

## **Counter-insurgency fashionable again, but will it work in Afghanistan?**

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Counter-insurgency is back in fashion. When costly failure loomed in Iraq in 2005 and 2006, the US and British militaries went searching for new ideas. As often happens, the new ideas they found turned out to be old ones. They went back to the history books and resurrected concepts of counter-insurgency warfare that had evolved in the colonial and post-colonial wars of the 19th and 20th centuries, up to and including Vietnam. At first promoted by a few visionaries, it has become the new orthodoxy of the war on terror. But will it work?

Counter-insurgency is about how to use modern armed forces, which are designed specifically to fight other modern armed forces, to fight dispersed and shadowy adversaries "among the people".

It is a different kind of warfare, and recognising those differences is a important step forward. It has been argued that last year's surge in Iraq succeeded not because there were many more troops on the ground but because, under General David Petraeus, they adopted counter-insurgency approaches.

But how true is that? Naturally Petraeus and his team believe their new tactics made all the difference. But many other factors were at work in Iraq's immensely complex ethnic, religious and political conflicts last year, and we really have no way of knowing how important the counter-insurgency ideas were.

This matters because Petraeus's new deputy in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, wants to apply the same ideas there. In his recent report, he proposed a counter-insurgency strategy backed by substantial increases in troop numbers.

But a close look at McChrystal's report shows deep weaknesses in the counter-insurgency concepts on which it is based, and raises real doubts about the viability of his proposals for winning in Afghanistan.

There are five ways in which McChrystal's vision of a counter-insurgency campaign for Afghanistan lacks coherence.

First, he argues that the essential condition for defeating the Taliban is to help build a strong, effective, legitimate government in Kabul that attracts and retains the loyalty of the Afghan people. One of his key aims, therefore, is to do all he can to help bolster the national government in the eyes of its citizens.

But at the same time, following counter-insurgency principles, McChrystal's report proposes that US and other intervention forces should focus on the local level and do all they can themselves to bring peace and prosperity direct to the people, thus bypassing and undermining the authority of the Kabul government. The reason, of course, is that the Kabul government is so corrupt and ineffective it cannot provide these services itself, even with massive aid. But how then is an effective and legitimate Afghan government to emerge?

Counter-insurgency interventions can make sense when there is a reasonable government already there to support, but not when the government itself is a big part of the problem.

Second, McChrystal's report says it is essential to seize the military initiative back from the Taliban, which in recent years has made real progress. But at the same time he argues that the military effort must stop pursuing the Taliban directly and focus instead on protecting the people.

Again, this is classic counter-insurgency doctrine, which holds that the key focus of operations is the civilian population and not the enemy's forces. But how can he seize the initiative while going on the strategic and tactical defensive?

Third, McChrystal argues that the situation in Afghanistan is urgent, and that a big injection of new forces is needed very soon if the situation is not to become irrecoverable.

But he also emphasises that to prosecute an effective counter-insurgency campaign these new forces will need to come highly skilled, not just in conventional military operations but in the diverse languages, cultures and politics of Afghanistan's diverse population. They need to be able to take part in and shape the local political processes, which are central to swaying the people away from the Taliban and towards Kabul.

But where are these thousands of linguistically trained, culturally aware and politically savvy soldiers to come from, within the next few months? People like Lawrence of Arabia cannot be turned out of army training schools in a few weeks. The fact is that classic counter-insurgency doctrines presuppose the availability of large numbers of remarkable people deeply schooled in local conditions and such people do not exist.

Fourth, McChrystal evades the uncomfortable fact classic counter-insurgency is very dangerous. Soldiers have to get out of their armoured vehicles and fortified encampments and live and move among the people, where they are vulnerable to insurgent attack. They have to fight alongside local forces of dubious loyalty and questionable quality.

All this means heavy casualties. Yet he knows high casualties will do more than anything to undermine the viability of his strategy, by eroding support at home.

And, finally, McChrystal places even greater emphasis than his predecessors did on training up the Afghan army and police to take over the fight against the Taliban. But who are these forces supposed to answer to? No army or police force in history was better than the government it was responsible to, and any army responsible to the government in Kabul would be more a liability than an asset. More likely, the forces we are trying to build in Afghanistan will end up answerable to no one.

There is much to admire in the work of the bright young men who have promoted counter-insurgency doctrines as the best way forward in the war on terror, and there is no doubt counter-insurgency has a better chance than conventional tactics.

But the fact remains that no Western intervention has ever succeeded in using counter-insurgency tactics to defeat a strong insurgency in support of a weak local government. And there is no reason to believe Afghanistan will be a first.

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