

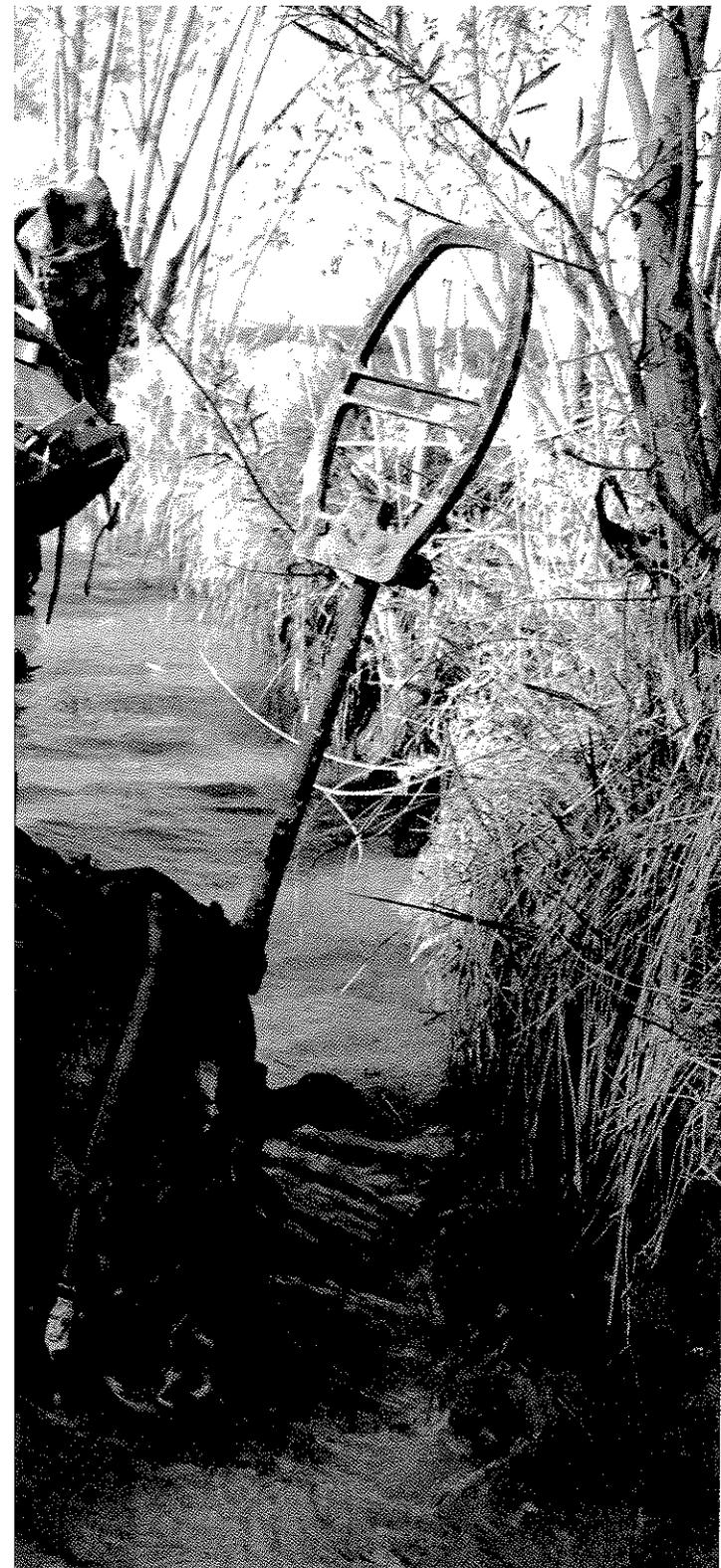
Slow learners

How Iraq and Afghanistan forced Britain to rethink COIN

BY CAPT. ANDREW P. BETSON

John Nagl, with his book “Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife,” seemed to be ahead of his time in contrasting the British and American approaches to counterinsurgency (COIN). His depiction of the British performance in the Malayan Emergency helped establish a perception of Britain’s deep-rooted understanding of insurgencies and the methods to counter them.

Since 2001, operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have set the subjects of Nagl’s work side by side to test the longevity of his thesis. As a result, the “British way” as an approved approach to COIN has been challenged. Since the beginning of NATO operations in Afghanistan, the British have experienced introspection and challenges to organizational culture similar to their American counterparts. This work will consider examples in recent operations that demanded change in counterinsurgency techniques and doctrine within the British military, dis-



British soldiers move cautiously through Afghanistan's Helmand province.

cuss how some sources within the organization called for acknowledgment that the U.K. was falling behind, and finally consider some of the recent results of the introspection.

