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Options for Avoiding Counterinsurgencies

David H. Ucko and Robert C. Egnell

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ABSTRACT: How can the West continue to shape international order without over-committing itself to ruinous and ambiguous operations on the scale of Iraq and Afghanistan? This article addresses this question by examining the failures of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, and by outlining three alternatives for future engagements: the Libya model, the indirect approach, and contingency operations in support of multilateral organizations. Each presents unique possibilities, but the imperative for strategic clarity and commitment is consistent.

By December 2014, the large-scale Western military effort in Afghanistan will be over, ending more than a decade of direct intervention in that country and Iraq. A page is being turned in the history of warfare and, as most recognize, there is a need to take stock of the diverse but often painful experiences of the past, and to translate these into appropriate lessons for future interventions.

That the recent campaigns, despite substantial investment, have yielded such limited results is difficult to accept. Yet denial will not prepare us for the future. Indeed, if the West is to remain in the business of shaping global affairs, sometimes by force of arms, it must resolve the contradictions raised by its recent campaigns.¹ Most pressingly, it seems, the West wants the rights that go along with global leadership, but not the responsibilities and costs. How can we bridge this gap? How can the West sustain its contribution to a very particular international order, without falling into the pitfalls that characterized the last decade? Creative solutions are urgently needed.

This article examines three such solutions in light of the failures of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. These alternate approaches provide more limited applications of force and more modest roles. Recent history suggests that—within key contexts and preconditions—such approaches can be successful.

The Challenges in Afghanistan

An important first step to understanding the challenges faced in Afghanistan is to broaden the scope of analysis beyond the mere conduct of operations. Many of the mistakes in Afghanistan were strategic and, therefore, had little to do with counterinsurgency. These include the creation of a highly centralized form of governance, the wasted opportunities provided by the fall of the Taliban, the massive diversion caused by the war in Iraq, and the decision to expand the International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF's) area of operations beyond Kabul without committing a fraction of the resources necessary for security

¹ For a cogent list of areas of enquiry, see Francis G. Hoffman, "Learning Large Lessons from Small Wars," *War on the Rocks*, February 5, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/02/learning-large-lessons-from-small-wars/>.

and stability. Underlying these missteps was the inability of international allies to establish common political and strategic aims.

The campaign was defined by three separate and poorly coordinated efforts: the US-led counterterrorism effort of Operation Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led ISAF effort to provide security and to enable the third mission, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), a UN effort devoted to political and economic development. On one side of the spectrum, Afghanistan was a narrow exercise in counterterrorism; on the other, it was statebuilding aimed at establishing democracy, gender equality, and human rights. Rather than a propitious division of labor, the broad spectrum of aims provided the West with the false comfort of “doing it all,” all at once, and with little need for prioritization. Tensions between competing interests were glossed over, but became strikingly apparent with NATO’s expansion beyond Kabul and the steady deterioration of security thereafter. The bloodshed deepened strategic divisions, both between and within individual governments.

In a context where victory was not really a relevant concept, the lack of political and strategic direction had serious consequences. Most importantly, it thwarted the essential process of balancing ends, ways, and means, and the mismatches therein which became increasingly obvious. Security worsened and the United States, having “discovered counterinsurgency” in Iraq, was called upon to rescue the effort. Counterinsurgency was seen as the solution to a strategic problem.² However, as an operational approach, it could not possibly provide the answer. The fact that the launch of the “Surge” and the switch to population-centric counterinsurgency coincided with the first talk of withdrawal from Afghanistan clearly did not help.

Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan

Theories and concepts should be used to make sense of a complex reality and to support the dynamic process of analysis, decisionmaking, and implementation. This is not just an intellectual exercise; the concepts we use have an impact on how we interpret the conflict, prioritize our resources, and conduct operations. Selecting a concept, or a term (like counterinsurgency), requires great care: ideally, it should help us understand the true nature of the problem, and how best to deal with it.

How does counterinsurgency measure up? The concept has been useful in moving many armed forces from an exclusive focus on conventional warfare, yet in itself, the idea of counterinsurgency has served better as an antithesis to past pathologies than as a prescriptive guide for ongoing campaigns. In Afghanistan, for several reasons, the introduction of a counterinsurgency framework did not help us understand the true nature of the problem or how to reach our aims.

