step framework, it says that it should be conducted sequentially and that analyses on each step should not be conducted until the step has been completed successfully. Looking at the ISAF operation through the perspective of Galula could give you an impression of how the implementation of the COIN theory at the strategic level influenced the actual operations.

The first step is the destruction or expulsion of the forces of the insurgency. This objective is achieved when static units are able to garrison the area. In some areas of the Helmand Province, this was accomplished by the expansion of the ISAF force in 2006. It is important to notice, however, that the insurgents were merely pushed into rural areas and Pakistan and not eradicated altogether. Furthermore, different insurgent groups remained in control of the rural areas of the Helmand Province which means that the successes may be attributed to the fact that most major cities/towns were controlled by ISAF.


13 Control should be linked to ability to protect.

14 The strategy of COIN was defined both by the then ISAF Commander General McCrystal and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen. Ron Ryning, NATO in Afghanistan: the Liberal Disconnect (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 58-65.


17 All eight steps are described sequentially by Galula and in the following analysis: Galula's chapter on operations will be the point of reference. Galula and Nagli, Counterinsurgency Warfare Theory and Practice, pp. 75-94.
the Helmand Province, the success of the elections is highly questionable as fraud, corruption and low voting percentages caused problems in both national and provincial elections. Generally speaking, the ISAF forces and forces from the Afghan National Security Forces have been able to maintain an acceptable level of security in the largest cities but have failed to ensure representation in the democratic institutions for the rural population.

The sixth step tests the local leaders, although this of course requires that step five - the holding of elections - was successful. With regards to autonomy and own initiatives concerning the upholding of security and developing the local area, the elected leaders have not been tested sufficiently. The testing has proven to be a difficult task as Afghan autonomy must be respected and there were an insufficient number of alternative qualified candidates.

The seventh step involves organizing a political party based on national consensus on at least a number of points in terms of how political visions and problems should be addressed. In this context, unifying the local leaders in one party or several parties is essential to sustaining the peace. In the Helmand Province (and in all of Afghanistan), this turned out to be impossible due to Afghan legislation. And the Afghan president Hamid Karzai's centralization of the power in the presidential office and the constant struggle between the parliament and the presidency have also obstructed progress in this area.

The final step is defined by winning over or suppressing the last insurgents and should be accompanied by an offer of amnesty to the remaining insurgents. This step has partly been a part of the 2006-2013 strategy and still is an important part of the offensive ISAF operation. These measures are successful in relation to the levels of operation and tactics and have put a lot of pressure on the Taliban command structure. However, on the level of strategy, this approach has failed in terms of steps 3 & 4 and the negative consequences include further radicalization and alienation of the COIN force from the majority of the population.

**Neglecting the Basic COIN Principles**

In general, you have two operation types: short-term operations and long-term operations. Naturally, short-term operations have short-term objectives and in Afghanistan these varied in the period from 2006 to 2013. The element of search and destroy, however, always played an important role, for example when the ISAF forces launched an offensive and established a series of Forward Operating Bases in some of the remote areas of the Helmand Province. In the frame of reference of COIN, this was a logical step in order to gain the support of the neutral majority. However, the focus was on the hostile minority and not on controlling the population. Furthermore, the decision to set an exit date did little in terms of convincing the population that COIN would be in control in the future. Also noteworthy in this context is the Danish duty term rotation system - 6-month terms - which according to the COIN laws and principles is very questionable in relation to interacting with the population.

The long-term operation was defined by the collaboration between the military and the civilian effort. From 2010 and onwards, these operations were placed in a COIN frame with ISAF leadership. The frame had a clear, hold-build-transfer strategy, with the hold element being vital in the COIN frame of reference. However, a major problem was the absence of a single commander in chief orchestrating (or dictating) the overall rebuilding efforts. Dividing Afghanistan between different nations each responsible for different provinces caused difficulties for the overall rebuilding strategy as the different ISAF nations focused on different aspects. In addition, the fixing of an exit date limited the hold element and had little effect in terms of persuading the population to choose to cooperate and side with the COIN forces.

**Conclusion**

The COIN approach in the Helmand Province could have been successful had it been more decisive and determined. Even though some elements have been implemented, it is open for discussion whether the COIN approach was anything but an articulated vision determining the ISAF strategy in Afghanistan. As shown in this analysis, Gallula's theory was identified and pursued implemented on the level of strategy but on the operational level, the step-by-step counterinsurgency framework was not sufficiently followed due to some very identifiable problems.

Firstly - and most important - the core focus on the hostile minority and the friendly minority made it difficult for the neutral majority to choose side. Secondly, the conventional approach with huge military bases with manpower-demanding high tech equipment alienated the majority of the population, which in turn led to the third problem: insufficient deployment of forces, causing lack of visibility of COIN forces in relation to the population. When a population cannot see the forces that are supposed to protect them, they simply do not feel protected.

The formation of national and regional political parties is the fourth issue which was not only neglected by ISAF/NATO but also thwarted by the friendly minority (with Karzai at point) by means of strict regulations in relation to the establishment and organization of political parties. The fifth problem is the decision to set an exit date which comes...
with a build-in “come what may” aspect and increases the dilemma of the population, or even shifts their sympathy to favor the insurgency.

Finally, the current strategy of targeting key insurgency leaders focuses on step 8 of the framework without steps 3-7 having been successfully completed. And although this definitely puts a lot of pressure on the Taliban Movement and the other insurgency groups, it does little in terms of persuading the majority of the population to side with the COIN forces.

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