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In Focus

*Dysfunctional Warfare: The Russian Invasion of Ukraine*
Rob Johnson

*Putin's Invasion of Ukraine in 2022: Implications for Strategic Studies*
Antulio J. Echevarria II

*Russia and China*
Ryan J. Orsini
Mark T. Vicik

*Beyond Conventional War*
Brandon Colas
Zachary Kallenborn

*Lessons from History*
Tami Davis Biddle
Alexander G. Lovelace

*SRAD Director's Corner*

*Russia's Strategy and Its War on Ukraine*
George Shatzer
Mission Statement
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Welcome to the Summer issue of Parameters. This issue consists of two In Focus commentaries concerning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, three forums, and the SRAD Director’s Corner.

In our first In Focus essay, “Dysfunctional Warfare: The Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” Rob Johnson traces Russian dysfunctionality in the conduct of the war. He also discusses how the war on Ukraine underscores six factors vital to armed conflict: adroit strategy, logistics, fighting spirit and motivation, mass, greater firepower, and technological superiority. In our second In Focus essay, “Putin’s Invasion of Ukraine in 2022: Implications for Strategic Studies,” I discuss how some of the key dilemmas in strategic studies—such as the decline of major wars, the limitations of strategic coercion, the utility of the paradigm “War amongst the People,” and our current understanding of the relationship between war’s character and its nature—are either challenged or refined by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

The issue’s first forum, Russia and China, includes two articles exploring important areas of strategic concern for the United States. In “Economic Statecraft and US-Russian Policy,” Ryan Orsini offers a comprehensive assessment of the US-Russian economic relationship, identifying how Russia exploits strategic asymmetries to gain advantage in the so-called gray zone and how the United States can modernize its economic statecraft to sustain its ongoing economic coercion. In “Strengthen Arctic Governance to Stop Russian and Chinese Overreach,” Mark Vicik examines the history of Arctic governance and demonstrates the weakness of the current rules-based order; he then provides policy recommendations for securing US interests in the region.

Our second forum, Beyond Conventional War, features two articles proposing different ways to think about warfare. In “Defining and Deterring Faits Accomplis,” Brandon Colas describes faits accomplis, offers suggestions for how to deter them, and suggests Department of Defense leaders frame territorial disputes as a real estate market they can analyze and manipulate. In “InfoSwarms: Drone Swarms and Information Warfare,” Zachary Kallenborn explores the dependence of drone swarms on information and offers insights into how this important emerging technology fits into the broader defense ecosystem.

The third forum, Lessons from History, consists of two essays providing historical perspectives on the character traits of successful leaders and the military-media relationship. In “Character Traits Strategic Leaders Need,”
Tami Davis Biddle identifies key leaders of World War II and highlights the qualities that helped them achieve success in the challenging roles they performed. In “Tomorrow’s Wars and the Media,” Alexander Lovelace uses military history to offer practical guidelines for how the press can be used successfully by military leaders in future conflicts.

In the final section, the second installment of the SRAD Director’s Corner, George Shatzer focuses on Russia’s strategy and its war on Ukraine. He reviews The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace by Oscar Jonsson and Learning from Russia’s Recent Wars: Why, Where, and When Russia Might Strike Next by Neal G. Jesse and shows how these books might help readers better understand Russian motivations and willingness to wage war. The books also provide insights for strategists attempting to deal with Russian aggression. ~AJE
**Dysfunctional Warfare:**
The Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Rob Johnson
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ABSTRACT: Russia's invasion of Ukraine was based on false premises, faulty assumptions, and a weak strategy. As the conflict has unfolded, heavy losses have imposed a strain on available Russian manpower. The Russian army reached a culminating point outside Kyiv and has exhibited little sign of operational learning. By contrast, Ukrainians have fought an existential war, making good use of dispersed light infantry tactics with high motivation levels. Western support has allowed them to compensate for their deficiencies in armaments and munitions. This commentary also shows military and policy leaders how the political context continues to impose limitations on the Ukrainians.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, Vladimir Putin, Volodymyr Zelensky, dysfunctional warfare

As early as February 28, 2022, just four days into the war, RIA Novosti accidentally leaked Russian President Vladimir Putin's stated objectives. It seems Putin intended to secure Kyiv in just two days and announce on February 26 that a new world order had been ushered in. The rapid takeover of Ukraine was supposed to have presented the West with a fait accompli, like operations in Belarus and Kazakhstan, but also a new, more robust Russian foreign policy. Putin aimed to end Western global domination and abolish its rules and claimed “Anglo-Saxons” rule the West, so the “German project” to run Europe represented a challenge to them. He forecast a split between Europe and the Anglo-Saxons was inevitable, stated Russia was in a conflict with the West, and argued in the planned statement that “Greater Russia” (including Ukraine and Belarus) had returned to its “rightful position” as a world power. He believed the challenge to the West would prove irresistible.

The statement seems to confirm that Putin aims to conquer Ukraine in its entirety, annex the territory, and position conventional forces on the borders of Ukraine and Belarus before moving nuclear forces into Belarus to counter NATO. At this point, some pundits think Putin is unhinged, however, a long-term analysis of his motives indicates he is consistently aggressive. His actions, in his estimation, are the culmination of brinkmanship and military preparations that have paid dividends over 20 years:

subduing Chechnya, preventing Georgia from joining NATO, intimidating the Baltic countries, seizing Crimea and the Donbas, crushing democratic movements in Belarus and Kazakhstan, and persuading the West not to interfere with his “near abroad,” including his ally Bashar al-Assad of Syria.

The Russian leader and his elites think in terms of geography and military strength, not public opinion or international diplomacy. To Putin, only elite opinions matter. The masses and small countries are expected to fall into line with the Great Powers. In his interpretation of the world, status is measured only by size and strength.²

Putin believes the West has “expanded” geographically at Russia’s expense, and he does not accept that Eastern Europe popular opinion voluntarily joined NATO. For him, democratic movements are the orchestration of covert forces. For Russian leaders, “color revolutions” are not genuine public uprisings. They are the products of US and Western operations and information warfare, a view they hold because that is how they would use them. For Putin, the West has been dismantling threats to its global domination (including Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria) through revolution, invasion, and economic tools—and he believed Russia was the next target. In his calculus, Russia and China are the only powers that can stand against the West.³

This outlook explains Putin’s demands to the United States and the Europeans on December 17, 2021. He called for the establishment of a Russian sphere of influence over Eastern and Southeastern Europe; the suppression of the Caucasus and Central Asia; and the construction of a new global order, where Russia and China act as replacements for the West and the Western world is confined to the Atlantic. These grandiose ambitions were supposed to be expressions of power, but they looked like statements of fear. Putin, fearful of popular, democratic protests and movements and globalization, favors autarky. He fears Western technological advances that threaten to leave Russia as a declining state. After the humiliating end of the Cold War, he is afraid of losing the chance to resurrect Russia’s power.⁴

The result is an unnecessary, illegal, and immoral war that serves no purpose and deprives Putin of achieving his ambitions. Far from a demilitarized Eastern Europe to “guarantee security” for Russia, European countries have announced their desire for greater security through rearmament. If stability at home had been

2. Keir Giles, Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West (Chatham House Insights Series, Brookings Institution, 2018); and Mark Galeotti, We Need to Talk about Putin: How the West Gets Him Wrong (London: Ebury, 2019).


the objective, Putin failed. He faces the most significant wave of protests of his entire administration. If he wanted to make Russia a great and respected power, then the economic consequences of his decision have proven disastrous, and the country’s reputation lies in tatters. Even if he can win battles in Ukraine, the war has been a strategic failure from the start.

**Dysfunctionality in the Tactical-Operational Dimension**

The initial Russian plan to seize Kyiv in a lightning coup de main air assault operation at Hostomel Airport, reinforced by the rapid drive of armored columns from the Belarusian border, failed because of the quick reactions and determined resistance of the Ukrainian forces and Russia’s failure to neutralize Ukrainian air defense. The expected blitzkrieg faltered as the Ukrainians destroyed vehicles at a significant rate along predictable routes. The forward elements of the Russian army outstripped their logistics. Some vehicles broke down, others ran out of fuel, and troops began looting to find food. Attempts to move into Ukraine along multiple axes left each element deficient in air defense, close-air support, and electronic warfare capabilities. In some cases, communications at the battalion level were dependent on civilian commercial equipment. The Russian army stalled despite a year of preparations, and the initial offensive failed.

There are a host of other more significant problems in the functioning of the Russian army. Ukraine is winning the information war in the West, which is not surprising given Russia’s breach of international law. At the UN, despite holding the chair of the Security Council, Russia was humiliated, its justification of a “special military operation” exposed as a blatant rupture of jus ad bellum. Its subsequent conduct has trampled over customary international law, the law of armed conflict, and jus in bello. The UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to condemn Russia’s actions. Only a handful of states abstained. Significantly, one of those states was China, which appears to have been complicit insofar as Beijing knew in advance of Putin’s plans.

On the ground, the Ukrainian resistance and President Volodymyr Zelensky’s dignified yet impassioned leadership drew global admiration. The Ukrainian troops at Chernihiv prevented the capture of the main route toward Kyiv for a week. Kharkiv’s resistance also proved effective. One or two Russian units that penetrated the city were practically wiped out, and commentators remarked

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5. Natasha Bertrand (@NatashaBertrand), “Breaking: @mchancecnn with Russian Forces at the Antonov Airport about 15 Miles outside of Kyiv. "These Troops You Can See over Here, They Are Russian Airborne Forces. They Have Taken This Airport,"” video clip, Twitter, February 24, 2022, 9:06 AM, https://twitter.com/i/status/1496849053824471041.

how similar the Russian setbacks were to the fate of their forces in the First Chechen War.\(^7\)

Russia had pinned so much hope on the success of its coup de main that it did not open the offensive with overwhelming fires, as its military doctrine requires. This decision was a political gamble to seize the capital rapidly and decapitate the Zelensky government, just as the Soviets had done in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Kabul in 1979. Russia’s failure to use considerable firepower, except to create confusion, meant even the poorly prepared Ukrainian defenses, including air defenses, remained intact. What emerged was that the Russian air force close-air support had either failed or was inadequate.\(^8\) Subsequently, it appears there was a lack of coordination capabilities with ground forces and suggestions that Russian pilots either could not communicate with ground elements or were concerned their side might shoot them down.

The assembly of battalion tactical groups was too weak to penetrate far.\(^9\) The attrition of losses or breakdowns caused much-smaller units to arrive piecemeal at their objectives, with disastrous results. The vast columns of road-bound vehicles heading toward Kyiv were thus halted, offering a ripe target for Ukrainian drone or air attacks. It took more than a week to sort out the confusion, bring up fuel and supplies, and reorganize the column to permit access to armor and artillery. There was evident confusion and frustration on the Russian side, and their solution was to use massive volumes of firepower to clear routes and reduce urban areas.

The Ukrainian resistance has come as a shock. Russian prisoners and intercepted communications revealed they thought the Ukrainians would greet them as liberators. Western military specialists have been surprised by another factor. Russian drills at the tactical level were of a lower standard than expected.\(^10\) Basic battle skills (such as alertness, logistics management, and moving tactically across the terrain to avoid casualties) were substandard, and evidence suggests a significant lack of discipline. Observers noted Russian troops remained mounted


in vehicles and did not dismount to support their tanks. This failure meant the Ukrainians, with both advanced antitank guided weapons and basic antitank weapons, were effective.

Russian tactical errors have assisted Ukraine’s “defense in depth,” absorbing Russian strength by fighting deeper inside their territory. Ukrainian forces have chosen to contest every axis, and in the north, they have been successful, though it has proven harder to hold on in the south. Ordinarily, the Russian army would pulverize any resistance with artillery, but its attempt to thrust deep into the country has given the Ukrainians the opportunity to slow the advance.

Against the greater number of Russian forces, the Ukrainian strategy has become reliant on resistance in urban areas where its forces can inflict heavy losses. Held up, Russian commanders have tried surrounding and bombarding cities, leaving supply lines vulnerable to rural interdiction by smaller groups of Ukrainian troops. It is evident the Russian response, as they have done in Syria, will be the deliberate destruction of cities and towns. The humanitarian consequences have been harrowing and have deepened Ukrainian determination and Western empathy.

Russia has been surprised by the spirited public protests and unhappy receptions from formerly pro-Russian Ukrainians its occupation forces have met. There have been two responses by Moscow. First, Rosgvardiya troops, whose sole task is robust internal security, have moved to occupy eastern provinces. Second, Russia attempted to stage a fake popular “welcome” in Kherson soon after it fell. As in other false-flag operations, the action failed because it was exposed. On March 13, Russian forces detained Kherson’s mayor and staged a declaration of a Kherson People’s Republic to emulate the Luhansk and Donetsk model. This act has reinforced suspicions that Putin intended to overrun and expunge Ukraine as a state, with the statelets incorporated into Russia. The Duma has already proposed Luhansk and Donetsk, like Crimea, should be incorporated, a request Putin was only too glad to accept.

Russian Special Forces then launched assaults, air attacks, and missile strikes on Ukrainian gas, oil, and energy installations located around the country to degrade resistance. There was considerable alarm when the fighting led to the bombardment of the Zaporizhzhya nuclear plant. The International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN held emergency sessions as the threat of radiation dispersion.

leaks intensified. Nevertheless, the Russians continued shelling and airstrikes, believing concerns for civilian safety would weaken Ukrainian resolve.

Ukrainians, however, continue to put up fierce resistance, particularly at Sumy, Irpin, and Chernihiv. In one episode, Ukrainian troops infiltrated Russian lines and used handheld antitank missiles against a train carrying fuel for Russian armored vehicles. A surface-to-surface missile struck a military airfield just inside Russia. Audacious helicopter attacks hit Belgorod oil storage facilities twice in two weeks. Zelensky has continued to urge more vociferously than ever that the West should supply antiaircraft systems, provide more munitions, and prevent Russia’s use of the skies.

Russia conducted amphibious landings 18 miles (30 kilometers) from Mariupol to secure the Black Sea coast, one of its early operational objectives. Resistance, however, continued though the Russians surrounded the city at the end of the first week. Russia is subsequently in breach of the law of armed conflict—shutting off electricity and, therefore, water supply and power generation for hospitals. The Russians have conducted intensive bombardments of civilian areas. Several attempts to provide a safe evacuation for civilians have failed because shelling has continued, destroying evacuation transport. A particularly tragic case, Mariupol points to the intimidatory optics Putin has tried to use to force the Ukrainians into capitulation. The decision to destroy and cut off the means to survive and bomb the civilian population was deliberate and indicates how Russia will treat other urban areas. By contrast, 19 years earlier in Iraq, US forces had been far more precise and efficient than the Russians. The Russian model of urban warfare appears to be a rerun of the war in Syria, with similar levels of destruction.
Despite Putin’s ability to overrun a territory, analysts have noted he lacks the manpower to secure his gains.\(^{19}\) Moreover, he cannot simultaneously garrison and suppress Ukraine while posing a threat to NATO unless he intends to complete his plans in stages separated by long intervals of consolidation.

