Nested Networks and the Theory of Competitive Control

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David Kilcullen's *Out of the Mountains: The Coming of Age of the Urban Guerrilla* is a strong contribution to the literature surrounding counterinsurgency, with a specific focus on the future of urban and periurban areas and their potential threats. More specifically, he articulates this by looking through the lens of four megatrends: population growth, urbanization, littoralization, and network connectivity. Kilcullen himself stated that in writing the book he set out to "find a set of ideas that would do a better job at explaining conflict ecosystem – the nonlinear, many-sided, wild, and messy world of real conflict – than do traditional binary paradigm such as counterinsurgency" (Kilcullen 2013, 17). In doing so, he introduces the concept which he coins the "theory of competitive control." This theory, when applied to irregular conflict and nonstate armed groups, is meant to give credence to the notion that populations respond to normative systems of control and order in order to feel safe. He argues that the longevity of the control hinges on the actor's ability to maintain a wide-spectrum normative system.

Chapter 2 highlights how Kilcullen's theory of competitive control has been applicable on three separate fronts in three distinct places in the world: Mumbai, Mogadishu, and Jamaica. Kilcullen draws commonalities between these places in the fact that they all follow the same megatrends of rapid population group, urbanization, a close proximity to the sea, and are networked. Or, as Kilcullen writes, crowded, complex, and connected. This is important to note, as he suggests that the environment in which insurgencies will flourish will continue to shift in the future away from the traditional setting that society is accustomed to seeing them in. Moreover, it is necessary to reevaluate modern counterinsurgency theories and techniques in order to accommodate for, according to Kilcullen, the likely inevitable urban change.

Modern theorists believe that the nature of war and conflict will move away from state-on-state activity and will largely involve the current trend of nonstate actors. Nevertheless,

conventional warfare, or total war in a Clauswitzian sense, will likely still exist. With conventional warfare, however, come conventional war principles like *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. Needless to say, insurgencies do not follow the rules of conventional warfare. Western democracies have therefore needed to adjust to the "new reality" of irregular warfare and the complexities that arise with it (Baylis et al. 2019, 184). How then do governments supplant illicit power of nested networks within irregular warfare? Kilcullen suggests that it is nearly impossible, given the current trajectory. To an extent, I would agree. However, even Kilcullen himself wrote that *Out of the Mountains* and is a conceptualization of future environments given current trends and data. Addressing this he wrote, "Because we have the data, because we can see the projection, we can change the outcome – we can bend the curve, ideally in the direction of greater resilience, unlocking the adaptive resources that are already present in the cities under stress…" (Kilcullen 2013, 260).

If societies are to believe that the only constant is change, then the changing nature of warfare and armed conflict will likely experience unforeseen events in the future that will challenge Kilcullen's theory of competitive control. If cities can devolve into feral cities, why can they not evolve away from them? With ever-growing globalization, the interconnectedness of world will play a vital role in security in the future, as much as it could work against it. The concept of security itself, in the traditional sense of the word, will likely need to be expanded upon. To be more specific, the focus of security should not be considered explicitly from a militaristic stance, but that of humanity. Kilcullen touches on this idea in his conclusion by saying that "…the project isn't the project. The *community* is the project" (Kilcullen 2013, 260). Ultimately, what matters most is the people.

If governments are to take a community driven approach, rather than a militaristically driven approach, there may indeed be success in supplanting an insurgency. As Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki noted in their work *How Insurgencies End*, "With a few exceptions, lasting insurgency endings are shaped not by military action but by social, economic, and political change" (Connable and Libicki 2010, 154). Alternatively, Jones et al. wrote, "Most successful counterinsurgency campaigns have required political, economic, and social programs to help fill the vacuum once military forces clear territory" (Jones et al. 2016, 59). The commonality between these two theories is that change will likely occur with social, economic, and political motivators. With this, Kilcullen uses the example of the example the Afghan government and the Taliban. He wrote,

> Then, as now, the problem in Afghanistan wasn't fundamentally a military one: the Taliban, for all their ferocious reputation, were no math for NATO in military terms, and they'd been solidly defeated several times over in campaigns around the country since 2001. But because there was no viable, effective, nonabusive government to replace them – or, putting it in competitive control theory terms, because the Afghan government couldn't muster a wide-spectrum normative system to compete with that of the Taliban – the insurgency always returned, because it did things that the people needed and that the government either could not or would not do. (Kilcullen 2013, 157).

Kilcullen suggests that had the Afghan government been in a position to provide its people with the same normative services and systems as the Taliban, a transfer of power may indeed have been possible.

Considering Kilcullen's projection of the future of guerilla warfare and the four megatrends of population growth, urbanization, littoralization, and increased connectivity, it is understandable

why he theorizes that it may be nearly impossible to supplant an insurgency. This is especially true when taking into consideration other projected security issues like climate change and its effects on populations, natural resources, health, and geography. Insurgencies may be a relatively new threat in the capacity that they are today, naturally exacerbated by globalization. Threats have evolved, as have the actors that are responsible for those threats. In the way that nuclear weapons were a new phenomenon, so too are modern nonstate armed groups and their practice of irregular warfare. Former CIA director James Woolsey once said, "it was if we were struggling with a large dragon for forty-five years, killed it, and then found ourselves in a jungle full of poisonous snakes" (Baylis et al. 2019, 226). While used in a different context, this could be applied to Kilcullen's idea of nested networks in an urbanized environment. Conventional conflict and warfare have existed since antiquity. In recent history, states have needed to adapt to the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the new threat they bring in a technology-driven globalized world (the dragon). Today, states and their institutions must acclimate to the threat of non-state actors and attempt to accommodate their response to irregular warfare (poisonous snakes in a jungle).

In these irregularities there is one constant: the people. History tells us that there will always be a threat. History also shows that we have the ability to overcome threats as well, newly developed or not. While insurgencies may be eradicated, their mission and ideology can live on. Nonstate armed groups will continue to plague states with irregular warfare so long as their political purposes have not been addressed. Therefore, in order to supplant an illicit power, governments will need to comprehensively analyze the group as well as its environment –ergo the environment's people – prior to any designed counterinsurgency action. Kilcullen's theory of competitive control holds validity because the normative system that armed nonstate actors produce creates order and generates predictability (Kilcullen 2013, 153). That is not to say that

the people that these actors control prefer the destabilizing tactics used by insurgents, rather, that that they are preferable to a potential destabilizing alternative.

While Kilcullen's *Out of the Mountains* provides valuable insight into the likely future of urban guerilla warfare, I think its most critical analysis is that it is not completely inevitable nor an insurmountable threat. While insurgencies can arise anywhere, most lack the capability and resources to start. Many budding insurgencies fail or only have partial success. Though the probability of the creation of an insurgency is low, there are a variety of factors that contribute to its potential success. Of these factors are three primary components: grievances, weak governance, and greed – both monetarily and opportunistically (Jones 2017, 18). These issues will likely be intensified by the four megatrends previously addressed. With this, I will return back to two important concepts addressed in this paper: (a) that ending insurgencies requires social, political, and economic change; and (b) the significance of recognizing the people affected by illicit power. Jones et al. spoke of filling the vacuum once a military force leaves, but what should also be considered is successfully filling the same vacuum that is created if an insurgency and its normative systems is supplanted. A holistic approach – vis-à-vis social, political, and economic change – is necessary in future counterinsurgency measures by addressing both the nonstate armed actors as well as the people. It is equally important to recalibrate our response to conflict as it is to drag ourselves out of the mountains.

References

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