Demobilizing Irregular Forces
For Karen and Erin
Demobilizing Irregular Forces

Eric Y. Shibuya

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Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to Louise Knight and David Winters at Polity Books for taking a chance on a first-time book writer, and for their understanding for the delays incurred when “real life” intruded onto my writing time. Clare Ansell and Susan Beer put the book together beautifully. I would also acknowledge the two anonymous reviewers whose comments improved this work. All errors and omissions, of course, are mine alone.

I owe a great deal to good mentors. Richard Chadwick at the University of Hawaii, Stephen Sloan at the University of Oklahoma, and Dimitris Stevis and Sue Ellen Charlton at Colorado State University. In my career, I have been blessed with supportive colleagues and engaged students. First at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies and now at Marine Corps University, the men and women I have worked with have been some of the most dedicated leaders and educators I have had the pleasure of working with. I could easily name them all, but special mention goes to Chris Jasparro, Terry Klapakis, and Paul Smith, as well as Willy Buhl, Rich DiNardo, Paul Gelpi, John Karagosian, Frank Marlo, Doug McKenna, BJ Payne, Paul Pond, Erin Simpson, and Brian Yee. As for my students, I thank you for your service and for all of our discussions, which either sharpened my arguments and thinking or simply made me laugh (intentionally or otherwise) when I needed it.

Finally and most importantly, this book is dedicated to my
wife Karen and our daughter Erin. They are the center of my world and I thank them for their understanding when this book inevitably pulled me away from "family time." Thank you, I love you both. Now, let’s go play.
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The early stages of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2002 and 2003 respectively only served to confirm what most analysts had concluded from Operation Desert Storm nearly a decade prior. Simply put, modern militaries (most especially the United States) had become so effective at waging conventional warfare that engaging them in such a manner would place most adversaries at a great disadvantage. Indeed, such concerns were expressed even before Afghanistan and Iraq.\(^1\) However, while a great deal of attention focused on the effectiveness of the United States and other modern militaries in waging and winning wars, there was a growing, parallel analysis suggesting that this greater effectiveness had not extended to the post-conflict situation. “Winning wars” was one thing, but “securing the peace” another matter entirely. Modern militaries had focused on the obvious dangers of warfighting, while post-conflict “stabilization” measures were often seen as someone else’s problem (this despite the long history of the military role in post-conflict stabilization).

While the end of the Cold War gave greater freedom of action to Western nations, international organizations such as the United Nations, and regional organizations as well (African Union, Pacific Islands Forum, etc.), the removal of the Cold War context revealed the greater complexity underlying much of these “new” conflicts. Third-party interventions could “do” more, but that did not mean they knew how to help. In fact, this ability to intervene “sooner” than in the
past is further complicated by not simply the post Cold War context, but rather by the post World War II “norm” that military conquest will no longer be an acceptable way of gaining territory. Hence, military interventions today seek to stabilize post-conflict environments without “occupying” them in the political sense. This creates the paradoxical situation of an international coalition expressing commitment to spend the time and resources to assist in stabilizing a region after conflict, but also promising to leave as soon as possible.

**Civil Conflict and its Aftermath**

The challenge of an armed group is one of the most critical issues any state can face. Its veneer of legitimacy in jeopardy, a government must find ways to lower levels of violence and either punish the perpetrators or answer their grievances. In either case, the government must also address any passive support for the group and bring those individuals back into the fold. However, the rise of an armed force is only a symptom of a much deeper issue – the deep insecurity and lack of faith the population has in the state apparatus. This insecurity arises from two main situations. In the first case, the government security structure cannot provide for basic security from unacceptable levels of targeted violence. Phil Williams discusses this situation in post-2003 Iraq. Williams argues, “[the armed groups] originated or (where they already existed) expanded largely because of the inability of the [Coalition Provisional Authority] and subsequently the Iraqi Government to provide security to Iraq’s Shiite majority.”¹ In the second case, the government security forces are *themselves* the source of threat to the community. In either situation, the government’s lack of ability or inclination to provide basic security is a major motivating factor in the creation and evolution of armed groups from outside the government system.
The end of the Cold War allowed for greater intervention by the international community to preserve global stability. These increasing interventions have led to an ironic situation of chronic tensions, if not conflict. Decisive conclusions to conflicts have become increasingly rare in the modern world. It is no longer acceptable, for the most part, to take territory from another country after victory in conflict. The international community either through regional or international organizations and/or coalitions has, especially in the post Cold War world, inserted itself between warring parties in an effort to bring an end to the violence. These operations hope to create “breathing space” between opposing parties in an effort to diffuse tensions, and to create the initial conditions for a peaceful society. The end of chronic organized armed violence does not lead automatically to peace; indeed, it is frequently the case that the end of “organized” or “political” violence leads simply to disorganized violence and/or criminal banditry. Whatever the term, it is certainly not “peace.” Third parties and outsiders can certainly contribute, but fundamentally, peace must be cultivated from within a society. The international community generally recognizes their contribution to developing this peace as having three major elements: the physical removal and/or destruction of much of the weaponry in the area, the elimination of the (quasi-) military or security force structures, and finally a process whereby former combatants are brought into the rest of the community. These respective processes comprise the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program.