The first reason stems from the misinterpretation and overgeneralization of lessons from past counterinsurgency campaigns. Historians and military thinkers often stress the limited generalizability of operational approaches from one context to the next. One would, therefore, assume that when a colonial policing approach was revived to support

² Hew Strachan, “Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War,” *Survival* 52, no. 5 (2010): 168.

the state-building campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, care would be taken to appreciate the differences separating these two worlds. Yet such analysis was all too rare.

One result of this rather problematic reading of history was the exaggeration of the “hearts and minds” aspect of operations, and the neglect of often equally important coercive components.³ Much of the emerging wisdom was based on polished historical accounts of past campaigns that were never critically examined. Instead, a liberal 21st century filter was applied that simply reinforced preexisting biases. In fact, collective punishment, executions, and forced population movements are but a few examples of past tactics, employed even in the most revered yet academically abused campaign—Malaya. Much of this scholarship and pop history was benignly intended to reverse the prior over-reliance on military force. Since then, the pendulum has swung from one extreme to the other and it will continue to do so lest greater historical rigor is applied.⁴

There are also key contextual differences to grapple with. Past counterinsurgency operations took place as “internal” challenges within empires.⁵ Today, the West engages these challenges as part of a coalition and in support of weak yet legally sovereign and fully independent states. Despite some room for divergence, contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine still presumes a sufficient harmony of interests between intervening and host-nation governments, or at least an ability to push the latter toward the “correct” course of action. Actual practice provides a more sobering perspective. In Iraq, institutions either collapsed through war or were dismantled through coalition decree, leading to the infiltration of sectarian elements into positions of central power and a government whose interests often ran counter to those of the intervening coalition. In Afghanistan, the counterinsurgency campaign confronted a deeply dysfunctional state bureaucracy and a NATO headquarters that lacked the capacity and resources to run anything but the security aspects of operations. In both campaigns, difficulties with host-nation governments were compounded by differences among coalition partners regarding approach, commitment, and contributions.

A further change has already been hinted at: the availability and competence of civilian means. The strategic intent in Iraq and Afghanistan required substantial civilian participation, large and capable enough to compensate for in-state weaknesses. This resource was at the disposal of past empires in the form of colonial administrations with local experience and understanding, and local police forces that could maintain order.⁶ Today, the political and civilian components of counterinsurgency are tremendously under-developed, despite efforts like the Stabilization Unit in the United Kingdom and the ill-fated Office of the

3 Paul Dixon, “‘Hearts and Minds?’ British Counter-Insurgency from Malaya to Iraq,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, no. 3 (June 2009).

4 For an elaboration of this point, see David H. Ucko and Robert Egnell, *Counterinsurgency in Crisis: Britain and the Challenges of Modern Warfare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 19–44.

5 John Mackinlay made this point already in 1997. See John Mackinlay, “War lords,” *RUSI Journal* 143, no. 2 (1998): 25. It does not follow that historical counterinsurgency campaigns are entirely irrelevant, as David French notes, the discontinuity can also be exaggerated. See David French, *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency 1945–1967* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 252–253.

6 See for example I.A. Rigden, *The British Approach to Counter-Insurgency: Myths, Realities and Strategic Challenges*, Strategy Research Project (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, 2008), 13; Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peace-keeping* (London: Frank Cass, 1971).

Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) within the United States. This deficiency has caused a distinct mismatch between ambitions and resources.

Attempting to transplant past counterinsurgency approaches onto contemporary state-building efforts also risks neglecting the essentially conservative nature of counterinsurgency. The concept of counterinsurgency presumes that the problem at hand is an insurgency that challenges the status quo. While successful counterinsurgency campaigns have often involved certain political concessions, counterinsurgency operations are predicated on the survival of the state or preemption of violent change through peaceful liberalization. However, this description hardly fits the role played by the Kabul regime. Nor is it clear that the defeat of the Taliban and other groups would really meet Western strategic aims or even lead to stability. The question is whether “the insurgency” was the issue? Or, was it a symptom of more profound problems in the establishment of the Afghan state, its evolution, and the shortcomings of Western intervention in the regional context in which all this has played out?

