

# The Consequences of Forgetting the Lessons Learned During Counter-Insurgency Operations of the Global War on Terrorism

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The purpose of the United States Army is to fight and win the nation's wars on land. According to FM3-0 (2025), "The Army's primary mission is to organize, train, and equip its forces to conduct prompt and sustained land combat to defeat enemy ground forces and seize, occupy, and defend land areas" (p. 1). Ever since the large land wars of World War I and World War II, the United States Army has prepared for another large land battle somewhere in the world. Planning for battle against other large militaries worldwide is expected, as they pose the greatest threat to the United States' security, and being unprepared for nations like Russia and China would be detrimental. Until the fall of the Soviet Union, the primary objective was to plan for another large land battle in Europe. The Cold War large maneuver warfare mentality continued through the 1990s and beyond the terror attacks on September 11, 2001. After some hard lessons learned and too many casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States Army changed its tactics and training mentality to focus on Counter-Insurgency Operations (COIN). With the rise of China and Russia's aggression in Eastern Europe, the Army is back to focusing on large land battles through its Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO) doctrine (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2025). If the Army is not careful, we will find ourselves in a position where we must learn the hard lessons of COIN operations again. Even as the Army shifts its doctrine back to a focus on LSCO, it must not lose sight of the high likelihood of a COIN conflict. It therefore must find ways to maintain the lessons learned during the Global War on Terrorism to help save service members' lives in the future.

While it is necessary to prepare for LSCO in the event of a potential conflict with China or Russia, history since World War II indicates that a COIN conflict is more likely (Kilcullen, 2012). The fact that the United States is acknowledging and preparing for China as its own described pacing challenge (United States Department of Defense, 2022) will likely deter a LSCO confrontation. Analyzing the total physical and economic devastation to the nations of Europe and Asia after World War II, proves that a large war is not worth the cost, even if a nation comes out as the victor. During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union knew a war against each other would be disastrous, even if it did not reach the likely nuclear climax. Instead, the United States found itself embroiled in several small-scale conflicts. Furthermore, except for Desert Storm, none of these conflicts since the Korean War looked anything like the war the Army was preparing for against the Soviets. Even Desert Storm is not a good example of LSCO because the United States Army destroyed the Iraqi Army so quickly and decisively that it did not demonstrate the depth and breadth required for an actual LSCO conflict.

The biggest conflict the United States was involved in between the end of the Korean War and the present was the Vietnam War. The reasons for the start of the Vietnam War, and the political fallout from the war, are well documented, and the details do not need to be covered here, except to understand the United States Army perspective that we never learned how to adapt to a COIN fighting style the North Vietnamese pursued. While a handful of battles, such as Ia Drang, had the look of large-scale ground combat, the North Vietnamese understood they could not stand toe to toe with the United States Army. Therefore, they engaged in extensive guerrilla tactics while the Army was trying to fight a LSCO-style war. At the cost of many US lives, we could not change our fighting style and adjust away from the concept of the fight against the Soviet Union. While the Vietnam War was a long, bloody fight, it did not hold any of the staples of LSCO.

Following Vietnam, the United States found itself engaged in several small conflicts around the globe, with the intent of creating global stability and protecting its interests. Until the United States and its allies expelled Iraq from Kuwait in Desert Storm, none of the small operations could be considered LSCO. These operations ranged from conflicts in Panama and Grenada to a variety of other locations

(US Army Center of Military History, 2015). All these operations dealt more with stability or policing type actions; much more akin to COIN than LSCO. Desert Storm is the one conflict that comes the closest to LSCO since the Korean War. However, as mentioned above, the quick and overwhelming victory by the Allies never allowed this war to reach anything close to the conflict planned against the Soviets at the time, or to the potential conflict with China that the United States Army is preparing for now. After pushing the Iraqi Army out of Kuwait, the United States pulled forces out of Iraq and did not attempt to unseat the Iraqi government or stabilize the country. Regardless of whether this was the right decision or not, based on events after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, it is easy to see how Iraq could have turned into a COIN operation if the Army had been ordered to stay. Since Desert Storm, the United States continued to find itself involved in small, stability, or guerrilla operations in a variety of locations like Bosnia, Kosovo, and other locations around the world (US Army Center of Military History, 2015).

Following the attacks on September 11, 2001, the United States started the operations in Afghanistan, shortly followed by the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Despite the end of the Cold War and the small policing and asymmetrical operations the Army found itself in since then, the doctrine still focused on large-scale ground operations. It took ten years for the United States to understand that we need to change our doctrinal approach to the Global War on Terrorism (Stenson, 2022). The lessons learned over two decades of COIN operations were hard-earned and well-documented. Since the completion of the last LSCO-type conflict in Korea and countless asymmetrical operations since then, the United States Army has finally understood and implemented the changes needed to succeed in COIN operations. Since the end of major operations in the Middle East and the growing threat posed by China, and to a lesser degree by Russia, the United States is focusing again on LSCO.

The argument here is not that the United States should not adjust its doctrine to LSCO or ignore the threat posed by China and Russia. Doing so would be irresponsible and jeopardize the interests of the United States and global security. However, Army doctrine and plans need not be mutually exclusive. History can be a teacher, offering a glimpse into what alternate futures could hold. By preparing for LSCO against near-peer threats, we are reducing the likelihood of a LSCO conflict. However, as outlined in the RAND study, this could increase the likelihood that China or Russia would support asymmetrical conflict against the United States, as they did in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan (Predd, Deluca, Savitz, Geist, & Lee, 2025). Preparing for LSCO does not exclude preparing for COIN operations. While there are many ways the United States Army can maintain lessons learned from the Global War on Terrorism, two broad frameworks can help planners determine the best course of action.

One concept is to incorporate COIN principles across all Army training echelons. This would be a broad-based approach that provides minimal training to all Soldiers across the Army. A potential downside to this approach is that it could get marginalized while focusing on China and LSCO operations. The second approach is to focus on one primary unit as the experts in COIN Operations beyond the Special Forces' scope. This unit would be the first deployed to an operation that was COIN in nature, or after a large-scale maneuver is successful and stability operations begin, much as in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. One potential downside of this approach is the risk of limiting the manpower available for LSCO operations should they occur. However, it would not be difficult for this unit to move from COIN to LSCO if the need arose.

## References

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