The course of co-option: Co-option of local power-holders as a tool for obtaining control over the population in counterinsurgency campaigns in weblike societies. With case studies on Dutch experiences during the Aceh War (1873-c. 1912) and the Uruzgan campaign (2006-2010)

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Conclusion: The course of co-option in theory and reality

Introduction

This book has sought to study the challenge of co-opting local power-holders in weblike societies through both the theory and reality of counterinsurgency warfare by first constructing an analytical framework for understanding co-option in such a societal environment, and subsequently by scrutinizing Dutch experiences during the colonial Aceh War and the contemporary Uruzgan campaign. In this concluding chapter we will provide a synthesis of the findings of the three separate parts of this book, allowing us to draw a definite conclusion on co-option as a tool for counterinsurgency within a highly fragmented societal landscape. To that end, this chapter will first discuss the theoretical and historiographical insights of the analytic framework, and then will deal with the findings of both case studies before merging them to formulate a final answer to our main question of how counterinsurgents have co-opted local power-holders in order to attain control over the population in a weblike society.

Theoretical and historiographical insights

The assumption underlying this study’s main question is that in counterinsurgency campaigns in weblike societies a strategy of collaborative relationships with local power-holders is instrumental in obtaining control over the population. As the logic of control through collaboration is subject to an ongoing debate, this book’s theoretical exploration has assessed the validity of this underpinning by unraveling the mechanism through which collaboration spawns control. It was found that a strategy of collaboration offers a potential path to control as it bolsters both the government’s legitimacy and resources, and consequently leads to a stable condition of control. The successful application of such a strategy requires the government to address two fundamental issues: cultural legitimation, and consecutive mobilization. Cultural legitimation encompasses the exploitation of a target society’s pattern of legitimacy in order to augment the populace’s acceptance of the government’s authority. This might vary, from the use of rational-legal means to co-option of traditional or charismatic power structures, depending on the local population’s perception of legitimacy. An increase of the government’s legitimate authority sparks the people’s will to collaborate, and consequently the government can further exploit this by mobilizing much-needed resources (like self-defense militias and intelligence) from within the population. Additionally, mobilization and cultural legitimation are mutually reinforcing as they both enhance collaboration with the government and thereby increase governmental control. Contrary to this approach, the application of a ‘control-first’ strategy in a counterinsurgency
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The theoretical analysis of control through collaboration also revealed that a successful collaboration strategy requires the government (including assisting forces) to secure its collaborators effectively against insurgent violence, and other types of counter-collaboration actions. Furthermore, it became clear that counterinsurgents involved in a strategy of collaboration through co-option might find themselves confronted with local power-holders who possess considerably more resources at the grassroots level than the government itself. In order to dominate such agents without alienating them, the government should seek to carefully formalize them within and absorb them into its institutions. This is echoed in the practice of grassroots mobilization that seeks to formalize existing militias as part of the state’s security apparatus. The need to control local power-holders in a highly dynamic environment that is characterized by an ongoing struggle for control (in which all parties seek collaborative ties with these agents) also spawned the insight that the government and its counterinsurgency forces not only should be the dominant actor, but also should be the most attractive partner for collaboration. This demands a flexible strategy that is heavily dependent on the structure of the target society, which brings us to the practical implementation of co-option. While the theoretical analysis has demonstrated that co-option provides a possible path to control in counterinsurgency warfare through cultural legitimation and mobilization, the next step is to test whether co-option of local power-holders can be practiced in a weblike society. Who exactly should be co-opted in order to establish control? How can the government ensure that it becomes the dominant and the preferable partner in such a highly fragmented societal landscape?

Tailoring a collaboration strategy to local circumstances requires a profound understanding of the target society in order to ensure cultural legitimation. A weblike society is a common form of societal organization in developing countries around the world. This type of society is characterized by a high degree of political, social, and cultural fragmentation, and can consist of fairly autonomous local units. The political structure and its intimately related pattern of legitimacy reflect this fragmentation as control is typically obtained at the local level. Consequently, local power-holders, who compete for control within the various locales of such a society, dominate the political structure and therefore co-option of these agents is key to obtaining control over the population as a whole. While this reveals the validity of co-opting local power-holders as a path to control, this is insufficient for understanding the actual application of a co-option strategy in a weblike society as it still leaves unclear the question who, exactly, should be co-opted.
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A further analysis of the political structure of weblike societies has provided the insight that a local power-holder’s legitimate authority is typically derived from access to resources that accommodate the population’s strategies for survival. Political power comes from the ability to distribute these resources along the mesh of kinship, economic, and religious networks. Those local power-holders capable of maintaining multi-stranded patron-client relationships through these intertwined networks, dominate the political marketplace at the local level. In some cases such authorities might even rule over several autonomous societal fragments. Next to these dominant agents, a variation of lower-level power-holders is also commonly met at the local political marketplace. These grassroots leaders are at the very least capable of providing security to their followers (typically organized as kin-groups). This can help to resist marginalization by more powerful agents, such as when dominant local power holders engage in self-interested predatory behavior (e.g. coercion, economic exploitation) towards less powerful social groups. Such exploitation could otherwise lead to alienation of these grassroots factions, which in turn could give motivation to join or support an insurgency. Consequently, a co-option strategy in a weblike society should not only address dominant local power-holders, but should also seek to involve (marginalized) lower-level leaders. Since the composition of the political marketplace typically varies for each specific locale, there is no standard answer to the question of whom to co-opt. Therefore, we have identified a spectrum of co-option that ranges from dominant local power-holders at one end, to security providing kin-group authorities at the other. Any co-option strategy that seeks to obtain control over the population of a weblike society should aim to collaborate with local power-holders within this spectrum.

Solving the puzzle of how the government can be the preferred as well as the dominant agent for co-option of local power-holders in weblike societies first necessitated a more profound exploration of the state-society nexus in countries where such societies are present. Whereas states typically seek to accumulate centralized power and resources, weblike societies are notoriously decentralized. Hybrid states that have implemented a policy of cultural legitimation that respects the authority of local power-holders while simultaneously seeking to enhance centralization have been the ones most successful in establishing control over their weblike societies. The dialectic of control in this state-society system is such that co-opted local power-holders remain in control at the local level, while through themselves they enhance the state’s legitimacy and overall control. This immediately reveals the strong position of local power-holders vis-à-vis the state, and why it is that obtaining dominance in co-optive relationships is the major challenge for the government. The colonial states that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century were the first hybrid entities to successfully address this challenge by creating (and dominating) relationships of mutual dependency between the government and local power-holders, by providing, withholding, or withdrawing resources. Colonial administrators actively interfered in local politics in order to secure state dominance over local power-holders. Similarly, today’s states with weblike societies in the developing world seek to tip the balance of the collaboration equation by engaging in a
The successful implementation of co-option requires the state to establish an independent local administration capable of interfering with grassroots politics, and bargaining with local power-holders. Whereas administrators with a profound knowledge of local circumstances fulfilled this role in the colonial states, contemporary states with weblike societies often lack such a capacity as their administrative apparatus is typically dominated by local power-holders whose interests do not necessarily align with those of the state. The actual methods that can be deployed by local administrators to establish and maintain co-optive relationships vary from the use of force to pure persuasion. Typically, however, soft coercion and persuasive measures that seek to punish or reward local power-holders by withholding, withdrawing, or allocating state resources are the predominant tools of co-option. The clever use of these methods allows the state to manipulate the local political marketplace and empower marginalized actors while simultaneously curtailing the influence of dominant local power-holders. Most importantly, however, the analysis of the methods of co-option revealed that the local administration should possess what we have labeled co-option domination, which guarantees enforced compliance of even the most powerful local power-holder. This not only requires control over the provisioning of state resources, but also, if necessary, the use (or threat) of force - the ultimate coercive tool to ensure compliance. Yet, force should be used carefully as too much emphasis on force alienates local power-holders - and consequently might lead to their collaboration with insurgents. Forging and maintaining co-optive relationships thus requires an independent local administration capable of adopting a flexible approach that allows shifting between coercive and persuasive methods as deemed necessary for dominating the co-optive bargain with individual local power-holders. The methods of co-option, consequently, constitute a continuum from force on the coercive side, to pure persuasion on the persuasive side.