Time has become a critical factor. The deterioration of the Russian economy and the resupply of the Ukrainian resistance will strengthen over time, which means Putin is in a race to reduce major cities and take Kyiv, in particular, before the economic damage at home worsens. To thwart this strategy, the Ukrainians need to hold on and draw as much support as they can from the West, particularly in air-defense technologies, intelligence feeds, and financial support. By the beginning of April, exhaustion and attrition had forced Russian troops to withdraw from around Kyiv.\(^{20}\)

**Russian Miscalculations**

Fear of NATO intervention is undoubtedly growing in Russia. Putin has threatened nuclear escalation as a “response to Western economic measures” and hinted the financial squeeze placed on Russia could be construed as an act of war. While such threats have deterred some Western intervention, the damage to the Russian economy has been severe. The ruble plunged to half its value in a day and continues to dive. While the Europeans and British have debated the importance of sanctioning oligarchs, the sanctions placed on the Russian central bank by the Western powers, especially the United States, created the most significant impact.

The Kremlin’s response to growing international criticism has been to cut off social media and sever the Internet to isolate the Russian public and force them to depend on RusNet and a diet of pro-Putin television.\(^{21}\) Maria Ovsyannikova, an editor at Channel One (a state broadcaster), protested during a live broadcast. The government placed subsequent doubt on her motives as she urged the European Union to abandon its sanctions.\(^{22}\) Like so many others, the Russian government swept her from public view.

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Some 13,000 protestors had been arrested by March 7, 2022. Putin held a nationalist rally, and Russian state broadcasters have indulged in an evermore bizarre alternate universe of Kremlin propaganda. Russia claims it is “rescuing” Ukraine from Nazis, that there is no war going on, and that the Russian-speaking eastern Ukrainians are being subjected to “genocide” and makes no mention of the massacres conducted by Russian troops at Bucha or the indiscriminate bombardments of cities. Arrests continued until the “no war” protests started to dry up. The Russian police applied their usual heavy-handed tactics, and the litany of the Kremlin’s repressive measures has brought back the Soviet Union in spirit and practice.

Putin’s objectives to improve Russia’s security in the region and at home have become counterproductive despite attempts to conceal his miscalculated invasion. Stubbornly, Putin believes he can win in the face of setbacks. He intends to cow the West, survive through China’s potential economic assistance, and crush all opposition with dictatorial measures he could then justify. He calculates he can withstand public opposition at home and thinks the West cannot sanction oil without crippling itself. He believes he can use threats to prevent NATO intervention, including Western calls for the provision of combat aircraft, No-Fly Zones for Ukraine, or even defensive weapons. Putin believes it is a matter of time before he can defeat Ukrainian resistance, and there is no doubt it is in his officers’ interests to convey a positive view of progress. Putin’s arrest of Federal Security Service chiefs underscored how hazardous it would be to oppose the Russian leader. This action also reveals how he is trying, once again, to ensure he is not blamed for any failures.

The possibility of an extension of Russian coercion to the Arctic, Mediterranean, and Atlantic regions, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia is among the less certain developments. Russian manpower shortages have forced Putin to recall private-military companies from Africa and the Middle East. By March 11, he was calling for volunteers from Russia and the former Soviet sphere, suggesting heavier losses than he expected. To mobilize Russia’s full potential, Putin would have to admit the “special military operation” failed. Meanwhile, Zelensky has also

called on Ukrainian peacekeeping personnel to return home, and he told men of fighting age they could not join their escaping families.

NATO’s appetite for military intervention remains nonexistent. The primary reason for this aversion is to avoid direct conflict with Russia that could become a nuclear exchange if Putin, for example, actually used weapons of mass destruction. It is purely a question of avoidance, primarily through inexperience with how deterrence works in practice, with little consideration given to escalation control. There are legal and collective security questions, too. If any single NATO member engages in the conflict, the entire alliance will become involved. Such a move is dependent on US President Joe Biden, but there is no sign he will make this decision. Of course, the risk of Russia attacking Poland or other NATO members is still there, and intensive planning continues. American and British forces have reinforced the Eastern European flank of NATO, albeit with modest numbers, and a NATO fleet exercised in the High North. At the same time, Poland announced a significant increase in defense spending.27

The prevailing hopes heard in Western capitals are for civil unrest in Russia, or a palace coup, which might lead to a change of government. Both are improbable since Russian polls indicate the invasion has made Putin more popular as a “strong leader.”28 Public protests in Russia can be closed down by the repressive tactics of the police and condemned as Western-inspired attacks on Russia. Sanctions may take years to have an effect and are used by the Kremlin as “evidence” of Western aggression. Internal changes in Russia would require a much greater confluence of setbacks: high inflation, deteriorating services, incompetent authorities, a succession of policy failures, and, crucially, military defeat. If the Ukrainians defeat the Russian army, civil unrest might unseat the president.

At this stage, both sides are considering the options and potential outcomes of the conflict. In Russia, Putin insists he is fighting to prevent genocide against Russian speakers in Donbas, a fantasy he peddled to justify the invasion.29 Putin proclaimed his objective of “de-Nazifying” Ukraine, but the existence of far-right activism was sparse, and there was no evidence Ukraine was under the control of Nazis. Russian propagandists continue to claim the Ukrainians are welcoming

“liberation,” but this is nonsense. No one has greeted the Russian troops as anything more than invaders and oppressors.30

There was an option for talks with Ukraine, but Russia’s offers to negotiate have not been sincere. Putin has demanded all his objectives be met and threatens the destruction of Ukraine if they are not met. His only reason for talks has been to keep NATO, or any UN mission, out of Ukraine. So far, he has avoided a ceasefire because this action might give other countries the opportunity to arrive and establish cordons or areas of control that would deprive Putin of a full military victory and make a resumption of the conflict more difficult.

Russia has looked to China for munitions and support. The United States has made it clear to Beijing that supplying the Russians with military assistance would lead to US sanctions on China. The Chinese are already suffering from the economic stresses of a real-estate crisis, suppressed Western markets, and the consequences of an authoritarian approach to COVID-19 restrictions. Consequently, Beijing has chosen to pretend not to support Putin and has blamed the United States for the conflict in Ukraine while looking to serve their national interests.31

Meanwhile, Europeans have refused to impose full sanctions on Russian oil. The revenues Putin can derive from oil, an estimated $65 billion since the start of the war, are sufficient for him to continue funding the conflict, despite a fall in the value of the ruble and a potential decline in overall Russian production.32 Efforts by European leaders to persuade Middle Eastern producers to pump more oil have failed as they see no reason to threaten fellow producers or flood the market and reduce prices when they could profit. Europeans lack the wherewithal to make the final step that would damage Russia irrevocably because the European continent has not diversified its fuel supply. After efforts to find alternative sources were explored (especially from the United States), the German government admitted it could only reduce to a 65 percent dependence on Russian oil after 12 months. Putin knew this, too. The British are glad with their Brexit decision, which has reduced UK reliance on Russian and European supplies.

Ukraine has fewer options. It can either seek a compromise peace with Russia, with all the attendant risks, or continue to fight. Ukrainian resilience is admirable but existential—by the fifth week of the war, for example, Mariupol was still defending itself despite massive bombardments. Drone footage shows a city in ruins and a population without water or electricity queuing for dwindling food supplies. Russian shelling and airstrikes have damaged over 90 percent of the structures, and survivors talk of bodies littering the streets or buried under the debris.

Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and France’s President Emmanuel Macron have urged the Ukrainians to give up Mariupol and end the siege for “humanitarian” reasons. Both leaders favored such a concession as the prelude to more substantial negotiations on the war’s end. Critics suggest these attempts had more to do with the Turkish and French domestic situations and the desire of Erdogan and Macron to appear to be “statesmen.” On March 28, 2022, another round of tentative talks between Ukraine and Russia produced no results.

Thus, Zelensky chose to fight on, continue to receive Western defensive weapons, and even reach out for offensive weapons from other countries. These weapons include heavier caliber missiles to strike Russia itself, armored vehicles, and aircraft. Poland could have sold its much-publicized stock of MiG29s to a third party who then offered them to the Ukrainians. Western powers, however, are still reluctant to take this step, anxious to avoid escalation. The United States and the United Kingdom have made it clear they would offer loitering munitions, such as Switchblades, to the Ukrainian army.

By early April, Ukraine remained open to the idea of talks and offered to continue its position as a neutral state, which Russia requested, but there is no sign Putin is going to conclude the conflict. Indeed, analysts regard the talks as a way for the Russian forces to reposition themselves and prepare for an envelopment of the Ukrainian troops in the eastern provinces—the anticipated attempt at a Kesselschlacht.

The Changing Character of War

Much seems conventional in the Russian war in Ukraine. It has been augmented with unconventional methods and intense fighting and marked by civilian suffering. Russia has the advantage in terms of mass, but Ukraine has been forced to overcome this asymmetry by using light infantry tactics to delay and destroy Russian columns. Russia’s relative advantages have been eroded by the economic measures imposed by the West, Ukraine’s steady mobilization of its manpower, and the provision of foreign equipment.

In information warfare, Ukraine has been able to win support from the West against Russia’s clear breach of international law. In Russia, however, there is considerable support for the Kremlin’s special military operation.

When assessing the determination to win and the role of leadership, there is a clear difference between Zelensky’s popular and warm style and Putin’s remote and cool style. Ukrainian morale and determination have been impressive, while Russian military morale has suffered amongst some units. Meanwhile, most of the Russian public appears to be completely unaware of the details of the conflict, being fed a diet purely of military successes. This withholding of information creates a potential vulnerability as setbacks come to light, such as the sinking of the Russian warship Moskva illustrates.36

Technological performance is a key feature of assessing this conflict, and Ukraine’s anti-armor weapons have been successful. On the other hand, Russia possesses greater numbers of advanced fighters (like the SU-35), which it can deploy, and missiles (over 900 had been used by March 15, 2022). Russia also has more artillery and surface-to-surface missiles. Both forces possess drones for surveillance and strike. Ukraine maintains an advantage since Russian formations are easier to find and strike than the dispersed Ukrainians. The images of Ukrainian drone strikes also give the impression the Russians lack counter-drone technologies in sufficient numbers at the tactical level and rely instead on mass to achieve their objectives.

Russia has relied on area bombardments with a few precision-guided systems. While these bombardments significantly damage urban areas, they are easier to survive, giving the Ukrainians an advantage in urban warfare. Remarkable war footage comes from courageous reporting on the ground and drone cameras. The clips of blackened buildings, scorched windows, heaps of rubble and debris, and hollow walls from Mariupol resemble scenes from World War II in Europe or the battle for Mosul in Iraq. Shaken escapees spoke of bodies lying

in the streets because it was too dangerous to try and recover them because of the shelling. This operation is a twentieth-century war being fought with twenty-first-century weapons.

Competence in combined arms operations is evidently mixed in the Russian forces. The Russian coordination of fire and movement, while achieving progress along several major axes (such as westward from Kharkiv and north from Kherson), did not yield results for the advance on Kyiv from the north. The Russian doctrine of creating a wall of fires behind which its forces can maneuver along the axes of least resistance was not evident until the end of the first month of the war, perhaps because of logistical weaknesses. The doctrine of artillery-led operations depends on a secure, abundant, and efficient logistics chain. Russia’s logistics chain has been substandard, and it may have shifted attention to operations in eastern Ukraine to shorten and reduce lines of communication.

Ukraine’s logistics also face challenges. By the beginning of April, Ukraine had lost over 600 armored vehicles and 15 combat aircraft, but it had the advantage of being able to depend on local support. If necessary, its dispersed formations of infantry could forage for supplies. Weapons and ammunition have also flowed in steadily from the West. The United States has been generous in its supply of munitions, initially delivering 180 tons of munitions and an aid package worth $200 million. Biden increased this amount in mid-March to $1 billion and promised to increase aid to $8 billion at a future date. Along with Europe, some 17,000 missiles have been dispatched to Ukraine. This action was significant, as Zelensky said, because the Ukrainians were using antitank and anti-aircraft missiles “20 times faster” than they were arriving. Furious about the Western supplies, the Russians targeted a Ukrainian military base located near the city Yavoriv, 60 kilometers from the Polish border, with a missile strike because the location, an alleged Western munitions depot, had been used by NATO forces in the past to train Ukrainian soldiers.

War also demands recovery from setbacks and adaptation. The failure of the Russian coup de main required a significant adjustment of strategy and tactics. Russia moved to a slower and more deliberate use of firepower to make progress. Levels of resistance and logistics challenges made progress even slower, which has


imposed costs on the Russian economy. Additionally, the Russian army’s officer corps has no tradition of self-critique and is therefore unlikely to change.

We can differentiate the character of war by assessing strategies and their political purpose. In terms of cost-benefit analyses, Putin’s war is no longer worth the military success that Russia might have achieved. Putin has failed to grasp that Ukraine is now in an existential war, and the country will resist. Russia cannot achieve its strategic ends and risks a stalemate. Putin may be tempted to break the logjam with weapons of mass destruction. It seems more likely he will try to achieve a military “success” by capturing Mariupol and securing eastern Ukraine. He assumes the West will not intervene for fear of nuclear retaliation. Yet, there is a degree of political desperation in the Kremlin. For Putin, the war is existential, even if it is not for his countrymen, and full mobilization is an option. For its part, Ukraine can exhaust the Russian army and impose attrition. It can also extend the Russian flanks by opening up new threats geographically and conceptually in cyberspace or against Russia’s hydrocarbons industries. Ultimately, the Ukrainians may be able to compel the Russians to make a choice: to persist and suffer irreparable losses or desist and achieve some compensatory peace.

At the time of writing, there are still significant risks in this conflict. The failure to export grain in the summer of 2022 or access humanitarian aid threatens a food security crisis in Ukraine, the Middle East, and North Africa. Russia could seek to exploit the situation by blaming the West. There is also a substantial threat of a radiological accident since there are nuclear power stations across Ukraine which Russian missiles could breach. The death tolls of such an accident would be large and long-term.

