Beyond Population Engagement: Understanding Counterinsurgency

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The US military has made considerable progress in developing counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy and doctrine, including the publication of Army Field Manual 3-24 and the military’s successes in working with the population to stem the insurgency in Iraq. The short-term goals of COIN are now fairly well understood: engage the population and win their support. Whichever side wins the support of the population—either the host nation (and US forces that support it) or the insurgents—wins the battle.

The battle is not the war, however. The long-term goal of a counterinsurgency campaign requires the creation of a functioning state, a government that can stand on its own, provide for its citizens, and promote regional and international stability; this achievement is victory in a counterinsurgency. Transitioning from the short-term success of population engagement to long-term viability of the host nation is far more difficult and less understood.

It is important for the military to understand the long-term goals of counterinsurgency in order to take the appropriate measures in the near-term that support the objective of creating a functional state. To that end, this article outlines three analytical stages to achieve victory in COIN: population engagement, stability operations, and the creation of a functioning state. It contends that actions taken in the early stages of COIN should always keep in perspective the long-term goal of creating a viable state. Without this foresight, actions taken in the short-term may undermine the stability of the state and result in defeat.
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Stage 1: Population Engagement

Most scholars agree that insurgency is a form of political violence that aims to challenge the existing authority in a state, be it the government or an occupying force. Insurgent violence, in other words, is not random violence but violence with a greater purpose. French insurgency expert David Galula defines an insurgency as “a protracted struggle conducted methodically, step by step, in order to attain specific intermediate objectives, leading finally to the overthrow of the existing order.”¹ The US Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency field manual echoes this definition, describing 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.”²

Unlike conventional wars, where one military aims to defeat another on the battlefield, the center of gravity in insurgencies is the population.³ In other words, the battle between insurgents and the state is a tug-of-war for the loyalty and support of the population. Galula contends:

If the insurgent manages to dissociate the population from the counterinsurgent [the government], to control it physically, to get its active support, he will win the war because, in the final analysis, the exercise of political power depends on the tacit or explicit agreement of the population or, at worst, on its submissiveness.⁴

Without the population’s support, insurgents cannot survive. Likewise, without the population’s support, a state’s government lacks legitimacy and is unlikely to survive.

A successful counterinsurgency strategy requires winning the population away from insurgents by drawing on a mixture of kinetic and nonkinetic actions. Finding the balance between kinetic and nonkinetic operations is perhaps the greatest challenge in the early stages of a counterinsurgency.⁵ If the goal is to build rapport with the population and win their trust, then kinetic operations alone are unlikely to achieve this end. If the population and insurgents are intertwined, as they usually are in the early stages of COIN, then kinetic operations run the risk of collateral damage to the individuals and infrastructure, which will cause a loss of trust and

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support. The ability to establish a permissive environment and the threat of force are necessary ingredients in COIN, however; without the threat of force, it is unlikely that insurgents or even the population will alter their behavior. COIN, therefore, requires the use of sticks and carrots; the challenge for counterinsurgency forces is how to apply both in a manner that establishes security, builds rapport with the population, and wins their trust. In order for the short-term success of population engagement to take root, the military needs to transform the initial rapport developed with the population into sustainable efforts and projects that work toward the creation of a viable state.

Stage 2: Stability Operations

Population engagement and stability operations are two analytically distinct stages yet, in practice, are connected. The actions accomplished to build credibility and trust in the early stages of COIN directly impact stability operations. Both population engagement and stability operations should, in turn, feed into future efforts to reconstruct the host nation. The US Army field manual on stability operations emphasizes that stability operations begin in the earliest stages of engagement:

For many agencies and organizations, stability operations are considered as part of broader efforts to reestablish enduring peace and stability following the cessation of open hostilities. For military forces, however, stability tasks are executed continuously throughout all operations. Executed early enough and in support of broader national policy goals and interests, stability operations provide an effective tool for reducing the risk of politically motivated violence.

In other words, population engagement and stability operations need to support the long-term goal of creating a viable state in order to be truly successful.

