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PD and Counterinsurgency in the Globalization Age: Two Sides of the Same COIN? [1]

Globalization is contributing to a growing international divide -- political, economic, cultural, and digital. This gap, characterized by the polarization of wealth and resources and the breakdown of shared goals and identity, has contributed to heightened instability and the generation of conflict. Terrorism and holy war have been among the reactions.

Unfortunately, the West's organizational tools, policy instruments and military doctrine, mired still in Cold War era thinking, appear incapable of responding adequately. Foreign ministries and departments of defense tend to be rigid, compartmentalized and hierarchic; they aren't designed or equipped to connect with populations, forge partnerships with civil society, use the new and conventional media strategically, generate granular intelligence, or communicate cross-culturally. Few diplomats or military officers have the requisite background, training, skills or experience.

Moreover, the prevalence of an adversarial world view predicated on an "us versus them" mentality and a tendency to militarize international policy responses has imposed a continuing focus on out-moded objectives such as technological/weapons superiority; controlling territory and retooling command bureaucracies. In the face of an agile, smart, networked and distributed threat -- global insurgency which uses religion to motivate violent extremism -- new approaches are imperative.

Those who theorize war and political-military relations these days have little choice but ponder counterinsurgency (or COIN, in the language of the trade). It just happens to be what many NATO governments are attempting to do in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq -- and, it must be added, without great success. Conventionally trained armies are struggling with asymmetrical confrontations because they are organized, doctrinally, culturally and materially, for contesting the larger-scale and more structured types of conflict which they would like to fight, rather than the jagged, complex, shadowy conflicts in which they find themselves enmeshed.

Traditionally formed diplomats, for their part, are running into difficulty because they are equipped primarily to deal with the representatives of other states, and are most comfortable operating in metropolitan centers where much time is spent interacting with others of their ilk.

How can insurgency be successfully countered? Not easily. From Roman times to the Third Reich, and including the so-called Indian wars in the western USA and the Boer War in southern Africa, some combination of harsh measures, retaliation wreaked upon civilians in a manner way out of proportion to your own losses, and extreme brutality could usually be counted on to dampen the enthusiasm of the population for rebellion. Another tried and true

technique is massive occupation -- say, one soldier for something between every twenty and every one hundred persons occupied, depending upon the ferocity of the resistance. That means heavy casualties for the occupier, and consequent political challenges on the home front.

With widespread sensitivity and concern over human rights, mass media coverage, and limited public tolerance for casualties, neither of these standard approaches is realistically possible. So what remains? You can try to hand over control to a friendly local regime and allow them to deal with the backwash, but, as has been shown with the Karzai (Afghanistan) and al-Maliki (Iraq) governments, that is a tall order. It is very difficult to find credible, legitimate, and effective partners.

In a striking example of the post-Cold War de-territorialization of political space, it is the population, not the place that has become the strategic center of gravity. That puts a premium on political persuasion, convincing people that your intentions are noble and constructive and that your efforts deserve support. Yet this is rarely attempted. Instead of reaching out to populations through dialogue and partnership, a variety of alternative objectives have been substituted: break, take, hold, repair the damage.

Variations on the theme of "shock and awe," which combines speed, advanced technology and overwhelming force to establish "full spectrum dominance" might work for regime change, but are highly counter-productive in the aftermath.

In the counterinsurgency type of conflict, as was so clearly the case in Vietnam, tactical victory is next to irrelevant. If you are winning every battle but still losing the war, then something is clearly out of kilter. Modern insurgency is in large part a function of underdevelopment, and will best respond if treated accordingly. If all efforts are not directed ultimately toward locally sourced good governance, the rule of law, the provision of services and political participation, and the construction of representative institutions, then neither development nor security can be anticipated.

Distracted by terrorism and confounded by the jihadist political ideologies associated with Islamism, it seems fair to say that the main currents of strategic thinking in Western countries have not fully adapted to the sweeping implications of the globalization age. Specifically, the costs of the failure to come to terms with the political and developmental pre-requisites of security are adding up, and now demand a fundamental change in direction.

How to begin to bridge this gap, especially, in the case of armed conflict, at the sharp, pointy end of the diplomatic spectrum?

Here something quite unprecedented seems to be happening. Two strains of thought, emanating in some cases from opposite ends of the intellectual spectrum, are apparently converging. When it comes to dealing with irregular conflict, military and civilian analysts are arriving at more or less the same place: the theme of engaging populations. The clearest signs of this convergence are cropping up -- if not always explicitly -- in the literature on counter-insurgency, a good deal of it written by active or retired service personnel. This is especially evident in some of the new thinking around "Three Block" and "Fourth Generation" war, which implies a broader understanding of the implications of globalization.

With the release of a welter of new articles, books and manuals, contemporary COIN doctrine, at least at the tactical end, is beginning to come into line with current conditions in theater. As

happened in earlier conflicts in places such as Vietnam and Malaya, it is gradually dawning on the theorists of counter-insurgency that asymmetrical conflicts are prime candidates for the application of political approaches to problem solving and dispute resolution, applied through the medium of public diplomacy.

Shared PD/COIN themes include favoring flexibility over force; emphasizing brain power over firepower, and; winning hearts and minds rather than taking and holding physical territory. Critical competencies? Abstract thinking, problem-solving skills and rapid-adaptive cognition. Awaiting instructions, following orders and referring to operating manuals won't cut it in this fast-paced, high-risk environment. And talking with the enemy? It just might produce better results than shooting up wedding parties, crashing through compounds, bashing down doors and entering living rooms in tanks. These methods provide the grist of jihadist recruitment videos, not the building blocks of confidence, trust and respect.

Bottom line? In the globalized international security environment, political counterinsurgency and military public diplomacy appear to be converging to become two sides of the same coin.

What are the full implications for soldiers and diplomats, armies and foreign ministries?

This remains to be seen, but of this, at least, we can be sure. Soldiers may have the watches, but the guerrillas have the time. So let's start by putting a hold on dispatching the armored divisions, and instead send in a busload of political officers who can operate effectively in conflict zones, who specialize in dialogue rather than combat, and for whom insurgent thinking will be second nature.

For multilingual, culturally savvy, creative and, not least, courageous public diplomats, the challenge of COIN beckons inevitably.