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The end of counterinsurgency and the scalable force

THE U.S. military for years has debated the utility of counterinsurgency operations. Drawing from a sentiment that harkens back to the Vietnam War, many within the military have long opposed counterinsurgency operations. Others see counterinsurgency as the unavoidable future of U.S. warfare. The debate is between those who believe the purpose of a conventional military force is to defeat another conventional military force and those who believe conventional military conflicts increasingly will be replaced by conflicts more akin to recent counterinsurgency operations. In such conflicts, the purpose of a counterinsurgency is to transform an occupied society in order to undermine the insurgents.

Understanding this debate requires the understanding that counterinsurgency is not a type of warfare; it is one strategy by which a disproportionately powerful conventional force approaches asymmetric warfare. As its name implies, it is a response to an insurgency, a type of asymmetric conflict undertaken by small units with close links to the occupied population to defeat a larger conventional force.

Insurgents typically are highly motivated otherwise they collapse easily and usually possess superior intelligence to a foreign occupational force. Small units operating with superior intelligence are able to evade more powerful conventional forces and can strike such forces at their own discretion. Insurgents are not expected to defeat the occupying force through direct military force. Rather, the assumption is that the occupying force has less interest in the outcome of the war than the insurgents and that over time, the inability to defeat the insurgency will compel the occupying force to withdraw.

According to counterinsurgency theory, the strength of an insurgency lies in the relationship between insurgents and the general population. The relationship provides a logistical base and an intelligence apparatus. It also provides sanctuary by allowing the insurgents to blend into the population and disappear under pressure. Counterinsurgency argues that severing this relationship is essential. The means for this consist of offering the population economic incentives, making deals with the traditional leadership and protecting the population from the insurgents, who might conduct retributive attacks for collaborating with the occupying force.

The weakness of counterinsurgency is the assumption that the population would turn against the insurgents for economic incentives or that the counterinsurgents can protect the population from the insurgents. Some values, such as nationalism and religion, are very real among many populations, and the occupying force's ability to alter these values is dubious, no matter how helpful, sincere and sympathetic the occupying force is. Moreover, protecting the population from insurgents is difficult. In many cases, insurgents are the husbands, brothers and sons of civilians. The population may want the economic

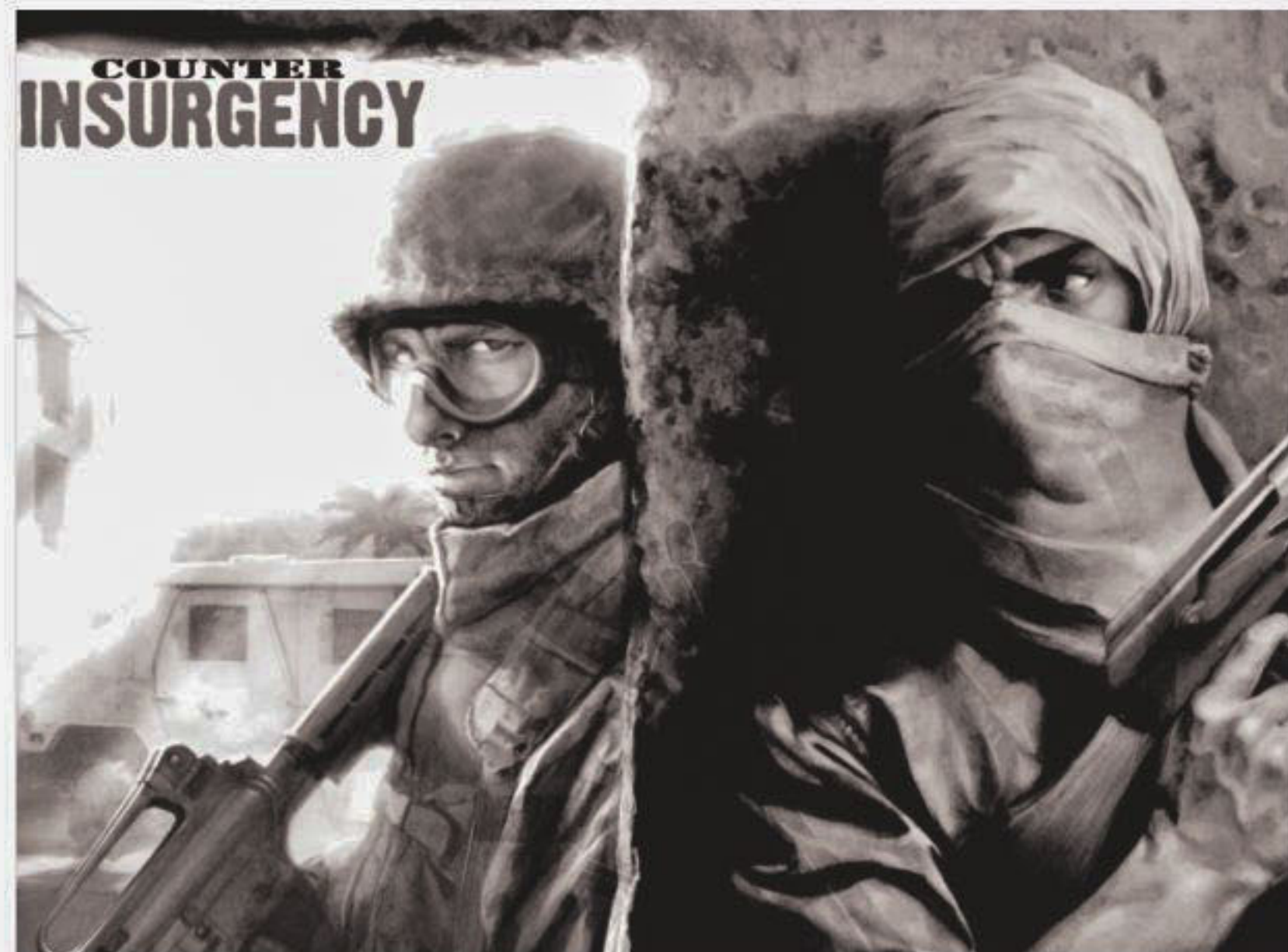
benefits offered by the occupying force, but that does not mean citizens will betray or ostracize their friends and relatives. In the end, it is a specious assumption that a mass of foreigners can do more than intimidate a population. The degree to which they can intimidate them is doubtful as well.

