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Afghanistan victory unlikely, says DND manual

Presented by



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Archie McLean/Canwest News Service

The Department of National Defence has released a counter-insurgency manual that manages expectations for victory, urges troops to understand their adversaries' grievances and pushes for political and social solutions in concert with military force.

The guide, obtained by the National Post, was signed by Chief of the Land Staff, Lieutenant General Andrew Leslie, and formally went out yesterday by e-mail and hard copy.

The 241-page document arrives as the Islamist Taliban forces are making further gains against NATO and Canadian troops in Afghanistan, the latter of whom are scheduled to withdraw in 2011.

"It is unlikely that the conflict will be suddenly ended with a major military victory against the insurgents, who will rarely offer the opportunity for decisive military engagement and are typically organized into small clandestine cells," the document says.

This should not be construed as the language of defeat, cautioned Bruce Hoffman, a leading expert in counterinsurgency who teaches at Georgetown University. He said it is a way of mitigating expectations, which is typical of these manuals.

"This is not pre-emptive, but it is timely," he said. "You have to commend the department for their foresight."

Western nations have, in recent months, expressed growing concerns that the Afghan war is one that cannot be won, although Peter MacKay, the Minister of National Defence, rejected such suggestions before a Commons committee this month.

"[If] we're there to protect people and promote peace and freedom and security, and the promotion of quality of life for these people, then we are succeeding," Mr. MacKay said, while noting that success has not come as quickly as hoped.

Officials at Land Force Command, the group that produced the document, Counterinsurgency Operations, were not available for comment yesterday.

Insiders say the book has been in the works for two years.

A compendium of modern military thinking informed by colonial misadventures and successes, the manual calls for a co-ordinated attack by both political and military forces. "Insurgency is a political problem," reads the introduction. "The mere attrition of insurgents is highly unlikely to result in [their] defeat."

Though the manual urges troops to reject Western absolute values, uses postmodern words such as "meme" and "heuristic," and likens insurgencies to communicable diseases, such approaches are commonly advocated in defence circles, said Prof. Hoffman, a former advisor to U. S. Army Chief of Staff George Casey when he was commanding general in Iraq.

The book also features citations that range from Greek historian Herodotus to Mao Zedong to Black Hawk Down author Mark Bowden.

Prof. Hoffman, whom the book references, said that several allies have already produced similar manuals with much of the same philosophies, most recently the United States.

"The situation in Iraq was going to hell in a handbasket, and there was a recognition that the United States forces were too conventionally oriented," he recalled. "Again, [the manual] was not pre-emptive, but it was timely. It arrived just around the time of the surge," he recalled, referring to the buildup of troops in Iraq advocated by General David Petraeus -- who also co-authored his army's new official manual on counterinsurgency warfare. "It had an important role overall in improving U. S. operations in Iraq."

Like its U. S. counterpart, Counter-insurgency Operations takes issue with the conventional notions of the victors and the vanquished. "Military forces do not defeat insurgencies; instead they create the security conditions necessary for the political resolution of the conflict," it says.

Prof. Hoffman noted the manual's insistence on understanding the enemy's "narrative" might be its biggest accomplishment. Defined as a plausible story that illustrates real or perceived injustices and grievances, the narrative could also be described as an uprising's founding cause.

"Similar to propaganda, most narratives will possess, at the very least, a kernel of truth but may also include substantial amounts of mythology," the book says. Regardless of their origins and their ideology, the manual continues, the grievances can be legitimate, and a "certain amount of empathy may be justified in dealing with insurgents."

Understanding the root of the grievance, Prof. Hoffman says, helps the military separate the enemy combatants who are fighting for ideology, or those who signed up for money. "You identify and isolate the extremists, and bolster the moderates."

A common pitfall, it explains, imposing one's own values on others. "Such an assumption and situation risks creating or exacerbating the perception that foreigners are trying to impose values and beliefs at odds with those of the indigenous population."

It also cautions against demonizing or delegitimizing one's foes as thugs, a time-honoured mistake

made by former U. S. secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld and others. "The classification or dismissal of a nascent insurgency as a criminal or some other movement will only fuel the insurgency through inappropriate responses," it warns.

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