The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency

Paul B. Rich, Isabelle Duyvesteyn

Whither Counterinsurgency

Publication details

David H. Ucko

Published online on: 11 Jan 2012


PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Since its encounter with political violence in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US military has taken significant steps to improve its understanding of counterinsurgency. Faced with operational demands for which they had little preparation, its troops adapted quickly, on the fly, and while under fire. Nearly ten years on, the outcome of these campaigns still hangs in the balance, but the sustained operational experience has already had a profound effect on the US military as an institution. During this period its priorities have shifted, from a near-exclusive focus on major combat operations to a greater emphasis on the types of missions encountered in theater, be they termed ‘counterinsurgencies’, ‘stability operations’ or, somewhat perversely, ‘small wars’. As part of the reorientation, US military thinking now reflects greater awareness of war’s political essence, its unpredictability, and of what it means to intervene in foreign polities. The rate of institutional change has in many ways been impressive, given the United States’ fraught relation to counterinsurgency since the Vietnam War.

The process of change is not limited to the United States, though it is here that it has been the swiftest and most apparent. It was not until 2010, four years after the US Army and Marine Corps published their seminal counterinsurgency manual, that the French armed forces followed suit; NATO, meanwhile, has yet to ratify its ‘Allied Joint Publication for Counterinsurgency’, despite being engaged in Afghanistan since 2003. Even so, change is occurring, prompted by repeated military tours in Afghanistan and Iraq. Counterinsurgency has thus moved from being a marginal concern, indelibly (and ill-fatedly) associated with the Vietnam War, to a prime preoccupation among the armed forces of several European countries. Whereas the United Kingdom and France have long traditions of counterinsurgency and old manuals that could be dusted off and updated, several other European nations are pondering this term for the first time and are, in many cases, finding that its nature and requirements differ significantly from those of previous experiences with peacekeeping and humanitarian operations.

For proponents of this learning process, the progress made represents the hopeful first few steps of a much longer and sorely needed transformation. Yet the rise of counterinsurgency has also confronted a backlash, and resistance to the idea is rapidly spreading – in part because of its perceived failure to bring results in Afghanistan. Most of those who follow the debate will attest to counterinsurgency’s gradual ‘falling out of grace’, whereby a concept perceived as necessary and innovative only a few years ago is now deeply unpopular and in danger of being flushed out before even taking root. NATO forces will undoubtedly retain a presence in Afghanistan for
years to come, as will US forces in Iraq, but there is little enthusiasm for the concept of counterinsurgency or hope that its associated lessons and principles may help, either in ongoing operations or elsewhere. Indeed, references to counterinsurgency are increasingly likely to draw tired sighs or outright hostility, as if the concept were a big con, conceived out of sheer naivety, or worse, with an intention to deceive.

A crossroad has thus been reached, where what has been learned over the last decade is either rejected or consolidated. To some, the opportunity to come to grips with counterinsurgency is matched in magnitude only by the cost of failing to do so, yet to detractors the concept is based on poor scholarship and distracts the armed forces from their ‘true’ calling. The two camps are engaged in a tug-of-war, but it is unclear where either team stands or whether they are pulling at the same rope. This is therefore a good point at which to ask some pressing questions: is counterinsurgency theory truly bogus, or is it the soil in which this seed is planted that is unsupportive of its germination and growth? If the critics of counterinsurgency are right, is there nonetheless something to this concept that ought to be saved? If the critics are wrong, what are the benefits of retaining and promoting counterinsurgency as a military priority today?

**Counterinsurgency as a thesis**

The first and most basic problem in assessing counterinsurgency as a concept is that it lacks any agreed definition or meaning, which complicates its status as a ‘thesis’. The most common definition is derived from US military doctrine, which defines counterinsurgency as ‘those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency’ (US Department of the Army and US Marine Corps 2006: 1:1). Yet this definition is too broad, as it fails to exclude from its remit *any* action ostensibly taken to counter an insurgency. Counterinsurgency is therefore given neither form nor substance; it is simply the label used to describe the totality of actions aimed at defeating irregular forces. Even the *effectiveness* of such action is irrelevant to the use of the term, as the definition centres on the *intent* to defeat the insurgency rather than the *success* in doing so. Beyond this intent, there is nothing to help distinguish counterinsurgency from any other type of operations, as any action ‘taken by a government to defeat an insurgency’ is by definition and by that very fact ‘counterinsurgency’.