Given the fact that external coalitions toppled the existing regimes and instigated revolutionary societal changes in both Iraq and Afghanistan, it is a stretch to argue we were merely protecting or even reforming the status quo. Instead, the international community was the true revolutionary agent of change, and branding its efforts as counterinsurgency led us to misunderstand the actual roles of different actors within those respective societies, not least our own. Most critically, it reveals an all-too militaristic and optimistic view of what it takes to transform societies.⁷

The Way Ahead

Whether or not counterinsurgency ever provided an appropriate lens through which to understand the security challenges presented by failing states, it has proved too costly—politically, financially, and in blood. Reaction to this realization has, to date, been far from impressive. Much of it has been dominated by slogans—“no more Iraqs,” “no more Afghanistans,” “counterinsurgency is dead”—none of which is particularly helpful so long as global interests are the rule. For sure, no one wants to repeat such campaigns, but neither the Iraq war nor the Afghan war began as counterinsurgencies. Instead, it was precisely our refusal to anticipate and prepare for the complexity of war and the enemy’s ability to adapt that produced these problems. Nothing here condemns us to endless encores of similar campaigns, but neither can we return to the military thinking that dominated before them: a vision of war as an apolitical, militarily decisive, and technologically driven phenomenon, unfolding on an isolated battlefield. To do better in the future, we must think more creatively about how to engage with war’s complexity and political essence, in order to shape global security affairs yet *without* repeating the traumas of the last decade. Recent history suggests three options for future interventions: the Libya model, the indirect approach, and contingency operations in support of regional and international

⁷ For a longer version of this argument, see Robert Egnell, “A Western Insurgency in Afghanistan,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2013): 8-14.

organizations. These three models in turn point to obvious areas of investment, both intellectually and in terms of resources; yet, while helpful, all are also reliant on key conditions and capabilities. Most critically, each requires far greater clarity about the nature and demands of expeditionary operations, their typical duration, and the challenges of operating as one member of a larger team.

The Libya Model

Following weeks of civil war in Libya in 2011, NATO's North Atlantic Council decided that some sort of military intervention was needed. On 19 March, NATO commenced its Operation Unified Protector by launching Tomahawk missiles and air sorties at government targets. The aims of the operation, set by the UN Security Council, included the establishment of a no-fly zone, the protection of civilians, and the enforcement of an arms embargo. The unofficial aim, it was speculated, was regime change in favor of the National Transitional Council (NTC)—the Libyan resistance movement established during the war.

Operating in coordination with NTC but without ever deploying regular ground forces, NATO and coalition partners assisted in the gradual defeat of the Libyan government. Most of the support came from the air, with aircraft targeting vital government forces and installations. The war raged until 20 October 2011, when, during the battle of Sirte, NTC forces located Qaddafi and beat him to death. Despite NTC requests that NATO stay until the end of the year, the operation was formally terminated the following week. In the campaign's aftermath, NTC set up a new government, paved the way for elections, and sought to establish and maintain a level of relative security.

Western intervention in Libya in 2011 has been portrayed as a useful contrast to the costly and drawn-out campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Airpower expert Christina Goulter argued:

[A]fter nearly a decade of counter-insurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, . . . OUP proved that an air campaign, focused and driven by ISR [intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance], can win a war when combined effectively with irregular ground forces.⁸

Yet, in a sense, the Libya campaign simply repeated the so-called Afghan Model, applied during the initial combat phase of Operation Enduring Freedom and lauded then, too, as a uniquely effective means of applying Western military might.⁹ Then as now, the model saw Western powers ply their advanced combat capabilities—precision-guided munitions in particular—in support of local ground forces, reinforced by a small number of special operations forces to ensure proper coordination. Going back further, the prototype for the approach was tested in the Balkan campaigns of the 1990s, in which NATO aircraft bombed targets from a risk-free altitude and let local allies (the Croat forces in Bosnia and the Kosovo Liberation Army in Kosovo) conduct ground operations.

