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Extracting Counterinsurgency lessons: The Malayan Emergency and Afghanistan

British success in Malaya appeared to show how an insurgency could be defeated by Western-led forces. The campaign was plundered for 'lessons' - for Vietnam in particular. The latter's failure, however, led critics to argue that Malaya was a special case which did not offer transferable 'lessons'. An analysis of the general principles underlying British success in Malaya can nevertheless still provide important policy implications for Afghanistan.



By Karl Hack, for RUSI.org

In his 'Commander's Initial Assessment' of 30 August 2009, General Stanley A. McChrystal called for a 'jump' in forces in Afghanistan, in order to increase troop presence in critical areas. McChrystal argued that this would enable genuinely 'population-centric' operations, coupled with a 'deeds-based' approach to winning support, and so counter ordinary Afghans' growing 'crisis of confidence' in security forces. [1] Increased emphasis was to be placed on protecting the population, reducing the distance between security forces and people, and increasing and partnering Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

McChrystal's diagnosis recalled aspects of the Malayan Emergency in 1950-52, when a force surge, increased unity of command, and intensified population-centric operations brought insurgency to a violent crescendo. This coerced Malaya's communists into scaling back their operations via their 'October 1951 Directive'. However, McChrystal's report - beyond talking of the need for greater force density in selected areas - did not fill in what a population-centric campaign might look like.

Drawing on a previous attempt to conceptualise 'lessons' from Malaya [2], this article asks what 'population-centric' operations meant, and how the underlying principles of success in Malaya might translate to Afghanistan. It offers the Malayan Emergency as a case-study, and as a way of raising campaign-defining questions and issues.

What was the Malayan Emergency?

The British colonial government declared a national state of emergency in the Federation of Malaya on 18 June 1948. The Emergency had been caused by the rivalry between a colonial regime committed to slow devolution of power, and a Chinese-led communist party. While the communists had received British assistance during the wartime anti-Japanese resistance, they

had used united front tactics and infiltrated unions after the war. Communist subversion and violence in labour organisation led to a spiral of left-wing action and state repression.

The resulting Emergency lasted from 1948-60, during which the population rose from 5 to 6 million, of whom about forty-six per cent were Malay and more than thirty-five per cent Chinese of immigrant origin. Most of the remainder were Indians. The communist Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) peaked at about 8,000 in 1951, supported by a *Min Yuen* (mass movement), and Armed Work Units. Peak support amongst the wider population was estimated at one million. The MNLA was ninety per cent Chinese.

The police and army, meanwhile, peaked in 1952 at 60,000 and 40,000 respectively. These were supported in addition by 'Home Guards' (local, part-time village guards) recruited from the same rural Chinese that the insurgents courted. This peaked at around 250,000 or just under five per cent of the total population in 1952. That is equivalent (allowing 28 million Afghans to 5.5 million Malaysians and so a ratio of 5:1) to an Afghan 'Home Guard' of 1.25 million.

Emergency powers were broadened to include detention without trial, controls on food and movement, and individual and group punishment. Although the military notionally assisted the civil power, in 1950 an army man was appointed Director of Operations (DOO), and in 1952 the new DOO was also made High Commissioner. Moreover, while civil law continued, in practice wide discretion under Emergency powers produced a 'para-legal' situation as regards emergency operations.

How was the Emergency won?

Emergency operations can be divided into three phases:

1. Counter-terror in 1948-9
2. Clear and Hold in 1950-52
3. Optimisation from 1952-60

With little intelligence, Phase 1 was characterised by area sweeps, large-scale detentions, group punishment, and the rapid build-up of security forces. This broke down larger insurgent groups, but it increased insurgent recruitment by alienating many civilians.

The turning point came in the 'population control' of Phase 2. General Briggs became DOO in early 1950 and instigated a comprehensive 'Briggs Plan', with executive committees (combining police, military, Special Branch, and administrative officers) at local, state and national levels. Executive powers enabled these committees to override administrative fissures. The plan emphasised resettlement (500,000 moved into 'New Villages'), concentration (clustering of 600,000 isolated labourer's houses), and sustained area patrolling.

