

# RETHINKING COUNTERINSURGENCY WARFARE

**Michael Evans** explains the complexities of counterinsurgency to **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe**

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In September 2010, Dr Evans spoke with Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe, a defence analyst who has published widely on Australian, South Asian, and Indian Ocean political and security issues.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** When did COIN (counterinsurgency) tactics and strategies first enter the Australian military and how was it implemented?

**Michael Evans:** In the modern sense, counterinsurgency began in the Australian Army in the 1950s during the era of Forward Defence in South-East Asia under the Menzies government. However, as has been pointed out by several historians, Australian

counterinsurgency—at least in its purely military dimension—draws heavily on earlier traditions of small-unit soldiering in general, and Second World War jungle warfare techniques and tactics, in particular. Australian Army counterinsurgency as a serious institutional activity began in the early 1960s with the work of Brigadier (later General) Frank Hassett on anti-guerrilla doctrine in South East Asia. By the mid-1960s, with Australian troops in South Vietnam, the Army produced one of the best doctrine manuals of any English-speaking Cold War Western military, the 1965 Division in Battle Pamphlet 11, *Counter-Revolutionary Warfare*. It was short, well-written and mercifully free of the business school style jargon that blights much contemporary doctrine. Although the manual's political context is now dated, in terms of technique it was and still remains highly regarded by experts as a model of its kind. Indeed, it was being used by Australian commanders in Somalia as late as 1993, which is quite a shelf-life.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** From a COIN perspective, what was significant about the Australian involvement and experience in the Malayan emergency?

**Michael Evans:** The Australian military learnt a great deal from the 1952 British Army's *Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya* pamphlet and drew deeply on the success of British Commonwealth forces under Generals Briggs and Templer. Pragmatism, flexibility and the Anglo-Saxon penchant for the functional

over the theoretical were all products of Malaya, and Australia built its approach on this empirical tradition. Of course, today, Malaya has enormous symbolic significance because it produced one of the few relatively clear-cut victories over an insurgent movement. Most of the methods used were codified in Sir Robert Thompson's classic 1966 work, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*. Malaya informed Division in Battle Pamphlet 11. Looking back, what is striking about Malaya is that as a campaign, it was *sui generis* in its success. When applied by others, most notably by the Rhodesians, these methods proved much less successful in the different political and ethnographic circumstances.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** From a COIN perspective, what was significant about the Australian involvement and experience in Vietnam?

**Michael Evans:** That's an interesting question to ponder given the revival of interest in counterinsurgency over the last few years and the rise of a group of Western military fundamentalists known popularly as the COINdinistas. Some COINdinistas, drawing on the intellectual fusion of classical counterinsurgency pacification techniques with neo-classical ideas of 'clear, hold and build' theories, claim that the Australians never really conducted counterinsurgency in Phuoc Tuy province. According to this revisionist argument, the Australian Task Force 'cleared and held' but never built. We patrolled in an 'enemy-centric' fashion and fought the Viet Cong, but we did not take a 'population-centric' approach with all of its attendant civil-military functions. Therefore, the argument goes, Australians did not execute proper counterinsurgency. This strikes as a classic case of presentism triumphing in historical analysis. It is akin to saying that because the Catholic Mass is now performed in plain English with the priest in full view of the congregation, the older Latin version with the priest partly obscured no longer fulfils the essence of Catholicism as redefined by Vatican II. We need to be aware of 'Vatican II

counterinsurgency.' I am yet to meet a Vietnam veteran who does not believe that what he was doing in South Vietnam was counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency is like pornography: you know it when you see it.

The Australian Army that came out of Vietnam was in my opinion probably the finest small unit army in the world in the early 1970s. It was not for nothing that General William Westmoreland, the US Commander in South East Asia, compared the Australian Army to the inter-War German *Reichswehr* under Hans von Seeckt. As a former Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General John Coates, has observed, the war in Vietnam professionalised the regular Australian Army as a modern combined-arms force—and that professionalism had at its core the art of counter-revolutionary warfare (as counterinsurgency was referred to at the time).

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** How would you describe the state of the Australian military and its preparedness for COIN in the aftermath of Vietnam to its deployment in East Timor?

**Michael Evans:** We were not prepared for East Timor—although people like me had been warning that the Australian Army would go and fight offshore in South-East Asia or the Pacific—for several years. The period 1972–97 was in my view the era of the Australian Army's Babylonian Captivity. The land force was seen as a kind of geographical abstraction and not as an instrument of statecraft. It was chained like an unwanted dog to the Defence of Australia (DOA) doctrine and forced to convert itself from a military establishment configured for expeditionary warfare and tropical counterinsurgency into a force that would be optimised for domestic, long-range desert group operations in Northern Australia. Army 21, as this scheme was called, was part of a strategic fantasy reminiscent of France's Petainists and their obsession with the Maginot Line. No one seems to have recalled Major General Sydney Rowell's wise advice to the Americans about fears of a Japanese landing in Broome in 1942: 'if they land we'll send the Salvage Corps to pick up their bones because there is no water

between Broome and Alice Springs.’ Army should have relentlessly quoted Rowell at those individuals in the 1980s and 1990s who sought to impose DOA thinking on the land force.

