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BETWEEN TACTICAL SUCCESS AND STRATEGIC FAILURE:

RETHINKING EFFECTIVENESS IN COUNTERTERRORISM AND COUNTERINSURGENCY

Executive Summary

This paper gives an overview of key challenges when evaluating effectiveness in modern Western counterterrorism (CT) and counterinsurgency (COIN) strategies since the 1990s. It argues that, despite a doctrinal focus on legitimacy and population protection, practical approaches have prioritized measurable, short-term outputs. Evidence from multiple cases highlights a persistent gap between tactical indicators and political outcomes. As a result, current evaluation practices remain insufficient, underscoring the need for more comprehensive, evidence-based frameworks that incorporate legitimacy as a central dimension of effectiveness. Such frameworks could operationalize legitimacy through indicators such as public trust in local authorities, patterns of civilian cooperation, recruitment dynamics of insurgent groups, and perceptions of security and governance. Integrating these qualitative and quantitative dimensions would allow for a more accurate assessment of whether CT and COIN strategies contribute to sustainable political stability.

By Laurence Jost

A central challenge when assessing the effectiveness of the underlying counterinsurgency (COIN) and counterterrorism (CT) principles is the question of how to measure it. Although measuring success is also problematic in conventional warfare—as demonstrated by the limitations of "body-count" metrics in Vietnam—these challenges are even more pronounced in CT, where political legitimacy and social dynamics resist straightforward quantification. Existing evaluations suggest that many interventions remain empirically under-assessed, while commonly used indicators—such as casualty figures or disrupted networks—fail to capture the political conditions necessary for sustainable stability.

This working paper analyses key challenges in evaluating the effectiveness of Western CT strategies, drawing on selected doctrinal developments and empirical illustrations. It argues that the evolution of Western counterterrorism (CT) and counterinsurgency (COIN) reflects a persistent tension between measurable tactical efficiency and elusive political legitimacy – a tension that predates the formal codification of COIN doctrine in 2006 and continues to shape its implementation today. The rupture lies in the recognition that in a postcolonial world, external powers cannot replicate imperial models of governance-building. What remains is a narrowed, kinetic doctrine unable to deliver measurable long-term success.

Historical Precedents of Failure: When Efficiency Undermines Legitimacy

While the early post-9/11 counterterrorism and counterinsurgency doctrine emphasized population protection, legitimacy, and civil–military integration, its practical application revealed profound difficulties. A historical precedent that foreshadowed many of these challenges was the U.S. intervention in Somalia in the early 1990s. Although this operation predated the formal codification of CT and COIN strategies, it embodied many of the same underlying assumptions that would later define them – most notably the belief that limited security provision and basic governance support could generate popular legitimacy. It also confronted similar operational dilemmas: the inability to clearly distinguish insurgents from civilians, the misreading of local political structures, and the unintended alienation of the very population meant to be protected. Initially framed as a humanitarian and stabilization mission, the intervention quickly devolved into a security crisis culminating in the events of October 1993, commonly remembered as the

"Black Hawk Down" incident.[1] The Somalia case demonstrated the fragility of western interventions that later would become knows under the CT/COIN concepts, when confronted with complex social realities. The U.S. military and its coalition partners struggled to distinguish between insurgents and civilians in a densely urban and factionalized environment. As operations intensified, civilian casualties mounted, producing widespread resentment among the Somali population. Instead of being perceived as protectors, U.S. forces came to be viewed as occupiers, eroding trust and legitimacy. This dynamic triggered a hostile environment in which segments of the population actively supported militias against international troops. The very premise of the doctrine — that security forces could secure popular support by providing protection and services — was undermined by the lived experience of local communities. This dynamic became particularly visible during the UNOSOM II mission, which also marked the first armed deployment of German Bundeswehr forces outside NATO territory, illustrating how even broadly supported international interventions struggled to translate security provision into local legitimacy.

Moreover, the attempt to operationalize civil–military integration through provisional structures foundered. The idea of delivering governance and services in tandem with military operations proved unworkable in the Somali context, where state institutions had collapsed, and external actors lacked the cultural knowledge to navigate clan politics effectively. Instead of reinforcing legitimacy, international engagement deepened perceptions of foreign intrusion.

