Part II
Roles and Utility of Ground Forces

Chapter 4
The Roles and Utility of Ground Forces in Counterinsurgency and Stability Operations

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Introduction

Ground forces are dealing today—not just in the Asia-Pacific, but across Europe, Africa and the Middle East—with a changing strategic context characterized by dramatically increased lethality, precision and combat capability on the part of non-state armed groups, and a return of armed rivalry among advanced nation-states. The return of great-power military competition brings with it the potential for conventional conflict among peer and near-peer enemies, and many western and allied ground forces are discovering, after almost two decades of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, that they need serious re-capitalization and capability upgrades to deal with the new threat.

Terrorist groups like the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda are far from defeated in the Middle East and Africa, while in Afghanistan the Taliban are resurgent, suggesting that there is no military end in sight to the current round of conflicts against non-state groups. At the same time, some 17 years after the Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks of 2001, and after long and exhausting campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and elsewhere, political leaders and the public in many countries are tired of conflict, and there is little appetite for future large-scale or long-duration counterinsurgency (COIN) or stability operations.

History, however, demonstrates that such operations tend to occur with predictable regularity. For example, in United States military history from the Mexican War of the mid-19th century onward, we see a consistent pattern: U.S. forces become involved in one large-scale or long-duration commitment of this type about once every 25 years, with smaller operations every five years or so. This pattern seems to be quite independent of political leaders' interest (or lack of interest) in such campaigns: repeatedly, American presidents have come into office focused on domestic agendas or other priorities, only to find themselves drawn into irregular conflicts (that is, conflicts primarily against non-state actors) against their will—or, more often, without deep consideration of the consequences.

This pattern has only increased since the end of the Cold War, as U.S. global commitments and obligations have proliferated. A Defense Science Board study conducted in summer of 2004 "highlighted the fact that stabilization and reconstruction

operations typically last 5 to 8 years, significantly longer than combat operations" and that "since the end of the Cold War, the United States has begun stabilization and reconstruction operations every 18 to 24 months," imposing an increasing burden on the capabilities—especially ground forces—needed for such operations.[1] American allies and partners such as Japan, Australia and NATO countries are often drawn into such conflicts, as after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, and will almost certainly continue to be involved as part of coalition expeditionary forces responding to crises.

At the same time, each of our countries has its own regional and global security priorities and commitments, which in turn tend to drag us into these forms of conflict. Australia's experiences in East Timor, the Solomon Islands, Bougainville, and most recently the Philippines suggest that even in the absence of alliance commitments in places like Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, Australian forces would still be engaged in very frequent small-scale campaigns and, less frequently, large conflicts involving counterinsurgency and stabilization operations. Even in the (still relatively unlikely) event of great-power conventional or limited nuclear conflict—for example, on the Korean Peninsula or in Europe—the need for post-conflict stabilization and security operations would not go away, and these operations would have to be conducted under particularly difficult circumstances. Thus, whether we like it or not, professional military planners need to consider the requirement for future counterinsurgency and stabilization missions.

The Operating Environment

Four mega-trends are shaping the operating environment for such operations. These include population growth, urbanization, littoralization (the tendency for populations, cities and infrastructure to cluster on coastlines) and massively increased electronic connectivity. The first three are long-standing phenomena, dating back at least to the Industrial revolution in Europe in the mid-18th century and accelerating since the mid-20th century. Taken together, the combination of population growth and urbanization has transformed the planet—from a global population of about 1.5 billion in 1900, of whom less than 10% lived in a city with a population of one million or more, to 7.7 billion today of whom more than 55% live in a major city. The latest (2018) United Nations urbanization projection suggests that 68% of the world's population will

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[1]   United States Department of Defense, *Defense Science Board 2004 Summer Study on Transition to and from Hostilities*, Washington DC: Office of the Under-Secretary for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics, at https://policy.defense.gov/portals/11/Documents/solic/DSB%202004%20Transition%20To%20and%20From%20Hostilities.pdf.

live in major cities by the middle of this century, with 90% of that urban growth taking place in Asia and Africa.[2] By mid-century the world will have added another 2.5 billion to its urban population, reaching 6.8 billion people in cities (compared to 3.1 billion in rural areas) by 2050.[3] At the same time, the world's population increasingly clusters on coastlines, with coastal population growth and urbanization consistently outstripping growth in inland areas, due to coastal migration and more rapid growth of cities that already cluster within striking distance of the sea.[4]

While these trends have been around for decades, the mega-trend of connectivity has exploded since the beginning of this century, and is bringing dramatically increased lethality, precision and multi-domain capability to the kinds of non-state armed groups (guerrillas, insurgents, terrorists and militias) that ground forces typically encounter in COIN and stability operations. The proliferation of mobile phone networks, the internet, satellite communications and smartphones including smart handheld devices and GPS-enabled navigation systems enables non-state actors to apply high-precision fires, offset their physical position from their military operations, and coordinate complex activities without creating targetable vulnerabilities (such as large or obvious headquarters).

