

The Challenges of British Counterinsurgency in Helmand - Why did it go so Wrong?

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It is the thesis of this paper that the challenges facing British counterinsurgency (COIN) in Helmand province (Afghanistan), derive from a lack of adhesion to the central maxims of classical COIN. This paper posits that the principles outlined by Robert Thompson (1966) are largely atemporal, and *sine qua non* to successful COIN. In Helmand, Britain confronted the realities of protracted war and counterinsurgency; this elicits the question driving this paper, “are the rules and maxims laid out by Thompson and classical COIN theory being followed in Helmand?” Axiomatically, this paper is a study of British COIN; it seeks to ascertain the degree of adhesion the British exhibited to the ideas of classical COIN, and then correlate this with the challenges faced. The paper finds that the British failed to adhere to the central ideas of COIN, and subsequently encountered challenges. It is the hypothesis of this paper that *COIN operations invariably face challenges when significant deviation from Thompson’s principles occurs*. To substantiate this contention the paper takes a holistic approach. The paper first analyses British shortfalls, focusing on the lack of a clear aim, paucity of accurate intelligence, a deficit of personnel, the ‘push’ north, and an institutional ethos gravitated towards conventional warfighting. The latter section focuses on the external variables which have undermined British COIN, namely, U.S. counterterrorism, the incompetency of President Hamid Karzai’s administration, the ethnic composition of Helmand and the role of the British public.

First, two schools of thought will be drawn upon to set the theoretical parameters of the paper, classical and Neo-Classical COIN (Neo-COIN) theory. The classicist’s thesis derives primarily from the seminal works of David Galula (2006) and Robert Thompson (1966). Galula provides a classical definition of insurgency, and posits that the term refers to a protracted struggle conducted methodologically in order to attain specific objectives, in particular “to overthrow the existing order” (2006, p.2).

In his seminal book Galula lays the ideational foundations of COIN theory. For example, he contends political primacy over military power. This conviction is summarised in Galula’s famous dictum that “a revolutionary war is 20 percent military action and 80 percent political” (Galula, 2006, p.63). Essential though it is, military action becomes subsidiary in COIN operations. The military’s role is to prevent insurgent regressions in a territorial unit and to ensure the civil-political powers enough freedom to work effectively with the population (Galula, 2006, p.63). That is not to say, however, that the military is absent in decision making. Galula contends that there should be a “coordination of efforts”, using the Malayan campaign as an example, this is accommodated through committees comprised of civilian, police and military personnel (2006, p.64). Furthermore, the counterinsurgent needs to habituate to the *sui generis* nature of COIN warfare. For example, heavy, indiscriminate weaponry plays a minimal role as it alienates the population and is not conducive of hearts-and-minds (HAM). Rather, COIN operations require highly mobile and lightly armoured infantry in large number. In addition, the ethos of the counterinsurgent army must be gravitated towards civilian-centric operations, not kinetic warfighting (Galula, 2006, p.65).

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that the principles outlined by Thompson (1966) are *sine qua non* to successful COIN operations. Based on his experience of the British COIN campaign in Malaya (1948-1960), Thompson elicited a number of generalisations, which exhibit an atemporal character as they are largely applicable to former and current COIN operations. These generalisations gain semantic clarity as they are condensed into five core principles. First, the government must have a clear political aim, to establish and maintain a free and

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independent state which is politically and economically viable. This is achieved through reforming to restore government authority and the amelioration of corruption and poor governance, designed ultimately to win over HAM (Thompson, 1966, pp.51-52). Second, the government must function in accordance with the law. Thompson contends that “a government which does not act in accordance with the law [...] cannot expect its people to obey the law”, otherwise opportunities are created for the insurgents to present a viable alternative (1966, p.53).