Britain's history as a colonial power has provided its military with extensive experience in counterinsurgency. Following the conflict with Chinese Communist insurgents in Malaya in the 1950s, Robert Thompson, the postwar secretary of defense for Malaya, prescribed five principles for countering insurgency based on his experiences in the war:

- Have a clear political aim.
- Work within the law.

- Develop an overall plan.
- Defeat political subversion.
- Secure base areas.

Thompson's principles influenced U.K. doctrine, as demonstrated in the 2001 British Army counterinsurgency manual, which outlined the six principles of COIN as:

- Political primacy and political aim.
- Coordinated government machinery.
- Intelligence and information.
- Separating the insurgent from his support.
- Neutralizing the insurgent.
- Longer term post-insurgency planning.

The vast experience and resulting doctrine, however, have not proven a panacea for the U.K. in contemporary COIN.

The British operations in Helmand province of southern Afghanistan serve as an example of how challenging the COIN principles can be in practice. In 2006, troops deployed to the region armed with their 5-year-old COIN doctrine, guidance for the proper establishment of forward operating bases (FOBs) and the emphasis that they should always use minimum force. But they found in Helmand the most intense fighting that the British Army had experienced since the Korean War.

CAPT. ANDREW P. BETSON is an Army officer and master's degree candidate at the Patterson School of Diplomacy en route to instruct at the U.S. Military Academy. He served as a platoon leader and company commander during two deployments to Iraq.

While the U.S. Army has embraced bottom-up change, the British Army has been accused of hubris.

Operation Herrick 4 was an interagency plan to secure an area enclosed by a triangle composed of a British center of operations called Camp Bastion and the Afghan cities Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. Seemingly in accordance with the concepts defined in British COIN doctrine, British paratroopers almost immediately acquiesced to the request of the provincial governor, Mohammed Daoud, that they disperse in FOBs throughout the province. The distances between FOBs, however, meant the positions were not mutually supporting and therefore vulnerable. Realizing this, the Taliban ruthlessly attacked the platoon bases and FOBs, nearly overrunning them on several occasions.

Helmand presented the British troops with some of the paradoxes in COIN operations. They were committed to their principle of separating the insurgent from his support and are perhaps wrongly given credit for doing so before their American counterparts in Afghanistan. Their concepts of operations, however, were driven by faulty intelligence and caused such vulnerability that British troops were forced to barricade themselves within their remote bases. After consistent pressure from enemy forces, the British forces entered into controversial truces in the Musa Qala and Sangin districts. This was not the only instance in which British decisions angered allies. Choosing to avoid interfering with the poppy trade further sat at odds with the host-nation government and the International Security Assistance Force command.

The U.K.'s struggles in Afghanistan seem to support a British officer's statement that "I feel that British doctrinal and historical knowledge of COIN is actually a bit of a myth." British Army Col. I.A. Rigden supported this anonymous officer's statement in his 2008 U.S. Army War College paper, "The British Approach to Counter-Insurgency." In it, he defines six myths concerning the British Army and COIN:

- The British approach to COIN is a result of a correct interpretation of experience to doctrine.
- The British approach to COIN is best.
- The Malayan Emergency is the counterinsurgency exemplar.

- The concept of "hearts and minds" is correctly understood.
- Minimum force is used appropriately.
- The British Army has won Britain's COIN campaigns.

Rigden's discussion of the Malayan Emergency strips away some of the aura attached to it as a result of Nagl's book. Rigden mentions, for instance, that famed Field Marshall Sir Gerald Templer uniquely possessed plenipotentiary powers while commanding COIN forces against the Chinese Communists. These and other factors defined a special set of circumstances that

Rigden argues would likely not be repeated.

The conditional and fleeting nature of the British Army's successes in Malaya were exposed in its operations less than a decade later in Cyprus and in the most recent campaigns. Counter to what seemed to be a seminal lesson from the Malayan experience, Field Marshall A.F. John Harding, the commander of British COIN forces in Cyprus, attempted to use untrained and poorly led Turkish police forces to quell local unrest. He furthermore

tended toward more conventional sweeping operations as opposed to focusing on population-centric objectives. His means of operations were considered by some to perfectly enable the insurgency.

Similarly counterintuitively, in their current operations, some in the British military revel in the fact that their forces serve six-month tours instead of the U.S. Army's 12- and 15-month tours. But the faster turnover limits continuity within areas of operations and ultimately hurts credibility among allies, namely the Americans. While the U.S. Army has embraced bottom-up change, the British Army has been accused of hubris and of being "smug" and "complacent," as Air Chief Marshal Jock Stirrup, the chief of the Defence Staff, put it before he retired last year.

