Review Article
Counter-Insurgency Warfare as Military Malpractice
by Edward Luttwak

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Edward Luttwak's article in the February 2007 edition of the *Harper's* magazine (essentially a response to the US Army's Field Manual on Counter-Insurgency) is an interesting academic foray into the business of counter-insurgency. *While some of its explorations are thought provoking, its principal conclusions, however, fail to resonate.* Let us try and see why.

The author, as early as in the article's prologue, makes a key assertion, *"Insurgents do not always win, but their defeats can rarely be attributed to counterinsurgency warfare,"* implying thereby that the military dynamic is rather inconsequential in the addressal of counter-insurgency challenges. For two principal reasons, he goes on to explain. One, is that while modern democratic governments are willing to start wars, even fight them, they lack the resilience and resolve to sustain the fight through the transition phase towards stable governance. Two, is the gross inability of the military instrument to win over popular public support. While the insurgents/terrorists, the author contends, always secure the people's support, either by natural empathy or by coercion, the only way for militaries to get similar support is by out-terrorising the insurgents (creating an environment where the fear of strong reprisal outweighs the desire to help the insurgent); and since 'out-terrorising' is no longer a viable proposition, the military dynamic is always doomed to fail. While the first inference is true (Afghanistan and Iraq), the second seems to be a gross oversimplification flowing from an inadequate understanding of the politico-military dynamic. Suitably orchestrated counter-insurgency campaigns can provide the critical tactical

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groundswell; though it will always be the political breakthrough that will spell unambiguous strategic success. Quite obviously, the two have to act in step – in the face of modern challenges, actually in splendid concert. Counter-insurgency campaigns of the kind we have seen in India (in Jammu and Kashmir and much of the northeast) as also in Iraq and to some extent in Afghanistan, point to the enabling role that militaries can play in quelling counter-insurgencies albeit with limited outcomes. The modern military dynamic is multi-faceted and variously nuanced – it addresses the violent capacities of the insurgents headlong, while concurrently keeping in check their coercive influence on the public. While drawing legitimacy from, and being conscribed within, a certain legal structure, it provides the overarching security framework for grievances to be addressed, balms to be applied, negotiations to proceed and political processes to bloom. *To infer, therefore, as the author does, that counter-insurgency is a wasteful malpractice, appears rather melodramatic and quite over the top.*

The reality, in fact, may well be different – as we step into an era of *more conflicts and less wars,* and even as global militaries seek to reorient and re-structure in order to meet the new challenges, the broader politico-strategic class seems to be failing on two accounts. Firstly, in absorbing the changing nuances of the utilitarian use of force as also in providing the necessary impetus in terms of clear and resolute leadership or enabling political consensus. More often than not, what fails us is not the tactical groundswell but the lack of political drive and resilience; yet in the aftermath, the unfortunate, hackneyed conclusion almost always is that military solutions don't work, counter-insurgency is a malpractice, etc, etc. Perhaps, the nature of failure may be better described thus, "Insurgencies need conjoint and relentless politico-military addressal. Success eludes us because modern democratic political dispensations fail to demonstrate the requisite leadership, resilience and nerve (driven, of course, by domestic, electoral and economic considerations); the wise insurgent, therefore, chooses not to outfight but to simply outlast democratic militaries."

In Iraq, in the first few years, the US military did get it wrong, horribly wrong at that. But when all seemed lost, the US military was quick to introspect and carry out a *surge* and not a retreat.[1] The surge was as much about an increase in numbers as it was about a change in tactics. From chasing militants all around the Euphrates Valley while leaving the civilian populace unguarded and exposed to insurgent terrorism and coercion[2] (the Haditha massacre of November 2005,[3] perhaps being its worst manifestation) to protecting and winning over the people,[4] the conceptual shift brought about a significant reduction in violence levels[5] and

