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Conclusions and Recommendations

This study employed data collected for 204 phases of 71 insurgencies begun and completed between WWII and 2010. Each case was supported by a detailed case narrative and also by quantitative data on nearly 300 individual factors. These analyses benefited considerably from including both quantitative and qualitative data and from being able to move back and forth between the two. The qualitative narratives frequently suggested new factors or hypotheses, which were then tested comparatively across cases using the quantitative data. Patterns that did not make sense in the quantitative analyses were explored in the detailed narratives, with the nuance from the narratives being turned back into the quantitative analyses in the form of still more new hypotheses or new factors. Analyses tested specific COIN concepts, prioritized these concepts, considered factors associated with longer or shorter insurgencies, and examined factors related to the duration of postconflict peace intervals. We conclude with a reprise of the key takeaways from our findings, elaborated and expanded by way of conclusions and recommendations.

Key Findings

Because this research was vast in scope, the results are rich, detailed, and sometimes complicated. While different readers may find different aspects of our findings to be the most interesting or illuminating, this section presents findings identified as key in formulating and supporting successful COIN operations.

The Iron Fist COIN Path, Focused Primarily on Eliminating the Insurgent Threat, Is Historically Less Successful

The historical cases primarily followed one of two COIN paths: the "iron fist" path, with a focus preponderantly (and often almost exclusively) on eliminating the insurgent threat, or the motive-focused path, with primary or at least balanced attention to addressing the motives for beginning and sustaining the insurgency. While both paths can lead to success, historically, COIN forces following the iron fist path won only 32 percent of the time, while those on the motive-focused or mixed path won 73 percent of the time. Not only have iron fist COIN efforts failed more often than they have succeed, but they have almost always involved atrocities or other COIN force behaviors that are "beyond the pale" by contemporary U.S. ethical standards, ranging from forced resettlement and coerced labor in Indonesia, Kampuchea, and other cases to the "disappearances" or civilian massacres in Algeria, Afghanistan in the 1990s, Tajikistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and others.

While this finding appears particularly relevant to ongoing debates between advocates of population-centric or enemy-centric COIN, this report argues that different categories provide better context for these results and a more nuanced understanding of COIN going forward. The reason iron fist COIN forces struggle is that they focus exclusively on the insurgents at the expense of the support for those insurgents, and they focus exclusively on kinetic action to eliminate those insurgents at the expense of efforts to diminish the motives for the insurgency (and for supporting the insurgents). *Successful COIN forces find a balance between types of targets (insurgent support or the insurgents themselves) and types of actions (efforts to kinetically eliminate insurgents/ support versus efforts to diminish the motives for insurgency/support).* COIN forces on the motive-focused path succeeded not just because their main emphases included motive-diminishing actions, but also because they fought the insurgents and targeted both insurgents and support. The (relatively small) number of iron fist path winners prevailed with a primary emphasis on smashing the insurgents but also found ways to diminish insurgent support as a secondary consideration.

Following the pair of dichotomies offered in Chapter One (targets and actions against those targets), we found that COIN forces that defeat insurgencies target both the insurgents' tangible support and the insurgents themselves, and they usually do so by focusing on the motives for the insurgency (and the support) and by using force. Future COIN forces would benefit from seeking balance on both of these dimensions. When considering COIN concepts, a future COIN force would do well to implement concepts that are supported here but also to make sure that the concepts employed and overall strategy adopted address both support and active insurgents—and do so through both diminishing motives and kinetic diminution.

Seventeen of 24 COIN Concepts Tested Receive Strong Support, and One ("Crush Them") Has Strong Evidence Against It

Table 4.33 lists the 24 concepts for COIN tested in our study. Seventeen of the 24 received strong empirical support.[1] Three of the strongly supported concepts are singled out for more detailed attention in the next section because they were identified as priority concepts that were always present in COIN force victories. Strong evidence arose against one concept: "crush them."