By this point, our theoretical analysis has clarified all facets for understanding co-option as a strategy for obtaining control over the population within a weblike society: co-option spawns control through the fundamental mechanisms of cultural legitimation and consecutive mobilization. These mechanisms can be implemented by co-opting local power-holders, as identified within the spectrum of co-option, through a continuum of methods applied by an independent local administration. Ultimately, however, this book’s main question can only be appropriately answered by comparing theory with evidence from the actual practice of co-option during counterinsurgency warfare in weblike societies. Our exploration has, therefore, bridged the gap between theory and reality through an analysis of the facets of co-option, as identified within the conceptual framework underlying Western
population-centric counterinsurgency campaigns. As the roots of modern counterinsurgency harken back to the very colonial states where co-option embodied the state of the art of enhancing governmental control over highly fragmented societies, a historiographical tour d'horizon of co-option throughout the three evolutionary stages of counterinsurgency was adopted to reach a deeper understanding of the utility and place of co-option in counterinsurgency. While there are significant differences in purpose and environment of colonial, classical, and modern neo-classical campaigns, they nevertheless all share the imperative of obtaining control through the population’s collaboration. Moreover, historical variations in the utility and role of co-option provide additional insights that can be used as directions for the analysis of co-option in the reality of counterinsurgency warfare. In this way, our exploration of co-option in counterinsurgency from a historiographical perspective has provided the analytical background for this book’s case studies.

The historiographical analysis brought forward the insight that (of the three historical counterinsurgency concepts) colonial warfare and modern neo-classical counterinsurgency are best suited for establishing control over weblike societies. Both concepts have acknowledged the importance of cultural legitimation and mobilization through co-option of local power-holders as the basis for establishing control over highly fragmented societies. The importance of the locale as the primary arena for establishing an acceptable level of governmental control characterizes colonial warfare as well as modern counterinsurgency. An equally important similarity is the scarce capability of resources -especially security forces- for the conduct of a campaign. The concept of classical counterinsurgency, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of establishing a strong, modern state endowed with extensive resources. In this concept, co-option is only practiced in support of the modernization process that seeks to establish a centralized state. Furthermore, classical counterinsurgency was specifically designed for transitional societies and consequently lacks the underpinnings necessary for obtaining control over a weblike society. This was further supported by an analysis of the two practical facets of co-option. It was concluded that classical counterinsurgency exclusively seeks to co-opt lower-level local power-holders by use of extensive resources, whereas colonial warfare and modern counterinsurgency aim at co-opting dominant as well as lower-level societal agents with limited resources only. Thus, only colonial warfare and modern counterinsurgency are relevant for studying our problem of co-option as a tool for counterinsurgency in weblike societies.

Our finding that the fundamental role of co-option in both colonial warfare and contemporary counterinsurgency is almost equal provides a preliminary answer to our main question. Yet historical variations brought to light significant differences in the practical facets of co-option. With regard to the fundamental role of co-option, both colonial warfare and modern neo-classical counterinsurgency consider co-option instrumental in establishing an acceptable level of control to achieve stability on the short term. This approach acts as an underpinning for long-term development and stability since additional state building takes place after the initial pacification or counterinsurgency phase. As a strategy that seeks
to exploit the local pattern of legitimacy and to mobilize additional resources in highly fragmented societies, it emphasizes the local level, which constitutes the dominant political marketplace. Thus, both colonial warfare and neo-classical counterinsurgency adhere to a ‘local-first’ strategy in which control is obtained and consolidated at the grassroots level with only a secondary role for the state’s centre. This materializes in accommodations between local power-holders and the local administration; accommodations which are the result of a bargaining process that seeks to establish co-optive relationships in order to encapsulate local power-holders and their resources within the localized framework of the state.

Let us now turn from the similarities to look at the differences. Colonial warfare and modern counterinsurgency differ considerably in the way they seek to practice co-option. Colonial warfare placed emphasis on co-opting dominant local power-holders, whereas co-opting lower-level agents was done only if necessary. In contrast neo-classical counterinsurgency places emphasis on co-opting lower-level local power-holders, but co-opting dominant local power-holders should also be pursued because a stable condition of control requires the collaboration of the dominant agents. An even greater difference concerns the issue of how to co-opt. In colonial warfare the bargaining process was conducted by colonial administrators employing a mix of coercive and persuasive methods backed up by a credible threat of force. This often sufficed for dominating even the most powerful local agent. The contemporary situation, by contrast, has seen local power-holders co-opted into a local administration under supervision of the counterinsurgents using predominantly persuasive methods. Moreover, (the threat of ) force is largely absent in contemporary co-option, and soft coercion is therefore virtually the only option for achieving compliance of unwilling actors.

These differences raise questions about the application of co-option in the reality of counterinsurgency warfare. While an explanation for colonial warfare’s preference for co-option of dominant local power-holders can be found in the scarcity of resources available to the colonial state, neo-classical counterinsurgency, which suffers from a similar scarcity, prefers to co-opt both lower-level and dominant local power-holders. This has informed the proposition that modern counterinsurgents cannot co-opt a mix of dominant and lower local power-holders as they lack the resources for such an approach. Equally important is the matter of limited coercive capability for co-option in contemporary counterinsurgency. How does this affect the ability of today’s counterinsurgents to field a flexible strategy that provides them with enough leverage to be the dominant, as well as, to be seen as the preferable partner for co-option? Since both the analysis of colonial warfare and our theoretical exploration have revealed that a credible coercive stick is instrumental in achieving co-option dominance, this has led to the proposition that neo-classical’s limited coercive capability is insufficient for controlling co-optive relationships. A thorough understanding of co-option as a tool for counterinsurgency in weblike societies, however, requires us to mirror these matters with regard to colonial warfare. It needs to be explored how, exactly, colonial warfare achieved a co-option of dominant, and (if necessary) lower
local power-holders with limited resources using a mix of persuasive and coercive methods. A true understanding of co-option in counterinsurgency, consequently, can only be acquired through an analysis of both colonial and contemporary experiences, as this will enhance our insight in the dynamics surrounding the practical issues of whom and how to co-opt. Therefore, a more robust answer to this book’s main question can only be given after scrutinizing the application of co-option in the quotidian reality of the colonial Aceh War and the contemporary Uruzgan campaign.

