Learning Difficulties: The US Way of Irregular Warfare

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Abstract: Since 9/11, the United States has achieved notable gains against al Qaeda, and also Daesh, all while avoiding another mass-casualty attack at home. Yet, institutionally, culturally, and in its capabilities, the United States government remains seriously ill-equipped for the task of countering irregular threats. Partly as a result, Islamist extremism shows no sign of being defeated, having instead metastasized since 9/11 and spread. Why, given the importance accorded to counterterrorism, has the US approach remained inadequate? What is impeding more fundamental reforms? The chapter evaluates the United States' way of irregular warfare: its troubled engagement with counterinsurgency and its problematic search for lower-cost and lower-risk ways of combating terrorism. It suggests needed reforms but acknowledges also the unlikelihood of change.

Keywords: Counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, irregular warfare, the United States
Schlagworte: Terrorbekämpfung, Aufstandsbekämpfung, irregular Kriegsführung, USA

1. Introduction

Since 9/11, the United States has eliminated terrorist leaders, routed the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, achieved notable tactical and operational gains against organizations like Daesh, and avoided another major attack on the homeland. Yet, nearly two decades since 9/11, the US government's ability to counter irregular actors remains troublingly inadequate. Many within the national security community fail to recognize this deficiency: they see these confrontations as manageable through drones, Special Operations Forces, and armed proxies and they evince little appetite to engage more fully given the costs and troubled outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Such complacence may not be warranted. The ideology behind the 9/11 attacks, then limited to extremists in Afghanistan, has spread, with volunteers flowing to fight for Daesh and attacks causing deaths and instability in a growing number of countries. The United States may so far have emerged relatively unscathed from such violence, but the concern with terrorism is nonetheless straining the country's liberal and cosmopolitan values, which, ultimately, is what it is fighting to protect.

Why, given the importance accorded to counterterrorism, has the US approach remained so inadequate? And why have we not seen greater change? The chapter evaluates the limitations of America's way of irregular warfare and comments on its possible future.

2. America's Brief Counterinsurgency Era

Following the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the US Department of Defense (DoD) became concerned with counterinsurgency as a means of stabilizing war-torn societies and enabling a US withdrawal. Some also perceived the ability to reverse 'state failure' as depriving terrorist organizations sanctuary.[1] In 2005, therefore, the DoD issued a directive that positioned *stability operations*, related to counterinsurgency, on par with major combat operations.[2] The US Army and the Marine Corps published doctrine on counterinsurgency

that gained influence across NATO.[3] The US military also re-oriented training to meet the challenges of urban, contested environments.

The learning was impressive—and also challenged the US military's orthodoxy.[4] Despite repeated engagement in stability operations, the US military defines strength in terms of what is needed to fight a "conventional" adversary, operating like itself.[5] In contrast, the US military regards non-state adversaries as less sophisticated, less lethal, and less worthy.[6] Irregular campaigns also sit badly with military institutions: victory is ambiguous, success is political rather than military, and the effort often spans years if not decades.[7]

Ultimately, the bureaucratic and cultural resistance to change overcame initial signs of reform. It is not only that the US military will 'no longer be sized to conduct large-scale prolonged stability operations', as the DoD stated in 2014, but rather that qualitatively it is not proficient in irregular settings.[8] Doctrine is continually updated, but it is not driving change in other areas, where through difficult trade-offs the new must displace the old. In education, curricula retain their conventional flavour, with scant focus on the areas relevant to political violence—language, social sciences, humanities.[9] In training, despite some signs of change during the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns, the focus rapidly returned overwhelmingly to conventional matters.[10]

The US Army has also not reoriented its force structure for counterinsurgency. Despite undergoing recently 'the most ambitious restructuring of its forces since World War II', namely