The Somali intervention also highlighted the methodological problem of measuring CT effectiveness in practice. Metrics such as territory controlled, number of insurgents killed, or humanitarian aid delivered failed to capture the decisive factor of local legitimacy. In Mogadishu, tactical military successes were offset by strategic political failure: the inability to maintain trust and cooperation from the population. This discrepancy revealed that effectiveness was not simply reducible to operational indicators but hinged on socio-political dynamics that external forces struggled to influence. Ultimately, the Somalia case illustrated why the early precedent of what later would become the U.S. COIN/CT concepts, while coherent in theory, faltered in execution. It assumed that legitimacy could be constructed through security provision and governance assistance, but underestimated the risks of civilian harm, cultural alienation, and blurred lines between combatants and non-combatants.

The result was a collapse of trust, a hostile population, and the withdrawal of U.S. forces. This experience underscored the limitations of externally driven CT/COIN and foreshadowed the enduring challenge of translating doctrinal principles into sustainable outcomes on the ground.

Doctrinal Vision: The Promise of Measurable CT and COIN Efficiency after 9/11

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, U.S. and Western policymakers articulated a renewed counterterrorism (CT) and counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine within the framework of the "Global War on Terror." Codified in Field Manual 3-24, this approach reconceptualized terrorism and insurgency as fundamentally political struggles in which legitimacy, rather than battlefield destruction, constituted the decisive metric of success. The strategic objective was thus defined as protecting populations, strengthening political authority, and denying safe havens to non-state actors. Military force was understood as necessary but insufficient unless translated into durable political stability and public acceptance of governance.

[1] Center of Military History (2002): The United States Army in Somalia, 1992-1994, Vol. 70, US Army Center of Military History.

This logic implied a comprehensive civil–military approach. CT/COIN doctrine emphasized the integration of security operations with political reform, economic development, and the provision of basic services. Instruments such as Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) reflected this multidimensional model, linking military action with governance and development at the local level. Intelligence and an understanding of the "human terrain" were considered central preconditions for effectiveness, enabling targeted operations and adaptive responses to insurgent dynamics. At the same time, the doctrine assumed that coordinated action across military, diplomatic, and development actors was essential for generating legitimacy. Fragmentation among these actors was seen as a key strategic risk. Similarly, adherence to legal norms and restraint in the use of force were framed not only as ethical obligations but as functional requirements: excessive violence risked alienating local populations and undermining the broader political objectives of the mission. Finally, like visualized in *figure 1,* the doctrine emphasized the development of host-nation capacity as a prerequisite for sustainable success. External intervention was conceived as temporary, with long-term stability dependent on the ability of local institutions to assume responsibility for security and governance. In sum, early post-9/11 CT/COIN doctrine combined kinetic disruption with a population-centric and legitimacy-oriented framework, in which political outcomes were understood as the ultimate measure of effectiveness.

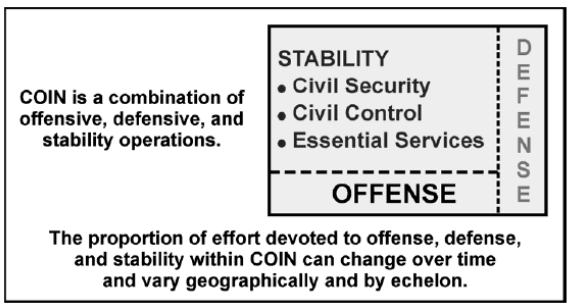

*Figure 1 – Possible counterinsurgency phases (*United States Department of the Army/United States Marine Corps (2006): Field Manual 3–24: Counterinsurgency (FM 3–24/MCWP 3–33.5), Washington, D.C.).

Adaptation and Collapse of the U.S Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism Model

Post-9/11 CT/COIN doctrine drew heavily on earlier counterinsurgency traditions, particularly French colonial practice. The post-9/11 transformation of U.S. counterterrorism (CT) and counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine cannot be understood without reference to the intellectual trajectory of General David Petraeus. Often described as the "architect" of the Global War on Terror, Petraeus drew heavily on the writings and practices of French colonial officers engaged in counterinsurgency during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. French colonial officers such as Joseph Gallieni, Hubert Lyautey, Roger Trinquier, Marcel Bigeard, and Jacques Hogard developed strategies aimed at defeating anti-colonial insurgencies in Indochina, Algeria, and sub-Saharan Africa. Their doctrine emphasized population control through territorial compartmentalization (quadrillage), the integration of civil and military authority, the mobilization of auxiliary forces, and the use of psychological warfare to undermine insurgent legitimacy. For Petraeus and his contemporaries, these writings offered a blueprint for waging "small wars" in fractured societies where insurgents blended into the civilian population. For Petraeus and U.S. planners, these French colonial writings were attractive less as historical precedents than as purported solutions to a persistent problem of effectiveness: how to neutralize insurgents embedded in civilian populations without resorting to large-scale conventional warfare.