Stability operations are the most difficult stage of long-term success in COIN because they are the point when military and civilian responsibilities meet and the military should, in theory, hand off most nonmilitary capacity-building responsibilities to civilians. This point of collaboration—what the stability operations field manual calls “the whole-of-government approach”—faces several challenges, including varying capacities among agencies, ambiguity regarding command and control, and different organizational structures and cultures. In recent stability-building efforts, blending military and civilian contributions has been one of the most vexing challenges.
Stability operations are also the most difficult stage in the long-term application of a counterinsurgency program because they require building sustainable capacity within the populace and government that will determine the viability of the state. A functioning state needs, first and foremost, human capital in order to be self-sustaining and provide for its population. This includes leaders, technical experts, security forces, educators, and healthcare providers. War-torn nations often lose human capital, a phenomenon known as “brain drain.” Therefore, stability operations need to emphasize developing and retaining human capital in order to support the long-term goal of a viable state.

In addition to developing and retaining human capital, most nations will also require investment in their physical infrastructure, either because it has been damaged during the conflict or did not exist in the first place. Physical infrastructure, however, should not be developed without the human capacity to maintain it; otherwise it will not be sustainable in the long-term. The emphasis should initially be on developing human capital, then developing a sustainable infrastructure.

Stability operations are typically divided into several tasks or “pillars,” although there is little agreement regarding the number of pillars or what they are called. The US Army field manual on stability operations names five core tasks: providing civil security, establishing civil control, restoring essential services, supporting governance, and enabling economic and infrastructure development. The manual also stresses that information engagement, while not a stability operation per se, is a critical component of operations and should compliment and reinforce the five core tasks. The State Department identifies five tasks: security; justice and reconciliation; humanitarian and social well-being; governance and participation; and economic stabilization and infrastructure [development]. The Center for Strategic and International Studies Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project lists four pillars: security and public safety; economic and social progress; governance and participation; and justice and reconciliation. The US Institute of Peace names five pillars: safe and secure environment; rule of law; stable democracy; sustainable economy; and social well-being.

Four essential pillars are outlined in the following text—security, economics, governance, and justice—and two additional pillars important for transitioning a state from failing to viable—social capital and national identity—are also considered. With each of these pillars, the focus should continue on engaging the population and working with and through the people to build a sustainable state.
Security

Security may seem like an obvious concept to define—the absence of violence—but in a COIN environment, the goal of security is much more than nonviolence. For example, sufficient number of forces could effectively control a population and prevent violent activity through the imposition of curfews, checkpoints, and patrols. In a COIN environment, however, violence is a symptom of a greater problem; it is a means to compel social and political change. Defining security as simply the absence of violence, therefore, is only treating the symptoms and not the root of the problem.

In a COIN environment, security considerations need to include the perception of safety, which will most likely be based on factors other than just the presence or absence of violence. Psychologist Abraham Maslow uses the term “safety needs” in his pyramid of human needs to describe the desire to feel secure. Safety needs encompass physical security, but also include social aspects, such as a sense of community, and a daily routine and predictable future. Maslow also identifies religion and philosophy as important safety needs, providing a sense of purpose and existential direction. In a COIN environment, therefore, it is better to think of security as more than the absence of violence; it is the mixture of physical, communal, and psychological needs that makes the population feel safe, stable, and hopeful for the future. Achieving a sense of safety in a population therefore goes beyond deploying security forces; it requires developing all the pillars of stability operations and a government capable of supporting and providing a stable economic, political, and security environment.

Economics

The long-term goal of the economic pillar is to create a legitimate and sustainable gross domestic product, which provides food and other necessary items to the population and an import and export economy that does not result in deficit spending. A healthy economy should provide the opportunity for the population’s work force to engage in stable, sustainable and, preferably, meaningful employment.

