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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During the counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan Western soldiers found themselves operating as foreign interveners in highly fragmented indigenous societies. The high ground of the human terrain in these so-called weblike societies is dominated by local authorities such as tribal elders, religious leaders, and warlords, who control the population at the grassroots level. Co-opting these local power-holders is instrumental in stepping up the collaboration between the local population and the counterinsurgents, while simultaneously diminishing support for the insurgency. Thereby this concept, which was successfully implemented in both Iraq and Afghanistan, offers a seemingly obvious approach for obtaining control over the population in highly fragmented societies. Yet, the recent emergence of co-option as a predominant tool for counterinsurgency in weblike societies has revealed a number of fundamental and practical complications. These complications have rendered the utility of this tool less straightforward than it seems; at worst the concept might be fundamentally flawed and incapable of delivering long-term success, while at best it appears rather complicated to practice and only effective for obtaining an acceptable result on the short term. This controversy urges for a better understanding of co-option in counterinsurgency warfare.

At the heart of this book is the question of how counterinsurgents have co-opted local power-holders in order to attain control over the population in a weblike society. A profound understanding of the course of co-option requires us to answer this question by studying both the theory and reality of counterinsurgency warfare in such societies. First, a theoretical exploration of the logic of control through collaboration and the dynamics of co-option in the specific setting of a weblike society serves to unravel the concept’s underpinning. Moreover, this also allows to construct an analytical framework for understanding the application of co-option in the reality of counterinsurgency campaigns. Next, a historiographical analysis bridges the gap between theory and reality by providing an insight in the way co-option has been incorporated in different concepts throughout the evolution of Western counterinsurgency. This analysis offers further guidance for studying co-option as it reveals that colonial warfare and modern counterinsurgency are best suited for practicing co-option in weblike societies. Consequently, a profound understanding of the course of co-option requires an insight in the reality of both colonial pacification and modern counterinsurgency campaigns. Therefore this book scrutinizes Dutch experiences during the colonial Aceh War (1873-c. 1912) and the contemporary Uruzgan campaign (2006-2010). Ultimately our main
question is answered by merging the theoretical and historiographical insights with the findings of both these case studies.

Part One consists of the theoretical and historiographical explorations of the course of co-option. The former has spawned the insight that co-option of local power-holders is a potential path to control over the population 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 functions to spark the people’s will to collaborate, which can be further exploited by mobilizing resources, such as self-defense militias and intelligence, from within the population. The theoretical analysis also revealed that an effective strategy requires the government and its counterinsurgency forces to be the dominant as well as the preferable partner for collaboration. This demands a flexible strategy tailored to the specifics of the target society by addressing the practical issues of whom to co-opt and how to co-opt.

The political structure of a weblike society is dominated by local power-holders who compete for control within the various locales of such a society. Co-option of these agents, therefore, is instrumental in establishing control over the population. Yet, the choice of co-optees is more complicated as commonly a mix of dominant and lower-level local power-holders exerts control over the population at the grassroots level. Since the composition of the political marketplace varies for each specific locale, there is no standard answer to the question of whom to co-opt. Any co-option strategy that seeks control over the population in a weblike society should aim at collaborating local power-holders in a spectrum that ranges from dominant local power-holders to lower-level legitimate leaders (typically kin-group authorities). The methods of co-option constitute a continuum varying from the use of force to persuasion. When deployed by an independent -i.e. free from local influences-local administration this so-called co-option continuum allows to dominate the co-optive bargaining process with local power-holders by shifting between coercion and persuasion as deemed necessary. The theoretical analysis, thus, provides the insight that co-option is a valid method for establishing control over the population in a weblike society; it spawns control through cultural legitimation and consecutive mobilization which can be implemented by co-opting local power-holders that are part of a spectrum of co-option through a continuum of methods deployed by an independent administration.

The gap between theory and reality is bridged by studying the conceptual embedment of the facets of co-option (cultural legitimation, mobilization, whom to co-opt and the methods of co-option) during the different evolutionary stages of Western population-centric counterinsurgency. This historiographical analysis brought to light that (of the compared historical counterinsurgency concepts) colonial warfare and modern counterinsurgency are best suited for establishing control over weblike societies. Both concepts acknowledge the
importance of cultural legitimation and mobilization through co-option of local power-holders. In both cases this materializes in a ‘local-first’ approach that seeks to establish an acceptable level of control at the grassroots level with limited resources only. Achieving stability at the short term acts as an underpinning for long-term development and stability since additional state building takes place after the initial pacification or counterinsurgency phase. Yet, colonial warfare and modern counterinsurgency differ considerably in the way they seek to practice co-option. The former emphasizes co-option of dominant local power-holders, whereas lower-level leaders are only co-opted if necessary. In contrast today’s counterinsurgency places emphasis on co-option of lower-level local power-holders, but dominant agents should also be engaged as their collaboration is necessary for establishing a stable level of control. An even bigger difference concerns the matter of how to co-opt. In colonial warfare the bargaining process was conducted by 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 -withdrawing or withholding resources- is therefore virtually the only option for achieving compliance of unwilling actors. A thorough understanding of the course of co-option requires us to study these differences and similarities in the actual use of co-option as this will enhance our insight in the dynamics surrounding such an approach. Therefore, a robust answer to this book’s main question can only be given by scrutinizing the application of co-option in the daily reality of the colonial Aceh War and the contemporary Uruzgan campaign.