This is a conundrum for those interested in counterinsurgency and who operate with an implicit and much narrower understanding of what is meant by this term. One attempt to get around this conundrum was through the introduction of terms like ‘population-centred’ and ‘enemy-centred’ counterinsurgency, to distinguish between competing views of how these operations should be understood and conducted (US Department of Defense 2006: 4). Analytically speaking, these terms are awkward and highly unsatisfying: most successful counterinsurgency campaigns are concerned with both the population and the enemy – facets that are difficult to separate – and are, in any case, ‘strategy-centric’. Elsewhere, there has been a temptation to talk of ‘good’ and of ‘comprehensive’ counterinsurgency so as to differentiate between those who ‘get it’ and those who do not. The vagueness inherent to these statements is testament to the lack of specificity in the discussion as a whole.

The reason there is no better definition is because counterinsurgency is a fluid concept that is dependent on circumstance. As David Kilcullen (2009: 183) points out, ‘there is no such thing as a “standard” counterinsurgency … the set of counterinsurgency measures adopted depends on the character of the insurgency’. Yet this is also unsatisfactory, particularly when counterinsurgency experts and scholars are asked to define their terms. ‘Counterinsurgency’ then emerges
as a useful shorthand label employed to describe something that is impossible to define, and it is then simply hoped that those who talk about it all mean the same thing. This can provide for a very ambiguous and unproductive conversation.

The alternative to this endemic vagueness would be to laden the definition with more content, plausibly by leaning on the characteristics shared by previous and current campaigns. But this would appear to be both an unending and thankless task, as for every two counterinsurgency analysts there tends to be three views of what characteristics matter the most. Efforts to substantiate the term also risk inviting a form of conceptual navel-gazing that abstracts the discussion from the full diversity of counterinsurgency campaigns throughout history. Indeed, between the near-impossibility of finding differentiated terms to describe a messy reality, and the political process that invariably accompanies such an effort, it is necessary to ask whether clearer semantics or more structured definitions could in fact capture the essence of counterinsurgency any better than the loosely-defined terms used to date. At some point, it may be wiser to take the approach of historian Hugh Seton-Watson, who in the introduction to one of his books notes that while his effort to make sense of his chosen subject ‘undoubtedly lacks neatness’, this is ‘inevitable because the subject itself is not neat’ (as cited in Berdal 2009: 27).

**Theory or practice**

In the absence of an agreed-to definition, counterinsurgency tends to be understood according to its implementation. But because there is no set criteria of what constitutes a genuine counterinsurgency operation, it is also difficult to establish a shared practice to point towards as a valid representation of theory. In turn, any operation conducted in Afghanistan, Iraq or elsewhere, against insurgents, is said to be counterinsurgency, and the concept is judged according to all or any of these experiences.

In these conditions, counterinsurgency rarely shines. Instead, the somewhat predictable outcome is that the concept undergoes a decline for the very same reason that it was initially introduced: the very difficult problem of overcoming insurgency. While the initial interest in counterinsurgency tends to stem from unanticipated adversity in combating ‘rebel’, ‘guerrilla’ or other ‘non-state armed groups’, once fully engaged in what are typically protracted, challenging and costly campaigns, these initial reasons for re-discovering this approach to operations are lost, or rather drowned out: by heartfelt exhortations to withdraw, to abandon the imperial pretensions of ‘nation-building’ and to return the military to its traditional duties. A similar trend is apparent today. Whereas instability in post-invasion Iraq prompted the US military’s initial rediscovery of counterinsurgency, the eventual demise of the concept is likely to spring from its perceived failure, in Afghanistan, to manage the problem it is ostensibly intended to address – or to do so at an acceptable cost.

Judging counterinsurgency in this manner makes sense, intuitively. By this logic, counterinsurgency emerges as nothing but a myth, periodically restored from the historical wastebasket, promoted by a new generation of naive enthusiasts, and returned back to the basket from whence it came once it is found to bring nothing but despair, exhaustion and disappointment, all at a terrible price. This is a temptingly simple conclusion, but it is also too hasty, suffering as it does from three serious shortcomings.