a stability of sorts. Did not the military component of the *counter-insurgency, therefore, work? Did it not lay the edifice for a possible political* solution? What more do we expect the military to do? *Force*, after all, can only target and address the violent dynamic of counter-insurgency in as people friendly a manner as possible; the onus of finding a solution through the political quagmire must be that of the civilian bosses. Similarly, in Jammu and Kashmir, we have seen a steady evolution in the military dynamic – from all out aggression and violent pursuit of terrorists at one time to surgical offensive operations and now an even more nuanced but resolute preservation of the peace (with the heart as a weapon). This is not to say that the military has not made mistakes – it has, but it has also been quick to learn and adapt. Has the accompanying political dynamic shown similar imagination ? Perhaps not. Is the military challenge not as great as the political test ? Arguably so, but perhaps yes. But, if despite the decline in the dynamic of violence, if permanent peace continues to elude us, what is the more gregarious chant likely to be: military solutions don't work, counter-insurgency has yet again proved to be a malpractice, et al. The ongoing hullabaloo about the Armed Forces Special Protection Act (AFSPA) is a case in point. Over the past few years, an AFSPA enabled strong counter-insurgency dynamic has brought down violence levels to a point whereby the next logical step is obviously undertaking precise measures for improved governance and political outreach. Since that proves to be elusive and since you find it difficult to make progress through the difficult political terrain – infusing life into a battered economy, rebuilding fragile administrative institutions, tackling widespread corruption and initiating dialogue with disparate political groups – in order to demonstrate progress, you start meddling with the enabling security dynamic: blame the AFSPA as the sole reason for friction with the people and use a clerical interpretation of statistics (bereft of a fundamental understanding of how counter-insurgency operations are conducted)[6] to clamour for its withdrawal. It would make so much more politico-strategic sense to make use of the security springboard to make imaginative political forays in search of solutions; but since you lack the political savvy, what better than indulgence in some brio with the military? The counter-insurgency paradigm in Afghanistan bears similar analysis. In the aftermath of 9/11, after the brilliant success of Operation Enduring Freedom, with the Al Qaeda in flight and the Taliban in near rout, the Anglo-American effort in the counter-insurgency phase saw grudging, half-hearted support from its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)/European allies. Citing domestic pressures/ concerns, one nation committed troops with the outrageous caveat that they

would not be pressed into combat missions after dark. Another sent troops but only into relatively operationally safe zones; other contributors committed their troops only in combat support/logistics roles, often symbolically, rarely materially. The British contribution was marred by stifled funding and some very public face-offs between the then Prime Minister (PM) Gordon Brown and his upright and outspoken Chief of General Staff Gen Richard Dannatt. The Americans were the only ones to put their money where their mouth was in terms of troop contribution and funding, albeit as lone rangers and with much mathematical quibbling over surge numbers. In sum, the military dynamic in Afghanistan was severely hampered by collective dissonance and profound reluctance on the part of the political hierarchies. Coupled with the failings of the political initiatives led by Hamid Karzai, Pakistani double dealing and the fact that the entire peace/restoration enterprise was pitted against a battle hardened and wily customer (the Taliban) only waiting to outlast what was always a faint-hearted and half-baked endeavour, the outcome could have been foretold. In the ultimate analysis, prospective democracy in Afghanistan has been let down not as much by the instruments of force as perhaps by lack of political will, resilience, resolve and imagination. Or perhaps, we have yet again failed to generate the necessary politico-military synergy that modern counter-insurgency challenges demand.

But the alibis are once again familiar and herein lies the utility of Luttwak's article. It stirs a debate between the two critical components of the counter-insurgency paradigm – the military and political dynamics. While we are all agreed on their composite utility in the pursuit of success, we are sometimes less than fair when it comes to apportioning blame in times of failure – Luttwak too falls into the trap. To meet the financial demands of the two wars (Iraq and Afghanistan) America needed to curb profligacy and raise taxes through bipartisan consensus. A paralysed and deeply polarised Washington could do neither; while it failed to rein in the thuggery in Wall Street (choosing to bail out the delinquent and the complicit instead) and could not muster the courage to tax the rich, it chose to deflect matters by laying the blame for the economic crises almost entirely at the doorstep of the two wars. We also make the mistake of viewing these challenges in an either/or manner. But nations need to address economic and security challenges concomitantly; it is not uncommon historically to have both economic and security crises hit you in near simultaneity (the Great Depression and World War II), placing huge demands on the political leadership in terms of vision, imagination, resolve and deftness in obtaining the necessary consensus

in order to help their countries navigate their way through the muddle. We did not see much of this happening, even as the strains of the all too familiar alibis have begun to reemerge: wars are no solution, Afghanistan simply cannot be stabilised, etc.

Many other assertions in Luttwak's diagnosis of the travails of counter-insurgency are banal clichés. His contention that modern armies continue to be structured (only) for large scale war and that advanced societies have a low tolerance for casualties are extremely generic and only relative truths. Military force structures are predicated on possible conflict scenarios that are estimated conjointly by the civil and military minds and are constantly altered in accordance with changing needs. In Desert Storm, the American military had a force structure designed to unleash overwhelming force as required by the then prevalent doctrine; by the time the forces were deployed for Iraqi Freedom, the military had restructured to lighter, mobile components in accordance with the changed worldview of the Rumsfeld-Tommy Franks duo. For the counter-insurgency phases of operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the forces embraced further doctrinal and organisational change. The Indian Army too has varied structures and doctrines to meet the conventional challenges posed by Pakistan and China as also to meet the counter-insurgency challenges in Jammu and Kashmir and the northeast. To be fair, even the much maligned Pakistan Army, when the need arose, adapted and restructured fairly well to meet the insurgency challenges in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). So, this fixity of military structures is somewhat an academic myth – actually, modern militaries are in a constant state of evolution to meet threats across the conflict spectrum. So also the contention that advanced societies are loath to absorb casualties. Advanced and by implication informed societies are still willing to shed blood, albeit for just causes and in the service of missions that have been responsibly and thoroughly thought through with threshold levels varying in accordance with the perceived justness of the cause. While, of course, there is little tolerance for the Vietnam type ill-conceived endeavours, equally, Western societies are no longer afflicted by the 'body bag syndrome.' The figure of 6,000 odd men and women of the American military alone martyred in the two wars over the last decade speaks for itself. Anti-war protests in Britain in 2009/2010 were more about the callousness of the Gordon Brown government in providing the right equipment/facilities for the soldiers in Afghanistan and the consequent casualties, as against casualties *per se*. The public at large is willing to support the prosecution of wars as also put their loved ones in harm's way provided the cause

