# Learning How Not to Scare People: The Paradox of Counterinsurgency

https://www.e-ir.info/2015/02/20/learning-how-not-to-scare-people-the-paradox-of-counterinsurgency/

LILLIAN FIGG-FRANZOI, FEB 20 2015

With the official closure of the NATO ISAF mission at the start of the New Year in 2015, the West's involvement in Afghanistan will demand analysis and reflection for decades to come. As one of the most important intervention exercises in modern history, it will be essential to reflect upon the Afghanistan campaign, and its gradual unravelling. As a small contribution to this discussion, I reflect here upon a concept that, in the first decade of the 2000s, dominated the intervention's strategic paradigm, nominally referred to as the "cult of counterinsurgency".

The phrase "cult of counterinsurgency" was made popular by former the UK Foreign Secretary's Special Representative to Afghanistan, Sir Sherhard Cowper-Coles. In his 2011 memoir-policy-critique, *Cables From Kabul: The Inside Story of the West's Afghanistan Campaign,* he outlined the axioms of counterinsurgency that may have contributed to stabilisation in Afghanistan from a security perspective, but through its domination of intervention strategy may have also contributed to the mission's continued failures.

While the counterinsurgency doctrine helped war strategists adjust to street-conflict, in contrast to conventional battlefield conflict, and while the doctrine also identified the characteristics of new kinetic warfare, it has arguably overstretched itself when dealing with the very real elements that constitute the necessary "3-D" responses to modern instability, namely, defense, diplomacy and development. As pointed out by Cowper-Coles, counterinsurgency quickly became a misguided goal rather than what it was designed to be, namely, a tactic. Yet, In the case of Afghanistan, we now realise that the strategy of the long-term operation should not have been a military one that primarily involved countering insurgents (Ringsmose & Thruelsen 2010; Mikolashek & Kalic 2011); such a strategy now appears to have been overstretched.

At this pivotal point in twenty-first century global policy, at the closure of one massive modern intervention mission and the possible cusp of many more, is necessary to reconsider how much counterinsurgency can achieve and has achieved. In this manner, it is important to reflect upon the degree to which counterinsurgency operational failures are due to the primacy that counterinsurgency has in Western intervention strategies. Afghanistan may be an excellent case study demonstrating how the balanced 3-D's—and not merely defence—are central to modern intervention success.

**Afghanistan**

Afghanistan is a distinct laboratory in conceptualising the 3D's. Interlocking challenges of "state-collapse, radicalisation, population growth, social inequality and hopelessness" make necessary a future that includes a different posture than that which the armed forces adopted in the past (Surhke 2011, 10). The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was the de facto Western force in Afghanistan since 2001, acting as a multi-lateral, civilian-military organisation deployed to stabilise the country. Its mission was one of confusion, and even contention, between member-forces trying to negotiate and understand the soft and hard elements of their work.

It is important to understand the Afghanistan campaign within what is called a "New Wars" context. New Wars

# Learning How Not to Scare People: The Paradox of Counterinsurgency
Written by Lillian Figg-Franzoi

describes the modern form of warfare that places conflict within and amongst the people, so that battle-lines are not easily distinguishable. Mary Kaldor coined the term New Wars in 1999 and scholar Mark Duffield egged on further analysis with his major work in 2001 *Global Governance and New Wars.* The concept unyieldingly connects security with development. Through it, under-developed areas are understood as potential hot spots for conflict and tension, and the primacy of globalisation then classifies underdevelopment beyond a state's borders as a potential domestic threat requiring potential action (intervention, or what we all came to know under President Bush's Iraq's invasion as "pre-emption"). All this is clearly illustrated in the goals of the NATO strategic concept where it is recognised that

crises and conflicts beyond NATO's borders can pose direct threat to the security of Alliance territory and populations. NATO will therefore engage, where possible and when necessary, to prevent crises, stabilize post-conflict situations and support reconstruction.

In the Afghanistan context, this "New Wars" paradigm was overwhelmingly evident. The 2006 Riga summit clearly articulated NATO's imperative that "there can be no security…without development, and no development without security" in Afghanistan. With development and security clearly intertwined, the question remained, what becomes the appropriate response. In theory, the popular response to New Wars was what became known as "3-D", namely "Defense, Development and Diplomacy".