First, there is a need to differentiate between counterinsurgency theory and its implementation. The term may lack a set definition, but greater awareness of the scholarly literature and military doctrine reveals a distinct divergence between how these operations are conceived of in theory and conducted in practice. Both in Iraq and Afghanistan, troop numbers have been a constant concern; the needed cultural, political and linguistic awareness has been patchy;
civil–military coordination has been found wanting; host-nation partners have typically been less than cooperative; and broadly speaking, these large-scale interventions have also lacked a unified strategy or clearly defined end-state. In Iraq, the US-led coalition shifted to a counter-insurgency-informed strategy four years into the campaign with the so-called ‘surge’, a short-lived affair by the standard of past counterinsurgency campaigns. This effort was tremendously helped by the ‘turning’ of local Sunni insurgent groups, something the surge itself in some cases provoked, yet even then the political end-result remains highly contested and sustained stability is far from guaranteed. In Afghanistan, what can only be described as ‘counterinsurgency lite’ has fared less well, and now confronts the limited time-lines that most troop-contributing countries have imposed on their participation in the campaign. Beyond the difficulties of raising troops for the mission, of controlling the country’s borders or of eliminating havens, the campaign is further undercut by the illegitimacy and unaccountability of NATO’s host-nation partners and by the lack of clarity as to the campaign’s overall objective, which tends to shift between state-building, counter-terrorism, saving NATO’s reputation and keeping the United States happy (a prime concern among European troop contributors).

Of course, it is impossible to intervene only when the perfect conditions are already in place, and any assessment of counterinsurgency that relied on such best-case scenarios would be both self-fulfilling and worthless. At the same time, given the demands and risks of these endeavours, it is also important not to enter into them with scant planning or preparation for the aftermath, as was the case in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and then to hope for immediate returns. Indeed, given the naivety with which they were launched, the ill-advised improvisational approach to the initial escalation of violence, and the subsequent hurry to get out, perhaps these campaigns are not the model counterinsurgencies on which this concept ought to be judged. Instead, the case could be made that the US military and its NATO allies are simply ill-structured and ill-prepared for these ambitious efforts, which is reason enough for further institutional change and for greater caution when considering future interventions.

There is certainly a need to disaggregate theory and practice, but it is also important not to render the theory beyond reproach. Already, defenders of counterinsurgency theory have been compared to die-hard Marxists, in that both insist on the infallibility of their cherished doctrine, while blindly ascribing its highly problematic track record to poor implementation. It is a powerful charge: a concept or ideology that survives only on paper, or that is unworkable, has very limited worth, particularly when its attempted application causes lives to be needlessly lost. The redeeming point about counterinsurgency is that its theory has shown practical value, albeit typically on an operational and tactical rather than strategic level. Indeed, virtually all Western land-based campaigns against insurgents, guerrillas and other non-state armed actors have reaffirmed the general validity of what are often referred to as ‘counterinsurgency principles’: these touch upon the importance of achieving a nuanced political understanding of the campaign, operating under unified command, using intelligence to guide operations, isolating insurgents from the population, using the minimum amount of force necessary to achieve set objectives, and assuring and maintaining the perceived legitimacy of the counterinsurgency effort in the eyes of the populace. Most important, perhaps, is the exhortation to adapt and arrive at a tailored response rather than to fall back on template solutions (see Thompson 1966; Kitson 1977: 284–90; Cohen et al. 2006).

That these principles have practical utility is not wholly surprising, as they are also in large part commonsensical. For instance, there is nothing militarily controversial about linking good intelligence to effective strike operations, and it is also clear that in a foreign environment where adversary and civilian look alike, obtaining good intelligence will require a special understanding of and working with the local population. Similarly, it is difficult to find fault with the
notion that a greater understanding of the environment, its people and structures, will present external actors with more and better options, or that controlling and influencing key populations will first require that they are adequately isolated from the intimidation, threats and coercion of others. As a political and military contest for control, counterinsurgency is concerned with combining coercion with co-option, which leads logically to the emphasis on fostering legitimacy for the intervention itself and for the actors it seeks to support. The validity of these premises is such that they have also been found relevant to other types of operations conducted to help stabilise war-torn lands, be they termed stabilisation missions, pacification or ‘robust’ peacekeeping. Indeed, in his survey of two decades of ‘post-conflict peace-building’, Mats Berdal (2009: 95–6) identifies ‘three broad priority tasks’ for outside forces: ‘providing a secure environment; stabilising governing structures; and ensuring the uninterrupted flow of basic, life-sustaining services’ – a familiar list of priorities for anyone well versed in counterinsurgency doctrine.