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1 For a critique of this concept, see Charles T Call, "The Fallacy of the 'Failed State,'" *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 8 (December 2008): 1491–1507.
2 US Department of Defense, "Directive 3000.05: Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations" (2005).
3 U.S. Department of the Army and United States Marine Corps, *FM 3-24/ MCWP 3- 33.5. Counterinsurgency* (Washington DC: U.S. Army, 2006).
4 See David H. Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U.S. Military for Modern Wars* (Georgetown University Press, 2009).
5 Nadia Schadlow, *War and the Art of Governance: Consolidating Combat Success into Political Victory* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017).
6 See Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance— 1950 to Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1977); Andrew F. Jr. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (JHU Press, 2009).
7 Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era*, 2.
8 US Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review* (Washington DC, 2014). 19.
9 Maj. Gen. Robert Scales (USA, Ret.), "Slightly 'steamed,' Gen. Scales Explains His Criticism of the Military's War Colleges," *Foreign Policy*, May 11, 2012.
10 Fred Kaplan, "Challenging the General," *New York Magazine*, August 26, 2007; Scott A. Cuomo, "Will We Be Prepared for What's Next?" 91, no. 7 (July 2007); Crispin Burke, "Sorry, Pentathlete Wasn't on the Syllabus," *Small Wars Journal*, January 29, 2009, www.smallwarsjournal.com/mag/docs-temp/169-burke.pdf.

their modularization into brigade combat teams,[11] the Army did not incorporate the lessons of on-going campaigns, such as the shortfalls in military police, engineers, medical units, civil affairs, linguists, psychological operations (PSYOPS) and explosive and ordnance disposal (EOD) teams.[12] No part of the force has been specifically tailored toward tasks said to be of equal importance to conventional combat: the establishment of civil security, the restoration of essential services, and support to governance and to economic and infrastructure development.

The ensuing gaps have been filled through *ad hoc* solutions. Thus, the Human Terrain Teams (HTT)—groups of anthropologists and social scientists—were deployed to provide units with insight and methodologies to understand the local population. Stood up hastily and unevenly trained, the teams received mixed reviews. Nonetheless, they responded to a felt need for knowledge that the military could not meet. Though US intelligence adapted post-9/11 to strike targets, it has 'neglected "white" information about the population that was necessary for success'.[13] Thus, despite its civil affairs, PSYOPS, intelligence, and other units, the US military remains 'deaf, dumb, and stupid' as it engages with the world.[14] This is a problem that improvised fixes cannot fix.

In technology, DoD poured money into costly programmes of questionable relevance in today's environment. The Army pursued the Future Combat Systems whereas more relevant platforms, such as the Mine-Resistant, Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle, received attention only following Congressional pressure.[15] Scalable technologies, more suited to operations among civilian populations, never became a defense priority.[16] Even the Marine Corps, despite a legacy with 'small wars', invested in amphibious assault, with the V-22 Osprey, the Joint Strike Fighter, and the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle; none are relevant to irregular operations.[17]

These priorities stem partly from the Iron Triangle—the 'special relationship' between DoD, Congress, and private industry—but they reflect also the armed services' culture. The Army sees itself as designed to 'fight and win the nation's wars', and these exclude what once was termed 'operations *other than war*' (or OOTW).[18] The Marines are concerned with not being a "second land army" and promote an identity-furnishing

role in amphibious attack, all while taking for granted their supposed proficiency in 'small wars'.[19]

Alongside service culture lies the military's *bureaucratic* culture. Centralized process-driven management has stunted the shift from a peacetime military deploying infrequently and briefly to one engaged in protracted wars.[20] Inflexible and laden with regulation, the military personnel system fails to track needed skills and instead promotes according to decade-old career paths. As per a 2011 poll, only 7% of junior officers agreed that the Army 'does a good job retaining the best leaders'.[21] The problem is risk-aversion, as the Army's zero-defect culture encourages conformity and smothers creativity.

The military's rotational system has also been found wanting— yet will not change. When the US Army won the WW2, they replaced the system whereby units stayed together for the duration of the war. Though rotations were germane for peacetime, they staunch the continuity needed for protracted engagement.[22] Paul Vann famously quipped that 'the United States has not been in Vietnam for nine years, but for one year nine times'; the problem remains.[23] Longer tours are not necessarily the solution—though they were extended to 15 months during the surge in Iraq (and tours in Malaya, that canonical case, lasted 24 months). One could instead focus on the transitions between deployments, to enable continuity, or return units to the same area. Nothing like this has happened; saving the bureaucracy trumps winning the war.