Supporting the host nation in the creation of a legitimate economy in a COIN environment is perhaps the most difficult task US forces and civilians face. During a counterinsurgency, civil war, or failing state, the government typically is unable to provide goods and services for its population, and gray markets (legal goods sold illegally) or black markets (illegal goods sold illegally) emerge to fill the demand. Insurgents, in fact, often use goods and services as a means of enticing the population’s sup-
port, becoming the *de facto* government in their areas of operation. Moreover, crime and black markets, such as weapons and drug trafficking, often go hand-in-hand with insurgencies and often reinforce one another. These illegal economies eventually need to be brought under the jurisdiction of the government or otherwise curtailed; their continued operation undercuts the legitimacy of the state.

If black markets and insurgent services are the primary source of employment and sustenance for the population, however, the illicit markets cannot be terminated without providing legitimate goods and services in their place. Without these replacement services, the population will most likely suffer deprivation and come to resent the occupying powers and government for closing vital markets, thereby diminishing trust in leadership. Shutting down illicit economies can have the effect of putting people out of work and deposing local or national leaders, providing additional motivation for the populace to join insurgent groups. Transforming an illegitimate economy into a legitimate one is always a tricky undertaking.

The *Guide for Participants in Peace, Stability, and Relief Operations* integrates physical infrastructure into the economic pillar of reconstruction, recognizing the critical importance of roads, electrical grids, water supplies, and so on as essential for creating a stable economy. The *Guide* also recognizes the need to develop and manage natural resources in a manner promoting equity among a state’s citizens. 15 This last point is especially important in a nation like Iraq, where oil wealth has to be managed in such a manner to not favor one group or region over another.

**Governance**

Governance, broadly, involves how a state is managed and run. The long-term goal of a nation’s governance should be establishing a relationship between the government and its people whereby the government provides safety and security, economic opportunity, goods and services, and transparency, while the population, in return, gives up some of its liberties, freedoms, and income in the form of taxes to follow the rules and authority of the state. Governance, therefore, involves the interaction between a state’s leaders, the goods and services it provides a population, and the population’s support and cooperation with the state. Eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and nineteenth-century English philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke called this arrangement the “social contract.”

Almost by definition, governance and the social contract have been severely damaged in a COIN environment; the state is unwilling or unable to provide for the population, and the population is unable or unwill-
ing to support the state. Typically, local leaders or insurgents become a de facto state. US forces and civilians need to work with and develop existing leaders in order to achieve the long-term goal of creating a viable and legitimate government. These acts may include working with leaders within the government, if it exists, and those outside government who hold power and influence with the local populace. In the early stages of COIN and stability operations, “good” leaders—those willing to place the needs of their constituents above their own—may be hard to find. In many of these cases, the military and civilian agencies may be forced to work with less-than-savory leaders, including insurgents, in an effort to achieve initial objectives. Not all leaders in an insurgency are capable of contributing to a viable government, but neither are all insurgent leaders necessarily bad. Some insurgent leaders may have a good deal of popular support due to their commitment to improving the circumstances of the local populace. In cases where these leaders are amenable to power-sharing and compromise, they potentially can be valuable allies. Long-term success in COIN requires distinguishing between the useful and nonuseful leaders, and then managing problematic leaders in a manner that will add to the viability of the state. This is no small task.

In order to achieve the long-term goal of a stable and viable state, it is important to have a vision for the form of governance most appropriate for the host nation. The Guide specifically names “stable democracy” as the long-term goal of this pillar, which includes “legitimate systems of political representation at the national, provincial, and local levels; effective ministries; political parties; free media; and robust civil society.”

While a stable democracy is perhaps the best form of government for realizing the social contract and the maintenance of a viable state in the long-term, it is worth noting some of the challenges related to creating a democracy. Mature, stable democracies take time—perhaps decades—to develop. Fostering democracy requires a long-term commitment, from the host nation and the external states and agencies committed to the nation’s development. The path to democracy is often difficult and may even be the source of instability and conflict, particularly if the population organizes and votes along ethnic lines, giving electoral success to the ethnic group with the most voting members.