Insights from the Aceh War

Cultural legitimation and mobilization were key features of colonial pacification campaigns. The scarcity of resources available to colonial states typically necessitated the use of local power-holders and their militias for establishing control over the target society's population. Although the Dutch had gained considerable experience in practicing these underlying mechanisms of a co-option strategy since the early days of their presence in the Indonesian archipelago, they encountered severe difficulties in implementing these principles during the Aceh War. Due to a poor understanding of Acehnese society it took the Dutch more than two decades to formulate the first beginning of what would become a successful co-option strategy. During the first period of the war subsequent commanders remarkably failed to establish or accept a proper understanding of Aceh's highly fragmented society and its pattern of legitimacy as an underpinning of their approach. Consequently, despite all previous experiences with co-option as a strategy for obtaining control, the first part of the war was characterized by a diffuse, if not completely absent, practicing of cultural legitimation and mobilization.

The failure to adopt an appropriate co-option strategy during the first two decades is obvious from the choice of local allies as well as the way these relationships were forged and maintained. Consistent with the general trend in colonial warfare the Dutch first sought co-option of a dominant local power-holder. The political structure of Acehnese society, however, was dominated by the uléëbalang who were the legitimate authorities ruling the more than 100 locales of this highly fragmented society. The Sultan, who was initially the centre of gravity of the faltering Dutch co-option strategy held merely symbolic authority, and therefore was incapable of controlling Acehnese society as a whole. Similarly, the warlord-like Teuku Uma did not prove the key to control over the Acehnese as he only held influence over the west coast and the adjacent part of Great Aceh. These false assessments were the result of a lack of knowledge on local affairs that prevented the effective use of the limited resources. Moreover, the resulting quest for an appropriate strategy triggered a series of policy changes that rendered the Dutch a notoriously unreliable partner for collaboration; during the first part of the war the colonial administration never managed to become the preferred as well as the dominant agent. At best the Dutch became either only the dominant
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Partner (in the vicinity of their Kutradja bridgehead) or temporarily the preferred agent, as was the case with Teuku Uma. The co-option of the latter resulted in a debacle that effectively illustrates the importance of fine-grained intelligence and a capability for co-option domination; the administrators in Kutradja were highly ignorant of Uma’s duplicity and self-convinced that they controlled Uma through the allocation or withdrawal of rewards. Moreover, it also clarified that the true legitimate power-holders had to be engaged and that the Dutch had to create a vested interest that would render them the preferred as well as the dominant partner for co-option.

The Aceh strategy that ultimately brought the colonial administration control by co-opting the ulêëbalang emerged in 1898 when Snouck Hurgronje’s 1892 report on Acehnese society was accepted as the underpinning for the Dutch war policy. Thus, cultural legitimation became finally embedded in the colonial administration’s strategy as the question of whom exactly to co-opt now was answered through a proper analysis of the target society’s pattern of legitimacy. Although mobilization was initially reluctantly practiced due to the experience with Uma’s legion, the use of self-defense militias gradually became a key feature of the new approach. All of this was made possible by the so called Korte Verklaring, a system which allowed colonial administrators, the ‘officers-civil authorities’, at the grassroots level to engage the leading ulêëbalang of a locale with a tailored package of co-optive methods based on knowledge of the local circumstances. This KV-system, however, was only introduced after the colonial administration had secured its reputation as the dominant partner for collaboration through a series of firm actions against the most defiant statelets of Aceh’s Dependencies. These actions demonstrated the Dutch willingness to deploy force at the local level. Thus, exemplary force created a credible threat of force and thereby yielded co-option domination. Backed up by this potent coercive stick the local colonial officials managed to establish and maintain a system of co-option in which the Dutch created a vested interest for the ulêëbalang to co-opt; non-compliance was severely punished, while compliance was generously awarded. The methods employed for establishing and maintaining co-optive relationships directly addressed a local power-holder’s personal interest. They typically encompassed economical rewards as well as soft coercion such as fines and the withdrawal or withholding of economical incentives. Thus, the Aceh strategy finally established the Dutch as the dominant as well as the preferred partner for collaboration.

In terms of this study’s analytical framework the Aceh strategy won control over the local population as it successfully implemented cultural legitimation and mobilization by co-opting dominant local power-holders at the grassroots level through a flexible approach that consisted of a balanced use of coercive and persuasive methods. While the ulêëbalang were the dominant agents of their own locale at a lower societal level (where they controlled, various segments of predominantly villagers) they only held limited influence over the wider society. Consequently, these local power-holders can be positioned in the middle of the spectrum of co-option. With regard to the co-option continuum the Aceh strategy represented a balanced mix as it mainly relied on soft coercion and persuasive methods
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for establishing co-optive relationships, but also depended on a credible threat of force. As always in colonial warfare, the use of force against the population was never far away. Yet it should be noted that according to standards of that day the Aceh strategy might have been a genuine example of limited force. Compared to the estimated total of casualties of the Aceh War or those of for instance the earlier Java War, the more than 12,000 Acehnese that perished as a consequence of the Aceh strategy are a relatively limited number. Yet, this number also demonstrates that it goes without doubt that brutal force was inherently part of the reality of colonial pacification as even exemplary force included mass casualties. While totally unacceptable to today’s standards we have to conclude that lethal force was a key trait of co-option in colonial warfare as it was pivotal for setting the collaborative equation to the administration’s advantage.

Compared to the commonly observed pattern in colonial warfare the Aceh strategy deviates from the standard practice of co-opting dominant local power-holders capable of exerting influence over the wider population. However, this was not an uncommon exception in pacification campaigns, as the need to address the target society’s specific pattern of legitimacy would often prescribe co-option of lower-level societal leaders. Typically, the colonial administration would first seek to co-opt a single dominant local power-holder as such an agent could be controlled with relatively limited resources. When this proved insufficient more intensive co-option of lower-level local power-holders became an option. Clearly, the evolution of co-option as part of the Dutch war strategy corresponds to this pattern as Aceh could not be controlled through (seemingly) dominant local power-holders such as the Sultan or Teuku Uma, but only by co-opting the uléëbalang, the legitimate authorities in charge of the various locales of this highly fragmented society. While this seems logical considering the need to practice cultural legitimation, we should not forget that it took the Dutch more than twenty years to reach this conclusion. This once more stresses the pivotal importance of a proper understanding of the target society for formulating a successful co-option strategy. Preferably fine-grained intelligence on the local societal landscape should be available before the start of the campaign, but due to the complicated nature of highly fragmented, weblike societies this is often not the case. Therefore counterinsurgents should strive to develop a clear picture of the human terrain as soon as possible and exploit this understanding in order to adapt their campaign design.