Organization of the Book

This book does not intend to set out uniform “guidelines” for DDR. In fact, one of the central premises of this book is that the situations and background context of any case are too
varied to suggest a universal blueprint for DDR that will work in all cases. While there are of course many valuable lessons taken from each case, this does not (and should not) establish a DDR “doctrine.” Certainly, in the United States, there is a mental bias for just such a blueprint in areas of military planning. The most recent example being the development of the counterinsurgency (COIN) manual based on the initial experiences of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many scholars in the counterinsurgency field would characterize the manual as “old wine in new wineskin,” and indeed the COIN manual does draw from some of the classic works in the counterinsurgency literature. Other critics put forward the more operational concern that the emphasis placed on counterinsurgency will cripple the American military’s abilities to deal with more conventional threats. Both criticisms are not without merit, but are beyond the scope of this book. The COIN manual is noted here as an object lesson. While the manual establishes a “doctrine” of counterinsurgency, doctrine should not be dogma.

Perhaps even more important than “how” an action (be it COIN, DDR, or some other “nonconventional” military operation) is conducted is the question of “who” conducts (or at the very least, leads) them. There are serious considerations of “insider/outsider” issues that impact the ability of parties to intervene effectively. While most of the general precepts are the same for DDR no matter who leads the program, some differences between internal government and foreign government (or international agencies) interventions do exist, especially in terms of what practices are deemed to be culturally acceptable. This is especially true for operations such as COIN and DDR where there is great potential for the use of violence. Patrick Bishop, writing about the experiences of British paratroopers in Afghanistan, discusses an attempt to bring the tribal elders together for a meeting. Rather than
voluntary attendance, the Afghan National Army forces all of the elders to attend. While the practice was heavy-handed, Bishop notes that this actually protected the elders from the Taliban, as the elders could claim that they were coerced to attend. Bishop says, “It was the Afghan way of doing things. But it was not an example that the rules the British imposed on themselves allowed them to follow.” What Bishop misses in his criticism is that these “rules” are not a limitation, but a byproduct of the recognition that the British cannot act in the same fashion as the Afghan soldiers because they lack the cultural legitimacy to do so. Just as in COIN operations, the cultural norms of the affected populations must be taken into account as the DDR program is implemented.

The deeper question for understanding and evaluating the impact of “Insiders” vs. “Outsiders” in DDR projects is whether similar phenomena are manifesting due to the same causes or whether different underlying dynamics are appearing in similar ways. Whoever the initiating agent is, the purpose of DDR remains the same: DDR programs must contribute to the longer-term goal of establishing a solid post-conflict peace. (This is not the same as saying that DDR must establish a solid post-conflict peace, although this distinction is not always clear.) This book aims to focus thematically on the various phases of the DDR program, rather than (as is usually the case in the academic literature) an analysis of the DDR process within a single case.

The next chapter provides a brief overview of the history and evolution of the DDR enterprise. There are some interesting lessons provided by earlier DDR cases, but the major growth in the DDR enterprise occurs in the post Cold War era, as the end of the bipolar conflict gives the international community (particularly international organizations like the United Nations and World Bank) greater freedom to maneuver. However, this subsequent increase in “peacekeeping”
operations (an obvious misnomer in many cases, as there was at best only an illusion of peace in some cases) and other military interventions may have had the inadvertent consequence of ending conflict for the time being, but not alleviating the tensions between the competing parties. A group that considers “victory” as being stolen from them due to intervention may hope to continue the conflict when the intervention force leaves, and DDR is part of the process to prevent such actions from “spoilers.”