These limitations are open secrets. The Joint-Staff-commissioned study, *A Decade of War*, noted 'a failure to recognize, acknowledge, and accurately define the operational environment', a 'conventional warfare paradigm… ineffective when applied to operations other than major combat', and a 'failure to adequately plan and resource strategic and operational transitions'.[24] However, the bureaucracy will not reform, due to institutional inertia, but also the willed resistance of those who condemn counterinsurgency as a misuse of military resources. Buffeted by the sheer difficulty of achieving change, this camp has won out.

The case against counterinsurgency rests on a presumed bifurcation, and therefore a choice, between *irregular* scenarios (as in Iraq or Afghanistan) and *conventional* ones (as in the 1991 Operation Desert Storm). The US military has long touted preparedness for 'full-spectrum' operations— yet resource-allocation operates on an implicit dichotomy between the high- and low-ends of the spectrum in which the former prevails. It is true that *operationally* the ground forces have concentrated overwhelmingly on counterinsurgency, or on operations *called* counterinsurgency, yet *institutionally*, change has been superficial.

11 Association of the United States Army. *The U.S. Army: A Modular Force for the 21st Century*. Torchbearer Issue March 2005. Arlington, VA: AUSA Institute of Land Warfare, 2005, 4.

12 For proposals for reform, see Maj. Kenneth J. Burgess, 'Transformation and the Irregular Gap', *Military Review*, November-December 2009.

13 U.S. Government, Department of Defense, and U.S. Army, *Decade of War, Volume I: Enduring Lessons from the Past Decade of Operations* (Suffolk, VA: Joint and Coalition Operational Analysis, 15 June 2012).

14 Gen. Stanley McChrystal, as cited in Christopher J. Lamb and Megan Franco, "National-Level Coordination and Implementation: How Systems Attributes Trumped Leadership," in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, ed. Richard Jr Hooker and Joseph J. Collins (Washington DC: NDU Press, 2015), 227.

15 Pat Towell, Stephen Daggett, and Amy Belasco. *Defense: FY2008 Authorization and Appropriations*, CRS Report for Congress, RL33999. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service. May 11, 2007, 29.

16 See David C. Gompert et al., *Underkill: Scalable Capabilities for Military Operations amid Populations*, Rand Corporation Monograph Series (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2009), 8–9.

17 See *Fiscal Year 2009 Budget Request: Summary Justification*. Arlington, VA: Department of Defense, February 4, 2008, 164-165.

18 Joint Chiefs of Staff, *JP 3-07 Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other than War* (Washington DC, 1995), vii.

19 Terry Terriff, "Of Romans and Dragons: Preparing the US Marine Corps for Future Warfare," *Contemporary Security Policy* 28, no. 1 (April 2007): 143–62.

20 Thomas E. Ricks, "Our Generals Failed in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, October 18, 2016.

21 Tim Kane, "Why Our Best Officers Are Leaving," *The Atlantic*, February 2011.

22 Andrew P. Aswell, "Calming the Churn: Resolving the Dilemma of Rotational Warfare in Counterinsurgency" (Thesis, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2013).

23 As cited in Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 206.

24 Joint and Coalition Operational Analysis, "Decade of War", 2, 3, 15, 25.

Needed is an unlikely bottom-up review. Rather than bifurcate and pick and choose, irregular and regular challenges must be seen as overlapping, as reflected in the rise of 'hybridity' to describe warfare.[25] Conventional campaigns will require skills related also to counterinsurgency: when territory is seized, engagement with its population will follow, urbanization presages operations among people and politics, and adversaries will exploit media and asymmetry, much like insurgents. To 'learn counterinsurgency' is therefore to learn *modern warfare*, the complexity of which cannot be wished away.

Yet that is what is happening. Though the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are not over, American ground forces are already pivoting to conventional capabilities. The re-familiarization is to recover lost skills, yet presumes that counterinsurgency has already been perfected.[26] This confidence does not reflect reality—or the continuity in force structure and preparation. Certainly, the record does not justify the 2014 shuttering of the Army Irregular Warfare Center, the phasing out of Human Terrain Teams, or the cuts to the counter-IED unit stood up during the Iraq War.[27] As to the DoD's expectation that it can quickly 'regenerate capabilities that might be needed' in future counterinsurgencies, the lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan are sobering.[28]