8 Christina Goulter, "Ellamy: The UK Air Power Contribution to Operation Unified Protector." Draft paper in RAND study on Operation Unified Protector, Santa Monica, Calif (Forthcoming 2014), 139

9 See Stephen Biddle, "Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare: The Afghan Model in Afghanistan and Iraq," *International Security* 30, no. 3 (Winter 2005–06): 161–76.

The Libya model presents undeniable advantages. First, the approach kept costs to a fraction of those accrued in Iraq and Afghanistan. Second, as in the NATO-led air campaign over Kosovo, coalition and civilian casualties were minimal; again, NATO intervened without incurring a single fatality. Third, although some ambiguity surrounded the actual aims in Libya, the results of the intervention appeared—at first blush at least—far more promising than those expected from Afghanistan following NATO’s withdrawal.

These advantages notwithstanding, it is critical to acknowledge the preconditions that allowed the Libya model to be effective. Indeed, the campaign was in many ways exceptional, undermining its potential as a precedent. First, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s lack of subtlety, in combination with the backdrop of democratic revolutions in Northern Africa, provided the campaign with unprecedented international support—a sense of urgency to “do something.” From then on, much of the war was fought in the desert, greatly facilitating aerial bombardment. There was also a clear opposition to Gaddafi in the NTC and the rebel troops that served as proxies. Moreover, the geographic location, at the very borders of Europe, facilitated both basing and logistics. These conditions will not always obtain.

Going further, and risking a cliché, the enemy has a vote. Even in Libya, government forces sought to exploit NATO’s strategic and tactical preferences. Having initially operated in large regular units across the desert, government forces adapted following the initial air attacks. As Brigadier Ben Barry explains, Gaddafi’s forces “dispersed heavy weapons in populated areas and made extensive use of armed 4x4 vehicles, similar to those used by the rebels,” something that “greatly complicated NATO’s ability to identify and attack them.”¹⁰ Clearly, such adaptation came too late, yet future adversaries are likely to be more wily, severely limiting the viability of winning wars from the skies.

Finally, it is worth considering the political consequences of the limited ownership inherent in this approach. The model inevitably empowers a local proxy. The key question, therefore, is what happens after the aerial bombardment has stopped, when the model is put back on the shelf, and it is time to establish a new political accommodation that is both desirable and stable. These days, the Afghan war is hardly remembered for the initial successes of the “Afghan Model”—indeed it was precisely the political fall-out of the Taliban’s toppling that bedeviled subsequent efforts at stabilization. Similarly, although successful in toppling the Gaddafi regime, the Libyan intervention unleashed destabilizing forces within Libya and regionally. In Libya, “factional, regional, tribal and ideological divisions” have marked the three years since the revolution: the “central government, far outgunned by powerful local militias, holds little sway beyond its offices.”¹¹ Regionally, fighters and weapons have spread as far as Mali and Syria, destabilizing the already fragile states in the region.¹² The implication is not that NATO should have used ground troops in Libya, but rather that the Libya model must not be mistaken for more than it is: it does not render intervention easy,

10 Ben Barry, “Libya’s Lessons,” *Survival* 53, no. 5 (2011): 6.

11 “Little to celebrate,” *The Economist*, February 22, 2014.

12 UN Security Council’s Group of Experts, “Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) concerning Libya,” S/2013/99, March 20, 2012, 24–38.

but simply offloads the responsibility for political consolidation onto others, with whom we must learn to work far more effectively.

The Indirect Approach

In the last eight years, the US military has experienced a revolution in its understanding of counterinsurgency. When the US Army and Marine Corps published their counterinsurgency manual in December 2006, the term denoted, almost exclusively, the deployment of large armed formations to provide security for the host-nation population and assume responsibility for various military and civilian tasks.¹³ As the doctrine was written while 144,000 US troops were actively involved in an insurgency in Iraq, this focus on the “direct” approach to counterinsurgency was appropriate. Even then, the manual was criticized for not acknowledging alternative approaches and this criticism has become far more vocal with the perceived failure of the direct approach in Afghanistan. The dominant argument now is that for strategic, political, and financial reasons, outcomes must be achieved “indirectly,” by relying on the structures and capabilities of the host-nation and thereby do more with less. A key precedent for this approach is the US advisory mission in El Salvador in the 1980s, which is credited with the defeat of the Farabundi Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The British campaign in Dhofar, from 1962 to 1976, provides a second, increasingly cited, precedent, since Britain relied on the armed forces of the host-nation government along with sub-state militias to achieve its aims there. A more recent case is the US military’s assistance of Colombia in its campaign against the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). This case provides the perfect foil for the direct interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan: they overlapped in time, but whereas the direct engagements were ruinously expensive, politically costly, and ambiguous in their outcome, the weakening of FARC under President Alvaro Uribe is a counterinsurgency success story.¹⁴ Similarly, the US special operations forces-led efforts to assist the Philippines government against the Abu Sayaff Group stands out as a low-cost, low-profile yet fairly successful intervention, at least in comparative terms.¹⁵