In the context of Afghanistan, policymakers heavily relied on the Department of Defence to formulate and execute non-military tasks, which constituted elements of the non-defense 3-D approach. US military, in the words of Former US Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates, must "kick down the door" and match its ability "to clean up the mess and even rebuild the house afterwards". Scholar Mark Moyar described that "the military would do well to enlarge its own capabilities for funding and managing development programs, to meet the large demand in this war and to prepare for going it alone in the next" (Moyar 2011, 16).

However, such an approach to intervention in modern warfare can be identified as contributing to its failure. Afghanistan needed a 3D strategy "with a better balance and better division of labour between military defence, diplomacy, and development" (3D Security Initiative 2009 (underlines graciously original)). Former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton articulated this sentiment, that the 3D approach should be used by the US to strengthen its national security policy. But she also admitted that these "D"s were not being well balanced. In 2009, correcting the balance became a firmer part of the Obama administration's approach in Afghanistan. President Obama affirmed that in the 21st century, "We're going to have to use diplomacy, we're going to have to use development." Despite these sentiments, the Afghanistan campaign was dominated by the legacy of the military addressing the 3Ds through its "cult of counterinsurgency" which ultimately weakened the intervention's success.

## What is Counterinsurgency?

Counterinsurgency as a popular military concept arose long before the 3Ds mainstreamed into foreign policy lingo. In fact, the entire idea of what was coined "New Wars" is based on experiences that arose throughout the post WWII environment, throughout Cold War developments.

Counterinsurgency is itself an elusive concept. In the words of one of its founding fathers, David Galula, it "cannot be defined except by reference to its cause". Summarily, insurgents in a specific context generally try to undermine the legitimacy of a host government. The engagement between insurgents and the forces countering them revolves largely around who has the population's trust (Wenneberg 2011; Chandrasekaran 2011). Counterinsurgency therefore involves a combination of kinetic (that is active military) engagement of insurgents *and* winning population support. Kinetic practices include night raids, targeted killings and air or drone strikes which are then coupled with quick impact projects (QIPs) aimed towards winning hearts and minds (WHAM), peace support operations (PSOs) and civilian and military coordination (CIMIC) which aid in reconstruction and development. Through counterinsurgency, it becomes the role of the military and its soldiers to make the intervention, as a whole, a success.

## Alphabet Soup for the Military

# Learning How Not to Scare People: The Paradox of Counterinsurgency
Written by Lillian Figg-Franzoi

The ever-expanding alphabet soup of counterinsurgency (QIPs, WHAM, PSOs and CIMIC) epitomise how soldiers are to take charge of a non-ending list of non-military work in their operations. Despite extensive modern training, the core issue here is whether soldiers are wholly unequipped to complete these assistance projects which in and of themselves are befuddling and contradictory.

Counterinsurgency doctrine places primary importance on "protecting populations". According to US Special Operations Commander, Chief Admiral Eric Olson, counterinsurgency has become "a euphemism for non-kinetic activities" like those listed in the alphabet soup above. Olson contends that counterinsurgency doctrine is an oxymoron, because it dilutes its kinetic value by attempting to involve all sorts of activities with which the military is unequipped to govern. This includes development work, humanitarian assistance and political engagement. He further states that there is a false assumption that the military has vast civilian-sector capabilities, which covers governance-enhancement, forming youth groups, infrastructure building, teaching locals and even what has been called "armed social work". But frankly, soldiers are misplaced to fulfil jobs like those listed in US-FM 324's Tactics' chapter, where in-depth cultural awareness of local wages is expected to accompany guerrilla-sweeps. The doctrine ultimately expects soldiers to switch back and forth between development and combat work within days or hours, which understandably confuses both soldiers and the effected populations regarding the military's goals and the primary objectives of the intervention as a whole.

The Afghan mission, like many modern interventions, was consistently in need of increased civilian capabilities (Benashel et al 2009). These, if provided, could have better contributed to organising the alphabet soup of politicised development. Yet the important point to make is that this additional capacity should not have been incorporated under the umbrella of counterinsurgency. Public diplomacy, capacity training, understanding local social fabric, and infrastructure development must be understood as tactics and knowledge separate from counterinsurgency.