Effective COIN Practices Run in Packs, and Some Practices Are Always in the Pack: Tangible Support Reduction, Commitment and Motivation, and Flexibility and Adaptability

One of the key findings of the original *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers* research was that "effective COIN practices tend to run in packs," that COIN forces that defeated insurgencies implemented numerous effective practices rather than just a few.[2] The current study found that effective COIN practices still run in packs, but the wide range of cases considered here allows better discrimination of COIN essentials. QCA techniques identified three priority COIN concepts. These three con-

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[1] Note that 18 rows in Table 4.33 are listed as receiving strong support; this is because a single approach, legitimacy, has been subdivided into two rows: one for government legitimacy and one for legitimacy of the use of force.

[2] Paul, Clarke, and Grill, 2010b, p. xv.

cepts were implemented in every COIN win, and no COIN loss implemented all three:

- tangible support reduction
- commitment and motivation
- flexibility and adaptability.

Implementation of all three of these concepts appears to be a prerequisite for COIN success, based on the core historical data of this study.

Tangible support refers to the ability of the insurgents to maintain needed levels of recruits, weapons and materiel, funding, intelligence, and sanctuary. In every COIN win, COIN forces managed to substantially reduce tangible support to the insurgents; only two COIN forces managed to substantially reduce insurgent tangible support and still lost.

Tangible support is not the same as popular support. Although tangible support can come from a supporting population, it can also come from an external supporter (a state sponsor, a diaspora, or a nonstate sponsor). This report echoes the finding from *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers* that "tangible support trumps popular support."[3] In many cases, tangible support came from the population and the level of popular support corresponded with levels of tangible support. When they did not match, however, victory followed tangible support. All three cases in which the government had the support of the majority of the population but the insurgents' tangible support was not significantly interrupted were COIN losses. Among the 14 cases in which the COIN force reduced flows of tangible support to the insurgents, but the insurgents retained their popular support, the COIN force won 12.

Commitment and motivation assessed the extent to which the government and COIN forces demonstrated that they were actually committed to defeating the insurgency, rather than maximizing their own personal wealth and power, bilking external supporters by extending the conflict, or avoiding (or fleeing) combat. In all COIN wins, the

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[3]   Paul, Clarke, and Grill, 2010b, p. xxii.

government and COIN force demonstrated their commitment and motivation; all 17 of the cases in which commitment and motivation were assessed as lacking were won by the insurgents.[4] Note that this set of factors considered the commitment and motivation of both the threatened government and the COIN force, not just one or the other.

Flexibility and adaptability captures the ability of COIN forces to adjust to changes in insurgent strategy or tactics. While some COIN forces failed to adapt (and lost) in early or intermediate phases in cases that they still managed to win, all successful COIN forces made any necessary adaptations in the decisive phase of each case.

Every Insurgency Is Unique, but Not So Much That It Matters at This Level of Analysis

A regular theme in discussions of insurgency is that "every insurgency is unique." The distinctive narratives for the 71 cases studied here led the authors to concur, except that those distinctive or unique characteristics do not matter at this level of analysis. All of the findings of this study hold across the core cases without exception for unique narratives or cases.[5] This holds for the prioritized concepts, and it holds for the COIN scorecard. A simple scorecard of 15 good practices and 11 bad practices perfectly discriminates the 59 core cases into wins and losses.

Subtracting the total number of bad practices in the decisive phase of each case from the total number of good factors produces a scorecard score. If the score is negative (more bad practices than good), then the case was a COIN loss; if the score is positive (more good practices than bad), the case was a COIN win. No exceptions.

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[4]   Before dismissing this result as trivial or obvious, note that there are several cases in the data in which an external actor contributed well-motivated and professional COIN forces in support of a government fighting an insurgency, but the government and indigenous COIN forces failed to demonstrate their resolve. All of these cases led to COIN losses. U.S. involvement in Vietnam is one obvious example, as is Egypt's campaign in Yemen.

[5]   Where the distinctive features and characteristics of individual insurgencies most certainly *do* matter is in actual efforts to implement concepts and practices on the ground. Our findings do not suggest a one-size-fits-all approach to COIN at the execution level; rather, these findings suggest that there is a finite set of good practices that a COIN force should always aspire to realize, but how a COIN force actually does so in any given operation will vary with the context.