Once again, it has to be stressed that during the heydays of the colonial époque, in which co-option was a well-known standard practice for controlling fragmented indigenous societies, it took the Dutch war authorities almost twenty years to develop an appropriate awareness on the societal dynamics of Aceh, and another six years to accept this as the basis of their strategy. When this strategy was ultimately implemented, the colonial administration established control over the Acehnese by co-opting the legitimate local power-holders who ruled over the more than 100 various locales through a combination of exemplary -yet brutal- force and a locally applied mix of soft coercion and persuasive methods. Additionally, however, it has to be mentioned that this result was squandered in the decades following
Aceh’s pacification as the Dutch failed to adopt a proper follow up strategy that enhanced the connection between state and target society and therefore could not transform the acceptable level of control into durable control over the population. Instead the ulëëbalang were wrongly empowered in the role of colonial administrators, as they were attributed almost absolute powers in the fields of law and religion at the expense of the villagers and ulama. In the long run this delegitimized Aceh’s chiefs and inspired a renewed uprising of the ulama-led resistance. Thus, in addition to our insights on the implementation of co-option in the reality of a colonial pacification campaign, the Aceh case also stresses the importance of an appropriate follow up strategy that consolidates and exploits the gains of the pacification phase. As aforementioned, control in Aceh proved particularly hard to establish and when pacification was achieved at last, it was not to last.

**Insights from the Uruzgan Campaign**

Cultural legitimation and mobilization were originally not incorporated in the newly emerging neo-classical counterinsurgency concept as it embraced classical counterinsurgency’s imperatives of modernization and the advance of liberal democracy. The reality on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, triggered the adoption of these two underlying principles of co-option in order to provide an underpinning for long-term stabilization with use of limited resources and within a limited amount of time. The Uruzgan campaign embodies an early example of the embrace of co-option in modern counterinsurgency. It coincided with the full-fledged acceptance of this method in Iraq and preceded the formal introduction of co-option as part of the overall Afghan campaign. Although at this time (2005-2006) there was a growing awareness of the importance of local power-holders, earlier experiences in Afghanistan had revealed the Afghan state’s inability to control warlord-like agents and their militias. Consequently, the Dutch government, under influence of domestic political pressure, excluded such local power-holders from collaboration and imposed an explicit caveat on cooperation with militias. While soldiers on the ground circumvented the latter restriction as they succeeded in institutionalizing such armed groups within the Afghan state’s security infrastructure and Dutch politicians ultimately proved willing to accept mobilization for urgent self-defense purposes, the ban on co-option of warlord-like local power-holders proved more problematic. This severely hampered practicing cultural legitimation as it prevented the TFU from establishing influence over Uruzgan’s dominant local power-holders, Jan Mohammed Khan and Matiullah Khan. Thereby it limited the exploitation of the pattern of legitimacy to lower-level, sub-tribal leaders who were empowered in order to establish a tribally balanced political order that could provide a stable platform for further development. Thus, whereas the mobilization issue was pragmatically solved during the TFU campaign, the Dutch demonstrated a lack of will to fully embrace cultural legitimation.
Further evidence in support of this conclusion on the Dutch government’s faltering will is provided by the rather ambiguous policy of emphasizing the importance of a decentralized effort in Uruzgan, whilst simultaneously also focusing on establishing a modern, centralized state ruled from Kabul - as opposed to the hybrid entity capable of controlling the local fragments of weblink societies. This not only frustrated attempts to strengthen the local administration by linking it to Uruzgan’s legitimate sub-tribal leaders, but also benefitted the dominant local power-holders who were well-connected to the Karzai government. These problems were further augmented as a consequence of different views of US and Australian allies (who favored cooperation with both warlord-like agents) and who would ultimately provide the forces succeeding the TFU. In the end all these matters had disastrous effects on the results of the Dutch campaign as the carefully nurtured tribal balance quickly vaporized within months of the TFU’s withdrawal and the dominant local power-holders again could exert their power unobstructed. A key insight provided by the Uruzgan campaign, therefore, is that in order to provide an underpinning for long-term stability a co-option strategy should not be hampered by unrealistic political restrictions that might prove counterproductive for the end state. This not only requires the will to adapt in the field, but also the will to adapt political-strategic guidelines in case adopted cultural legitimation and mobilization policies do not fit the circumstances in the operational environment.

Despite the shortcomings in the way the Dutch sought to implement the underlying mechanisms of co-option, the TFU campaign can be considered a genuine example of a population-centric counterinsurgency campaign. It sought to establish control by exploiting the local pattern of legitimacy and mobilizing resources from within the target population. After overcoming inevitable initial adaption problems (such as obtaining a proper understanding of the local societal landscape and gearing its mindset, strategy, organization and operations for war amongst the people), the task force adopted a proper counterinsurgency approach in order to provide an underpinning for long-term stability. The failure to fully embrace cultural legitimation limited the choice of co-optees to lower-level sub-tribal leaders and independent governmental officials. This has to be considered the fundamental flaw of the Uruzgan campaign as our theoretical and exploration has revealed that co-option of dominant local power-holders is pivotal for establishing a stable condition of control. Considering the powerful position of the dominant Popalzai strongmen, it seems a miracle that the TFU succeeded in establishing temporarily control over the population by co-opting (previously marginalized or sidelined) sub-tribal leaders and independent governmental officials. Consequently, the way the TFU managed to establish control during its mission offers interesting insights that further contribute to our understanding of co-option.

The Dutch short-term success can be fully explained by the effective use of a mix of soft coercion and persuasive methods. Until the announcement of the TFU’s withdrawal this mix sufficed for co-opting Uruzgan’s sub-tribal leaders and independent governmental officials, while also mitigating the spoiling influence of the dominant local power-holders.
Removal was effectively used as the ultimate coercive measure against lower-level local power-holders whose powerbase depended on an official position. In the case of Jan Mohammed, however, removal proved ineffective. Similarly, the coldshouldering of both Popalzai strongmen did not contain their influence. The most effective tool for curtailing the influence of both warlord-like tribal entrepreneurs was provided by manipulating the local political marketplace and simultaneously containing Kabul’s interference with local affairs in Uruzgan. Empowerment of previously sidelined or marginalized sub-tribal leaders of most notably the Barakzai, Achekzai, and Tokhi through the allocation of resources (such as for instance development aid, military support and training, and money) and immaterial support led to a more balanced political order that was connected to the provincial administration. In addition to empowerment of independent governmental officials such as Governor Hamdam, members of formerly ill-represented factions were also appointed in official positions in order to establish an inclusive local government. Yet, it has to be mentioned that the TFU was also quick to change to informal empowerment outside governmental channels when (after the announcement of its withdrawal) it became clear that its attempt to establish an independent, inclusive local administration was doomed. Thus, the TFU achieved its temporarily success thanks to the deployment of a mix of soft coercion and persuasive methods that not only effectively established co-optive ties with sub-tribal leaders and independent governmental officials, but also mitigated the influence of the dominant local power-holders for a considerable part of its campaign.