Achieving a mature democracy during stability operations may be an unrealistic goal. There are, however, intermediate goals toward which US forces, civilian agencies, and the host nation can work in their effort to create a stable government capable of transitioning to a democracy sometime in the future. Clare Lockhart’s September 2009 testimony before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee describes “good-enough governance” as a reasonable expectation in the near-term during stability op-
erations. Good-enough governance focuses on a limited number of key functions the government should perform: security; a structure and process for decisionmaking within the rule of law; accountability in public finance; and basic services to the population. With regard to Afghanistan, Lockhart names five such services: irrigation for agriculture; basic transportation infrastructure (such as roads); basic healthcare and education; potable water; and electricity.¹⁸

Intermediate goals in governance should focus on inculcating the rights and responsibilities of citizenship: voting, civic participation, and taxation. Educating the population and establishing legitimate expectations toward the government are some of the initial steps for a stable government, and in the long-term, a democracy.

Justice

Justice contains two components: law, and its implementation. A state should codify laws that are equally binding on all the populace, and which provide a sense of justice and fairness. A nation’s laws should encompass four broad areas at a minimum: politics (such as constitutional law); economics (such as contract law and property rights); society (laws that govern relationships between citizens); and civil obedience (laws that govern the relationship between citizens and the state).²⁰ States may also want to consider instituting laws that conform to international norms and treaties, such as human rights practices, international maritime agreements, and so on.

Most democracies have a constitution as the supreme law of the land. Although the norm, not all democracies have a constitution; Israel and Great Britain are two examples of democracies without codified constitutions. Furthermore, some democracies have allowed for religious laws, such as Islamic sharia, to govern aspects of their citizens’ lives. India, for example, permits Muslim courts to apply sharia to govern family matters, but criminal and civil issues are managed according to secular laws codified by the state.

It is necessary for a state’s police force and court system to work together to enforce and apply the various laws. Therefore, it is necessary that a state possess a professionalized police force, jails, courts, and trained lawyers and judges.²⁰ In a COIN environment, oftentimes the state lacks the necessary ingredients to ensure justice—its laws may no longer be valid or applicable, the police force may be in disarray, lawyers and judges are nonexistent, and basic infrastructure, such as courthouses and prisons, have been damaged or destroyed. All of this needs to be constituted in order for justice to be established.
Building human capacity is primary for the implementation of justice. Both the military and civilian agencies play important roles in training and advising individuals and groups responsible for executing the law and order functions. Likewise, the population requires education related to the judicial process and the rights and responsibilities of citizens in promoting justice.

**Social Capital and National Identity**

In addition to the five pillars, there are two other pillars that are key to long-term success in a COIN environment: social capital and a state’s national identity. These pillars focus on the population and social cohesion at the community and state levels. Both require the attention of US forces and civilian agencies in order to support the long-term goals of COIN.

**Social Capital**

Social capital refers to the “informal norms” (unofficial rules) that create trust and cooperation between individuals. Examples of informal norms include things such as handshake agreements, keeping unwritten promises, and the “golden rule” (doing unto others as you would have others do unto you). Social capital, in other words, is one of the major factors holding groups and societies together; it is often summarized in one word: trust. Much of the social capital that coalesces societies is transparent and often taken for granted. It evolves over time and is inculcated through socialization, or behavior shaped by the actions of the larger group.

Often in war-torn societies, and especially as a result of civil wars or insurgencies, the trust that holds a society together has been either damaged or destroyed. Negative forms of social capital, such as loyalty to one’s ethnic or religious group, can take hold and prevent a particular faction of the society from trusting others. Under these circumstances, social capital needs to be reconstructed if the society and state are to function successfully.

Social capital, however, is not directly constructed; it is the norms and unofficial rules that evolve over time and are often the indirect byproduct of interaction in a variety of situations. US forces and civilian agencies have an important role to play in reconstituting social capital. From the earliest stages of COIN, US forces and civilian agencies need to create situations where groups are provided with incentives to interact and build trust.