A fifth long-standing trend—though one whose effects have only become militarily relevant more recently—is climate change. At present, the effects of global warming can mainly be seen in terms of increased military competition in the Arctic, the opening up of warm-water ports and sea routes that were previously ice-bound, and the deployment of garrisons in the high north and the entry of expansionist powers like China into this arena. Arguably, however, the greatest impact from climate change may occur in the Antarctic with the emergence of conflict over newly-accessible resources, and in the world's coastal cities as extreme weather events, storm surges and sea-level rise place populations and infrastructure under increasing risk.

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[2]   United Nations, *2018 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects*, at https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html.

[3]   *Ibid.*

[4]   Barbara Neumann, Athanasios T. Vafeidis, Juliane Zimmermann, and Robert J. Nicholls (2015) "Future Coastal Population Growth and Exposure to Sea-Level Rise and Coastal Flooding—A Global Assessment" in *PLoS One*, Volume 10, No. 3, online at https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4367969/.

Implications of the Operating Environment

The implications for ground forces conducting operations in this environment include:

- A greater likelihood of combat taking place within urbanized terrain, especially on coastlines or in low-elevation coastal zones within striking distance of the sea;
- A cluttered, complex, highly connected battlespace with civilian populations, infrastructure and property present and needing to be protected;
- A civilian population (and urban infrastructure) that relies for essential services on the maintenance of uninterrupted connectivity—and therefore thinks of data, power and electronic connectivity as essential services akin to water or food;
- The need to consider humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities (particularly in coastal cities) as potential combat operations since an array of enemies is likely to treat deployed forces conducting humanitarian assistance as a potential target;
- Intense scrutiny from international and domestic media, imposing tight constraints on the kinds of lethal actions that forces can take in a COIN or stabilization operation, and the manipulation of perception ("fake news") and political warfare by adversaries who are adept at using social media;
- The increasing prevalence of state-backed or state-sponsored irregular forces (partisans, militias, terrorists or guerrilla groups enabled and supported by money, material, advisors, air and artillery support from hostile nation-states);
- Tele-operated weapons systems and remote warfare capabilities such as drones, including drone swarms (both in the air and under water) and remotely operated sniper weapons—meaning that an adversary need not be physically in the same location as the weapon, or in the same place as the effects that weapon creates;
- Repurposing of consumer electronics and advanced manufacturing capabilities to enable non-state armed groups to attain state-like levels of precision and lethality;
- The emergence of guerrillas and insurgents with air, sea, land and cyber capabilities, so that joint COIN and stabilization operations will become the norm, although land forces will still be required to provide the majority of the personnel involved;
- The emergence of information-kinetic (or cyber-kinetic) operations that combine physical manoeuvre with operations in cyberspace to achieve a single integrated effect, which (because of the increasing reliance of urban systems on the "internet

of things") will increasingly have lethal effects;

- The emergence of non-state enemies capable of using diaspora linkages (through connections to immigrant or displaced populations in intervening countries) to attack countries directly in the homeland, rather than merely by opposing deployed forces.

All this implies that future stabilization, reconstruction, COIN and other forms of irregular warfare will increasingly take place in a crowded, cluttered, urbanized, highly connected environment, against both state-based and non-state enemies, who employ a complex mix of techniques intended to bog us down into exhausting, protracted and indecisive operations while side-stepping our advanced military capabilities.

The Centrality of Ground Forces in Irregular Warfare

Within this environment, and in the context of operations against adversaries with these characteristics, ground forces will remain central to success in COIN and stability operations. This is because, even with the increased connectivity and remote engagement capabilities discussed above, such operations still require a physical presence on the ground. To be effective, troops must be able to interact with the government, populations and partner agencies including police, humanitarian assistance organisations and international institutions (such as the United Nations) in the area.

Even when operations are police- or civilian-led (for example, during Australia's intervention in the Solomon Islands after 2003), the physical presence of troops on the ground will often be needed to ensure that civilian agencies can interact safely with the population under threat. The military, in this sense, may act as a guarantor or delivery system for effects provided by civilian agencies. In order for that physical presence on the ground to be survivable against the advanced threats outlined earlier, the force must have the ability to fight, survive and win in a close combat environment, a capability that only combat-capable ground forces (as distinct from unarmed or lightly-equipped peacekeepers) can deliver.

