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Transcript

Urbanization and the Future of Conflict

Dr David Kilcullen

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Chair: Professor Theo Farrell

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Theo Farrell:

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome, my name is Theo Farrell, I am head of the Department of War Studies at King's College London and it's my very great pleasure to introduce Dr David Kilcullen. I imagine for most people in this room he actually doesn't need any introduction, being such a legendary figure in the world of counter-insurgency. But just briefly, rather than just go through his whole biography, Dr Kilcullen is currently chief executive officer of Caerus Associates and he is author of the book that's over there, just out with Hurst, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla*. He is previously, of course, author of *The Accidental Guerrilla* which, all the work I did in the British Army, you'd invariably find a copy of this book on the desks of most of the planners. In his previous incarnations, Dr Kilcullen has been special advisor to the US secretary of state in 2007 and 2009, and, of course, he was senior advisor to General Petraeus in Iraq in 2007. So, without further ado, I'm going to hand over to Dr Kilcullen.

David Kilcullen:

Thanks Theo. Well, thank you for having me and it's nice to see so many people willing to come inside on a beautiful day to chat about unpleasant stuff. So what I thought I'd do is spend about half an hour talking about some of the main ideas in the book and then open up to a discussion and let you guys drive around the issues that are of interest to you. That's actually going to be a lot more interesting for me than giving a talk that I've given already, and probably more interesting for you as well.

The book that I've just finished – the title is *Out of the Mountains* and it comes from a quote from Osama bin Laden whose son was interviewed by Peter Bergen about four years ago. He said, 'When we lived in Afghanistan our father used to make us do these incredibly gruelling hikes across the Hindu Kush all the time into Pakistan and we used to whine about it,' – these were teenage kids – 'and say, "why are you making us do this?" And our dad always used to say, "We never know when war will come, we have to know our way out of the mountains."'

I decided to write the book in the middle of getting ambushed in Afghanistan in September of 2009. I was coming down a hill, middle of the afternoon, and it was one of these classic Afghan ambush scenarios. Lots of Afghan villages are strung out along valley floors and these valleys only have one road, so when you go up a valley in the morning everybody knows exactly where you're going to be at about four o'clock in the afternoon, you're going to be

driving down a valley on a main road, and that's a pretty common time to be hit with an ambush in Afghanistan, and I remember halfway through this fire fight thinking: this isn't a very good ambush, these guys are off their game today. By 2009 the Taliban had got pretty good at this kind of stuff, but this was not one of those kinds of ambushes, it was pretty half-arsed to be honest, and we got to the end of it and my vehicle crew said to each other, 'How many Taliban do you think we killed?' and I said, 'Well what makes you think they were Taliban?' and they said, 'Dude, they were shooting at us.' And I realized that we have this external reductionist framework of counter-insurgency that we drop over the top of something that's actually much more complex and differentiated than just a simple matter of a non-state armed group that's insurging against the government.

So I started to think about what are some different ways to conceive of the operating environment that we're going to be working in in the next generation, and different ways to conceive of the types of operations that we're going to be doing, so the book is about that. And I'm certain that it's not the answer, right. I'm pretty sure that I am wrong about a lot of what I put forward in the book, but what I'm trying to do is start a bit of a discussion with military people, academics, diplomats, aid agency folks. Most of us have spent about a decade focused very, very heavily on a particular set of challenges to do with non-state irregular actors mainly in landlocked rural remote environments, and the military has actually got pretty good at dealing with guerrillas in the desert and in the mountains. Aid agencies and diplomatic services have really reoriented to this very complex set of challenges, but when you look at the data that we have available about the future environment, it suggests that what we've been doing for the last decade doesn't actually bear very much resemblance to what we'll be doing in the next generation, so let me talk about that in a bit more detail.

