
Doctrine or Dogma? Adapting to Deal with Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century

Chris Barrie

On Wednesday 3 March 2010, in a speech at Kansas State University,¹ the Chairman US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, laid out, and expanded upon, three principles about the proper use of modern military forces. These are:

- Military power should not—maybe cannot—be the last resort of the state.
- Force should, to the maximum extent possible, be applied in a precise and principled way.
- Policy and strategy should constantly struggle with one another.

In the same speech, as he pointed out the benefits of coalition operations, he said, “The Australians are experts at counterinsurgency warfare”.

In a weblog² on 11 March, Major General Jim Molan challenged the truth of this statement. In his blog General Molan ponders the question of whether or not “it is important to have military credibility in this modern world”. According to General Molan Australia had not covered itself with glory during the Iraq counterinsurgency and more likely did some harm to our “strategic interests by being there and not fighting”. In Afghanistan he acknowledges that we have pulled our weight better. Nonetheless, he writes, even in Afghanistan we still fall short of supporting the US war effort at either the strategic level or at the tactical level.

In his analysis General Molan concludes that the danger of the Admiral Mullen’s fulsome praise is that we believe it. He goes on to state, in direct contradiction of the Chairman, that “(w)e are not experts in

¹ Landon Lecture Series Remarks delivered by Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, Wednesday 3 March 2010.

² Major Gen (Retd) Jim Molan, ‘Australian Forces: Drinking the Kool-Aid?’, The Interpreter, Lowy Institute for Foreign Policy, 11 March 2010, <<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2010/03/11/Australian-forces-Too-much-praise.aspx>> [Accessed 29 March 2010].

counterinsurgency (COIN) and we are not better than the best modern COIN forces in the world, the US and the UK".³

Thus it is timely that this edition of *Security Challenges* offers for examination by its readers a series of essays that deal in counterinsurgency and the impact of doctrine on ground operations from the perspective of relevant US, UK, French, German and Canadian experiences especially noting how well they have been able to adapt to meet new challenges.

The Importance of Doctrine

The question of the place of doctrine in framing an Army's ability to deal with situations on the ground, to be dealt with by forces available at any place and time, has always intrigued me. On one hand, it is argued, it is the deep understanding of doctrine that, coupled with proper training, enables forces to fight together effectively. This requires the integration of all available information to give accurate situational awareness, using the output of sensing systems that indicate precisely what threats may develop and the tools to respond to those threats in the most appropriate way, and even accessing available combat power if necessary to resolve any situation on favourable terms in accordance with assigned rules of engagement.

It also follows that the development of sound doctrine requires not only a deep knowledge of potential operations that will have to be conducted but also the intellectual capacity to penetrate the key issues within the profession of arms and analyse them before we can produce it. In any force of mass this is no easy task. How our doctrine is able to adapt to different needs may be a good measure of our capability to deal with the unthinkable, and a test of the institutional structures that support military capacity.

On the other hand a rigid adherence to doctrine that is out-of-date or not relevant to the situation being confronted may stifle an Army's ability to deal with enemies who are either exploiting their flexibility and adaptability and able to change their methods quickly, or in possession of superior tactics. Lives may be placed at risk. There is, of course, always the possibility that operations on the ground will demand the abandonment of doctrine that is not relevant, or the reshaping of procedures that are not adequately dealt with in current training but if this situation is allowed to exist for too long it will undermine the effectiveness of doctrine as a unifying mechanism, and produce widespread mistrust of it.

The development of doctrine is thus given a high priority in most professional military forces. Published doctrine forms the basis on which military personnel are educated in their specialised professions and trained, building up from individual training at schools where specific skills are taught, to

³ Ibid.

formation level ground exercises in which units are tested for competencies at both unit and multiple unit level. Moreover, good doctrine also assists interoperability greatly if each country adopts similar doctrinal approaches, even allowing for possible cultural differences between the way in which each country's forces operate. This is of particular importance in counterinsurgency operations.