Third, the government must have an overall plan. This plan must strike an essential civil-military balance characterised by “complete coordination in all fields” or the situation may arise in which military operations “produce no lasting results because they are unsupported by civilian follow-up action”(Thompson, 1966, p.55). Furthermore, if the insurgency is countrywide, the civil-military plan must advance incrementally, one district at a time, not ineffectually dispersing resources along a broad front. Fourth, the government must give priority to defeating political subversion. It is central to separate the population from the insurgent, if the “little fish” are removed from the “water” then their “eventual destruction becomes automatic”, due to a deficit of supplies, recruits and intelligence (Thompson, 1966, p.56). Fifth, a government must secure its base areas first. The priority of the counterinsurgent is to focus on population centres and more developed areas which represent the locus of economic-political strength. This may mean accepting the insurgent gains control of remoter areas. To stymie the proliferation of political subversion in insurgent areas, the government must aim to limit the insurgents’ capacity “by securing its own base areas and working methodically outwards from them” (Thompson, 1966, p.57). This approach is summarized by the analogy of an ‘ink-spot’, a key component of Thompson’s thesis. This paper will use these principles to assess British COIN.

The classicists’ thesis has been challenged by the Neo-COIN school of thought. The principle tenants of which are Frank Hoffman (2007) and David Kilcullen (2006; 2007). In many respects Neo-COIN represents the restatement of the established maxims of counter-insurgency, a *redux* that was largely necessary due to the inertia of Western armed forces. Contemporary scholars still emphasise political primacy. The people remain the prize. However, Hoffman (2007) posits that the “insurgent of today is not the Maoist of yesterday” (p.1). This contention derives from a number of factors. For example, the changing organisational structure of insurgencies, which are less hierarchal, rather, they are diffuse and cellular with less connectivity and comprised of loosely affiliated networks, linked by a key individual/ideology (Hoffman, 2007, p.4). In addition, there is a new “virtual dimension” to insurgencies. For example, Hoffman draws attention to new technologies in communication, *inter alia*, internet, mass media, which are becoming more central in generating support and recruiting globally (2007, p.8). Furthermore, the contexts in which insurgencies take place are also changing. For example, the classical approach contends that insurgents seek sanctuary in distant and complex terrain (Galula, 2006, p.23). Hoffman argues, however, that “urban centres are [...] the insurgents jungle of the twenty-first-century” (2007, p.5).

David Kilcullen concurs with Hoffman and avers that much of what comprises contemporary insurgencies is new, requiring fundamental reappraisals of conventional wisdom. Kilcullen argues that the capacity of the insurgent is changing due to “globalisation effects” (2006, p.112). For example, he draws attention to the complicated international networks which now supply insurgencies and the increasing use of media for conveying the insurgents’ message to a global audience. The internet gives insurgents near-instantaneous means to publicise their cause, it also enables moral and financial support, and a means for recruitment providing the insurgency with a “virtual sanctuary” (Kilcullen, 2006, p.113). This has led scholars to postulate an era of ‘Global-COIN’. In sum, Neo-COIN is not a direct repudiation of classical-COIN theory. Rather, its habituation to the changing nature of twenty-first century insurgencies.

This paper contends that effective COIN operations require an astute understanding of classical COIN theory and an appreciation of the changing nature of today’s security environment. However, British COIN operations in Helmand exhibited a notable deviation from the above principles and subsequently encountered challenges. The British have an excellent COIN tradition, from Malaya to Northern-Ireland. However, this hubris has been undermined by the conduct of the Helmand campaign. First this paper will outline British shortfalls.

Before the analysis of COIN in Helmand can begin in earnest, it is necessary to outline British policy. British policy was based around the ‘Comprehensive-Approach’, the coordination of efforts between disparate government

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departments involving a variety of actors, embodied in the 2005 'Joint-UK-Plan-for-Helmand' (Farrell, Gordon, 2009, p.679). The Joint Plan included extending Government of Afghanistan authority, developing the Afghan-National-Army and Afghan-National-Police (ANA;ANP), as well as economic/social development (Pritchard, Smith, 2010, p.68). HAM was a central component in the British approach. For example, the British aimed to provide security to facilitate the 'Provincial-Reconstruction-Team's' (PRT; combined civilian-military venture) long-term governance/economic development goals and 'Quick-Impact-Projects' (QIPs) aimed to improve local infrastructure (Farrell, Gordon, 2009, p.669). Much of what comprises Thompson's five principles and classical-COIN is evident in the Joint Plan. However, its application was marred by a number of endogenous and exogenous factors.