An alternative to counterinsurgency?

There is of course another dimension of asymmetric warfare, which encapsulates guerrilla warfare and special operations warfare. This is warfare by which highly trained light infantry forces are deployed on a clearly defined mission but are not dependent on the local population. Instead, these forces avoid the general population, operating on their own supplies or supplies obtained with minimal contact with the population. Notably, either side could adopt these tactics. What is most important in considering guerrilla warfare from the perspective of the counterinsurgent is that it is not merely a tactic for the insurgent; it is also a potential alternative to counterinsurgency itself.

Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan have shown that the U.S. military is not very good at counterinsurgency. One could argue that the United States should improve its counterinsurgency capabilities, but there is little evidence that it could master such capabilities. There is, however, another form of light infantry warfare to consider, and it is a form of warfare the United States is good at. The alternative does not seek to win over the population but is designed to achieve very definable military objectives, from the destruction of facilities to harassing, engaging and possibly destroying enemy forces, including insurgents.

Special Operations Forces are highly useful for meeting these objectives, but we should also include other types of forces. The U.S. Marine Corps is one such example. Rather than occupying territory, and certainly rather than trying to change public opinion, these forces have a conventional mission carried out in relatively small unit operations. Their goal is to assert military force in highly defined if limited missions designed to bypass the population and



strike at the opposition's capabilities. This is exemplified best in counterterrorist operations or the assault on specific facilities. These operations are cheap and do not require occupation. More important, these operations are designed to terminate without incurring political cost the bane of prolonged counterinsurgency operations. The alternative to counterinsurgency is to avoid occupational warfare by rigorously defining more limited missions.

To illustrate these operations, consider what we regard as a major emerging threat: Non-state actors potentially acquiring land-based anti-ship missiles. Globalism brings with it intensified maritime trade. Meanwhile, we have seen the dissemination of many weapons to non-state actors. It is easy to imagine that the next stage of diffusion would be mobile, land-based anti-ship missiles. A guerrilla group or insurgency, armed with such weapons, could take advantage of land cover for mobility but strike at naval vessels. In fact, we have already seen several instances where groups employ this strategy. Hezbollah did so in operations against Israel in 2006. Pirates off the coast of Africa are a non-state threat to maritime shipping, though they have yet to use such weapons. Likewise, we see this potential in suicide boat bombs launched from the coast of Yemen.