Proponents commonly point to five key advantages. First, the indirect approach puts local forces in the lead and thereby avoids many of the linguistic and cultural hurdles encountered by foreign troops. Second, by keeping the response local, the counterinsurgency campaign remains untarnished by the stigma of foreign occupation. Third, putting local forces in the lead also reduces the political costs for the intervening government. Fourth, these interventions are also commonly less costly financially—a corollary of the smaller footprint.¹⁶ Fifth, and most fundamentally, the indirect approach puts the local government in charge

13 U.S. Department of the Army and United States Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24 MCWP 3-33.5 (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, December 2006).

14 Thomas Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC* (Carlisle, PA: The Strategic Studies Institute, 2002).

15 Gregory Wilson, “Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation: OEF-Philippines and The Indirect Approach,” *Military Review* 86, no. 6 (Nov-Dec 2006): 2-12.

16 As Fernando Luján points out, “since the approval of Plan Colombia in 1999, the cost to run the entire program – including all military and civilian assistance – has roughly equaled the cost of running the Iraq or Afghanistan war for a single month during the surge.” See Major Fernando Luján, “Light Footprints: The Future of American Military Intervention,” *Voices from the Field* (Center for a New American Security, March 2013), 8.

for solving what is, after all, its problem: it puts the onus of the solution on local ownership and responsibility.

The indirect approach rightly recognizes the limits on what external powers can achieve by themselves in a foreign land, particularly one they scarcely understand. The focus on partnerships also touches on the essence of expeditionary counterinsurgency: the need to maintain host-nation legitimacy, build capacity, and engage in a manner that is sustainable. While the notion that “small is beautiful”—that indirect deployments make more sense—is largely correct, it is dangerous to stop the analysis at this point. Indeed, the indirect approach, like counterinsurgency or interventions of any type, comprises severe challenges that must be fully understood.

Three caveats stand out as critical. First, recent experience indicates that advising local security forces is an art in itself. There is a common misconception that because the advisory approach puts the local government and its security forces in the lead, the intervening power is somehow shielded from the complexity otherwise typical of counterinsurgency. However, as experience shows, advisory work is, in fact, highly challenging, requiring specific skills and capacities. Two problems are historically consistent: ensuring the professionalization of the host-nation security force and that it uses what it learns in ways that are accountable and in keeping with mission objectives. In El Salvador, the cap on deploying a maximum of 55 US advisors and the ban against joint operations with the El Salvadoran Armed Forces (ESAF) undermined these goals. Specifically, US advisers lacked both leverage and oversight and relied on ESAF being willing and able to follow the guidance provided. Neither of these conditions obtained. Although the advisory campaign was vital for regime survival in the early phase of the war, the transition for peace a decade later had more to do with the passing of the Cold War and other domestic factors than the marvels of the indirect approach.¹⁷

The problems of oversight and leverage resurfaced when US troops sought to establish security forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. A consistent finding from these theaters is that the effectiveness of advisory missions is best guaranteed by “partnering” with local security forces: living and operating with them, day and night, from the same base and streets. Yet the implications of this requirement are significant: they call for specific and extensive preparation, including language training and cultural awareness. Notwithstanding various efforts to boost regional expertise, it is uncertain whether Western troops are adequately prepared for this task. Pointing to special operations forces as a solution, given their specialized skills, is insufficient. Fewer in number and not easily mass produced, they lack the capacity to undertake large-scale advisory missions. To be sure, successful advisory efforts are rarely light in troop numbers: a mere 55 advisers may have deployed to El Salvador, but it is a very small country, in close proximity to the United States where additional training was provided and, even then, the personnel cap and other restrictions actually undermined the proper prosecution of the campaign. To do better, sufficient advisors are required to accompany each unit being trained.

