Cultural awareness and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan

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How has an absence of "cultural awareness" disadvantaged the ongoing counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan?

The current campaign in Afghanistan has lasted for over nine years and the Taliban has grown into a formidable insurgency, seemingly capable of enforcing a stalemate upon the world's most powerful militaries. Counterinsurgency (COIN) has therefore become a critically important issue in international affairs. Accordingly, this paper explains why a lack of cultural awareness will condemn a counterinsurgency to almost certain defeat, and subsequently link this statement's accuracy to the current campaign in Afghanistan. An initial analysis of the Afghan campaign in terms of perceived ethnocentrism and a lack of an attempt to positively influence perceptions demonstrates this point effectively. Consequently, an analysis of the successful integration of cultural awareness in historical counterinsurgencies in Malaya, Vietnam and Dhofar, serves to prove that the two most prominent counterinsurgent actors in Afghanistan today have a strong historical precedent for doing what they are not today. An explanation for this significant paradox is then found in the analysis of three notable theories on counterinsurgent and insurgent strategy and culture, and on military culture and organizational learning.

The paper's principle arguments are therefore that the campaign in Afghanistan *is* failing as a result of a lack of counterinsurgent cultural awareness; that its principal actors *do* know what needs to be corrected regarding cultural awareness; but that institutional culture and organizational learning difficulties are presenting a barrier to necessary adaptation. In conclusion, the author recognizes the significant doctrinal and strategic-level progress being made with regard to integrating cultural awareness into counterinsurgency, but claims that tactical-level activities still lack what is needed to succeed.

Introduction

The current war in Afghanistan began on October 7th 2001 when the United States (U.S.) launched Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and overthrew the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.[1] Having been removed from power, the Taliban set about establishing themselves as an insurgent movement hidden within and outside the country. Since then, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which currently constitutes troops from forty-seven nations,[2] has struggled to establish nationwide security and defeat the Taliban insurgents.[3] This apparent paradoxical reality poses a significant danger to international stability, and is therefore a puzzle that urgently needs solving.

The acclaimed U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) counterinsurgency manual defines an insurgency as "an organized, protracted, politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control."[4] Meanwhile, Paget

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has claimed that an insurgency can comprise of differing levels of guerrilla warfare, sabotage, subversion and terrorism.[5] It can safely be said therefore, that the concept of insurgency has existed for hundreds, if not thousands of years, perhaps dating as far back as the Maccabbean Revolt of 167-160 BC.[6] Therefore, how is it still so misunderstood? Has two thousand years of historical experience not been at all useful in contributing towards the development of an effective counter-strategy?

Without question, a great deal *has* been written and learnt proving definitively that counterinsurgency wars *can* by won. Nevertheless, one significant factor critical to a successful counterinsurgency has too often been the missing link to victory – cultural awareness. In the author's view, this is certainly the case in Afghanistan.

This paper aims to explain why a lack of such awareness will condemn a counterinsurgency to almost certain defeat, and then to link this statement's accuracy to the current campaign in Afghanistan, and thereby suggest potential improvements. In order to do this, three distinct theoretical and analytical angles will be separately examined.

Succeeding this introduction, a theoretical framework will provide an overview of this paper's preeminent focus – cultural awareness – and will explicate its relationship to counterinsurgency theory and the campaign in Afghanistan. The succeeding section will seek to define the concept of counterinsurgency and establish why and how employing cultural awareness is so critical to attaining success. In order to demonstrate this, the author will establish how a widespread *lack* of cultural awareness in the campaign in Afghanistan has inherently disadvantaged its chances of success. This negative analysis of the Afghan campaign will be approached using two broad foundations – (1) the existence of ethnocentrism and (2) a lack of an attempt to positively influence local-level perceptions, both of which directly discredit any chance of attaining legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people. The analysis will therefore evaluate the Afghan counterinsurgency campaign with the intention of proving this paper's fundamental premise – that the primary objective of counterinsurgency is to gain the acquiescence of the local population, and therefore prevent the insurgent from gaining popular support. In such competition, it is only logical that culturally aware interaction is indispensable.

Following this, another section will employ three historical case studies – Malaya, Vietnam, and Dhofar – to demonstrate how the integration of cultural awareness into *all* levels of counterinsurgent operation can positively define their chances of success. Two of these military endeavors, Malaya and Dhofar, conducted by British forces, have become established cases of exemplary counterinsurgency success, whilst the third, Vietnam, has proven to be a model example of "the triumph of [an] institutional culture" that relied on "firepower and technological superiority"[7] over the need to adapt to new forms of modern warfare.[8] Subsequent analysis will show how innovative concepts that integrated local culture and its specific demands successfully persuaded the population to support the counterinsurgent and helped contribute towards combating the insurgency.

This paper's final focus will be upon how institutional military culture can pose significant obstacles to organizational adaptation to fighting counterinsurgency. As will be explained, this "COIN syndrome"[9] affects some militaries more than others. The U.S., epitomized by its experience in Vietnam, has often struggled to adapt to counterinsurgency-type conflicts due to a military culture that has often remained loyal to Clausewitzian-Jominian conventional warfare,[10] whilst the British military, with its colonial history, has found this institutional adjustment less challenging.[11]

Having covered such substantial ground, it should become explicitly clear that cultural awareness and population engagement is critical to acquiring popular support and defeating the insurgent. By defining the actual concept and substance of counterinsurgency as a military strategy vis-à-vis cultural awareness, and by analyzing its theoretical and practical applications, this paper's question should find itself answered. The subsequent examination of the theory blaming stubborn military culture and insufficient organizational learning for the U.S.' failure to adapt to fighting counterinsurgencies will therefore allow for a concluding section that expounds the future of warfare and the place of conventional militaries within it.