The US Army must question what force is needed for 21st-century threats. Regrettably, it is instead in an identity crisis, unable to compete in terms of stand-off weaponry yet unwilling to embrace the one area where it is king—the occupation of territory, its cities, people, politics and all. Its plea for relevance now rests on the jargon of 'multidomain battle'; one general's attempted explanation is unintentionally revealing:

'Put simply, Army forces will maneuver to positions of relative advantage and project power across all domains to ensure joint force freedom of action. We will do this by integrating joint, interorganizational and multinational capabilities to create windows of domain superiority to enable joint force freedom of maneuver. Joint commanders will then exploit those windows of superiority by synchronizing cross-domain fires and maneuver to achieve physical, temporal, positional and psychological advantages.'[29]

Seldom has so much jargon been deployed to say so little, but one thing is clear: counterinsurgency is out.[30]

3. Moon without a Planet: Where is the Policy?

A second constraint on US counterinsurgency is the lack of a deployable civilian component that can direct military operations to serve political ends. Within the West, counterinsurgency finds its heyday in colonialism; campaigns were prosecuted by states with a quasi-permanent civilian and military presence abroad. These structures are no more. The military can be deployed, but the civilian element is missing. This matters, as counterinsurgency, we are told, is 80% political and 20% military: the aim is to address drivers of violence, an undeniably political task.[31]

Instead of colonial administrators, the United States engaged in Iraq via the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the Organization of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) — neither 'had the right people or assets to make their presence felt… Few among them had any detailed knowledge of the Iraqi milieu'.[32] By 2006, in Afghanistan, the United States proposed a 'Comprehensive Approach', but this rhetorical innovation could not link a massive bureaucracy, much of it domestically focused, for action abroad. Even when ambassadors and commanders worked well together, their agencies' differing priorities and cultures hampered coordination.[33]

Resourcing of the 'Comprehensive Approach' also remained lacklustre, even for the State Department and the Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID contributed significantly to the Vietnam War but then abandoned ever playing such a role again. It downsized so much that by 2006 its entire staff was smaller than its Vietnam-era deployment. Despite reforms following 9/11, it lacks a sizeable deployable capability and must rely on contractors.[34] Sections within USAID also resist working alongside DoD, as seen in the manoeuvrings necessary for the creation of its Office of Military Affairs in 2005.

As to the State Department, inadequate funding undercut its effort to create suitable structures, be it the civilian reserve corps or the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS). In Congress, these capabilities were seen as peripheral to national security and irrelevant to congressional districts (unlike military spending, which brings jobs). More broadly, State never succeeded in changing the culture, career paths, risk tolerance, or procedures to enable work in conflict zones.[35] Hence, given the resource imbalance, the US lacks the civilian structures of historical campaigns and its response to irregular threats remains mainly military. Even when the military makes gains, it is a 'moon without a planet to orbit'.[36]

The gap between political direction and military effort can be addressed by challenging the faith in the military as a strategic problem-solver. To enable political solutions to political problems, the State Department would need to lead regional policy and direct the military combatant commands accordingly.[37] This

25 Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*. (Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007).
26 US Department of Defense, "Quadrennial Defense Review," 19.
27 Brendan McGarry, "Pentagon's New Role for JIEDDO Counter-IED Agency," *Military.com*, 14 March 2015.
28 See US Department of Defense, "Quadrennial Defense Review," 19.
29 Gen. David G. Perkins, "U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command: 'Army's Architect' Adapts for Current and Future Success," *Association of the United States Army*, September 16, 2016.
30 It really is: it was replaced by the term 'wide area security', defined as 'the application of the elements of combat power in unified action to protect populations, forces, infrastructure, and activities; to deny the enemy positions of advantage; and to consolidate gains in order to retain the initiative'. See U.S. Army, "ADP 3-0 Unified Land Operations," (Arlington VA: Department of the Army, October 2011), 6.
31 David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964), 63.
32 Joseph J Collins, "Initial Planning and Execution in Afghanistan and Iraq," in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, ed. by Richard D Hooker and Joseph J Collins, 2015, 62.
33 Lamb and Franco, "National-Level Coordination and Implementation: How Systems Attributes Trumped Leadership," 208.
34 Corine Hegland, "Pentagon, State Struggle to Define-Nation Building Roles," *The National Journal*, April 30, 2007.
35 Paul Fishstein and Andrew Wilder, "Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan," *Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Medford, MA*, 2012, 50.
36 Sarah Sewell, "Introduction to the University of Chicago Press Edition: A Radical Field Manual," in *The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007). xl.
37 I am grateful to Michael Davies for this idea.

would require a regional viceroy position held by an ambassador with the requisite linguistic and political acumen (and ending the distribution of ambassadorships to unqualified candidates as political favours).[38] The State Department would then need to be reorganized and resourced to man the regional commands (along with its other core functions), resulting in a deployed diplomatic corps executing policy with military support.[39] So far, nothing of the sort has materialized.