Whilst successful on the short term, the Dutch approach created a problem for the long term as any durable solution for stabilizing Uruzgan’s societal landscape necessitated the incorporation of both dominant local power-holders and their network of followers. More immediately, the return of the Popalzai strongmen after the Dutch withdrawal not only led to a decrease of governmental independence, but also renewed intra-factional feuding. This triggered a violent re-emergence of the Taliban in the province. Former Dutch co-optees were now left without protection and therefore vulnerable to assassination attempts. A grim illustration is provided by the untimely death of key Dutch allies such as Barakzai authority Mohammed Daud and Achekzai leader Malem Sadiq. Thus, the short lived Dutch success came at a high prize in terms of long-term stability, security, and even the lives of some of their former co-optees. Consequently, the ultimate insight that should be obtained from the Uruzgan campaign is how to prevent this contradiction of short-term success and long-term consequences to occur again and instead achieve a more durable result.

In terms of this book’s framework for understanding co-option the Uruzgan campaign predominantly addressed lower-level local power-holders through an approach that emphasized the persuasive side of the co-option continuum. Additionally, provisional dominance was obtained through manipulation of the political marketplace (through empowerment of sub-tribal authorities) and limiting interference from the Kabul government. Uruzgan’s sub-tribal leaders and independent administrators were well-respected authorities at the local level, but only held limited influence over other societal
segments. In contrast to the warlord-like strongmen their influence did not exceed the provincial political marketplace. Consequently, these agents can be placed in the lower middle of the co-option spectrum. At this point the Uruzgan campaign deviates from the general trend of co-option in modern counterinsurgency as typically a mix of dominant and lower-level local power-holders as well as independent governmental officials is preferred. As repeatedly stated this difference was caused by the political decision not to engage in co-optive relationships with warlord-like local power-holders that prevented a full-fledged embrace of cultural legitimation. At the start of the mission (2006) this position made sense considering the previous problems with warlords in the Afghan state-building project and the fact that the Taliban in Uruzgan had again become relevant as a consequence of actions from both Popalzai strongmen. Yet, the task force’s increased awareness on the target society should have triggered a revision of this policy as it became clear that both actors still held considerable influence. With the benefit of hindsight we even can conclude that it would have been better if the TFU had launched a serious attempt to establish direct influence over these dominant warlord-like agents. Consequently, if we want to learn from the Uruzgan campaign’s rupture between short-term success and long-term results, it is pivotal to develop an understanding of the way modern counterinsurgents can establish and control co-optive relationships with warlord-like dominant local power-holders.

This challenge directly refers to the two propositions formulated as a consequence of our theoretical and historiographical exploration; today’s counterinsurgents lack the resources for co-opting a mix of dominant and lower local power-holders, and their limited coercive capacity is insufficient for controlling co-optive relationships. Interestingly, the Uruzgan campaign reveals that while the Dutch deliberately opted not to co-opt the dominant agents, they managed to outmaneuver those actors and for the time being even succeeded to become the dominant as well as the preferable partner for co-option (for lower-level local power-holders). This remarkable provisional co-option domination that was achieved without a credible coercive stick and with limited resources only, offers some final insights on the application of co-option in the reality of modern counterinsurgency. As aforementioned manipulation of the local political marketplace combined with simultaneous engagement of the central government in Kabul in order to limit the dominant actors’ exploitation of state resources were instrumental in achieving temporarily dominance at the grassroots level in Uruzgan. As this method sufficed for containing the spoiling influence of both dominant local power-holders, it also offered a potential path for forging co-optive relationships with these agents. Therefore, the TFU could have co-opted a mix of dominant and lower local power-holders with limited resources and without a capability to enforce compliance by use of force. Yet, this requires the will to engage such warlord-like agents and we have seen that the Dutch government lacked this will. Thus, the Dutch should have also attempted to co-opt Uruzgan’s dominant local power-holders as they could do so.

This conclusion might be considered rather obvious as it concurs with the standard practice in modern counterinsurgency, which prescribes co-opting a mix of dominant and
lower-level local power-holders as well as independent governmental officials. A second insight, however, is of a more fundamental nature as it concerns the matter of transforming temporarily success in durable success. The Uruzgan case has demonstrated that whereas the Dutch achieved provisional dominance and managed to establish a tribally balanced order connected to an inclusive local government, their results started to evaporate as soon as their withdrawal was announced. The most important insight that can be obtained from the TFU campaign is that in modern counterinsurgency sufficient commitment is required to persevere dominance until a self-sustainable political order has emerged that can act as a stable platform for long-term development. The Uruzgan campaign clearly shows a lack of such commitment: the Dutch withdrew before the sub-tribal leaders were capable of autonomously maintaining their position vis-à-vis the dominant local power-holders. The course of the US and Australian successors was also unhelpful as both contingents favored the Popalzai strongmen. Moreover, Dutch empowerment of co-optees beyond the TFU campaign was of a rather limited nature and those agents proved vulnerable to assassination. Achieving a sustainable result, thus, either requires the will to extend the intervener’s commitment until a sufficiently stable political order has been established, or demands a continuation of the adopted co-option strategy by succeeding coalition forces.

In sum, our analysis of the Uruzgan campaign has enhanced our understanding of co-option in contemporary counterinsurgency. It revealed that in addition to lower-level local power-holders and governmental officials, warlord-like dominant agents might also be co-opted since the limited resources available suffice for establishing temporarily dominance without use of force. Yet, a durable result requires the commitment to persevere this approach until a self-sustainable, and therefore viable political order has been established. Ultimately both matters come down to the intervening counterinsurgent’s political will to establish an acceptable level of control over the population in a weblike society through a co-option strategy and encapsulate this result in a hybrid state capable of controlling the various locales through the newly-created local political orders. The Uruzgan case has demonstrated that the Dutch government lacked the will to fully implement co-option as part of its counterinsurgency effort and neither was prepared to extend its commitment until a stable political order had been established. Even more worrying is that a similar lack of will nowadays has protruded the Western attitude towards interventions in weblike societies. This has triggered a disconnect between the counterinsurgency phase and the long-term follow-up for wider stabilization as epitomized by the current situation in Iraq which allowed for the emergence of the Islamic State. While modern counterinsurgency might successfully implement a co-option strategy in order to provide an underpinning for long-term development, the achieved results will quickly fade away and even prove counterproductive if such an approach is executed without sufficient political will to do so.
Conclusion

How have counterinsurgents co-opted local power-holders in order to attain control over the population in a weblike society? Theoretically, a successful strategy that delivers a stable condition of control requires the counterinsurgent to honor two fundamental and two practical principles of co-option for controlling the populace under such conditions. First, cultural legitimation and mobilization allow for the exploitation of the target society’s pattern of legitimate authority, and the rallying of additional resources from within that society. The former encompasses formulating a tailored collaboration strategy based on an appropriate understanding of the local societal landscape in order to connect legitimate authorities to the state, thereby enhancing governmental control. Typically, a local perception of legitimacy based on traditional or charismatic leadership (or the combination of both) necessitates a co-option strategy in which the state exploits such agents to enhance its own legitimacy and control. Mobilization of resources from within the target society allows the state to overcome a scarcity of resources. This, in turn, also sparks further collaboration as it strengthens the connection between the people and the government, thereby enhancing the state’s legitimacy. Cultural legitimation and mobilization are thus mutually reinforcing mechanisms. As local power-holders might be capable of fielding more resources than the government at the local level, grassroots mobilization also functions to carefully institutionalize these agents in order to enhance governmental control. Moreover, in an environment of dynamic contention for control between two or more parties, the government needs to secure a position as the dominant as well as the preferred partner for collaboration in order to practice cultural legitimation and mobilization successfully. In addition to an accurate understanding of the societal landscape, this requires the adoption of a tailored, flexible strategy that encompasses a capacity to both enforce and reward compliance.

