

Review - Counterinsurgency

Written by Brigid Pavilonis, William Rose, Andrew Majkut and Nicholas Phillips

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BRIGID PAVILONIS, WILLIAM ROSE, ANDREW MAJKUT AND NICHOLAS PHILLIPS, FEB 26 2014

Counterinsurgency

By: David Kilcullen

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010

David Kilcullen is an Australian soldier-scholar whose writings on insurgency and counterinsurgency are the most influential since David Galula's classic 1964 book on the topic.[1] In this review we examine Kilcullen's book, *Counterinsurgency*, which is a compilation of most of his writings up to the 2010 publication date.[2]

Our team of reviewers is an unusual combination of professors at a military service academy and a liberal arts college, as well as a senior undergraduate cadet/student from each institution.[3] The review lists the book's chapters, explores major insights about counterinsurgency that Kilcullen offers, notes unexpected but important linkages between scholarship on counterinsurgency and United Nations peace-building missions within war-torn countries, and ends with reflections on how the book has great utility as a teaching tool in a variety of educational settings.

Chapters

The book's Introduction is appropriately titled "Understanding Insurgency and Counterinsurgency." It defines key concepts and summarizes over-arching analytic points (some of which are developed below). Part I of the book is "A Ground-Level Perspective," and it contains five of his six chapters. First is "Twenty-eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-level Counterinsurgency," originally published in 2006 and enriched in this reprinting with his updated thinking as of 2009. Second is "Measuring Progress in Afghanistan" where he examines metrics associated with counterinsurgency, specifically focusing on requirements for a population-centric solution. Third is "Globalization and the Development of Indonesian Counterinsurgency Tactics." It summarizes some of the research from his Ph.D. dissertation.[4] Fourth is "Reflections on the Engagement on Motaain Bridge, 10 October 1999," where Kilcullen describes, and examines lessons from, his combat experience in Indonesia while serving in the Australian Army. Fifth is "Deiokes and the Taliban: Local Governance, Bottom-up State Formation, and the Rule of Law in Counterinsurgency."

Part II of the book is "A Global Perspective." It contains the sixth and longest chapter, "Countering Global Insurgency." His thesis about the post-9/11 world has several components. Most notably, he begins by arguing that the threat is a global radical Islamist insurgency that will require counterinsurgency and not just counterterrorism. Due to the globalized nature of today's threat, Kilcullen argues that Galula's classical counterinsurgency approach is less applicable today because it was designed to defeat insurgency in one country. Alternatively, he forwards a "complex systems analysis" to provide mental models to understand modern insurgency and to gain insights to counter it.

Major Insights

Classical and Post-Classical Insurgencies

Counterinsurgency does a thorough job with several major shifts in the nature of many contemporary insurgencies:

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the jihadist Islamic insurgency that operates globally as well as within countries, and globalization of communications, which together mean that both insurgents and counterinsurgents strive to influence outsiders' images of the conflict. Missing from this collection of his writings up to 2010 is his article "Counter-insurgency *Redux*" in which he explores additional shifts that are quite important. Here we note just a few, and we advise reading the article.[5]

In [some] cases, insurgency today follows state failure, and is not directed at taking over a functioning body politic, but at dismembering or scavenging its carcass, or contesting an "ungoverned space." ...In other cases, like Afghanistan, the insurgent movement pre-dates the government. ...Politically, in many cases today, the counter-insurgent represents revolutionary change, while the insurgent fights to preserve the status quo of ungoverned spaces, or to repel an occupier – a political relationship opposite to that envisioned in classical counter-insurgency.

Kilcullen's various efforts to update classical counterinsurgency make major contributions to the literature on the topic. Note too that he does not claim that the classical counterinsurgency literature has no utility, because it can explain historical cases and can be helpful in modern cases of a contained insurgent movement. With Kilcullen's assistance, as we examine contemporary and future insurgencies, we are now armed with important questions to ask about their nature and therefore what approaches to counterinsurgency may be appropriate.

Taking into account differences between classical and contemporary insurgencies, in the Introduction to his book – written several years after publication of "Counterinsurgency *Redux*" – Kilcullen offers "two fundamentals" that apply across case studies. "The first is to understand in detail what drives the conflict in any given area or with any given population group. This implies the need to update that understanding as the environment shifts, to develop solid partnerships with reliable local allies, and to design, in concert with those allies, locally tailored measures to target the drivers that sustain the conflict and thus to break the cycle of violence. The second is to act with respect for local people, putting the well-being of noncombatant civilians ahead of any other consideration, even—in fact, especially—ahead of killing the enemy."[6]

No Silver Bullet

Kilcullen's book makes additional contributions to the academic study of counterinsurgency. One is to counter the tendency of scholars and practitioners to overstate the importance of details and tactics used in the past. Both scholars and practitioners read case studies of the exploits of the French, British, and Americans in post-colonial counterinsurgency campaigns, as well as more contemporary reflections on campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. But what are they looking for? Oftentimes it seems to be a silver bullet, the perfect counterinsurgency strategy that will be applicable regardless of conditions. As Dr. Kilcullen shows in chapter 3, his Indonesia case study, the Indonesian military developed a successful strategy, known as *pagar betis*, to defeat the rural insurgency of Darul Islam in West Java. A new urban insurgency broke out in East Timor decades later, and *pagar betis* was again utilized despite the vastly different circumstances; the Indonesian military failed and in 1999 East Timor gained its independence.