The DDR process is best considered as a symbiotic, holistic process. However, there is some analytical clarity to be gained by focusing on each part of the DDR process in isolation. The following chapters will therefore consider each component of the DDR process separately, keeping in mind the critical requirement of integrating (or more likely, understanding their points of reinforcement) DDR in practice. The next chapter will discuss the disarmament phase of DDR. It considers the various facets that go into an effective disarmament program and discusses how and why the international community in general has seemed preoccupied with this particular dimension of DDR to the detriment of the wider goal of initiating the building of a sustainable post-conflict peace environment. The great visibility of the disarmament phase is very attractive to political leaders (who can point to the program as evidence that “something is being done”) but this activity may have little to do in the end with setting the conditions for a long-term peace.

The next chapter focuses on the demobilization phase of the process. While disarmament reduces the possibility that minor grievances can quickly escalate into acts of major violence, the demobilization phase is where the process of peacebuilding moves from simply the absence of organized, politically oriented violence towards stabilization and the beginnings of reconciliation. The more obvious manifestations of demobili-
zation are when combatants surrender uniforms and insignia (if they exist), and no longer view themselves as part of a larger military unit. The less obvious but more significant aspect of the demobilization process is the psychological shift wherein the former combatants leave the context and structures of their fighting groups and begin to enter civilian life. The duration of the conflict and (more individually) the length of time the combatant was engaged, directly or indirectly, in conflict can have somewhat contradictory effects on the ease of demobilization. Combatants who have been in combat for much of their lives may find it very difficult to leave that structure and reinsert themselves into the larger society. For many, the resistance toward demobilization and reintegration may have less to do with the desire for peace than with the fear of uncertainty. This is especially true of child soldiers, who have had little or no connection to a non-combat lifestyle. However, in other cases the overall duration of the conflict can strengthen and empower the communal desire to end the violence, a phenomenon referred to as “war fatigue.”

Perhaps most important to consider, while the disarmament phase is most often led primarily by the military, it is during the demobilization phase that the handover of control and responsibility usually shifts from the military to civilian-led agencies and organizations. This aspect has been mentioned in the literature, but considerations of the issues involved in this handover have not received the attention it probably deserves. This shift is not symbolic; it can entail a shift in resources, not to mention the potential bureaucratic confusion and clash of institutional cultures. Making this transition as seamless as possible requires people in different agencies to work together and to get to know and understand each other and their respective agencies, their mandates, and their capabilities.

Reintegration is undoubtedly the key aspect of the DDR
process. Effective disarmament and demobilization are only symptoms or evidence of movement towards communal reconciliation. Demobilization only works if the combatants and the larger community find themselves in positions they consider “safe.” Reintegration, as the most difficult and important part of DDR, implies that there is a society, a community, for the former combatants to be brought back into. That society is often assumed to be some variation of the status quo ante, but if such were the case, then there would arguably have been no armed group to begin with. Reintegration is not necessarily about the previous society, but about creating an atmosphere and/or process where disagreements and grievances are addressed without violence or the chronic threat of violence. “Success” in DDR therefore takes place within the larger context of post-conflict reconciliation. Berdal notes concisely, “in the absence of political trust and a basic willingness to abide by agreements already entered into, demobilisation programmes are likely to fail, however well they are designed and financed.”

This reconciliation is more than simply national legislation or international agreements, but perhaps even more significantly must occur at the community level. While state-to-state relations and programs may handle reconciliation at the macrolevel, community-level programs may be more important to the individuals at the grassroots, though these programs often do not get the visibility or the associated funding of national or international programs.

Successful reintegration programs are not simply “jobs programs.” Specifically, they cannot be instituted as “entitlements” to ex-combatants or seen as rewards for participating in acts of violence. The violence cannot be legitimized in that fashion. Reintegration is therefore not just about bringing the combatant back into society, but also about creating a reinforcing relationship that gives the larger society the motivation to accept the combatant. Incentives for reintegration