4. Send in the Drones

The demands and disappointing results of counterinsurgency encouraged more indirect means of influence. Under Barack Obama, particularly his first term, drones came to be used extensively to target suspected al Qaeda operatives in areas where, for practical or political reasons, ground forces could not operate.[40] These strikes have eliminated key operatives, disrupted al Qaeda activities, and forced it and its affiliates to adopt precautions.[41] Obama credited the policy for preventing terrorist attacks on 'international aviation, U.S. transit systems, European cities and our troops in Afghanistan'.[42] Yet, the effectiveness of drones correlates with perceptions of legitimacy—of the strikes, but also of the United States. As irregular warfare is a competition of legitimacy, the drones can represent a net loss in strategic terms.

The problem has three roots. First, the civilian casualties cause anger not only among the victims' families and friends, but entire communities, radicalizing many.[43] Proponents claim that casualties are low and in line with Just War criteria.[44] The total body count is however contested, and almost beside the point: the fact of civilian deaths, in significant numbers, and the spread of such events through social media, are inflammatory.

Second, the strikes rely on the application of international humanitarian norms outside of a declared conflict. When the programme started, it was so wrapped in secrecy that the US national security community would not acknowledge its existence. Perversely, this practice persisted even as a public debate on drones was raging. The secrecy delayed an official US government narrative to justify the strikes. Under pressure, the Obama administration in 2013 shared its legal criteria with Congress but, fatefully, not with the public, and so the legitimizing effects of this transparency were minimal.[45]

It was not until December 2016, a month prior to leaving office, that the Obama administration made public the legal case for drone strikes, which it based on just war principles and the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force.[46] It is not clear whether, from a public relations standpoint, this explication made the strikes less toxic. Missing is a concerted effort to achieve buy-in both internationally and domestically, and so the tangible gains of drones, impressive as they are, may yet be outweighed by their intangible symbolism and political payload.

Third, the US drones denote moral hazards: the pilots face no risk (beyond the psychological), outrage about dead foreigners seems too transient, and the threshold for legal authorization appears, even if it is not, too low, with the US government acting as judge, jury, and executioner. There is a disturbing asymmetry to a superpower operating with such impunity in failing states. If a compelling case cannot be made to justify such action, even in the face of possible collateral damage, the net gain of the strike must be reassessed.

It would help if the strikes built on partnerships with host-nation governments. Though some US actions have enjoyed tacit support from local governments—Yemen and Pakistan—there is no sense of a joint strategy. For the strikes to gain strategic meaning against insurgent or proto-insurgent outfits, they require a broader military effort to control territory, which in turn calls for a political strategy that addresses the drivers of violence. Instead, the strikes have become a military response to a political problem; they fatefully assume that 'if only we can get enough of these bastards, we'll win the war'.[47] This approach leaves the local population wherefrom the violent organizations stem with few options, armed radicals on one side and the threat of American drones on the other. Who then will support the United States? Who could afford to do so, when the group holds the ground?

With these complications, it is unsurprising that while drone strikes have weakened al Qaeda, the movement and its ideology have assumed new forms—in Syria, Iraq, North Africa—all while Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia remain targeted by jihadist violence.[48] Because the drone programme seems decisive and low-risk, it 'has taken on a life of its own, to the point where tactics are driving strategy rather than the other way around'.[49]

5. Building Partnership Capacity (BPC)

The US way of irregular warfare relies also on 'building partnership capacity'—advice and assistance rendered to partner nations. Indeed, ca.148 countries are involved in US-led BPC efforts. This policy echoes the Nixon Doctrine, which following the Vietnam War limited US involvement and held host-nation governments responsible for their own defence.[50] The approach