The Joint Plan was operating in the context of two distinct overarching missions. Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the U.S. led counterterrorism mission, and International-Security-Assistance-Force's (ISAF) NATO-led COIN, aimed at providing stability to facilitate political and economic development (Ucko, Egnell, 2013, p.81). The UK initially contributed to OEF, then later ISAF. NATO's mission comprised a four stage expansion plan to extend the areas of operations to all provinces of Afghanistan. However, lack of cohesion undermined the NATO effort. For example, the relationship was characterised by 'national-caveats', some member-states (France, Spain, Germany, Italy) placed restrictions on troop numbers and were reluctant to deploy or support troubled provinces, particularly in the south (Jones, 2009, p.254).

The aim of the British mission has been in a state of flux, from supporting counterterrorism as a component of OEF, to facilitating Afghan democracy. Political leadership talked of peace-support operations to enhance counter-narcotics, whilst brigade-level personnel worked under the assumption of a COIN operation (Egnell, 2011, p.301). The Foreign Affairs Committee noted in 2009 that "the UK has moved from its initial goal of supporting the US in countering international terrorism, far into [...] counter-insurgency, counter-narcotics, and state-building" (House-of-Commons, 2009). This denotes that the British mission was implemented against the backdrop of no overriding plan, contradicting Thompson's first principle. This led to significant challenges for the British as confusion over the type of mission led to inadequate resources required for COIN.

Compounding the strategic confusion was a paucity of accurate intelligence on Helmand and the strength of the Taliban. Brigadier Ed Butler (British contingent commander 2006) contends that he was informed to prepare for a "permissive environment" in Helmand and Colonel Stuart Tootal (commander 3 PARA) argues that "any use of force was seen as a last resort" (Tootal, 2009, pp.25-26). This contrasted starkly with the realities on the ground. Warren Chin (2007) contends that the Taliban in the south were well resourced due to the opium trade, and had an additional 40,000 fighters in Pakistan, many of which were crossing the border in anticipation of British deployment (p.213). Furthermore, the British were largely unaware of the scale of the 'narco-economy', and the large section of the Helmandi population dependant on it. The concurrence of a counter-narcotics operation, focused on poppy eradication, therefore conflicted with the other aim of providing stability and economic progress (Pritchard, Smith, 2010, p.84). Uncertainty over the situation on the ground in Helmand made it impossible for planners to tell the military what levels of security were necessary for the reconstruction mission to succeed or the resources required for an effective campaign. It led to; *inter alia*, inadequate distribution of resources in terms of personnel for COIN, creating challenges.

British COIN faced challenges due to a deficit of troops. For example, the British committed approximately 3,300 troops under 16 Air-Assault-Brigade in April 2006 in a province with a population of 850,000 and geographically the largest in Afghanistan (Farrell, Gordon, 2009, p.73). This was partly due to the deployment coinciding with the ongoing commitment in Iraq. However, deficiencies in troop numbers are attributable to inadequate coordination between the military and Whitehall. For example, military commanders informed Secretary of State for Defence John Reid in May 2006 that they were "content with the troops, equipment and support from London", despite this number being inadequate for COIN (Ucko, Egnell, 2013, p.83). This created a number of challenges. For example, only a small portion of Helmand could be secured and implementation of the 'ink-spot' strategy was limited to Gereshk and Laskar Gah (Ucko, Egnell, 2013, p.83). Farrell argues the British lacked "the presence [...] to develop ties in most communities" (Guardian, 2013). In addition, a deficit of manpower also made those forces deployed on the ground more inclined towards the use of superior firepower as a means of dominating the area. For example, brigades used on average 500-540 indiscriminate air-strikes (Farrell, Gordon, 2009, p.678). This evidence infers that the British

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deviated from the theoretical imperative and Joint-Plan, subsequently facing challenges. For example, the challenge of early troop numbers derived from a lack of civil-military coordination, directly repudiating Thompson's (1974) third principle, "complete coordination in all fields". The subsequent reliance on maximum fire-power conflicts with the Galula's maxim that the use of conventional force should be limited, creating significant challenges. Farrell and Giustozzi contend that "indiscriminate use of fire [...] alienated locals [...] mobilised local armed resistance and [...] foreign fighters seeking jihad"(Guardian, 2013).