Australia was lucky that the Chief of Army in 1997, Lieutenant General Frank Hickling, took the brave decision to break with DOA thinking and return the Army to its traditional roots as an expeditionary force. Not much more than a year later we were in East Timor. To field a force, we had to improvise and cannibalise land force capabilities hollowed out by a quarter century of death by a thousand cuts. We were saved by Hickling’s breathing space, by the quality of our soldiers, and by the long shadow of the expeditionary professionalism bequeathed by operations in Vietnam. If matters had gone wrong for Australia in East Timor, there would have been a reckoning with those who designed DOA for the Army. They were lucky.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** What impact did the East Timor operation have on the Australian military and how did it influence and prepare the Australian Army for COIN operations in Iraq and Afghanistan?

**Michael Evans:** East Timor restored the professional confidence of the Australian Army after a quarter of a century of sterile DOA thinking. It re-established our reputation as an expeditionary land force. It is no accident that this confidence and reputation was epitomised by Peter Cosgrove, the last of the great Vietnam veterans, who provided skilled and charismatic leadership. We rediscovered small unit tropical soldiering, we relearned the intricacies of expeditionary operations and, above all, the Army recaptured its historical soul embodied in the Digger who fights away so that those at home can be safe. All of these factors stood us in good stead post-9/11 with Afghanistan and Iraq. Having said this, it is important to remember the political context. Australia did not initially participate in Afghanistan and Iraq as counterinsurgency missions. Both began as conventional wars for regime change. The fact that both missions became insurgency situations was due to the Coalition’s failure

to understand the implications of post-conflict stability operations and, more broadly, nation-building as a strategy. When we took Osama bin Laden’s wolf’s lair in the Tora Bora mountains, what did we find in the caves? We found copies of insurgency manuals, including Mao Zedong’s *On Guerrilla Warfare*. We have no excuse for not knowing what was coming.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** How has the Australian Army managed its deployments in both Iraq and Afghanistan? What do you see are its successes and shortcomings or similarities and differences?

**Michael Evans:** The beginning of wisdom is to understand that the Australian Army is first and foremost a political instrument, a tool of statecraft. As Colonel Ted Serong, the leading Australian counterinsurgency theorist of the Cold War era, put it, Australia always uses its military force in support of a diplomatic position and never the reverse. Our Army is small; it lacks mass; it is an instrument of surgical effect, insofar as that is possible in land warfare. Accordingly, our offshore deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq have reflected a form of military statecraft to support both our liberal democratic values and our alliance with the United States. In Iraq, an unpopular commitment, we deployed a cavalry regiment; in Afghanistan, a war with broader popular support, we entered Uruzgan with the Dutch in a reconstruction and training mission plus a Special Operations Task Group. Again, it is important to note that neither the Iraq nor Afghan commitments was ever described by the Howard or Rudd governments as counterinsurgency missions. When it comes to modern war, Australia’s mantra may be described thus: ‘as military as necessary and as political as possible.’ Some critics call for much more heavy lifting, but in a democracy what you can do with military force is shaped by the political class and the will of the electorate. We will do well to keep all of this in mind because it is easy to get sucked into counterinsurgency; it is much harder to get out.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** What key lessons and experiences do you think the Australian Army has drawn from its experience in Iraq and Afghanistan?

**Michael Evans:** Both theatres have served as operational laboratories in terms of testing our readiness, training, leadership and tactical skill-levels. As with all post-World War II deployments, the experiences have tended to illuminate the tactical-level excellence—and the operational-level inexperience—of the Army. We have operated as niche forces with many officers embedded in the Coalition command and control system. In the case of the Special Forces, hunter killer operations have, of course, been vital. For our reconstruction-training units, the raising and training of an Afghan National Army brigade in Uruzgan has been the essence of the mission. In all this activity, it is important to remember that counterinsurgency warfare has been the by-product rather than the rationale for our military commitment. Insurgency is what we face from performing reconstruction and training to improve Afghan local capacity.

Some observers have criticised Australia for not taking counterinsurgency more seriously and not sufficiently preparing for it within our education-training continuum. It is certainly true that Australia has tried to avoid the overheated rhetoric of the ‘COINdinsta revolution’ that has occurred in the United States and, to a lesser extent, Britain. Rather, we have preferred to quietly rewrite Army counterinsurgency doctrine and to introduce courses at the Defence College and elsewhere. Far more may need to be done, but the process of improving our knowledge of contemporary counterinsurgency has well and truly begun in a measured way. It is worth contemplating a few of the reasons why we have sought to avoid the brash new world of the COINdinstas.

First, at the forefront is the ADF’s awareness that our missions in Iraq and Afghanistan are not defined by our political masters as counterinsurgency—even though they involve the latter. In Afghanistan, the use of the ADF, for better or worse, is political rather than military in character; this consciousness is

reinforced by the reality of real limits to the use of the military instrument in counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency is a mystery rather than a puzzle. One can solve a puzzle but a mystery evades easy resolution. Afghanistan is a mystery wrapped in the cloak of guerrilla warfare, a mystery that requires a political outcome.