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Theoretical Framework

Since 1945, there has been a considerable proliferation of small wars defined by insurgent movements employing guerrilla warfare strategies to defeat incumbent or occupying powers. In fact, Marston has calculated that only twelve percent of conflicts since 1945 could be categorized as conventional, with the remaining eighty-eight percent being irregular.[12] According to Huntington, this shift has been the result "of rapid social change and the rapid mobilization of new groups into politics, coupled with the slow development of political institutions."[13] Smith stresses that these "wars of the people" are now the dominant form of warfare,[14] and due to globalization and the increased interconnectedness of the international system, are likely to remain prevalent for decades to come. Consequently, counterinsurgency theory has found itself under increasing focus, and many public figures have become synonymous with developing new tactics and strategies to defeat insurgencies.

Counterinsurgency is defined as composing of "military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency."[15] From a simplistic perspective, ISAF in Afghanistan is broadly acting within all these spheres. However, in the author's view, one critical facet consistently highlighted as a prerequisite for a successful counterinsurgency is critically missing within the institutional culture of the Afghan operation – *cultural awareness*.

WHAT IS CULTURAL AWARENESS?

For the sake of this paper, cultural awareness shall be taken to represent a local-level understanding and appreciation of the foundational norms, values and expectations that govern and structure individual societies. More specifically, and perhaps more applicable to Afghanistan, one may apply what T.E. Lawrence identified as "tribal structure, religion, social customs, language, appetites [and] standards."[16] Knowledge of this "human terrain"[17] allows a counterinsurgent to "demonstrate a genuine engagement with the population" and aim towards winning legitimacy and "the hearts and minds of the people"[18] – a key counterinsurgency objective. Integrating such knowledge requires counterinsurgents to become "3D operators"[19] or "warrior diplomats"[20] and, according to Galula, be "prepared to become a propagandist, a social worker, a civil engineer, a school teacher, a nurse, [and] a boy scout."[21] Therefore, in line with local understanding, political sensitivity and local or tribal engagement, cultural awareness has become a critical "force multiplier"[22] in counterinsurgency warfare.

CULTURAL AWARENESS & COUNTERINSURGENCY THEORY

As Sun Tzu proclaimed over two thousand years ago, "if you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained, you will also suffer defeat."[23] In other words, "it is hard to defeat an enemy who you do not understand."[24] Employing a counterinsurgency strategy suggests an active competition between the incumbent government (or representatives of it) and the insurgents for the loyalty and acquiescence of the local population.[25] It is therefore, as Nagl emphasizes, a direct (military or coercive) and indirect (non-military and persuasive) battle for "hearts and minds"[26] exercised 'on the ground' throughout a society. Whilst ensuring civilian security *will* require kinetic activity, gains made on that front can only be short-term. To sustain the security of "the human environment,"[27] and develop legitimacy through "the unconditional support of a population,"[28] it is principally the 'political, economic, psychological and civic actions' stated in the above definition of counterinsurgency that are most important. Showing "respect for local people [and] putting the well-being of noncombatant civilians ahead of any other consideration … especially ahead of killing the enemy,"[29] also becomes preeminent. Such a campaign consequently becomes an attempt "not to win – as if the emotions and aspirations of the local population can be co-opted to the counterinsurgent cause – but to understand and persuade."[30] It is here that the importance of cultural awareness and understanding is truly underlined for "persuasion always is culturally sensitive. You cannot persuade someone if you do not understand his language, motivations, fears, and desires."[31]

Henri Boré explains the complete operational utility of cultural awareness by stressing its three principle resulting advantages – (1) being able to anticipate how the enemy will act, (2) making it easier to win the trust and cooperation of the population, and (3) enhancing the ability to garner valuable human intelligence (HUMINT).[32]

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The relationship between cultural awareness and counterinsurgency is well established in traditional theory. The influential writing and conduct of T.E. Lawrence,[33] Mao Tse-Tung,[34] Che Guevara,[35] Frank Kitson[36] and David Galula[37] all placed considerable attention upon culture. Moreover, the anthropological profession has, over much of the twentieth century, played a noteworthy role in integrating indigenous cultural knowledge into national security and foreign policy spheres – Ruth Benedict in Japan,[38] Gregory Bateson in New Guinea,[39] Tom Harrisson in Borneo[40] and Gerald Hickey in Vietnam[41] to name only a few.

In terms of this paper's case studies, all three, including Vietnam, which ended in defeat, developed innovative concepts that integrated local culture and its specific demands. The 'New Villages' and the *Iban* tribal force in Malaya;[42] the cattle drives and *firqat* tribal forces in Dhofar;[43] and the Strategic Hamlet Program, the Combined Action Platoons (CAP) and the Civilian Irregular Defense Corps (CIDG) in Vietnam,[44] all successfully persuaded the local population to support the counterinsurgent and thus helped isolate and, except for Vietnam, defeat the insurgent.

CULTURAL AWARENESS & AFGHANISTAN

Cultural awareness is absolutely crucial in Afghanistan, where macro-oriented Western militaries are confronting an enemy which resembles "an influence, a thing invulnerable, intangible, without front or back, drifting about like a gas"[45] within an alien society of an "intensely local nature."[46] Afghanistan is a traditional society, dominated by ancient tribal practices, Islamic culture and a well-established suspicion of outsiders. A foreign force in such an environment cannot defeat the insurgency by itself – "only locals have the access to the population and deep understanding of a particular insurgency that is necessary"[47] – and to secure sufficient legitimacy and trust from the population, one *must* appear sympathetic and receptive to it.

Unfortunately, instead of cultural awareness and local engagement, ISAF activities have helped develop a persona of disconnection from the population. This has primarily arisen from an extraneous employment of technology, which encourages an institutionalization of risk aversion[48] and thus separation from the local population.