is just, the funding right and associated metrics appropriate. The tolerance level for casualties is not low, but has been suitably calibrated by informed, modern societies. The spirit of sacrifice in militaries is alive and continues to throb. Thomas Friedman tells us how wonderstruck he was, when, in July 2009, while accompanying Adm Mike Mullen on a trip to Camp Leatherneck in Helmand province, he met a soldier who was on his *sixth deployment*[7] *to Afghanistan*. Thomas recalls how he was driven to think of all the women soldiers – mothers who had left their husbands and children for a year, infantrymen who first signed up after 9 /11 simply because they thought it was their duty to defend their country and soldiers who kept coming back to fight even after being grievously injured. While being gracious in his praise of the soldier, it is the politician whom he holds guilty of lack of leadership and the soft bigotry of low expectations when it comes to summoning the American people to do big, hard things together[8] – a failure to invoke the spirit of sacrifice, doggedness, perseverance and resolve, so essential for the successful addressal of security challenges.

At times, Luttwak borders on the juvenile. While critiquing the US Army Field Manual, he castigates professional militaries for conjuring "*tempting delusions that some clever new tactics or some clever new technology can defeat insurgents*." Respectfully, modern professional militaries do not suffer from any delusions. They, in all humility, realise the compelling need to calibrate operations in the light of evolving political realities and painfully rework their operational doctrines accordingly – something that should draw praise and not flak. A careful read of the US Army Field Manual tells us that it is a diligent attempt to encapsulate the valuable experiences of decades in real combat situations into a very readable and pragmatic document – somewhat of "a combat treasure," and not "some clever new tactics" as Luttwak would have us believe.

Luttwak goes on to question the very quest for popular support and good governance on the premise that mere obedience and not popular support is the necessary pre-condition for political dispensations to survive, while quoting the survivability of the Libyan and Syrian models in support of his contention. Recent events demolish the wisdom of his arguments.

A decade ago, in a thoughtful book, *The Utility of Force*, Gen Rupert Smith made a strong case for greater politico-military synergy and for a more utilitarian application of force to meet modern security challenges. While apportioning blame for failures, he accused militaries of preparing not for the "last" but the "wrong" war and for making no serious effort to fight "wars amongst the people." Around the same time, Gen Tony Zinni in his book, *The Battle for Peace*, made a

strong plea to take on disruptive forces in nations at risk before conditions therein turn into crises. He made a persuasive case for integrating the foxhole view with that of the policy-maker, of bringing together the theorist and the practitioner, in a serious attempt to address security challenges in an anticipatory, proactive, intelligent manner. In the years since those resounding critiques, while the militaries have made serious attempts to refashion their responses, the politico-thinkers, have failed to galvanise the requisite tools for success. Our strategic commentators, meanwhile, have been more hackneyed and even less incisive in their responses. Ditto for Edward Luttwak's piece.

Notes

1. Thomas L Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum, *That Used To Be US* (Hachette India, 2011), p. 298.
2. Thomas E Ricks, *The Gamble* (Allen Lane, 2009), p. 5.
3. For details of the incident, see Ibid., pp. 3-6, as to how, when hit by a roadside bomb, Marine Corporal Justin Sharratt's squad launched a sweep for insurgents, killing 24 Iraqis. Worse, the corporal, justifying his actions in the military justice system review that followed by persuading himself to say, " they were all insurgents, " to include the women, children and a wheelchair bound old man who had died in the process
4. Ibid., p. 6.
5. In refreshing contrast to the events characterising the Haditha massacre, see the remarkable restraint displayed by a platoon of the 22 Marine Expeditionary Unit in early 2006 when similarly provoked, as cited in *Field Manual 3-24, COUNTER-INSURGENCY*, Headquarters of the US Army, December 2006, chapter 7, p. 4.
6. Praveen Swami, *The Hindu*, October 29, 2011.
7. Friedman and Mandelbaum, n. 1, p. 299.
8. Ibid., p. 297.