Conflict Transformation as Counterinsurgency

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Specialists in one field sometimes see an attractive concept in use in another field, seize it, drag it, and try to put it on display to enhance or legitimize activities in their own field. The concept may not actually work as it should work in the new arena. As a result it may be adapted to suit new purposes that are not compatible with its original use. "Conflict transformation" has long been used by peace and conflict scholars, while being asked more recently to do service in the military and security sectors, where its meaning has been subtly altered to refer to the "softer side of counterinsurgency." That shift is a misuse of conflict transformation, and should be of concern to peace studies.

The concept of conflict transformation emerged in the mid-1990s as an alternative to overly prescriptive models of conflict settlement and resolution then used in peacekeeping and peacebuilding activities. In its original form, John Paul Lederach defined it as an "*elicitive* approach, one that promotes social empowerment and transformation by respecting people and their knowledge and getting them to look for answers within themselves and their context" (emphasis added). An inherent assumption behind the concept is that conflict results from some identifiable asymmetry, inequality, inequity, or injustice within a given social, cultural, or economic context or framework. Conflict scholars such as Johan Galtung, Chris Mitchell, and Louis Kriesberg subsequently used the concept to refer to nonviolent interventions to bring about long-term structural, relational, and cultural changes and they used it to imply more than management and certainly more than settlement.

Rather, the goal was challenging the structure that gave rise to the conflict in the first place and, in so doing, changing the dynamic among the conflicting parties. This meant developing processes and systems that promoted empowerment, justice, peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and recognition. It also meant widening the scope of actors involved in conflict resolution processes by reaching out to and including grassroots or civilian participants and, in particular, participants from otherwise marginalized groups. These initiatives were viewed as having the power to "transform" a conflict such that it was not

simply settled, managed, or resolved but "transcended" into a kind of positive peace as various forms of structural and cultural violence were addressed with the active involvement of the civilian population.

"Conflict transformation" began making its way into military documents after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Use of the term in military publications started innocuously enough with the dissemination, in December of 2005, of a Joint Forces Command pamphlet titled *U.S. Government Draft Planning for Stabilization, Reconstruction and Conflict Transformation*. The document called for an interagency approach to the so-called "War on Terror" bringing together military and civilian sectors. It stressed the importance of "unity of effort" and it outlined a general plan involving stages of stabilization, reconstruction, conflict transformation, and "locally led nascent peace." The term "conflict transformation" is likely to have resonated in the military community. Military pundits were accustomed, after all, to the catch-all phrase "transformation of war," a term Martin van Crevald popularized in his book by the same name in 1991. Furthermore, with the country on a war-footing after the September 11 attacks, and setbacks in the so-called "War on Terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq, military strategists, policy analysts, and scholars alike were drawn into an exploration of tools that could be used in both arenas.

Twelve months later, in December of 2006, then U.S. Army General David Petraeus and U.S. Marine Corps General James Amos seized on the concept and brought several of its component parts into a more influential document—the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*. This was a time when counterinsurgency, a mainstay of colonial fighting, was making a comeback. Only months before, the Australian military strategist David Kilcullen, then Chief Strategist in the U.S. Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, had published an article in the *Journal of Strategic Studies* in which he argued that the "War on Terror" should no longer be construed as conventional warfare (to dominate land operations) or even as counterterrorism (to take out terrorists) but as global counterinsurgency (to win over entire populations and change societies).

To be clear, the generals in their field manual did not specifically use the term "conflict transformation." Rather, to promote a population-centric "hearts and minds" campaign, update military doctrine, and give legitimacy to what was soon to be called the "softer side of counterinsurgency," they integrated conflict transformation terms into their promotion of "unity of effort," a concept that specifically "integrated civilian and military activities" to defeat the enemy. "Mil–civ" integration (also known as military–civilian) was not a new idea in counterinsurgent strategy. As early as 1917, T. E. Lawrence highlighted the value of soldiers cozying up to locals. Ever since the 1960s, those tasked with developing counterinsurgent strategy believed

that to deprive insurgents of their power and appeal they needed to gain the support of local populations by taking off their helmets and doing what Mao Tse Tung famously said guerillas must do, namely "swim in the people as the fish swims in the sea."

Moreover, only a year before Colonel John Nagl, a West Point professor who served in Iraq and contributed to the Petraeus/Amos manual, had published a how-to book, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam,* in which he detailed how to win over populations in guerilla wars. What was new in the Field Manual was the insertion of recognizable conflict resolution and conflict transformation language into an otherwise military-oriented counterinsurgency procedural guide. To defeat the enemy and achieve stability, defined a priori as "stabilization" and recognition of the host government's "legitimacy," the generals proposed that counterinsurgents employ what conflict scholars would immediately recognize as basic tools of conflict transformation. For example, in a novel fusion of the military concept of "intelligence" and the conflict transformation concept of "eliciting" information, they specifically advised counterinsurgents to focus on understanding the population by putting down their guns and "eliciting" information from them about their cultures, perceptions, values, beliefs, interests, and ways of making decisions. Further, in language that might have seemed unusual to military readers, but was familiar to peace and conflict scholars, they recommended addressing the "root causes" of conflict and meeting basic or "fundamental needs." They, however, carefully characterized these activities in terms of military objectives, such as "to undermine insurgency" so that it no longer posed "a threat capable of challenging a government."

