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The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U.S. Military for Modern Wars

by David H. Ucko

Reviewed by Nathan Freier, a Visiting Professor at the US Army War College's Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute and a Senior Fellow in the New Defense Approaches Program at CSIS

David Ucko's book perfectly captures the central paradox in contemporary defense policymaking. According to Ucko, in spite of almost a decade of irregular warfighting against various insurgent and terrorist actors, "corporate level" DOD remains reluctant to institutionalize armed stabilization and extended counterinsurgency (COIN) at the expense of or in addition to preparation for more conventional conflicts.

Ucko's central message? In the field, the US military has adapted to COIN and broader irregular warfighting. Admittedly, however, this adaptation was too slow, and, it was initially born of failure. Nonetheless, a decade of hard experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has resulted in real in-stride military innovation. Ucko's key evidence pointing toward "business end" adaptation are the 2006 COIN manual, written under General David Petraeus' leadership, and the implementation of COIN doctrine (again under Petraeus) in the now famous Iraq War "surge"—dubbed Operation Fardh al-Qanoon. Ucko concludes, however, that full or durable institutionalization of the hard-won lessons and new capabilities emerging from Iraq are vulnerable to inherent DOD biases still wedded to wars it prefers—conventional—versus wars it has—irregular.

Ucko does an excellent job outlining the policy and doctrine forensics of the current state of play. In this respect, *The New Counterinsurgency Era* provides solid history of the decade-long bureaucratic tug-of-war associated with DOD's adjustments to an expanding unconventional challenge set. Ucko is on target when he places initial blame for policy-level resistance to stability operations (SO) and COIN on DOD's general orientation under Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Senior defense officials from 2001 to 2006 sought to exploit the US-dominated revolution in military affairs (RMA), pursuing wholesale high-tech transformation regardless of the character of ongoing wars and what those wars portend for the future.

At its roots, Rumsfeld's defense revolution focused on precision war with another state. It did not account for large-scale irregular warfights. Reality was not to interrupt the RMA. To RMA adherents, COIN efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan were momentary aberrations, insignificant in many respects to the growing neoconventional threat from China and a host of would-be nuclear powers.

To the most ardent acolytes of defense "transformation," the early course of the Afghan and Iraq wars validated their world view, a vision where

advanced technical capability and its inherent superiority ultimately mattered more than mass. The Taliban was routed quickly as US firepower enabled the Northern Alliance on the ground, while Saddam's grip on Iraq collapsed a mere three weeks after an under-sized, conventional US-led force drove up the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys to unseat him. Ultimately, Ucko argues that it was the insurgency emerging after regime change in Iraq that laid bare the vulnerability of Rumsfeld's transformation.

To be sure, Ucko takes more than Secretary Rumsfeld and the RMA to task over the failure to institutionalize SO and COIN. He asserts that greater adaptation to irregular warfighting was and remains at odds with a powerful tsunami of countervailing forces—mostly emanating from inside the Washington beltway. These forces range from overly conservative institutional military leadership to defense industries relying on a “big war” narrative to sell high-tech programs. The “iron triangle” that constitutes the US defense community—DOD, Congress, and big US defense contractors—all had reasons to resist greater adaptation. Thus, advocates of COIN were often themselves “insurgents” in their own institutions.

Perhaps Ucko's most biting criticism is saved for advocates of a special forces (SF) or SF-like “indirect approach” to pressing irregular challenges. According to Ucko, this group recognizes the need to adapt to irregular warfighting but seeks to do so at very low visibility and cost, saving room inside the defense program for traditional military challenges. Readers will find that Ucko has tapped into a recent powerful Defense predilection that seeks to offset the hazards associated with most unconventional challenges by either preventing them outright or combating them through cultivating more capable partner security forces worldwide. To Ucko and many others, the “indirect approach”—like conventional deterrence and dissuasion—is clearly preferred, as it offsets the broad costs of large-scale military operations. Building partner capacity alone, however, does not obviate the need for general purpose forces that are ready for direct intervention. Believing it does incurs enormous strategic risk.

In the end, Ucko plays into a common frustration among many COIN and SO purists. That is, regardless of how jarring recent experience has been and in spite of the exquisite quality of new doctrine and concepts based on that experience, policy can and often will go in another direction. The military's reading—or in this case a segment of the military's reading—of the future strategic environment does not always conform to that of senior policy makers. Military doctrine and concept developers account intellectually for “all possible wars” at the operational level. Today's wars—more appropriately the US approach to them—will not always or even commonly look like our response to tomorrow's. And, regardless of the proven efficacy of a very comprehensive COIN approach, there are clearly pitfalls. These are choices made by future civilian decisionmakers after the best military advice—not by COIN enthusiasts, concept developers, or doctrine writers.

In this regard, Ucko's book is an important warning to senior civilian and military leaders against hastily discarding essential national security tools.

These same leaders, however, are the very people who ultimately decide where, when, for what purpose, and toward what end the United States next employs the military instrument. Clearly, a bounty of lessons on how to posture for and conduct extended SO and COIN emerged from Iraq and Afghanistan. That does not mean that those lessons are automatically universal, durable, or indelible. Faced with a crippled domestic economy in the twilight of two expensive COIN operations, the United States might well choose to address similar future threats in a less costly manner. This may result in the pursuit of more limited strategic objectives and, thus, a less expansive US investment.

Ucko is clearly correct. The next US war is far likelier to look like Baghdad circa 2006 than Kuwait City circa 1991. What remains in doubt is whether or not a US president—well aware of the enormous absolute costs of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—will be circumspect in the objectives pursued, by implication limiting the US effort in time, human capital, and material resources. Or, if faced again with righting a failed regional power, he or she chooses maximum stabilization, nation-building, and COIN. Prediction at this point is impossible; however, there are good indications the former is preferred.



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Global Security Watch: Kenya

by Donovan C. Chau

Reviewed by Dr. Dan Henk, Director, Air Force Culture and Language Center, Air University

This work is a recent addition to the Praeger *Global Security Watch* series—publications that assess the “strategic dimensions” of individual countries. The publisher makes bold claims, calling the book “an expert analysis . . . first to examine the strategic dimensions of Kenya and the political and military circumstances that shaped the country.” The author more modestly claims that he seeks to “inform the general public, students, scholars

and policy makers in the United States.” The publication may not fully live up to the advertiser’s hype but does achieve the author’s intent.

The author organized his text in a straightforward if somewhat mechanical manner—an initial chapter provides the geographic and political background to the country followed by a chapter examining the recent history of the Kenyan Armed Forces. Chau then takes three chapters to analyze Kenya’s security relationships with its neighbors (Tanzania, Uganda, and Somalia) and relations with the United States. Subthemes in these latter chapters include Kenya’s connections to various other states and institutional actors, among them the United Kingdom, People’s Republic of China, Ethiopia, and the larger East African and Horn of Africa communities. A final chapter concludes with policy recommendations for Kenya and the United States.

No publication can be all things to all people, and reviewers are vulnerable to an arrogance that insists a work should reflect the reviewer’s (rather than