Unverified statistics put the figure of civilian deaths in the thousands, with 10 million displaced individuals and over 3 million refugees crossing the border into Poland and Moldova. These figures were revised to 4.5 million refugees and 11 million displaced internally. The actual number is far higher. There have been heart-rending scenes of children and families killed. Ukrainian parents wrote “children” in paint on their cars and homes, hoping to be spared, often without success. Columns of refugees passed the remains of cars and buses smashed by gunfire, their occupants lost. In Mariupol and Kharkiv, the numbers of civilian casualties rose rapidly. According to UN-verified figures, there were 549 civilian deaths and 957 injuries in Ukraine as of March 10 (the end of the second week of the war).

The indiscipline of the Russian army produced another equally predictable and appalling by-product of war—atrocities. At Bucha, retreating Russian troops left behind the corpses of civilians they had shot down in the streets. Survivors reported the casual nature of the abuse. Russian soldiers had murdered civilians, branded civilians with swastikas, raped girls as young as 10 years old, run over injured civilians with vehicles, and used grenades against terrified inhabitants sheltering in basements. The outrage was global, but the Kremlin denied it, inventing claims the United States staged the incidents despite photographic evidence and verbal testimony to the contrary. These were war crimes, and Biden was clear in his personal view of the atrocities, and so was the International Criminal Court, which had begun compiling evidence.

The Russian war on Ukraine underscores six vital factors of armed conflict. The first three factors are adroit strategy, adapted to the context and changing conditions; the paramount importance of logistics; the criticality of fighting spirit and motivation. The second three factors—mass, greater firepower, and apparent technological superiority—have not conferred upon Russia the advantages it expected in the operational dimension. While Russia’s operational dysfunctionality has prevented military success, the political miscalculations made by the Kremlin have been even more significant. Whether the Russian armed forces can correct their mistakes, the war remains an example of supreme folly conducted with shameful brutality.

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Putin’s Invasion of Ukraine in 2022: Implications for Strategic Studies
Antulio J. Echevarria II

ABSTRACT: This special commentary examines critical issues for the field of strategic studies raised by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, including the waning of major war, strategic coercion, and “War Amongst the People.” Drawing on previous scholarship and current events, this commentary considers the questions raised by the first major war of the twenty-first century. It provides recommendations for scholars and senior leaders on how to work together to address the questions of strategy and policy that have and continue to arise as the war progresses.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, strategic coercion, gray zone, compellence

Whatever its outcome will be, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has the potential to shape the defense policies of the United States, its strategic partners, and their rivals in decisive ways. It is, after all, the first major war of the twenty-first century, one that involves large numbers of conventional and irregular forces, and which has displaced millions of civilians. At the time of this writing, the unofficial second phase of the invasion—the battle for the Donbas and Luhansk oblasts—has only just begun. Yet many research efforts have already begun to discern whether, or how, the operational methods, the weapons, and tactics employed by the combatants will affect the future of warfare. While these efforts will employ similar methodologies—interviewing key Ukrainian (and some Russian) and other officials, gathering evidence of unit actions, assessing damage to personnel and combat vehicles—the better analyses will probe further than “Russian ineptitude” as the primary explanation for operational outcomes and will explore whether any new military technologies or techniques have irrevocably changed the conduct of war. Russian ineptitude, in any case, does not preclude an eventual victory for Moscow. The campaigns in Chechnya, Syria, and Georgia show the Russians can stumble initially but ultimately “win ugly” if given enough time and moral space.1

Besides informing contemporary defense policies, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine will offer an intriguing case study for the rather broad field of strategic studies. To begin with, analyses of the war in Ukraine and all its preludes will shed light on the six principal explanations for the apparent decline in the incidence of major war since 1945. It will also add to the growing body of literature on strategic coercion, particularly with

respect to the criticality of information flow as well as the effectiveness of extensive financial and cultural sanctions. Similarly, the war may reveal much about the continued usefulness of the popular paradigm, “war amongst the people,” advanced by British General Rupert Smith some two decades ago. Furthermore, it could tell us a great deal about those forces—enmity, chance, political purpose—commonly associated with the Clausewitzian model of war’s nature, especially the power of enmity as a strategic multiplier. This special commentary offers some initial thoughts about each topic in turn. But it is important to make clear this list is hardly exhaustive.

The Waning of Major War

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s most recent invasion of Ukraine undermines the popular notion that large-scale, interstate wars have become passé. Some pundits have argued the declining occurrence of major wars since World War II is evidence that armed conflict itself is disappearing altogether. While few scholars seem willing to go to that extreme, they do offer six explanations (discussed below) for what on the surface appears to be a marked decline in the frequency of large-scale conflicts. But the interesting implication for strategic studies is half of these explanations functioned as accelerants rather than as deterrents for Putin’s act of aggression against Ukraine.

The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. According to this explanation, major wars have declined in number due to the risk such wars pose of nuclear escalation, which could well lead to unparalleled devastation if not mutual annihilation. Instead, states have opted to pursue limited conflicts that do not present existential threats to other regimes or to compete within the so-called gray zone, the realm of aggression short of war. As some sources have noted, however, Putin chose to launch large-scale operations against Ukraine precisely because his previous invasions led only to “frozen conflicts” in the Donbas and Luhansk oblasts and his gray-zone activities have not yielded the results he desired.

The spread of democracies and democratic values. This explanation suggests the decline of major wars has occurred because the number of democracies worldwide is increasing, and democracies purportedly do not go to war with...
one another. Yet, as multiple accounts have indicated, Putin perceived Ukraine’s movement toward a fully democratic and representative government as a threat to his style of autocratic rule. Thus, he opted to arrest that progress with military force. In this case, therefore, the spread of democracy and democratic values increased, rather than decreased, the likelihood of a major war. Given the fact that autocratic regimes frequently see democracies as threats, the spread of democracy itself appears likely to cause more wars before it can be said to cause fewer of them.

The growth of multilateral institutions. Multilateral institutions, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United Nations (UN), and the European Union (EU), are believed to have reduced both the number and scale of armed conflicts by increasing security more collectively and by creating “new normative standards, communication channels, and institutional practices.” These new alternatives and customs have provided states with opportunities to enhance their security and to channel their competitiveness in less belligerent ways. Unfortunately, Putin saw at least one of those multilateral organizations, namely NATO, as a threat to his security. In 1946, George Kennan described the Russian mind as perennially suspicious and insecure, a characterization we may hope will one day be overcome by events. But that day is not yet here. In terms familiar to students of Thomas Schelling, even an alliance built merely to deter must, by definition, be intimidating.

Increasing economic integration. According to this explanation, governments refrain from choosing armed conflict to settle their grievances because war in general and interstate war in particular cause a high degree of economic disruption. Armed conflict clearly benefits some sectors of the global defense industry; however, it disrupts commerce and financial markets, driving up prices and increasing other costs even for parties not directly involved in the conflict. Even though the Russian economy is relatively small compared to many Western economies, the sanctions imposed on it by the West have started a ripple effect that some experts warn might halt globalization and separate the world’s economy into three spheres: a Chinese-led one, a US-led one, and a European one divided between the other two. Whether or not the effects extend that far, fears over the negative impact a major war might have on an integrated global economy are at least partially founded, as second- and third-order economic

6. Väyrynen, Waning of Major War, 19.
effects are notoriously difficult to predict. For his part, Putin gambled in two ways: that Russian financial institutions would find sufficient workarounds to remain effective and that the campaign in Ukraine would conclude before sanctions could take full effect. On the first gamble he was correct; however, it remains to be seen how much longer the Russian economy, the 11th largest in the world with a GDP of $1.70 trillion in 2019, can endure such pressures as the conflict becomes more protracted.10

The influence of international law and the law of armed conflict. This rationale suggests the influence of international law and the law of armed conflict have restricted the reasons states may legally go to war, and how they may wage it. To be sure, to have legal restraints on the conduct of war is useful. But for this explanation to be persuasive, prosecutions of war criminals must occur in a timely fashion.11 Historically, that has not been the case. For example, “It took two decades for the Nazi Adolf Eichmann to be called to account. It was two and-a-half decades for former Chilean President Augusto Pinochet, and four decades for Kang Kek Iew, Nuon Chea, and Khieu Samphan.”12 Clearly, the existence of the International Criminal Court and the promise of post-conflict investigations into possible war crimes neither dissuaded Putin from invading Ukraine, nor from allowing his troops to attack non-military targets. In fact, attacking noncombatants appears to be one of the Russian army’s primary tactics.

The spread of anti-war norms. This explanation says the expansion of anti-war norms has made it much more difficult to “sell” a contemporary populace on the need to participate in an armed conflict. To be sure, anti-war norms have ebbed and flowed throughout modern history. Nonetheless, they represent an important measure of national will (or international will in some cases). They also have a critical downside in that aggressors can leverage such attitudes to bully states into policies of appeasement. Putin has successfully employed that tactic throughout much of his presidency. Fortunately, the situation reversed itself after his invasion of Ukraine. Most of the free world, with the assistance of a brilliant Ukrainian information campaign, bonded emotionally with President Volodymyr Zelensky and the Ukrainian people and came to see the Russian state as having brutally victimized its peace-loving neighbor.

In theory, all six explanations offer plausible reasons for the alleged decline of major conflicts since World War II. In practice, however, none dissuaded Putin from opting to launch a major assault against Ukraine. Indeed, of the six explanations, the first three functioned more as accelerants or enablers of Putin’s plans for war rather than as decelerants. The fourth, economic integration, is in some ways neutral: it affects aggressors, defenders, and nonaligned parties alike, though certainly not equally. On the one hand, it demonstrates why sanctions and economic embargoes have become weapons of first resort in the modern era, at least for pro-Western democracies with robust economies. On the other hand, these measures require time and the cooperation of other parties to be effective, and such cooperation cannot be assumed regardless of the severity of the case.

Members of the international community have already begun to experience adverse effects from the sanctions and embargoes imposed on Russia, turning the process of economic punishment into a war of attrition and exhaustion in which all sides must endure some costs. Perhaps not surprisingly, the influence of international law and the law of armed conflict neither dissuaded Putin nor his top leaders. But perhaps they offer hope of exacting some form of legal justice in the future that might influence other actors. The last explanation, the spread of anti-war norms, clearly offers aggressors advantages during peacetime but quickly works against them in wartime. Anti-war sentiments transformed almost overnight into antipathy for the Russians and sympathy for the Ukrainians. Before the invasion, Putin’s bullying tactics gave him a distinct advantage in dealing with heads of state who wanted to avoid war. But he lost that edge once the conflict started and then antipathy grew which led to a host of cultural sanctions, such as barring Russian athletes from competing in international events.

But this list is also instructive for what it omits. Oddly, a seventh potential explanation for the low incidence of interstate wars since 1945 is the relative balance of military power, especially regionally. Heads of state might indeed fear nuclear escalation and may have avoided armed conflict as a result, but they also might have been deterred by the fact that they possess little in the way of a decisive military advantage over their rivals. This contemporary “balance of power” is not the “balance of nuclear terror” that existed between NATO and the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War. But it might be as effective, and it might be one reason states have decided to compete within the “gray zone,” below the threshold of war, rather than above it. Obviously, as Putin’s current war in Ukraine proves, miscalculation is always possible, and deterrence, like any strategy, is only as stable as the pace of technological innovation permits. Yet something should be said for the possibility some would-be aggressors have been soberly calculating their odds of succeeding militarily, and have decided not to take the risk.
Strategic Coercion—A Closer Look

The conflict in Ukraine offers an important case study regarding the exercise of strategic coercion—the “deliberate and purposive use of overt threats to influence another’s strategic choices”—within the context of a major war.13 The literature concerning strategic coercion is substantial and is still growing. Most of it, however, deals with parties that are not significant economic or military powers armed with nuclear weapons. Assuming reliable insights will eventually emerge regarding Putin’s decision making, the concept of strategic coercion stands to advance in at least three topics: the critical nature of the flow of accurate information, the integral value of the dynamic of compellence and deterrence, and the efficacy of short- and long-term financial and economic sanctions.

For controlled coercion to take place, the target must receive reasonably accurate information about the strategic situation, including combat losses, and—to borrow Schelling’s words—the “pain yet to come” for noncompliance. Otherwise, reducing an adversary’s military power and strategic advantages lacks coercive value. If targets simply reject accurate (but perhaps unpleasant) information, as irrational actors sometimes do, that is one matter. If the targets are simply not receiving it, that is another matter, and it requires a different approach lest the attempt at strategic coercion fail for the wrong reasons.

Research on strategic coercion has been aware of the problem of irrational actors for some time and has made progress in tackling it. However, it has not completely separated the irrational actor problem from the “ignorant actor” problem. We know Putin was not receiving accurate information from his subordinate commanders and advisers; he eventually took some corrective measures, but the situation might not be fully resolved. At the same time, numerous theories surfaced—from “mad man” to “victim of stroke”—claiming Putin was an irrational actor and had to be treated as such.14 But we would presumably treat a “mad man” differently than we would someone who is malevolent but ignorant because the latter would have thresholds he would not want to cross; whereas the former would not. To further complicate matters, Putin could be both irrational and ignorant. Nevertheless, the larger point is strategic coercion theory (and practice) would benefit from more research into how best to distinguish between the two.

Research into strategic coercion might also address how the concept’s two essential components, compellence and deterrence, could function as a synthetic dynamic. Separating the two has some value, particularly with respect to education. But it tends to obscure their complementary nature: they are interrelated counterparts, not complete opposites. Compellence often requires some form of deterrence, and deterrence typically involves some form of compellence. Together they round out strategic coercion, the aim of which is to make our adversaries do what we want—and not something else. Clausewitz and Schelling saw it the same way. They understood war to be an act of force to compel our adversaries to do what we want—which also implies denying our adversaries the ability to do something we do not want. For example, an invasion aimed at compelling the capitulation of a head of state should also include measures for deterring an insurgency should the first aim be accomplished. Fortunately, Putin invaded Ukraine with forces insufficient to accomplish the first objective, and it is unclear he had properly considered the second. For their part, the Ukrainians and those supporting them want to compel Putin to give up his aggressive intentions, while also deterring him from escalating.

We find this synthetic, compellence-deterrence dynamic at work in nearly all conflicts short of Schelling’s notion of “brute force,” that is, those situations inimical to the bargaining model of war. An example is using military force to perpetrate genocide, which eschews arriving at a negotiated settlement or a bargain of any sort. Campaigns sometimes begin as exercises in brute force but then transition to the bargaining model if the defenders’ resistance is too strong. Combining compellence and deterrence into a single dynamic will also facilitate gaining better control over adversaries and crisis situations. Modern articulations of strategies of control reach back to the 1950s and 1960s in the works of J. C. Wylie, Henry Eccles, and Herbert Rosinski; their concept of control should be reexamined and developed further for application in today’s strategic environment. The conflict in Ukraine will afford opportunities for strategic theorists and practitioners to study how the two components of coercion might function together and what their limitations might be. In short, the conflict in Ukraine, because of its strategic scale and operational scope, will offer new data which will improve the concept of strategic coercion. These data should justify fusing compellence and deterrence together more formally, rather
than informally or accidentally. Eventually, that process should be routinized in military training and execution.