The world is filled with chokepoints, where the ocean narrows and constricts the flow of ships into corridors within range of land-based anti-ship systems. Some chokepoints, such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of

Malacca and the Strait of Gibraltar, are natural, while others, such as the Panama and Suez canals, are man-made, and they are vulnerable to weapons far less sophisticated than anti-ship missiles. These chokepoints, as well as other critical coastal waters, represent the vulnerabilities of the global economic system to state and non-state actors. Occupying them is the logical next step up from piracy.

Providing naval escorts to protect commercial vessels would not solve the problem. The escorts would not be in a position to attack the land-based

attackers, whose location would be unknown. Airstrikes are possible, but as we have learned in places like Kosovo, camouflage is an effective counter to airstrikes despite its shortcomings.

These are the circumstances under which scalable, self-contained units would be needed. U.S. Marines, who have forces of sufficient scale to engage attackers in relatively larger areas, are particularly well suited for such missions. Special operations teams would be useful against identified and static hard targets, but amphibious light infantry in various sized units would provide the ability to search, identify and destroy attackers who are constantly moving or redeploying. Because these would be land-sea operations, cooperation between naval forces and ground forces would be critical. These clearly are Marine missions, and potentially urgent ones.

This is one mission among many that can be imagined for smaller-unit operations against non-state actors in a hybrid war scenario, which would avoid the obvious pitfalls of counterinsurgency. Most of all, it would provide boots on the ground distinguishing between targets, camouflage and innocent victims and still be able to deploy unmanned aerial vehicles and other assets.

The issue is not between peer-to-peer conflict and counterinsurgency. While increasingly rare, peer-to-peer conflict still represents the existential threat to any country. But the real problem is matching the force to the mission without committing to

occupation or worse still, the social transformation of the country.

Scale and mission
The type of government that Afghanistan has is not a matter of national interest to the United States. What is of national interest is that terrorist attacks are not planned, practiced or launched from Afghanistan. Neither occupation nor transformation of the social structure is necessary to achieve this mission. What is necessary will vary in every conflict, but the key in each conflict is to contain the commitment to the smallest level possible. There are three reasons for this. First, doing so defines the mission in such a way that it can be attained. This imposes realism on the mission. Moreover, minimizing commitment avoids the scenario in which prudent withdrawal is deemed politically unacceptable. Last, it avoids the consequences of attempting to transform an entire country.

Military intervention should be a rare occurrence; when it does occur, it should be scaled to the size of the mission. In the chokepoint scenario addressed above, the goal is not to defeat an insurgency; an insurgency cannot be defeated without occupying and transforming the occupied society. The goal is to prevent the use of land based missiles against ships. Missions to destroy capabilities are politically defensible and avoid occupational warfare. They are effective counters to insurgents without turning into counterinsurgencies.

These missions require a light force readily transportable by multiple means to a target area. They should be capable of using force from the squad level to larger levels if necessary. Forces deployed must be able to return as needed and remain in theater without needing to be on the ground, taking casualties and engaging in warfare against non-essential targets and inevitably against civilians. In other words, the mission should not incur unnecessary political costs.

The key is to recognize the failure of counterinsurgency, that warfare is conducted on varying scales of size and that any force must be able to adapt to the mission, ideally operating without large onshore facilities and without moving to occupation.

The current debate over counterinsurgency opens the door to a careful consideration of not only the scalability of forces but also the imperative that the mission includes occupation only in the most extreme cases. Occupation leads to resistance, resistance leads to counterattacks and counterattacks lead to counterinsurgencies. Agile insertion of forces, normally from the sea, could beget disciplined strategic and operational planning and war termination strategies. Wars are easier to end when all that is required is for ships to sail away.

Not all wars can be handled this way, but wars that can't need to be considered very carefully. The record for these wars does not instill optimism.

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What awaits NATO in the future

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SINCE the last NATO summit in Lisbon nearly two years ago it has carried out its operation in Afghanistan, conducted a UN sanctioned mission to Libya and focused on executing a new missile defense system over Europe. At the end of May in Chicago World Leaders came together once more to deal with the emerging global complex security challenges.

At a time when Europe plunges deeper into recession and the future of a single currency is under serious challenge, the NATO Summit didn't actually come into spotlight. Also, the victory of an anti-EU candidate in the French Presidential election didn't help this issue. At a time of budget cuts and shrinking defense budget in the West how will NATO manage its transition from Afghanistan to newer threats to its partner nations remains the pressing issue.