The problems of limited early troop numbers were compounded by operational mistakes, exacerbating existing shortfalls and creating new challenges. The principle error was the decision to expand the British area of operations to northern Helmand. This decision derived not from a strategic imperative, but due to political pressure from provincial Governor Mohamed Daoud (by extension, Karzai) concerned by Taliban advances in the north (Egnell, 2011, p.303). The result was the dispersal of British forces north, deviating from the ink-spot strategy. For example, the 'platoon houses' approach was adopted in which platoon strength detachments occupied solitary compounds concentrated around Now-Zad, Sangin, Musa-Quala and Kajiki (Ucko, Egnell, 2013, p.85). This created challenges for the British. The dilution of forces stymied reconstruction around Laskar Gah and Gereshk, where some limited progress had been made through force concentration. Michael Clarke (2011) contends that northern expansion undermined PRT development efforts as "more peaceful towns to the south that ought to have been models of secure development became host to disaffected Afghan families fleeing the fighting further north"(p.23). Thompson was critical of such reactionary movements, arguing "by seeking quick military victories in insurgent controlled areas, will certainly get a long-haul for which it nor the people may be prepared"(1974, p.58).By responding to Daoud, the British defied Thompson's fifth principle, securing the "base area" first, encountering significant challenges.

Northern expansion violated the central maxim of COIN, that operations must be gravitated towards political-economic development, not conventional warfighting. For example, 16 Air-Assault-Brigade focused on combat, not influence operations as there was a severe escalation of violence caused by the vulnerability of isolated British units (Egnell, 2011, p.303). An adverse security setting is not conducive of an effective HAM strategy. Rather, the emphasis on military operations and the negation of reconstruction undermined British attempts at winning over HAM of local Helmandis'. For example, civilian organisations tasked with facilitating humanitarian relief and development were unable to deploy on the ground due to the security threat (Pritchard, Smith, 2010, p.71).Furthermore, the PRTs could rarely leave the compounds they were attached to and reconstruction projects such as building schools, bridges and roads were hampered by the Taliban, who would simply destroy them when the British had left (Pritchard, Smith, 2010, p.71). In addition, the confinement of British units to 'platoon houses', limited contact with the local population, the British therefore suffered from a lack of local intelligence on the Taliban (Egnell, 2010, 291).The evidence above indicates, *prima facie*, that British COIN encountered challenges as they failed to adhere to Thompson's fifth principle "securing the base areas first". This caused a deviation from the Joint Plan and undermined the ink-spot strategy, perpetuating into a focus primarily on the kinetic aspects of operations, which "produce[d] no lasting results [as it was] unsupported by civilian follow-up action", failing to win HAM (Thompson, 1974, p.55).

In addition to operational mistakes, British COIN in Helmand encountered challenges due to the negation of HAM; attributable to an ethos gravitated towards conventional warfighting. Anthony King (2010) posits that within the British army there is a cultural predisposition towards kinetic operations. For example, the training of soldiers and officers places great emphasis on maximum firepower and taking the initiative (Catignani, 2012, p.523). This is reflected in soldiers' attitudes towards the war. As one officer notes "I think there was an urge among the military to get stuck into the Taliban [which] tends to eclipse the rather more mundane requirements of reconstruction", Major Paul Blair (commander 3 PARA) commented in 2008 that "we were hoping to get into a fight, because that's what you've been trained for"(King, 2010, p.324). An NCO confirms this cultural predisposition: "a rapid rate of fire allows you to do whatever you want. If you get a sustained period of rapid fire for even ten/fifteen seconds, no matter if they want Jihad [...] if that fire comes in, they will just hit the deck and nothing will come back"(Catignani, 2012, p.533). This evidence indicates that the army's intrinsic conventional character propels it towards reliance upon kinetic warfighting. This is a contributing factor to the deviation from Thompson's first principle, "a clear political aim"(1966, p.50). The British faced challenges because the use of conventional methods undermined HAM efforts of the PRT, to promote governance and Government-of-Afghanistan legitimacy (Egnell,2010).