Yet, as Berdal (2009: 96) also adds, while these priorities appear self-evident when stated in such broad and abstract terms, each ‘raises new and more searching questions and the answers to these … have proved anything but clear-cut’. This relates to a second problem with gauging counterinsurgency as a concept on the basis of its implementation: conducting counterinsurgency successfully is notoriously difficult. Thus, while a quick survey of past campaigns reveals the general validity of a number of broad principles, the campaigns themselves were not always successful. Intuitively, this high level of frustration should force a rejection of counterinsurgency as a failed concept. Yet while this may seem a logical recourse, the operational difficulties associated with counterinsurgency are unlikely to disappear and we would then need a new concept to grapple with these endemic challenges. Refusing to study and prepare for counterinsurgency will not reduce the need for the associated skills and capabilities and the desire to avoid counterinsurgency should not be confused with a ready ability to do so.

Operational or strategic

This leads to a third point: counterinsurgency, like insurgency, is not a strategy, but a description of a strategic end-point, either to mount or defeat a threat to the established authorities. The more difficult questions of whether to embark on such a campaign, or how to prosecute it, are strategic-level questions that counterinsurgency doctrine – operationally oriented as it is – cannot answer. A close reading of the theory reveals that it never encourages foolhardy campaigns to stabilise war-torn countries or to defeat insurgencies wherever they may rear their head; if anything, a note of caution regarding the requirements of such interventions can be parsed from the field manuals and main texts. More commonly, it has been the lack of awareness of such doctrine and texts that have necessitated their rediscovery: witness the gradual introduction of counterinsurgency principles and practices following the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001, of Iraq in 2003, but also following the initial failures to grapple with incipient insurgencies in the Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century, in Malaya and Algeria in the 1950s, in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, and in El Salvador in the 1980s. When, as in these cases, a commitment is made to assist an insurgency-threatened government, the theory and principles of counterinsurgency can provide useful guidance in meeting this strategic end, but the latter is always decided upon and defined at a higher level and will itself be more or less realistic.

Even when the commitment has been made to engage in a protracted counterinsurgency campaign, the relevant doctrine still offers no roadmap or silver bullet, but merely a collection of tentative lessons learned. Such guidance may be very helpful in the design and execution of an effective campaign plan, but that plan must itself, as the theory clearly states, be adapted to
specific circumstances; certainly, it must be closely tailored to the causative factors of violence, which will in each case be unique. As Hew Strachan (2008: 51) has cautioned:

Strategy uses theoretical insights to question real events in a bid to shape them according to the needs of policy, but as soon as strategy allows the expectations of theory to lessen its grasp of what is really happening it has allowed theory to be its master rather than its tool.

This last point is frequently missed in current discussions of counterinsurgency. Because of the overbearing backdrop of the Afghanistan campaign, counterinsurgency is commonly judged on its ability to achieve the strategic aims set for this particular campaign. This is an odd and inauspicious test for the concept, not only because of the difficulties of conducting ‘state-building’ in Afghanistan, but because the link between the stated strategic objectives there (to ‘disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda’) and the operational tenets of counterinsurgency is very difficult to discern. The country’s terrain, size, geo-strategic location and past make foreign occupation a fraught endeavour and, even then, al-Qaeda is constrained neither to Afghanistan, nor to Pakistan, but would subsist even if the counterinsurgency campaign were successful and the region radically transformed. To many observers, ‘counterinsurgency’ is therefore an ill-suited and overly grandiose response to the problem of al-Qaeda and is judged accordingly, as a bad policy option for Afghanistan, rather than as a collection of principles and best practices, detached from any one campaign and operating below the realm of strategy.

This tendency is in part the result of an unfortunate conflation between the operational and strategic levels of war, one that relates intimately to a common misunderstanding of counterinsurgency today. The absence of a clear and viable strategy, more obvious in Afghanistan, but arguable also in the case of Iraq, has resulted in counterinsurgency, an operational concept, being leaned upon as strategy in its own right (Strachan 2010: 168). This has also been the tendency of some proponents of counterinsurgency, who confuse its related principles (population security, governance, legitimacy) as strategic ends in themselves, and try to pursue them all at once, with no clear vision of the desired end-state. Missed in this all-too-often hurried embrace of newly rediscovered theory is the need to adapt its premises and principles to the specific political goals being pursued. ‘Strategy’, Eliot Cohen writes,

is the art of choice that binds means with objectives. It is the highest level of thinking about war, and it involves priorities (we will devote resources here, even if that means starving operations there), sequencing (we will do this first, then that) and a theory of victory (we will succeed for the following reasons).3

Plainly, a counterinsurgency field manual is unable to address these difficult questions or resolve the attendant trade-offs, though, importantly, it may provide valuable guidance and insight when it comes to tying carefully defined strategic aims to the design of operations.