## Learning How Not to Scare People

Fulfilling the duties of the alphabet soup should not only *not* be the responsibility of soldiers, but this expectation is also a fundamental problem. Soldiers should not be expected to commit to political engagement or be expected to affect Afghanistan's social fabric. The Field Manual 324 asserts that soldiers should "serve as a moral compass which extends beyond the coin force and into the community," but this seems to be not only naïve but dangerous to military and development work by conflating and confusing the aims and goals of specific missions (see Waldman 2009). The directive that "many people find rifles, helmets and body armour intimidating" so soldiers should "learn how to not scare [these people]" is not only an incredible directive in a Field Manual, but wholly disconcerting.

In 2003, ISAF was increasingly frustrated by the inability of the civilian aid apparatus to deliver appropriate assistance that would counter the Taliban delivery of public goods and support central government capacity. The 2006 Comprehensive Approach called for closer integration between development, governance and military strategy, putting the military in charge of delivering aid and public services. As Former Norwegian Defense Minister, Espen Barthe Eide said, "we must not shy away from robust action when such action is called for." And it is essential to recognise that many military-based efforts provide the necessary foundation for development, but  development cannot be a tactic beneath counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency, with its short-term perspective of "secure and hold" is not conducive to building, which constitutes a long-term endeavour.

## Rhetorics of War-fighting: Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Disagreements over the extent to which Afghanistan is or should have been primarily a development project, a "Responsibility 2 Protect" intervention, a peacekeeping mission, or a defensive military strike, are long-standing and still unsolved. In fact, it can be argued that each country involved in the NATO-ISAF operation had a distinct view of what kind of mission they were conducting. States like Norway and Canada considered it primarily a politicised development project (Cabrera 2006; Ravndal 2009), with the UK serving in a peacekeeping mission (Cooper-Coles 2011) and the US engaged in a muddled military strike and nation-building project (Dobbins 2009).

Defining Afghanistan as a development or humanitarian mission may make the project more palatable, because soft

# Learning How Not to Scare People: The Paradox of Counterinsurgency
Written by Lillian Figg-Franzoi

projects for peace are often easier for domestic populations to digest and politicians to advance. But again, as poignantly stated by Norwegian scholar and critic Janne Haaland Matlary, "to die for a development project is hardly acceptable."

This sentiment highlights the reluctance of major powers to downplay the military aspects due to the need to defend the rationale for their troops' presence in the conflict area, and why their citizens are dying. For smaller countries, governments find it especially difficult to justify to their citizens why their soldiers are dying for a mission classified primarily in development or peace support operations terms.

Clearly, Afghanistan was never merely a development project; indeed, rebels and fighters still disrupt security and governance on a daily basis. However, framing the mission as primarily a military strike complicated the work being conducted because it became too heavily driven by inappropriate military strategies, with actors misapplied to certain areas of work.

As argued here, counterinsurgency is not appropriate as a development strategy; it is incapable of delivering a political victory. The entire project is *both* humanitarian *and* military, where "the military tool is simply one 'normal' tool in the toolbox of democracy-building and stabilization" (Matlary 2006, 108). The simple fact is that the military is better equipped to deal in "stick" approaches, such as countering insurgents kinetically, while diplomatic or development approaches function better using "carrots", such as building local capacity, enhancing spaces for political engagement, and helping with appropriate livelihood projects. If we acknowledge that Afghanistan was *not* merely humanitarian or military in nature, but both, we may then be better able to recognise the dangers that have arisen in this case regarding the experienced counterinsurgency-as-strategy approach. In essence, military engagements used for humanitarian and development projects often contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the situation becomes over securitised, over-militarised, and politically constricted.

## Admitting the Issue: Commitment and Prestige

A central element of the Afghan mission's continued failure was the lack of commitment by international actors. It does not matter whether the mission was dominated by a hubristic military viewpoint or a naive development paradigm when neither of these have the necessary resource-support from contributing donor governments. While coordination and balance within the mission in determining its goals and tactics was obviously a problem, arguably the greater problem was the commitment of actors to make decisions regarding the mission's fundamental nature. Without agreement on what the mission was about, it was a forgone conclusion that the principal actors would fail in contributing the necessary funding, equipment, training, and long-term perspective in achieving semblance of success.

Distractions from neighbouring Iraq conflict, dwindling domestic support for military engagements abroad during the financial recession, and changing political leaders all contributed to failures in the massive and complex endeavour that was the Afghanistan intervention. While solving the coordination issue of balancing appropriate tactics and thinking about the conflict in a manner conducive to mission-success is important, the operation will always be at a loss unless international commitment to the project is increased and sustained.