Along similar lines, and to return to a topic mentioned above, Putin’s invasion of Ukraine will shed light on the coercive power of financial sanctions on a large, modern state with strong economic ties, especially in terms of oil and gas, to the West. At present, the sanctions consist of a combination of targeted and comprehensive sanctions, which the West can increase or decrease as necessary but not without some unwanted secondary or tertiary effects. Research into the coercive power of sanctions (or economic coercion) suggests they work best under specific conditions: (1) when costs to the target are significant, (2) the senders’ costs are minimal, (3) the issue of dispute is of low importance to the target, (4) the sender and target are closely allied, (5) sanctions are endorsed by an international institution, and (6) the target state is a democracy. As readers will note, only three of the six conditions obtain with respect to Russia’s current invasion of Ukraine.

While sanctions have become a weapon of choice for modern democracies, they also have a long and not entirely successful history. They have the advantage of being flexible, able to serve in a deterrence or compellence role, or both. The West has used them against Russia in both capacities, including the erosion of Moscow’s ability to manufacture war material and to resupply its forces over the long term. (Inept Russian logistical planning also added to the cost-imposing effects of sanctions in the short term.) By some accounts, the effect of sanctions may reduce Russia’s GDP by as much as 12 percent in 2022. It is unclear how effective Russian countermeasures will be. Economic sanctions may remain a weapon of first resort in the future. But, as with any weapon, adversaries and potential adversaries will have studied its effectiveness and adopted some countermeasures.

**War amongst the People—Still**

In the early twenty-first century, British General Rupert Smith attempted to introduce a new paradigm of armed conflict which he referred to as “War amongst the People.” This paradigm, which was intended to shift defense thinking and

19. Daniel R. Drezner, “Economic Sanctions in Theory and Practice: How Smart Are They?,” in Greenhill and Krause, eds., Coercion, 251–70; as the author explains, even post–Cold War and other data sets have not changed the contingent nature of the results.
procurement in the West away from its preoccupation with force-on-force conflicts, or what Smith refers to as “interstate industrial wars,” to contemporary wars. These wars are characterized by six major trends. First, the ends for which wars were fought have changed from the “hard absolute objectives of interstate industrial war to more malleable objectives to do with the individual and societies that are not states.” Second, wars were now fought “amongst the people,” as exemplified by the “central role of the media,” which bring armed conflicts into “every living room,” even as they are being fought in streets and fields far abroad. Third, modern conflicts “tend to be timeless,” since they center on establishing conditions that must be maintained until treaties or peace agreements are reached, which can require years or decades. Fourth, fighting takes place in a manner designed “not to lose the force,” rather than employing the force and expending it as necessary in pursuit of the overall aim of the conflict. Fifth, “old weapons” designed for industrial war were of necessity being adapted to “new uses,” to accommodate “war amongst the people.” Sixth, the sides in contemporary conflicts consist mostly of nonstate actors, meaning multinational groupings, such as alliances or coalitions, were pitted against parties that were not states.

Smith can be faulted for attempting to use Thomas Kuhn’s framework of conceptual paradigms to describe different types of wars. Paradigms are better at describing the systems of thought or ways individuals and groups think about things than the things themselves. Wars are notorious for the “contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous,” a phrase once popular among French and German sociologists to describe generational overlap, that is, when individuals of two or more generations occupy the same space and time. An example is Western society in the 1960s, when a younger generation embracing anti-establishment values clashed with an older, more conservative one hewing to traditionalism.

In short, classifying phenomena according to periods can be problematic because things can be in an era without being of that era. So, it is with wars. Industrial-age, interstate conflicts such as World War I and World War II occurred temporally with many of America’s “Banana Wars,” for instance, in which the US military often had to deal with violent nonstate actors. Yet the two types clearly differed. (The two world wars, incidentally, were fought by alliances, which Smith and others classify as nonstate actors.) The United States has participated in at least 10 times more noninterstate, nonindustrial-age wars than it has interstate, industrial-age wars. Nothing about the twenty-first century thus far suggests this ratio will change in favor of interstate wars.

While his attempt to classify wars is problematic, Smith should not be faulted for having tried to persuade defense establishments in the West to develop better tools for fighting nonindustrial, noninterstate wars. That dream is both a noble one and a worthwhile goal. Not surprisingly, it remains both. Western defense establishments continue to resist investing in the requirements needed to deal with such wars, perhaps because the larger profits come with producing the military hardware necessary for interstate wars. This is not to say the West should forgo preparing to fight interstate wars, which have always been high-risk but low incidence. Rather, the West can, and should, commit itself to prepare for and, when necessary, to conduct both types of wars.

Most of the trends Smith identified are correct, though one might quibble about his description of the absolute nature of political aims; the Korean War and the Vietnam War, for instance, were examples of negotiated settlements. The salient characteristic Smith rightly ascribes to new wars, such as counterinsurgencies and peacekeeping operations, is they occur amongst the people. But as the conflict in Ukraine shows, that characteristic also holds true for major wars today. As of April 5, 2022, for instance, the UN migration agency reported some 11 million people had been displaced within Ukraine and more than 4 million had fled Ukraine. Refugees would have impacted any conflict that might have broken out in Central Europe during the Cold War, though Smith’s point is military doctrine and training exercises at the time rarely took account of the refugee flow and how its presence might impede operational maneuver.

In the current conflict in Ukraine, noncombatant populations are not only refugees but defenseless targets. Video evidence and personal testimonies have implicated the Russian military in war crimes because it directly targeted civilians in flagrant disregard of international law and the law of armed conflict. To be sure, populations across the globe are watching this conflict play out on their television sets, iPads, and computer screens. The suffering they have witnessed has caused them to put pressure on their governments to do more to support the Ukrainian cause. NATO, the European Union, and others have responded by increasing sanctions, and transferring more arms, money, and other support to Ukraine.

In sum, noncombatants have become participants in this war just as much as Ukrainian and Russian military personnel, and despite the law of armed conflict. This war is, thus, a war amongst the people in every sense, even though it is interstate and multinational in character. Western military strategy and doctrine

must account for this fact as this phenomenon is likely to manifest itself again in other theaters, regardless of the scale or political aims of the conflict.

**War’s Changing Character and Dynamic Nature**

The fact that the conflict in Ukraine is also a war amongst the people raises an important question about the relationship between war’s character and its nature. To be sure, the US military believes war’s character—the institutions that participate in armed conflict, the weapons and doctrines employed, and the whole process of warfare itself—changes over time and varies across cultures. However, the US military also believes war’s nature is constant because every armed conflict, no matter how large or small, consists of political motives, human emotions, and the element of chance. While that point is demonstrably true, it merely tells us what the common denominators are that unify all wars without telling us that they, too, fluctuate and interact. They are dynamic, perhaps even more so than the institutions that make up war’s character.

We can find an important example of that dynamism in the current war in Ukraine in which human emotions, especially enmity, have motivated the defenders to resist the superior numbers of the Russian invaders. They are essentially fighting what Clausewitz would have recognized as a war of national resistance or national liberation in which the citizenry often takes up arms. But in this case, the spirit of enmity has more than a tactical significance. It has become a strategic multiplier thanks in large part to the support most of the free world is showing toward Ukraine with massive amounts of military and other aid.

The Ukrainians have threatened to continue resisting by means of an insurgency should their regular military be defeated. Insurrections were one of the reasons Clausewitz saw the defense as the stronger form of war. By his reasoning the defender had the easier task, to survive; while the attacker, who must subdue the defender, had the harder mission. A military force can be defeated, and its government overthrown, but until its citizenry consents to the aggressor’s terms, or is subdued, the fighting will not end. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the West’s campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan during this century have shown us what insurgencies can mean for an occupying force.

So, while research efforts into the conflict in Ukraine examine what aspects of war’s character might have changed, they would do well to consider war’s nature as well. The result might have serious implications for policies of defense and deterrence in Eastern Europe where conventional forces backed by trained and equipped irregulars might prove cost-effective indeed.
Conclusions and Recommendations

In sum, research into the conflict in Ukraine will offer a wealth of answers to some fundamental questions in the field of strategic studies. Paradoxically, it will also create more questions for academics to ponder. Moreover, each of the topics discussed above informs the general context of the war in Ukraine in important ways. Three of the explanations for the decline of major war, for instance, also contributed to shaping Putin’s justifications for the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Theories of strategic coercion, in turn, influenced the quality of each side’s thrusts and parries. “War amongst the people” is still a valid way to frame modern conflict, though it includes many more dimensions than its author originally conceived. Finally, the motivational element of war’s nature has proven quite powerful indeed in favor of one side and to the obvious detriment of the other.

What should military staff colleges, war colleges, and civilian programs for strategic studies do while research is underway to determine what about the character of war might have changed? First, they should encourage the further exploration of these themes and others related to large-scale, interstate conflict by hosting conferences and seminars where participants can exchange views. Second, they should promote more research into the topic of major war by seeking funding for grants and collaboration opportunities; the US Department of Defense can help immensely by establishing or re-establishing a series of research grants and fellowship programs, such as the Minerva program. Third, they should encourage revisions to their core curricula to accommodate what some might describe as the “return of major war” and find ways to incentivize faculty to offer electives covering some of the aforementioned topics as well as other related themes. Fourth, all academic and military educational institutions can increase the value of modern war-gaming and simulations exercises by sponsoring or facilitating research that adds to historical databases on armed conflicts; analytics enhanced by artificial intelligence technologies can augment the cultivation of those databases. Finally, both academe and military educational institutions should look for ways to bridge the cultural gaps between them and to foster collaborative research; each has valuable insights to offer to the study of armed conflict in all its manifestations.

If only the dead have seen the end of war, only the living can study it. And the study of future war, to include its prevention and mitigation, can only take place in the present.
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Economic Statecraft and US-Russian Policy

Ryan J. Orsini
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ABSTRACT: This article assesses the American-Russian economic relationship, identifying how Russia exploits strategic asymmetries to gain advantage in the space below armed conflict and how the United States can modernize its economic statecraft. It draws upon a wide range of comparative research, from US-Russian military thought to the American-Eurasian economic interrelationship, to evaluate the full range of economic statecraft within a single dyad of countries in the context of coercion theory. This analysis will assist American policymakers in reforming priorities and processes according to principles of economic statecraft to sustain ongoing American coercion and set conditions for advantage upon the return to bilateral competition.

Keywords: geo-economics, economic statecraft, Russia, gray-zone warfare, hybrid warfare, geopolitics

Since the 2014 Crimean crisis, American policy has attempted to coerce Russia into abdicating its gains and to deter it from future aggression. But from armed intervention and assassination to election meddling and energy manipulation, American policy has failed to exact fundamental concessions.1 Russia’s massing of troops and invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 are only the most recent signals of the US government’s inability to effect Russian behavioral change.

Today, the United States finds itself in a state of economic war with Russia.2 The United States has mobilized its economic instruments of power against Russia, unleashing an unprecedented package of export, debt, banking, and individual restrictions.3 Although the cascading externalities of deploying so many economic weapons have yet to be determined, American economic action today will play center stage in future Russo-Ukrainian deescalation, bilateral competition with Russia, and the global financial system at large.4 The United States must exploit this opportunity to shape the international and bilateral relationship to return to future competition

on better terms. Not since the September 11 attacks has the United States been presented such an open policy window to remake domestic and partner economic relationships to improve US national security. This article looks to the past to inform this future competition by examining why the United States has been unable to translate its economic endowments into capable and credible force against Russia in gray-zone competition.

This failure stems from a strategic misalignment: The conventional paradigm of US deterrence policy is fundamentally misaligned with the core, nonmilitary means of Russia’s gray-zone strategy. Chief among these largely misunderstood means is an engine of licit and illicit economic interests. The policy of the United States has largely stagnated in a Cold War paradigm of military and economic deterrence. Today, though, the dollar and tools of economic statecraft are mightier than the sword. Russian strategies of economic influence have seized this initiative. Russia’s continued penchant for gray-zone aggression, according to US intelligence estimates, reflects an assessment the West is either unwilling or unable to inflict the requisite pain below the threshold of armed conflict. Coercion, the alignment of adversary incentives to induce desired behavior, is akin to a negotiation; threats must evolve to reflect both a target’s interests and competencies and the coercer’s changing leverage. Administrations may change in the United States, but its Russian gray-zone policy problems remain the same. Without a more robust counter to its economic statecraft, Russia will continue to reap gains in future competition with the West.

This article proposes a revised policy program to achieve the coercion the United States desires vis-à-vis Russia through economic statecraft (or the use of economic tools as nonmilitary means to promote beneficial geopolitical and domestic results). First, the article identifies shortfalls in US-Russian policy through the lens of economic statecraft—how Russia achieved its gains, how American policy stagnated, and how this asymmetry manifests in practice. The article then outlines how the United States can modernize its economic tools, improving effectiveness and efficiency to leverage the nation’s capacity for economic statecraft to establish gray-zone deterrence through a triad of domestic coordination, international cooperation, and transatlantic transparency.

Translating Economic Coercion in the Gray Zone

The United States’ core problem in combating Russian gray-zone aggression is one of latency. Despite both relative and absolute economic disadvantage, Russia is better at mobilizing economic means into capable and credible force for two reasons. First, the United States has failed to understand the changing nature of the Russian security dilemma and the resulting emphasis on malign economic coercion. Second, the United States has not adapted its logic and methods of economic statecraft. This misalignment carries significant strategic problems during bilateral, gray-zone competition because the United States has failed to generate the domestic unity of effort, broad international enforcement, and necessary measures of success required to deter Russia.