While the scorecard is not a strategy for or a theory of COIN and could not, by itself, be used to plan a COIN campaign, it is a useful diagnostic tool. If an ongoing COIN campaign has a positive scorecard score, that is a clear indication that it is headed in the right direction. If such a campaign has a negative score, it indicates that something is wrong: There is a need to either amplify certain supporting efforts and make more progress in certain areas or revisit existing COIN strategy to make sure effective practices are pursued.

Quality Is More Important Than Quantity, Especially Where Paramilitaries and Irregular Forces Are Concerned

Of perennial interest to scholars of insurgency are the force requirements for effective COIN. The granularity of data sought for these cases does not allow for conclusions regarding ratios of COIN forces to insurgents or specific COIN force composition ratios between regular forces, police, SOF, or paramilitary forces. These analyses do support some higher-level observations that should be of interest nonetheless.

First, in no case did the COIN force win unless it could force the insurgents to fight as guerrillas or win the preponderance of conventional engagements by the decisive phase. Governments seeking to transition their COIN forces to being able to overmatch the insurgents usually sought to increase both the quality and the quantity of their COIN forces. While quantity may have a quality all its own, in every historical case in which the question was relevant, COIN force quality appears to have been more important than quantity.

Second, most COIN forces used significant numbers of police, paramilitary, or militia personnel, with virtually no correlation with outcome. This is because, too often, these forces were inadequately armed or trained or otherwise ineffective. However, in the 23 cases in which police or paramilitary forces were not ineffective, COIN forces won 69 percent of the time. This is another historical endorsement of the importance of COIN force quality and is a further endorsement of the inclusion of such forces, if they can be adequately prepared.

Governments Supported by External Actors Win the Same Way Others Do

The results in Chapter Six show that external or externally supported COIN forces win almost as often as wholly indigenous COIN forces. This suggests that, by itself, using external forces is not a bad COIN practice. Further, results for cases involving COIN support by external actors match results from the core data; the same concepts that were correlated with COIN success in the broader data were also correlated with success in the external actor cases.

The external actor analysis raised two cautions, however. First, as noted previously, commitment and motivation of the government and COIN forces are critical to COIN success. This holds in external actor cases as well. No external or externally supported COIN force was able to prevail if the host-nation government was insufficiently committed. The caution, then, is for would-be external supporters: You can't want it more than they do!

Second, every case involving external professional forces supporting the insurgents was a COIN loss unless it was balanced by external professional forces supporting the government. This caution applies to those who advocate "light-footprint" support to COIN forces, support restricted to advisers, SOF, and air power. History suggests that if the insurgents have external conventional forces on their side, the COIN force needs such support, too.

COIN Takes Time, but Some COIN Practices Help End Insurgencies Sooner and Lead to More Durable Postconflict Peace

The duration of insurgencies varies widely; the median length of the 71 cases was 118 months (slightly less than ten years). Beating an insurgency takes longer than succumbing to one, on average: The median length of a COIN win was 132 months (11 years), while the median COIN loss was only 95 months (slightly less than eight years).

Chapter Five identified factors and concepts whose presence was correlated with shortening COIN wins and with prolonging the peace interval after a COIN win. The following concepts, in addition to being endorsed earlier as associated with COIN success, all signif-

icantly decrease the remaining duration of a conflict when they are present:

- tangible support reduction
- border control
- strategic communication
- beat cop.

These additional separate factors are also significantly associated with decreased duration:

- COIN force was of sufficient strength to force insurgents to fight as guerrillas.
- COIN or government actions did not contribute to substantial new grievances.
- There were significant government reforms since onset of the conflict.

The analysis of postconflict peace intervals was much more limited, but it identified three factors significantly related to the stability of a COIN win and extending the length of the postconflict peace interval:

- There were significant government reforms during the conflict.
- There were significant ethical/professional/human rights–related military reforms during the conflict.
- The conflict caused significant host-nation economic disruption.

Note that reform (of both of the government and the military's human rights behavior) is not only a supported COIN concept (see Table 4.33), but individual reform-related factors also contributed both to reducing conflict length and to longer postconflict peace intervals.