Yet the French colonial model was structurally embedded in an imperial context where external powers exercised direct sovereignty. French officers could reorganize local administration, suspend legal norms, and exert coercive control over populations with relative impunity. This framework proved deeply problematic when transposed into the postcolonial environments. As showcased by *Figure 2*, unlike colonial settings, where imperial powers exercised direct sovereignty, Western forces from the 1990s onwards operated within

independent states whose political legitimacy and administrative authority they could not command. The hybrid vision of civil–military governance central to French doctrine – predicated on control, coercion, and institutional penetration – was thus structurally incompatible with postcolonial sovereignty. What had functioned under imperial hierarchies now confronted the limits of external influence and the necessity of local consent. Crucially, this incompatibility was not only normative but functional: without sovereign control over institutions and populations, the mechanisms through which colonial counterinsurgency once generated compliance, intelligence, and population separation no longer produced effective outcomes.

The case of Somalia thus serves less as an anachronistic prelude than as an early empirical demonstration of a recurring effectiveness problem later central to post-9/11 CT/COIN: tactical activity proved measurable, while political acceptance– the decisive variable – remained opaque and beyond external control. Although the formal codification of COIN occurred post-9/11, those early interventions already exposed the same underlying dilemma: the pursuit of tactical efficiency at the expense of political legitimacy and the willingness of the population to accept international forces. U.S. forces, unable to distinguish civilians from insurgents, inflicted civilian casualties that turned the local population decisively against them. The attempt to integrate governance and stabilization through provisional reconstruction teams collapsed amidst a lack of state institutions and the complex dynamics of clan politics. Instead of gaining legitimacy, U.S. involvement reinforced perceptions of occupation, leading to a rapid withdrawal. The Somalia case revealed not only the operational limits of counter insurgency predecessors, but also the difficulty of measuring effectiveness.

Despite these earlier precedents, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan after 2001 compelled the United States to revive a similar doctrine, known as the COIN doctrine. This apparent paradox — the return to a concept repeatedly associated with failure — brings up the question of why the concept was revived in the first place. Faced with protracted insurgencies, collapsing governance, and rising civilian casualties, U.S. policymakers recognized that purely kinetic approaches had proven inadequate for stabilizing complex post-conflict environments. Under Petraeus's influence, the U.S. Army thus reinterpreted earlier lessons, seeking to refine rather than abandon COIN. The publication of FM 3-24 in 2006 codified a "population-centric" strategy that promised to reconcile military force with political legitimacy by emphasizing the rule of law, protection of civilians, and the rebuilding of state authority. In this sense, the doctrine's revival reflected less a

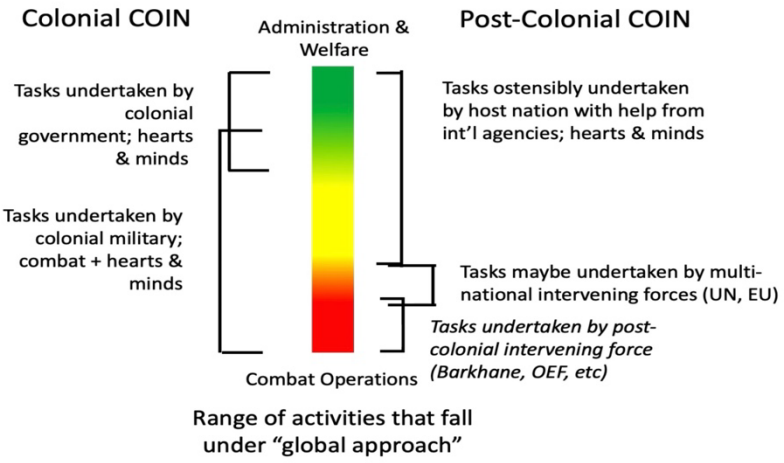

Figure 2 – COIN strategies in comparison by Michael Shurkin Ph.D. (Shurkin, M. (2020/2021): France's War in the Sahel and the Evolution of Counter-Insurgency Doctrine, in: Texas National Security Review 4 (1): 35–60.

rejection of past failures than an attempt to transform them into a more systematic and theoretically grounded model of counterinsurgency. This vision materialized most prominently in the "Surge" in Iraq (2007–2008), when additional U.S. forces were deployed to secure urban neighborhoods, foster local governance, and weaken insurgent networks. For a time, violence levels declined, suggesting partial effectiveness. Yet the model proved unsustainable once U.S. forces withdrew, as local institutions lacked the capacity or legitimacy to uphold the gains.