38 Robert B. Oakley and Michael Casey Jr, "The Country Team: Restructuring America's First Line of Engagement," *Strategic Forum* (Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2007).
39 Edward Marks, "Next Generation' Department of State," *American Diplomacy*, accessed May 10, 2017.
40 President Bush oversaw 48 drone strikes in Pakistan; President Obama 353. See "Drone Strikes: Pakistan," *New America*, accessed May 18, 2017, /in-depth/americas-counterterrorism-wars/pakistan/.
41 Avery Plaw, Matthew S. Fricker, and Carlos Colon, *The Drone Debate: A Primer on the U.S. Use of Unmanned Aircraft Outside Conventional Battlefields* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), 69-72.
42 "Obama's Speech on Drone Policy," *The New York Times*, May 23, 2013. See also Ewen MacAskill, "US Drone Strikes in Yemen Crucial to Prevent Terrorist Threat, Panetta Says," *The Guardian*, April 19, 2012.
43 Plaw, Fricker, and Colon, *The Drone Debate*, 65.
44 "Obama's Speech on Drone Policy," *The New York Times*, April 23, 2013.
45 Scott Shane, "John Brennan, C.I.A. Nominee, Clears Committee Vote," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2013.

46 See The White House, "Report on the Legal and Policy Frameworks Guiding the United States' Use of Military Force and Related National Security Operations," *Washington Post*.
47 New York University law professor Philip Alston, as cited in Steve Coll, "Obama's Drone War," *The New Yorker*, November 24, 2014.
48 Coll, "Obama's Drone War."
49 Audrey Kurth Cronin, "Why Drones Fail," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1, 2013.
50 Richard Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam." November 3, 1969. www.presidency.ucsb.edu.

also rests on said success stories where the United States supported counterinsurgency efforts indirectly: the Colombian fight against FARC, the El Salvadoran war on FMLN, and the Philippine effort against Abu Sayyaf.

Proponents of BPC point to four advantages. First, putting local forces in the lead obviates the linguistic and cultural hurdles faced by foreign troops. Second, keeping the response local precludes the stigma of foreign occupation. Third, a smaller intervention reduces the political and financial costs for the intervening government. Fourth, BPC puts local politicians in charge for solving their own problem: it recognizes the limits on what external powers can achieve in a foreign land, often one they scarcely understand.

Yet the US approach toward BPC lacks strategic coherence and the results are mixed. To date, the approach has not helped the United States achieve its strategic objectives.[51] In Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, Mali and elsewhere, US attempts to stand up local defences against insurgency have faltered. Where the approach is said to have worked—in Colombia, El Salvador, or the Philippines—outcomes were either less impressive than commonly thought or conditional on factors that are difficult to reproduce.

One condition is familiarity with the recipient military and an ability to build on its capabilities. In Colombia, US assistance was aided by the two countries' history of cooperation, stretching back to the Korean War, and to the institutional and educational integration of their militaries. US advisers understood their partner, their system, and knew what niche capabilities were needed: tactical mobility, medics, and training in special operations and human rights.[52]

In contrast, in the fight against al Qaeda, familiarity and integration have been low and US efforts instead mirror-image its own military in counterproductive ways.[53] One problem, reflecting US military culture, is the reliance on technology as silver bullets to irregular challenges: in US hands, such gear can be an enabler, but they require a global supply chains, advanced maintenance, and large pools of trained personnel—aspects difficult to replicate, particularly on short notice.[54]

Whereas in Colombia aid was centralized under Plan Colombia, efforts in countries threatened by al Qaeda are fragmented and therefore less effective. The United States is engaged in at least seven initiatives of security-force assistance in Mali, where local forces are combating al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). While on aggregate significant, the effort is split between different authorities, resulting in a scattershot effect on the host-nation military. Where equipment was provided, it was not matched to the needs and abilities of the local forces, whose proficiency in desert warfighting remained inferior to

that of AQIM. Lacking was a comprehensive DoD-wide, or even Special Operations Forces-run, program.[55]