As I look forward, I see a high degree of operational continuity but a very strong environmental discontinuity between what we've done for the last decade and what we'll be doing in the future. The operational continuity is fairly easy to lay out. War between states, interstate conflict, is diminishing across the planet and has been diminishing since about the middle of the last century. In the same timeframe, non-state armed groups, so what we call intrastate or non-state conflict - civil wars, insurgencies, terrorism, some forms of social conflict involving organized violence - have maintained at about the same level. So, it's not that there's more irregular warfare on the planet, it's that irregular warfare isn't diminishing in the same way as conventional warfare has over the past couple of generations. So,

proportionally, even though irregular warfare has always been the most common form of conflict on the planet – about 80 per cent of wars on the planet in the last two centuries have been irregular in nature – it's going to be even more the dominant mode of conflict in the next generation.

In the case of the American military, if you start a timeline in the middle of the 19th century and run it forward to now you find this incredibly consistent pattern whereby the American military gets involved in a large-scale or long duration counter-insurgency stabilization or other irregular warfare campaign about once every 20 to 25 years, right back to the Mexican War in 1846. It gets involved in a medium- or small-sized campaign on about the scale of Kosovo or Bosnia about once every five to 10 years, and the interesting thing about that pattern is it's entirely independent of policy-makers' preferences. At the beginning of 2012, President Obama laid out a policy where he said, 'Look, the American military is not going to do this stuff any more. It's a really bad idea to be doing large-scale counter-insurgency. We're not going to structure or size the force for that kind of operation in the future.' By my count he's the seventh president to make basically that same statement. People periodically say we're not going to do this any more but we still do it at about the same pace.

In the case of the British Army there's a very similar consistent pattern, although the scale is a little different. So that although currently it seems quite fashionable here in the UK to talk about getting out of the kinds of operations that we've been doing for the last decade, history suggests that we will probably continue to do them, so that the military needs to really understand how to deal with non-state armed groups in complex irregular warfare-type campaigns, not because that's necessarily the most dangerous – war between states is still the most dangerous thing in the international system – but because it's the most common, it's what people do on a normal basis. So a high degree of operational continuity going forward, but the environment in which we're going to be working is going to be entirely different from what we've been doing for the last decade.

So, let me lay out why I think that is. I should caveat this by saying this is a projection not a prediction, so what I've done is looked at the data that people currently have and extrapolated that out to show where it's taking us right now. That doesn't mean that the future that I'm sketching out inevitably will happen, in fact I hope that it doesn't, but it's where the data are taking us. Four major factors are shaping the environment. I call them megatrends in the book. Population, urbanization, littoralization – which is a fancy geographer's term for the tendency for things to cluster on coastlines– and then the new

factor, connectivity – dramatically enhanced connectivity in just the last 10 years. So let me talk through each of those in turn.

At the beginning of the European Industrial Revolution in 1750 the population of the planet was about 750 million people. It took 150 years to double, reaching 1.5 billion in 1900. It then took only 60 years to double again, getting to three billion by 1960, it doubled again to six billion by the year 2000 and in just the dozen years since then we've added another billion people to the planet. So, we're seeing not only dramatic population growth, but an acceleration in the rate of population growth over the last couple of centuries. It's interesting to note also that that doubling between 1900 and 1960 happened at the same time as two world wars and a major global influenza pandemic, which between them killed 150 million, mainly young and healthy, people, so it seems that you can have a fairly major mass extinction event without changing that basic underlying pattern of population growth.

That pattern has tracked very closely with a pattern of urbanization, so again, at around the same timeframe, the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, somewhere between two and three per cent of people on the planet lived in a city of a million or more. By 1900 the figure was 25 per cent, by 2008 it was 50 per cent, and the prediction, or the projection I should say, from groups like the Bureau of Economic and Social Affairs at the UN is that we'll be looking at 60 to 70 per cent urbanization by the middle of this century. In the same timeframe we're going to add another two to three billion people to the overall global population between now and 2050, so in the next generation we'll see the same number of people on the planet added to the global population as it took all of human history right up until 1960 to generate across the whole globe.