One example of how to develop social capital comes from post-Taliban Afghanistan and the creation in 2003 of the National Solidarity Program. Rather than having nongovernmental or international organizations rebuild infrastructure in towns and provinces, development money was
pooled in Kabul and each town received block grants that it could use for projects. In order to receive these grants, Community Development Councils were required at the local level to discuss and vote on which projects should be implemented. Larger projects, such as bridges, required villages to “pool” their credits and collaborate on which projects should be implemented. Building and reconstructing infrastructure became the stimulus compelling individuals to negotiate, make decisions, and take ownership of development projects outside their own communities. The byproduct of this process was social capital.22

Rebuilding social capital needs to be initiated at the beginning of any COIN operation and continue throughout stability operations, culminating in the creation of a viable state. Individuals and local organizations need to recognize common interests—across ethnic, tribal, or religious divides—in order for a populace to properly cohere and function; such cooperation is not likely to happen on its own.

A State’s National Identity

National identity, like social capital, is essential for the long-term viability of the nation. Similar to social capital, there are good and bad national identities. Bad national identities are those that divide society and exclude individuals or groups. Examples of bad national identities may include those based on ethnicity, religion, kinship, tribe, or race. Often in a post-conflict society, especially following civil wars and insurgencies, a state’s national identity has been damaged, and individuals are susceptible to identifying with whichever group provides the greatest degree of safety and protection.23

In order for a state to function properly, its citizens need to have a common identity with one another and the state. In the United States, national identity is based on the ideals of the state, which are enshrined in the Constitution. American military forces take an oath of allegiance to uphold the Constitution, not the President, a particular group, or even US territory. Citizenship is based on being born in the United States, or through immigration and naturalization for individuals born elsewhere. In theory, any otherwise qualified person is entitled to citizenship irrespective of race, gender, ethnicity, or religion. Finally, being a US citizen comes with civic responsibilities, such as jury duty, voting, and taxation.

This form of national identity is commonly called “civic nationalism;” it is based on loyalty to rule of law, governing principles, citizenship, and participation. Civic nationalism is a particularly useful form of national identity for multiethnic states because it permits individuals or groups to maintain their ethnic identities, while subsuming them under the
broader identity based on citizenship and participation. National identity is learned, not assumed. This is true even for national identity based on race, ethnicity, tribe, and religion. In the United States, citizens are formally schooled in civic national identity through schools, military service, television, other forms of media, informally at home, and through social capital.

US military forces and civilian agencies need to help foster a sense of national identity in which all can participate. A sense of national identity should be formally taught within the education system. US forces and civilian agencies should also promote a sense of national identity, as part of military and police training, and civil service. National identity can be fostered informally through television, sports programs, and other forms of popular culture.

**Stage 3: A Functioning State**

Transitioning from stability operations to a functioning state requires the phasing out of large-scale foreign involvement and the ability of the state to stand, independent of external assistance. This transition includes the departure of nongovernmental organizations that provided services in lieu of the state, the withdrawal of security forces that kept the peace, and an end to the state’s dependency on foreign aid for the bulk of its gross domestic product. Until a state can provide these basic services, it is not truly independent or viable. The goal of nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, the US military, and civilian agencies should be to work themselves out of the stability operations business.

Defining the parameters of a functioning state is critical for the long-term success of a counterinsurgency, because without a final vision of the state and society, it is difficult, if not impossible, to develop strategies. As previously mentioned, insurgency is primarily a political problem, and the emergence of insurgent groups signifies that the relationship between the government and the people is not sufficient to obtain long-term objectives. The long-term goals of a counterinsurgency require a strong relationship between a state’s government and its people; returning to the status quo ante is not acceptable because it does not resolve the underlying political problems. Without solving these problems, future insurgencies are likely to reemerge.

The nineteenth-century sociologist Max Weber defined a state as a government with “a monopoly on the use of force.” Weber’s definition suggests that a state with more than one group capable of projecting force lacks internal sovereignty and is therefore a failed state. In other words, his assessment of a viable state focuses solely on security. While security is a key component of a state, a more robust comprehension of a state’s
makeup is required to fully understand the long-term goals associated with COIN operations.

A functioning state performs several critical roles on behalf of its citizens, neighboring states, and the international community. First and foremost, a functioning state’s government should have the ability to address its population’s needs, including basic services—such as food, potable water, sanitation, health care, and security—along with education, justice, law and order, and policies contributing to social well-being. In return, citizens may be asked to sacrifice some of their liberties. This is the previously described social contract. A government’s ability to ensure delivery of goods and services to the population over the long-term is the best way to prevent the reemergence of insurgencies.

