



## **Couterinsurgency's Tao**

The most fashionable strategy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century disappears on the edge of  
the Afghan ravine and the chinese dawn

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The charm of the pure theories is represented by their characteristic of being able to not accept compromises, to follow an easy reasoning and not to show any flaw. But it is wise to ask ourselves if they can depict the complex reality.

After more than 10 years of international missions in Afghanistan, the international military and politics entourages have seen the birth of modern Counterinsurgency doctrine as the new and necessary strategy to take over conflicts defined “other than war” and “post-conflict”; then to the fame gained by its modern theoretical father, General David H. Petraeus and, finally, to the call into question of his theory.

The truth is that the case shows as the opportunity to catch the basic interactions between the change in the global strategic environment and the local implications, between economic trend and the government's decisions, between human events and strategic theories.

Couterinsurgency is the strategy put to use by a state and/or a third actor with the aim of defeating armed groups rising up against the legitimate government, undermining its control of the territory, to take finally its place. This kind of war finds in civil population its natural arena. Here insurgents can hide in villages or major urban spots. People can hide insurgents, seeing them like revolutionary dreamers, heroes bringing requests of renewal, social progress or keepers of traditional culture. So people can offer safer places, goods, supplies and weapons. This is the core challenge for counterinsurgency actors, because driving out insurgents from their refuges among population may cause collateral damages, dead and wounded. This toll can disaffect population, increasing support for the insurgents. For that reason, states and international organizations should show themselves as reliable actors, being considered like true promoters of peace, security and improving economy, legal guarantees, services and social development. Doing this the population would refuse insurgents actions, defining them like a menace to the law and

order. The solution to win such a conflict is furnished by the literature of counterinsurgency whom suggest to “conquer hearts and minds of the population”.

Petraeus’ theory is not brand new, but an adjustment of the former one. He read David Galula and his experience in Algerian conflict, Lawrence about Arabic guerrilla of the nineteenth century (the well known “Lawrence of Arabia”), and the cases study of Vietnam, Malaysia and French Indochina.

The teaching he received is that in the new strategic environment, after the cold war, modern conflicts will more and more take place in weak or failed states, with troops operating among local civil population, invoked to accomplish not just tradition military operations. Despite technological innovation and development that reduce human presence in the skirmishes, it will be necessary in the near future to have troops on the ground, taking over just not military operations, but major public works, buildings, reconstruction of education institutions, judiciary institutions, politics, social and economics.

Between May 2011 and November 2012 many factors, however, changed. The declared victory against Al-Quaida, signaled by the killing of its leader Osama Bin Laden, brought to the partial loss of value of the Afghan territory, not anymore the sanctuary of the most dangerous terrorism.

After a short time, the figure of General Petraeus has been overwhelmed by a sex scandal, forcing him to resign from the CIA and to publicly apologise to his wife, depriving the afghan war of his theoretical father.

Moreover, the international economic crises has reoriented priorities of the states, hitting hard many countries, especially United States, making it hard to spend money on conflicts like this.

Behind the downwash in Afghanistan, referring to security, strength of the state, and economic development, there is the prospect that counterinsurgency failed, missing the main purpose to make Afghanistan safer, ensure prosperity and to let it carry out efforts by its own. Are we sure this is a right interpretation?

Military loss has been constantly increasing between 2001 and 2010, from 12 to 711, but decreasing in 2011 and 2012, with 566, 402 deaths respectively. 2013 data seems to be in accordance with this trend.

The civilian losses kept increasing until 2011, reaching a little 3000 deaths, but decreasing to about 2700 in 2012, with an increasing percentage of Taliban origin.

The majority of deaths are from IED (improvised explosive devices). The highest number of victims are in 2010 with 368 deaths, both military and civilians. 2009 has been the year with the highest percentage of IED victims: 60 percent. This percentage has been reduced in the next years, with 58 percent, 51 percent and 42 percent, with the number of victims decreasing to 252 in 2011 and 132 in 2012. This downward trend may show a slow decrease in the strength of insurgents, maybe due to a better control of the territory, especially of roads.