Instead, what is needed is a counterinsurgency that thoroughly integrates cultural awareness, so as to "work by, through, and with indigenous forces and populations"[49] towards victory. Due to the local and tribal nature of the Taliban' and Afghan society, which is inherently rooted in the Pashtun concepts of *woleswali* (district) and *alaqadari* (subdistrict),[50] a culturally aware bottom-up engagement with tribes[51] is necessary in order to discern an acceptable solution to Afghan civilians. Therefore, in this context, there is a distinctly dual nature of cultural awareness in that its application is necessary within all tactical-level counterinsurgency activities, *and* on a strategic-level, to develop a solution acceptable to Afghan society.

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Afghanistan: A Lack of Cultural Awareness

OEF was primarily an unconventional military operation conducted by companies of Afghan Northern Alliance and U.S.-British special forces. While the invasion was largely successful, conditions soon demanded the deployment of conventional forces to definitively defeat what remained of the Taliban and al-Qaeda.[52] Unfortunately this failed to occur, and considerable numbers of the Taliban and al-Qaeda were able to flee to neighbouring Pakistan.[53] As a result of this, and of the subsequent failure of ISAF and the newly-empowered Karzai government to conduct effective post-conflict reconstruction and political development, the Taliban soon filtered back to Afghanistan as an insurgent force. By 2006, ISAF faced a sizeable Taliban insurgency that had shifted from conducting occasional operations in rural heartlands, to frequent large-scale attacks against "more populated areas, urban centres, and main infrastructure"[54]

A major factor in facilitating this Taliban regeneration was ISAF's failure to adequately appreciate counterinsurgency principles, especially that it is essentially a competition between two or more actors for legitimacy in the eyes of the host population. This chapter will seek to justify this paper's premise, that a fundamental lack of cultural awareness in strategy and tactics has been instrumental in ISAF's failure to gain the legitimacy required to discredit the Taliban as a viable political actor. In order to do this, the author has deduced two preeminent themes within ISAF's endeavours that represent this absence of cultural awareness – (1) ethnocentrism and (2) a lack of an attempt to positively influence local-level perceptions – which, along with some suggested solutions, will form the basis for the forthcoming chapter.

ETHNOCENTRISM

Taken to mean 'evaluating other cultures according to preconceptions originating in one's own culture,'[55] ethnocentrism is widely accepted as a fundamental problem in ISAF's ongoing counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan.[56] As a multinational non-Afghan, and indeed non-Asian body, ISAF characterizes a foreign entity to Afghan people. Given that "the need to have one's culture acknowledged if not approved is a universal human desire,"[57] a foreign ethnocentric military force in an alien land is condemned to fail. An ideal counterinsurgent force should seek to ameliorate this impediment by integrating a thorough understanding and awareness of the culture within which it operates into its strategic- and tactical-level endeavours. 'Using preexisting indigenous political systems would create legitimacy for ISAF's actions, and avoiding the imposition of foreign norms and values would help generate public cooperation for ISAF's development programmes.'[58] Unfortunately however, since OEF, ISAF has largely failed in this regard, and has instead generated policy and operated on the ground based on mirror-imaging[59] Afghanistan with Western ideals and norms. This has sabotaged most of its initiatives aimed at garnering popular support and legitimacy.

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The most prominent area where ISAF forces have displayed ethnocentrism is concerning the political nature of the state it wants to help build. While ISAF-contributing states have centralized political systems, Afghanistan has a well-established history of decentralized power, where local tribal authorities retained considerable influence vis-à-vis the central government.[60] Unfortunately, ISAF states have focused on centralized nation-building, and consolidation through democratic elections, while traditional local power sources have been disregarded as illegitimate. To make matters worse, elections *have* been held and corruption has been consistently widespread, thus undermining the very foundation of legitimacy upholding ISAF's presence. Indeed, government misrule, corruption, and a consequent lack of legitimacy is emphasized by insurgency analysts as being "*the* root cause"[61] of guerrilla recruitment and strategic success. Afghanistan is a predominantly rural society "where dynastic and religious authority has been unquestioned for over a thousand years"[62] – "state- or nation-building, therefore, is a futile enterprise."[63] To regain legitimacy, ISAF must strive to develop a solution acceptable to *Afghans*, which is inherently local in nature, comes from the bottom-up, and incorporates "a blend of central *and* local/tribal power."[64]

While local issues dominate Afghan popular concern, the Taliban is also distinctly local in nature. In fact, between forty and fifty percent of Taliban fighters are thought to be "local allies" fighting for personal, local or tribal reasons,[65] such as individual pride, to protect one's tribe, or to exact revenge for the death of relatives. Unfortunately, without learning from these dynamics, an ISAF focus on acting conventionally within a more urban centre of gravity will continue to provide micro-oriented motives for Taliban foot-soldier recruitment. Neutralizing these 'accidental guerrillas'[66] by ceasing such action, as well as through persuasive and culturally-aware information and psychological operations, and the provision of local-level security and employment, is arguably the key to critically weakening the Taliban as a credible threat.

Thus far, ISAF seems to have perceived Afghanistan's tribes as representing both a major threat to success, and an illegitimate form of political authority. Conversely, the Taliban directs much of its activity towards appealing directly to local cleavages,[67] and to manipulating traditional tribal *Pashtunwali* codes like *nang* (honour) and *haya* (shame) against ISAF's presence.[68] For Pashtuns, who make up a majority of the Taliban, tribal identity creates a fierce sense of loyalty through blood ties and obligations.[69] Instead of isolating this potential and leaving them open to Taliban coercion, ISAF should embrace tribes by funding, organizing and training local tribal security forces to protect their respective locales against Taliban infiltration. Indeed, Afghanistan has an established history of successfully "pluralizing"[70] its security, dating as far back as Abdul Rahman Khan's tribal levy forces in 1880.[71] Reinvigorating tribal security in the form of *arbakai, laskhars,*[72] *tsalweshtai and chalweshtai*,[73] whilst simultaneously endorsing tribal bodies like the *jirga* and *shura* (that actually embody many democratic values[74]) with jurisdiction over them would generate multiple benefits, including 'disincentivizing' 'accidental guerrilla' recruitment, lending ISAF essential local-level legitimacy, and connecting locals with their government whilst retaining some extent of mutually-acceptable autonomy.[75]

LACK OF FOCUS ON POSITIVELY INFLUENCING PERCEPTIONS

The United States is losing the war in Afghanistan one Pashtun village at a time, bursting into schoolyards filled with children with guns bristling, kicking in village doors, searching women, speeding down city streets, and putting out cross-cultural gibberish in totally ineffectual campaigns – all of which are anathema to the Afghans.[76]

While ISAF operations clearly *do* influence perceptions in Afghanistan, and while counterinsurgency doctrine *does* recognize the importance of doing so positively, there is, as the above quote implies, not a sufficient incorporation of cultural awareness in the actual performing of operations.