Now, those people won't be evenly distributed. They're overwhelmingly going into urban areas and overwhelmingly on coastlines in the developing world, so one of the points that is made by people that track this for a living, is that population growth on the planet is becoming an almost entirely urban phenomenon and it's very concentrated in low- and middle-income cities which happen to be mainly on coastlines. So, in the year 2000, out of the 25 largest cities on the planet, only four, Moscow, Beijing, Tehran and Mexico City were not on a coastline or on a major river delta. Already today 80 per cent of the world's population lives within 50 miles of the sea. This is an area that military planners call the littoral, the area where the effects of land, sea and aerospace overlap and it makes a very, very complicated operating environment when you have those overlapping effects. When you add into that a very, very heavily urbanized environment, you get a dramatically high

level of complexity, crowdedness, a variety of other factors that make it very difficult not only to understand but to operate in that environment.

So, those three factors, population growth, urbanization, littoralisation are not new, they've been around for a couple of centuries. They're very well understood. At the end of the 20th century a lot of militaries on the planet were writing about the urban littoral and talking about the need to engage in that kind of environment. We then got distracted, we went off to Afghanistan and Iraq and most of the professional militaries, aid agencies and diplomatic services in the West have spent the last decade in landlocked environments away from cities focusing on non-state armed groups in the countryside. The only two militaries in the West that have engaged in any significant urban fighting since 2000 is the US and the United Kingdom, and only the United Kingdom of all the countries that were committed to Iraq and Afghanistan has done urban littoral operations, so coastal urban environments. British in Basra and during the al-Faw peninsula during the invasion of Iraq, the only time that any of the Western militaries engaged in Afghanistan or Iraq have done any coastal urban operations. So the new normal for most militaries, aid agencies and diplomatic services is what we've been doing in Afghanistan but, as I said, that's not the environment that we're looking at.

There's a new factor which wasn't there in the 20th century, it wasn't even there about five years ago, which is actually dramatically changing the environment, and that's connectivity. So, when Western militaries were writing about the urban littoral and the Three Block War and all these kinds of issues in the 1990s, that was the pre-cell phone era, it was before significant penetration of internet into low and middle-income countries, it was before satellite television. When you fly over Mogadishu or Lagos or over one of the favelas outside Rio de Janeiro today, the most striking element of the rooftop landscape is how many people have satellite television dishes and how many cell phone antennas there are. I went to Mogadishu last year to do some work with the Somali National Army as they were kicking al Shabaab out of Mogadishu and was really struck by how many people have cell phones. It turns out 24 per cent of Somalis own and use a cell phone. There are four major cell phone companies just in Mogadishu city alone.

The Somali shilling, which is a currency that's survived for 20 years without a state or a central bank, floats on free exchange rates in a currency market that happens on the trading floor within Bakara Market in the middle of Mogadishu, and the traders who work in that market send out SMS text messages five times a day to update the latest currency exchange rate and all the traders downtown get that text message and run their businesses

based on that floating currency. That's only possible because people all have cell phones. This, when I began to look at it in great detail, turned out to be not only a really transformative effect on the environment but also something that's transforming conflict.

There is a connectivity differential between large urban spaces and rural areas. Right now about 1.4 million people per week or about 180,000 people a day migrate to a city across the planet. One of the reasons why people used to move to urban environments was because they had access to markets, to infrastructure, to government services, there was a high degree of prosperity. That's all still true but one of the things that's new is they also have access to connectivity. So in Somalia, also in Nigeria – we did some work in Lagos to support the research for the book – people go to cities because that's where you need to be to be connected and you need to be connected in order to tap into the global economy.

There's a million Somalis in the global diaspora, many of them live in North London or in Minnesota, Saint Paul in the US and the amount of money that gets remitted to Somalia from overseas Somalis is sufficient to sustain much more of the Somali economy than what happens in the rural countryside or downtown in Mogadishu. And so access to that international stream of remittance money, of trading networks, both licit and illicit, is only really possible if you are connected and you have to be in Mogadishu to be connected. And I use Mogadishu as an example but we saw the same thing in Mumbai, in Karachi, in Dakar, in parts of Jamaica, in the Caribbean, Latin America. It's a very, very common worldwide phenomenon now. It doesn't just change the way people engage in commerce and live their lives, it also changes conflict, and I spent a lot of time in the book talking about the Arab Spring conflicts and the use of networked connectivity in those conflicts and how it changes not only the way that irregular warfare happens but the way that everything happens in these cities.