Gradually the 'Briggs Plan' allowed operations to be targeted around the New Villages. Controls were tightened as operations began, hard-line *Min Yuen* rounded up, and the remaining softer supporters compromised. The security forces were thus controlling not just population but *space* [2]. They were defining areas where, with better 'live' intelligence, they became more the ambushers than the ambushed. In October 1951 the Malayan Communist Party's October Directive thus ordered a change towards more easily supported, smaller units, more jungle food growing, transferring a fifth of fighters (1,600) into armed work units to support the *Min Yuen*, and to reducing incidents which harmed the population. At the same time, the communists determined to increase united front and subversive work again.

These orders progressively reached insurgent units over several months. Within this period every major indicator of conflict slumped. The number of rubber trees slashed by insurgents declined from 70,000 a month in January 1952 to less than a thousand in September. Average insurgent strength slumped from 7,292 in 1951 to 5,765 in 1952, while the ratio of insurgent to security force casualties climbed from 3:1 in 1951 to 6:1 in 1952 [3]. From mid 1952 the MNLA began a 'little Long March', ending in exile along the Malayan-Thai border, where, between 1955 and 1960, dispersed pockets of guerrillas were rounded up.

Just as the 'surge' and 'Briggs Plan' of 1950-51 (with its population- and space-centric operations), and the communists' 'October Directives' began to mature, the British were feeling downcast. Why? The High Commissioner had been assassinated in October 1951, there was friction between commanders, and the police had been pushed almost to breaking point. Ironically, then, many attributed the sudden change in 1952 to the personality of the DOO and High Commissioner who arrived in February - General Sir Gerald Templer.

In truth Templer arrived with the changing tide, but was also the perfect person to oversee the transition from the 'Clear and Hold' Phase 2 to the 'Optimisation' Phase 3 of late 1952-60. He possessed a high level of experience of both civil administration and intelligence. He separated Police Special Branch from the Criminal Investigation Department, gave it its own school, and facilitated the rapid rotation of police and army officers through the latter. Templer perfected a system we can define as CAD (Collect-Analyse-Disseminate), notably with the 1952 publication of *Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya*. He oversaw the transformation of security forces into a 'learning organisation'. The operations around New Villages were henceforth gradually perfected based on feedback and a new operational research staff, and increasingly planned not around government administrative borders, but to correspond to the communist committee areas. Meanwhile, phased police retraining began, and from December 1952 'Operation Service' emphasised the police's role as servants of the population.



Another aspect of optimisation was propaganda. The term 'winning hearts and minds' was credited to Templer. In reality 'winning hearts and minds' was subdivided. The policy towards insurgents and *Min Yuen* was to target propaganda at them personally, or to have ex-insurgents draw up propaganda in the insurgent's own terminology. The equivalent in Afghanistan would be ex-Taliban writing pamphlets in quasi-Islamic phraseology. [4] For 'fence sitting' villagers, propaganda cited the danger of helping insurgents and the possibility of getting security and help from government forces: it was based more on persuading minds than 'winning hearts'.

(Right: SAS Trooper and Orang Asli: British success relied on providing real protection and help from jungle forts)

At the highest political levels, the key was working with prevailing currents. As with American policy in post-2003 Iraq, Britain started with idealistic ideas of introducing Western-style politics, with ethnic groups to be mixed into policy-driven parties. But the British soon compromised with ethnically-defined politics. For example, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) played a vital role in screening detainees, and the British eventually accepted that an alliance between the MCA and the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) would dominate, with the latter calling the shots in a system of 'elite accommodation'.

In more general terms, the British lost insurgencies where they failed to win a major local political ally (Cyprus, Palestine, Aden), and won where they allied with core local groups such as with key factions of the Kikuyu in Kenya. In Northern Ireland, meanwhile, Britain's escape from defeat was linked to Loyalist interest in supporting the security forces, while the ultimate peace agreement had more to do with a stalemate of murder between different local factions, than with any new or increased British military success.

How might Malayan principles reflect on Afghanistan?

Let us assume - as a heuristic device for re-imagining counterinsurgency policy - that the key underlying characteristics of Phase 2 of the Malayan campaign are also necessary to win in Afghanistan. The following therefore might be key.

1. Numbers. The numbers that were required to achieve population/spatial control, translated to Afghanistan at 5:1, are 1.25 million home guards in addition to regular host nation security forces, 200,000-plus foreign troops, and 240,000 police. The translation of numbers is theoretical, but the point is to demonstrate the order of numbers, and types of forces, which may be required to achieve population-centric security.