The practice of co-option involves the actual selection of co-optees, and the methods used to establish and maintain relationships with these agents. In weblike societies, co-optees are selected from a spectrum of legitimate authorities ranging from security focused (kin-)group leaders with authority over small societal segments (as low as the village level), to dominant local power-holders keeping multi-stranded (economical, security, religious) ties with their followers and capable of influencing the wider society, even ruling over multiple locales. The exact choice of co-optees, however, heavily depends on the circumstances in each specific locale and might also be influenced by the counterinsurgent’s preference (as long as the principle of cultural legitimation is followed). With regard to the methods of co-option, a continuum was identified varying from the use of force on the coercive side to pure persuasion on the persuasive side. Shifting between the methods of the continuum allows for solving the need to be both the preferable, and the dominant partner for co-option. While (the threat of) force provides the ultimate guarantee to dominating co-optive relationships, and therefore provides a credible capability for co-option domination, the emphasis
The Course of Co-option

Conclusion

typically lies on a mix of soft coercion and persuasive methods, such as the withdrawal and allocation of resources. Since dominant local power-holders in weblike societies typically permeate governmental institutions, and such agents often also engage in shady practices (like predatory behavior towards less powerful societal segments), an independent local administration is a prerequisite for fielding such a flexible strategy capable of linking local power-holders that represent various societal segments to the government. Furthermore, durable preservation of state control through local power-holders requires a hybrid state in which local power-holders are the respected agents of control at the grassroots level, while at the same time the state dominates those agents from the centre without becoming too centralized. This again reveals the importance of a flexible strategy that allows the government to dominate while also being the preferred partner for co-option.

In both colonial warfare and contemporary neo-classical counterinsurgency, co-option based on cultural legitimation and mobilization is acknowledged as key to establishing control over a highly fragmented society (see also table 2). In addition to a shared recognition of the grassroots level as the primary locale for establishing control, both concepts aim to achieve this with limited resources. They also emphasize that the pacification or counterinsurgency effort should achieve a sufficiently stable, acceptable level of control, while a durable level of control will follow as a result of additional state building. With regard to the practical issues of whom to co-opt and the methods of co-option, however, colonial warfare and modern counterinsurgency differ considerably. Due to the limited availability of resources colonial pacification campaigns primarily focused on co-opting dominant local power-holders from the upper part of the spectrum of co-option, and only referred to lower-level leaders if the situation required so. Force fulfilled a pivotal role in such campaigns as it provided colonial administrators with a capacity for dominating even the most powerful indigenous actors. Contemporary counterinsurgency campaigns emphasize the importance of local power-holders at the lowest societal levels and only incorporate dominant agents because a stable level of control requires the collaboration of these agents. Further, soft coercion in the form of withdrawal of resources or removal from official positions embodies the penultimate coercive tool for co-option in modern campaigns, as the use of force is restricted to insurgents. These conceptual differences have fueled the propositions that contemporary counterinsurgency lacks the capability to co-opt a mix of dominant and lower local power-holders since it suffers from a similar shortage of resources as colonial campaigns; and that today’s limited coercive capacity is insufficient for dominating co-optive relationships.
Conclusion

The Course of Co-option

Cultural legitimation Mobilization Preferred co-optees Methods of co-option

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Colonial warfare</th>
<th>Neo-classical counterinsurgency</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilization</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred co-optees</td>
<td>Dominant lower-level if necessary</td>
<td>Lower-level also dominant because necessary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods of co-option</td>
<td>Balanced (exemplary) force</td>
<td>Mainly persuasive soft coercion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Co-option in colonial warfare and neo-classical counterinsurgency

Interestingly, the similarities between colonial warfare and modern neo-classical counterinsurgency provide a preliminary answer to our main question. A profound understanding of co-option in counterinsurgency and the practical differences between colonial and contemporary campaigns, however, necessitates a more thorough investigation into how such a strategy materializes in the reality of counterinsurgency warfare at the grassroots level in a highly fragmented society. Therefore, we will now merge the findings of the Aceh and Uruzgan case in order to draw a definite conclusion.

While both colonial warfare and contemporary counterinsurgency acknowledge the importance of co-option and its underlying principles of cultural legitimation and mobilization, the case studies have brought to light that implementing these principles have met severe difficulties. During the Aceh War the colonial war authorities failed to accept a proper understanding of the Acehnese pattern of legitimacy during the first part of the war, for the central authority structures of the Sultanate were considered the key to establishing control over the Acehnese. Consequently, the Dutch strategy was flawed and subject to various changes in strategic choices. This effort was also compounded by the ever-present political-strategic imperative to limit the war’s expenses. Moreover, this also prevented the effective mobilization of local armed groups, and even led to the Teuku Uma debacle in which a key ally defected from the Dutch side. Only after more than twenty years was a proper strategy finally formulated that aimed at co-opting the ulëëbalang, the legitimate authorities of this highly fragmented society. Yet even at this time, the exact nature of ulëëbalang legitimacy was misunderstood. The problems with cultural legitimation and mobilization during the Aceh War, therefore, were ramifications of faltering adaptation of the Dutch to population-centric warfare in Aceh’s specific circumstances. This is even more remarkable given that the Dutch colonial state held a track-record of successful pacification campaigns, and co-option of local power-holders was a time-honored practice in the Dutch East Indies.

The Uruzgan campaign also suffered from adaptation problems in acquiring an appropriate understanding of the target society. Yet, considering the limited experience of
modern Dutch forces with population-centric counterinsurgency in weblike societies, these problems were solved relatively quickly. After only two years, an effective counterinsurgency strategy was adopted and implemented. More important, however, was that political restrictions prevented a full-fledged adoption of the principle of cultural legitimation by excluding the province’s dominant warlord-like local power-holders from collaboration. The will to adopt cultural legitimation fully was absent, as became clear from the ambiguous policy that, on one hand, emphasized a modern centralized state, while on the other it focused on pursuing a localized approach in Uruzgan. Similarly, mobilization of local militias during the TFU campaign was hampered by a political caveat that prohibited collaboration with armed non-state actors. However, in reality, this caveat was effectively circumvented as a consequence of ingenuity of soldiers on the ground, who adopted a practice of formalizing militias within the official security structures of the Afghan state. Yet, cooperation with the most well-equipped and organized armed group remained out of bounds as this was commanded by the Popalzai strongmen. In the Uruzgan case, therefore, adaptation problems were not so much encountered in the field as they were at the political-strategic level, where politicians and policy makers lacked the will to match their guidelines to the reality in the field. Thus, the case studies demonstrate that even if the importance of co-option is recognized, success is hard to achieve as formulating and implementing an appropriate strategy based on cultural legitimation and mobilization might be hampered by adaptation problems at both the political-strategic and operational levels.

