

The Limits of The Malayan Emergency as the Universal COIN Paradigm

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Abstract:

The principles and policies put forth by the British administration during the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) have set the benchmark for counter-insurgency (COIN) situations. Optimal utilisation of a military force, the harnessing of a nation-state's national unity and proper leadership techniques via command and control are key learning points to be taken away from the crisis. However, it is vital to note that each COIN situation is unique and depending on the scenario, these learning points need to be applied with some degree of flexibility. Each situation can be unique based on the cultural dynamics and present ideologies pertinent in the local population. As such, each situation requires appropriate management, taking into consideration the key factors that contribute to the situation at hand whilst also noting past achievements and failures.

Keywords: Counter-terrorism, Situational Flexibility, Insurgent Tactics, National Unity, Command and Control

INTRODUCTION

The Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) has been frequently cited as a counter-insurgency (COIN) paradigm, whereby key concepts of utility of force, 'winning hearts and minds' and effective command and control are deliberated.¹ This essay will argue that the Malayan Emergency is indeed often regarded as a paradigm for COIN, largely due to its success story. However, it will be wise to put the lessons learnt into a specific context and not take them wholly as universally enduring maxims which are independent of time, place and situation. Each COIN is different from another. We may apply the principles of COIN (just like principles of war) but there is a need to be flexible and adaptive due to cultural dynamics, ideologies and emerging trends of contemporary COIN situations.

The essay is divided into four main sections: the first section offers an analysis of John Nagl's two approaches of COIN, namely 'annihilation' and 'turning the loyalty of the people' in the context of the Malayan campaign.² The second section will present

a literature review of four commonly drawn lessons from the campaign, namely: (1) 'population control', (2) 'winning hearts and minds', (3) command and (4) 'learning organisation'.³ These lessons demonstrated the application of a "total war" strategy by the British which ultimately brought about its success in the Malayan Emergency. The third section presents two case studies: (1) The Vietnam War to highlight the contrasting COIN approach by the United States (US) and how it led to failure and (2) Afghanistan (a present-day COIN situation) to illustrate how both the US and Britain have applied similar traditional COIN techniques and yet achieved minimal success in the campaign. The essay concludes by highlighting the dynamics of contemporary insurgencies which inevitably limit the success of a traditional COIN strategy in modern times.

THE CONCEPT OF 'PEOPLE'S WAR' IN INSURGENCIES

Before we commence on the analysis of COIN methods in the context of the Malayan campaign, it