With regard to the military aspect of ISAF activities, counterinsurgent forces present an image of inherent disconnection and isolation from the population. As counterinsurgency success depends on acquiring the support of 'the people,' such separation is deeply damaging to ISAF's chances of defeating the Taliban and establishing nationwide stability. Deploying counterinsurgent forces in large isolated heavily-defended forward-operating bases,[77] and employing them in sweeps and patrols[78] shadowed by air support and shielded by heavily-armed

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armoured vehicles, prevents genuine engagement with those who matter most – the civilians. After all, how can a counterinsurgent become truly aware of "the community's real interests, attitudes and desires"[79] in order to try to satisfy them, without walking, talking and *living* amongst them? By appearing superior, unapproachable and averse to risking themselves for unarmed civilians, ISAF forces appear apathetic to the interests of those they claim to be fighting for, and from whom they require legitimacy to succeed.

This introduces a major criticism of `Western, especially American, forces – they are institutionally over-accustomed to fighting conventional attritional conflict, and organizationally slow to adapt to fighting asymmetrically.[80] For example in June 2009, somewhat incredibly, the U.S. Army reintroduced the 'body count' as the metric for success in Afghanistan,[81] and by the end of that year, less than five-percent of U.S. forces in Afghanistan had reconstruction and development as their primary mission.[82] In general, ISAF forces have continued to favour kinetic-centric and intrusive operations where the chance of civilian casualties and the breaching of cultural customs is elevated. Given that Afghan culture has a deeply ingrained suspicion of 'outsiders,'[83] and that many Afghans are still haunted by horrific memories of civilian casualties during the Soviet War, such culturally offensive and belligerent exploits serve to further delegitimize ISAF's presence in the country.

A more effective counterinsurgency strategy would involve giving the Afghan National Army (ANA) a more front-line role in fighting the Taliban, but more importantly, in providing local-level security. Given their inherent cultural awareness and linguistic fluency, "after years of watching from the back seat,"[84] the ANA could beneficially act as local intermediaries, help boost local-level counterinsurgent legitimacy and encourage HUMINT collection from those who have best access to 'the hidden enemy.'[85] Rather than "falling in love with the guy who speaks English,"[86] the leveraging of ANA ties to the Afghan community could potentially open access to those more influential residents[87] who may have previously been hesitant to approach foreign soldiers.[88]

ISAF could capitalize on such extra stimuli and work towards acquiring a more developed local-level cultural understanding by deploying its troops *within* strategic villages and towns – or *tache d'huile* (oil spots), to use Lyautey's expression.[89] Renting and operating out of a *qalat[90]* (fortified family compound) would guarantee genuine population engagement and expose avenues for acquiring sincere mutual cultural understanding between ISAF and local Afghan residents. The counterinsurgents could therefore begin building relationships based on legitimacy, through communication and trust,[91] and from which an impression of an acceptable solution to locals would be prompted. Rather than "throwing money"[92] into building western-style motorways, it would soon become clear that local markets, and agricultural assistance are of far greater value. An idea of "good enough governance"[93] would lead to an acceptance that self-styled Afghan 'warlords,' though distasteful to Western eyes, should be seen as potential major players and power-brokers in state building.[94]

ISAF is predominantly composed of soldiers from the U.S., with further sizeable contributions from Britain, Italy, Germany and France,[95] all of which are highly developed, internationalist states. It is surprising therefore, that on a matter of such importance, their counterinsurgency endeavours in Afghanistan reveal such low levels of cultural awareness. While the Iraqi insurgency helped initiate a doctrinal re-evaluation of counterinsurgency strategy (epitomized by Field Manual (FM) 3-24), and helped stimulate a considerable analytical focus on the subject, actual tactical-level behaviour and operations have, by and large, failed to sufficiently adapt themselves in order to make a concrete difference.

In Afghanistan "three decades of war, population displacement and social upheaval"[96] have left the people both tired of, and used to conflict. The Taliban exploit their familiarity with the environment to conduct a Maoist strategy of transiently infiltrating and exerting influence in strategic localities, whilst also remaining predominantly hidden. ISAF forces meanwhile, too often locate themselves away from population centres, conduct themselves in a culturally offensive fashion and are too risk averse to attempt sincere or permanent local-level engagement. As a result, the Taliban corroborates the famous maxim that "control of local systems and structures inherently shapes collaboration"[97] by exploiting the fact that they can spread their influence through coercion and control more easily than ISAF can. ISAF's only viable opportunity to counteract this is to adopt a culturally aware strategy based on local-level engagement that is in harmony with indigenous norms, values and expectations.

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There is in fact a considerable historical precedent for such a strategy – if only one could learn to more effectually adopt useful lessons from history, and integrate them into military structures and thinking, such problems as outlined in the above chapter would not have ever transpired.

Historical Counterinsurgency Experience

Having covered the Afghanistan campaign's lack of cultural and local awareness, this ensuing section will seek, via reference to three case studies, to demonstrate that ISAF's two preeminent contributing states, the U.S. and especially Britain, have a considerable historical precedent for successfully integrating cultural awareness into counterinsurgency conflicts. While two cases, Dhofar and Malaya, ended in counterinsurgent victory, and the third, Vietnam, ended in defeat, they all developed tactics and strategies that understood and exploited cultural awareness in order to neutralize and combat the insurgent enemy.