It is not surprising in this context that the U.S. Army under these same generals devised and subsequently secured Congressional funding for "human terrain teams." The human terrain teams initiative embedded anthropologists and other social scientists, including conflict studies scholars, in troop units to capture information that could be used to enhance military planning. This program would come to be viewed by some as designed for the purposes of subjugation and not the type of transformation envisioned by conflict scholars. But while there was some outcry, particularly by anthropologists, over the "arming" and "militarizing" of the social sciences, the outcry was not enough to dislodge the efforts and it could be argued that a further integration of conflict transformation concepts with security strategy ensued.

This fusion was taken to a new level in August of 2008 when the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) put out a document titled "Measuring Progress in Conflict Environments: A Metrics Framework for Assessing Conflict Transformation and Stabilization." This publication, a joint effort of the U.S. Army and USIP framed conflict transformation as a "self-sustaining peace" that is

specifically achieved by or through stages that include "imposed stability" and then "assisted stability." Few in the conflict management field would disagree that a modicum of stability is necessary before effective efforts at conflict transformation can be achieved. But the notion that imposed or even assisted stability are necessary or prudent precursors is a distinct adaptation since it suggests that conflict transformation cannot be created from the inside, but rather can only occur with external intervention. A later document issued by USIP and the U.S. Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute in 2009 appears to frame the transformation aspect of the process in a way that is more consistent with Lederach's original conception, but the damage may have already been done.

By October of 2008, Colonel Patrick Kelleher, in a report submitted to the Joint Military Operations Department at the Naval War College, had proposed that conflict transformation be embraced wholesale by the U.S. government as the primary framework and a "paradigm" for "Security, Stability, Transition and Reconstruction Operations (SSTR)" in what was now being called the "Long War" against insurgency. Borrowing from Lederach the importance of implementing a process to achieve "sustainable results" and from other influential work by Miall, Ramsbotham, and Woodhouse, he addressed the need to achieve transformation at five levels: "context transformation," "structural transformation," "actor transformation," "issue transformation," and "personal and group transformation." But at each level, although he used the language of conflict transformation (paying attention to "basic human needs" and "empowering civil society"), he cast its intent in clearly utilitarian and prescriptive terms, such as to "win the peace," "to establish a new domestic order," and "to further U.S. objectives."

That same month, the U.S. Army was to put out another field manual, this one specifically devoted to Stability Operations (*Stability Operations: Field Manual* 3-07) in which "conflict transformation" to achieve "a sustainable peace" was presented as an integral component of stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. What was notable here was not that the original intent of conflict transformation was misstated, but that the overall mission was placed in a context that linked current counterinsurgency (and by extension conflict transformation) in a direct linear path with a series of repressive interventions to manage, compel, and shape order and stability in the past (such as the interventions Great Britain used to restrict the thirteen colonies after the French and Indian Wars; the 1786 Ordinance that placed Native Indian Affairs under the U.S. Secretary of War and led to their being herded into reservations; the imposition by the United States of a military government in Cuba following the Spanish American War; the occupations of Germany and Japan after World War II; and the later proxy wars fought by the United States to impose order and stability in Haiti, Liberia, Somalia, and the Balkans).

Conflict transformation, as originally construed, appears to have been stood on its head. One effect has been subsequent constructions of humanitarian assistance as no more than a means to achieve order and stabilization. Such a construction is well illustrated in a February 2012 article in *Peace and Stability Journal Operations Online* where Air Force flight surgeon and ophthalmologist Dr. Stephen G. Waller characterizes the provision of "humanitarian assistance," which he refers to as "one of the four components of stability operations," as something that has been an integral part of "the military's *bag of tricks* ever since President Thomas Jefferson sent Captain Meriwether Lewis west in 1801 with a smallpox vaccine to use to create access and influence with the Sioux of the Dakotas" (emphasis added). In other words, its purpose is not to enable conflict transformation by meeting human needs but to entice key actors and thus create the conditions to influence them after conflict. Another effect, as Duffield has observed, has been to encourage the creation of structures not to empower the marginalized but to bring about order, stability, and development even if that means supporting new forms of despotic rule over others.

Today, large numbers of security and military course syllabi, many available online, make reference to the concepts of "conflict transformation," "counterinsurgency," and "stability operations" together as if one of these concepts cannot be understood without the others. To be sure, some of the integration of these concepts may be legitimate and the usage consistent with original definitions of the terms, but the growth is too significant and the juxtaposition too great (particularly in light of the past decade's security conflicts) to be dismissed without closer examination.