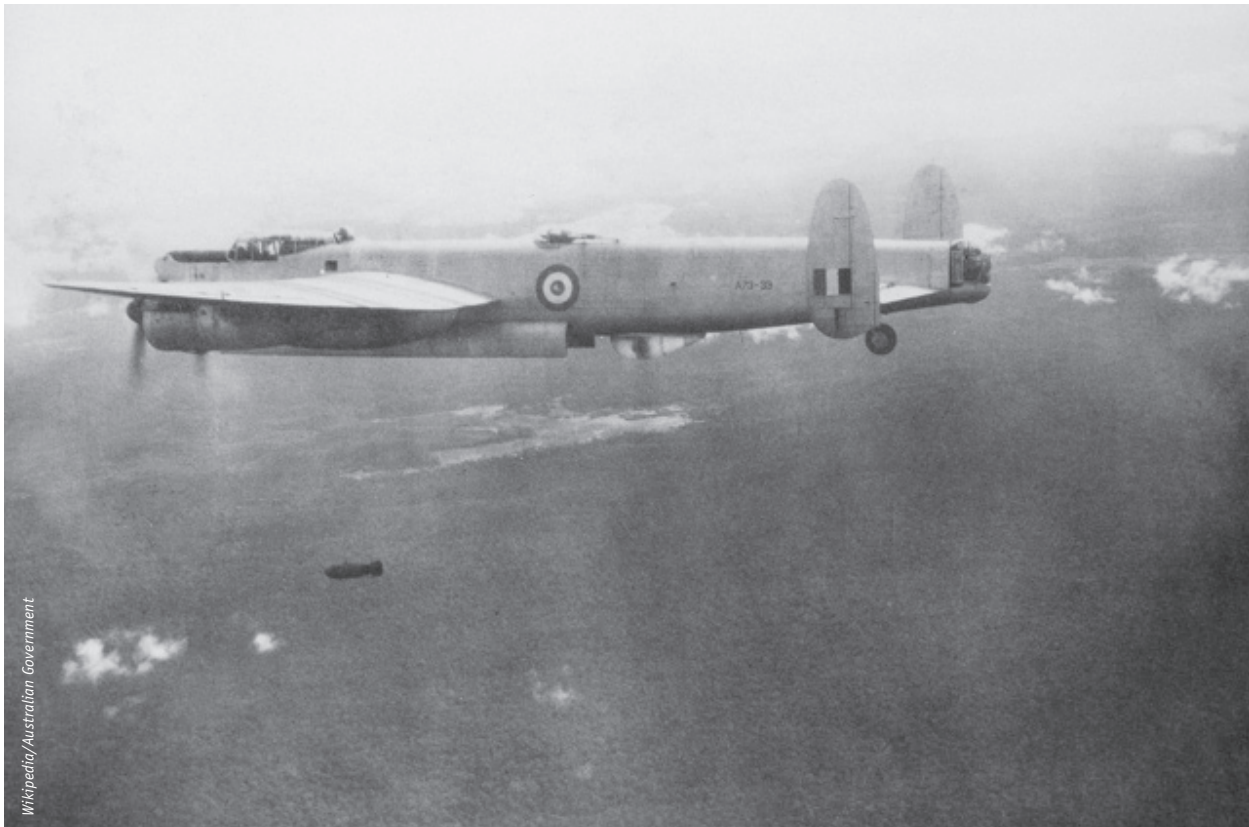
is necessary to first examine the key characteristics of such forms of revolutionary war and appreciate the nature of insurgencies. Carl von Clausewitz's 'Remarkable Trinity' of the people, the army and the government illustrated the development of the 'people's war' concept.⁴ He drew inspiration from Napoleon's remarkable success in the French Revolution, a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) in itself, which harnessed the power of the people to enable the optimisation of the tri-factors of the people, the army and the government. Mao Zedong took this theory even further by unleashing the full potential of the Communist people's power and proved that "the richest source of power to wage war lies in the masses of the people."⁵

So how does the 'people's war' fit into insurgencies? The US Army defines insurgency as "the concept of resistance applied to an organised effort by some

portion of the civil population of a country to resist, oppose or overthrow the existing government."⁶ Similarly, the British Army's definition of insurgency is "an organised, violent subversion used to effect or prevent political control, as a challenge to established authority."⁷ The underlying theme in these military doctrines' definitions is aptly described by Sir Robert Thompson that an insurgency is a war for the people.⁸ Hence, the crux lies in the support of the people and the essay will study how this prime factor was manipulated by both the insurgents and the government during the Malayan campaign.

APPROACHES OF COIN IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MALAYAN EMERGENCY

Throughout history, there have been two distinct approaches of COIN: (1) 'annihilating' the insurgents; and (2) 'turning the loyalty of the people.'⁹ These



Avro Lincoln Bomber A73-33 of No. 1 Squadron RAAF on a bombing mission over the Malayan jungle onto communist rebels. Two 500 pound bombs can be seen falling from the aircraft.

two approaches resemble two conventional warfare approaches, known as the direct and the indirect approach. 'Annihilating' the insurgents is akin to the direct approach which is a force-on-force concept in order to achieve victory over another. 'Turning the loyalty of the people' is more of the indirect approach which aims to separate the people from the insurgents so that the latter can no longer sustain due to the lack of support. Between the two approaches, the Malayan Emergency was more a vindication of the second one of 'turning the loyalty of the people.'

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In the initial phase of the Malayan Emergency (till early 1950), it appeared that the government's political strategy bore more a semblance of the "annihilation" approach. By the end of 1949, the police force had risen to almost 18,000 regular police, 30,000 special constables and 47,000 auxiliaries. With this, the military could focus more on the pursuit of the insurgents in the jungle instead of dealing with localised security missions. Likewise, the military strength was reinforced with troops from England and the numbers reached 32,000 by March 1950.¹⁰ Such force build-up efforts were evidence of the political intent to go force-on-force against the Communist insurgents and embark on 'attrition warfare.'