The US Department of Defense defines insurgency as "The organized use of subversion and violence by a group or movement that seeks to overthrow or force change of a governing authority".⁴ Some people prefer to use the word "rebellion" and this word more accurately reflects the Oxford dictionary which defines an insurgent as a rebel or revolutionary.⁵ In either case we are looking at security situations which are very different from the conventional war scenarios that were the basis for most of the training and education that took place in the cold war.

In his landmark book *The Utility of Force* Lieutenant General Rupert Smith sets out compelling argument to explain why today's conflicts must be understood as intertwined political and military events. He makes clear why the one-size-fits-all model of total war politicians still cling to, must be abandoned in favour of new strategies that take account of the fact that wars are now fought among civilian populations that is "war amongst the people".⁶ And so counterinsurgency is defined in the United States as "the comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to defeat and insurgency and to address any core grievances".⁷

With these perspectives in mind let us look at the articles set in front of us.

United States

The paper written by Daniel S. Roper and Richard L. Kiper canvasses the scale of changes that were required to transition from notions of fighting a conventional war against the Soviet Union to all the difficulties now presented by asymmetrical warfare in which the adversary is likely to be lightly equipped, and living in and amongst the people. Since the adversary will not possess all the tools of combat power that conventional forces possess the insurgents will seek to exploit perceived weaknesses and vulnerabilities through any means that they can. By any standard the degree of change required to redirect the focus for large armies has been massive—a serious challenge for our adaptability.

⁴ Department of Defense, Joint Publication 1-02, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, October 2009, p. 266.

⁵ *Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, 1996. p. 731.

⁶ General Sir Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2007), pp. 374-415.

⁷ Department of Defense, Joint Publication 1-02, p. 128.

Even though experience obtained from looking at the lessons of the Korean and Vietnam wars should have placed the United States in good stead to develop sophisticated approaches to dealing with limited war constructs involving insurgents such work was eschewed as a political consequence of the failure in Vietnam. A strong focus was placed on defeating the military power of the Soviet Union in Europe mainly through conventional campaigning, with the support of NATO allies and other friendly countries. So, counterinsurgency doctrine disappeared from US publications, and no training was conducted.

It is really after 9/11 that ground operations began to take on a very different look. No longer could counterinsurgency operations be an after-thought, and thinking that if a force was well trained for conventional war then the ability to deal with asymmetric warfare was assured proved incorrect, and costly.

So this paper gives us a fascinating look at how US counterinsurgency doctrine was developed and tested in the field as its deployed forces wrestled with meeting new security challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan. After the passing of the Rumsfeld era in 2006, true transformation blossomed when the work of the best and brightest people in the US military became formally endorsed doctrine in the shape of FM 3-24, finally approved on 15 December 2006.

This effort in the United States demonstrates both positive and negative characteristics. These become very important given the centrality of the role of US armed forces in most coalition efforts around the globe.

On the negative side one ponders why it seemed impossible under the Rumsfeld era with all the hoop-la attached to transformation efforts to get any serious work done quickly on counterinsurgency and how to deal properly with asymmetrical threats when it became evident, even at the senior military officer and political level, that such work should command a high priority by the end of 2003. This is not to say that no work was done at all but even the final draft of FM 3-24 was not released until July 2006, with final approval delayed until after Rumsfeld's departure from the Pentagon.

For my own part, this unwillingness seemed to stem from a perception that high technology forces could deal with any threat and concomitantly minimise the numbers of troops involved as a matter of neo-conservative dogma. If any evidence was needed to support such a view the narratives in the Woodward trilogy or the dismissal of Secretary of the Army White and the Chief of Staff of the US Army General Shinseki in the lead up to the war in Iraq, or indeed some of the revelations in General Sanchez's book⁸ ought to give us all food for thought—such may be the price of leadership at the

⁸ Lt Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez, *Wiser in Battle: A Soldier's Story* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008). An extract 'How Much Did Rumsfeld Know?' can be found on <<http://www.time.com>>

top! The true position on counterinsurgency may be stated best in Thomas Rick's book *Fiasco* in which he deals with this question of how the initial US counterinsurgency strategy of late 2003 violated the basic tenets of a successful counterinsurgency strategy when the "cost of such wilful ignorance was high".⁹ I am sure that these issues confronted a number of other senior US military officers with the serious leadership dilemma of whether to stand up and fight to do what instinctively they knew was right, or try to work with the prevailing system in the hope that one day all would be well.