After Good COIN Practices Are in Place, the Average Insurgency Lasts Roughly Six More Years

Because the COIN scorecard discriminates historical wins and losses so effectively, it begs a further question: Once a COIN force man-

ages to achieve a positive balance of good COIN practices versus poor COIN practices, how long do they have to sustain those practices? The answer is, on average, about six years.

All COIN wins in the data have a COIN scorecard score of at least 2 by their conclusion, but few achieve such a score in the first phase. The median remaining duration of an insurgency after the COIN force achieved a positive scorecard score was 69 months, so, on average, those that establish effective COIN practices prevail in 69 months. Note, however, that there is considerable variation around that average, but it suggests a planning point.

Poor Beginnings Do Not Necessarily Lead to Poor Ends

One of the key findings from *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers* was that "poor beginnings do not necessarily lead to poor ends." In other words, COIN forces that get off on the wrong foot have time to adapt over the course of an insurgency.[6] This finding holds over the more comprehensive set of cases studied here. Each of the 71 cases was divided into between one and five phases, for a total of 204 rows of data. Each phase was scored for whether the COIN force or the insurgents had the upper hand at its end. Since each case had a single decisive phase, 204 minus 71 leaves 133 intermediate or initial phases. In more than half of the intermediate phases (32 of 58) en route to COIN wins at the case level, the insurgents held the upper hand. Only nine of 29 COIN winners at the case level "ran the table" and had the upper hand in every phase of the conflict. All of the others had at least one phase in which the insurgents got the better of it but the COIN force managed to win by the end anyway.

Recommendations

Taken together, these key findings suggest the following recommendations.

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6   Paul, Clarke, and Grill, 2010b, p. xxiii.

Recommendations for Defeating Insurgencies

Focus First on Overmatching the Insurgents, Defeating Their Conventional Military Aspirations, and Forcing Them to Fight as Guerrillas

No COIN force won while unable to force the insurgents to fight as guerrillas or defeat them in the preponderance of conventional engagements (which occurred only when the insurgents should have fought as guerrillas but made critical strategic errors). If insurgents are able to give main-force battle, then the conflict is more like conventional warfare than COIN and governed by the principles of that type of conflict. Priority must be given to reducing the insurgents (or the insurgents' external supporters) to the point that COIN forces have clear conventional overmatch.

Identify Insurgents' Sources of Tangible Support and Seek to Reduce Them

The importance of reducing insurgents' tangible support is the centermost finding of this research. Successful COIN forces reduce not only the active insurgents but also the support that fuels the insurgency.

Recognize That Essential Tangible Support May or May Not Flow from the Population

Tangible support often comes from a supportive population, but it can also come from a diaspora or an external state (or nonstate) actor. Effective COIN requires the identification of sources of support and successful efforts to diminish it.

Be Prepared to Continue Good COIN Practices for Six or More Years After a Substantial Balance of Good COIN Practices Is First Achieved

The median duration of an insurgency after a COIN force achieves a positive scorecard balance is slightly less than six years. This duration is also quite variable and does not include the length of time required to achieve a positive scorecard balance in the first place. Recognize that COIN takes time, and be prepared for a long haul.

Avoid the "Iron Fist" COIN Path

Effective COIN balances action against both the insurgents and the insurgents' sources of support. Effective COIN also balances kinetic

action and action aimed at diminishing the motives for supporting or continuing the insurgency. Exclusive emphasis on kinetic action has been much less likely to lead to success in the past.

Generate or Retain Capabilities to Plan and Pursue Multiple Mutually Supporting Lines of Operation

Because of the balance required between motive-focused and kinetic action and the balance required between reducing insurgents and reducing insurgent support, COIN forces must be prepared to pursue multiple lines of effort simultaneously. Good COIN practices run in packs, and COIN forces must be able to realize a pack of good COIN practices at the same time.

Recommendations for Helping Others Fight an Insurgency

When Building Host-Nation Security Forces to Fight an Insurgency, Balance Quality and Quantity, but Favor Quality

Because of the demands of effective COIN, better forces will fare better. COIN requires more than just armed warm bodies. While there is certainly a need to balance quantity and quality, too many troops of low quality can do more harm than good, as witnessed in the host of cases in which militias on the side of the COIN force ended up working at cross-purposes.