Following this newly formulated COIN/CT agenda, a central component of post-9/11 CT practice was the Kill-Capture doctrine, aiming to cut the snakes head of. Special operations forces, often supported by drones, targeted insurgent leaders and logistical hubs with the aim of decapitating networks. While tactically efficient, this approach suffered from diminishing returns. Leadership decapitation often produced rapid replacements, sometimes more radical than their predecessors, while civilian casualties from raids and airstrikes eroded local trust. In Afghanistan, repeated night raids became emblematic of the tension between short-term disruption and long-term legitimacy. The appeal of Kill-Capture operations thus lay precisely in their apparent measurability: leadership removals, disrupted networks, and strike counts offered quantifiable indicators of success, even as their cumulative political effects remained ambiguous or adverse. The transition from a colonial-inspired COIN model to a predominantly military-centric CT approach reflects not only operational frustrations but also the structural limits imposed by postcolonial sovereignty. In the French and British empires, colonial administrators could directly reconfigure institutions, impose legal frameworks, and dictate governance. In a case like Somalia, external actors lacked sovereign control. Post-colonial COIN approaches thus are depended on cooperation from host governments that were considered illegitimate by their populations and societies that were often corrupt, fragmented. Without reliable local partners, attempts at integrated governance faltered. Consequently, U.S. strategy narrowed to tools it could control directly: kinetic strikes, special operations, and intelligence-driven raids.

This narrowing reflected a broader postcolonial reality: Western powers could no longer impose comprehensive governance systems on foreign societies. Whereas Petraeus's reading of French colonial doctrine suggested that legitimacy could be manufactured through coordinated civil-military action, post-2001 interventions revealed the limits of such engineering. Legitimacy in postcolonial states rested not with external forces but with local actors, whose cooperation could not be guaranteed. Thus, the grand design of population-centric COIN eroded into the pragmatic reliance on military instruments alone.

As a compensatory measurement, the emergence of "remote warfare" epitomized this evolution. Drones, private military contractors, and the training of local proxies became central tools, minimizing Western footprints while sustaining kinetic pressure on insurgent networks. Yet the measurement dilemma persisted: while body counts and strike tallies offered quantifiable metrics, they obscured deeper political outcomes such as regime legitimacy, governance capacity, and societal resilience. Tactical disruption was repeatedly achieved; strategic stability remained elusive.

In sum, the evolution of western CT/COIN strategies illustrates a trajectory from the intellectual borrowing of French colonial practices, through the failures of Vietnam and Somalia, to the adaptation and partial success of FM 3-24 in Iraq and Afghanistan, and finally to the reduction of strategy to military-centric remote warfare. The continuity lies in the tension between measurable tactical efficiency and elusive political legitimacy.

Outlines of a Model for Measuring the Efficiency of COIN/CT Strategies

The preceding analysis demonstrates not merely that counterterrorism (CT) and counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrines struggled in practice, but that their practical shortcomings were structurally reinforced by flawed conceptions of effectiveness. The central problem was less the abstract difficulty of sustaining legitimacy or distinguishing insurgents from civilians than the systematic privileging of operationally measurable indicators over politically decisive outcomes. CT and COIN campaigns were assessed primarily through quantifiable metrics – kills, captures, disrupted networks, or reduced incident counts – while legitimacy, public trust, and institutional resilience remained analytically marginal. This imbalance shaped incentives on the ground, encouraging short-term disruption rather than long-term stabilization. As a result, strategies appeared effective within their own evaluative frameworks while simultaneously undermining the political conditions required for durable success. The core failure, therefore, lay not in the gap between theory and practice, but in the misalignment between what CT and COIN sought to achieve and what it was designed to measure. In this sense, the problem of measurement is best understood as a symptom rather than a cause: efficiency becomes measurable precisely where political complexity is ignored. Measurement problems thus emerge as a consequence of these conceptual uncertainties: when key categories remain blurred, efficiency is inevitably assessed through proxy indicators that privilege what is operationally visible over what is politically decisive. Unlike conventional warfare, where success can be assessed in terms of territory seized or enemy units destroyed, CT and COIN operates in a political and social terrain where the decisive variable is legitimacy. Yet legitimacy is inherently difficult to quantify. This dilemma has fueled recurring debates about whether tactical indicators, such as "kill counts" or disrupted plots, can meaningfully reflect strategic success. Against this backdrop, the RAND "Counterterrorism evaluation" from 2018 has played a central role in advancing more systematic and analytically grounded approaches to measuring CT and COIN effectiveness.[2] Rather than offering a single, unified model, RAND's contribution lies in a series of empirically informed frameworks that interrogate what can be measured, how it can be measured, and – crucially – what remains resistant to quantification.[3]