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Furthermore, early British brigades deployed to Helmand exhibited notable lack of military adaption, focusing on their core-competencies, not COIN. 16 Air Assault Brigade adopted the 'platoon houses' approach, not dissimilar to its regimental culture of operating behind enemy lines in dislocated units (King, 2010, p.326). Similarly, 3 Commando Brigade's concept-of-operations derived from its core-competencies. The Royal-Marines have a tradition of aggressive charges on beaches and speedboats, replicated in the development of Mobile-Operating-Groups tasked with seeking-out/engaging the Taliban (Ucko, Egnell, 2013, p.90).¹² Mechanised Brigade succeeded 3 Commando, and focused on its core-competencies, namely mechanised warfare. It made extensive use of armoured vehicles (e.g. Mastiffs) in combat clearing operations around Laskar Gah, Gereshk and Sangin (Farrell, 2010, p.13). Axiomatically, each brigade focused on its core-competencies, omitting a population-centric approach for one that was primarily conventional in nature. However, this is attributable to an absence of a clear overriding plan, Thompson's first principle; as a result each brigade reverted back to its core-competencies and ethos in an attempt to ameliorate the failures of previous brigades. The British also defied Galula, in that each brigade failed to adapt to a COIN approach, resulting in a lack of adherence to COINs central maxim of 'political primacy', subsequently failing to 'win' the HAM.

However, it is worth noting that when the British realigned with the central maxims of COIN, the above shortfalls were ameliorated. The deployment of 52 brigade (Oct-2007) represented a marked shift in British conduct; it adopted a more population-centric approach pertaining more to HAM. For example, stabilization activities facilitated PRT reconstruction efforts in Musa-Quala, enabling the local population to move back in (Farrell, 2010, pp.16-17). Furthermore, the British returned to a model which resembled an ink-spot approach, the 'Afghan-Development-Zones' part of the 2008 'Helmand-Road-Map'. The concentrated force had notable success, particularly in the political-economic development of Gereshk. British operations also reflected the shift in approach. For example, Operation Moshtarak (2010) in Nad-e-Ali made significant progress in winning over HAM, as once secured, public services were improved, and elections held for the district council, enabled by an augmented British contingent of 9,500 and a more competent ANA (Egnell, 2011, p.309). This infers that adhesion with the core ideas COIN reduces the challenges faced by the counterinsurgent.

The study of challenges facing British COIN in Helmand must be holistic. There is a complexity of variables, other than British shortfalls, which have undermined COIN. Most notably, U.S counterterrorism, the incompetency of the Karzai administration, the ethnic composition of Helmand, and the role of the British public.

British COIN was undermined by the concurrence of counterterrorism under OEF. Michael Boyle (2010) posits that counterterrorism and COIN, though not mutually exclusive, are largely incompatible. For example, they exhibit divergent assumptions on the role of force, 'winning' HAM, and the necessity of building a strong representative government (Boyle, 2010, p.336). Rather, the methods of U.S. counterterrorism in OEF entail reliance on drones and Special Forces in the use of lethal and sporadic force to kill Taliban/al-Qaeda operatives, interdict their movement and disrupt their networks (Boyle, 2010, p.343). However, the use of counterterrorism methods caused widespread discontent amongst Afghans. For example, a UN report specifically attributed counterterrorism raids with a 40 percent increase in civilian deaths 2007-2008, causing public protest against British and U.S presence (The New York Times, 2009). The use of lethal force undermines British HAM policies by alienating the Afghan population, presenting the Taliban as a viable alternative. The Taliban has capitalised on these raids, contending that they transgress Afghan cultural norms about the sanctuary of the homestead, portraying ISAF as disrespectful of local traditions (Boyle, 2010, p.346). Furthermore, OEF 'mission creep' to include the Pakistani Taliban, caused realignment between disparate Afghan-Pakistan insurgent groups against ISAF. Subsequently, the augmented operational networks between the Pakistani-Afghan Taliban have funded (capital/personnel) the Afghan insurgency (Boyle, 2010, p.348). This indicates that the Neo-COIN school of thought gains utility in Afghanistan as the insurgency has moved beyond national borders.

The incompetency of Karzai's administration has undermined British attempts to win over the HAM of the Helmand population. For example, there is a culture of corruption (bribery, embezzlement, abuse of power and nepotism) innate to Karzai's government (UNODC, 2012, p.3). Karzai brought warlords into his administration, including Vice-President Mohammad-Qasim-Fahim, believed to be "involved in illegal activities, including running armed militias, as well as giving cover to criminal gangs and drug traffickers" (Guardian, 2009). Many within Karzai's government,

