

# COIN reorientation - too far or not far enough?

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‘The ‘COIN over conventional’ argument has largely been centred in force structure investments rather than strategy. Moreover, many of the proposed ‘solutions’ have reflected short term tactical imperatives, which more than often have not persisted, as insurgent tactics have changed or campaigns have evolved over time.’



*Hardening of land forces has been a major gain from COIN reorientation, of benefit in conventional warfighting. Depicted an MRAP of the Charlie Company, 1st Squadron, 38th Cavalry Regiment, 525th Battlefield Surveillance Brigade, near Kandahar in May, 2011.*

A DECADE of continuous COunter INSurgency (COIN) operations conducted across the developing world, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, has produced deep changes in Western force structures, in part due to re-equipment of deployed units, but also due to delays or cancellations in programs intended to recapitalise post Cold War force structures. Advocates of COIN operations have argued this is not enough, while advocates of ‘conventional’ operations have argued the opposite.

The argument put forward by proponents of COIN-optimised force structures is that COIN operations will be an unavoidable feature of the long term strategic environment for coming decades; therefore, Western force structures should be built first and foremost around capabilities to perform COIN operations, at the expense of conventional military capabilities. The opposing argument is that traditional, or conventional, capabilities must have first priority since fighting hostile nation states is the primary purpose of the military, and COIN is an ancillary or secondary purpose.

How radical the ‘COIN-first’ position is depends on the advocate involved. How much impact this ideological position results in also depends on how much influence an advocate is able to produce. Recently retired Secretary of Defence Robert M Gates was arguably one of the most radical proponents of this idea, and given the powers wielded by this office, he was in the position to forcefully drive this agenda – to the extent of sacking the then Chief of Staff US Air Force, and the then Secretary of the Air Force. Gates then stripped funding for key existing and future Air Force resources and capabilities, under his ‘next-war-itis’ mantra.

Gates was not alone in promoting the COIN agenda. A number of special interest groups and lobbyists exist in the United States, some of which are embedded in the machinery of State, and some of which exist in other parts of the wider defence community.

Proposals or ideas promoted or implemented under the ‘COIN over conventional’ include the replacement of ‘heavy’ land forces with ‘light’ rapidly deployable land forces, replacement of traditional naval surface combatants with ‘light’ littoral assets, and replacement of high performance manned combat aircraft with low performance Remotely Piloted Vehicles / Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (RPV/UAV). The justification for these choices is seldom that the conventional assets to be replaced cannot do the job, but rather that the specialised COIN asset can do the job cheaper or better, despite evidence that this may not be true, or only partly true.

In part ~~the~~ this debate in the United States reflects a lobby-driven political system, where everything is marketed and ideology is used often in extremis to drive a particular agenda. This in turn is a byproduct of an environment in which rapid change is sought to rapidly adapt to a rapidly changing environment. Whether that change is necessarily the best choice to be made, either in the short, medium or long term tends to be often of less importance than being seen to be producing change. The 1990s Network Centric Warfare ideological campaign followed a similar pattern, and while it has produced some good outcomes, it has also produced and deeply entrenched quite unrealistic beliefs about NCW effectiveness and utility, which continue to contaminate both the strategic debate and force structure planning.

Much of the justification for the 'COIN over conventional' argument has been centred in several key aspects of how the COIN campaigns since 2001 have played out. These include:

- Increasing use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) by insurgent forces resulting in sustained personnel losses by Western, especially United States forces.
- The resilience and persistence of insurgent forces, which frequently avoid engagements and hide when confronted, denying opportunities to destroy them.
- The widespread nature of instability across the Islamic world, and thus enormous geographical footprint of affected areas.

Contemporary insurgent forces, and the Al Qaeda fostered Islamo-fascist movement is no exception, are modelled to varying degrees on the 20th Century 'revolutionary warfare' concept, which had its successes and failures through the Cold War era. The intent of the insurgents is to topple incumbent nation states and replace them with new nation states, led by the luminaries of the insurgent movement. The model, best developed and exported by the Soviets, envisages a sustained long term campaign of hit and run attacks, sabotage, assassinations, and other attacks against the machinery of state, be it the military, police, judiciary, political figures, media, education and any other entity seen to be part of the state. The intent is to destroy the credibility of the incumbent regime to produce political unrest, and ultimately a popular revolution to oust the regime.

During the Cold War period many such campaigns were launched by the Soviets who actively

supplied the insurgent movement with materiel and advisors, and most often were opposed by Western nations supporting the incumbent regime with materiel and advisors, or in some instances with direct intervention. While the Vietnam conflict is often presented as a revolutionary warfare insurgency it is actually a poor example since most direct combat involved PAVN forces infiltrating the South, often using heavy weapons. The Soviet adventures across Africa followed much the same pattern, and while often presented as insurgencies were in fact conventional wars in which insurgents were in effect used as special forces to support conventional armies. Such insurgents are thus in effect proxy forces for an outside nation state with a larger strategic agenda, which may actually not be in the interests of the insurgent movement.