Let me give you just two examples. In August of 2011 in Misrata, which is a town in central Libya, there was a very significant piece of urban fighting on the coastline between Gaddafi's regime and the Libyan rebels. There was a French naval taskforce sitting offshore as part of NATO's Operation Unified Protector. One of the intelligence officers on board one of the French warships began to notice that on Google Earth there were continually popping up a whole series of pin marks on the map of Misrata and began to wonder, what do these marks show? It turned out that Libyan school kids were getting shot by snipers as they were trying to move around the streets and they'd started marking on their smartphones where the sniper positions were, not for

the French but just to tell each other, don't go down that street because there's a sniper in this building at the end of it.

When the French realized that kids are marking positions of regime snipers they began to run air sorties against those positions. When the kids realized if we mark something on Google Maps the French bomb it, they went out and marked every piece of regime infrastructure they could find and when something got destroyed they would take it down. So what you had was what the military calls bomb damage assessment, BDA, which is traditionally one of the hardest things to do in a littoral campaign, being done on a completely self-synchronized crowdsource basis. As far as I can figure out, talking to a lot of folks on the ground in Misrata and to a couple of guys in the French Navy, at no time did the French ever make direct contact with these guys on the ground. It was completely self-synchronized.

Second example: in Syria, some of you may have seen photos of this but there are a number of homemade armoured vehicles kicking around Aleppo, Idlib, parts of Damascus. We run humanitarian reporting for aid agencies on the ground in Syria and I've seen a lot of this coming from people who are tracking where the aid is getting through, but oh I saw this homemade tank, and one of them is a thing called Al-Shams which is pretty famous now. It is a Mini Minor chassis, it's about six feet long and about three feet wide, it has steel armour plating all over it, it has a machine gun mounted on top of it that's remote controlled from inside. It has no turret or anyone in the higher part of the vehicle. You run it with a Gameboy controller from inside on a flat screen television that's mounted to the front of the inside of the vehicle, and it has video cameras around the outside that you use for driving. It's made in a homemade backyard workshop.

Two points about this particular vehicle, and it's one of many that you see on the ground. One, you can only do that with a population that's tech savvy, that's technologically literate, that is dense enough that you can find a guy to build the computer system and a guy to build the remote control gun system and a mechanic to build the chassis and it's ideally suited to the type of environment where it operates. A common Western military armoured vehicle is somewhere between 12 and 16 feet wide. Good luck getting that down a street in the back alleys of a place like Aleppo or Damascus, you won't be there. And it's interesting when I show pictures of this to professional soldiers, particularly armoured guys, they will say, well it has a machine gun, it doesn't have a turret with a tank gun, it'll be overmatched as soon as it faces another armoured vehicle. That's correct. It will never face another armoured vehicle because it's in streets which other armoured vehicles can't get to, and it's

there to dominate a piece of terrain and to move around as kind of a mobile machine gun post to support the rebels.

So, we see not only the online connectivity aspect but we see rebels in Syria doing this kind of manufacturing using android phones, using the compass app to lay their rockets, using iPads which now have mortar firing tables as an app that you can get on the App Store to lay the mortars. So we're seeing this democratization of technology through connectivity that's changing the way that urban fights develop and it's changing the way that people fight against regimes.