2. Malaya also shows that population and spatial control forms the necessary core of a matrix of policies, in which 'persuading minds' and 'winning hearts' are subordinate. The emphasis was on civilian hearts and minds measures in combination with achieving a degree of physical security through population and spatial control of disputed rural areas. Although this involved population movement, other methods (such as concentrated patrolling by units attached to particular areas, and surveillance and penetration of insurgent groups, as in Northern Ireland), might achieve similar effects.

3. One critical factor in British counterinsurgencies was finding a force or ethnic groups within a society, and working with their weight. In Malaya this meant abandoning a purer Westminster model in favour of elite accommodation between communal groups. In Afghanistan it might suggest that Western-style reform of the centre could be as much a problem as a solution. Giving more power to regions, which can harness Pashtun, Tajik and other leaderships, might work better, combined with reorganising the centre as a place where these groups can bargain effectively. Without this, some of the 'corruption' that is currently being attacked in Western capitals may be the patron-client relationships that achieve cooperation between 'leaders' as the representatives of provincial forces. Attempts to over-westernise the centre could even render it increasingly separate from society. The question should not be how to make the centre more like the United States or European Union, but how to help local forces find stable forms for the kind of politics they can actually adapt to. Should no satisfactory central arrangement be possible (even by loose federalism), a backstop might be to accept partition into 'natural' areas - 'Pashtunistan' etc. At the same time, the French Indochina war of 1945-54 provides a counter-warning that supporting groups without integrating them into an overall political system can be disintegrative.

4. The geography of operations can differ within a single insurgency: different areas may be at different phases simultaneously. In addition, it is no good simply basing operations around government units of administration; they need to override government fissures through executive committee systems, and through tailoring operations to enemy geographical frameworks.

5. Propaganda and rewards must also be distributed effectively. In Malaya, the incorporation of ex-insurgent intelligentsia into propaganda roles was also vital.

6. Counterinsurgent forces must become learning organisations. The key here is that in Malaya, such learning was premised on achieving area and civilian security through Phase 2's population- and space-centric operations.

Conclusion

While precise tactics and doctrine cannot be treated as easily transferable, it is possible to reflect on underlying principles. In the same way as Marxism-Leninist and Maoist principles of insurgency were reapplied to new geographical and social terrain by insurgents, so too can such counterinsurgency principles.

Above all, the Malayan case suggests that population-centric policies work best when they are also spatially aware, imposing security on specific areas. The precise form used in Malaya - population resettlement - may not always be viable, but there have been other approaches to achieving the same end. Secondly, it suggests success requires outsiders to genuinely adapt to local political and communal realities, and that the logic and modernism of Western policies can create problems [6]. In addition, it suggests that continual micro-adjustments may be more dangerous than major crises, since it was the latter - in 1950-51 - that persuaded Britain to provide a step-change in force-levels and strategy. Above all, the key value in historical case-

studies is that they allow us to examine very different possible strategies, rather than allow policy to be driven by the expediency of everyday operations and politics.

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The views expressed above are the author's own, and do not necessarily reflect those of RUSI.

NOTES

[1] Commander NATO International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan [General Stanley McChrystal], *Commander's Initial Assessment*, 30 August 2009, redacted version accessed online on 13 October 2009, from: http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf?sid=ST2009092003140

[2] The 'space-centric' conceptualisation is from N.A.D. Senaka Dharmatileke, 'The Strategic Role of Built Space in Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: the case of the New Villages in British Malaya (National University of Singapore, unpublished thesis, c. 2008).

[3] Karl Hack, 'The Malayan Emergency as Counter-Insurgency Paradigm', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, 3 (June 2009): 383-414.

[4] *Freedom News: The Untold Story of the Communist Underground Publication* (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2008), pp. 331-38, *Freedom News* 25 (15 August 1951).

[5] The British were initially as idealistic - and naïve - as pre-2004 neocons, only retreating to Malay preference under pressure.

[6] There is an echo here of the prescient scepticism for American 'third way' ideas and good motives in Vietnam expressed in Graham Greene's, *The Quiet American* (London: William Heinemann, 1955). Greene's 'unquiet American' Pyle causes harm *because* he acts from abstract ideals such as liberty, and tries to impose them regardless of realities (p. 122).