Despite the heavy resource commitment, the Malayan government could not gain its foothold as the insurgents still had the support of the common people who believed in the political cause of a better 'Communist way of living.' The 'annihilating' approach was clearly not the solution and the tides turned against the insurgents only with the advent of Lieutenant General Sir Harold Rawdon Briggs as

Director of Operations (DOO) in Malaya and the implementation of the Briggs Plan, which bore the trademarks of 'turning the loyalty of the people.' It was essentially a network of security operations established simultaneously in all states that would sever the support relationship between the insurgents and their supporters.¹¹

In 1952, General Sir Gerald Templar was appointed High Commissioner for the Federation of Malaya. Templar's tactics against the communists were held up as a model for COIN. His application of 'winning the hearts and minds' was one of the key success factors and this strategy was certainly the central part in removing the support of the local populace away from the insurgents. His initiatives included the construction of villages, where ethnic Chinese were resettled away from the jungles and beyond the influence of the insurgents. Templar also fought to grant Malayan citizenship to some 1.2 million Chinese and 180,000 Indians who were born in Malaya.¹² He sought political and social equality for all Malaysians and ultimately worked towards a united Malayan nation where there would be common citizenship for all races. These efforts resonated with the people and their loyalty swung in favour of the government.

COMMONLY DRAWN LESSONS FROM THE MALAYAN CAMPAIGN

The Malayan campaign presented four commonly drawn 'lessons' categorised under the rubrics of: (1) 'population control', (2) persuasion, or 'winning hearts and minds' through the utilisation of minimum force, provision of political concessions and social benefits, (3) command through unified and dynamic leadership and (4) the need for security forces to become effective 'learning organisations.'¹³

Population Control

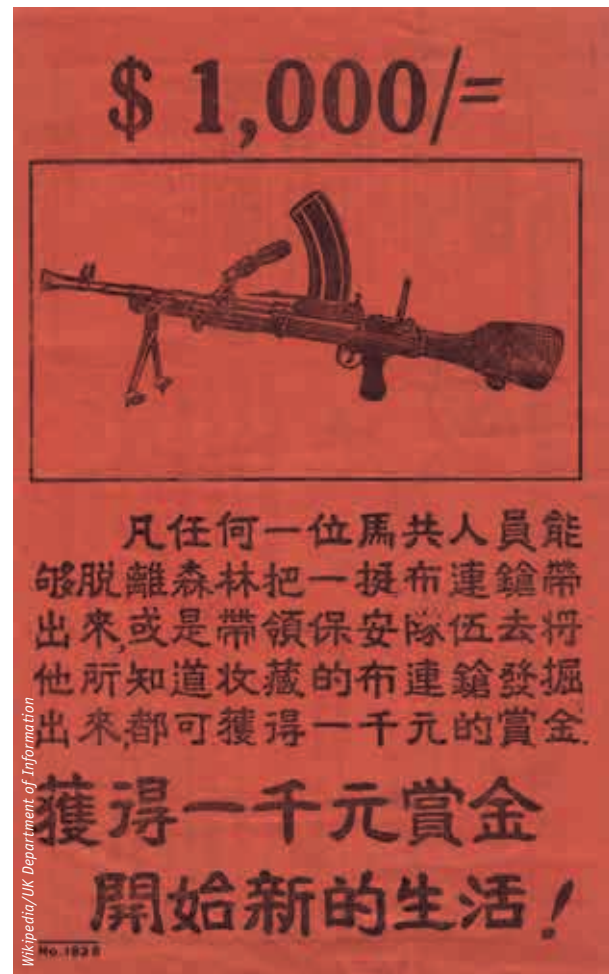
The implementation of many civil-military initiatives helped to break the links between the insurgents and their mainly Chinese sympathisers

who were living in the squatters. Other than the deployment of security forces to enhance local security in populated areas and forcing the insurgents back into the jungle, there were also civil programmes such as travel control and curfews, resettlement of the squatter population to secured and new villages, as well as food and drug controls in 'black' areas to deny the insurgents their supply lines. In particular, the resettlement of the squatter populace to secured villages prevented the contact between the communist insurgents and the people, thereby causing the inability to spread the communist agenda and curbed the recruitment of supporters. Along with progressive social and economic development and reinforced with the active and transparent efforts by the British administration towards self-governance and the independence of Malaya, the local population was kept largely under control.¹⁴

Persuasion or 'Winning Hearts and Minds'

Political will is a critical factor to win "the battle for the hearts and minds" of the affected populace because the people needed assurance in the effective and righteous administration of the government to be loyal, instead of choosing the side of the insurgents who advocated political freedom from the colonial master. P. Dixon highlighted three ways in which the battle for 'hearts and minds' could be won: (1) good government and nation-building, which aimed to improve relations with the local populace, (2) psychological operations, which persuaded the local people to support the government and (3) the use of 'minimum force' to avoid unnecessary tension with the local population due to the perceived aggression in soldiers.¹⁵ These were put into significant effect by the British administration albeit in the latter part of the Malayan campaign.