Strategic Misalignment and Economic Statecraft

Since the Cold War, Russian strategy has evolved based on Russia’s assessment of the American-led threat of forging greater emphasis on nonmilitary means. Russia observed a pattern of forcible regime change that exploited the changing nature of war.11 Interventions in Iraq, the former nation of Yugoslavia, Haiti, Afghanistan, and Libya exemplified how the United States wielded nonmilitary means, including the use of economic sanctions and isolation to converge on a state’s external and internal vulnerabilities.12 Consequently, Russian strategy emphasizes the continuous use of nonmilitary means. Short of conflict, Russian policy tools leverage licit and illicit methods, particularly in the informational and financial domains, to establish favorable diplomatic conditions.13 Russian nonmilitary action constantly seeks to suppress internal conflict from US exploitation and to manipulate other states’ vulnerabilities.14 During conflicts, Russia focuses on preemptive action across the country’s instruments of policy to consolidate political gains.15 This approach increases adversaries’ costs and enables crisis resolution on Russia’s terms, despite its material disadvantage.16

Malign economic influence underlies all components of Russian strategy, particularly below the threshold of armed conflict. In practice, Russian strategy functions along two tracks centered on economic statecraft. First, Russian patronage networks exert direct and indirect pressure on a target state’s decision making. Russian state entities and proxies exploit nontransparent economic structures to influence democracies without attribution; this strategy is known as “malign finance.” Russia exchanges financial, military, and technical support with targeted individuals and groups for regime loyalty. Russia also reserves a tremendous amount of resources for these networks. The country yields the world’s largest system of crony capitalism. An estimated $300 billion of oligarch money has left Russia since 2006, including at least $300 million to malign finance.

Second, Russia seeks dominance of strategic sectors—particularly energy, military industry, and finance—through the manipulation of corporate ownership, direct investment, bilateral trade, and private holdings. Together, these tracks generate a pronounced information asymmetry, a condition in which one party possesses superior understanding in one or more transactions, for Russia relative to the Western free market. Russia applies these measures to exploit the preferences, vulnerabilities, and resiliencies of target states, generating disproportionate influence at a relatively low cost. These licit and illicit measures offer carrots without the risk of uncertain capital markets or political conditionality. The measures also form the “stick” that can effectively cripple a state’s sovereignty by co-opting a target country’s sociopolitical elites. Russia has increasingly leveraged these tools to destabilize target countries over time, perpetrating the vast majority of world malign finance cases since 2013.

24. Conley et al., Kremlin Playbook, 2.
These Russian tools counter two of the West’s main nonmilitary advantages: economically interdependent alliance networks and the dollar-based sanction. Russian economic statecraft generates “underbalancing” against the country among Western allies.\(^2\) As a result, bilateral economic interests with Russia attenuate the tendency for smaller states to band together in the face of Moscow’s aggression. These interests also insulate Russian actors and systems targeted by Western sanctions. Cyprus exemplifies how geopolitical underbalancing generates perverse cycles of Russian influence. Russia dominates Cypriot investment inflow, securing a financial foothold that shields oligarch assets and proliferates influence across transatlantic political systems through offshore accounts.\(^2\) Russian nonmilitary means exploit gaps in the international hierarchy and authority to which the United States has grown accustomed, magnifying an ongoing decline in American financial, military, technological, and informational power advantages.

In addition, the American deterrence policy has largely extended the Cold War–era paradigms of coercion, misjudging and discounting Russia’s changing security dilemma, and emphasizing nonmilitary means.\(^2\) The Cold War emphasized military deterrence and the complementary means of economic statecraft centered on sanction—actions designed for an era of limited economic interdependence between the Soviet Union and NATO.\(^2\) The Cold War also emphasized a linear conception of the political utility of force between nonmilitary and military means along horizontal and vertical dimensions of escalation.\(^2\) Following the Soviet collapse, this paradigm drove a flawed deterrence strategy and unnecessarily isolated Russia through predominantly military instruments.\(^2\) This conceptual stagnation is even more damaging in the Putin era, in which Russia’s malign economic activity exploits gaps in detection, attribution, and response.\(^2\)

Further, gray-zone aggression during this era is often misattributed in Western studies as a uniquely Russian way of war, resulting in a lack of critical review of

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the United States’ nonmilitary weaponry during competition. Without strategic empathy for Russia and the larger geopolitical context, the United States lacked the ability to sequence and vary military and nonmilitary force combinations appropriately. Thus, the sanction, one of the United States’ primary weapons in gray-zone competition, has become overused, despite the tool’s ineffectiveness, which results from its lack of precision. Unable and unwilling to adapt, the United States yielded many of the post–Cold War advantages the nation could have used in its coercion policy against Russia.

Since the 2013–14 Ukraine crisis, this outdated concept has increasingly led to a misunderstanding of Russia’s means and an overestimation of American actions. Western sanctions negatively impacted Russian gross domestic product, international reserves, and concentrated losses within the Russian defense, energy, and equity markets following the 2013–14 crisis. The purpose of sanctions is always multifaceted in practice, and US-led action raised the cost of Russian noncompliance by removing resources available for various Kremlin objectives. However, the direct effect of American sanctions on Russia after the Crimean crisis, has been overstated.

Commonly used measures of pain inflicted by sanctions (such as damage to Russian markets and gross domestic product) now appear to be driven primarily by modern oil-price volatility. Meanwhile, other tools of economic statecraft, including a wealth of financial and monetary tools (such as cross-border flows), continue to receive little attention in American literature and policy. Thus, although overt military aggression subsided, Russia continues to implement its asymmetric strategy. If coercion truly occurs “in the mind of the potential aggressor,” then American policy has fallen short. For Russia, economic sanctions, military posturing, and diplomatic isolation are modest costs compared to the strategic benefit of aggression.

Bleeding Coercion: Manifestations of the Problem in Practice

American misalignment manifests in a policy that lacks domestic unity of effort, broad international enforcement, and necessary measures of success, each of which is an important component of effective economic statecraft. Despite the country’s raw economic potential, the United States’ chronic inability to organize and deploy economic statecraft has continued to undercut the desired coercive effect during gray-zone conflict.

First, American policy has lacked unity of effort, resulting in reactionary and convoluted economic actions. Economic coercion for both short-term compellence and long-term containment works best if the conditions that trigger and remove sanctions are known. But as American policy consensus has evolved, US strategy has been applied inconsistently in response to discrete Russian behavior. Before February 2022, ambitious sanction packages showed all signs of political mission creep, penalizing an ever-expanding range of behaviors from Ukraine to human-rights violations and rogue regime support. Unlike other policy tools, such as diplomatic pressure and military deployment, economic sanction rollout has often been piecemeal.

Additionally, the implementation of the policy has suffered from competing goals and expectations among branches and agencies of the US government, particularly between Congress and the president. Though desynchronization across agencies may typify US policy, the effect of this desynchronization has been particularly insidious given the persistent nature of Russia’s malign influence. This asymmetry has allowed Russia to allocate its economic means over time more efficiently. The asymmetry has also reduced the United States’ overall coercive effect, convoluting desired objectives and drawing resources away from Russia’s most significant vulnerabilities.

A lack of broad international enforcement has also marred American policy. International cooperation enables economic coercion by minimizing third-party actors’ ability to offset or nullify intended effects. American unilateralism, however, is first and foremost limited in terms of modality. Although tools of

44. Welt et al., US Sanctions on Russia, 29–35.
47. Baldwin, Economic Statecraft, 143–49.
economic statecraft cover a wide area of financial, fiscal, trade, and monetary policy, US-Russian policy has been limited to direct economic sanctions.48

American unilateralism has also been defined by limited international cooperation. The United States’ economic actions have been increasingly independent of the initial response to the Crimean crisis. Russian economic interdependence and statecraft have exploited the unanimous consent requirements of the EU, producing collective underbalancing against Russia as states have sought to protect national energy and patronage interests.49 Multinational coordination has largely been isolated to the military sphere, centering on the NATO European Deterrence Initiative and expenditure requirements.50 Countries have fed upon each other via this unilateralism, generating further deleterious effects. Reliance on sanctions threatens partner-country sovereignty and reduces the range of cooperative policy options. Reliance on independent action reduces domestic political willingness for more substantive economic tools beyond sanctions. These fractures have weakened the intended coercive effect by reducing the breadth and depth of overall Western capability and signaling collective hesitance to use available means.

Finally, American economic coercion has lacked a nuanced method of measuring success. The confounding nature of economic coercion, among other nonmilitary means, requires a refined understanding of the effectiveness of economic statecraft.51 During the Cold War, Soviet defense spending assessments became important determinants of success.52 However, modern US policy chronically underestimates Russia’s economic resilience during gray-zone competition. For years, Russia studied the economic coercion of the United States and mitigated the former’s economic vulnerability in relation to the latter by slowly diversifying the former’s trade, reserve holdings, and payments systems.53 Licitly, Russia took deliberate action to withstand economic pressure by maintaining a large petroleum market share, low debt levels, and extensive nondollar reserve holdings.54 Illicitly, Russian patronage networks have allowed the Kremlin to bail out targeted officials and firms, compensating them with

49. Welt et al., US Sanctions on Russia, 39–44.
contracts, subsidies, and other rents. Russia’s successful use of nonmilitary means to resist American sanctions reveals the symbolic and ineffective nature of US economic policy.

Coercion is a form of negotiation in which an adversary signals its willingness and capacity to hurt. Russian behavior signaled the country could withstand the tools the West was willing and able to use below the threshold of armed conflict. If the United States does not change its coercion strategy, the country should only expect continued policy failure.

Modernizing US-Russian Policy through Improved Economic Statecraft

The United States must refocus its economic statecraft policy vis-à-vis Russia to realign nonmilitary means and counter the illicit activities at the core of Russia’s economic advantage. In short, the United States must create and signal additional capacity to hurt Russia economically. This policy modernization achieves one overarching goal—to build and focus economic means toward “latent force,” or the withheld threat of violence. A more holistic and effective US strategy requires a reassertion of three mutually supporting policy principles: domestic coordination, international cooperation, and transatlantic transparency.

![Policy response triad diagram]

Figure 1: Policy response triad

**Domestic Coordination**

For decades, American economic statecraft has taken a back seat, lacking vertical integration with jurisdictions spread across multiple agencies and

55. Carpenter, “Sanctions on Russia.”
horizontal integration to generate the holistic capability necessary to combat a wide-ranging threat like Russia’s malign influence.58

Better domestic integration requires a realignment of Russian policy talent. Although the Biden administration recently created a short-term Task Force KleptoCapture aimed at the wealth of Russian oligarchs, a more sustained effort is needed.59 One mechanism of improved integration could feature a standing National Security Council task force that focuses on Russian influence due to its increasing centrality to US executive action.60 The United States’ combatant commands, such as United States European Command, represent another way to promote coordination. Both options provide the cultural, diplomatic, and intelligence expertise to build economic statecraft preemptively into current, future, and contingency operations.

Regardless of the format, these structures should join members of the Department of Defense, the Department of State, the Department of the Treasury, the Department of Energy, the Department of Justice, the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, and the Office of the US Trade Representative.61 This interagency group serves three core roles:

- Assess the changing Russian vulnerabilities to American economic leverage.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of US policy allocations over time.
- Ensure the coordination of economic statecraft in interagency campaign planning during competition and crisis.62

Economic tools must remain dynamic in response to changing licit and illicit economic market forces. These policy and theater-level constructs (for example, closing loopholes in existing policy or preemptively establishing triggers for implementation) can synchronize the intended goals of economic coercion and tailor policy over time to improve effectiveness.63

60. Undermining Democracy (statement of Michael Carpenter); and John Gants, White House Warriors (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 209.
63. Fishman, “How to Fix.”
Another mechanism for improving unity of effort is organizational priority. Unlike in the defense, intelligence, and diplomatic communities, no standing interagency process for publishing documents related to reoccurring, national, economic statecraft strategy exists.64 Such a process would allow the relevant agencies to signal, coordinate, and assess a major pivot in economic statecraft—for instance, to begin prioritizing the countering of authoritarian influence over the countering of the financing of terrorism, thereby transitioning the interagency from a legacy policy developed after the September 11 attacks.65

A final mechanism of integration is by way of legal process. The US legal code inhibits sharing financial information related to law enforcement and national security—a gap readily exploited by Russian actors seeking to obfuscate any ties to the Kremlin or its proxies.66 The United States needs a more suitable way of negotiating anti-money laundering (AML) consistent with citizens’ data privacy protections.67 Currently, federal agencies operate through a patchwork of laws to navigate restrictive and outdated provisions, such as the 1974 Privacy Act. Legal code reform is necessary for enabling whole-of-government AML processes that extend civil-liberty protections to cover the data protection needs of modern society.68 Designed to support federal law enforcement and private-business needs, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act represents a reform model for building an apparatus that improves financial intelligence gathering within the American banking system without infringing upon civil liberties.69

When coupled with a coordinating interagency body and proper prioritization, legal process reform offers an impressive tool against malign economic influence within the broader American financial system. Consider the example of negative Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States externalities. The committee’s reforms are widely credited with limiting potentially subversive foreign direct investment inflow into the United States.70 Although restricting foreign direct investment inflow is sometimes an appropriate policy goal, it is not an unalloyed good. Preventing licit foreign direct investment inflow also generates the negative externality of licit but unattributable or illicit inflows. Without

64. Drezner, “United States of Sanctions,” 152.
65. Rudolph and Morley, Covert Foreign Money, 60.
70. Rosenberg, Harrell, and Feng, New Arsenal for Competition, 16.
proper assessment and monitoring, this dynamic might generate an offsetting effect representing a net loss for American interests.71 Armed with a legal process similar to that codified in the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, an interagency coordinating body could assess and refine policy over time.

Improved domestic coordination demonstrates national determination and the capacity to deliver economic pain consistently over time. Relative to the United States, Russia benefits from the longevity of its senior civilian and military leaders, enabling the pursuit of consistent strategy. On the other hand, Russia has long believed US policy is erratic due to the US electoral process and political incentive structure, thereby creating vulnerability to political warfare.72 A more sustainable model of domestic coordination that is aligned to both interagency requirements and national values delivers a powerful coercive effect by addressing these perceived weaknesses.

International Cooperation

Improved international cooperation is essential for generating broad enforcement of strategy vis-à-vis Russia. The United States must be realistic, developing politically feasible options for partner countries to minimize underbalancing. First, the United States should seek unity of effort within like-minded structures—both established international organizations and incipient regional organizations. Second, when the United States must challenge economic paradigms, it must ruthlessly prioritize them.