The Malayan Emergency (1948-60) was "one of the largest and bloodiest conflicts waged by British Commonwealth forces after World War II."[98] Initially armed and funded by the British government to counter Japanese occupation, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP)[99] organized an insurgency to combat British rule through a Mao-inspired peoples' war. Having begun ominously with large-scale "jungle bashing" operations,[100] the British, under an inspired leadership aware of the indigenous culture and social dynamics, initiated an effective bottom-up counterinsurgency strategy that gradually destroyed the insurgency.

The Vietnam War (1959-72) was fought between the U.S. (fighting with, and on behalf of the South Vietnamese government) and the Vietcong – a military front of the North Vietnamese Communist government.[101] Although the conflict's historical narrative is dominated by the U.S.' "bureaucratic inability to adapt to unconventional situations,"[102] America did in fact develop countless innovative programmes that successfully harnessed indigenous culture and capabilities. While only speculation, it is possible that had many of these programmes been implemented on a national scale, and been given more time to develop, the end result of the conflict may well have been different.

The Dhofar Rebellion (1965-75) was initiated in 1965 by the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG).[103] Although a relatively small conflict, a successful rebellion in British-backed Oman would have had severe Cold War strategic consequences for the West,[104] especially given its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, a key oil transit route. Initially, as a result of Omani Sultan Said bin Taimur's repressive policies, PFLOAG enjoyed considerable initial success.[105] However, after a British-assisted coup in 1970 by the Sultan's son, Qaboos bin Said, the counterinsurgency strategy, buttressed by two squadrons of the British Special Air Service (SAS) and four hundred and fifty British officers, acquired a higher focus on civil development and indigenous responses,[106] resulting in "the best conducted counterinsurgency campaign ever fought."[107]

A fundamental aspect in developing a counterinsurgency strategy is discerning the local-level dynamics driving the insurgency. While a simple inquiry will indicate the drivers as being primarily political, there are often more elementary motivations stimulating an insurgency, especially the human desire for security and survival.[108] If the counterinsurgent threatens human security, such as by employing excessive firepower, the insurgent cause is only strengthened and the counterinsurgent becomes more isolated from the indigenous people and culture, and success drifts further from its grasp.

It is for this reason that the British Army in Malaya adopted the principles of minimum force and small decentralized military units.[109] This explicitly restrained the use of heavy weaponry or airpower,[110] and reduced the foreign force 'footprint,' both of which substantially aided General Templar's foundational effort to win the Malayan people's

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"hearts and minds."[111] In Vietnam, initial strategy actually emphasized the use of heavy weaponry in tandem with employing the body count as a metric of success. However, when General Abrams took command of the campaign in 1968, he emphasized the provision of "meaningful continuing security" for the Vietnamese population and an immediate end to the "often irrelevant 'body count' preoccupation,"[112] which, despite some U.S. institutional resistance, helped to improve perceptions in some areas of Vietnam. Furthermore, in regions where USMC were deployed, the use of airpower was largely prohibited[113] so as to constrain perceived risk aversion and to intimate an equality with the locals.

In addition to attempts to limit the foreign footprint and prevent civilian casualties, a counterinsurgent can also establish indigenous irregular militias as the predominant counterinsurgent 'face.' By developing self-defence militias, like the Home Guard in Malaya,[114] or the People's Self Defence Force in Vietnam,[115] the counterinsurgent can exploit a naturally superior knowledge of local terrain, people and indeed the enemy itself. Furthermore, by ensuring that indigenous forces are locally seen to "bear the brunt"[116] of the conflict, the danger of backlash against an 'interfering foreign power' is limited. Consequently, indigenous militias and tribal forces can serve as exceptional force multipliers. For example, the Dhofari *firqat* tribal forces, who trained and fought with the SAS, 'functioned not only as scouts and guides … but also as 'home guards,' consolidating and defending areas [recently] … swept clear by the Sultan's Armed Forces.'[117] The *firqats* also acted as reliable sources of intelligence that "could not have been obtained in any other way," while their knowledge of the local terrain and impressive speed of manoeuvre, neutralized *adoo* (PFLOAG soldier) advantages.[118] In Malaya, the British exploited tribal antipathies towards the ethnic-Chinese guerrillas in order to develop militias with invaluable jungle knowledge – the *Dyak* and *Iban* tribes featured most prominently.[119] Given the ethnic-Chinese nature of the Malayan insurgency, the British also established ethnic-Chinese Special Constables, Auxiliary Police and Home Guard to protect villages and man local police posts.[120] Similarly, in Vietnam, U.S. special forces and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) focused considerably on developing local indigenous forces that "associated and intermingled with the people on a long-term basis"[121] and that could lend cultural expertise towards combating the Vietcong. As well as more orthodox militia, like the Popular Forces (PF) and the CIDG, the U.S. also established unique cells. For example, under South Vietnamese leadership, the Phoenix Program[122] created Provincial Reconnaisance Units, composed of former-Vietcong militants who, as 'counter-guerrillas,'[123] targeted the Vietcong infrastructure in order to sever its links with the population. Moreover, the Rural Development Cadre, created to imitate the Vietcong's social organization, was established as a paramilitary group of "highly trained and motivated men [who] were sent to work in villages to ameliorate conditions for villages and establish rapport between the governors and the governed."[124] In other words, they were doing what counterinsurgents often try, and fail to do as a result of their cultural and local ignorance.

