

REVIEW

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is a practising counterinsurgent. He joined the British Army towards the end of the Cold War and since then has accrued much experience of stabilisation operations and countering insurgency. His operational experience is drawn from Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Iraq and some considerable time in Afghanistan. His most recent deployment saw him running a strategic advisory team for the commander of Regional Command (South) in southern Afghanistan over the period November 2009 - November 2010. He will return for his third tour of southern Afghanistan in May 2012.

Victory Among People – **Lessons from Countering Insurgency and Stabilising Fragile States**

Right up front in the introduction to David Richards' and Greg Mills' Victory Among People – Lessons from Countering Insurgency and Stabilising Fragile States is the assertion that "conventional war is a thing of the past". This bold starting point begs an urgent question: are nations presently developing security organizations and industries that are relevant to future conflict?

It is true that predicting the future is an imprecise science. Some time ago, as a student in Glasgow, I was regularly relieved to see that the man outside the tube station proclaiming 'the end is nigh' continued to live yet another day. Despite the passing of many apocalyptic deadlines, I am told that this harbinger of doom is still there, and in rude health too. But predict the future we must. Professor Sir Michael Howard, President Emeritus of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, offers wise advice to those involved in the future gazing business: "No matter how clearly one thinks, it is impossible to anticipate precisely the character of future conflict. The key is to not be so far off the mark that it becomes impossible to adjust once that character is revealed."

The British Armed Forces' Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC), one of many organisations engaged in shining a light on the future, recognises the primacy of the modern insurgency in mapping global strategic trends to 2040. Its influential *Future Character of Conflict* paper argues that global trends indicate increasing instability and growing opportunity for confrontation and conflict. In particular, the changing dynamic between the major powers will influence how nations prepare to fight. DCDC predicts that globalisation will accelerate the pace of change in the character of conflict and create a 'Global Joint Operations Area'. State failure, it posits, will be one of the dominant and defining features of future conflict. Further, it assesses that preventative engagement may help to mitigate the occurrence and consequences of state failure if the military instrument is used as an integrated element of what it terms 'smart power'. DCDC also postulates that access to resources (energy, food or water) will drive states' security interests, and that control over these resources and their methods of distribution will be a crucial feature of conflict in the international system. These factors may dictate why we fight, where we fight and thus how we fight. Fuelled by insecurity, imbalance and grievances (real or perceived), it also seems likely that the threat of extremist non-state actors will remain a significant threat to legitimate polities. Lastly, the future character of conflict could result in nation states and alliances having less discretion than may be presently assumed.

This challenging backdrop painted by DCDC presents a powerful case for the study of the anatomy of insurgency, by those with a responsibility for applying the political, informational, diplomatic, security and economic levers of power. David Richards' and Greg Mills' *Victory Among People* provides a rich starting point for this study.

Victory Among People is much more than just a review of contemporary conflicts. It needs to be at the top of the reading list for any prospective or practising counterinsurgent – politician, government official, development specialist or soldier. The compendium takes the reader beyond academic commentary and sets out convincing deductions and recommendations for preventing or countering insurgency. The defining strength of *Victory Among People* is drawn from the dense and rich case studies used to build the compendium. The deductions and themes emerging throughout provide essential reference points that will help inform real decisions, actions and reactions.

Much ink has been spilt in recent years on the subject of contemporary conflicts. What makes *Victory Among People* different to the plethora of other studies of counterinsurgency is the breadth, diversity and range of perspectives. The compendium comprises some 21 standalone chapters which, collectively, set out regional case studies of 16 campaigns and several specific capabilities that are central to delivering progress in modern conflicts. The specific capabilities tackled in the compendium include highly informed studies of *intelligence*, *information operations* and *special forces*. Each of these capabilities, when handled with precision, provides a potent 'weapon' in the counterinsurgent's armoury. As a practising counterinsurgent and avid reader of whatever comes off the press on the subject, I found the compendium to be highly convincing and credible for a number of key reasons.