In both Aceh and Uruzgan (see table 3), the hampered implementation of cultural legitimation and mobilization was echoed in the practical issues of co-option. This influenced most significantly the choice of whom to co-opt. The selection of co-optees during the Aceh War deviated from the standard in colonial warfare, which is to co-opt dominant local power-holders. However, they also adopted an often-used alternative approach, which is to seek collaboration of lower-level agents. Yet, it took the Dutch far too long to identify the ulèëbalang ruling over the various locales of Acehnese society as the prime agents of co-option. While the selection process was severely hindered by inaccurate assumptions held by Dutch authorities about Acehnese political organization, and by their preoccupation with the Sultan as a central authority, the situation on the ground should have informed a more appropriate approach. The failure to develop sufficient awareness on the societal landscape again stresses the need to commit an adequate capability for gathering and analyzing fine-grained population-centric intelligence. This, however, remained somewhat problematic during the Aceh War; for although the ulèëbalang were rightly acknowledged as the legitimate authorities in Acehnese society, the exact nature of their legitimacy remained misunderstood. Whereas these chiefs predominantly based their power on their position as economical entrepreneurs, the Dutch mistakenly perceived them as feudal lords. This had severe consequences in the long run: the colonial administration inadvertently empowered the ulèëbalang as feudal lords into the period after the pacification campaign, which resulted in the alienation of other societal segments, and thereby delegitimized Aceh’s chiefs.
In Uruzgan the selection of co-optees was limited to lower-level local power-holders and independent governmental officials. The dominant agents were excluded due to political restrictions such as the aforementioned ban on collaboration with the Popalzai strongmen. Ultimately the campaign’s achievements proved short-lived, as the actors who were purposefully not co-opted ended up mattering more in the post-mission landscape than those who were. For these reasons, the Uruzgan case offers the insight that it is better to establish influence over dominant agents than to keep them at bay. During the mission, however, the TFU’s choice of co-optees sufficed for establishing a tribally balanced political order, for previously sidelined or marginalized leaders were re-installed in the provincial political marketplace. Initially, however, this was not so much the consequence of an appropriate intelligence assessment but more a consequence of the Dutch stance vis-à-vis the dominant strongmen, which rendered the TFU a natural ally for those strongmen’s rivals. Population-centric intelligence later confirmed this course. Consequently, the policy of establishing a balanced political order by co-opting lower-level local power-holders and incorporating these agents into the provincial government became strongly embedded in the TFU’s strategy.

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<tr>
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<th>Mobilization</th>
<th>Preferred co-optees</th>
<th>Methods of co-option</th>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>flawed understanding</td>
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<td><strong>Uruzgan campaign</strong></td>
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<td>Lower-level</td>
<td>Mainly persuasive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dominant not allowed</td>
<td>soft coercion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>initially political caveat</td>
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Table 3: Co-option in Aceh and Uruzgan

It has to be noted here that the societal landscape analyzed in the two case studies differed considerably. Uruzgan is just one locale of Afghan society, while the Aceh case studied Acehnese society as a whole. Moreover, whilst both societies can be characterized as weblike societies sharing a high degree of fragmentation and fairly autonomous local fragments, the distribution of power in these societies also varied considerably. In Aceh legitimate political power rested mainly with the *uléébalang*, who ruled over relatively small autonomous locales and without wider influence. By contrast, in Uruzgan the provincial marketplace was made up of a mix of dominant agents capable of influencing the greater Kandahar region (even up to the national level), as well as lower-level leaders whose leverage was restricted to their own societal segment or the wider province at best. Consequently, the difference in choice of co-optees ($\Delta y$ in figure 7) in both cases also reflects the unique structure of each society. An even more important observation is that the successful Aceh strategy deviates from the standard
of colonial warfare as it sought to address the specific pattern of legitimacy, whereas the Uruzgan campaign differs from the standard in neo-classical counterinsurgency because of the Dutch refusal to co-opt dominant local power-holders. As the latter intervention failed to produce a sufficiently stable level of control due to this failure to incorporate the dominant agents, the case studies reveal that, ultimately, regardless of the intervener’s preferences, the local societal circumstances should dictate the answer to the question of whom exactly to co-opt. Both case studies have demonstrated that an appropriate intelligence picture of the local societal landscape is pivotal in this matter. Preferably such information should be available before the onset of a mission as it allows for a campaign design that is tailored to local circumstances. However, in reality planners are working with an incomplete picture. Therefore, counterinsurgents should develop an awareness of the unique features of the target society as soon as possible in order to adjust their co-option strategy and make the right selection of co-optees: *societal context is king*.

Figure 7: The Aceh Strategy and Uruzgan Campaign depicted in the analytical framework of co-option in weblike societies

We have seen in both cases that the methods of co-option concurred with the prevailing counterinsurgency concept at their respective times. The Acehnese were ultimately controlled
through a balanced mix of soft coercion and persuasive methods utilized by colonial officials who aimed to create a vested interest for individual local power-holders. Instrumental within this approach, however, was a credible coercive stick that was established through exemplary force. As was common in pacification campaigns during the colonial period, lethal force was part of the sum of elements that had to tip the collaborative equation in the colonial administration’s advantage. The Aceh strategy caused significantly less casualties among the local population in comparison to earlier stages of the war, or Dutch campaigns in other parts of the archipelago. In essence, however, brutal force remained an inherent part of this approach, and was even necessary for its success. The Uruzgan campaign, by contrast, illustrates that such use of force has totally disappeared in the co-option continuum available to modern counterinsurgents. Instead, removal of local power-holders was the ultimate coercive act. Whereas this was sufficient for dominating co-optive relationships with lower-level leaders, it proved insufficient for containing dominant local power-holders and their network of clients who were determined to act as spoilers. Although these agents were excluded from co-option as a consequence of aforementioned political guidelines, the Dutch had remarkable success in temporarily curtailing the influence of warlord-like actors. This was made possible through a combination of soft coercion and persuasive methods that encompassed manipulation of the political marketplace by empowering rival agents, while simultaneously engaging the national level in Kabul in order to prevent interference through governmental channels. That led to a balanced political order that was linked to a more independent provincial administration (nurtured by the TFU) that now also included representatives of previously sidelined or marginalized societal segments. Even so, this tremendous achievement started to collapse as soon as the Dutch announced their withdrawal and consequently lost their leverage in Kabul—and therefore also their dominance. Despite an attempt to preserve the newly-created political order through informal empowerment (outside governmental institutions) of these lower-level leaders, the results of the Dutch engagement faded away rather quickly. Therefore, the mix of soft coercion and persuasive methods employed by the TFU brought only transient control.