That said, most of the ground forces that are actually in theatre during any future COIN or stabilisation operation may not come from our own militaries. Rather, they may include a very large component of locally-recruited partner forces. The ground force needed for this type of operation might be drawn from police and troops of the host nation, enabled and assisted by a cadre of professional advisers form our own forces. This would imply a training, advisory and enabling capability—of the kind normally

seen in security force assistance (SFA) and foreign internal defence (FID) missions—to be deployed at the outset as part of an expeditionary force for COIN or stabilisation missions. Indeed, given the unavoidable requirement for a large ground force in COIN and stabilisation missions, combined with the reluctance of our own governments and publics to commit large forces to such deployments, this type of mixed deployment may become the norm.

Such a mission might involve an initial, short-term deployment (lasting a few weeks to a few months) to establish the framework for a subsequent, much longer but also much smaller mission using SFA and FID techniques to build up a partner force to conduct COIN and stabilisation operations. Alternatively—and by far the preferred option if the security situation allows—a mission might be structured as a FID/SFA task from the outset, with a quick-reaction force (QRF) held in reserve, perhaps afloat in a sea base, or in a forward operating base in a neighbouring country, as a way of enabling a smaller SFA force to stand up local partner forces. Civil affairs, psychological operations and other specialised elements as well as civilian agencies would operate forward, but the main force would be held back.
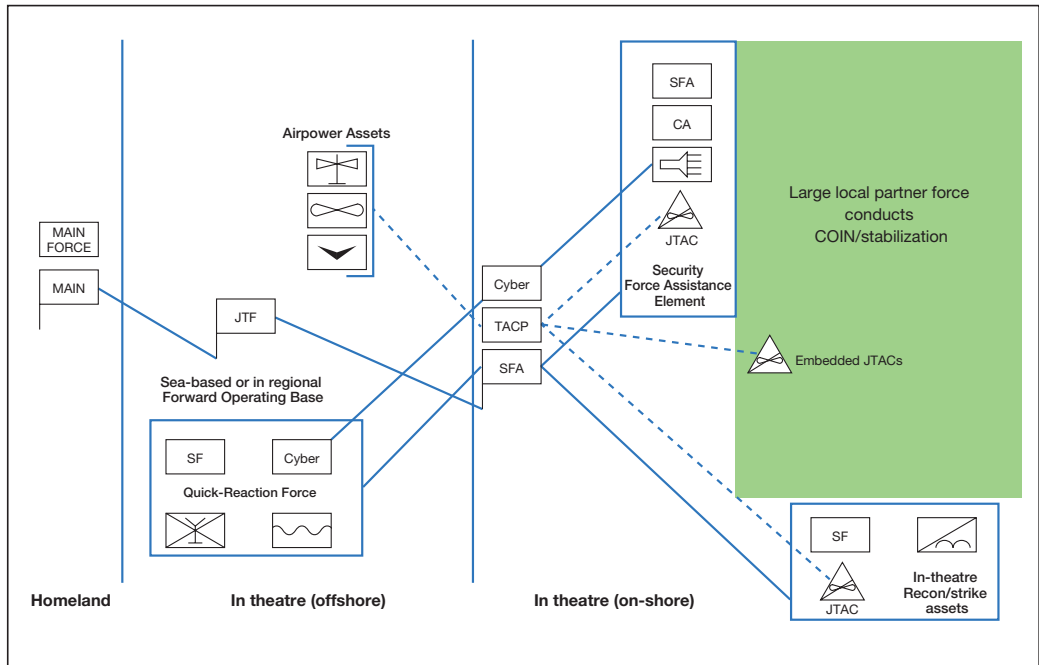
Such a deployment, with the conventional main force withheld from the theatre of operations and a smaller detachment spearheading SFA and FID, would likely be the most viable approach given current constraints—but would also involve a heavy reliance on precision airborne, maritime and ground-based strike capabilities to ensure force protection and improve the chance of mission success. An operational structure for this kind of mission might look as depicted in Figure 1.

As a result, ground forces in the future environment will likely have similar roles and missions to today, but in order to maintain their utility while performing distributed tasks of the kind outlined above, they will need to be organized and equipped quite differently.