17 David H. Ucko, “Counterinsurgency in El Salvador: The Lessons and Limits of the Indirect Approach,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 24, no. 4 (2013).

Therefore, the indirect approach cannot, must not, be seen as “counterinsurgency on the cheap.” If partnering is indeed required, advisory missions will in all cases require sustained buy-in—institutionally to create the capabilities, and politically to allow troops to operate from the front line over protracted periods. As seen in Afghanistan, it is often the advisors themselves who become the target so as to sever the critical link that partnering provides.

Another consideration for the application of the indirect approach is the need for a partner. In Colombia, the Philippines, and most other settings where the indirect approach is said to have worked, the advisors operated alongside an established government and military. Colombia, for example, has a long record of elected civilian governance and a strong military. By contrast, it is questionable whether the indirect approach would have worked in Afghanistan in 2001, in Iraq in 2003, or in similar settings. This uncertainty clearly restricts the applicability of this approach.

Even where the central state is extant and somewhat competent, thorny issues of legitimacy and strategy loom large. In the quest to defeat an insurgency, the professionalization of a country’s armed forces or security sector is but one part of a broader puzzle. David Galula’s admonition that counterinsurgency is 80 percent political and only 20 percent military is now a cliché, but its implications have not been grasped.¹⁸ While professional security forces are critical, they are not in themselves strategically decisive: much depends on the *political objectives* their operations serve. Where this strategy is misguided or altogether absent, security operations have little or no meaning. By analogy, it serves no purpose sharpening the scalpel if the surgeon operating is drunk.

This point is critical, as it is typically at the *political* level that the host-nation partnership will fray. Partners are more willing to accept military aid and assistance than to undergo the political or social reforms deemed necessary for success. Governments facing an insurgency almost by definition suffer from some legitimacy deficit—hence the armed resistance. It is not uncommon that they are more concerned with retaining power and privilege than with undercutting dissent through effective reform. The resultant dilemma for counterinsurgency advisers is formidable. In Dhofar, the solution to Said bin Taimur’s refusal to reform was a military coup carried out by his own son and with the support of the British government. Within 24 hours, various liberalizing measures were passed, giving political meaning to the armed forces’ security operations and producing the happy outcome for which the campaign is known.¹⁹ Yet, for a less happy precedent, consider the advisory years in Vietnam (1950–65) and the US decision to remove the recalcitrant Ngo Dinh Diem, a desperate measure that opened the door to sending more US ground troops in 1965. In other words, nothing within the indirect approach removes the need for suasion and compulsion—diplomatic tasks where the West under-performs. This requirement once again limits what we can expect to achieve from the indirect approach. Much like any other

18 David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (London: Pall Mall, 1964), 89.

19 Ian F.W. Beckett, “The British Counterinsurgency Campaign in Dhofar 1965–1975,” in *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*, ed. Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2008), 175–190.

model of intervention, it must be tailored to specific circumstances and support a sound strategy.

Contingency Operations

Another means of burden sharing is by limiting the role of Western forces and ensuring residual tasks are carried out by international, regional, or local partners. The role played here might entail the provision of quick-reaction forces to assist a peace operation or protect it from a sudden crisis. Such a “contingency operation” would in principle be similar to that played by the British military during its intervention in Sierra Leone in 2000 or by the French-led coalition force in Operation Artemis in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 2003. The benefit here is that in assisting a preexisting mission, the intervening power is allowed to focus on just one phase of the campaign, thereby limiting its exposure and risk. Yet by the same token the effectiveness of these interventions also relies on the ability to transfer demanding follow-on tasks to competent actors with greater staying power.

