The Unknown Enemy

Western counterinsurgency doctrine proposes that cultural intelligence is an important requirement for those forces operating amidst the unfamiliar sociopolitical structures often found in distant conflict zones. Yet while the determination to understand the intricate nature of alien societies may appear a rational undertaking in such circumstances, Christian Tripodi argues that these endeavours rarely help deliver success. The frictions of war and the complex human, cultural and political 'terrain' of the operating environment render such efforts highly problematic. In their attempts to generate and instrumentalise local knowledge for the purpose of exerting influence and control, Western military actors are drawn into the unwelcome realm of counterinsurgency as a form of political warfare. Their operating environment now becomes a space charged with phenomena that they rarely comprehend, rarely even see and over which they struggle to exert any meaningful control. All in pursuit of a victory that might literally mean nothing.

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The Unknown Enemy

Counterinsurgency and the Illusion of Control

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To Jo and Amy

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Preface

In the summer of 2009 in the Garmser district of Helmand Province, local elders began to arrive at the gates of Forward Operating Base (FOB) Delhi, home to 2nd Battalion, 8th Regiment of the US Marine Corps. There they would ask to speak with Carter Malkasian, a State Department official who had recently been appointed as the district's political officer. Observers noted Malkasian's remarkable rapport with these greybeards. A journalist reported,

> The adoration … stems from his unfailing politeness (he greeted people in the traditional Afghan way, holding their hands for several minutes as a series of welcomes and praises to God were delivered), his willingness to take risks (he often travelled around in a police pickup instead of an American armoured vehicle with a squad of Marines), and his command of Pashto, the language of Southern Afghanistan (he conversed fluently, engaging in rapid-fire exchanges with the elders).[1]

Malkasian was a diplomat rather than a Marine, a US government official with a PhD from Oxford and a past that had included a career in academia as well as an earlier role as a political advisor to US forces in Iraq's Anbar province. But he was certainly there for the Marines' benefit. The relationships he built and the information he sought signified an attempt to generate a detailed picture not only of local tribal life in Garmser but of the intricacies and vagaries of the local political environment. Malkasian's endeavours were designed to allow the 2/8th to form a mental, and in due course graphic, representation of the local 'human terrain'; a phrase designed to describe the indigenous social and political structures within its area of operations. Such information would be used to inform their population-centric counter-insurgency (COIN) methods, allowing the employment of a range of measures that would appeal to ordinary Afghans while simultaneously helping destroy, disable or even reconcile local Taliban elements in this part of southern Afghanistan. The extent of Malkasian's apparent value in this respect, particularly his ability to build trust with influential local actors, led to senior US officers

claiming the need '[f]or a Carter Malkasian in every district of Afghanistan'.[2]

Malkasian's role in Garsmer, and as part of a much wider COIN campaign in Afghanistan as a whole, is of genuine interest, partly because the description of his interaction with local elders (minus the reference to police pick-ups or Humvees) could have described, word for word, that of the typical British political officer operating a century beforehand just across the border with modern-day Pakistan in what was then the North-West Frontier Province of British India. From the courteous greeting in fluent Pashtu to the harvesting of fine detail with respect to local political atmospherics, this was stock-in-trade for the British tribal administrator. Even more so the laborious attempt to chart intricate tribal structures for the benefit of those military colleagues charged with quelling violence and insurrection in the region. In such ways the thoroughly modern US official and his British imperial predecessor were partaking in a remarkably similar enterprise. Projected into the midst of a hostile and unfamiliar society, these individuals were tasked not only with generating an understanding of that society, but doing so for the purpose of enhancing and refining systems of influence and control on the part of those military and political actors whose interests they represented

Malkasian's presence in Garmser during that period of the conflict in Helmand is of greater interest than for its mere historical synchronicity, however. In a broader sense it draws attention to a host of issues intimately related to the theory and practice of modern-day COIN and stabilisation operations. The recent attempts at political transformation through force in Iraq and Afghanistan brought to the fore a series of considerations relating to the ways in which Western militaries might better comprehend the political, social, and cultural networks into which they had been projected: in particular, the ethnographic composition of these otherwise alien societies; the structures and alignments of political and social elites; and the loyalties, needs and wants of local populations. And with this new-found drive to 'understand' arrived a concomitant requirement to instrumentalise that understanding, to use such knowledge in ways that could aid the emergence of desired political outcomes. The thirst for so-called cultural intelligence as a fundamental component of modern population-centric COIN theory led not only to the appearance of characters such as Malkasian deep on the front line but also to the appearance of anthropologists, ethnographers and a variety of other social scientists within the military effort in both Iraq and Afghanistan as they sought to lend their expertise and insight on the socio-cultural domain to the design and prosecution of operations.

Yet as Malkasian's inadvertent mimicry of British colonial techniques illustrates, the drive to understand one's enemies and the populations and societies from which they stem is no modern doctrinal flash in the pan; it is an intellectual and practical preoccupation that has long concerned those charged with the business of conquest. The West in particular has exhibited a habitual tendency to try to project its authority into unknown or unfamiliar spaces; its efforts in this respect accompanied by various initiatives designed to generate an understanding of those spaces, often in support of transformative change. In that context we can re-examine Malkasian's presence in Garmser with a second important consideration in mind. To what extent did the forms of knowledge provided by this remarkable academic-cum-diplomat actually aid the prosecution of the COIN campaign there? In what way did his presence aid the defeat of local insurgents and contribute to a state of political and economic stability in Garmser? Despite the skill and determination of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, despite an approach to COIN that focused on working with and through local communities, and despite Malkasian's presence, the US Marines failed to conclusively defeat the local Taliban. In this they were simply prey to the same basic dynamics that had applied to British political officers who, despite being embedded for years and potentially even decades within Pashtun tribal society and thoroughly conversant with local language, religion, custom and idiom, had nevertheless encountered some seventy years of concerted resistance to their authority, witnessed multiple outbreaks of widespread revolt, and failed to bring durable government control to bear upon key parts of the frontier.