A similar fusion is increasingly apparent in the scholarly literature. As an indication, consider the results of a recent (October 1, 2012) *Google Scholar* search of co-occurrences of "conflict transformation" and "counterinsurgency." Scholarly mentions of "conflict transformation" alongside "counterinsurgency" were rare in the twelve years before 9/11: two publications for the period from 1989–1994 and fifteen for the period from 1995–2000. This situation changes dramatically for the 6-year period after 9/11 when the United States was attacked and in David Kilkullen's words, counterinsurgency became "fashionable again." For the years 2001–2006 the search yields 151 documents, a tenfold increase over the previous period. The number surges fourfold to 567 for the next period (2007–October 2012), a time span that encompasses most of the 6 years after the release of the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* in December of 2006. A further search adding the word "stability" for the latter time frame yields a whopping 456 publications while a search with the addition of "stability operations" yields 158. As further evidence of confluence, John Paul Lederach and Johan Galtung, recognized as the Fathers of peace and conflict transformation, and General David Petraeus, the

acknowledged architect of U.S. counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, get about equal mention in these documents (63 cite Lederach, 57 reference Galtung, and 58 cite Petraeus).

To be sure, mentions of either "counterinsurgency" or "counterterrorism" occur in only 655 (10 percent) of all 6,760 documents that have any reference to "conflict transformation" in this period (2007–2012) and most were put out by U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has eschewed use of the word "counterinsurgency" in favor of the euphemism military–civilian (mil–civ) operations, but the growing use of conflict transformation as a technique to be used in conjunction with counterinsurgency, even if employed mainly by the DoD, should be of concern to conflict scholars. In a search for ways to frame, legitimize, and connect counterinsurgency, stability, and "peace" operations, military strategists began invoking and using the term conflict transformation. I contend that the use of conflict transformation in the context of counterinsurgency and stability operations, or even in what NATO euphemistically calls a "comprehensive" (military–civilian) approach, is a misuse.

While a case can be made that counterinsurgency, because of its population-centric orientation, has distinct military benefits over conventional warfare and over counterterrorism (the effort, after all, is more to win over a population and protect it than to kill), it is a muddying of the waters to view conflict transformation as an integral or even complementary endeavor for two reasons. First, conflict transformation is always nonviolent whereas counterinsurgency, even if it embraces population-centric operations, is a form of warfare that may employ violence (such as house raids, targeted assassinations, and drone strikes) to achieve some of its objectives. Second, conflict transformation is an elicitive approach, designed to elicit structural issues and problems that give rise to conflict in the first place and bring about long-term structural change whereas counterinsurgency and stability operations are prescriptive tactics and strategies designed to bring about particular forms of military stabilization and political order in the short term. In short, one seeks to empower and build civilian capacity to change unjust social and political arrangements while the other assumes a priori that a host government is legitimate and structural change in institutions that marginalize a segment of the population is not a priority or even a mandate.

Continued use of "conflict transformation" in the context of counterinsurgency not only blurs what Cynthia Bell has called the "ways of war and peace," it poses the possibility that conflict transformation will take on a normative connotation that suggests that in war-to-peace transitions, conflict transformation depends on Western imposed or assisted stability. This is a significant departure from Lederach's conception of conflict transformation

as something that cannot be "created" or directed from the outside. This risk should not be dismissed lightly.

Beyond the normative issue, there are practical reasons for abandoning the use of "conflict transformation" as a tool in the arsenal of counterinsurgency. As Dr. Christopher Lamb and Dr. Martin Cinnamond observe in a 2010 article in *Joint Forces Quarterly,* there is an inevitable tension in military–civilian operations when one is charged with "capture-kill" missions and the other is expected to "shape, clear, hold and build." This tension is aggravated by the increased risk to both sides when the lines in the sand between them are unclear. These risks are likely to have been a factor in the shift, over the last two years, from on-the-ground counterinsurgency to greater use of high tech equipment including unmanned drones to "decapitate" insurgent leadership. Ideally, drone strikes target the enemy directly and precisely. In fact, drone strikes in Afghanistan have been associated with strings of civilian casualties and this has heightened tensions. Outcry over these casualties has led in turn to increased calls for "unity of purpose" (as well as "unity of effort") across the military–civilian fronts. It is only a short step, but one that is now being made, to suggest that the current system of "parallel chains" of "mil–civ command" be abandoned in favor of a "single authoritative command and control" system such as that used when General Douglas MacArthur was given authority over all U.S. activities in Japan after World War II. It would only take one additional step to begin promoting the need for what Colonel Crofford, quoting from a February 2012 workshop on *Peace and Stability Operations*, has called "a shared lexicon," thus completing the subordination of conflict transformation concepts to utilitarian military objectives.

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