The Wahhabist Al-Qaeda Islamo-fascist insurgency is a genuine insurgency, as much of it does not involve direct support by a nation state, although Saudi and Pakistani interests have been actively involved in sponsoring the movement, even if the official government positions are otherwise. The Shia insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan on the other hand are classical proxy actors, as are the Hamas and Hezbollah movements, all resourced and coordinated by Iran.

The best strategy for dealing with an insurgency depends on the nature of the insurgency. State sponsored insurgencies will wither if the sponsoring state is neutered, whether by invasion or high intensity aerial bombardment to thoroughly, not partly, destroy its apparatus of state and economy. Insurgencies sponsored by non-state actors present greater challenges, as the organisation



*For air forces, COIN reorientation has been a very damaging "zero sum" game, as every specialised COIN RPV/UAV drains resources from conventional combat aircraft, while being a complete operational liability in conventional warfighting against modern air defences.*



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*For navies, COIN reorientation has often been a “zero-sum” game, as specialised COIN vessels such as the Littoral Combat Ship drain resources from conventional fleets, while offering no useful capability in modern blue water operations against opposing navies.*

*The hardening of land force vehicles and renewed interest in armoured vehicles has proven to be a bonus for land forces, as soft logistical vehicles vulnerable to new generation battlefield guided munitions are replaced with hardened vehicles. Land force hardening has been one of very few byproducts of COIN reorientation which has not been damaging to conventional warfighting capabilities.*



must be attrited from the top down, its support base in an urban or rural populace seduced away, and its local and foreign supporters and sponsors identified and rendered ineffective. Importantly, non-state actor sponsored insurgencies can take many years to defeat as the insurgents will operate covertly and exploit human shielding opportunities to a maximum, to maximise collateral damage and thus propaganda effect for the cause.

The ‘COIN over conventional’ argument has largely been centred in force structure investments rather than strategy. Moreover, many of the proposed ‘solutions’ have reflected short term tactical imperatives, which more than often have not persisted, as insurgent tactics have changed or campaigns have evolved over time.

In the domain of land warfare proponents of COIN have advocated several ideas, some of which are viable, some less so.

The idea of increasing the size of standing land force elements is expensive, but to a large extent unavoidable to avoid burning out existing troop formations, which have suffered retention problems with repeat long duration deployments – along with other more tragic side effects, such as increased suicide rates and endemic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) problems. Western military forces through the Cold War and post Cold War period relied on a mix of regular standing forces, and reserve forces, which in the United States comprise both service reserves and National Guard formations. This is a model designed for nation state conflicts, where large numbers of personnel need to be surged into a theatre rapidly for a high intensity short duration conflict. Once the conflict is over, the troops go home.

This model is not a good fit to long duration COIN campaigns, where forces may need to spend a decade or more holding territory until the insurgent movement is broken and a stable indigenous government and military established. The United States has borne the brunt of the current COIN effort and has experienced major problems especially with reserve units, as long deployments of many months duration are quite incompatible

with the lives of ‘part-time warriors’. Collapsed small businesses, lost employment, broken careers and marriages are not how a community should be rewarding citizens prepared to risk all for their country.

As a result, the United States has increased numbers, primarily in land forces. Concurrently, there have been significant losses in other areas, primarily as a result of downsizing maritime and aerial capabilities.

A more fundamental argument around the size of land forces is whether better effect could be produced by other means, such as increasing ISR capability to minimise deployed force size requirements. This has considerable merit, and the increased use of persistent armed ISR platforms such as RPV/UAVs has often produced high effect in theatre. If the game is inflicting attrition, this is high payoff strategy.

The flipside of this problem is that COIN is often as much about killing off insurgents as it is about convincing the populace that the troops are always there to keep the insurgents away. Insufficient troop numbers to cover areas in a persistent manner allows insurgents to simply migrate across district boundaries to evade troop rotations. Only by putting troops into all areas concurrently will deny insurgents escape zones.

However, keeping large numbers of troops in all areas of interest drives up logistical support costs, which are considerable, especially for remote theatres such as Afghanistan. This also increases opportunities for insurgents to set up ambushes and IED attacks, and it creates more opportunities for accidental or inadvertent disputes to arise between the populace and the troops.

Troop numbers in theatre has been a contentious issue since 2003, and former SecDef Rumsfeld’s edicts, which capped deployed numbers, declared against military advice, clearly did not help the campaign. The ‘surge’ later in the Iraq campaign did eventually break the insurgency.

The ‘COIN over conventional’ argument advocating more troops in theatre, and thus larger standing land force sizes, has merit but is neither a panacea nor an inexpensive ‘quick fix’.

Much more problematic in this debate is replacing upper tier aerial and naval capabilities with COIN-optimised replacements.

The instance of replacing fighter bombers such as F-15Es and F-16Cs with MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper armed RPV/UAV aircraft is a case in point. These remote control robot aircraft are slow persistent platforms with the capability to orbit an area of interest for many hours, carrying a sensor payload and a small, guided munitions payload. Orbiting out of reach of MANPADS and





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automatic guns, they are mostly invisible to insurgent forces and mostly immune to insurgent weapons. They have proven very useful in both Iraq and Afghanistan, allowing insurgent movements to be surveilled closely in support of other forces, or high value insurgent targets to be attacked without warning with small, guided weapons such as the AGM-114 Hellfire anti-armour missile.