Improved financial regulation and intelligence sharing represent one avenue of international cooperation. Today, the global AML system suffers from critical structural flaws because most governments have unsuccessfully outsourced regulation to the private sector, leaving pockets of excellence balkanized within Western financial intelligence.73 The United States should augment the personnel and budgetary resources of the Department of the Treasury’s Financial Intelligence Unit (the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network) and partner it with similar state institutions overseas—notably, the Group of Seven’s Financial Action Task Force and affiliated regional organizations.74

Additionally, the United States can bolster political support for the EU Directorate-General for Competition. This office’s actions against state-owned enterprises such as Gazprom serve as an emerging check on malign

73. “Losing the War.”
74. “Losing the War.”
economic influence. In 2018, the office’s investigation of Gazprom’s gas-market monopolization prompted Russia to make concessions in its long-term gas pricing to avoid a multibillion-euro fine. These market-oriented concessions threaten Gazprom’s future domination of the Eurasian energy sector and build advance cooperation on geo-economic action (such as regulation and sanctions), thereby minimizing tendencies for political compromise or underbalancing that dilutes effectiveness.75

The United States can also improve cooperation by fostering independence from Russian gas imports. For decades, natural gas served as a critical bridge of mutual dependence from Russia to Europe.76 Thus, the United States must work with the current of European gas politics to manage the broad, international coalition required for sanction efficacy. First, the United States should adopt a “small yard but high fence” concept to protect the most critical American sanctions against Russia. This approach prioritizes the prevention of Western investment and technology transfer to Russia’s energy sector—a major, long-term liability to regime survivability because Russia requires technological innovation to access and exploit its vast reserves in the Poluostrov Yamal.77 These sanctions threaten the future market dominance of Russia’s state-owned energy firms, the Kremlin’s most controllable geo-economic asset.78

Gas independence also requires American support for European energy and investment diversification by promoting regional energy competition that decreases the Russian market share. To reduce the importation of energy, the United States can promote other European options, such as north-south connectors with Nordic and Mediterranean nations, the recently opened EU Southern Gas Corridor, or the expansion of European access to imports of liquefied natural gas.79 This short-term diversification of European energy can replace as much as 60 percent of current Russian-gas imports.80 Imports of liquefied natural gas to Europe represent a Russian economic vulnerability as Russia’s legacy pipeline delivery systems decrease in market efficiency.81

79. Blackwill and Harris, War by Other Means, 205–9.
To replace market investment opportunities, the United States can negotiate bilateral investment treaties to liberalize private capital flows and reduce the risk of Russian state economic capture. In particular, the United States can support burgeoning green-energy production by leveraging the sector’s increasing regional technological advances and political salience. Ultimately, the Europeans would best achieve this diversification. The United States should support a continental gas strategy that collectively assesses individual country exposure, shifts excess stocks within the euro area, and establishes funds to compensate countries and sectors damaged from ongoing economic sanctions.

Financial regulation improvement and European gas-trade independence will require the United States to withhold economic force selectively through other inducements. One way is leveraging Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List exemptions for key political concessions in the Russian-gas relationship. Formally known as licensing, this process temporarily suspends economic sanctions in return for progress on desired objectives. The United States should apply these tools on a bilateral or limited, multilateral basis as needed to mitigate the effects of regional underbalancing. Alternatively, the United States can selectively apply exemptions to foster competition among Russia’s burgeoning independent gas producers who increasingly threaten Russia’s state-sponsored dominance of gas exports. Another positive inducement is providing diplomatic and economic clarity for Western firms to reenter the Eurasian market as sanctions are reduced. This strategy could include clear messaging about the triggers for sanction imposition and removal as well as financial safeguards (such as capital liquidity and tax provisions). A final critical economic inducement should seek to preserve third-party country access, including that of China, to American, European, and US-dollar markets. Transatlantic market access is an important incentive for minimizing Russian sanction leakage by third parties, such as China.

Alliances and partnerships inherently come with trade-offs. Opportunity cost abounds in the prioritization of financial intelligence and energy independence. But these mechanisms are rarely used to communicate commitment. As the leader of a diverse coalition of allies, the United States must welcome trade-offs amongst allies to secure a common purpose and key coercive tools.

83. Gustafson, Bridge, 355.
84. Poitiers et al., “Kremlin’s Gas Wars.”
85. Fishman, “How to Fix.”
86. Gustafson, Bridge, 291–316.
Transatlantic Transparency

Finally, the United States can modernize its economic firepower by increasing the transparency of cross-border financial transactions. Data may not be “the new oil,” but data are the key to understanding the allocation and effectiveness of Russian economic means. As the preeminent global hub for economic transactions, the West’s privileged access to financial flows is its premier means of network power to exert international influence.89 In practice, Russia’s malign influence exploits state-level variations of financial law and regulation to avoid attribution and complicate response. Since 2006, just 17 percent of known malign Russian finance cases have been illicit.90 Transparency is also constrained by evolving financial engineering and reporting procedures (such as electronic currency procedures and alternate clearing mechanisms). Financial operations that are not dollar-denominated, such as Bitcoin, Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges, and central bank digital currencies, threaten future American advantage vis-à-vis Russia. These forms of exchange decrease US financial access, placing bank liabilities directly within the citizenry or outside the US-dominated commercial bank structure.91 Privileged data access is a key US policy tool, and regulation-based financial transparency is essential to maintaining the strength of this tool.

Financial transparency improvement begins by closing loopholes in the transatlantic alliance structure. The New York City-, London-, and Brussels-based financial industry continues to dominate global market flows. The industry is also the hub of most global financial transparency mechanisms as states have increasingly decentralized AML enforcement to the commercial banking sector.92 The United States should work with transatlantic financial organizations to improve international financial transparency standards, such as defining the ultimate beneficiaries of limited liability.93

The Anti-Money Laundering Act of 2020 presents one opportunity. This law requires first-time disclosure of individual ownership of an underlying financial equity to the Department of the Treasury.94 The act is not without drawbacks. The law does not cover pooled investment vehicles (such as trusts or private-equity funds), nor does it augment resources to administrate and oversee the

90. Rudolph and Morley, Covert Foreign Money, 10.
92. “Losing the War.”
93. Undermining Democracy (statement of Laura Rosenberger).
reporting. Nonetheless, the act represents a major milestone for improving the financial community’s financial transparency standards and enforcement. The law is one of many ways the United States can improve the transatlantic financial system. The Biden administration could eliminate exceptions to the USA PATRIOT Act that allow exemptions from AML provisions for real estate and luxury transportation dealers. The administration could also implement section 885 of the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act, which requires beneficial ownership reporting within federal acquisition databases. Finally, Congress can pass the ENABLERS Act, which would establish more financial transparency requirements (such as beneficial ownership reporting) for US law, real estate, and accounting firms.

Transparency can also come from improved international financial institution reporting. The inability of international financial institutions to manage changing financial engineering trends over time contributes to the institutions’ increasing insignificance and enables Kremlin operations. For instance, definitions of key bilateral flows (such as hydrocarbons and military expenditures and investment) and remittance flows vary across states and institutions, making Russian means more obscure. Limited reform of international financial institutions could streamline financial flow accounting and authorize penalties for actors who violate revised transparency norms. Such reform could also support the construction of databases for law enforcement and intelligence that could contain beneficial ownership and transaction history information.

Transatlantic financial transparency is crucial to building the latent economic force required to coerce Russia and combat its malign influence. Armed with this knowledge, the United States can design more effective sanctions and market pressures or reallocate support that builds resilience in key states and sectors. More importantly, the consolidation of transparency norms among a global coalition would be a critical signal to the Kremlin and build future capability to monitor and penalize Russia’s malign influence.

97. Vittori, “Biden Must Go.”
98. Vittori, “Biden Must Go.”
100. Orsini, “Guns, Butter, and Tweets,” 34.
101. Vittori, “Biden Must Go.”
Communicating Commitment to the Financial Industry

Democracies often struggle to communicate resolve to their targets due to the strength and quantity of various interest groups.\textsuperscript{102} The limiting factor for US economic coercion is not capacity; instead, the limiting factor is coordination and communication. Despite its dominant position in international financial markets, the United States’ inability to control outbound investment by private citizens severely weakens its financial sanctions.\textsuperscript{103} Fueled by competition among transatlantic banking firms, the financial lobby has grown in strength since the 1980s, achieving a broad trend of deregulation.\textsuperscript{104} In many ways, this lobby exemplifies the domestic and international challenges facing the United States vis-à-vis Russian economic statecraft. The United States must work with the industry through moral suasion, market incentives, or failure of risk reform.

One way to realign incentives is by signaling the use of section 311 of the USA PATRIOT Act against Russian malign financial networks. Section 311 compels American banks to guard the sanctity of the American financial system against illicit financial activity by designated groups. Whereas market forces usually weaken conventional trade sanctions, section 311 leverages these structures as banks naturally seek to protect their access to private-market liquidity.\textsuperscript{105} Section 311 combines governmental suasion and market incentives into a powerful, geo-economic weapon for safeguarding the larger American financial system. Since its inception, section 311 has aligned US and industry goals as banks have moved out of self-interest to isolate the laundering and threat financing of state actors and terrorist networks.\textsuperscript{106} The threat of section-311 action following ongoing economic sanctions on the Russian banking system would be a powerful signal of more latent force and increased targeting of malign finance.

With proper signaling, the United States can use this tool to align state and market goals, influencing financial industry reform without formally triggering section 311. The strength of section 311 derives from potential use, leveraging market pressures to align the goals of banks and government against money laundering practices. Numerous actions could increase the perceived plausibility of section-311 action. The United States could provide planning guidance for banks to deleverage Russia-linked liabilities. In addition, the United States could create Federal Reserve liquidity provision vehicles to support banking systems. Alternatively, the United States could take on financial lobby influence

\textsuperscript{102} Biddle, “Coercion Theory.”
\textsuperscript{103} Steil and Litan, \textit{Financial Statecraft}, 159–62.
\textsuperscript{104} Adam Tooze, \textit{Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crisis Changed the World} (New York: Viking, 2018), 79–82.
\textsuperscript{106} Zarate, \textit{Treasury’s War}, 151–58.
by strengthening Foreign Agents Registration Act provisions and passing federal defamation law to restrict baseless libel claims. Finally, the United States could promote a voluntary code of conduct amongst leading US banks to resist Russia’s malign economic influence, encouraging both public-private transparency and cooperation. Fundamentally, the United States signals a commitment by consistently executing economic statecraft, including herding its powerful financial system.

**Conclusion: Consolidating Economic Gains in the Gray Zone**

Acknowledgment that potential adversaries such as Russia have studied and countered the United States’ capabilities and willingness to use military coercion since the Persian Gulf War is almost axiomatic. Much less appreciated is potential adversaries have studied and countered the American economic playbook. For years, Russia has exploited a fundamental misalignment in the United States’ deterrence policy through licit and illicit economic means to a gain relative advantage in gray-zone competition. Although US policy has stagnated and suffered from a lack of domestic unity of effort, broad international enforcement, and transparent measures of success, Russia has continued to shape and complicate the human, physical, and informational dimensions of the modern operating environment for American strategists, military leaders, and diplomats. The United States’ economic statecraft must return the favor. A combination of mutually reinforcing domestic integration, international coordination, and transatlantic transparency tailored toward unique Russian economic weaknesses would allow the United States to organize, galvanize, and prioritize its ways and means more effectively.

As the United States participates in the largest war in Europe since World War II, the nation should heed the lessons of postwar peace. The institutions developed and refined in the 1940s—from the Bretton Woods system to the UN—fundamentally altered the political and economic context to thwart Soviet goals. At times, improved foreign and domestic economic coordination and transparency will strain the United States’ geopolitical position. This strain, however, is the necessary pain of long-term coalition management. Today, the United States stands at the beginning of an

unprecedented economic war with Russia over its invasion of Ukraine. The United States must simultaneously set conditions to sustain its coalition for long-term economic coercion and return to competition on better terms. During a conflict, the distinction between success and failure is most fragile. Good strategy, however, consolidates gains to make them endure.112 Largely undeterred by previous US gray-zone policy, Russia has aggressively exploited this arena to gain geostrategic advances. Under unprecedented economic strain, Russia is likely to need its gray-zone advantage now more than ever. The United States should harness the domestic and international policy window created by the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war to consolidate the former’s economic gains, thereby denying strategic opportunity to Russia.

The United States must achieve objectives in the space between war and peace in a manner commensurate with the nation’s values and means. This imperative and the associated future coercive objectives potentially represent the United States’ preeminent foreign policy challenge in the twenty-first century. Russia is one test. On this battlefield, the dollar is stronger than the sword. The United States’ strategy must adapt and reform priorities and processes to wield its best weapons. Economic statecraft can no longer be a complementary effort; rather, economic statecraft must be the decisive force in generating the desired coercive strategy.

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Select Bibliography


ABSTRACT: This article argues shortfalls in the international institutions governing the Arctic have allowed Russia and China to expand control over the region. It provides an overview of regional governance and power dynamics, outlines a three-part approach to correcting deficiencies, highlights attempts by Russia and China to circumvent international governance, examines how the Arctic's governing institutions address Russian and Chinese growth in the region, and focuses on the institutional failures that have allowed Russia and China to expand—failures academic scholarship and US policy have not adequately addressed. Practitioners will find specific steps for rectifying issues with Arctic institutions to support the United States' interests in the region.

Keywords: Arctic governance, China, Russia, Arctic Council, UNCLOS

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Arctic has been deemed a bastion of peaceful international cooperation. Observers credit effective intergovernmental organizations and universally respected international agreements with maintaining this prolonged period of cooperation. Recently, however, global focus on the region has increased. A reduction in ice due to climate change has exposed the Arctic’s potential for resource extraction and commercial shipping. As the region’s strategic value has increased, the current “rules-based order” has become incapable of effectively safeguarding American interests.¹ A critical assessment of Russian activity over the past two decades demonstrates Moscow’s growing willingness to exploit weaknesses in international institutions to expand Russia’s military and economic control over the region. China has also manipulated international institutions to establish itself in the region. Washington’s reliance on the existing, rules-based order to maintain cooperation in the Arctic is insufficient. The institutions that regulate international politics in the Arctic now require critical updates to prevent the United States’ two primary geopolitical rivals from continuing to expand control in the region.

To safeguard its Arctic interests, the United States must develop more effective international institutions in the region. It must commit to establishing international consensus on the neutral status of Arctic shipping routes, establish a new forum in which to discuss and monitor economic and military activity in the region, and lead

the creation of a multilateral defense agreement in the Arctic that binds key regional allies in mutual defense against Russian and Chinese expansionism. This three-step approach would resolve critical gaps in Arctic governance and ensure the United States is prepared to protect its future interests as the Arctic region increasingly becomes a site for international competition.