In the book's Introduction, Kilcullen says, "the imperative [of counterinsurgency] is to understand each environment, in real time, in detail, in its own terms... and not by analogy with some other conflict, some earlier war, or some universal template or standardized rule-set."[7] There are some fundamentals, as noted above, and gaining sound understandings of a particular insurgency obviously would benefit from cultural and linguistic proficiencies. But it is the lack of universal answers to combating insurgencies that leads to the most important take away from the book: the need for constant reflection and innovation.

This theme is repeated throughout the collection. As mentioned in several places, the more efficient a counterinsurgency tactic is at disrupting the insurgency, the quicker insurgents will adapt. Kilcullen says, "in counterinsurgency success depends on adaptability in the face of a rapidly evolving insurgent threat and a changing environment."[8] Success is more likely when a counterinsurgent force that follows the two basic fundamentals, is supported by advanced intelligence operations, and is willing to adapt based on the current environment. Without reflection and adaptation, counterinsurgents will fight an up-hill battle. For readers interested in further observations on counterinsurgency best practices, see Kalev Sepp's comparative examination of thirty-six historic insurgencies

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and his observations of effective COIN (counterinsurgency) strategy, as well as the RAND study by Christopher Paul et al. that examines over 70 completed COIN cases.[9]

Linkages to UN Operations

Kilcullen's book also offers unexpected but important linkages between counterinsurgency and intrastate UN peacekeeping or peace-building missions. He observes that "...counterinsurgency and counterterrorism people need to start talking more with the peace-building and development community, and they both need to talk much more with the rule-of-law community. These academic and policy communities have been intellectually segregated for far too long, and the more we share insights, the better we'll do in the field." [10] Several connections arise in his book: case studies in common to these disparate fields of study, an elaboration of general similarities, and particular attention to the importance that both counterinsurgency and peacekeeping organizations be adaptable.

Indonesia is the focus of Kilcullen's third chapter. His East Timor case study, starting in the 1990s, is also covered in the literature on intrastate peacekeeping. This commonality applies as well to the earlier conflict in Somalia. For an in-depth examination of the geographically-limited but unexpected success of the Australian contingent of the UN operation in Somalia, see the article by Robert Patman.[11] For an excellent analysis of general connections between fields of counterinsurgency and international peacekeeping, see the article by Karsten Friis.[12]

A recurrent theme in Kilcullen's book is that "organizational learning and adaptation [are] critical success factors." [13] These ideas are developed further in John Nagl's book on military organizations that implement counterinsurgency.[14] Surprisingly, they are very similar to ideas forwarded by Lise Morjé Howard where she writes about the importance of "first-level organizational learning" to UN peace-building missions.[15] She advocates that the Special Representative of the Secretary General, who leads the UN mission on the ground, needs to oversee the operation and carry out tasks locally that are very similar to what Kilcullen advises in his "Twenty-eight Articles."

Both Howard and Kilcullen are attentive to two types of organizational learning, with the other type being what Howard calls "second-order" learning. By that she means general lessons from one operation that are then applied by the overall organization to other situations. Both scholars agree that blindly applying such lessons to new situations can be disastrous.

Howard shows that successful "first-order organizational learning" is one of three necessary conditions for a successful UN peace-building mission within a war-torn country. The other two are situational factors that are not too unfavorable and moderate Security Council interests. These three conditions, when all are met, are sufficient for success. Her analytic framework may be especially useful for counterinsurgency operations authorized by the United Nations. For counterinsurgency campaigns not supporting UN operations, her framework minus the condition about Security Council interests may also be suggestive. For instance, even with attention to sensible population-centric "best practices" and to organization learning, a counterinsurgency effort may fail if important situational factors are unfavorable — such as working with a host government that has little competence, reach, and legitimacy with the population. The bottom line, as Kilcullen advises, is that scholars and practitioners from both counterinsurgency and international peacekeeping could learn from each other.

In addition to encouraging theory development and research across seemingly distinct fields of study, Kilcullen recommends further research to help assess his thesis on how to counter the global insurgency. It has been a while since he wrote his sixth and longest chapter, and he advises that events in Iraq would be useful to study.[16] Updating that advice, perhaps events in Afghanistan and Pakistan could be added to the list of cases to explore.

A Teaching Tool

Our final theme in this review is the book's undersold significance and cross-disciplinary value for undergraduates who seek to improve their understanding of the 21st century security environment. *Counterinsurgency* has great relevance as a teaching tool, with its connection to other disciplines within security studies. It also offers important insights to both cadets in military academies and to students at public and private colleges and universities.