In this vein, it is ultimately naïve to discuss the 3Ds in a way that implies that all have the same funding, limelight and prestige. Defense has historically been the central stage of any country's foreign policy. The current New Wars context, while demanding a change in how security is implemented, does not automatically equate to principal actors realising the necessity of changing military strategies to complement but not supersede parallel work in campaigns. In the same vein, asking the military to step down its activities in a violent context to make room for development and diplomacy work is no simple task. Telling a military official that his or her work on countering insurgents in a security context is not the primary goal of the mission will not be easy when agencies, ministries and actors are competing for resources. Nor is this easy to do when lives are at stake.

This all being said, scaling down the revered cult of counterinsurgency in our future interventions, recognising counterinsurgency as a kinetic tactic contributing to an overarching political goal, may be the only way to provide

# Learning How Not to Scare People: The Paradox of Counterinsurgency
Written by Lillian Figg-Franzoi

similar missions with a sense of real international purpose. It will be important for this purpose to rise above not scaring the populations we are trying to help, but instead putting the welfare of these populations directly at the centre of our 3D approaches, by better reforming our strategies and tactics to contribute to intervention success.

## References

3D Security Initiative. (2009). "Civil society perspectives on US policy in Afghanistan". *3D Security Policy Brief.*

Cabrera, R. (2006). "Adjusting military forces to the new security environment: the case of three middle powers: Australia, the Netherlands and Norway". *Real Instituto Eleano. Area: Security & Defense.*

Chandrasekaran, R. (2011). "Is NATO's Counterinsurgency strategy working in Afghanistan? A case study".*Centre for International Policy Studies. Policy Brief No 11*

Dobbins, J. F. (2009) "Nation-building and counterinsurgency after Iraq" in*Grimmingsrud, T. & Pedersen, H-. M. Small Nation, Big Difference: How the Norwegian armed forces should conduct counterinsurgency operations.* Naval Postgraduate School.

Kaldor, M. (1999). *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Kalyvas, S. N. (2011). "New and Old Civil Wars: A Valid Distinction?" *World Politics,* Vol. 54 (1): 99-118.

Matlary, J. H. (2006). When Soft Power Turns Hard: Is and EU Strategic Culture Possible? *Security Dialogue,* Vol. 37: 105-121.

Mikolashek, J & Kalic, S. N. (2011). Deciphering Shades of Gray: understanding counterinsurgency.*Small Wars Journal.*

Moyar, M. (2011). "Development in Afghanistan's Counterinsurgency: A new Guide". *Orbic Operations:* 1- 17.

Ravndal, J. A. (2009). "Counterinsurgency- when theory meets reality: Seminar report". *Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI).*

Richards, D. & Mills, G. (2011). *Victory Among People: Lessons from Countering Insurgency and Stabilising Fragile States*. London: RUSI Publications.

Ringsmose, J., & Thruelsen, P. D. (2010). "NATO's Counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan: Are classical doctrines suitable for alliances?". *UNISCI Discussion Paper* No 22: 56-77.

Suhrke, A. (2011). "Disjointed incrementalism: NATO in Afghanistan". *PRIO Policy Brief 11,* no pagination specified.

(2007). "Democratization of a dependent state: the case of Afghanistan". *Chr Michelsen Institute Working Papers.*

Waldman, M. (2009). "Mission Impossible? Deconstructing Counter-insurgency in Afghanistan". Talk given at Carr Centre 4 November.

Wenneberg, R. (2011). "'NATOs nye counterinsurgensy doctrine: kan den etterleves av norske styrker?". *Forsvarsakademiet Institut for Militære Operationer Stabskursus 2010-2011.*

## About the author:

# Learning How Not to Scare People: The Paradox of Counterinsurgency

Written by Lillian Figg-Franzoi

**Lillian Figg-Franzoi** currently works in the Peace and Security Cluster, a division within the United Nations Office for Project Services, where she supports logistics and management of projects engaging in post-conflict and conflict-intervention environments. She has previously worked with research institutes and non-profit organisations in development, gender and migration. Her publications include journal article, Malahat, the State and the People: Opium Use in the Republic of Iran and online contributions on Complex Emergencies: Programming Based on Sexual and Reproductive Rights. She holds a MSc in Defense, Development and Diplomacy from Durham University (UK).