Part Two discusses the Dutch experiences in the almost forty-year Aceh War. During the heydays of the colonial époque, in which co-option was a well-known standard practice for controlling indigenous societies, it took the Dutch more than twenty years to develop an appropriate understanding of Acehnese society. Consequently, the first period of the war was characterized by various unsuccessful attempts to augment colonial control. Especially the infamous Teuku Uma policy that rendered the colonial administration totally dependent on a single dominant local power-holder proved a debacle when their main local ally switched sides leaving the Dutch with empty hands. This case revealed that the Dutch lacked a capability to dominate their co-optees and also demonstrated the importance of a thorough understanding of local societal dynamics. These insights opened the door for the introduction of an approach that successfully implemented cultural legitimation and mobilization. This so-called Aceh strategy aimed at co-opting the uléëbalang, the legitimate local power-holders within Acehnese society, through a flexible approach that consisted of a balanced use of coercive and persuasive methods. While the uléëbalang were the dominant agents of their own locale at a lower societal level 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 for establishing co-optive relationships, backed up by a credible threat of force. As always in colonial warfare, the use of force against the population was never far away, and even exemplary force included mass casualties. While totally unacceptable to today’s standards such 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.

The Aceh strategy ultimately brought the colonial administration control over the Acehnese by co-opting the legitimate local power-holders ruling over the more than 100 various locales. Yet, it should 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. The colonial administration, thus, could not transform the acceptable level of control into durable control over the population. Moreover, the ulëëbalang were wrongly empowered in the role of colonial administrators, which delegitimized these chiefs in the long term and inspired a renewed uprising of the resistance. In addition to our insights on the implementation of co-option in the reality of a colonial pacification campaign the Aceh case, therefore, also stresses the importance of an appropriate follow up strategy that consolidates and exploits the gains of the pacification phase. Control in Aceh proved particularly hard to establish and when pacification was achieved at last, it was not to last.

Part Three deals with the Dutch forces’ four-year Uruzgan campaign that provides an early example of co-option in modern counterinsurgency. Under influence of domestic political pressure the Dutch government excluded dominant local power-holders from collaboration and initially imposed an explicit caveat on cooperation with militias. While soldiers on the ground circumvented the latter restriction 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; it severely hampered practicing cultural legitimation as it prevented the Dutch task force from establishing influence over Uruzgan’s dominant local power-holders. The exploitation of the pattern of legitimation, therefore, was limited to lower-level, sub-tribal leaders. Despite this focus on the lower middle of the spectrum of co-option, the approach proved successful in the short term; empowerment of previously sidelined or marginalized sub-tribal leaders led to a more balanced political order that was connected to the provincial administration. This was accomplished through the effective use of a mix of soft coercion and persuasive methods that 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. Overall the Dutch mainly relied on persuasive methods for empowering their allies and soft coercion for curtailing the influence of powerful agents. Due to the absence of force in the collaborative equation soft coercion was used for establishing provisional co-option domination, which proved sufficient for the duration of the campaign.
The main result of the campaign, a tribally balanced political order that was intended to serve as an underpinning for long-term stability, however, started to evaporate as soon as the Dutch announced their withdrawal. The reason for this was the failure to fully embrace cultural legitimation which had prevented co-option of the dominant local power-holders; this proved the fundamental flaw of the Dutch campaign as a durable result could not be achieved without the cooperation of the most powerful actors in the local political marketplace. The empowered sub-tribal leaders were incapable of autonomously maintaining their position vis-à-vis the dominant strongmen. The most important insight that can be obtained from the Dutch campaign, therefore, 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 as the Dutch withdrew before this was the case. Thus, achieving a sustainable result, 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 –which was not the case in Uruzgan.

So, to conclude, how have counterinsurgents co-opted local power-holders in order to attain control over the population in a weblike society? Theoretically, a successful co-option strategy is based upon the principles of cultural legitimation and mobilization. This allows for the exploitation of the target society’s pattern of legitimacy and the rallying of additional resources from within that society. These principles materialize in a practical approach that selects the appropriate societal agents within the spectrum of co-option and implements a flexible strategy that renders the government (through the counterinsurgents) the dominant as well as the preferable partner for collaboration by use of a mix of coercive and persuasive methods of the co-option continuum. Both colonial warfare and modern counterinsurgency have subscribed to this course of co-option as key to establishing an acceptable level of control with limited resources only. The achieved result is intended to serve as an underpinning for durable control and long-term stability that is to be established through additional state building. The reality of counterinsurgency warfare in weblike societies has revealed that practicing the course of co-option might meet severe difficulties; it not only requires a proper adaptation to the specifics of a population-centric counterinsurgency campaign, but also a thorough understanding of highly complicated local societal dynamics. Moreover, embracing co-option might also require adaptation at a higher level in order to match political-strategic guidelines to the reality in the field. Yet, both case studies have demonstrated that while such problems might cause serious difficulties, they are not insuperable; soldiers will adjust to population-centric counterinsurgency and sooner or later they will also acquire a proper understanding of the target society. Similarly, political-strategic guidelines are either interpreted pragmatically or adjusted to the local situation. Even in modern counterinsurgency with its emphasis on co-option of lower-level local power-holders with limited resources, and without the use of force, the course of co-option
has provided a path to an acceptable level of control. Both case studies, however, have also revealed that the transformation of this acceptable level of control into durable control has been problematic either as a consequence of an inappropriate follow-up strategy or a lack of political commitment. Since this study has predominantly focused on the counterinsurgency phase of an intervention in a weblike society, this finding offers an avenue for further research into the subsequent stabilization phase that should bring long-term stability. This book, therefore, has not only provided a profound understanding of co-option as a tool for counterinsurgency warfare in weblike societies, but in the end also urges for a similar understanding of the state building effort in the wake of such a campaign.