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Digging Our Own Grave? The Results of CT, COIN and Regime Change

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Digging Our Own Grave? The Results of CT, COIN and Regime Change

Greg Simons

Abstract

War is being increasingly used as an instrument of foreign policy, which has been assisted by a political level appreciation of the potential of the West's superior tangible military strength. The short-term results have been predictable, Saddam Hussein was quickly defeated, Gaddafi was overthrown. Emphasis has been placed on short-term goals and objectives, seemingly without thought to the long-term consequences of these actions. The recent ISIS offensive in Iraq has re-focused attention that these various wars are still all ongoing. What are the likely or possible results and consequences of failing to take into account the consequences and costs of these wars of choice?

This is intended as an opinion, and a reflection on the current state of affairs and possible future trends regarding the West's involvement in numerous irregular wars and revolutions. War should be a final resort, and for good reasons, rather than the apparent policy tool it is now. This has been the experience of philosophers and theoreticians of war through the ages, war needs to be carefully considered and executed, otherwise the wielder of the sword may face dire consequences. War is not only an opportunity cost, in other words the country needs to give something else up. But it also bears a diminishing return, if wars are too long and costly (in terms of blood and finance) it will begin to erode not only the tangible assets of war (soldiers, military hardware and so forth), but also the intangible assets are affected negatively (belief in the political and military leadership, will to fight). Ultimately, if there is a lack of strategic vision in fighting wars, rather they have a tactical or operational character, the lack of consideration of side effects shall ultimately haunt the actor. The recent events in Iraq and Syria with ISIS and their battlefield success are just one hint and lesson in this regard. Such lessons may take some years to emerge, but given the opportunity they shall. As Sun Tzu once said "strategy without tactics is the slowest road to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat."

In the Western world (United States centric and led) there needs to be a fundamental reassessment of how and why we fight wars. Events and actions in the Global War On Terrorism (GWOT) and the Arab Spring have been causing contradictory results and have actually ensured an increase in insecurity through threats of radicalisation and terrorism in the Middle East and in Western countries with significant Muslim communities. There has been a tangible display of this form of insecurity through events such as the 7 July 2005 bombings in London, the murder of the soldier Rigby by radicals, Belgium citizens being tried for war crimes committed in Syria fighting for Jihadi forces and the recent suicide bombing carried out by

an American citizen in Syria.

There is also the issue of what protracted conflict does to soldiers that have been fighting in Counter-Terrorism (CT) and Counter-Insurgency (COIN) operations for years and with only a vague end possibly in sight. The concerns caused by effects of psychological trauma was sufficient for the European Union within the framework of their FP7 research programme to have a specific call to study this problem. Crimes, violence and an inability to readjust to civilian life, together with a lack of support for these people have caused a dangerous situation. This situation is sufficient to raise the question, are we fighting the current wars and engaging in the various regime change exercises in tactics only, and lacking strategy?

It seems that there is somewhat of an obsession to try and not only learn basic lessons from the past from action in small wars, such as insurgency and terrorism, and then to create a 'blueprint' that can be used universally in a kind of cookie-cutter approach. However this ignores the basic dilemma, which is that best practice does not necessarily equate to best strategy. David Ucko evaluated the performance of COIN in Afghanistan very critically. "The lack of clear strategy behind the campaign resulted in the elevation of COIN from the operational to the strategic level. In parallel, the doctrinal best practices of COIN – population security, good governance, and legitimacy – were confused with strategic ends and pursued simultaneously. In practice, these were not adapted to specific problems and objectives and remained little more than slogans." [i] Ucko likened COIN as being "armed politics" (this is in-line with Sun Tzu and von Clausewitz who both classified war as politics by another means) and warned that doctrine should never replace strategy.

Haroro Ingram stated that there are three lessons from the experience of recent small conflicts. "1) Counter-insurgency thinking and practice typically lags behind that of its insurgent foe; 2) insurgencies succeed or fail based on their ability to synchronise competitive systems of meaning with competitive systems of control and 3) the core assumptions of the dominant hearts and minds approach to COIN should be re-examined in light of recent insurgent successes." He noted that between the years of 1775-1945 only about 20 per cent of insurgencies were successful, after 1945 this rate has doubled. [ii] The situation described above points to problematic issues in the way that wars are fought.

Analysts in the United States in the late 1980s and 1990s noted changes in the way that wars were organised and fought. One of these was the concept that was brought to light by William Lind and others in the Marine Corps Gazette in 1989, when they talked about the changing nature of war into what was termed as being fourth generation warfare (4GW). This was the decentralisation of warfare and the loss of the state monopoly on prosecuting armed conflict. A number of elements were associated with this kind of conflict: complex and long-term; terrorism, insurgency and guerrilla tactics; non-national/transnational base and highly decentralised; attack the enemy culture; use of psychological warfare and propaganda; political, social, economic and military pressures all used; low intensity conflict involving networks of actors; lack of hierarchy. Non-state actors are small in size and very agile in terms of their organisational structure and ability to make decisions (with long-term planning). The basic goals of this kind of warfare are for survival or to prevent the success of enemy decision-makers by demoralising them. There was another development in military strategy that is in some ways related, which followed 4GW.

In the 1990s, the US Department of Defence pioneered the theory of warfare that came to be called network-centric warfare. This involves taking advantage of the innovations taking place in information communication technology within the sphere of military operations. Publications, such as, *Understanding Information Age Warfare* by David Alberts and others (2001) outline the basic tenets of the theory, of which there are four. 1) Thoroughly networked force improves information sharing; 2) by sharing information, shared situational awareness and the quality of information is enhanced; the effects of shared situational awareness includes enabling collaboration and self-synchronisation, bettering sustainability and

speed of command; which greatly improve mission effectiveness. This form of warfare creates a competitive advantage by linking and keeping well-informed, geographically dispersed forces and it allows for permitting new forms of organisational behaviour. This is especially useful when the nature of the armed conflict is in-line with the notions outlined by 4GW.