Counterinsurgency as an antithesis

By scaling back the expectations of what ‘counterinsurgency’ as a concept can do, its value may be more fully appreciated. Counterinsurgency does not advocate or allow for painless foreign interventions, it does not provide a formulaic solution to the problem of political violence, nor does it constitute a comprehensible strategy with which to tackle insurgencies, al-Qaeda or the threat of global terrorism. Finally, to value the theory and doctrine of counterinsurgency is not
necessarily to see wisdom in NATO’s counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, or to support similar interventions elsewhere.

What, then, does the theory of ‘counterinsurgency’ do? If the theory is only ‘useful guidance’, much of which is commonsensical, what is its worth? The key lies partly in what precedes counterinsurgency dialectically, the thesis to which counterinsurgency provides the antithesis. In the last half-century, what counterinsurgency principles have done is to illustrate the unique logic of political warfare and its distinctiveness from the ‘conventional’ types of military campaigns for which most Western armed forces are structured and trained. In the US context, this pattern is particularly clear: interest in counterinsurgency has tended to peak when senior civilian and/or military leaders realise the limitations of ‘conventional’ military force in managing the security problems of the day. In the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy grew concerned that the dominant US policy of ‘massive retaliation’ was too inflexible to address the rising threat of political subversion (then seen as a Soviet Union-orchestrated phenomenon). Reacting to the ascendance of communism in Vietnam and in Laos, the instability of decolonisation in Africa and elsewhere and the successful communist revolution in Cuba, Kennedy pushed the US armed forces to adapt and to learn the basic principles and practices of ‘counter-guerrilla’ warfare (McClimток 1992: ch. 6). In the following few years, the US military developed new tactics and training exercises, expanded its special operations capacity, and its understanding of counterinsurgency.

This was, in Douglas Blaufarb’s words (1977), a ‘counterinsurgency era’ for the US military, though the reforms were often all too limited and superficial to have a sustained effect. In either case, this was also an era that came to an abrupt and unhappy end in Vietnam – another case of a traumatic operational experience torpedoing a still incomplete learning process. In the aftermath of US withdrawal from Vietnam, counterinsurgency was deliberately eliminated from US military doctrine, as the armed forces turned their attention to the Central Front and the prospect of an armoured confrontation with the Soviet Union. There were good reasons to concentrate on Europe, but that this shift comprised a simultaneous and total neglect of counterinsurgency was a direct result of the US military’s particular reading of its experience in Vietnam and its view of counterinsurgency. Generally, the senior US military staff felt that in Vietnam ‘the Army had lost a generation’s worth of technical modernization while gaining a generation’s worth of nearly irrelevant combat experience’ (quoted in Herbert 1988).

The deliberate neglect of counterinsurgency following Vietnam meant that the concept needed to be ‘rediscovered’ in the 1980s, when the United States again grew concerned about instability in the Third World. As it happened, the late 1970s did not feature the anticipated showdown in Europe against the Soviet Union. Instead, the United States witnessed the ascendance of left-learning regimes in several countries, including many former US client states: Ethiopia (1974), Mozambique (1975), Angola (1976), Grenada (1979) and Nicaragua (1979). The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Iranian revolution that same year, and the subsequent hostage crisis further demonstrated the volatility of international order and the vulnerability of US partners without its support. As in the 1960s these developments were perceived through the lens of the Cold War and as offering opportunities to the Soviet Union. The conclusion drawn within the US government was that the Cold War would be fought globally, requiring greater worldwide deployability and the capability to conduct ‘low-intensity’ operations, a new term for counterinsurgency and other types of ‘irregular’ operations (Downie 1988). In the 1980s, therefore, the US military again began to ‘learn counterinsurgency’: it issued new doctrine, adapted training exercises, and opened new centres and commands (notably the Special Operations Command). The activity was such that some spoke of the 1980s having once more ‘ushered in a new counterinsurgency era’ (Sarkesian 1986: 38). This time, the new
knowledge was put into practice in El Salvador, a testing-ground for a vicarious form of counterinsurgency, fought with advisers rather than combat troops.

The US military’s most recent ‘counterinsurgency era’, which began following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, was also motivated by a previous failure to grapple with the political complexities of war. Throughout the 1990s, a highly conventional and apolitical understanding of war marked US military thinking, as epitomised by the transformation programmes of Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld. Resistance to the peacekeeping operations of the Clinton–era dovetailed perfectly with a growing fascination with information technology and precision strike capabilities. The future of war lay not with the infantry, rotating in and out of seemingly endless peace operations, but with airstrikes, drones, computer and satellites, dispensing force swiftly, precisely and decisively. ‘Military operations other than war’ (MOOTW), as they were termed, did not feature in the literature on transformation or were presented as amenable to the precision-strike toolkit offered through the ‘information revolution’ (Ucko 2009: 49–53).