Help Host-Nation Governments Reform, Improve Their Commitment and Motivation, and Increase Their Legitimacy

Commitment and motivation is one of the factors characterizing all winning COIN forces and governments, and the findings specific to external actors show that committed external COIN forces do not make up for uncommitted host-nation governments. If supporting a partner plagued with corruption, internal divisions, poor governance, or other related challenges, improvement will likely be necessary before the insurgency can be decisively defeated. Encourage and support such improvement.

Retain Leverage Over Supported Governments and Elites to Encourage Sufficient Commitment and Motivation, and Avoid Creating Perverse Incentives or Dependencies

As an external actor, you can't want it more than they do. Uncommitted governments lose, and, historically, such governments have been more than happy to let someone else do their fighting for them for as long as possible. Make commitments of support contingent on demonstrations of commitment on the part of the host nation. The host nation may need to make progress in this area, and this need should not be held against it, but leverage to incentivize progress may also be needed.

Recommendations for COIN Doctrine and Theory

Move Away from Strategic Discussions Based on a Population-Centric Versus Insurgent-Centric Dichotomy, and Add Nuance by Specifying Target and Actions, Seeking Balance Between Them

Effective COIN balances action against the insurgents and action against the insurgents' tangible support, and that tangible support does not always stem from the population. Change the discussion to be cognizant of these facts and move away from polarizing and ultimately unproductive contention.

Revise COIN Doctrine to Reinforce Core Principles and Include Key Insights from This Research

FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency,* was being rewritten at the time of this writing. While the manual can certainly be improved, this analysis suggests that the criticism that has been leveled against FM 3-24 is largely undeserved. We recommend refining and improving FM 3-24, but the core principles should not be abandoned.

Questions for Further Research

The data collected for these 71 cases (289 factors over 204 phases) will support analyses that go well beyond those reported here. And should a future inquiry require data that are not (yet) in the database, additional factors could be added relatively easily.

Here are some questions that might be of future interest in this area, building on this foundation of data.

Big Footprint or Small Footprint?

These results show similar levels of success for external actors contributing massive ground forces (big footprint) and those contributing only advisers, SOF, or air power (small footprint), with most of the variation determined by the overall presence or absence of good COIN practices. Isolating external actor cases for additional scrutiny could provide further information on which to base decisions about levels of force in supporting future COIN efforts.

What Factors Lead to *Insurgent* Success?

All the analyses described here focus on the COIN force and the government, finding factors that are correlated with COIN success and trying isolate critical practices for defeating insurgents. Although we evaluated many factors relative to the insurgents, the insurgents play little role in these analyses, save as part of the conflict's context. While the policy issues of primary concern when this research was conducted addressed defeating insurgencies, what about cases in which we would prefer that the insurgents prevail? What are the best practices for overthrowing and defeating governments, and what efforts to support insurgents are most highly correlated with success?

How Do Insurgencies End?

While this report focuses on factors and practices that lead to effective COIN outcomes and, once that outcome is secure, on factors that might decrease the remaining duration of the conflict or improve the quality of the subsequent peace, questions remain about the "end games" of these conflicts. How, short of their total elimination and neutralization, are insurgent movements made to cease operations? What conditions are necessary for, or increase the likelihood of, negotiated settlements? What factors make cease-fires durable? What DDR approaches are effective?

How Many Troops Are Required?

One of the perennial COIN-related questions concerns force require-
ments: How many troops does effective COIN require? This question
is usually asked in terms of force ratios: How many troops per capita
or how many troops per insurgent are necessary? This research did not
collect data about relative force sizes at sufficient granularity to answer
these questions. The results in Chapter Five do suggest that the quality
of COIN forces is more important than quantity, while recognizing
that there is clearly a quantity requirement for success, too. Although
it does not capture detailed troop counts or force ratios, the existing
data set does contain variables that would be potentially useful in such
analyses, such as information about COIN approaches and strategies,
insurgent motivations and capabilities, and factors related to terrain.