Although these forms of warfare theory have been developed in the West, they seem to have been co-opted by the radical Islamist insurgent and terrorist movements. The current style of prosecuting war seems to be more in line with third generation warfare principles, where information plays a supporting role to military operations. However, the opponent is certainly fighting the current conflict by 4GW means, and where military operations play a supporting role to information. It is asymmetric warfare that is being fought very different by the sides engaged in the conflict. The West plays a more tactical and short-term approach, which sometimes is at odds with goals and objectives. For instance, by engaging in regime change within the Arab Spring context (Libya, Egypt, Tunisia and currently Syria), it provides opportunities for their opponent to seize upon. The 'victory' in Libya with the toppling of Gaddafi has rapidly turned into a nightmare, which has spilled into Algeria, Mali and Syria. It has also provided an enemy that is very agile and networked the opportunity to regain a lot of strength and create new places to gain support and base their power. Social media certainly enables the Islamic insurgency to simultaneously wage a real and a virtual struggle against a currently stronger enemy. It enables networking, recruiting, planning, logistics, propaganda and many more such operations that are needed to sustain an insurgency. Narratives of radical Islamic groups are carried by social media to geographically dispersed socially displaced individuals in the West and elsewhere. It uses norms and values, especially around aspects of social justice and the defence of Islam to compete with the Western narrative of democracy and security. This is shown in the tangible results of the 13-year long GWOT.

Since 2010 there has been an increase of 60 per cent in the number of radical Islamic groups and a 300 per cent increase in the number of attacks committed by al Qaeda and affiliated groups according to a study conducted by RAND.^[iii] One of the threats comes from the radicalisation of youth in Muslim communities in Western countries. American intelligence and CT officials estimate that some 70 Americans have travelled to Syria to join the fight against the Syrian government. There may be as many as 3000 Westerners having travelled to Syria. The British Home Office has stripped 20 Jihadis of their citizenship and in January-March 2014 British police have made some 40 "Syria-related arrests" (up from 25 for the whole of 2013).^[iv] Of the estimated 11000 foreign fighters in Syria, at least 400-500 are from France (President Hollande estimated publicly 700 French residents). In Bosnia, someone convicted of trying to fight in a foreign war (i.e. Syria) can be given a 10-year prison sentence, in France the sentence is three-five years (on a charge of plotting terrorism).^[v] Norway has also joined in arresting those wishing to travel to Syria to fight or in supporting radical Islamic groups.^[vi] The concern is that the activities of these fighters may not be solely restricted to foreign acts of terrorism or supporting terrorist organisation. There is some substance to this reasoning, in 2012 Mohammed Merah returned to his home city of Toulouse where he killed three French soldiers, three Jewish children and a Rabbi. The murder of Lee Rigby (an off-duty soldier) in Woolwich, England in May 2013, when two Islamic converts ran him down in a car and then hacked him to death (the reason giving was for the killing of Muslims by British Armed Forces) serves as another reminder of the dangers.

Soldiers in Afghanistan were, at one stage, being killed more as a result of suicide than enemy action at one stage. On the home front in the US, some 22 veterans per day are committing suicide. There are long waiting times for access to mental health, some waiting at least two months for an appointment.^[vii] The inability of returned personnel to cope with daily life has seen a surge in various forms of violence and crime as well as those that withdraw from mainstream society. The matter points to the situation where the intangible assets of the West are in decline and being degraded. At the same time, the insurgent foe's

intangible assets are gaining further strength, often as a result of what the West is doing and perceived to be doing within the contexts of GWOT and the Arab Spring.

There has been a refinement, amalgamation and harmonisation of 4GW and network-centric warfare, not by Western political and military circles, but by the diverse groups of the Islamic insurgency. They are a much more flexible and responsive organisation to their operating environment than their Western counterparts that seek to rely on procedure (doctrine) and short-term planning cycles. It is likely to be a matter of time, assuming the current trends continue their present path, the tangible elements of Western strength and power shall decline and become noticeable. The current military-centric approach to CT and COIN seems to ignore or at least underplay the important and decisive embedded political aspects to armed conflict.

End Notes

[i] Ucko, D., *Best Practice or Best Strategy: Can New COIN Doctrine Win Future Wars?*, ISN, <http://isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?lng=en&id=180195>, 27 May 2014 (accessed 31 May 2014)

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[iii] Ernst, D., *Al Qaeda Surge: Islamic Radical Groups Skyrocketed Since 2010, Study Says*, The Washington Times, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jun/4/al-qaeda-surge-number-islamic-radical-groups-skyro/>, 4 June 2014 (accessed 5 June 2014)

[iv] De Freytas-Tamura, K., *Foreign Jihadis Fighting in Syria Pose Risk in West*, The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/30/world/middleeast/foreign-jihadis-fighting-in-syria-pose-risk-in-west.html?_r=0, 29 May 2014 (accessed 31 May 2014)

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[vi] Staff Writers, *Norway Arrests Three Suspected of Supporting Syria Jihad*, AFP in Space War, http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Norway_arrests_three_suspected_of_supporting_Syria_jihad_999.html, 27 May 2014 (accessed 31 May 2014)

[vii] McElhatton, J. & Klimas, J., *Mental Health Delays at VA System Five Times Longer Than Reported*, The Washington Times, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jun/4/texas-va-probe-finds-more-waiting-list-problems/>, 4 June 2014 (accessed 5 June 2014)

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