For example, ground forces for this type of mission may need to be modular—organised as a relatively large number of small, semi-autonomous, interchangeable teams that can perform multiple tasks and transition rapidly between tasks as needed. Such modularity has become common in recent years at the brigade and battalion level as a result of experience in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, as experience in Syria and Africa has shown, this modularity may need to go down to a very low level, perhaps to the company, platoon or detachment level.

In order to be effective in the cluttered, complex and highly connected environment described above, such semi-autonomous modular teams may need to be linked by

Figure 1. Possible Future COIN/Stabilisation Mission Structure

battlefield management systems that rely on artificial intelligence (AI) and predictive analytics in order to optimise enablers such as logistics and fire support. Such systems will increasingly exploit smart-city and internet-of-things data, derived from the electronic sensors and data flows that will be increasingly prevalent in the connected urban environments of future operations. Human-machine teaming may replace some current systems for certain functions, such as high-risk search, long-range reconnaissance, and maintenance.

Likewise, to be survivable in this environment, ground forces will require protected, mobile firepower and battlefield mobility systems that are hardened against both physical and electronic attack including both traditional electronic warfare exploiting the electromagnetic spectrum (EMS), as well as cyber-attacks whether via the EMS or online via the internet. Mobility assets will need the ability to operate in cluttered urban environments, subject to close-range engagement by a variety of guided and unguided weapon systems, from any direction and without warning—and to survive such engagement without necessarily needing to fire back (thereby endangering at-risk civilian populations) or depart the area (thereby endangering the mission). The only assets currently capable of providing such direct armoured protection are tanks, or Protected Mobility Vehicles (PMVs) such as the Australian Bushmaster, but over time

additional systems—both land- and air-mobile, manned and unmanned—will need to be developed. These will need to be available both for the relatively small, forward-deployed SFA element located on the ground in theatre, and for the larger, offshore QRF and main force elements.

Deployed forces, whether onshore or offshore, will need the capability to create a protective bubble around themselves and any civilians they are required to protect—implying the ability to counter artillery, missiles, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), snipers, UAVs, cyber-attack and information manipulation. Due to the remote-warfare capabilities that modern threat actors have achieved, defensive assets in theatre will need the ability to reach back to, and coordinate with, elements in the homeland or offshore that have both the capability and the necessary authorisation to engage threat actors located remotely (i.e. not on the ground within a joint force area of operation).

At the same time, traditional skills in civil affairs, intelligence, medical and engineering support and logistics will remain crucial, even though assets that specialise in these skillsets may be held offshore or in regionally-located forward operating bases and called forward only when needed. Forward elements conducting SFA/FID tasks will need the ability to reach back to such assets for support, and capabilities to bring them forward (and protect them) when needed. For the forward-deployed element itself, skills in military governance, cultural familiarity with likely operating areas, and (ideally) a locally-appropriate ethnic and linguistic makeup for the advisory force, will be critical requirements for success.

Conclusion

The conflict environment is changing, and—after almost two decades of continuous COIN, stabilisation and counterterrorism missions—government and public opinion in western and allied countries are unlikely to support continued large-scale or long-duration missions of this type. Yet history demonstrates that such missions are, and are likely to remain, some of the most frequent and geographically widespread. Likewise, ground forces are critical for success in COIN and stabilisation missions, due to the need to interact closely with local government and populations, which implies the need to establish and maintain a physical presence in the area of operations, which in turn implies the need to survive and prevail in a close combat environment, which only ground forces can do. Thus, despite their unpopularity, ground forces can expect (and must be prepared) to continue engaging in these types of operations.

However, the same factors that have enhanced the threat in recent decades—in

particular, connectivity and the ability to conduct collaborative and remote engagement—also create opportunities for new operating methods for ground forces conducting COIN and stabilisation. These include the ability to deploy only a small element forward on the ground, conducting SFA and FID tasks, while supporting it with a QRF and other enablers that remain offshore in a sea-base or in regionally-deployed FOBs. In such a scenario the main force might be withheld from the theatre of operations and either deploy for a brief initial period only, or not at all.

For a force operating in this manner, protected mobility and communications would remain essential, as would the ability to access and deliver precision fire support when required. Deployed forces would probably be modular to a very low level, operating in a mesh of multi-role, semi-autonomous small teams supporting each other and swapping roles as needed. Traditional intelligence, engineering, civil affairs, psychological operations and military governance capabilities would remain essential, but might be called forward as needed. Ultimately, however, while ground forces will almost certainly continue to play a central role in counterinsurgency and stabilisation operations, the way they perform this role, the organisation and equipment with which they do so, and the environment in which they conduct such missions is likely to change, and keep changing, into the foreseeable future.