It was against this backdrop that counterinsurgency experienced its most recent peak. Having deposed the Saddam Hussein regime and triggered by an insurgency against the government installed in its place, the US military reached out to counterinsurgency theory as a means of understanding and responding to the instability in Iraq. Meanwhile, this theory also dismantled the assumptions that had held sway during the 1990s, broadening the US military’s mindset and culture, and its understanding of war. In that sense, the study of counterinsurgency again brought a welcome departure from prior misconceptions: it was a much-needed antithesis to a thesis that had not withstood its encounter with practice. Specifically, the concept instilled the idea that while wars are easy to begin, they are difficult to end, and that doing so requires a firm understanding of what causes violence to begin with. In reaffirming the political essence of war, it also forced a greater understanding of the local population and social context, which in turn brought concepts such as legitimacy and population control to the fore.

**Beyond counterinsurgency**

The (re)discovery of counterinsurgency was a step forward from the ‘transformation’-fuelled narrow-mindedness of the 1990s, but today counterinsurgency is no longer the antithesis, but itself the thesis. Its function as a reaction to muddy thinking is still being served, but it is also being held up in its own right and subjected to critical scrutiny. Such scrutiny is often sorely needed: the assumptions, the historical cases leaned upon, and the modern relevance of counterinsurgency theory are all areas that scream out for further research.

The problem with counterinsurgency scholarship is that it often gets too caught up in the specificities of theory, as if endless conceptual navel-gazing will reveal the answer to the problem of political violence. Part of the problem is the tendency, as counterinsurgency became a mainstream topic in strategic studies, for analysts and scholars to follow suit, eager to have their own say on this important topic. In the rush to get to the ball first, much of the ensuing scholarship lacks the firm anchoring in history or rigorous and time-consuming research needed to understand specific cases. There are only a handful of studies based on first-hand experience with the insurgency group being examined, and fieldwork and language skills are too often lacking. Inadequate attention has been given to area studies, regional experts and anthropological data; instead much of the research is self-referential and inward looking. In other cases, there is a tendency to want to be the one to crack the code, to overthrow ‘conventional wisdom’, or to find that particularly catchy acronym that explains it all. Within the ensuing deluge of counterinsurgency-related articles and books, there has been both wheat and chaff.
As the field gets overcrowded and the theory at times dangerously abstruse, there comes a point where it may be better to drop the term ‘counterinsurgency’ altogether: to recognise that it is too divisive, is readily misunderstood and that it at any rate is almost impossible to define. Indeed, given these attributes, and the nature of the discussion today, the longevity of ‘counterinsurgency’ as a military priority appears limited. Dropping counterinsurgency, however, would be to forfeit the functions that the term plays, first in grouping nominally similar types of operations into one helpful category, for insight, comparison and analysis, and second, in providing an oft-needed antithesis to the ‘conventional’ type of thinking on war that has tended to dominate within Western militaries.

The first, ‘grouping’ function can be useful but is probably dispensable. Certainly, there are as many risks and dangers as there are benefits in bringing together operations from different epochs and geographical settings just because they share the epithet ‘counterinsurgency’, a term whose meaning has evolved over time. Furthermore, the selection of operations for inclusion in this category is somewhat arbitrary, and excludes from consideration many interventions and armed campaigns that have relevant traits but were referred to by a different name: ‘revolutions’, ‘civil wars’, ‘stability operations’, ‘small wars’, ‘robust peacekeeping’ or ‘post-conflict peacebuilding’, to name but a few. Better to study past and current campaigns based on their shared characteristics rather than by what they were called.

It is less certain whether the term’s second function, as a useful antithesis, has been fully served. For that reason, abandoning ‘counterinsurgency’ would need to be done with two critical caveats in mind. First, this should in no way signify a return to the understanding of war that preceded the ascendance of counterinsurgency in the first place, to wit, an understanding of war as ‘conventional’. This idea of ‘conventional war’ has become an entrenched archetype within military thinking, in part due to a grossly simplified recollection of a limited number of conflicts that disproportionately shape the Western understanding of the phenomenon, primarily the Second World War and the imagined, yet ultimately averted, armoured confrontation on the Central Front. Yet on closer scrutiny, the notion of military confrontation on an isolated, unpopulated battlefield, in which the defeat of one side’s forces brings decisive victory for the other, is patently suspect, more so today than ever before.