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In his introduction to his first chapter and most widely-known essay, “Twenty-Eight Articles,” Kilcullen explains that he wrote it in reaction to the practical void left by FM 3-24, commonly referred to as the COIN Manual. But, just as Kilcullen’s work filled a void for soldiers in the field yearning for practical application to the theoretical ideas offered by FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* offers these same insights for undergraduates searching to better understand the relevance of their coursework. Many of today’s students in social science programs and military academies, Master’s programs and professional military education, like the Naval War College and US Army War College, have “grown-up” with counterinsurgency as part of the everyday lexicon, but often seek a greater understanding of how to apply COIN’s fundamental rules regarding the importance of the population and knowledge of the conflict’s history. This knowledge could likely have helped to improve the beginning phases of both the Iraq War and the War in Afghanistan. In both cases, recognizing the structure of enemy resistance, based on cultural and historical conditions, and utilizing a population-centric approach rather than an enemy-centric one may have resulted in increased security and prosperity.

Kilcullen builds upon his “Twenty-Eight Articles” in the third chapter where he recounts his own experience in war—the clash between the Australian army and Indonesian regular forces in the 1999 East Timor conflict. From his perspective as a company commander in East Timor in 1999, his retelling of the encounter offers powerful insights into the impact of the Clausewitzian friction of war, and serves as a reminder to soldiers and students that the battle’s geographic location, adversary’s intentions and, indeed, even the landscape is difficult to absorb in the heat of battle. Moreover, Kilcullen considers the difficult subject regarding risks to human lives. As Sarah Sewall notes in her introduction to the *Counterinsurgency Manual*, one of the greatest challenges in COIN operations are that they necessarily force soldiers to assume greater personal risk.[17] Counterinsurgency operations that have achieved some degree of stability often cause counterinsurgent forces to assume the greatest risk, as interactions with indigenous peoples are not only more frequent but also of greater consequence. Quite simply, soldiers must often disarm to achieve effective engagement—and desired operational outcomes.[18] Kilcullen uses his unarmed negotiation at the Motaain Bridge to demonstrate this challenge.

Even more difficult for Kilcullen was communicating this friction of war to his senior officers and government officials, where he was held accountable for battlefield actions, operational decisions and post-clash negotiations. This communication challenge among soldiers on the field, military and civilian leaders, and national and international policy-makers serves as one of this work’s most illuminating lessons.

The multifaceted nature of counterinsurgency and the extra risks that it imposes on troops because of the special rules of engagement make counterinsurgency a great context for productive dialogue between military and civilian communities. For students not in military academies, moreover, it illuminates what counterinsurgency can mean for individuals implementing it in the field. Through this book, cadets at academies and students at public and private colleges can better understand each other’s perspectives.

Those teaching counterinsurgency to college students, academy cadets, and graduate-level students can draw deeply from this lesson to remind all of those who might find themselves engaging in counterinsurgency operations – whether on the battlefield, in an operation center, or within a policy decision-making circle – that successful operations begin with greater cross-agency understanding and communication. Due to the book’s important observations on one of the world’s greatest security challenges — insurgency and counterinsurgency — interested observers of foreign policy and those wish to inform themselves on contemporary challenges would also find this book useful.

Acknowledgements For their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this review, we would like to thank Bruce Hoffman, Conor McCormick-Cavanaugh, Maureen Smolskis, and Douglas Stuart. All lapses in fact or analysis are strictly ours.

[1] David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1964).

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[2] David J. Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[3] Collaboration between our two institutions, the United States Coast Guard Academy and Connecticut College, is consistent with the goals of a Mellon Foundation project to facilitate such cooperation between military academies and liberal arts colleges. Douglas Stewart discusses it in his 13 September 2013 *E-IR* article, "Civil-Military Relations in the U.S.: What Needs to be Done?" See the section "**The Mellon Project on Civilian-Military Educational Cooperation.**" <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/09/13/civil-military-relations-in-the-u-s-what-needs-to-be-done/>.

[4] David J. Kilcullen, "Political Consequences of Military Operations in Indonesia 1945-99" (Ph.D. diss., University College, University of New South Wales, 2001).

[5] Kilcullen, "Counter-insurgency *Redux*," *Survival*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Winter 2006-07), 112-113.

[6] Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 3-4.

[7] *Ibid.*, 2.

[8] *Ibid.*, 20.

[9] Kalev Sepp, "Best Practices for Counter-insurgency," *Military Review* (May-June 2005), 8-12; and Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill and Molly Dunigan, *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013).

[10] *Ibid.*, 160.

[11] Robert G. Patman, "Disarming Somalia: The Contrasting Fortunes of United States and Australian Peacekeepers during United Nations Intervention, 1992-1993," *African Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 385 (October 1997), 509-533.

[12] Karsten Friis, "Peacekeeping and Counter-insurgency – Two of a Kind?" *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (February 2010), 49-66.

[13] Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 3.

[14] John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago University Press: Chicago, 2005).

[15] Lise Morjé Howard, *UN Peacekeeping in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ch. 1.

[16] *Ibid.*, 227.

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[17] Sarah Sewall, *Counterinsurgency Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), xxxviii.

[18] Ibid., 1-27.

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