There had been much debate over the employment of coercion and repression tactics by the British which was more evident in the early stages of the Malayan Emergency. Hence, it is fair to note that J. Hack argued that the British employed various techniques in Malaya



Leaflet dropped on Malayan Communist Forces in 1953. Chinese text reads: "If any member of the Malayan Communist Party is able to leave the jungle and bring out a Bren gun, or able to lead the Peace Keeping Forces to unearth a hidden Bren gun that he or she knows about, he will be eligible for a \$1,000 reward. Receive a \$1,000 reward to start a new life."

but in varied degrees across the different campaign phases. In the initial phase of 'counter-terror and sweep' from 1948 to 1949, the strategy was 'screwing down the people' through extensive population containment and intimidation to invoke fear amongst the populace.¹⁶ However, this harsh approach did not help much as the people felt oppressed and actually grew to sympathise with the communist insurgents, resulting in more covert support by the people.

The situation became better in the following phase of 'Clear and Hold' from 1950 to 1952 which featured the population control of the Briggs Plan

and persuading the minds of the populace being a more subtle approach. This phase also initiated the beginning of the end for the insurgents with the onslaught of initiatives aimed at convincing the people of the perceived 'better choice' to support the government administration. It was only in the last phase of 'Optimisation' from mid-1952 to 1960, where the 'winning of the hearts and minds' strategy was most evident through the offering of social and economic benefits and political concessions. And such remuneration packages critically wrested away the local populace support from the insurgents. The confidence building measures undertaken by the government clearly resonated with the people and they realised that it was a lost cause pursued by the communist insurgents.

Command Through Unified and Dynamic Leadership

The function of unified and dynamic leadership was paramount in achieving effective command and control of both civil and military arms of the government administration. This joint civil-military command structure can be seen in the employment of the British 'committee' system which enabled the management of the campaign through a network of war executive committees.¹⁷

The alliance of civil-military key appointments such as the creation of the post of Director of Operations (DOO) enabled the appointment of General Sir Harold Briggs who implemented the 'Briggs Plan' in 1950 which initiated the turn of the tide in favour of the British administration. Sir Gerald Templar, who subsequently took over as the DOO and High Commissioner in 1952, was also credited for revitalising the campaign and successfully 'winning the battle for the hearts and minds' of the local populace.¹⁸ Hence, the modification of the British bureaucratic structure and the appointment of 'the right man for the job' enabled the success of the COIN in Malaya.

Learning Organisation

The British army exemplified an open learning culture, especially during the years from 1952 to 1957. Bottom-up feedback and suggestions were encouraged and accurate intelligence was obtained. Local doctrine such as the 'Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya' (ATOM) was developed, with the establishment of an efficient system for the collection, analysis and dissemination (CAD) of best practice methods. The local training centres also improved in their methods to train and re-train the security forces. In essence, the British Army proved to be an exceptional example of a flexible and adaptable military organisation capable of innovating and remodelling its organisation of forces, doctrine and training during the course of a conflict without losing sight of its objectives and that of its government.¹⁹

WHY DID THE BRITISH SUCCEED IN THE MALAYAN EMERGENCY?

After reviewing the approaches of COIN and the commonly drawn lessons from the Malayan Emergency, can there possibly be a formula for COIN which led to the British success? Sir Robert Thompson who was a member of the staff of the British DOO then and eventually became the Permanent Secretary for Defence in Malaya, famously outlined five 'Basic Principles of Counter-insurgency': (1) the government must have a clear political aim, (2) function according to law, (3) have an overall plan, (4) give priority to defeating political subversion and (5) secure its base areas first.²⁰ He argued further that insurgents will never be vanquished by military operations unless the clandestine political organisation which supports them is breached. Hence, the military instrument alone cannot achieve total victory.