This relates intimately to the nature and purpose of war. On the former, it is historically typical for the termination of one phase of war to give way to new sources of uncertainty and instability. Indeed, the term ‘post-conflict’ is in this context highly misleading, as it suggests a clean break from war to peace, with little continuity between the two. It is more common for one conflict, upon its conclusion, to fuse into a new competition over resources, power and security, one that, unless carefully managed, will often take violent forms. As to the purpose of war, it is to consolidate a political compact that is preferable to the status quo ante and that is also sustainable. What this means is that even predominantly conventional wars will usually precede an ‘unconventional’ phase, because the gains made in combat require consolidation through stabilisation, political support, capacity-building or reconstruction. These realities of war are commonly missed in favour of neat theoretical distinctions and heuristic dividing lines.

Instead of returning to ‘conventional war’ as an alternative to ‘counterinsurgency’, the point would be to arrive at a more integrated understanding of ‘war’, informed by the experiences and campaigns of recent years, but without the divisive and vague jargon that they have provoked. This would also put an end to the bifurcation of wars as either ‘conventional’ or ‘irregular’. At first sight, this bifurcation is helpful, as it rightly frames stabilisation and counterinsurgency as problems that require a different mindset and skills than pure combat, and that deserve independent study. At the same time, the neat theoretical dichotomy also encourages an unspoken belief that the two forms of war at either extremity have rarefied equivalents in practice. In so
doing, it suggests that states have a choice between fighting conventional or irregular wars and that their forces can be tailored accordingly. Missed here is an appreciation of war as a complex political phenomenon, one that typically encompasses both irregular and conventional challenges and whose operating environment is rarely static but instead very difficult to control.

To reach a more fundamental understanding of war as a political phenomenon, it helps to consider some deeper questions about the requirements for true military effectiveness and the nature of the contemporary operating environment. First, what makes the use of military force effective? In a number of addresses in the mid 1990s, General Rupert Smith gave voice to this very question, suggesting a disconcerting lack of clarity on ‘what is it we expect the use of force or forces to achieve as opposed to do’ (as cited in Berdal 2000: 55). With this distinction in mind, what are armed forces expected to achieve and how are they best configured and supported to carry out the associated tasks? A second series of questions put the emphasis on the operational level: what are the features of the contemporary operating environment; what skill-sets and capabilities are required to meet these challenges; and which of these should reside within the armed forces?

These types of question talk neither of ‘conventional’ nor of ‘counterinsurgency’ operations, but rely on a broader conception of war based on its political purpose and likely challenges. However, in seeking to answer these questions, it quickly becomes clear that many of the lessons learned in recent counterinsurgency campaigns have a far broader relevance and should therefore not be forgotten. This raises the second caveat that must be fully taken onboard before ‘counterinsurgency’ is dismissed: eschewing the term does not mean that the operational challenges most closely associated with it will be avoided. Importantly, this remains the case even if we do not see another ‘counterinsurgency campaign’ or ‘stability operation’ in the near future. The bitter truth is that future land-based operations, whatever character they may take, are likely to involve a similar range of tasks as seen in today’s campaigns. If territory is to be seized, stabilisation of that territory will be an unavoidable requirement. If the global trend of urbanisation continues, future operations will likely be conducted in built-up environments, where the local population cannot be ignored but more often must be co-opted and even protected against attack. Given the persistent attraction and apparent effectiveness of asymmetric tactics against militarily inferior adversaries; the frequency of operations aimed at building local capacity; and the continued threat of ungoverned spaces acting as potential havens for terrorist groups, expeditionary land forces are also likely to confront insurgents, militia and other ‘irregular’ threats in future land-based operations. Couple all this with the near-inevitability of operating within a local culture and population with whom the foreign forces will enjoy at best transient legitimacy, and the broader relevance of experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan becomes very clear indeed.

