

Book Reviews

Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla

By David Kilcullen

Reviewed by Flight Sergeant Wayne Lovejoy

Introduction

Now that the lengthy campaign in Afghanistan is drawing down there is a requirement for military personnel, and those involved in international affairs, to identify and understand the environments where future conflicts are likely. This book attempts to do just that and focuses on the fact that conflict will take place where people are, which in the developing world is in urbanized, littoral areas. Conflict is taken in the widest possible sense and the whole spectrum of violence and social control is examined to give an insight into this complex web of activity that extends well beyond the counter-insurgency of the last decade.

Dr David Kilcullen is well versed in contemporary military operations and has a significant reputation within this area. During his time as an officer in the Australian Army he served on operational tours in Indonesia, Iraq and Afghanistan. He drew upon his experience in Indonesia as the basis of his PhD thesis, which examined the political consequences of military operations there. Since leaving the army he has advised key personnel in the US government and was part of General David Petraeus' team that devised the 'surge' in Iraq to quell the violence there.

His study primarily focuses on the developing world and how various nations within it will interact with four megatrends; population growth, urbanization, littoralization and networked connectivity. It is acknowledged from the outset that this is not a new area of study and it

actually began to receive much attention prior to the attacks on the US in 2001, after which interest was diverted to the more pressing matters of Afghanistan and Iraq. Over the years while attention has been elsewhere these trends have continued at a greater rate, and the data generated from this period is used to create a straight-line projection of the coming years. This projection therefore gives far greater credence to likely developments than other predications. The study does not stop at just identifying the complex terrain created by the population mass and urban sprawl, these megacities are explored as living entities with their own 'system flows' that generate 'toxic by-products'. These analogies are used to describe the interaction within such an environment, and lead onto the theory of competitive control which is used to examine social interaction and governance by non-state armed groups.

As conflict and unrest is examined at such a local level the secondary and tertiary effects of a government intervention or NGO aid program can be better understood in light of the system flows. It is explained that by intervening in one group's activities or distributing aid to another, then the balance of these flows is affected, and this can have adverse effects against those who are trying to help. It is by discussing these wider issues that the book's appeal increases as it is not just centred on a military approach. In general the logical arguments are easy to follow, while the statistically backed content that scholars require is passively written into a free-flowing tour of recent conflicts and incidents, which are informative and interesting.

These wide ranging examples really contextualise the ideas being proposed, and reinforce the fact that the overarching issues are not new. When discussing the theory of competitive control, Christopher 'Dudas' Coke's management of a garrison-district in Kingston, Jamaica, is used to demonstrate that armed non-state groups can successfully establish themselves as the local authority. It is suggested that he was successful because he applied a full range of measures from persuasive, through administrative, to coercive, which ultimately generated a normative system. This is then contrasted to Al Qaida in Iraq who only applied coercive measures, and failed to control the population, which contributed to their defeat.

Task Force Ranger's operations in Mogadishu are used to show that cities are living entities and not just a piece of complex terrain. Here the author explains how the Task Force did not understand the city, and focused purely on the tactical aspect of the mission. The population were aggrieved by US helicopters after many civilians had been killed by their fire, so when one was shot down the population, rather than an organised militia, quickly responded. This resulted in what is described as 'swarm tactics' in that there was no command and control, but simply local people responding as they saw appropriate. On the other hand, the Mumbai terrorist attacks are used to demonstrate the devastating effects that can be achieved when terrorists understand a city and its flows. The open source details that have been put together show how armed groups can disappear into congested shipping lanes before passing through smuggler routes and slums into the heart of a city completely unhindered.

The chapter entitled 'Conflict in Connected Cities' has many examples of how mobile communications and the internet can be used to generate allegiances between groups within a country, as well as to receive information and direction from outside it. This revolution in the use of communications is explored in some depth, exhibiting the almost endless amount of possibilities it creates. The Arab Spring is used to reinforce this, and as the focus remains fixed on the issues at hand, the points are clearly illustrated.

The evidence to suggest that the population expansion on the coastlines of developing countries is substantial and convincing, so too is how these megatrends converge to create network connected megacities. The diverse examples vividly illustrate how the processes and projections are prevalent, and how they will affect all future operations in these environments. The book is certainly worth buying for anyone with an interest in the type of environments that will be faced by governments and NGOs in the future, along with the trends that are affecting these. This is a very informative book on the specified subject, and it is written in a manner that makes it interesting and appealing to a wide audience.

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