Second, Australians are relentless pragmatists who see Americans as overly prone to enthusiastic cycles of theoretical faddism. Before the Iraq crisis (which began in 1990) spawned counterinsurgency, it gave us via Desert Storm the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)—now seldom referred to but once omnipresent in the 1990s. There is, therefore, a wariness amongst some senior Australian officers about the current rush to counterinsurgency, especially when it is presented as ‘the future of warfare’—as some COINdinstas are wont to do. The truth is, this is an age of full-spectrum operations and complex hybrids, and advanced armed forces must be able to respond to a multiplicity of contingencies.

Third, Australians have always performed well in small-unit soldiering and civil-military affairs, which are both at the heart of modern counterinsurgency. There is perhaps inside our officer corps a military hubris of ‘been there, done that.’ There is certainly a feeling that the Americans are discovering what Australian soldiers have always intuitively understood about small-unit operations and ‘war amongst the people.’ Finally, it is clear that much of classical counterinsurgency doctrine only partly meets the task of today’s armed nation building or stabilisation in globalised political conditions. For today’s wars, classical counterinsurgency, forged during the Cold War, is an analogue and not a replicant. This reality has reinforced Australia’s institutional reservation about uncritically embracing a ‘counterinsurgency revolution’ inside the ADF. So these are the conditions under which the development of new counterinsurgency thinking has had to proceed in the ADF, in general, and in the Army, in particular. As a result, we, in the writing team at the Command and Staff College charged with producing the Army’s new *Land Warfare Doctrine 3-0-1, Counterinsurgency* in 2008–09,

tried to distil best-practice doctrine in a cool, measured and realistic manner. Our manual is best seen as a bridging document for the land force and may serve as a guide for the ADF in its development of a Future Joint Operating Concept (FJOC) and future joint doctrine. Ultimately, the ADF will require an FJOC and joint doctrine that embraces elements of counterinsurgency, but which embodies political purpose, probes the strategic level of war, and provides linkage to the inter-agency community in the twenty-first century battle space.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** How has the Australian Army's urban warfare doctrine evolved?

**Michael Evans:** The Australian Army is very small and there are clear limits to its capacity in an urban environment. All Western defence forces are coming to terms with the reality that by 2020, over 60% of humankind will inhabit cities. This will rise to 75% by 2040. This revolution in urban demography barely resonates in the media or academia but is a coming global reality. As the planet urbanises, insurgency and irregular conflict will follow suit. As Clausewitz teaches, war is a clever chameleon that adjusts to political conditions. An urban world will make war different from a rural world. In the 1960s, Fidel Castro famously called the city the graveyard of the guerrilla. But by 2025, the megacity may well be well on its way to becoming the guerrilla fighter's version of the Sierra Maestra mountains. The 2008 Mumbai attack, in which 10 suicide terrorists effectively paralysed a huge Asian city for 60 hours, is a glimpse into what we may expect on a larger scale in future years. The difficulties we will face in emerging 'feral city' operations include density of population, media saturation, and limits on using armed force among civilians, compressed operations, and a multiplicity of environmental factors. If we can avoid fighting in cities we should do so, but if we have to undertake urban operations (as seems likely), then we need to develop a metrostrategy mentality in order to understand the twenty-first century city of the developing world as a complex demographic battle space.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** What impact do you think the Australian Army's deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan has had on the ethos of the Army as opposed to say Vietnam? What long-term implications will this have for the evolution of the Australian Army's strategic culture and strategic thinking?

**Michael Evans:** The main difference between the Australian Army in Iraq and Afghanistan and earlier in Vietnam is simple: conscription. In Vietnam, conscripts were the face of public controversy since young men were called up and compelled to fight. Circumstances are very different in Iraq and Afghanistan. We have a long-service, volunteer professional army in the field operating under the doctrine of 'unlimited liability'—military professionals accept that they may be killed in performance of their duties as integral to their contract with the state. What today's Australian soldiers cannot bear is being patronised by being turned into lost victims or alternatively being eulogised as celebrity heroes by the media. They are neither of these things. They are tough, proud, serious professionals; they are ordinary men and women doing the extraordinary; and they are part of a close-knit, stoic brotherhood. What they demand is the highest respect for their calling, which is the profession of arms—no more, no less.

What will be the long-term implications of Iraq and Afghanistan for Australian strategic culture? I think both campaigns will reinforce the Army's expeditionary ethos and the Australian way of war as a form of military support for a foreign policy steeped in Western liberal democratic values. I have written elsewhere about Australia's tyranny of dissonance between strategic theory and practice. The theory of Defence of Australia is couched in terms of insularity and geography, but the practice of Defence of Australia is always about our history and heritage, of going offshore to pursue vital interests to help uphold a favourable geopolitical order. It is a curious, paradoxical anomaly—again more of a deductive mystery than an inductive puzzle.