Operation Artemis is a cautionary tale. In response to the destabilization of eastern DRC, a French-led Interim Emergency Multinational Force (IEMF) deployed to Bunia to help strengthen security and rescue the local UN peacekeeping mission. Per the conditions tied to its deployment, IEMF spent three months in Bunia, during which time it expelled militia elements and reestablished security. It then handed over responsibility to the newly created UN “Ituri Brigade,” a 5,000-strong unit. On these merits, the operation was a success. Yet the IEMF’s limited mandate, temporally and geographically, meant that its effects were transient. As a later UN report found, “The strict insistence on the very limited area of operations—Bunia—merely pushed the problem of violent aggression against civilians beyond the environs of the town, where atrocities continued.”²⁰ Moreover, despite the UN force’s expansion, it remained undermanned and ill-equipped to sustain the gains of the intervention, greatly undermining its longer-term significance.²¹

The British military has enjoyed successes with “contingency operations,” illustrating the value of these types of interventions but also what they typically require. Initially deployed in Sierra Leone in 2000 to evacuate Westerners from the war-torn country, General David Richards saw an opportunity to side directly with the Freetown government against the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). British forces were involved in a number of confrontations against the RUF and maintained a presence off-shore to demonstrate resolve. The combat phase ended quickly but, notably, the British force then supported, trained, and reinforced Sierra Leone’s army and the local UN peacekeeping mission, so the country’s newfound stability could be sustained. Even after, Britain maintained a 140-strong force in Sierra Leone to advise the army and has remained one of the country’s greatest bilateral donors of aid.²²

20 Peacekeeping Best Practices Unit (Military Division), “Operation Artemis: The Lessons of the Interim Emergency Multinational Force” (New York: UN Department for Peace Keeping Operations, October 2004), 14.

21 Mats Berdal, *Building Peace After War* (Abingdon: Routledge for International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2009), 112.

22 *Ibid.*, 120.

Here, too, the results are far from incontestable. Nonetheless, the point is clear: the effectiveness of military force depended on, *inter alia*, coordinated and properly resourced follow-up actions. Civil–military cooperation and the ability to raise the competence of local and international forces to enable a smooth transition were also key. In that sense, the use of Western troops on contingency operations calls for many of the same capabilities as those needed for the indirect approach, which again highlights this area as requiring more urgent attention.

Conclusion

A major factor behind the relative success in Sierra Leone was the auspicious timing of the intervention. The role of Guinea and local defense forces, the expansion of the UN mission, and general war weariness were all critical in achieving peace.²³ These factors do not devalue the British effort in Sierra Leone but raise an important point about knowing when to intervene. Such knowledge is a requirement for all modes of engagement discussed here. Simply put, interagency coordination, advisory skills, or carefully honed military capabilities will never suffice if the strategy underlying their use is unworkable or no conducive entry points have been found (or exist) for effective intervention.

What is needed, in part, is finer strategic thinking—the art of using what we have in ways to meet our desired goals at an acceptable cost. Yet at a deeper level, what is necessary is also a more sincere interest—across the relevant arms of government—in the lands, peoples, and contexts in which military operations are to be launched. Only by understanding the environment (its politics, history, terrain, and population) will outsiders ever discern the opportunities for more effective intervention: the potential partnerships, the contextual enablers, and the strengths and weaknesses of both friend and foe. In Sierra Leone, much came down to the initiative of the in-country commander. It would be hopeful to rely on similar improvisation in future engagements.

Another common thread is the emphasis on broader, multinational frameworks in which Western forces play but one part. At best, such cooperation brings legitimacy, shared capabilities, and greater capacity. Yet fighting with allies is not easy. Separate “partners” enter the fray with greatly varying levels of commitment and for disparate (sometimes entirely wrong-headed) reasons. This is a challenge for even the strongest of contributors. Indeed, it is necessary to ask, before we consider any of the options outlined above, why it is that we intervene in the first place and how convincingly such efforts are tied to our national interest. Limited investment in the relevant instruments and the lack of clear thinking going into these endeavors certainly suggest a low overall priority. So, in our search for viable models of intervention, we must ensure that we select our approach on the basis of strategic soundness, not because it presents the dubious promise of an “easy war.” These interventions are never easy, and will only be made much harder if we mistake them as such.

²³ David Keen, *Conflict and collusion in Sierra Leone* (New York: James Currey/Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 267–73.

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