At the conceptual level, RAND approaches CT and COIN as fundamentally political-security problems rather than purely military ones. This perspective challenges outcome measures that equate effectiveness with kinetic outputs such as insurgents killed, leaders captured, or operations conducted. Instead, RAND studies typically distinguish between outputs, intermediate outcomes, and strategic effects. Outputs refer to immediate, observable actions – raids conducted, patrols deployed, or training missions completed. Intermediate outcomes include changes in violence patterns, organizational disruption of insurgent groups, or short-term improvements in security conditions. Strategic effects, however, concern longer-term political dynamics such as institutional resilience, legitimacy of host governments, and the capacity of societies to absorb or reject violent mobilization. This tiered understanding of effectiveness already signals a departure from simplistic efficiency metrics.

Methodologically, RAND's work emphasizes mixed-methods analysis. Quantitative data – incident counts, geographic dispersion of attacks, frequency of insurgent operations – are treated as necessary but insufficient indicators. These data are often supplemented by

[2] Bellasio, J./Hofman, J./Ward, A./Chua, F. (2018): *Counterterrorism Evaluation: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead*, Santa Monica, CA / Cambridge: RAND Corporation.

[3] Connable, B. (2012): *Embracing the Fog of War: Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency*, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation (MG-1086-DOD).

qualitative case studies, elite interviews, and contextual political analysis. The rationale is straightforward: CT and COIN operate in environments characterized by adaptive adversaries, complex social structures, and shifting political incentives. Isolating causal effects through experimental or quasi-experimental designs is therefore exceptionally difficult. RAND studies do not claim to resolve this problem fully but instead seek to make causal assumptions explicit and to situate quantitative findings within broader contextual narratives. A recurring methodological feature is RAND's attention to mechanisms rather than correlations. Rather than asking whether a particular COIN or CT tool "works" in the abstract, RAND analyses typically examine *how* and *under what conditions* specific interventions produce certain effects. For example, leadership-targeting strategies are assessed not only in terms of immediate organizational disruption but also in terms of secondary effects such as fragmentation, succession dynamics, and potential radicalization. This approach reflects a cautious stance toward generalization: effectiveness is not treated as a universal property of an intervention but as contingent on political context, organizational structure of insurgent groups, and the nature of state–society relations.

The empirical findings that emerge from this body of work are deliberately modest. RAND studies consistently underscore that many CT or COIN interventions demonstrate short-term tactical effectiveness while producing ambiguous or mixed strategic outcomes. Disruption of networks, degradation of operational capacity, or temporary reductions in violence are frequently observed. However, these gains often fail to translate into durable political stabilization or long-term reductions in insurgent activity. In several cases, RAND analyses point to adaptation effects, whereby insurgent organizations adjust tactics, decentralize command structures, or shift geographic focus in response to sustained pressure. This reinforces the broader insight that effectiveness cannot be inferred from declining attack numbers alone. One of the most significant contributions of the RAND approach is its treatment of unintended and second-order effects. Rather than framing these as anomalies, RAND studies integrate them into the core assessment of CT and COIN performance. Civilian harm, perceptions of occupation, and the erosion of host-government legitimacy are not externalities but integral components of effectiveness analysis. From this perspective, a CT campaign or COIN approach that achieves high operational tempo but simultaneously undermines political trust may be efficient in a narrow sense while strategically counterproductive. This analytic move aligns closely with the central tension identified throughout this working paper between tactical efficiency and political legitimacy.

At the same time, RAND analyses are explicit about their own limitations. Data availability remains a structural constraint. Many of the most consequential aspects of CT and COIN operations —intelligence cooperation, covert action, elite bargaining—are either classified or poorly documented. This creates systematic bias toward observable, publicly reported interventions and away from informal or clandestine dynamics. RAND researchers acknowledge that this skews evaluation toward what is measurable rather than what is necessarily most important. Moreover, terrorism and insurgency are relatively rare and clustered phenomena, which complicates statistical inference and longitudinal comparison.