First, it is true that no one insurgency is the same as another – they are all distinct. The alchemy of the political, geographic, cultural, demographic and security variables in each conflict will never combine to produce the same local or, indeed, strategic conditions. It follows that there can be no single master-plan for countering insurgency. Attempts to import a successful strategy from one campaign into another are likely to court disaster. But, as Greg Mills explains in his introduction – drawing on Churchill's dictum, "The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see" – by examining a broad and diverse set of regional case studies of conflicts separated by continents and decades it is possible to extract key themes that are common to all. The regional case studies make compelling reading, and range from analyses of African conflicts, such as the Congo, Uganda and Somalia, to countries that are in the post conflict phase, such as Liberia and Sierra Leone. In addition, *Victory Among People* looks towards Asia and unpacks seemingly intractable struggles in Kashmir, Afghanistan and Southern Thailand. It also brings to bear first hand analysis from conflicts that do not sit neatly in any hard and fast categories, such as Colombia and Bangladesh. Whilst each chapter stands by itself, when moving through the compendium (in any direction you choose), the steady drum beat of common themes thumps home the importance and credibility of *Victory Among People*. Each of the following resonated powerfully with me: the utmost primacy of politics; the population is the prize; armies (especially foreign armies) do not win insurgencies; clumsy execution of development and stabilisation programmes will fuel the insurgency; national principles and values must be attuned to the local environment; the fundamental need for a comprehensive approach; local knowledge and local ownership of the problem is decisive.

Second, *Victory Among People* is not constructed by distant academics drawing on

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PEOPLE – LESSONS
FROM COUNTERING
INSURGENCY AND
STABILISING FRAGILE
STATES. Edited by
General Sir David
Richards and Greg Mills.
ISBN:
(HB) 0-85516-158-2
(PB) 0-85516-163-9

second- and third-hand evidence. Instead, the sixteen authors contributing to the compendium represent a stellar and highly credible group. Most still have dust on their boots from recent first-hand operational experience, and each is a highly regarded practitioner with deep and broad experience of contemporary insurgencies. It is impossible to single any one of them; rather, it is their collective experience which underpins the credibility and relevance of *Victory Among People* as a whole. Reading the final section of the compendium, 'About the Authors,' first helps calibrate the considerable weight deserved by the analysis and recommendations made throughout. What's more, the compendium was developed in a federated way, with significant latitude being given to each of the authors. This does attract some risk, in that unilateral efforts to examine discrete campaigns could present befuddling contradictions. But the federated tactic worked: the emergence of a set of powerful common themes from unilateral analyses lends much authority to the broad conclusions drawn.

Third, most recent studies on conflict provide a one-dimensional view of the campaign under scrutiny. *Victory Among People* is unique in that it examines a number of campaigns from the insurgent's perspective. This novel and instructive approach underscores the fact that insurgents and counterinsurgents are often different sides of the same coin. They both compete for the same prize – which is fundamentally about winning the support of the population. When serving as the commander of NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, General Stanley McCrystal often described counter insurgency as a broad ranging approach aimed at '*winning the argument*'. The chapter scrutinising conflict in and around Rwanda provides an insight into the thinking and approach to insurgency developed by the Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA). The winning blend for the RPA included treating the opposition and population humanely, having a clear political objective which could be understood and bought into by the population, and creating a learning culture where tactics and approach developed at a faster rate than the opposition's. While the genocide in 1994 made the RPA's victory an imperative, it was understood that there ultimately would need to be political accommodation that was inclusive to all.

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As someone who has been at the delivery end of stabilisation operations and counterinsurgencies for over 20 years, these themes represent the Holy Grail for the practising counterinsurgent.

In summary, David Richards and Greg Mills have pulled together a classic reference manual or operational guide for countering insurgency. The compendium gets beyond froth and truisms to provide practical guidance for understanding and tackling insurgencies. Books on countering insurgency too often conjure up images of a bandoliered and weapon-carrying military. But in fact we are all counter insurgents in some way or another. Militaries do not win insurgencies. In fact, if left to operate in isolation from the more decisive aspects of countering insurgencies, they lose them. As David Richards and Greg Mills note in the introduction, "*victory among people is down to managed cooperation between arms of government over a sustained long-term timeframe with politics at the forefront at all times*".

Victory Among People, therefore, is for all of us.