On the positive side, at lower levels of authority, there can be no doubt that some very talented officers at various levels in the field were wrestling with how a counterinsurgency that presented them with a suite of very different challenges, should be dealt with. The work of General Petraeus is well known and it is covered in more detail in this article. It is a great credit to the learning environment that the US training and education system is built on that in a short period after December 2006 so much change was possible in one of the world's largest military forces. The departure of Secretary Rumsfeld in November 2006 and from December 2006 the leadership of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who has been able to apply his own brand of wisdom after many years work within the US defence and intelligence communities, may have had more than a small part to play in promoting this significant turn-around and freeing up the environment for debate and discussion so that Admiral Mullen can claim now that the United States has "become the best counterinsurgency force in the world".¹⁰

After such a traumatic start to the 21st century we should not be surprised to find that our US counterparts may now become very critical of coalition partners who fail to keep up.

United Kingdom

This paper by Daniel Marston, an acknowledged authority on the development of counterinsurgency doctrine, highlights the importance of genuine internal debate, and fostering a command environment where the chain of command can receive and act on quite severe criticism. Marston notes that initial British efforts at counterinsurgency operations in Iraq had not succeeded in spite of expectations that they would. But through a process of bottom-up learning and distillation of lessons learned significant changes were made to the British approach and, working in conjunction with US forces, are now proving more successful.

It is also noteworthy for the emphasis placed on the initiative taken by British officers and NCOs who did not accept the status quo, to begin a process of

⁹ Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), pp. 264-7. These pages deal with "The US Army vs the principles of counterinsurgency".

¹⁰ Landon Lecture Series Remarks delivered by Admiral Mike Mullen.

self-education using historical case studies from many countries to deliver change at the tactical and operational levels, though it took till early 2007 before Army-wide acceptance of the changes became possible. These initiatives began to show the British Army that more work needed to be done in Britain to prepare properly for the new operational tasks in Iraq and Afghanistan.

One other point that deserves attention concerns the tour lengths of deployed forces. While a six month tour of duty for combat units may still be inevitable because of reasons associated with retention and recruitment in an all volunteer force, a compelling argument is made to extend the tour lengths for commanders at senior level, as well as command and intelligence staffs, where investment in knowing all about the fight is critically important. It is hinted that tours of over one year may be needed, but not stated explicitly.

The paper also draws out most importantly the critical role that very senior officers must play in negotiating the need for adaptation and change with political leaders. Marston advocates that there is a very strong case to make sure that all the lessons, both positive and negative, are learned most particularly in Whitehall and PJHQ where the on-going campaign in Afghanistan deserves a high priority to be placed on this work to assure success.

Canada

The Canadian contribution by David Lambert sets out a compelling story of what happens when a-historical and untested ideas of transformation are imposed on a military force constrained by a very limited budget and little governmental support. The seduction of high technology as a means of reducing personnel requirements (and the likelihood of high casualties) proved irresistible as Canada tried to stay in lock step with transformation work taking place in the United States next door, no doubt. The great problem for Canada, and presumably Australia too, is that the huge resources of the United States are not available to maintain ground forces with a doctrine based on proven principles, as well as the additional costs of introducing high technology equipments and new ways of working into the force. Politically, leadership in the Canadian Forces was presented with the classic 'either or' choices by Government as it confronted demands for change to the investment profile of the force structure before and immediately after 9/11.

Nonetheless, the writer tells us that, despite these pressures, the Canadian Army has adapted itself to meeting the challenges it faces in Afghanistan and other places because the junior officers and NCOs kept sacred their commitment to the warrior ethos. Moreover, now that there is real work to be done, and done well, public confidence in the force has been restored.