The number of US troops has been reduced from 100,000 in 2011 to 63,000 in summer 2013. Total number of international troops (with Afghan armed and security forces) decreased from 485,000 in 2012 to less than 400,000 nowadays.

If the military side does not seem to be so complex, for sure the economic one and the perception of quality of life are dangerous. With highs and lows, the real GDP (Gross Domestic Product) has been stabilized after 2010 between 5 percent and 7 percent: way too low compared to the huge amount of resources to be spent to guarantee security in terms of salaries for police, needs, food and weapons. Inflation is still steady above 5 percent. The Afghan economy survives because of international aids (90 percent of national output), the highest for a single country after the World War II, that are almost completely spent, with the other amount of GDP, in the sector of national security. Furthermore, the black market is still huge and gets along with the high corruption at all the levels of administration. Opium production, for instance, even if decreasing from 2007, is still well above the level of the pre-war times.

These data are reflected in the popular opinions. The main concern is still how to guarantee security. However, second is the unemployment and the perception of corruption is constantly increasing. This factor is strictly linked to the negative perception of democratic trend, that was 21 percent in 2006 to 29 percent in 2012. It is like the general pessimism about the future of the nation, increased from 21 percent in 2006 to 31 percent in 2012.

It has to be remembered that the turnaround in Afghanistan in 2007 took place because of the "surge", the increasing of troops wanted by Petraeus to take control of the territory, the first step to get a proficient counterinsurgency. In the next years, results would agree with the "COIN cabal" (name given to the team of generals working with Petraeus, experts in counterinsurgency). Then, after the change of Petraeus and Mc Christal, the surge would have taken place in Afghanistan too, after Iraq, but having different results. And not just

analysing the military perspective. In Afghanistan there are physical, social and political-economic characteristics which help greatly the success of insurgency. These conditions are analysed in a Galula's book that inspired the generals of the "COIN cabal": "...corrupt government; neighbouring states offering sanctuaries for insurgent; population mainly rural and uneducated; a primitive economy". Finally, military success in these conditions would not lead to a defeated insurgency.

Galula stated that counterinsurgency operations are 80 percent political and just 20 percent military (Mc Chistal proposal was for a proportion of 95/5). So hearts and minds should be conquered by that 80 percent of activities. The missing roll-out of the economy, despite the military control of the territory, make the population unsatisfied about conditions that do not allow full sustenance. In these conditions we can find the revival of primitive social dynamics, such as corruption, black market, opium economy, sectarianism tribalism. The last one is evident in the ethnic and tribal composition of local policies and militias.

The link connecting economic development and democracy is crucial. Some scientists study the relationship between GDP per capita and democratic systems. Some distinguished theorists state about a clear linkage between them. Specifically, above a defined level of wealth, measured using the GDP per capita, democratic system becomes possible. It follows that, on the other hand, forcing a democratic system on a country that is not ready, would simply lead to a failure. Of course we could believe that an elected politician can appeal to criminals for more than one purpose: gain from the opportunity of easy corruption and protected from electoral immunity.

Another important aspect at the base of a wise approach to a country is cultural awareness. As democratic systems produce democratic cultures and some economic systems produce culture in accordance to their logic, in the same way the culture in a country has been formed through out the experiences in history, over many generations. The Afghan society has strong cultural characteristics, formed after decades of civil war and a social environment strongly ethnicized, tribal and polarized. In order to understand the possible reaction to a system it is vital to learn a counties history and structure, not simply by politicians or diplomats, but by armed forces operating on the ground too. Understanding the acculturation phenomena (how culture is formed over the generations) make the decision making for counterinsurgency operators easier. However, the American transition strategy is still inclined to prefer the military side instead of both economic and

diplomatic. Some in the United States do not talk about counterinsurgency as a grand strategy anymore. The loss of the American presence, the end of Karzai era due to constitutional limits, the good skills of taliban, capable of polarize and organize people anger and frustration, especially in rural communities, raised many doubts about security in the country after 2014.