Perhaps a formula for COIN can be deduced. We have seen that the indirect approach of 'turning the loyalty of the people' away from the insurgents brought about more promising results, as compared to the direct approach of 'annihilating' the

insurgents. In order to achieve this, the government needs to present a 'package deal' of social benefits, economic growth, transparent and effective governance and the minimum use of force. This 'package deal' usually weakens the credibility of the cause promoted by insurgents to overcome the authority since the prospect of a 'better living' surely appears more promising in the hands of the government authority.

In retrospect, the British COIN strategy in Malaya was a 'total war' concept which integrated the military instrument with political and socio-economic tools to defeat what essentially was a politically-motivated insurgency. Ultimately, the British succeeded because they rendered the political logic of the insurgency irrelevant by granting independence to Malaya.

CASE STUDIES – VIETNAM WAR AND AFGHANISTAN

The Vietnam War is often used as an example to highlight why the COIN strategy of the American administration failed in comparison to that of the British in the Malayan Emergency. Similarly, the contemporary COIN situation in Afghanistan has also been discussed in relation to lessons learnt in the Malayan Emergency. The essay will discuss four commonly drawn lessons and the 'total war' concept, as mentioned earlier, to analyse the two case studies.

Vietnam

So why did the American COIN strategy in Vietnam fail? One of the contributing factors was the absence of population control measures which serve to segregate the local populace from the insurgents and contain the spread of their influence. The British had sent a British Advisory Mission (BRIAM) which was led by Sir Robert Thompson himself. He shared the lessons learnt from the Malayan Emergency such as population control programmes and securing base areas with the American military but they were

not receptive to the ideas.²¹ Thus, the insurgents continued to reach out to the people and established the support network needed for intelligence sources and sustenance.

In addition, the American military did not believe in the importance of 'winning the battle of the hearts and minds' of the local populace in Vietnam. The increasing number of casualties and body counts, as well as the commitment of economic resources, also made the civilians more resentful against the government and the military for helping others at the expense of the American people.

It did not help that the political-military divide grew intensely due to a divergence between the political and military objective. President John F. Kennedy, who took office in January 1961, believed that a fundamental change in the military organisation, doctrine and training was necessary to combat against insurgencies.²² The US military, on the other hand, still adopted the direct approach and believed in using force to counter enemy forces.

The organisational culture was entrenched with the belief in fighting the conventional way.²³ The military leadership did not believe in the need to adapt to confront the asymmetric threat posed by guerrilla warfare and resisted any attempt for organisational changes. The senior military leadership such as Lieutenant General Paul D. Harkins who was the appointed military commander who took charge of the Military Assistance Command – Vietnam (MACV) in 1962, believed in conventional warfare of force-on-force to achieve victory.²⁴ Likewise, his successor General William Westmoreland was on a 'search and destroy' modus operandi.²⁵ The sheer confidence of the senior military commanders in their superior military might and firepower to overcome and outlast the enemy led to their blind faith that the US Army would prevail in Vietnam.²⁶

Hence, the American experience in the Vietnam War was a classic case of which the civil and military arms of the American administration clearly contravened the lessons learnt from the Malayan Emergency and failed to apply the formula of a 'total war' strategy. The lack of population control initiatives, the absence of persuasion techniques to 'win the battle of hearts and minds', dis-jointed civil-military command leadership and the US Army's inflexibility to adapt and learn were the perfect conditions for a fate doomed for failure.

Afghanistan

The key lessons learnt from the Malayan Emergency are still applicable to this day and we see their fundamental application in contemporary COIN situations, such as Afghanistan. Let us now examine how the British and the US militaries manage COIN operations in present times.

The British COIN strategy continues to advocate that there can be no military solution in insurgencies and that the key to success lies in the integration of political, economic and social tools to 'win the battle of the hearts and minds'.²⁷ Therefore, it is not surprising that the ideas of Sir Robert

The most critical challenge lies in the fundamental capabilities of the Afghan government and the people's trust in it. Strategic challenges exist due to the inability of the Afghan government to establish political, administrative, economic and social reforms which assure the Afghan people of safety and security. Without the assurance of these four tenets of public service, it will be difficult to win the 'battle for the hearts and minds of the people.'