In a 2009 paper for the U.S. Army War College, "US and UK Military Cultural Relevance for Future Warfare," British Army Col. Ralph Arundell posited that this process began after the Northern Ireland campaign calmed down in 1994. Arundell argues that the British, believing in myths like those described by



British soldiers fire on an enemy position in Afghanistan's Helmand province.

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

Rigden, approached their operations in Iraq lackadaisically, even failing to execute tactics, techniques and procedures perfected and expected in Belfast, a much less dangerous battlefield.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE PROBLEM

The first step to addressing these organizational problems is recognizing that such a problem exists. The U.S. Army underwent changes as popular support declined for its campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. The 2006 Golden Mosque bombing ignited a sectarian wildfire in Iraq pitting Sunni and Shiite neighborhoods against each other. The Iraqi people naturally accepted protection provided from any organization, to include the Shiite militia Jaish al Mahdi or the Sunni-based al-Qaida in Iraq. Meanwhile, the Taliban re-emerged in force in Afghanistan, upsetting the perceived progress of the Karzai regime in what had increasingly become the Bush administration's secondary front.

Faced with this litany of external problems, the U.S. military also progressively defined internal shortcomings. In 2005, British Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster wrote a scathing article on his observations of the U.S. Army's performance in Iraq after the fall of the Saddam regime. It was originally published in the "Seaford House Papers," a collection of the dissertations of students in the Royal College of Defence Studies. In his article, "Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations," Aylwin-Foster cites the U.S. Army culture as the cause of failures to effectively prepare for and execute the stability phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Combined Arms Center, based at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., published Aylwin-Foster's article unedited in a 2005 edition of *Military Review*. With a measure of humility, the magazine editor prefaced the article by saying, "A virtue of having coalition partners with a legacy of shared sacrifice during difficult military campaigns is that they can also share candid observations."

The years following the article's publication proved extremely dynamic for the U.S. Army. The Defense Department published a new joint doctrine on COIN, and units deployed in Iraq were inculcated with the tenets of the doctrine with the help of "command focus" provided by Gen. David Petraeus, who assumed command of Multi-National Forces in Iraq in early 2007. The implementation of the doctrine during the "surge" seems to have turned the tide in the country, while similar adjustments were enacted in Afghanistan.

Soon after the *Military Review's* publication, doubt emerged as to whether British officers were prepared to exhibit the humility demonstrated by their American counterparts. A for-

mer British officer wrote, "The preparedness to accept external criticism, such as that most obviously voiced by Aylwin-Foster, contrasts uncomfortably with the absence of any such exchange of views in British professional literature."

While abrasive writings from foreign officers are not prevalent, self-criticism can be found. In a 2006 edition journal from the Royal United Services Institute, a British think tank devoted to defense and security related research, an article from the director of the newly formed British Defense Academy identified some key barriers to organizational learning for armies, namely the U.K.'s. In his article, he decries what he considers a level of "anti-intellectualism" in the British military and discusses pride and conservatism as inherent characteristics of military organizations.

The regimental system of the British Army further complicates organizational learning and can confuse observers. The regimental culture is considered a contributing factor to the dispersed concept of operations undertaken by the British Parachute Regiment in Helmand discussed above. Harkening to glory days (or not so glorious days) of old, Army officers proudly compared their position in 2006 to their regimental affiliation with Operation Market Garden in World War II. The paratroopers' organizational forefathers in September 1944 jumped into the city of Arnhem in the Netherlands as part of a daring Allied operation to finally defeat the Germans. While the operation failed to achieve its strategic goals and the British unit suffered considerably, the paratroopers' élan continues to be highly regarded. This expression of organizational esprit de corps is considered a factor in the failed operations in Helmand.

Officers in the Army, however, also consider the merits of its regimental culture and consider it a valuable result of the British Imperial experience. Rigden argues that the regiments have long been the repository of tactics, techniques and procedures, and it is this factor that enables units to adjust quickly in combat. He further argued in his 2008 paper, however, that the Army, and the British military as a whole, has failed in the past to "collectively capture and retain this wisdom as an institution."

CHANGES, FINALLY

Changes may be seen in updates to U.K. military doctrine in the last decade.