Another constraint on US BPC efforts is the limited appetite for risk. The purpose of the indirect approach is in part to reduce exposure and, hence, US forces are shielded from battlefield dangers. However, such risk-aversion runs counter to established best practices. In El Salvador, the cap on advisers — only 55 were allowed in-country — and the prohibition on them joining the El Salvadoran armed forces (ESAF) on operation reduced leverage, limited oversight over how the local force performed, and prevented learning 'on the job'. Thus, whereas US aid protected the El Salvadoran regime, it proved impossible to optimize ESAF for counterinsurgency, sufficiently reduce human-rights abuses, or defeat FMLN militarily.[56]

A lesson from the last decade is that the effectiveness of training and the accountability of those trained are best enabled through 'partnering': by living and operating together, day and night, from the same base and streets. Instead, US efforts tend toward the El Salvador approach. Under Obama, US advisers in Syria were barred from combat missions other than in self-defence.[57] Until April 2016, two years after Daesh's advance across Iraq, US advisers were restricted to division headquarters, far from the front line. Obama then authorized deployments at the brigade and battalion level, but only 'for critical missions'.[58]

As part of US efforts against the Lord's Resistance Army, one hundred US advisers were 'dispersed among four nations in Central and East Africa', raising questions about effectiveness and commitment.[59] To combat AQIM, US advisers were sent to the Sahel, but they remained at headquarters and were not to engage in combat.[60] Though the Trump administration has relaxed the rules of engagement, the scandal that erupted when four US advisers were killed in Niger on October 4, 2017, illustrates the limited willingness to accept the risks inherent to this approach.

The limited number of advisors available for deployment also militates against partnerships at the local level. Traditionally, advisory work was a Special Operations Forces mission, as they are specialized for the task. Meanwhile, general-purpose forces have resisted advisory work in favour of traditional combat. When the need for BPC expanded post-9/11, reformers in vain urged the Army and Marine Corps to adapt.[61] Indeed, until mid-2008 the US Army did not recognize advisory work as command experience, and so a soldier's involvement in such teams would not appear on career records.[62]

51 See Kathleen J. McInnis and Nathan J. Lucas, "What Is 'Building Partner Capacity?' Issues for Congress," CRS Report (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, December 18, 2015). i.
52 Interview with Gen. Carlos Ospina, former Commander of the Colombian Armed Forces, Washington DC, October 2014.
53 T.X. Hammes, "Raising and Mentoring Security Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq," in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, ed. Richard D Hooker and Joseph J Collins (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2015), 332.
54 Phillip Carter, "Why Foreign Troops Can't Fight Our Fights," *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2015.
55 Michael Shurkin, Stephanie Pezard, S. Rebecca Zimmerman, *Mali's Next Battle: Improving Counterterrorism Capabilities* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017), 16-24. See also Simon J. Powelson, "Enduring Engagement Yes, Episodic Engagement No: Lessons for SOF from Mali," Thesis submitted to Naval Post-Graduate School, December 2013.
56 Robert D. Ramsey, III. "Advising Indigenous Forces: American Advisors in Korea, Vietnam, and El Salvador. Global War on Terrorism" Occasional Paper 18. Ft. Leavenworth, KS: CSI Press, 2006.
57 Eli Lake, "Orders for US Forces in Syria: 'Don't Get Shot,'" *Bloomberg*, August 11, 2016.
58 Andrew Tilghman, "U.S. Combat Adviser Mission in Iraq Expands to Battalion Level," *Military Times*, July 27, 2016.
59 "The Nature of the U.S. Military Presence in Africa, An Exchange between Colonel Tom Davis and Nick Turse" *Mother Jones*, July 26, 2012.
60 "U.S. Army to Train Africa Forces in Anti-Terror," *CBS News*, December 24, 2012.
61 John A. Nagl, *Institutionalizing Adaptation: It's Time for a Permanent Army Advisor Corps* (Center for a New American Security, 2007).
62 Fawzia Sheik, "Army Opposes Permanent Adviser Corps to Train Foreign Forces," *Inside the Pentagon*, September 13, 2007.

This backdrop explains the mixed problems seen when these forces were nonetheless made to partake: the mirror-imaging, the reliance on technology. It is therefore noteworthy that in 2017 the Army announced the creation of six permanent Security Force Assistance Brigades—a 'marked departure' from earlier policy.[63] Yet despite the creation of a Military Advisor Training Academy at Fort Benning, GA, it is unclear how these forces will be allowed to specialize for this work, or operate at the level where they can make a difference. Advisory work is anything but simple; it requires key skills that, history suggests, cannot easily be mass-produced.