Another important aspect relating to exploiting cultural and local dynamics is treatment of the enemy. Given that many insurgents are 'accidental' and fight for personal or local motivations, the wholesale killing of insurgents can in fact be detrimental to acquiring popular support. In Dhofar, Sultan Qaboos introduced an amnesty promising a "cash grant and full immunity"[125] for surrendering insurgents. Many of those who did surrender actually ended up joining the SAS-trained tribal *firqat* forces.[126] Not only is 'persuading a man to join you cheaper than killing him,'[127] but capturing enemy personnel provides an invaluable source of HUMINT on the enemy. Similarly, the Vietnamese*Chieu Hoi* amnesty programme aimed to procure informants and recruits for the pro-South irregular militias.[128] Reminiscent of Frank Kitson's 'counter-gangs' employed during the Kenyan Mau Mau uprising,[129] the British frequently employed captured Malayan guerrillas "to track down their former comrades in the jungle."[130]

With a more thorough understanding of local culture and social dynamics as they relate to the insurgency, culturally aware psychological operations can be designed and employed towards specific target audiences. In Malaya, a nearly entirely ethnic-Chinese insurgency stimulated the inauguration of organized Chinese language courses,[131] as well as the appropriation of Chinese-speaking British officials from all government departments[132] for strategic 'oil spots' where insurgent influence was high. Combined with a village development programme, these culturally and linguistically fluent counterinsurgents helped ease "the transition from rural squatter to village dweller,"[133] thus removing the principle incentive (economic deprivation) for insurgent support. In addition, the 'Psywar' section of the Malayan Information Services, manned predominantly by former-insurgents, developed a culturally aware programme – via Radio Malaya, Chinese language newspapers, air-dropped leaflets, government films and 'voice

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aircraft'[134] – aimed at persuading the Chinese population to turn against the insurgents, and at converting current guerrillas. The use of these ex-militants has since been deemed fundamental "in the success of the counterinsurgency effort."[135] In Dhofar, highly trained Arabic-speaking SAS intelligence troops situated themselves living *amongst* the population, which not only established a culturally sensitive counterinsurgent presence, but helped develop valuable relationships that, within a few months, produced "an enemy order of battle showing unit names, boundaries, personalities and re-supply routes in unprecedented detail" – something the Omani military had failed to generate in six years.[136]

Given that insurgents appear "invisible, fluid and uncatchable,"[137] collecting local-level intelligence on them is crucial, but, to gather such information requires the acquiescence of local populations. In Vietnam, the USMC recognized this and deployed CAPs to live and operate within strategic villages, where they interacted every day with the local population, learning their fundamental desires and cultural norms. A CAP would then help develop a village militia, whose valuable indigenous knowledge would further augment the collection of HUMINT[138] and help generate an air of counterinsurgent legitimacy. In Dhofar, British Army officers were seconded directly to the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), and thus, rather than being external advisors, gained culturally aware intelligence and helped convey to the population that "the government in Muscat … was calling the shots,"[139] something crucial in earning incumbent legitimacy. Like Afghanistan today, Dhofar commonly disseminated information by hearsay and rumour, and having SAS forces operating at the village level[140] helped acquire and propagate valuable and judicious intelligence. Meanwhile, in Malaya, while they provided effective and legitimate local-level security, the ethnic-Chinese village forces and police were invaluable in collecting intelligence on the enemy,[141] especially regarding its dependence on local populations for food supplies. Having security forces cohabiting with the population also helps reveal societal concerns for local future security and wellbeing, which can, if understood, be resolved to the inherent advantage of counterinsurgent legitimacy.

In fact, cohabitation with the population was a central theme throughout much of the campaigns in Malaya, Dhofar and some of Vietnam. In Dhofar, the SAS lived and operated with the *firqat* tribal forces they had developed, which inevitably led them to inhabit populated areas[142] where contact with civilians was beneficial for gaining legitimacy and trust. Similarly, in Vietnam, U.S. special forces, the CIA and the USMC lived and operated with irregular counterinsurgent units – such as the Montagnard tribal forces,[143] the PFs[144] and the Apache Force[145] – and in Malaya, the British Army and SAS did much the same with the Ferret Force,[146] the Malayan Scouts[147] and the Sarawak Rangers.[148] Such operational posture prevents a perception of risk aversion, and conveys a willingness for the foreign counterinsurgent to assume equal status with the local population, which is surely more constructive than locating oneself within large, isolated, and heavily guarded bases.

Being locally situated also allows the counterinsurgent to pursue culturally and locally aware civil development programmes, which help to prove that the incumbent offers a better alternative to the insurgent. In Dhofar, SAS commander, Lieutenant Colonel Watts recognized this and accordingly attributed more value to civil assistance tasks than to military operations.[149] Four-man SAS Civil Aid Teams (CATs) traveled extensively and provided countless services to locals, including basic medical, dental, veterinary and agricultural assistance. After realizing what was truly needed at a local level, a CAT established a model farm where Dhofaris could learn how to increase crop and livestock yields,[150] and the SAS even undertook a "Texan-style cattle drive supported by jet fighter cover and 5.5-inch artillery" to market at the Dhofari capital, Salalah. As Major General Jeapes claims, "there was no doubt that [the cattle drive's] demonstration of government power did more to impress the people than all the broadcasts and leaflets put together."[151] There was a comparable focus on culturally aware development and aid in Vietnam and Malaya. For example, in Malaya, Lieutenant General Briggs established civilian control over the counterinsurgency, and placed attention upon a culturally sensitive 'New Village' programme, where ethnic-Chinese citizens were paid to relocate from their squatter homes into newly built, Chinese-guarded villages.[152] A similar scheme in Vietnam, the Strategic Hamlet Program, aimed to separate the insurgents from the population upon which they depended for food, supplies and recruitment. Although the programme was stopped due to its perceived failure, subsequent evidence has shown that the hamlets brought "good [counterinsurgent] control to the countryside"[153] and the Vietcong considered them "to be a genuine threat to their control."[154] As part of the 'pacification' program, the South Vietnamese government also passed the Land to Tiller Act, which redistributed land to peasants and thus "addressed … the rural population's grievances with the government" and undercut a major Vietcong recruitment

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theme.[155]

While counterinsurgency is indeed a military strategy designed to combat an armed insurgent threat, this chapter has shown that it is still wholly possible to design culturally aware tactics and strategies for countering such a threat that encourage positive engagement with local populations. Moreover, it has shown that the U.S. and Britain, the two most prominent actors in the current Afghanistan campaign, have a valuable historical precedent for integrating and exploiting cultural awareness and local dynamics into successful counterinsurgency strategies. While conducted in different contexts and against unique adversaries, the crucial importance of acquiring and maintaining popular legitimacy, whilst simultaneously conducting a military campaign, was apparent in much of the strategic- and tactical-level thinking and activity in Malaya, Dhofar and Vietnam. So why has the current Afghanistan campaign not been able to sufficiently apply it on a practical level?