In 2001, the British Army released Army Field Manual (AFM) Volume 1, Part 10, "Counter Insurgency Operations (Strategic

COIN continued on Page 41

and Operational Guidelines)” to expand upon the tenets of the Army Doctrine Publication “Operations.” The manual is divided in two parts. The first defines the concept and conduct of insurgencies and tactics used by insurgents, and concludes with a section on contemporary examples. The second half focuses on counterinsurgency with subsections on strategic and operational considerations. In the latter half, the reader will find the principles of COIN that were heavily influenced by the British experience in Malaya, discussed above. Furthermore, the manual devotes an annex of the “Military Operations” chapter to Thompson’s views on COIN in Malaya as compared to Vietnam. In it, he argues that if the Americans had used in the early stages of Vietnam the COIN methods used in Malaya, they could have succeeded.

Eight years later, the British Army updated its doctrine with the release in October 2009 of AFM 1, Part 10, “Countering Insurgency.” The new manual still maintains two parts, but takes a very different approach. The first

part addresses fundamentals in both insurgency and counterinsurgency with a new collection of principles. Increased to 10 — with minor adjustments to some of the original remaining — the principles are now:

- Primacy of political purpose (same).
- Unity of effort (adjusted).
- Understand the human terrain (new).
- Secure the population (new).
- Neutralize the insurgent (same).
- Gain and maintain popular support (new).
- Operate in accordance with the law (new, though discussed in 2001 version).
- Integrate intelligence (adjusted).
- Prepare for the long term (same)
- Learn and adapt (new).

The new doctrine omitted the Thompson annex. The new manual’s case studies still cite the Malaya 1948-1960 example as the “classic campaign.” A Malaya veteran is quoted, however, warning against “overemphasizing the British operational experiences in Malaya; with its framework of established British administration and a loyal

native police, it had been an atypical theatre, where commanders ... never faced some of the formidable problems and obstacles that confronted other[s].” The changes in the doctrine provide concrete examples of how the British military learned the lessons from early shortcomings in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The British military’s experience in contemporary COIN operations elicited an unfortunate smugness and complacency in an organization that thought that it “got it.” Successful experiences in the past gave it a false sense of security in its approaches to Iraq and Afghanistan, and it suffered the consequences. Officers within the organization identified these shortcomings, but also began to point out failures in adaptation, while the U.S. seemed to embrace change. Though the early misperceptions may have delayed the response, the British military — especially the Army — eventually experienced very similar dynamics as its U.S. counterpart in its approaches to counterinsurgency. **AFJ**

CHINA *continued from Page 35*

military troops into strategically valuable areas. Moreover, the deployments correspond with soaring Chinese direct investment in Africa, with a welter of new deals for cobalt, copper, iron ore, manganese and other mineral resources.

Has China adopted a strategy of pushing military personnel into areas adjacent to its burgeoning national interests? What can the PLA’s language-training curriculum tell us about this?

Chinese peacekeepers need only five primary languages to communicate with a majority of the resource-producing African states: Arabic, English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. The PLAUFPL trains service members in all but Portuguese. It is interesting to note that last year, Chinese relations with Portuguese-speaking Angola cooled considerably despite Chinese investment of \$8.5 billion.

SUMMARY

China’s thinking on national security has evolved in three-stages: defensive

military strength, consolidation through comprehensive national power, and expansion by means of national strategic capability. During the Cold War, while militarily weak, the Chinese developed a defensive strategy to prevent external invasion through a combination of military and cultural forces. In stage two, following Deng Xiaoping’s reform, increased confidence led to the concept of comprehensive national power and consolidation of gains. Military requirements were lowered and national development moved into the spotlight. The current stage, national strategic capability, is founded on safeguarding sovereignty and national interests while expanding international influence. In short, China is now strong enough to begin expanding outward in a meaningful way, and language has become a key ingredient behind the move.

To determine the most beneficial strategic avenue for that movement, China weighed its domestic and international environments and chose the path best suited for its future prosperity

and security: westward. Beijing has supplemented strategic western movement with resource outreach, moving into Africa and South America to secure mineral and energy rights. The military element of these moves is being partially assisted through U.N. peacekeeping mission deployments. The close integration of Beijing’s economic interests and national security may force us to re-evaluate the People’s Liberation Army as a resource military deployed forward to protect Chinese financial interests abroad.

From the linguistic evidence, China is interested in pushing westward and challenging the commonly held belief that sea lanes and air transport are the only viable model for modern distribution of goods and economic activity. This potential swing in its strategic orientation, through the re-establishment of an overland rail above and below the Caspian Sea, could substantially change the face of the players and infrastructure in the Eurasian economy and perhaps alter the balance of power. **AFJ**