World leaders gathered at Chicago, and the Afghanistan issue took the center stage. They reaffirmed their faith on the Afghan security forces to protect their homeland. This is the most immediate concern over the ISAF's (International Security Assistance Force) departure from Afghanistan. Afghan military and police forces have been training for some time now with the US forces but they aren't prepared to take responsibility for their security. Many fear Al Qaeda could re-emerge with the exit of NATO troops from Afghanistan. It appears up to 20,000 British and US troops will remain behind at Afghan bases such as Bagram, Kandahar and Jalalabad for some time after 2014. Also, Afghan forces depend heavily on western money. When the aid dries up there won't be enough troops to secure the whole

country specially the rural areas. Some also raised concerns over the attempted peace talks with the Taliban. The accelerated plans to withdraw troops from Afghanistan will give them even less incentive to negotiate. Social reforms in Afghanistan which occurred in the last decade is wobbly, at best regardless of the fact that the number of girls in school is now well over 2 million compared to 5,000 in the Taliban era. More and more women are entering the workforce even politics which no one even dreamt of in Taliban Haven. All of which may go undone if they make room for old biases.

Withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan may lead to geopolitical instability. Afghan militants may cross borders, where western forces can't pursue them. It's also impractical to think Pakistan, burdened with her own problems would do anything to stop them. Another participant in this scenario can be Iran. The absence of US military presence in its neighborhood will result in Iran expanding its influence in this zone. If the outcome develops into a common goal of targeting US interests in this region, it will only worsen the contentious US-Iran relationship.

Broader engagement of the international community has been promised in the development of Afghanistan. Nations pledged to a long term commitment to establish a peaceful, stable and prosperous country with the support of a legitimate and accountable government. Now the obligation is on NATO's part to see it through.

Now to the much bigger issue at hand- can they remain pertinent in this century as it did in the previous one? During the cold war the US Led military coalition helped prevent communist aggression throughout the world. After the collapse of Soviet Union they were confined to Europe's backyard before committing to counterterrorism and nuclear proliferation.



Since then they have been supporting the African Union Peacekeeping Operations, assisted with the Humanitarian & Relief Works in Pakistan and conducted anti-piracy operations in the horn of Africa.

They even helped in the liberation of Libya from Gaddafi's forces. This along with the Afghanistan invasion can be seen as a major shift in NATO's policy. They are prepared to handle extreme situations with military power anywhere in the world, long before it reaches Europe. However, these

engagements were not popular among the people. Allies aren't the only countries expressing fatigue over NATO's involvement in the region. China's state-affiliated Xinhua News Agency portrays the alliance as warmongering bully and blames it for the international disputes. The agency chastises NATO and argues it needs to pipe down on the international stage.

Europe's continuous slashing down of their defense budget has now left US to cover three-quarter of NATO's entire budget. In Afghanistan few countries didn't allocate their soldiers in combat zones, rather insisted on deployment in peaceful areas. America didn't engage in the Libya operation from the front row but still had to assign military & intelligence assets. Europe has an increasing dependency on US military logistics. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO's Secretary General, has challenged members to embark on "Smart Defense," essentially pooling assets with the goal of developing and

sharing better key military capabilities. At this point the US seems committed, whereas Germany backed austerity measures has cast a shadow on Europe's intention. With the withdrawal of combat forces from Afghanistan in 2014, NATO will be without a portfolio for the first time in nearly two decades. Whether it should go back to its main function of protecting the homeland or chose to neutralize threats overseas can only be answered in the future. Whatever is said, the US still needs this transatlantic partnership to counter China's

growing military capability in the Asia Pacific, which Washington envisage as a critical region.

President Obama mentioned Europe as their reliable partner in choice. Now they must work with the US to form their interest, potential and target for the next decades. Vladimir Putin has established a set of allies in Latin America, North Korea and Iran are on the verge of acquiring Nuclear missiles and Yemen has created the next safe haven for Al-Qaeda, rising influence of BRIC from a global strategic perspective- Everything to get worried about. The west cannot function at the optimum level without NATO combining them altogether to protect their interest and hierarchy which they have enjoyed for so long.

How will the transatlantic alliance address these challenges will be answered in the coming years. Any mistake or failure to address an issue will have serious implications in the world of tomorrow. World leaders agree with this in the Chicago Summit declaration, "At a time of complex security challenges and financial difficulties, it is more important than ever to make the best of our resources and to continue to adapt our forces and structures. We remain committed to our common values, and are determined to ensure NATO's ability to meet any challenges to our shared security."

One thing's for certain- With the US pivoting towards the Asia Pacific region and EU fighting for a common ground among its members in both internal and foreign issue the real nature of NATO involvement in Global Security Measures is a long way from being determined.

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