In the scenario described above, the void rooms left by the pull back of United States and its allies in 2014 will be filled. Maybe from the new Chinese power, maybe from a new Afghanistan that will be able to survive itself (unconvincing) or from the chaos generated by the implosion of the state administration (way too weak).

Quite eastbound, precisely to China, is moving the focal point of the American strategic aims, and so global, setting the well-known “pivot to Asia” that is now the leitmotif of the American policy. In a world “more Chinese” the term “tao”, at the foundation of the philosophic and religious doctrine known as Taoism, stand for “way”, “path”, “method” in the most common translations, and it help us to better define the profile of our dissertation. So, we can ask ourselves what is the “counterinsurgency’s tao”. This question is more valuable if we consider that this strategy has been carried out in hardly optimistic conditions: far from the traditional and modern doctrine; pushing back from the realism of strategic implication between US and China; unlucky because of the latest affairs of his theoretical father. As a result: certainty disappears on the continent but it appears globally. Data are self explanatory: since 2020, 60 percent of American naval forces will be stationed in the Pacific Ocean, setting that “pivot to Asia” that aims to bound China in its sector of Chinese Sea, limiting its will to extend influence on the south-east side of the continent.

The illusory return to an era of strategic confront between two superpowers must not mislead. American military supremacy is huge when compared to China: ballistic missiles 450 vs 66, long range bombers 155 vs 132, nuclear submarines 14 vs 3, tanks 6.300 vs 2.800, fighting vehicles 6.452 vs 2.390, fourth generation fighters 3.092 vs 747, cruisers 83 vs 13, aircraft carriers 11 vs 1, awacs radars 104 vs 14, UAVs (Un-manned Aerial Vehicles) 370 vs 0, satellites 61 vs 36, just to mention some statistics and not considering the technological gap. China is aware of the economic importance of United States, first commercial partner with volume of exchanges keep growing. If China wants to grow to the same level of US GDP per capita needs to increase its GDP from 7trillion to 100trillion. So there is still time for a military confrontation even if the economic linkage would cease.

Latest experience in state's life, especially for the case of weak or failed states, shows that local instability can still be a menace to global security and this phenomena can be experienced in the future too. The complexity of the subject is due to many factors: global governance, international mandate to military actions, respect of human rights, the role of civilian population, the definition of democracy and the role of military forces. Referring to the last point, the help to the counterinsurgency given by Petraeus and his colleagues has been brilliant. In order to analyse properly the results we need to relate the strategies to the peculiarities of each environment (Iraq or Afghanistan) and carefully consider the available statistics.

Afterward, we should catch the signals from the changing geo-strategic environments, being careful to not force tendency in the data.

One of Sun Tsu's most famous sentence in "the art of war" is "victory is predictable but not certainly viable". This means that experiences in the past, handed down through doctrines developed by wisemen, are the reference point. But environment always changes, characteristics of the world where human stories take place different, like time and place. Strategist's ability consist of properly value the theoretical heritage related to the current situation, based on his judgment. Just acting like that the strategist can apply an effective strategy. Chinese traditional wisdom can help Americans: counterinsurgency striking doctrine failed itself or it was overthrown by several various events that compromised its value?

History tells us that counterinsurgency cases did not change accordingly to the changes in the political-strategic environment. Since Lawrence's war in Arabia at the beginning of 1900's, to French Algeria at the end of '50 studied by Galula, to the contemporaneous British war in Malaysia, to Vietnam war for Americans ending with Guerrillas in Iraq and Afghanistan, there are essential similarities. The most important teaching, maybe, is that militaries require cultural skills, relationship-wise skills, of interaction with civilians that go beyond traditional training and roles and, thus, personnel training and strategic efforts shall be more directed towards socio-economic sides rather than military and geo-strategic.

So, less military power and more diversification and quality in other sectors of a state public dimension. The core of a counterinsurgency like this is hidden in a Shakespeare sentence written by Americans on the lapis of Bernard Fall, a French counterinsurgency expert died in Ramadi during a bombing: "...when mildness and cruelty fight for a kingdom, the most gently player will be the first who win".