Military Culture and Organizational Learning

Now that it has been established that the Afghan campaign's lack of cultural awareness is undermining its chances of success, and that the primary counterinsurgent actors there have a strong historical precedent for effectively integrating cultural awareness into combating foreign insurgencies, this chapter will seek to give possible explanations for why this seeming paradox exists. Three prominent theories will be expounded: Lyall and Wilson's thesis blaming the modern mechanized military culture of the modern counterinsurgent; Taber's notion of the versatile 'flea-like' military culture of the insurgent; and Nagl's eminent theory that fuses military culture and organizational learning within the counterinsurgent structure.

MECHANIZATION & MODERN MILITARIES

Lyall and Wilson famously claim that the increasing mechanization of militaries after World War One is the principle reason behind a forty-one percent decline in great power success in counterinsurgency conflicts.[156] With regards to cultural awareness and its application to counterinsurgency, they convincingly associate the interrelation between a mechanized military and the level of cultural engagement, and thus awareness, that it acquires.

"Nineteenth century militaries were organized around 'foraging' principles in which soldiers extensively interacted with local populations to acquire supplies in the conflict zone."[157] Inevitably therefore, "foraging armies had excellent awareness of local-level power relations, cleavages and languages"[158] – things this paper has deemed fundamental for a successful counterinsurgency. Furthermore, regarding the necessary acquisition of popular legitimacy, constant engagement with the population, and the learning of its dynamics and languages, will generate a counterinsurgency presence that appears more "credible in the eyes of locals."[159]

Conversely, the late-nineteenth century's introduction of the railway into national infrastructures, and its subsequent association with improving military efficiency,[160] reduced counterinsurgent engagement with the host populations, and thus eroded their cultural awareness and "information-gathering capabilities."[161] The ensuing mechanization

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of military structures definitively broke this link with the population, and "machine war"[162] was institutionally adopted as the norm. Given their inherent reliance on technology, modern militaries apportion more manpower to maintenance, are ill-suited to operating in inhospitable terrain,[163] and, while 'machines' may afford considerable force protection and reduced casualty rates,[164] this only encourages risk aversion and a consequent separation from the centre of gravity, the population. As Lyall and Wilson accurately indicate, the U.S. CAPs in Vietnam were "routinely judged more politically reliable" than other forces in the country "because the Marines were constantly present.[165]

Lyall and Wilson conclude that the shift from 'foraging' to 'machine war' has resulted in an eighty-nine percent decline in the probability of counterinsurgent victory. They also valuably include other contributing factors, such as counterinsurgent fluency in the indigenous language, which is deemed "significant," and can be reinforced by the foreign nature of a counterinsurgency – a fifty-nine percent reduction in chance of success.[166] Finally, to demonstrate that culturally aware and locally-based counterinsurgency can still occur in the twenty-first century, Lyall and Wilson compare the activities of the U.S. Fourth Infantry and the 101st Air Assault Divisions in Iraq. They conclude that the 101st, which prioritized joint Iraqi-U.S. "daily patrols by dismounted soldiers" that resembled "police-style … 'walking beats'" were by far, the more successful – they perpetually collected reliable HUMINT, built up local relationships of trust, and "convinced locals that U.S. forces were willing to share the same risks,"[167] thus improving their legitimacy.

THE INSURGENT 'WAR OF THE FLEA'

The guerrilla fights the war of the flea. The flea bites, hops, bites again, nimbly avoiding the foot that would crush him. He does not seek to kill his enemy at a blow, simply to bleed him and feed on him, to plague and bedevil him, to keep him from resting and to destroy his nerve and morale.[168]

Robert Taber's notorious exposition of guerrilla (or insurgent) warfare, and his metaphorical use of the flea to represent the insurgent, explains effectively why ISAF struggles in Afghanistan. When an insurgency adopts a "disciplined strategic mindset that seeks to avoid enemy strength while attacking enemy weaknesses through countless attacks by dispersed guerrillas,"[169] the counterinsurgent is forced to counterintuitively "spread himself as thin as possible," which presents the insurgent with more, weaker targets.[170] In a Maoist manner, "the enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue,"[171] the Taliban in Afghanistan have forced ISAF into a costly and politically-unsustainable protracted war of attrition. When the insurgent poses such a perpetually unpredictable threat, the counterinsurgent will be hesitant to base itself within population centres, or to regularly engage with the population. The subsequent lack of counterinsurgent cultural awareness and local contact provides the insurgent with the opportunity to exercise its second crucial function – being a political actor. As Taber emphasizes, "the guerrilla is a political insurgent, the conscious agent of revolution; his military role, while vital, is only incidental to his political mission."[172]

So while the counterinsurgent constantly aims to acquire the legitimacy needed to qualitatively neutralize the insurgency, the flea-like insurgent proactively operates in ways that ensure its own survival *and* negate sustained counterinsurgent cultural contact. Moreover, the exasperating nature of the flea-like strategy tends to provoke counterinsurgents into becoming "their own worst enemies … [and reacting] with indiscriminate violence against innocent people,"[173] or by favouring the "substitution of machines for manpower"[174] in order to avoid casualties, which often cause illegitimate damage and death.