There is one final condition for effective advisory work: a viable strategy. In seeking to defeat insurgency, the professionalization of a country's forces is but one part of the puzzle; much depends on the *political aims* that their operations serve. Where this strategy is misguided, security operations have little or no meaning. By analogy, it serves no purpose sharpening the scalpel if the surgeon operating is drunk.

Critically, it is typically at the *political* level that partnerships fray. Supposed partners accept military aid, but wince at proposed reforms. These governments almost by definition suffer from a legitimacy deficit—hence the armed resistance—and are often more concerned with retaining power than with undercutting dissent. This dilemma obtains whether the United States intervenes directly, indirectly, or not at all. The predicament for advisers is therefore formidable and requires a yet-to-be-seen boost to US diplomatic powers. Instead, under Trump, the deficiencies on this front look likely to worsen, given the cuts to the State Department.[64]

6. Conclusion

The US government has since 9/11 developed new ways to combat irregular threats. It has avoided another major attack at home and penetrated murky networks in a wide variety of countries. Still, al Qaeda has not been defeated; instead, it has dispersed across the globe and been joined by Daesh, a group inspiring support in the Muslim-majority world and beyond.

Poor strategy, contingency, and the complexity of the task help explain the score-sheet, yet the USA was also badly prepared for this challenge and has failed to evolve. Within the military, the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan required reforms incompatible with institutional orthodoxies. Rather than internalize the lessons of these campaigns, the US military has preferred *status quo ante*. At most, it can be said to have perfected a kinetic approach, a narrow toolkit that denies the Clausewitzean notion of war's political essence. Within the broader US government, wherein interest in irregular warfare was always limited, there is today little to indicate a preparedness to engage politically or otherwise.

Underpinning the under-developed capabilities is a lack of strategy—and even of strategic competence. Put simply, despite years of engagement against international terrorism, there is no consensus on the importance of this struggle, its objectives, or theory of victory. The rise of Daesh has clouded this discussion: on the one hand, much treasure and political capital have been spent yet on the other, high-profile calls for institutional reform have not been heeded. On the one hand, terrorism is headline news that consumes the American people. Yet on the other, it has also been difficult to tie convincingly the threat of Islamist terrorism, responsible for approximately six American deaths per year since 9/11, to national security. The outcome has been a reliance on approaches thought to be low-cost—drones, proxies—which do not amount to a strategy and may cause more harm than good.[65]

The way forward involves four steps. First, the United States must prevent terrorist attack domestically but also establish the resilience not to over-react should one occur. Terrorism is not principally about taking lives but sending a message and, therefore, relies on the reaction of the targeted society. Second, the United States must refocus internationally, not just on eliminating terrorist leaders but on the conditions that allow insurgent groups to thrive. Third, it must establish, as part of this struggle, a narrative not of what the United States is fighting against, but rather what it is fighting for. Without its values—of democracy and human rights—the United States loses its best arguments in the global competition for influence. Fourth, it is necessary to develop the wherewithal required for global leadership. The balance of resources through which the United States seeks to create strategic effects is counterproductive. A better configuration would decentralize policy making and execution away from Washington DC, establish regional commands led by diplomats rather than soldiers, and produce hybrid civil-military teams that can operate in insecure environments. Though deep-rooted reform is unlikely, for how much longer, and to what end, can we accept approaches that fail?

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63 Sydney J. Freedberg, "Army Builds Advisor Brigades: Counterinsurgency Is Here To Stay," *Breaking Defense*, February 16, 2017.
64 "Trump Plans 28 Percent Cut in Budget for Diplomacy, Foreign Aid," *Reuters*, March 16, 2017.
65 Despite formally subordinating counter-terrorism to inter-state conflict, the Trump administration has not to date moved away from the policies critiqued in this article—to the contrary, the reliance on a narrow kinetic toolkit has increased. See Nicholas Schmidle, "Trump's Pentagon Tries to Move on from the War on Terror," *The New Yorker*, January 19, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/trumps-pentagon-tries-to-move-on-from-the-war-on-terror.