Coalition partners have also accepted Canadian Forces as reliable partners on the battlefield.

In step with these changes the Canadians began work on their own counterinsurgency doctrine in 2005, but based mainly on British work refined through unique Canadian experiences and insights into various case studies. Adaptation is to be achieved through a process of grounding lessons learned as the basis for future doctrine and training.

The paper finishes with a description of the counter-transformation work that has undone many of the changes wrought in the 1990s to restore the Army's customary way of doing its business in the ground fight. But, not everything that was lost has been returned and the author laments that at least "the Army now realises that they are losses".

France

The contribution from France by Stéphane Taillat concentrates on why and how ways ought to be found to adopt the Anglo-Saxon counterinsurgency thinking into the French tradition, highlighting that adaptation should be based on ideas of some intellectual weight, rather than thin mythology.

His article also draws our attention to the writings of French Colonel David Galula¹¹ who, according to Thomas Ricks, had written the definitive work on counterinsurgency based on his firsthand view of dealing with insurgents over two decades, and yet was virtually unknown "within the US military".¹²

Since 2003 the French have been studying the US experience in Iraq to underpin their own doctrinal developments as they seek to include important concepts, such as a "stabilization phase" as a means for seeking the peace, within their doctrine. Since it is appreciated that there will be a very high likelihood of future operations being conducted within coalitions the French are basing their thinking around substantive alignment with US doctrine and practices, notwithstanding that some huge shifts in thinking will be required.

Germany

The German article by Benjamin Schreer concentrates on the difficulties and obstructions to reform at the political and strategic level in Germany as the military struggles to get recognition of the true nature of the job that needs to be done in Afghanistan to ensure success. The paper also recognises the pressures for adaptation and change coming from deployed forces

¹¹ Lt Col David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964). Apparently this important book did not get translated into French and published in France until January 2008. It was an important reference work in the development of the US Army's FM 3-24. It is also referred to in the US paper as an important departure point for advanced thinkers on counterinsurgency.

¹² Ricks, *Fiasco*, p. 265.

especially in Afghanistan. As a consequence there are problems of stifling adaptation for reasons of political expediency, and of debate that does not want to engage with the core issues.

The record of performance even in limited tasks assigned to Germany has been constrained severely by political limitations imposed by the German Government on precisely what the forces can do. There is also a degree of resonance with points made in the Canadian paper about what happens when there is political demand to try and become involved even in the most trifling decisions at the tactical level, brought on by a sense of extreme sensitivity to casualties and an overall reluctance to be involved in the fighting, but tacit acceptance of the need to be part of the coalition effort because of relationships within NATO, and perhaps more especially with the United States. This is proving frustrating for the forces involved it seems.

My conclusion is that while trained military forces seem ready to prepare and train for counterinsurgency properly, there seems to be political and cultural reasons why there is a deep seated unwillingness to authorise the military to take on such roles. I am also struck by the possibility that there is a great deal of similarity between the German and Australian cases where constraints on action imposed by political leadership is preventing forces deployed from making a fulsome contribution frequently.

Common threads

There is throughout the papers either a stated or implicit connection that links the senior people involved in decision making at both political and military levels to success in adapting the resources at hand to meet new challenges as they emerge, with a focus on counterinsurgency warfare. In the United States it is stated formally that doctrine comprises fundamental principles that guide military actions in support of national objectives, yet it is very clear that there was a serious disconnect between national objectives and the doctrine back in 2003 and 2004.

But where sound doctrine may be said to exist it is worthless if the strategy employed is not in alignment with it. It seems extraordinary now, for example, that the actions of malcontents in Iraq, who turned into insurgents, had not been foreseen and plans made to deal with them given that the initiation of the war was the choice of the United States. Moreover, where good doctrine exists and the strategy is not properly supported disillusionment within the military, particularly at the lower levels of command, will grow.

