Responding to Intractable Insurgencies: Civil Society, Contested Environments and International (In)Security
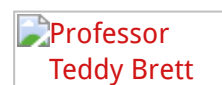
This lecture was given by Professor E.A. Brett at the NATO Defense College in Rome today, Thursday 25th September 2014.

Professor Teddy Brett

> We meet today in the shadow of continuing counterinsurgencies that have cost thousands of lives and a fortune in financial, moral and political capital. And we meet under the threat of similar insurgencies to come. Any smart future enemy will likely sidestep our unprecedented superiority in traditional, force-on-force, state-on-state warfare. And so insurgency, including terrorism, will be our enemies' weapon of choice until we prove we can master it. Like Bill Murray in Groundhog Day, we are going to live this day over, and over, and over again — until we get it right.

David Kilcullen, Three Pillars of Counterinsurgency, U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Conference, Washington D.C., 28 September 2006.

The Security Challenge: The Limits of the Military-Technology-Revolution

The intensifying global security crisis is a function of the contradiction between our technical ability to deliver almost unlimited force to any target anywhere and our political and social inability to locate and eliminate a growing array of insurgent movements and their armed offshoots that are disrupting many weak states and threatening the moral legitimacy and security of the most prosperous members of the liberal global order.

Rulers and generals often treat the systematic application of force as their default solution to the threats posed by disaffection and insurgency, as I learnt when I lived in Uganda under Idi Amin. They may also assume that the military forces designed to defeat conventional armies can also be deployed to defeat domestic insurgents, as I was almost asked to do as a (part-time) soldier in South Africa after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960.

The west now commands information and precision bombing systems that have enabled them to devastate threatening targets at little risk to themselves, but have failed to eliminate insurgency in Iraq, Afghanistan and Gaza since 'sensory and network technologies', including drone strikes, cannot 'eliminate the frictions, uncertainties, disorder, and nonlinearities of interactive clashes between opposing polities', as a Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments report recognised in a recent report.[1]

This tension created by the ability of disaffected political and social movements to 'side-step' the technological-military superiority of governments has always existed, but has become the major threat to global security since 9/11 and the Iraq war when an overwhelming military victory was followed by an intractable struggle between local and international sectarian movements, a weak and discredited government, and an unpopular occupying force.

Equally intractable problems in a growing number of states have turned this into a global crisis that demonstrate that the ultimate military as well as political objective in any civil conflict must be to persuade rather than force your enemies to lay down their arms, especially when your enemy is not simply the men with guns or explosive vests who are threatening your lives, but the disaffected communities who they represent and are trying to protect.

There is usually no alternative to force when confronted by movements using unspeakable acts of violence to achieve what seem to be irrational ideological goals, while soldiers rightly assume that politicians and civic organisations like NGOs must take primary responsibility for the policy decisions and interventions needed to win hearts and minds.

However, Generals always play a key advisory role in persuading governments to increase or reduce force in these situations, and the way soldiers behave has a decisive influence on the attitudes of both local communities and the armed groups that claim to represent them as you all know very well.

Solving these issues raises immense intellectual and practical challenges that I do not pretend to be able to resolve, but I I do hope that I can help you to think about the way in which a systematic understanding of the mechanisms that drive civil society could help to manage the violent conflicts generated by competition between antagonistic social, cultural and economic interests in weak states.

Civil Society, Contested Environments and Socio-Political Order

We think of 'civil society' in well managed states as the collective identities and organisations through which individuals come together to satisfy their cultural, emotional and ethical needs. Their ability to do this depends on the existence of a government that guarantees everyone's right to maximise their own goals provided that they do not interfere with anyone else's, and an economic and welfare system that enables them to survive without doing so.

Here a strong civil society depends on the quality of the organisational systems that people voluntarily create to strengthen their capacity to cooperate like political parties, religions, associations, clubs and NGOs, and strong civic organisations become the key building-blocks of a free society.

However, this is not the case in societies where dominant groups monopolise political and economic power, political and economic life is dominated by zero-sum competition for desperately scarce resources, and civil society is not dominated by voluntary cooperation but by groups that have to depend on exclusive ethnic, sectarian, kinship and class identities to survive and feel that they can only do so by dehumanising and eliminating their rivals.

Here rulers can survive for long periods by monopolising information and force as North Korea shows, but the administrative and economic failures of weak states, and increased access to low cost information and weapons systems by their opponents now make it far harder for national governments or occupying armies to do so.

Thus we may have to use force to contain violent rebel movements, but long-term security is increasingly dependent on our ability to find better ways to incorporate marginalised as well as dominant groups into a more inclusive social compact and thus convince them that they have more to gain more by making peace than war.

Responding to the Insurgency Challenge; From Coercion to Consent

Politicians and their military commanders in contested environments prefer to govern by consent rather than coercion, but are unwilling or unable to meet the basic economic needs, respond to the legitimate social grievances, respect the cultural identities and goals of their adversaries, and assume that eliminating their leaders and activists will solve the security problem.

This is more likely to intensify resistance and eliminate the possibility of cooperative solutions as we saw in Germany in 1919, and in Iraq in 2003. Similar failures still perpetuate violence in Palestine, Syria and elsewhere, and will continue until both dominant and excluded groups can be offered enough to persuade them to lay down their arms.

However, these problems can disappear when regimes are willing to incorporate former enemies into their developmental projects and generate the jobs and services needed to give them a stake in the new society, as we saw in in Germany in the 1940s, Uganda after the victory of the National Resistance Movement, or in Northern Ireland more recently.

Responsibility for these contrasting strategies clearly lies with politicians rather than soldiers, and is especially problematic in the increasing number of contexts where the principle of sovereignty forces western powers threatened by local insurgencies to rely on weak or corrupt local governments to play a critical role.

Soldiers should defer to politicians in these situations, but must take some responsibility for these outcomes because they always play a crucial advisory role. They now need to take much more account of the need for consent rather than coercion, and to be more willing to play the role of doves rather than hawks rather than doves, and to recognise that aid budgets also play a crucial military role.

Further, soldiers play a key role in perpetrating or alleviating tensions in actual conflict situations. Here a counter-insurgency strategy involving the excessive application of force is likely to strengthen resistance while an effective developmental strategy that weakens support for violence by helping key leaders and organisations in civil society to maintain social order and improve livelihoods will reduce it, as David Kilcullen's seminal studies of successful counter-insurgency operations, notably in Iraq, show.

This, of course, is easy to say, but very hard to do as I am sure our discussions will show. I can do no better than end by quoting Kilcullen's own challenge to the defence establishment in Iraq in 2006 that speaks directly to the theme of this workshop:

> To be effective, we must marshal not only all agencies of the USG … but also all agencies of a host nation, multiple foreign allies and coalition partners, international institutions, non-government organizations of many national and political flavors, international and local media, religious and community groups, charities and businesses. Some have counterinsurgency doctrine that is more or less compatible with ours. Some have different doctrines, or none. Some reject the very notion of counterinsurgency — but all must collaborate if the conflict is to be resolved.

This is a very tall order, but we ignore his words at our peril.

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