While the difference between the methods of co-option applied in both case studies (Δx in figure 7) does not differ significantly from the theoretical and historiographical findings, the insights from the case studies can nevertheless be used to deal with the two propositions that resulted from that same exploration. First, the TFU experiences demonstrate that co-option domination vis-à-vis lower-level local power-holder can be established by employing soft coercion. Even more important, however, is the finding that such a limited coercive capability also suffices for dominating dominant local power-holders. This requires a clever combination of coercive measures aimed at limiting the influence of such agents, and persuasive methods that empower (lower-level) competitors in order to manipulate the local political marketplace. Yet, in Uruzgan this only lasted as long as the Dutch commitment was uncontested. That amount of time was not long enough to establish an acceptable level of control that encompassed a self-sustainable political order in which lower-level local power-
holders were capable of autonomously maintaining their position while also defying the shady behavior of dominant agents. Equally important, such a stable situation cannot be created without also involving dominant local power-holders—a feature that was notoriously absent in the Dutch approach in Uruzgan. This leads us to the second proposition concerning contemporary counterinsurgency’s preference to co-opt a mix of dominant and lower local power-holders with limited resources. While the Dutch in Uruzgan did not co-opt the dominant agents because of the lack of political will to embrace cultural legitimation fully, they could have done so if they wishes because their temporarily dominance would have allowed them to establish ties with warlord-like local power-holders. Therefore, this case demonstrates that even with limited resources a mix of local power-holders could be co-opted. The findings of the Aceh case support this insight in a numerical way as the Dutch colonial administration managed to co-opt an extensive range of local power-holders (all dominating a specific small locale) without extensive resources. Thus, as long as co-option domination is achieved, local power-holders could be co-opted as required. Consequently, if we combine the insights on both propositions, it can be concluded that today’s limited capability for co-option domination suffices for co-opting a mix of dominant and lower-level local power-holders in order to yield an acceptable level of control. Be that as it may, the key issue underlying such an approach is the political will to embrace co-option fully, and to persist until a sufficiently stable situation has been created that can function as an underpinning for long-term stability. Moreover, the Aceh case, as well as the current situations in Iraq and Afghanistan, have all revealed the importance of an appropriate long-term follow up strategy. The stamina required for practicing a co-option strategy extends beyond the counterinsurgency phase of an intervention, and therefore requires a political will and determination to settle for the long term; something that has rarely occurred in contemporary Western interventions.

To conclude, we have seen that counterinsurgents can obtain an acceptable level of control over the population of a weblike society by adopting a tailored, localized strategy based on the principles of cultural legitimation and mobilization. These principles enable them to co-opt both dominant and lower-level local power-holders, depending on the societal context, through a mix of methods that renders the counterinsurgents’ side the dominant as well as the preferred partner for collaboration. In modern counterinsurgency these methods typically encompass soft coercion and persuasive methods that can be effectively employed to achieve provisional co-option domination. They ensure an acceptable level of control if the counterinsurgent is sufficiently committed to establishing a sustainable political order that incorporates dominant and lower-level local power-holders who are linked to an inclusive government at the grassroots level. While such a self-sustainable local order remains the ultimate goal of the counterinsurgency phase of contemporary interventions, the sustainability of these local achievements in the long run requires commitment beyond this phase. Only in this way can the various locales of a weblike society be incorporated into a viable hybrid state.
Although significant insights and rich evidence have been uncovered in this research, it does not presume to have exhausted all available knowledge on the subject. Therefore additional case studies are needed to assess and extend our findings. Yet, it has to be mentioned explicitly that both the theory and reality of co-option in counterinsurgency warfare have revealed that an acceptable level of control can be obtained through a tailored collaboration strategy. As mentioned in this book’s introduction the logic of control through collaboration has been the subject of an academic debate. Critics like Stathis Kalyvas have even even urged scholars to study violent contention from ‘the baseline control-collaboration model’ by use of predominantly quantitative data. Our findings, however, suggest that detailed analysis of historical case studies provides an alternative approach that offers a profound insight into the dynamics of control and collaboration at the local level. Moreover, the empirical evidence has even supported the theoretical finding that collaboration provides a potential path to an acceptable level of control. Although the limited scope of this research does not entitle us to make more general claims regarding this matter, it seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate by offering an avenue for further research into the dynamics of control and collaboration at the grass roots level.

This book has predominantly studied the counterinsurgency phase of Western intervention, and therefore the subsequent stage of stabilization also provides a starting point for further research, which needs to explore the long-term effects and possibilities of the course of co-option (including the exact character and functioning of hybrid states in which co-option can be practiced). Moreover, as studying the long-term effects also requires a further understanding of the relationship between counterinsurgency and state building, this suggestion concerns a well-known lacuna in modern counterinsurgency thinking that requires clarification.2 Ideally, therefore, such research should blend with efforts from the community of state-building scholars who also seek to enhance their understanding of the sustainability of short-term results on the long term.3

The present situations in Iraq and Afghanistan leave little doubt about the generalization of our conclusion that governments of Western states intervening in countries with weblike societies that are undergoing insurgencies should not only adopt the political will to implement co-option completely, but also must commit themselves for the long term. Without this stamina any attempt to intervene and stabilize such a country is doomed to failure. The reality, however, is that Western intervention politics today are dominated by a deficient political will that has characterized the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the rather limited interference in Syria.

This brings us to our final point concerning the role of insurgents in the contest for control over the population. In this study we have focused on the relationships between

1 See Stathis N. Kalyvas, ‘Micro-Level Studies of Violence in Civil War: Refining and Extending the Control-Collaboration Model’, Terrorism and Political Violence 24:4 (2012), 665-666. The model is based upon Kalyvas’ theory of irregular war (see Chapter One, section 1.2), which considers collaboration endogenous to control.
counterinsurgents and local power-holders, and insurgents have played only a minor role. The counterinsurgents either managed to thwart insurgent counter-collaboration, or succeeded in (temporarily) outmaneuvering a local insurgency. The insurgents, therefore, were unable to set up an effective system of competitive control. Currently, however, a reversal of roles has occurred as insurgents have started to duly exploit the effects of a faltering Western will to intervene by, for example, forging co-optive ties with local power-holders. The first issue of the Islamic State’s *Dabiq* magazine aptly describes how a dedicated office for tribal affairs has been set up to co-opt tribal leaders using a blend of persuasive and coercive methods, including violent force, ‘in an effort to strengthen the ranks of the Muslims, unite them under one imam, and work together towards the establishment of the prophetic Khilafa’.\(^4\) So, whereas Western interventions or sponsored states have failed to adopt effective (long-term) co-option strategies for controlling weblike societies, today’s insurgents are demonstrating that they will not hesitate to practice such a strategy in a more violent manner. Therefore, a full-fledged adoption of co-option as a tool for counterinsurgency, as well as for long-term stabilization, is more urgent than ever before.