Leadership must encourage the innovation needed to maintain the fighting edge. In countries where there is a culture that supports free and open debate the acknowledgement of the need for change, and consequent search for a new paradigm to deal with changed circumstances, is much

more likely to occur quickly and indeed approach the transformational in context, depending on the magnitude of the changes implemented. Of course, the reverse is also true.

Finally the central role played by the US military in leading the charge for change is evident in all papers. We should not be surprised since the preponderance of military force today is exercised by the United States. Nonetheless, none of the papers is suggesting that learning, discussing and thinking should be left entirely to the United States. Each country believes that it has something to offer to enhance overall performance in the field—and this is exactly how it should be.

Leadership

It would be wrong in this paper on the development of counterinsurgency doctrine and how adaptation is achieved within our armed forces to pay no regard for the work of two thought leaders on this topic. The most prominent is General David H. Petraeus who is currently Combatant Commander, US Central Command. It was Petraeus who oversaw the preparation of US doctrine on counterinsurgency when he was Commanding General of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and had responsibility for the US Army Combined Arms Center located there. Whilst there, Petraeus and Marine Lieutenant General James L. Mattis had the Field Manual on Counterinsurgency produced. It was mostly written by a diverse group of military officers, academics, human rights advocates, and journalists assembled for that task. In addition, Petraeus ensured that a study of counterinsurgency was integrated into lesson plans and training exercises at Fort Leavenworth during his command tour there from 2005 till early 2007.

Some people regard General Petraeus as the world's foremost thinker on counterinsurgency warfare today. It is noteworthy that in 1987 Petraeus had earned a PhD from Princeton University where he wrote a thesis on 'The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam: A Study of Military Influence and the Use of Force in the Post-Vietnam Era'. In a piece that appeared in the *Washington Post* in early 2007 Petraeus is quoted as writing, inter alia,

Vietnam planted in the minds of many in the military doubts about the ability of U.S. forces to conduct successful large-scale counterinsurgencies. These misgivings do not in all cases spring from doubts about the capabilities of American troops and units per se ... Rather, the doubts that are part of the Vietnam legacy spring from a number of interrelated factors: the previously noted worries about a lack of popular support for what the public might perceive as ambiguous conflicts; suspicions about the willingness of civilian policy-makers—not just those in the executive branch to stay the course; and lurking fears that the respective services have yet to come to grips with the difficult tasks of developing doctrine, equipment, and forces suitable for nasty "little" wars...

The military also took from Vietnam (and the concomitant activities in the Pentagon) a heightened awareness that civilian officials are responsive to

influences other than the objective conditions on the battlefield. A consequence has been an increase in the traditional military distrust of civilian political leaders ... While the military still accept emphatically the constitutional provision for civilian control of the armed forces, there remain from the Vietnam era nagging doubts about the abilities and motivations of politicians, and those they appoint to key positions. Vietnam was a painful reminder for the military that they, not the transient occupants of high office, generally bear the heaviest burden during armed conflict.¹³

The other leader who deserves mention in this article is former Australian Army officer, Dr David Kilcullen. It was as a serving officer that Kilcullen was awarded a CDF scholarship in 1999 to finish his doctoral thesis entitled 'The Political Consequences of Military Operations in Indonesia 1945-99: A Fieldwork Analysis of the Political Power-Diffusion Effects of Guerilla Conflict' for which he earned a PhD from the University of New South Wales.¹⁴ In this work he looked at the political power-diffusion effects of successful and failed counterinsurgency operations on traditional societies in Indonesia and East Timor.

