

FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5. Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies

United States Army Combined Arms Center

Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2014

200 pages, available online at http://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/135/JAO/FM%203_24%20May%202014.pdf

Reviewed by James W. Moore

In Hollywood, the general rule for movies is that the sequel never quite lives up to the original. It seems this rule applies to military field manuals as well. The U.S. Army and Marine Corps counter-insurgency field manual, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, supersedes the version released in December 2006. The ‘population-centric’ approach to counter-insurgency elegantly set out in that edition was hailed at the time as “paradigm-shattering,”¹ although it represented more a *revival* of than an *innovation* in counter-insurgency doctrine. Regardless, the 2006 version was always going to be ‘a tough act to follow.’

Unlike its predecessor, the purpose of FM 3-24 (2014) is not to re-introduce the lost art of counter-insurgency to the U.S. military. Rather, it is to capture and codify the lessons learned from the hard-fought counter-insurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. This version is organized in three parts. The first sets out the strategic and operational context for counter-insurgency operations (*the context*); the second provides the doctrine for understanding insurgencies (*the problem*); and the third lays out the doctrine for overcoming an insurgency (*possible solutions*).

Although FM 3-24 (2014) recaps much of the substance presented in the earlier version, one significant departure lies in the importance ascribed to culture. While FM 3-24 (2006) recognized the significance of culture, this element was nested — or buried — within a hierarchy of factors contributing to understanding an operational environment. Reflecting even more the cultural turn in U.S. counter-insurgency doctrine, FM 3-24 (2014) elevates culture, from one among many, to a factor of “unique importance.”² It is given its own chapter of 5½ pages (versus a 2½ page section in the 2006 version) that elaborates upon the fundamental aspects of culture; the underlying, predictable patterns of interaction with the world evident in all cultures; and techniques to enhance cultural understanding, including green cells, cultural advisors, and human terrain teams.

BOOK REVIEWS

In general, FM 3-24 (2014) is a backward-looking document. This is not meant as a criticism. As mentioned earlier, that is precisely its purpose: to look back and to capture the lessons learned from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is intended to preserve the Army's and the Marine Corps' hard-won institutional wisdom, and to pass on this wisdom to future generations of warfighters, thereby avoiding the need to 're-invent or to re-discover the counter-insurgency wheel,' as was the case in the early years of the Iraqi and Afghan campaigns.

But how relevant will these lessons be in the future security environment? Consider the discussion in FM 3-24 (2014) on remote area operations (paragraphs 7-63 to 7-70). These operations are conducted in insurgent-controlled or contested, unpopulated, rural areas — rugged, inhospitable regions (for example, heavily forested and mountainous areas) that provide insurgents with cover and concealment, and are not easily penetrated by counter-insurgents. While descriptive of many areas of operations in the Afghan campaign, how likely is this a characterization of future areas of operation? In his recent book, *Out of the Mountains* (2013), David Kilcullen argues that four megatrends will shape tomorrow's "conflict climate": population growth, urbanization, littoralization, and connectedness.³ These drivers will converge (if they have not already) in an operational environment typified by underdeveloped and overburdened coastal megacities. If Kilcullen is right — which is not to say that this would preclude the U.S. military from ever again conducting counter-insurgency operations in rural areas — how applicable would the lessons learned from operations in the mountains of the Hindu Kush be for the counter-insurgent patrolling, say, the teeming slums of Mumbai?

There are other reasons to question FM 3-24's (2014) future relevance. The field manual refers to a spectrum of involvement in countering insurgencies, ranging from enabling host-nation governments and security forces, to direct action with U.S. forces serving as the primary counter-insurgent force. Granted, the spectrum has to be laid out in its entirety in order to cover off all or most contingencies; that is the function of doctrine. However, the prospect of U.S. forces acting as *primary* counter-insurgents in an insurgency is highly unlikely, certainly for the remaining years of the Obama Administration. A key premise of the emerging — and highly criticized — Obama Doctrine is that the U.S. will not commit substantial 'boots on the ground' to fight overseas insurgencies. President Obama made this point explicitly in his 28 May 2014 commencement address at West Point. In dealing with the diffuse

threat of terrorism, he said, America needs to develop a strategy that "...expands our reach without sending forces that stretch our military too thin, or stir up local resentments."⁴ The U.S. role lies in "empowering partners" — "to train, build capacity, and facilitate partner countries on the front lines"⁵ — so that they can shoulder the lion's share of the counterinsurgency burden. Even when faced with the humanitarian disaster in Syria, and ISIS's efforts to carve out an Islamic caliphate in northern Iraq, Obama has been loath to commit American forces to direct military action, save, possibly, for limited and precise air strikes against terrorist targets in Iraq. Moreover, it is hard to imagine Obama's successor in 2016 reversing his 'reluctant-interventionist' approach. As has almost become cliché, the American public is *war* weary, or, more accurately, *world* weary. How applicable will a comprehensive, population-centric, counter-insurgency approach be in a policy environment where the commitment of sizable U.S. military forces overseas is a 'non-starter'?

The writing of FM 3-24 (2014) was a necessary exercise, providing closure on a decade of U.S. direct involvement in two draining counter-insurgency campaigns. But its relevance for the future is an open question. In my opinion, FM 3-24 (2014) is destined for the shelf, there to stay until the Iraq and Afghanistan experiences have faded sufficiently from America's collective memory for the U.S. to once again "go abroad to slay dragons."⁶

Dr. James W. Moore, Ph.D., LL.M., is a Defence Scientist in the Socio-Cognitive Systems Section at DRDC – Toronto Research Centre. His current research involves

designing a conceptual framework to guide Attack the Network (ATN) capability development as it relates to the human dimension and non-technological interventions.

NOTES

1. Samantha Power, "Our war on terror," in *The New York Times*, 29 July 2007.
2. FM 3-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2014), p. vii.
3. David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 28.
4. "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony," 28 May 2014. Available online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2014/05/28/president-obama-speaks-west-point-graduates#transcript>
5. *Ibid.*
6. While Secretary of State in the James Monroe administration, future president John Quincy Adams cautioned: "Americans should not go abroad to slay dragons they do not understand in the name of spreading democracy."