**Arctic Governance**

A variety of organizations and agreements govern conduct between states in the Arctic, including the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (coordinates coast guard operations), the Svalbard Treaty (regulates activity on the Svalbard Islands), and the International Maritime Organization (standardizes maritime practices). However, the two most influential institutions in the region are the Arctic Council and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The Arctic Council, initially formed by the 1996 Ottawa Declaration, brings together key Arctic players to discuss the major issues facing the region and develop cooperative solutions. The core of the Arctic Council is comprised of eight permanent Arctic state members: Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark (representing Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States. These states have full deliberative and voting rights on all council activities, and chairmanship rotates between the permanent members every two years. The council also includes six representatives of Arctic indigenous groups as permanent participants (who can speak about issues but cannot vote) and 13 non-Arctic-state observers. China has participated as a non-Arctic-state observer since 2013. Key priorities include environmental protection, sustainable resource usage, and support to Arctic communities. Six working groups coordinate research and discussions on these key areas.

Since its inception, the Arctic Council has led Arctic governance and successfully promoted international cooperation on environmental protection and sustainable development. Despite these successes, the council’s governing capacity is limited due to significant gaps in the council’s ability to regulate commercial activity. Per the council’s charter, discussion of military activity is not authorized in the forum. As economic and military interests increasingly form the foundation of Arctic strategies, the council’s inability to address these interests will decrease the organization’s effectiveness in regulating international conduct in the region.

In May 2008, the five Arctic littoral states—Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States—met in Ilulissat, Greenland, to agree upon a

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legal framework for governing the Arctic Ocean. In the resulting agreement, the Ilulissat Declaration, the signatories agreed to maintain peaceful cooperation in the region and resolve territorial disputes in the Arctic Ocean through the tenets of the UNCLOS. The treaty, signed in 1982, gives a country the legal right to exercise sovereignty up to 12 nautical miles off the country’s coastlines and rights to explore and exploit resources up to 200 miles off the continental shelf in an area referred to as an “exclusive economic zone.” A state can manage and extract resources beyond the 200-mile zone if the area is determined to be a natural continuation of the state’s continental shelf. A state must submit a claim to alter the internationally recognized continental-shelf limit to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf for approval.

Historically, UNCLOS has managed territorial disputes in the Arctic Ocean well enough to prevent major conflict in the region. As climate change reduces Arctic ice coverage and opens the region to increased commercial activity, unresolved territorial claims threaten regional peace. Multiple states have competing claims to expand their exclusive economic zones to include newly accessible, resource-rich sections of the Arctic seabed. Canada, Denmark, Norway, and Russia have overlapping claims for exclusive economic rights over the Lomonosov Ridge, a resource-rich, 1,100-mile underwater feature stretching across the Arctic Ocean, asserting the feature is part of the continental shelf. Additionally, both Canada and Russia claim the channels between the islands off their northern coastlines are “internal waters” and can be governed like sovereign territory. Other states with interests in the region—particularly the United States—dispute this claim. Therefore, the critical question of whether key Arctic shipping routes—the Northwest Passage in Canada’s case and the Northeast Passage (also known as the Northern Sea Route) in Russia’s case—are international waters or sovereign territory remains unresolved. As Arctic territory becomes more strategically and commercially valuable, territorial disputes left unresolved by UNCLOS will continue to escalate tensions in the region.

Germany and China in the Arctic

The Arctic was a site of conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War. However, for the past three decades, strategic competition has given way to cooperation. Scholars often credit the effectiveness of the Arctic Council and the regimes built around UNCLOS for maintaining this peace; however, more critical analysis suggests this period of benign cooperation was primarily driven by the United States’ reduced focus on the region. As climate change makes the Arctic more accessible, the region’s strategic importance has become more apparent to American policymakers—especially as Russia and China routinely circumvent the international institutions that govern the Arctic to militarize and exploit the region economically.

Both Russia and China consider Arctic resources critical to continued economic growth in the coming decades. The two most sought-after resources are northern maritime shipping routes—specifically, the Northwest Passage over Canada and the Northern Sea Route north of Russia—and the newly accessible mineral and energy deposits beneath the melting Arctic ice.

With the largest Arctic territory of any state, Russia has always seen the region as foundational to its national identity, economic development, and defense policy. As a permanent member of the Arctic Council and a key player in most Arctic institutions, Russia has a history of sustained engagement with the international community in the region. Additionally, with an economy based on exporting raw materials, Russia has been a leader in locating and extracting oil, gas, and mineral deposits in its northern territories. The potential for economic exploitation has made the region, in the words of Russian President Vladimir Putin, the country’s “strategic reserve for the twenty-first century.”

Since 2001, Russia has expanded its military and economic presence in the Arctic to secure access to its resources. In 2008, Russia released the Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic until 2020 and Future Perspectives. This strategic document, begun as early as 2001, identifies as key priorities the use of the Arctic “as a strategic resource base,” “the use of the Northern Sea Route as a national unified transportation line of communications,” and the protection of the environment and preservation of peace in the region. In 2014, Putin announced the creation of the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command (now known as the Northern Military District) to coordinate the expansion of military activity throughout Russia’s northern territories. In March 2020, Putin issued

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Russia and China

the Foundations of the Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic for the Period Up to 2035. Though it reiterated many of the same policies as the 2008 document, the updated policy called for an even stronger focus on developing the Northern Sea Route and a commitment to combating “actions by foreign states . . . to obstruct the Russian Federation’s legitimate economic or other activities in the Arctic.”

In the coming decade, Russian economic activity in the Arctic and the ensuing military buildup to protect it will continue to increase.

Although Russia relies on the Arctic primarily as a source of natural resources to export, China sees the region as the source of raw materials to process or consume domestically to fuel its continued economic growth. Additionally, Arctic shipping routes offer Beijing a potential method for transporting goods without having to move through the geopolitically sensitive and geographically restrictive Strait of Malacca. Lacking a historical presence in the region, China has rushed to build a cultural connection and legal right to access the region. In addition, China refers to itself as a “near-Arctic power,” thereby advancing a national narrative of China as the central element linking the Arctic and Antarctica and claiming a deep, historical connection to both poles. Chinese leaders seek to use scientific research to gain physical access to the region and a role in its governing institutions. In 2004, Beijing established the Arctic Yellow River Station on the Svalbard Islands, an international hub for scientific research that secured the country’s access to the region and strengthened its capacity to operate in polar conditions. In 2013, China leveraged its role in Arctic scientific research to gain observer status on the Arctic Council. Since then, Beijing has used its Arctic access and position in its governing institutions to lay the groundwork for economic exploitation of the region.

Russian and Chinese leaders have exhibited a growing ability to cooperate despite their differing Arctic aims. These leaders have developed a partnership based on a shared interest in building the infrastructure needed to access the region’s resources. Russian companies need investment from external sources to access deposits of liquified natural gas. China, which has money to invest but lacks Arctic territory in which to invest it, is partnering with Russia on major infrastructure projects, such as the Yamal LNG natural gas project. Joint Russian and Chinese efforts to extract Arctic resources make the region more commercially valuable to both countries.

To expand access to raw materials in the region, Russia and China have shown a willingness to exploit deficiencies and ambiguities in regimes that govern the Arctic. Beijing refers to the Arctic region, in addition to the deep seabed and outer space, as “res nullius,” or “no one’s property”—a region ungoverned by law and without defined territorial holdings. So far, China has been unwilling to disrupt international norms by taking steps unilaterally to extract Arctic resources, choosing instead to partner with Arctic powers such as Russia and Greenland on mining and drilling projects. Chinese leaders, however, continue to define the region as unregulated and free for economic activity. Chinese scientific activity increasingly focuses on preparing for the direct extraction of resources and conducting “assessments of polar oil and natural gas . . . to explore the possibilities and means for future use.” The country’s public disregard for the legal regimes governing the Arctic and its clear focus on building the scientific knowledge and technical familiarity needed to mine Arctic resources clearly illustrate Beijing’s intention to expand economic activity without regard for international institutions.

Russia has been more brazen than China in its disregard for the Arctic institutions. In 2001, Russia submitted to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf a claim for over 460,000 square miles of the disputed Lomonosov Ridge. The commission rejected the claim, citing significant gaps in Russia’s scientific justification. In 2007, with the territorial status of the ridge still undetermined, Russian leaders sent a submersible vehicle to the disputed territory to collect soil and water samples and, most controversially, to plant a metal Russian flag on the seabed. The event sent a clear message to foreign observers. Regardless of the rulings of international bodies, Russia would continue to operate in and claim ownership of the resource-rich territory.

In addition to broadening access to Arctic territory to extract resources, Chinese and Russian leaders seek to increase access to the region’s key transportation routes by expanding control over the Northern Sea Route. Capitalizing on the route’s legally ambiguous status under UNCLOS, Russia instituted a requirement for foreign vessels to be escorted by Russian icebreakers. The law allows Russia to monitor and control traffic directly through the Northern Sea Route and to profit from the fees levied on foreign vessels for this support. Despite the route’s disputed status under UNCLOS, Moscow’s willingness to institute

18. Brady, Polar Great Power, 7, 57, 94.
21. Aliyev, Russia’s Military Capabilities.
these restrictions, and to exploit loopholes in Arctic governance has allowed the country to expand its control over the valuable commercial passageway.

In the spirit of viewing the Arctic as “no one’s property,” China has sought to gain control over shipping routes through massive investments in infrastructure. A 2018 Arctic white paper notes the creation of a Polar Silk Road through the Arctic as a key national aim. The project is part of Beijing’s larger Belt and Road Initiative to connect the country to emerging economic partners worldwide through massive infrastructure projects. The Polar Silk Road would develop the Northern Sea Route into a “blue economic passage linking China and Europe via the Arctic Ocean.”23 Considering the Northern Sea Route to be under its sovereign control, Russia invited China to expand the Belt and Road Initiative into the Arctic to profit from the new source of infrastructure investment.24 As it has elsewhere in the world, China has begun using this Belt and Road Initiative investment to expand its current political and economic capacity—and in the future, potentially, military capacity—in the region.25

Both Russian and Chinese leaders are committed to expanding access to raw materials and the use of Arctic maritime shipping routes and have taken steps to exploit the gaps in the Arctic’s governing regimes to secure control over these resources. Unless significant measures are developed to strengthen Arctic institutions, Russia and China will continue to expand their control over the region.

A Plan to Strengthen Arctic Governance

As Sino-Russian overreach in the Arctic has grown more flagrant, the United States has tried to draw international attention to the issue. For example, in 2019, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo attempted to call out Chinese incursion into the region, stating, “There are only Arctic States and Non-Arctic States. No third category exists, and claiming otherwise entitles China to exactly nothing.”26 However, these sporadic, unilateral actions have not led to significant changes in Russian and Chinese activity. To maintain effective and enduring peace, the United States needs to spearhead a multilateral effort to strengthen the rules-based order in the region and to enable American leadership to work with strategic partners to identify and counteract the pattern of Sino-Russian expansionism.

The United States must take three steps to improve Arctic governance and stymie Sino-Russian expansionism. First, it must lead an international effort to recognize the neutral status of the Northern Sea Route definitively, establishing a global norm Russia cannot restrict its use as a maritime transport route. Additionally, key players in the region should preemptively address future disputes by establishing a similar status for the not-yet-active Transpolar Sea Route through the center of the Arctic Ocean. The growing commercial viability of these Arctic maritime routes offers the potential for faster, safer, and more effective global transportation of goods. But Russia’s attempts to treat these routes as sovereign territory threaten the international community’s ability to realize their benefits fully. With UNCLOS unable to address this issue, the United States must step in and lead a new effort to define and regulate the Arctic shipping routes.

Second, the United States must create a new, international Arctic economic and security forum to take a leading role in the management of commercial and military developments in the region and fill gaps in the governing capacity of the Arctic Council. The council would remain a cornerstone of international cooperation in the region, but, based on its structure and established norms, the council is only capable of addressing “safe and noncontroversial issues.”

Upon assuming the chairmanship of the Arctic Council in 2021, Russia identified its primary goals as combating climate change, promoting sustainable development, supporting indigenous communities, and protecting biodiversity. The United States should support these commendable priorities. Conspicuously absent from Russia’s statement is any mention of the massive Sino-Russian infrastructure projects or increased attempts to control traffic through the Northern Sea Route that have come to define Russia’s activity in the region.

At the 2019 Arctic Council ministerial meeting, Pompeo received criticism for attempting to use the forum to voice concern about the threat Russian and Chinese activity in the region posed to American interests. The council’s obligation to maintain a cooperative spirit allows Russia and China to continue to support the organization while expanding their aggressive economic activity. Although the United States should continue to support the progressive, cooperative goals of the Arctic Council, the country needs a venue in which to discuss transparently, coordinate activity, and voice concerns about Russian and Chinese economic exploitation of the region.

As countries increase their military presence in the Arctic, the absence of a body in which to discuss international security matters becomes increasingly problematic. The Arctic Council’s charter bans any discussion of military issues within the forum. This shortfall is creating potentially destabilizing conditions. The dangers of this inability to coordinate on security matters were made clear in August 2020, when Alaskan fishermen, legally fishing within the United States’ exclusive economic zone, were buzzed by Russian aircraft and sent radio messages ordering them to relocate in an attempt to divert them from an ongoing naval exercise.30 The incident illustrated the need for an international forum to discuss, manage, and resolve issues related to military activity in the Arctic.

Presently, the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable is the primary organization that addresses international security issues in the region. This body unites key military leaders from seven Arctic and four non-Arctic states on a recurring basis to “exchange . . . information and [explore] the Arctic security and threat environment.”31 But, since 2014, Russia has been excluded from these discussions in response to its aggression in Crimea.32 This exclusion allows Russia to expand its military presence in the region without formal coordination with neighboring states—a dangerous and destabilizing trend.

In recent years, Arctic security experts have increasingly called for establishing an Arctic security forum that includes Russia as a permanent member.33 This expanded security forum should be established in conjunction with a new economic forum to be most effective. Therefore, the forum could address large-scale economic activity and the increased militarization of the region—the two major sources of tension the Arctic Council cannot manage. At a minimum, such an organization needs to meet annually and include the eight Arctic states (Canada, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States). Key non-Arctic states should be invited in a limited capacity to participate in discussions on matters pertinent to the states’ interests. For instance, China should be invited to discussions on Chinese-funded infrastructure projects in the region.

Whereas the Arctic Council provides a venue where states can establish consensus on key environmental and human development goals, this forum would...

32. Regehr, Military Cooperation, 5.
allow states to present their military and economic strategies in the region to solicit assistance. The United States must develop a new multinational security agreement among allied and partnered states in the region to monitor Russian and Chinese threats and coordinate policies to address the threats.