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including former Helmand Governor Asadullah Wafa have been heavily involved in the opium trade (Khan, 2009, p.1). Corruption permeates the judicial system, with provincial judges being particularly susceptible to bribing. In addition, there was widespread corruption within the ANP, frequently setting-up illegal checkpoints to extort money from the population (Pritchard, Smith, 2010, p.76). These external variables presented challenges for the British. For example, cohesion with a corrupt central/local government and ANP is detrimental to HAM efforts, as British forces are perceived as an extension of ineffective governance. Corruption contradicts Thompson's second principle, as it conflicts with article 75 of the Afghan constitution, "the Government shall [...] eliminate every kind of administrative corruption"(Constitution-of-Afghanistan, 2006, p.22). This propels the Taliban into a position of psychological ascendancy *vis-à-vis* the Government of Afghanistan/ISAF, presenting the British with challenges. For example, in Helmand, the Taliban offered a viable alternative to corruption (establishing 15 Sharia courts), contending that their mode of governance would be based on traditional Pashtunwali (Pritchard, Smith, 2010, p.75).

In addition to the innate corruption of Karzai's administration, British COIN faced challenges due to the ethnic composition of Helmand. There is a complexity of ethnic groups in Afghanistan, including *inter alia*, the Pashtuns, Tajiks and Hazaras (Wahab, Youngerman, 2010, p.14). Helmand is a Pashtun province, and the Taliban is drawn predominantly from the Pashtun faction. This presents the British with challenges. For example, the insurgent has the same background and lives by the same rules (Pashtunwali) as the population (Pritchard, Smith, 2010, p.75). This has been compounded by British insensitivities. For example, by allowing Tajik dominated ANA to operate in Helmand. Presenting the Pashtun Taliban as a viable alternative, as they can relate to and claim to aggregate local grievances, more so than the British/ANA (Pritchard, Smith, 2010, p.75). Subsequently, some Afghan and Pakistani Pashtuns have provided sustained support (funding/personnel) for the insurgency. This evidence denotes that adherence to Thompson's fourth principle is problematic, as the Taliban is embedded in the Pashtun faction which dominates Helmand. Furthermore, some scholars posit that a component of Pashtuns intrinsic character inclines them to reject central government. Anatol Lieven (2007) contends that resisting central authority is part of the "Pashtun way"(p.487). This creates challenges for the British, trying to expand central government authority within a Pashtun province.

Furthermore, Andrew Mack (1975) posited that the second front in protracted war is "within the polity and social institutions" of the counterinsurgents nation (p.177). Public opinion is progressively lost in the UK, remaining around 56 percent opposed to the war (spiking with casualties increases), and 77 percent supporting immediate withdrawal (yougov, 2014). This in part explains the withdrawal of all British combat troops from Helmand in 2014 (Guardian, 2012). Paul Dixon (2012) contends that public opposition derives from a "concern for the lives of our boys' and girls" (p.129). However, this presented British COIN with challenges. For example, Ucko and Egnell (2013) argue that domestic political pressure was a contributing factor to restrictions on the number of British troops' deployed (p.83). In addition, political pressure for a rapid exit undermines HAM efforts, as the reconstruction projects of the PRT and building a strong representative government, takes a long time (Anderson, 2014, p.46). The realities of protracted war entail the commitment of significant time and resources. However, trenchant public criticism of the war has curtailed the extent and timeframe of the COIN campaign, thus limiting its effectiveness.

To refer back to the question posed at the beginning, the British exhibited a lack of adhesion to the rules and maxims posited by Thompson and classical COIN theory, subsequently facing challenges. This was in part attributable to the endogenous factors which inhibited COIN. The British *modus operandi*, under the rubric of the Joint Plan, was theoretically competent. However, this was undermined by British shortfalls. From the holistic approach, it is evident that there was a complexity of exogenous challenges, and by their nature, largely unmalleable for the British. Since 2006 there have been substantial improvements to the British strategic approach, starting with the perpetual shift following the deployment of 52 Brigade and the 2008 Helmand-Road-Map. This substantiates the hypothesis of this paper, as a stronger degree of adhesion to the central maxims of COIN correlates with British successes. That said, there remain the perennial challenges to progress, such as the Pashtun nature of the insurgency, the incompetence of Karzai, the role of the British public. Finally, this paper contends that the Neo-COIN school of thought is more applicable to the nature of the Taliban insurgency. This is due to the 'regional dimension', and the role of networks based predominantly in Pakistan, which transgress national borders and have supplied the Afghan insurgency.

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