SAF Medical Corps lending assistance to Afghanistan casualties; 2WO Mazlan bin Mohd Khalid (from right) and MAJ (Dr) Koh Choong Hou transferring a casualty onto a waiting ambulance.

Thompson and General Sir Frank Kitson who were two renowned veterans of the Malayan campaign, still form the basis of the current British Armed Forces COIN doctrine.²⁸ The British showed commitment in this course by reorganising from a peace support mission in the capacity of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation-International Security Assistance Forces (NATO-ISAF) to that of the traditional and tested British COIN strategy of 'winning the hearts and minds of the people' through enhancing local security, strengthening the Afghan government administration and reconstruction efforts.²⁹

As for the US military, they have learnt from their mistakes in the Vietnam War and subscribed to the concept of a 'population-centric' campaign which is similar to the British COIN approach. In August 2009, General Stanley A. McChrystal as Commander of ISAF and Commander of the US Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) argued for the need for an increased emphasis on protecting the local populace, building the trust between security forces and the people and enabling the build-up and partnering with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).³⁰ This was aligned to the United States Government (USG)'s Integrated Civil-Military Campaign Plan (ICMCP), which integrated all efforts in resisting the insurgents, enabling and enhancing security for the Afghan people and developing effective and transparent governance.

Despite the commitment and efforts in COIN strategies by the British and the Americans, the context of Afghanistan's situation prevents a complete success of COIN in the country. Afghanistan is a failed state with no structured governance and has been conflict-ridden for nearly thirty years. Needless to say, a multitude of challenges ranging from political, economic, social and military presents such a highly complicated and significantly resource-draining predicament, which is unlike what we have seen in past COIN situations.

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PUTTING COIN IN CONTEXT

Although the lessons drawn from the Malayan Emergency may appear relevant in present COIN situations, there is still a need to put them in context. The circumstances and situation of Malaya then enabled the successful implementation of the British COIN techniques. The aim of the insurgency in Malaya was to spread the Communism way of living and overthrow the colonial administration. The suppression of the Chinese community was also the main issue of contention. Hence, the strategy employed by the British was scoped to address the political, economic and social domains.



The Special Operations Task Force (SOTF) of the SAF integrates the Army's Commandos, the Navy's Naval Diving Unit and other SAF elite forces, training them to counter possible terrorist situations.

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But what if the aim of the insurgency was for religious or ethnic reasons, just like what we observed in Afghanistan? The ethnic power struggle between the Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns created a complicated dynamic situation which hindered the stable build-up of the Afghan government.³² Consequently, the traditional COIN methodology which might have worked in the Malayan campaign cannot be applied wholly, since the conditions differ.

Taking cognisance of emerging trends such as globalisation, increasing urbanisation and evolving insurgent tactics, COIN operations have become more complex than before. Globalisation through information technology and social media facilitates the spread of the insurgents' cause beyond territorial borders. The power of social media has been vividly demonstrated in the emotions that stirred the people, as in the case of Arab Square. Moreover, the growing urban environment also provides better sanctuaries for insurgents. Urbanised communities are like a labyrinth and insurgents play this to their advantage by blending in with the common people, making it even more difficult to locate them. With greater accessibility to resources in modern times, insurgents are no longer primarily dependent on the support of people, especially for sustenance. Evolving tactics such as Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs)

and suicide bombs also force modern militaries to learn and adapt even faster in order to cope with the mounting complexities in COIN situations of today.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the success of the British COIN strategy in the Malayan Emergency has led to it being hailed as the paradigm for COIN. The lessons drawn from this campaign, namely population control, 'winning the hearts and minds', unified and dynamic command leadership and learning organisational culture are still relevant in contemporary COIN situations. With the understanding of an insurgency to be a war for the people, it is paramount to win the support of the people in order to achieve victory. Therefore, the military instrument cannot be employed alone. It must be integrated with the other tools (political, economic and social) to convince the populace to support the government authority instead of the insurgents.

But we should be cognisant that the lessons drawn need to be contextualised. The circumstances and conditions of each insurgency are unique. In addition, emerging trends and evolving insurgent tactics have made COIN operations even more complicated. Hence, the lessons learnt from the Malayan Emergency should be contextualised and not be taken wholly as universally enduring COIN maxim. 🌐

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