Dr Kilcullen left the Australian Army in 2005 and began work in the United States. He has now built up a serious reputation for counterinsurgency work in the United States where he has worked with General Petraeus and other experts in the field as well as becoming influential adviser to key officials in the Bush administration. He also worked on FM 34-2 *Counterinsurgency* in the closing days of its development. It may be critical to observe that in Kilcullen's 2006 "Counterinsurgency Redux" he concluded on the question of adaptation that:

today's insurgencies differ significantly from those of the 1960s. Insurgents may not be seeking to overthrow the state, may have no coherent strategy or may pursue a faith-based approach difficult to counter with traditional methods. There may be numerous competing insurgencies in one theatre, meaning that the counter-insurgent must control the overall environment rather than defeat a specific enemy. The actions of individuals and the propaganda effect of a subjective 'single narrative' may far outweigh practical progress, rendering counter-insurgency even more non-linear and unpredictable.¹⁵

Both these leaders demonstrate the critical importance of a free and open debate fostered in an environment where the military education system values the encouragement it can give to people to question the conventional approach and develop innovative thinking to meet new challenges. Both these experts did know about, and use, the work on counterinsurgency by David Galula, and others. Furthermore, the work of both these officers was irrepressible, even when the political-military interface at the top appeared

¹³ Rachel Dry, 'Petraeus on Vietnam's Legacy', *Washington Post*, 14 January 2007.

¹⁴ David Kilcullen, 'Political Consequences of Military Operations in Indonesia 1945-99', PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, 2000.

¹⁵ *Survival*, vol. 48, no. 4 (2006), pp. 111-30.

poisonous and out of touch with reality. Good leaders find ways of overcoming obstacles to progress even when the going gets tough.¹⁶

Implications for Australia

A good reason why policy makers ought to be interested in this edition of *Security Challenges* is simply to ask of themselves the key question in respect of setting Australian objectives in Afghanistan and our military involvement there: “are we doing the right thing, and are we doing things right?”

The articles drawn from the experience of other countries invite us to think about our own systems and approaches for dealing with the adaptation question and whether or not we are able to adjust appropriately when needed. Moreover, we could put these points to our deployed forces to hear what they think as this is where much needed adaptation in the United States began in the light of failed experiences in Iraq.

Another aspect for thought is the extent to which a free and open debate about Afghanistan and our involvement there is occurring. Are we satisfied that our defence community is fully aware of all the issues that may bear on Australian successes in Afghanistan and how much of this awareness has filtered through to the Australian community? These seem to be critical questions if the political and military relationships are to be kept in good alignment.

In truth, I have no idea whether or not General Molan is correct in his assessment. But I do think the analysis in this issue enables me to ask a range of questions about what we are doing in Afghanistan, which I would like to seek answers from those engaged. To test Molan’s hypothesis, it would be critical to ensure that we can clearly validate claims that we have not been complacent in doctrine development, nor in ensuring that our strategy in Afghanistan is directly linked to our doctrine, and training systems, as well as fully supported through the provision of all the resources needed. General Molan’s perception seems otherwise.

So, here are my questions:

- Are our deployed forces confident that our doctrine and training fully equips them to carry out the tasks expected of them?
- To what extent is doctrine a work-in-progress that draws on lessons learned not only by own forces, but also by other forces engaged in the coalition?

¹⁶ Thomas E. Ricks, ‘The COINdinistas’, *Foreign Policy*, December 2009, p. 63.

- Are we in control of our own destiny in the operational theatre?
- Have we engaged fully the intellectual capacity available in Australia to do the best job in Afghanistan? If not, what are the shortfalls in our current practice and what needs to be done to rectify any shortfalls?
- The Australian sense of achievement in the Vietnam war was impressive even though the overall strategy did not succeed. Is the same outcome possible in Afghanistan?

If one examines the availability of open material to assess how well the wider community is engaged in debate about our commitment in Afghanistan, one finds that while there is quite a lot of commentary in the newspapers and other media. In contrast, there seems little material in our professional publications. Is discussion and debate being stifled? If so, this is a problem: it does affect our credibility, and we should work hard to correct it.

Admiral Chris Barrie retired from full time naval service in July 2002 after a career spanning over 41 years. In his last posting as Chief of the Defence Force the previous Defence White Paper was produced in December 2000. He spent the bulk of his sea going career in the surface fleet having specialised in navigation. cbarrie@ozemail.com.au.