Another CT and COIN specific limitation concerns attribution. Even when changes in violence patterns or organizational behaviour are observed, attributing these changes to specific measures is fraught with uncertainty. Political transitions, regional spillovers, economic shocks, and intra-group rivalries often coincide with kinetic interventions. RAND studies therefore avoid strong causal claims and instead frame findings probabilistically, emphasizing plausibility rather than proof. While this restraint strengthens analytical credibility, it also limits the policy conclusiveness of the results.

Despite these constraints, the RAND approach offers a significant advance over earlier evaluation paradigms. It moves the debate away from binary judgments of success or failure and toward a more nuanced understanding of conditional effectiveness. It also reframes efficiency as a multidimensional concept that cannot be reduced to operational outputs. Importantly, RAND's work implicitly challenges the assumption—central to many post-9/11 strategies—that legitimacy can be engineered through external intervention. Instead, legitimacy is treated as an endogenous political variable shaped primarily by local actors, with CT and COIN measures exerting at best indirect and often unpredictable influence.

From the perspective of this working paper, the most important implication of the RAND literature lies in the research gaps it exposes. First, there remains no widely accepted framework for systematically integrating political legitimacy into the general evaluation. While RAND acknowledges legitimacy as crucial, it remains difficult to operationalize without resorting to proxy indicators that risk oversimplification. Second, longitudinal analyses remain underdeveloped. Most evaluations focus on relatively short time horizons, leaving open the question of whether observed effects persist, decay, or reverse over time. Third, the interaction between effectiveness measures and host-state political incentives is insufficiently theorized. External interventions are often assessed in isolation from the domestic power struggles and governance failures that shape their reception.

These gaps suggest that future research should move beyond assessing individual tools toward evaluating CT and COIN strategies as political processes. This would require closer integration of political science theories of legitimacy, state capacity, and elite behaviour with existing security-focused evaluation methods. It would also demand greater transparency and data sharing to enable independent assessment. For a working paper, the key point is not to resolve these challenges but to clarify them: the problem of measuring effectiveness is not merely empirical but conceptual. Measuring efficiency without addressing legitimacy risks reproducing the very paradox that has defined Western CT as well as COIN since 9/11 – operational success coexisting with strategic failure.

Lessons Learned: Toward More Effective and Accountable CT and COIN Strategies

The preceding analysis has traced the evolution of Western counterterrorism (CT) and counterinsurgency (COIN) from their post-9/11 doctrinal foundations to their practical limitations and structural constraints. While early doctrine emphasized legitimacy, population protection, and civil–military integration, empirical practice repeatedly revealed a persistent gap between strategic ambition and operational reality. Across empirical illustrations – from Somalia to Iraq and Afghanistan – CT and COIN has demonstrated a recurring pattern: tactical effectiveness is often measurable and achievable, whereas political legitimacy, the decisive condition for sustainable success, remains elusive.

This tension is reinforced by a critical methodological weakness. CT interventions are rarely subjected to rigorous, transparent evaluation, and where such assessments exist, they frequently point to limited or even counterproductive effects. Reliance on tactical metrics—kills, captures, disrupted networks—has obscured the broader political dynamics that ultimately determine success or failure. As a result, CT risks reproducing cycles of operational activity that generate quantifiable outputs while failing to produce durable stability. Against this background, several key lessons emerge. First, future CT strategies must institutionalize evidence-based evaluation from the outset. This requires clearly defined objectives that extend beyond immediate disruption to include indicators such as public trust, institutional resilience, and adherence to human rights. Measurement frameworks must combine quantitative and qualitative data and be

insulated from political pressures that privilege short-term results over long-term outcomes.

Second, CT must be understood and operationalized as a fundamentally political endeavour. In postcolonial contexts, legitimacy cannot be externally engineered but depends on local actors and institutions. External interventions should therefore prioritize capacity-building, accountability, and conditional engagement, rather than attempting to impose governance structures or relying predominantly on kinetic force. Third, the structural shift toward military-centric CT—characterized by special operations, precision strikes, and remote warfare—is likely to persist. While these instruments offer control and measurability, they are inherently limited to disruption and do not address the underlying political drivers of conflict. CT thus risks remaining a tool of conflict management rather than conflict resolution.

In sum, the central finding of this paper is that the effectiveness of CT is constrained less by a lack of operational capability than by a persistent mismatch between what can be measured and what ultimately matters. Overcoming this paradox requires a reorientation of both strategy and evaluation: away from short-term tactical indicators and toward a multidimensional understanding of political legitimacy. Without such a shift, Western CT will continue to achieve immediate operational successes while falling short of its strategic objectives.

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