In Fixing Failed States, Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart name ten functions of a state:

- Rule of law.
- A monopoly on violence (use of force).
- Administrative control within the government.
- Sound management of public finances.
- The creation of citizenship rights through social policy.
- The provision of infrastructure services.
- Formation of a market economy.
- Management of public assets.
- Effective public borrowing (national debt).
- Investment in human capital (education, vocational training, etc.).

These functions capture more than just a government’s monopoly on the use of force. They also emphasize the four pillars of reconstruction of governance, economic development, security and safety, and justice.

It is interesting to note that Ghani and Lockhart highlight not only the creation of a market economy as a necessary function of the state, but also that the government needs to manage its debt, both in public borrowing and overall finances. A nation that is dependent on foreign aid does not meet these requirements; ultimately, a state needs to become fiscally self-reliant in order to be considered fully functional. At the earliest stages of population engagement and stability operations, actions need to be instituted that will aid in creating a self-sustaining state.

Ghani and Lockhart’s list stresses the importance of developing “human capital,” or the population’s potential through education, vocational training, and other forms of enrichment. Developing human capital is a critical part of any state’s ability to be self-sustaining. Educated and trained people are required to run the nation, police its population, defend its borders, create and maintain the economy, and further educate and
train future generations. Initiatives need to be instituted early in population engagement and stability operations to “train the trainer” and establish educational programs specifically designed to develop human capital. Ghani and Lockhart stress that developing human capital includes public health programs, necessary to maintain a productive workforce and quality of life.29

Finally, Ghani and Lockhart’s ten functions allow for different forms of government to run a state. While democracy may be the most obvious expression of these functions, the list does not exclusively require it. It is worth noting that other forms of government may do a better job of meeting the people’s needs. For example, the United Arab Emirates is not a liberal democracy, but it meets most, if not all, of the ten functions. Focusing on the functions of a state, as opposed to its specific form of government, may allow for greater flexibility in US counterinsurgency operations.

Although not included in Ghani and Lockhart’s list, a state’s government should also be able to provide stability and maintain the security of its borders. A failed state often results in its citizens fleeing in order to find security and economic opportunity. Refugees are often a source of regional instability; Afghan refugees in Pakistan are a case in point. Failed states also run the risk of presenting opportunities for nefarious groups, such as drug traffickers, insurgents, and terrorist organizations. A truly stable and functioning state needs to understand it has obligations that extend beyond its borders.

**Conclusion**

Winning the counterinsurgency requires transforming the battle of population engagement into the long-term goal of a stable and functioning state—with a government that can stand on its own, provide for its citizens, and promote regional and international stability over time. Actions taken in the early stages of COIN and stability operations should work toward the long-term goal of creating a viable and fully functional state. Without these long-term objectives, stability is unlikely.

**NOTES**

3. Ibid., xxv.
6. Stability operations can also follow conventional wars where a country’s infrastructure, economy and governance need to be rebuilt.
8. Ibid., 1-3 to 1-6.
9. Ibid., 3-1 to 3-19.
10. Ibid., 2-5.
15. Perito, xxxvi-xxxvii.
16. Ibid.
17. For a useful discussion on transitioning a state to democracy, see Jack Snyder, From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict (New York: Norton, 2000).
19. Specific types of law can vary from country to country and be quite specific. In the United States, for example, there are dozens of fields of law that lawyers can specialize in. Broadly speaking, however, laws should govern the outlined relationships. See Susan Rose-Ackerman, “Establishing the Rule of Law,” in Robert I. Rotberg, ed., When States Fail: Causes and Consequences (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004), 182-221.
20. Perito, xxxvi-xxxvii.
24. For a discussion on different forms of nationalism and democracy, see Snyder, 24-25.
25. This is what Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart call “closing the sovereignty gap.” See Ghani and Lockhart.
28. Ibid., 160-63.
29. Ibid., 139-44.