Much has been made of the affordability advantages in operating uncrewed lightweight 1 to 5 tonne gross weight robotic aircraft with 100 – 1,000 SHP engines, over fast jet combat aircraft. Yet even a decade ago one of Israel's leading commanders observed at a conference that the actual operating cost was not unlike that of fast jets, due to the significant cost of providing orbital satellite bandwidth to support RPV/UAV aircraft, plus a logistical support tail of similar size. While less engineering personnel were required to service aircraft engines and systems, more were required to support control vans, satellite links, and other supporting field deployed infrastructure. An avionics fault in a fighter jet that could be managed by a pilot could bring down an unmanned aircraft, forcing much a more stringent maintenance regime. Deeper problems are less visible. Pilots with jet experience need to be retrained to fly RPV/UAV aircraft, and newly graduated pilots who spend their early postings on RPV/UAV aircraft need to be thoroughly retrained if they are to later fly manned fighters, bombers or transports.

More fundamentally, a slow moving RPV/UAV like the MQ-1 or MQ-9 has zero survivability against a modern air defence system, being vulnerable to radar guided surface-air-missiles, radar aimed

large calibre guns, and fighters. Such platforms are thus specialised COIN assets unusable in high intensity conflict between developed nation states. Every fighter squadron replaced with an RPV/UAV squadron is one less squadron usable in conventional or traditional air war roles.

The problems surrounding small littoral naval patrol vessels are much the same. Every destroyer or frigate replaced by a littoral vessel is at the expense of warfighting capabilities in nation state conflicts. COIN-optimised littoral vessels will not survive against modern aerial and naval threats that present sufficient challenges even for conventional warships.

In aerial and naval warfare, the debate has become the proverbial 'zero-sum-game' where capabilities in one area are at the expense of others.

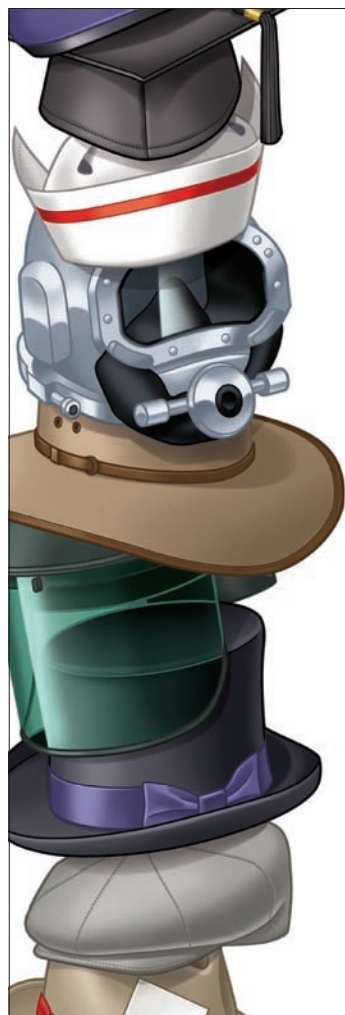
For land forces the issues surrounding the replacement of 'soft' logistical and support vehicle fleets with 'hard' vehicles are more ambiguous. Post-911, COIN advocates argued for the replacement of 'heavy' forces with 'light' forces to improve deployability. Operational experience in Iraq and Afghanistan proved that this model was not a good choice, and that better deployability should have been sought by improving airlift and fast sealift capabilities. The global proliferation of cruise missiles, smart bombs, guided long range artillery shells and artillery rockets, has changed the character of land warfare in conventional nation state conflicts, just as the IED changed the game in COIN campaigns. Land forces need to be better hardened in either environment, and investments in hardening benefit land forces no matter what the style of conflict might be. Hardened trucks, tanks

and attack helicopters are as good an investment in COIN operations as they are in conventional wars. The only circumstance where the 'COIN over conventional' argument can be considered truly rational is when one can rule out the occurrence of substantial nation state conventional conflicts for periods of many decades, permitting much of the force structure to be 'COIN-optimised' with no risk of defeat in a conventional conflict. Historically, the Roman Empire tried this in its latter period and suffered badly as a result. Britain's near defeat in the early years of the Second World War is a more recent example.

The reorientation of Western force structures to COIN operations may have improved effectiveness for Western land forces without significant strategic penalties, but the opposite has proven true for navies and air forces, as specialised COIN platforms have proved to be resource draining liabilities with little or no use in a modern conventional nation state conflict.

The notion of the coming decades being a period when nation state conflicts can be categorically ruled out is at best naïve and at worst courting extreme strategic risks. It is abundantly clear that the COIN reorientation has been strategically very damaging for Western air forces, damaging to Western navies, and of some benefit to land forces due to increased numbers and improved hardening. In turn it can be concluded that in air and naval power the COIN orientation has gone too far, and in land warfare, far enough in some areas, and not far enough in others.

As always, simple questions do not always produce simple answers, as popular as the latter might be.



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