Taber stresses the Maoist exploitation of time, space and will against the counterinsurgent.[175] As the Taliban has repeatedly proclaimed, "NATO has all the watches, but we have all the time."[176] So long as the insurgent maintains its flea-like advantage, it will lack a military centre of gravity, thus making itself difficult to defeat by force of arms alone.[177] The longer it survives, the more pressure will build within the counterinsurgent's domestic audiences calling for withdrawal, and thus defeat.

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MILITARY ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE & LEARNING

John Nagl's well-known treatise, *'Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife'* famously claims that "military organizations [especially the U.S.] are essentially conservative and reflexively opposed to change."[178] This statement implies that national militaries tend to favour traditional Clausewitzian or Jominian warfare strategies that "fight purely military battles with high-technology weaponry and overwhelming firepower."[179] It also indicates that military organizations that choose to fight unconventional adversaries will struggle to adapt to counterinsurgency strategy and tactics. While Nagl claims that the British military has, as a result of "its comparatively small size and its organizational culture,"[180] been better at adapting to 'small wars,' he stresses that adapting large military organizations, like that of the U.S., "is a task of an entirely different scale."[181] It is not surprising therefore, that the multinational ISAF has struggled to sufficiently adapt throughout its strategic, operational and tactical levels.

Given that cultural awareness and local engagement has been deemed a critical facet of a successful counterinsurgency strategy, employing a military that institutionally favours 'Powell-esque' "decisive force,"[182] or simply a "massing [of] a large number of men and machines [combined with] the predilection for violent and direct assault,"[183] is deleterious to any chance of success. Nagl analyses the U.S.' role in Vietnam to show how the World War Two "good war"[184] concept of warfare remained even when it was clear that an unconventional strategy was required. It is evident from his analysis that the "find 'em, fix 'em and finish 'em philosophy"[185] does not correlate with a culturally aware engagement with indigenous communities aimed at acquiring intelligence and developing the state from the bottom-up.

Since Vietnam, rather than organizationally learning from its failure, the U.S. military implemented "no significant conceptual change."[186] Concurrently, the 'Never Again School's' prominence, and General William Depuy's restructuring of U.S. Army doctrine eventually inaugurated the notoriously conventional Weinberger Doctrine.[187] Counterinsurgency thus became "something of an affront to the organizational culture of America's military,"[188] hence the difficulties in Afghanistan (and Iraq) today. Although recent U.S. experience has coerced its institutional memory to codify itself within military doctrine[189] – especially FM 3-24 – "field manuals say less about how a given military force *actually* behaves than about how it *wants* to behave."[190] Consequently, the ideal-type counterinsurgency campaign for Afghanistan, encompassing culturally aware tribal engagement aiming towards solutions acceptable to Afghans, will require a "complete paradigm shift at the highest levels of [U.S.] military organization."[191]

While other theories exist that seek to explain why 'big states' struggle to win counterinsurgency conflicts,[192] the three discussed above relate most closely to the place of cultural awareness in counterinsurgency. While Lyall and Wilson and Taber provide valuable theories regarding the military cultures and strategies of counterinsurgents and insurgents respectively, Nagl employs a framework that incorporates parts of both, *plus* the organizational difficulties states face when fighting unconventional enemies. When incorporated into an analysis of ISAF's Afghanistan campaign, all three theories are wholly relevant. The Taliban can certainly be perceived to be successfully employing a 'flea-like' strategy, while ISAF has undoubtedly struggled to adapt its mechanized structure to an unconventional conflict on inhospitable terrain and surrounded by warily cynical locals.

Nevertheless, as covered, ISAF, and most specifically the U.S., *has* made remarkable strides in terms of formulating progressive counterinsurgency doctrine and implementing less-conventional operational postures more in keeping with culturally aware counterinsurgency engagement. The Human Terrain System[193] is an excellent innovation, as is increased pre-deployment training in Afghan culture and language,[194] and the increased deployment of special forces as tribal engagement units.[195] Nevertheless, despite these strategic-level improvements, "a military organization's structure, philosophy and preferences have a much greater influence on the conduct of operations than written doctrine."[196]

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Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to substantiate the fundamental importance of cultural awareness and all its derivations to a successful counterinsurgency campaign by using Afghanistan as a contextual example. While a great deal of recent thought has been devoted to *military* counterinsurgency strategy and new ways of integrating twenty-first century weaponry and force structures, the most elemental foundation of this form of warfare – cultural awareness – has too often been dismissed as insignificant. While events in Afghanistan and Iraq have served to corroborate this paper's premise, and significant improvements *have* been made in doctrine and strategy, tactical-level activities reveal little constructive change.

Besides its horrific human rights record, Taliban-ruled Afghanistan was the safe-haven from where al-Qaeda grew and sanctioned the arguably world-changing September 11th 2001 attacks. It is crucial therefore, that Afghanistan is prevented from becoming such a state ever again. As has been explained, not only does counterinsurgency require a local, bottom-up culturally aware focus, but the "intensely local"[197] nature of Afghanistan inherently necessitates such an approach. "Culture-centric warfare"[198] is the future, and the great powers of the world *must* learn to adapt their impersonal conventional military customs to what is intrinsically a personal form of warfare. Malaya, Vietnam and Dhofar have served as three invaluable examples of what can be done, but the U.S., Britain, and indeed many other states, have an extensive historical record of experience in counterinsurgent warfare from which to draw upon. Rather than 'adopting a policy of abstention from small wars,'[199] military organizations must embrace the increasingly globalized nature of the international system within which they operate, and structurally integrate cultural understanding into their operational existence. It seems apt therefore, to end with a statement made by the current Commander of the NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General Caldwell, someone on whose shoulders, the future of Afghanistan's national security largely lies:

The future is not one of major battles and engagements fought by armies on battlefields devoid of population; instead, the course of conflict will be decided by forces operating among the people of the world. Here, the margin of victory will be measured in far different terms than the wars of our past. The allegiance, trust, and confidence of populations will be the final arbiters of success.[200]

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