From here springs the imperative to retain the lessons learned in recent counterinsurgency operations, even if, conceptually, we move beyond the artificial dividing line between ‘conventional’ and ‘irregular’ campaigns. This would also be a major opportunity to export the principles commonly associated with counterinsurgency to the broader realm of warfare, where they are often equally applicable. For example, while it is true that counterinsurgency is primarily ‘political’, the same holds true for all types of military operations. Similarly, the exhortation in counterinsurgency theory to understand your local environment is equally critical in wars of territorial conquest – though what it means to understand the terrain will naturally depend on its dominant features, one of which is the absence or presence of civilian populations. As to the emphasis in counterinsurgency theory on the requirements for effective interventions, this is something with far broader validity, touching upon the need to resource wars properly to meet set objectives. Finally, the emphasis on the local population as a potential partner or adversary
should not be a concern lodged exclusively within the domain of counterinsurgency, much as the need to adapt and learn faster than your enemy is a cardinal requirement for all warfare, not just ones conducted against ‘irregular adversaries’.

Conclusion

In the two months following its online publication in December 2006, the US Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency manual was downloaded over two million times (Sewall 2007: xxi). At the time, against the backdrop of a raging civil war in Iraq and the gradual resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the new doctrine represented a milestone in the American military’s learning of counterinsurgency, an approach to warfare that it was hoped would bring some sort of salvation to the two ongoing campaigns. As lead author of the manual and then commander of Multinational Forces – Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus was able to put some of its principles and practices into effect. The successes of the ‘surge’ in Iraq added credibility to the idea of counterinsurgency and elevated those most closely associated with it. Yet as the United States turned to Afghanistan, the new concept soon lost its shine. Contested from the outset by a vocal guard of sceptics, the backlash against counterinsurgency gained momentum as its attempted implementation in Afghanistan stuttered and, to many observers, failed. As a US military priority, the future of counterinsurgency now looks bleak, and what happens in the United States will no doubt seal its fate across much of Europe, where the embrace of counterinsurgency has from the outset been far more tentative.

Counterinsurgency deserves close and critical scrutiny. It is a divisive concept, one that is difficult to define, and whose implementation causes the loss of life. Furthermore, it is a highly unattractive form of warfare, and understandably there is no real appetite to repeat the types of engagements seen in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among critics, counterinsurgency is too ambitious, even presumptuous and arrogant, encouraging the idea that if equipped with the right doctrine, military forces can achieve social and political change in a foreign society that they do not understand. More discreet operations, carried out by local forces, and assisted by special forces, are seen as a less provocative, costly and fateful means of exerting influence as and when needed.

The criticism of counterinsurgency is often valid, but it also tends to ignore two points. First, counterinsurgency theory does not necessarily lead to calls for ambitious interventions in foreign countries, but provides guidelines and principles that have worked in similar settings and that may today be leaned upon in the construction of a campaign plan. Careful study and research is needed to determine how best to apply these principles to ongoing operations, and it is fair to say that the theory is better at raising the right questions than in providing the answers. Second, counterinsurgencies are rarely optional and are therefore likely to reappear, even after the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq draw down. This is not to say that future operations should be entered into carelessly, or that they would take the form of a ‘counterinsurgency’ or ‘stability operation’ per se. Instead, given the nature of the contemporary operating environment, an expeditionary land force is likely to encounter a similar set of challenges as in today’s campaigns: that of operating in an urban environment, in the midst of a civilian population, in a different language and culture, all the while countering irregular adversaries. In the face of this enduring complexity, the principles and doctrine of counterinsurgency still have a role to play.

After years of operational involvement in counterinsurgency, many of these principles may seem commonsensical, if extremely difficult to honour in practice. Even so, they still appear necessary in illustrating the unique logic of counterinsurgency and its distinctiveness from the
conventional types of campaigns for which most Western militaries train and prepare. This touches upon the second function of counterinsurgency doctrine: its use as a powerful corrective to the unhelpful tendency in the US military, but also elsewhere in the West, to divorce military affairs from political considerations, and to treat war as an elaborate targeting drill.

It is on these grounds that the decline of counterinsurgency would be regrettable, if through this process the associated knowledge and learning of the last few years is also forgotten. The one good reason to abandon the term, one that merits careful consideration, would be precisely because of its divisive and distorting connotations; the aim would then be to talk more plainly about the nature of war and of war-to-peace transitions. This in itself would be a step forward, away from artificial delineations between ‘conventional’ and ‘irregular’ operations and towards a defence posture based on the purposes of war and the likely features of tomorrow’s operating environment. It would signify the intent, at long last, to understand and study war on its own terms. At the same time, to abandon counterinsurgency on this basis presumes that the operational and strategic lessons of recent years have been sufficiently internalised that the term has lost its utility as a necessary antithesis. It may be that we are not quite there yet.

Notes

1 Research for this chapter was conducted during his time as Transatlantic Fellow at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, in 2009–10.
4 I am grateful to William F. Owen for this insight.

References