Let me end by saying a couple of things about how we might seek to understand this environment. In doing that I went back to Karl Marx who, whoever else or whatever else he might have been, was a social scientist thinking about European cities and urban populations at the end of the first hundred years of this pattern that I've been talking about of the Industrial Revolution. And Marx talks a lot about how rural populations when they're transported or transplanted to urban environments lose a lot of the connectivity that defines rural life. So if you think about yourself living in a village, you basically know everybody or you may even be related to many of the people on whom your life depends; the guy that you buy the food from, where the water comes from, the school teacher, the local governance people, are all folks that you know, that live within two or three minutes of your house, you might even be related to some of them. When you move to an urban environment you're now at the mercy of a whole set of systems of impartial institutional distantiated structures that all have to work together as a series of intermeshed moving parts and if one of those systems falls apart the whole thing falls apart. So you're now dependent on strangers for your livelihood and it's a completely different type of environment from the rural environment, and Marx talks about alienation and he talks about what he calls the 'metabolic rift' as people are torn out of their basic 'man in nature environment' as he describes it.

This idea turns out to be very influential in urban studies, so there are a lot of folks since the 1960s have taken the idea of urban metabolism and applied it to the functioning of cities and I do that in the book in a slightly different way. So in urban ecology we're talking about a material flow analysis where carbon, water, air, fuel, various sorts of inputs come into a city, there are various transformative processes that result in biomass and energy and so on, but then there are also waste products that have to be metabolized and dealt with otherwise toxins build up and you get pollution and all sorts of other problems in the city. What I've done is to take that stuff, and I'm not the only

one that's done this, but to apply non-material flows to it, to say let's look at energy, let's look at electricity, let's look at money, information, weapons, trade goods, drugs, and see how cities cope with the flow of these non-material elements and whether there's a way to analyse an urban environment as a system of flows rather than as a piece of urban terrain.

So if there are military folks in the audience, most people in the military are brought up to think about cities as a piece of urban terrain like it is static, it doesn't change. But the case-studies that I've done, particularly the ones of non-state armed groups in the slum areas that have emerged around these growing cities – which become doughnut-shaped or horseshoe-shaped pieces of terrain – where that city used to grow its food, it used to be the catchment area for its water, but now it's a slum area where the police don't go and a non-state armed group is dominating that area. Everything that city needs to survive, all the flows of the urban metabolism, have to run the gauntlet of a piece of terrain that's controlled in many cases by non-state armed groups.

In Nairobi for example, gangs like Mungiki and the Taliban – which is actually not in any way associated with the Taliban, it's just the name of a particular gang – and to some extent Somali gangs, have come to dominate a ring of terrain where 60 per cent of the population of Nairobi live but in only six per cent of the land area, and politicians in the downtown part of Nairobi have found themselves having to make deals with these non-state actors because they can shut the city down. They have a chokehold on the survival of the city because of the way these cities have grown. We saw similar things in Dakar and Lagos and Karachi and a variety of other places.

So, one of the implications is we have to really start thinking about cities as the unit of analysis rather than the nation state if we're going to understand this environment. The second thing is we have to come up with new tools of understanding, and this is, again, an appeal to those of us that spent the last decade putting 110 per cent of our attention on the problems of Afghanistan. In the time while we've been distracted urban studies has moved on, there's more data available, there are different ways of thinking about the environment out there and there's a whole new body of thought on how urban environments function that didn't really exist in the 1990s when the military was looking at the urban littoral. More to the point, things have changed and now there's this enormous degree of connectivity that didn't exist in the past which is transforming conflict as well as everything else.

At the end of the book I come to the conclusion that I started off from a position of looking at conflict because that's my background, but this isn't really a theory of conflict, it's kind of a theory of everything that's going to be happening on the planet in the next generation. Conflict is just one part of it. It's not all bad. There's some very, very positive aspects to future urbanization, not only for the environment but also for people's livelihood. We could be looking at up to two billion more people in the global middle class by the middle of the century with enormous potential for lifting people out of poverty, improvements in public health and education, new markets, those sorts of things, and there could be some really positive aspects to what we're looking at, but only if we get our heads out of the mountains where we've been for the last decade and start really engaging with this set of problems. There's a whole new set of challenges that we need to get our heads around as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, we hope, begin to wind down.

So, let me stop there. I've laid out most of the key issues in the book. There's a lot of other stuff to talk to and there are some key case-studies that we may want to kick around, but let me throw it to you.