Population-centric Counterinsurgency as seen through the Iraq War Logs: A Preliminary Evaluation

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August 2011

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Master of Arts degree in the Master of Arts program in the Committee on International Relations

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Abstract

Has the population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy, advocated by prominent practitioners such as General David Petraeus, been effective in stabilizing Iraq, and does it hold promise for Afghanistan? The answer to this question has significant implications for contemporary American security policy and yet remains the subject of intense debate. On the one hand, advocates (including nation-builders across partisan lines) believe that FM 3-24 ‘gets COIN right,’ and claim that the introduction of COIN into Iraq in 2007 helped to turn around a previously deteriorating situation. Dissenting voices, on the other hand, argue that the introduction of COIN and the surge were spurious in the reduction of violence in Iraq; instead, various other factors (such as the reconciliation-minded Sons of Iraq program) intervened around the same time to shift the dynamics of the conflict (Mark 2010). Given that Iraq and Afghanistan are hardly like countries, and that relative pacification in Iraq is potentially the result of conjunctural causation, adjudicating this disagreement has been a complex problem.

This study attempts to intervene in the ongoing debate, by challenging the belief in COIN success at the source – Iraq – by evaluating it on the operational measures advanced by David Kilcullen, one of the leading proponents of COIN. In doing so, it sidesteps the conjunctural causation debate. The thesis begins by formalizing a set of expected trends one would expect to detect empirically if COIN strategy were operating as intended. Through the use of computational linguistic techniques, it then describes the macro-story contained within the nearly 400,000 significant-action field reports that constitute the Iraq War Logs. The analysis demonstrates that the military’s own accounting of its COIN-related activities does not pass the test designed by one of COIN’s strategists. The research concludes that the data do not appear to strongly support the position that COIN was effective in the Iraqi case and so the discourse of ‘reproducing success in Afghanistan’ is suspect.