At heart then, this study seeks to address a critical question. If Western militaries emphasise the need for a much fuller understanding of the peoples and cultures that they operate amongst as part of expeditionary COIN and stabilisation operations in particular, then what is the relationship between such forms of understanding and the success of these endeavours? While many academics and doctrine writers extol the virtues of increased socio-cultural understanding as critical to operational and strategic success in COIN and stabilisation, this study argues that the issue is far more nuanced. In particular it frames this thirst for local knowledge as being a fundamental aspect of a particular form of conflict, what this study terms 'political warfare'. It argues that the desire by military actors to achieve an understanding of local native society, of its cultures and attitudes, of its forms of political organisation and of its power structures and personalities has to be seen in the context of the ultimate objective, namely ambitious attempts by the intervening power to exert dominance, control or influence over that society. Warfare now

becomes a form of activity defined not simply by military action but also by the need to build political influence over the local population. But as this book illustrates, engaging – often violently – with the human, cultural and political 'terrain' of an unfamiliar society for the purpose of satisfying the grand designs of policymakers sat thousands of miles away often produces highly problematic and counterintuitive results. Our determination to understand the complex nature of alien societies may indeed be a rational response to the need to guide our actions more effectively therein, but when invited to inform the deeply complex task of manufacturing desired political outcomes through violence, that process becomes hostage to a variety of powerful shaping factors intrinsic to the processes at play. Hence the title of this study. While the 'Unknown Enemy' might appear at first glance to be an obvious reference to the stereotype of the shadowy insurgent, in reality it refers to those hidden factors that accompany the exercise of power in these circumstances, and which continually and negatively affect our attempts to deliver the outcomes sought.

Commentators will no doubt object to aspects of this book. Some may argue that it speaks to a form of military endeavour that we are unlikely to see again. That the era of liberal intervention, expeditionary COIN and nation-building is no more and that therefore the arguments proposed herein are most likely redundant, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. But as more perceptive observers note, claims as to the demise of these sorts of missions have been made before and have always proved premature in the face of the West's desire to protect or advance its interests amidst the perpetual instability of the global system.[3] The US government's claims of 'never again' after the painful experience of Vietnam were followed a decade later by its interventions in Lebanon and Grenada. A decade after that came interventions in Somalia and Haiti. Predictably, within a further decade there was the conquest of Iraq and almost inevitably a decade after that a return to the same. Meanwhile, operations in Afghanistan have seen US and British forces inch their way toward their *third* decade in that country, while France risks being dragged into its own 'forever' war in Mali.[4] These adventures appear to be a fundamental and unavoidable component of Western foreign policy and will likely continue to be so.

Others, alternatively, may argue that over the course of its pages this book appears to provide an overly bleak assessment of the utility of COIN and stabilisation operations in general. It may do but that is certainly not the intent. At heart the argument must simply be seen for what it is, namely a plea to recognise and acknowledge the very real problems associated with any activity whereby ambitious political objectives and the military designs that underpin them are exposed to the

inherently unpredictable nature of war, the intellectual distortions of military doctrine, the powerful preferences of military actors, and the seemingly innate pathologies that appear to repeatedly infect the export of power under such conditions. In this context the demand for greater understanding, for greater 'cultural intelligence' in the service of ambitious COIN and stabilisation operations, needs to recognise how the utility of such cherished forms of knowledge often rests at the mercy of powerful alternative forces.

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Writing a book isn't simply about professional support, however. Without the encouragement of friends and family it's unlikely that one can generate and sustain the mental energy required to turn vague ideas into a finished project, particularly while coping with all the other important aspects of life. In that respect certain individuals stand out. To Julie-Clare; a true friend and one whose kindness and selflessness helped create the peace and stability to allow me to pursue this project. To Paul and Chris, two warrior-intellectuals whose propensity for deep, penetrating and questioning thought is effortlessly balanced by their equal propensity for sending me an endless stream of highly distracting internet memes. To Kenneth Payne, a colleague and friend who both keeps spirits up and also helps me sink them on a very regular basis. Long live our regular sessions at Moya's in Oxford, and the hazy mornings that follow. To Geraint Hughes; a superb scholar and a unique individual, one who constantly restores my faith in humanity. To my brother Liam, simply one of my favourite human beings. And to Stephen, for the many, many years of cheerful and uncomplaining support.

Lastly, a moment of reflection. A few months before completing this book I received news that the Cambridge University political scientist Aaron Rapport had died at the tragically young age of thirty-eight. As an avid consumer of his superb scholarship I had first invited him to speak at the UK Defence Academy in 2017. Such was the students' appetite for his rapid-fire wisdom that he had returned the following year, and again in May 2019 when he journeyed down from Cambridge to give his customarily brilliant, energetic and witty talk. Yet unbeknownst to us, his audience, he did so whilst labouring in the final stages of a terminal illness. It was to be his last lecture, and he passed away the following month. Many have spoken in praise of him as a brilliant intellect and a remarkable teacher. He was both of those things, but he was also just a wonderful bloke.