Recently, NATO has attempted to fill this role. Following the 2016 Warsaw summit, NATO released a communiqué that focused on strengthening the ability to “deter and defend” against threats to the North Atlantic. But the communiqué stopped short of articulating a comprehensive policy on Arctic security. 34 Many scholars and policymakers hope NATO can unite to mount a credible deterrence in the north, but using the organization as the primary tool for securing American interests in the Arctic appears unlikely and inadvisable. Of the 30 countries in NATO, only five, including the United States, are Arctic states. Many non-Arctic members, particularly those in Southern and Eastern Europe, have routinely shown little interest in committing resources to Arctic security matters. 35 Even if NATO could develop an Arctic policy, the significant differences in security concerns between member states would leave the alliance inflexible and slow to respond to Arctic security issues.

To best serve US security interests in the Arctic, Washington should develop a new northern security alliance modeled after North American Aerospace Defense Command that extended to European partners and allies. The alliance would focus on coordinated monitoring of foreign military activity in the Arctic and intelligence sharing and focus on detecting and sharing intelligence on offensive cyberwarfare operations and other gray-zone operations that have become Russia’s trademark in Eastern Europe. Maintaining the ability to mount a credible defense against Russian and Chinese expansion without unnecessarily escalating military tension in the region is foundational to American security in the Arctic. An alliance like the North American Aerospace Defense Command, which focuses on collective monitoring and coordination of military capabilities, would be most effective at striking this balance.

This northern security alliance would include NATO Arctic states, such as Denmark and Norway, and non-NATO partner states with a shared concern over Russian activity in the region, such as Finland and Sweden. Participation could also be offered to non-Arctic NATO states with genuine security interests in the region, such as the United Kingdom, which has strategic interests based on its position in the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom gap, one of the key entry points into Arctic waters. A small, focused

northern security alliance would be much more flexible than NATO in countering Russian coercive activity in the region. With a focus primarily on monitoring naval and air activity and intelligence sharing, such an alliance would be less threatening to Russian leadership than an expansion of NATO into the region. The three steps outlined in this article would fill the critical gaps in international institutions in the region and ensure a more stable, rules-based order.

**Conclusion**

Official Russian and Chinese policy documents outlining Arctic strategies still identify cooperation and respect for international governance as key priorities in the region. But these nations’ actions over the past two decades have not matched their rhetoric. Both Russia and China are making deliberate attempts to exploit loopholes in the region’s governing regimes, specifically those related to UNCLOS and the authority of the Arctic Council, to expand Sino-Russian access to Arctic resources and shipping routes. To deter Sino-Russian expansionism in the region, the United States must strengthen the international institutions in the Arctic. The three key areas requiring American attention are the territorial status of Arctic shipping routes, a lack of coordination on economic and military matters between Arctic states, and the ineffectiveness of collective security agreements in the region. These areas of focus offer the best initial steps for the United States to secure its interests in the region more effectively.

Along with its allies and partners, the United States relies on access to the Arctic for transportation, scientific research, and regulated economic activity conducted in accordance with international law. Additionally, the United States is not obligated to secure its population in the high north from negative influences from foreign states. As Russia and China continue to exploit, control, and restrict access to the region, protecting these interests will become increasingly difficult for the United States. The United States must lead an international effort to correct these shortfalls in the Arctic’s governing regimes as quickly as possible. The longer the United States allows its adversaries to circumvent the rules-based international order in support of their expansionist policies, the more difficult maintaining a cooperative and peaceful Arctic in the future will become.
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Select Bibliography


Defining and Deterring Faits Accomplis

Brandon Colas

ABSTRACT: This article describes faits accomplis—how states attempt to seize disputed territory using military force, hoping to avoid war in the process—and offers suggestions for how to deter them. Since 1945, faits accomplis have become the most common means by which states attempt to take over territory, even though they frequently result in armed conflict. US deterrent efforts, however, often focus on stopping invasions, not limited land grabs. This study combines the traditional literature on deterrence with Dan Altman’s recent research on faits accomplis to suggest Department of Defense leaders should frame territorial disputes as a real estate market they can both analyze and manipulate.

Keywords: deterrence, territorial disputes, gray zone, brinkmanship, escalation

In February 2014, Ukraine had 22,000 troops stationed on the Crimean Peninsula. A month later, Ukrainian armed forces had lost their primary naval base, 12 of 17 surface combatants, most of their naval aviation assets, and their main naval repair and maintenance facilities. Ukraine also lost over 2 million citizens and 10,000 square miles of territory. In the process, the Ukrainian armed forces suffered only a single casualty. If this action was a Russian invasion, as then-Vice President Biden insisted while visiting Kyiv the following year, it was a strange one. The “invasion” had cost Ukraine dearly, but the seizure of Crimea in 2014 is better described as a fait accompli, wherein an aggressor state uses limited military force to seize a disputed territory, risking war in the process. It takes two states for a successful fait accompli: an aggressor willing to risk war and a victim or defender who decides losing territory is better than using its military to respond and risk war. Russia seized the disputed territory without going to war, using a complex combination of techniques that included removing insignia from Russians’ uniforms, overcoming Ukrainian military bases by ramming through gates, and blocking aircraft runways with vehicles to prevent Ukrainian reinforcements from landing. The brazen Russian tactics relied on a belief the Ukrainians would be unwilling to fire the first shot.

The 2014 conquest cost Russia as well. Following Crimea, Russia weathered various sanctions, built up its military, and learned the wrong lessons. Eight years later, Russian troops entering Ukraine expected the same experience. Numerous reports indicate that many Russian soldiers did not know they were going to invade Ukraine until shortly before it began. Those who knew did not expect opposition. Some may have brought along parade uniforms.\(^5\) This fait accompli failed catastrophically.

### How States Seize Territory

Russian aggression against Crimea in 2014 and the whole of Ukraine in 2022 illustrates the three means by which states can seize territory: brute force, coercion, and faits accomplis. The Department of Defense is prepared to counter the first two. Brute force is an invasion and occupation, such as Hitler in Poland in 1940 or the current Russian campaign in Ukraine after the unexpected Ukrainian resistance to the fait accompli attempt. A second means to seize territory is coercion: threatening damage and latent violence.\(^6\) Enough force built upon a border could cause a government to make concessions, determining the fight is not worth it. Hitler entered Denmark unopposed in 1940; Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky could have resigned in February 2022. However, brute force and coercion can be deterred by an opposing force or, if deterrence fails, rolled back by military conflict.

Despite years of talk about the gray zone, the Department of Defense is unprepared for faits accomplis, perhaps because resisting a fait accompli is more complicated than deterring a full invasion. Instead of initiating war and then attempting to seize territory (brute force) or threatening war unless territory is surrendered (coercion), in a fait accompli, a state seizes a piece of disputed territory with military force and attempts to avoid war in the process.\(^7\)

Faits accomplis are common. Recent international relations research has shown the primacy of faits accomplis compared to the use of coercion or brute force to seize territory. Attempted conquests of entire territory after 1945 were extremely rare. From 1945 to 2022, there were only four attempts to conquer another state wholesale and absorb its territory. Successful attempts

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were North Vietnam against South Vietnam in 1975 and Indonesia against Timor-Leste in 1975, and unsuccessful attempts were North Korea against South Korea in 1950 and Iraq against Kuwait in 1990.\(^8\) The United States’ invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) led to the occupation of both states, but the long-term occupation was never the intent of these wars, which were also not based on territorial claims. Since 1945, there have only been four instances of brute force and two of coercion, but as of 2018, states had attempted 65 faits accomplis.\(^9\) Faits accomplis, which impose “a limited unilateral gain at an adversary’s expense in an attempt to get away with that gain when the adversary chooses to relent rather than escalate in retaliation,” are the most common means for states to pursue territorial gains.\(^10\) Common but risky, attempted land grabs frequently fail and lead to armed conflict. Of the 65 cases between 1945 and 2018 charted by Dan Altman, only half succeeded.\(^11\) Attempts to return to the status quo often lead to major escalation, presumably because the aggressor state has miscalculated the “true” red line for the status quo.\(^12\) The risk of war is probably higher than the cases that result in armed conflict. States using limited military force to take territory have already calculated their action is more likely to succeed in seizing the territory than escalating to a wider war. This data only accounts for the states that acted on the (sometimes erroneous) belief that war would not result. We cannot determine the number of states that did not act based on the expectation of war—as James Fearon noted, a state that launches an attack has already taken the defender’s relative capabilities into account. Hence, a state making a challenge is a state that is already resolved.\(^13\)

The US military must understand the conditions under which faits accomplis occur and what factors lead to their success and failure. Both China and Russia have several ongoing territorial disputes with US allies, have employed faits accomplis in the past, and will likely do so in the future. Limiting Chinese and Russian expansion entails cutting off these forcible territory seizures before they occur. Resolving them after the fact—“rollback” type strategies—are a considerable risk.\(^14\) Studying faits accomplis can also help map out underdeveloped “road to war” sequences, providing leaders with

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anticipated off-ramps and better scenario planning. In *Arms and Influence*, Thomas Schelling notes:

> There is just no foreseeable route by which the United States and the Soviet Union could become engaged in a major nuclear war. This does not mean that a major nuclear war cannot occur. It only means that if it occurs it will result from a process not entirely foreseen, from reactions that are not fully predictable, from decisions that are not wholly deliberate, from events that are not fully under control.¹⁵

One implication of Schelling’s claim is that if a war between the United States and China occurs, it is unlikely to take place because Taiwan declares its independence; all three states are aware of the dangers of such a scenario. A war involving a Chinese attempt to use a fait accompli to claim Taiwan-occupied Itu Aba (Taiping Island), on the other hand, could well happen: faits accomplis generate unpredictable reactions.

This study attempts to anticipate reactions by showing how states can calculate the desirability of using faits accomplis to seize disputed territory, for both themselves and their rivals, by modeling disputed territory as a real estate market. Military and civilian leaders wanting to deter faits accomplis can manipulate the market by directly affecting the input variables of territorial value, the cost of war, and the probability of war. Deterrence against faits accomplis also has implications for countering a wide range of gradualist techniques common in the gray zone.

**Calculating the Desirability of Faits Accomplis**

**Why States Prefer Faits Accomplis to Brute Force and Coercion**

The near-universal condemnation of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine strongly implies there is a global norm against the use of violence to claim territory.¹⁶ The existence of a norm among states does not mean that actions violating it will occur but does suggest that if that norm is violated, states will need to explain and justify their behavior. Extreme discursive practices are required to break the norm; Russia has claimed it will de-Nazify Ukraine, fears Ukrainian chemical weapons provocations, and suspects Ukraine may develop

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a plutonium-based nuclear “dirty bomb.”\textsuperscript{17} If any of these justifications were true, breaking the norm against Ukraine’s territorial integrity would make sense. But by protesting too much, Russian propaganda inadvertently shows how unacceptable it is for a state to launch a war to seize territory.

While brute force can enable one state to absorb another, it rarely takes place. Although coercion might seem another way for a state to claim the territory of another, coercion is difficult and can create its own set of problems for the aggressor state. Studies of compellence provide some suggestions for why an aggressor state’s efforts to coerce another state to surrender its territorial claims rarely succeed. As Schelling notes, almost any affirmative action “requires that an opponent or a victim do something, even if only to stop or get out.”\textsuperscript{18} In a territorial dispute, the affirmative action required would be that one state accepts the de facto loss of its territory. By contrasting compellence and deterrence, Gary Schaub shows why compelling an opponent is more difficult than dissuading an opponent from an action. In deterrence, generally, a compliant adversary is no worse off, while a defiant one expects retribution. However, as he notes, “Compellent demands […] promise no chance of gains. They pose the adversary with a choice between two losses: the certain loss of compliance and the gamble between avoiding this loss or suffering more significant losses.”\textsuperscript{19} Prospect theory suggests the nature of coercion encourages resistance: defying the coercive attempt might result in success, or at least less of a loss, whereas submitting locks in the loss.

Even though seizing territory by brute force is difficult, and coercion inspires defiance, there are still territorial disputes around the world—many militarized, and many resulting in the shifting of territory from one state to another—and yet few wars. One suggestion for this absence of full-scale war is that conquest has changed: states seize smaller territories in faits accomplis. In terms of timing and pace, seizing the territory can occur quickly in a lightning strike or a gradualist manner—a long series of discrete events that achieve a state’s objectives over time.\textsuperscript{20} Regardless of the pace, no single model is used in a fait accompli. The Russian example of using the hybrid war in the


Crimean Peninsula in 2014 differs significantly from current Chinese efforts to make land (literally) in the Pacific and then fortify those territories.

Categorizing the success rate of conventional versus hybrid means of seizing disputed territory is beyond the scope of this article. A state launching a fait accompli will employ its available forces in the means it believes is most likely to succeed in conquering while avoiding war. Trying to generalize what that force employment will look like is difficult. A massive buildup followed by limited use of overwhelming force might cause a defending state to become more (or less) likely to resist or collapse. The hybrid use of “contractors” and cyberattacks against the power grid could lead to sudden surrender or irate resistance.

Faits accomplis, whether fast or slow, subtle or blatant, all share the calculated risk of actions that could result in war. A successful fait accompli by the aggressor represents a corresponding failure of deterrence on the part of a defending state. And the failure of deterrence can erode the defending state’s broader deterrent position toward the aggressor and undercut its commitments. 21

A Model of Fait Accompli Calculation

Data show territorial conflicts still exist in the twenty-first century, and states prefer to use faits accomplis to seize territory. In what context would a fait accompli become appealing for a state? Understanding this decision-making process is critical for military leaders who want to anticipate and deter conflict. One way to frame how states decide that the risk of a fait accompli is worth risking war is to treat disputed territory as a real estate market. China and India, for instance, have identified sections of their disputed border line (what they have “agreed to disagree” about) as the “Line of Actual Control.” States agree on the location, which is fixed, but the value of the territory fluctuates over time for each state. This fluctuation helps explain why a state would risk a war for a land grab.

To set up a simple model: at a particular time, two states have implicitly agreed that a particular piece of territory is too valuable to abandon but not worth a war. Each state’s calculations differ, but both countries anticipate a negative value in going to war for the territory. 22 When determining how much to value territory, a state first identifies how much it would be worth to have the territory without conflict. From this constructed value, the state then

plans for the worst-case scenario, subtracts the cost of a losing war, and factors in the probability of war and victory given war. A positive result suggests the benefits of war for the territory are likely to outweigh the costs—and, of course, a fait accompli is a bet war is unlikely to occur.

![Figure 1: Variables affecting desirability of a fait accompli](image)

Actual numbers are irrelevant to this simple model, which shows how the four input variables that determine whether the risk of a fait accompli is worthwhile can be affected by states’ strategies even though internal and external changes to a state mean dozens of factors will interact to affect the value of the disputed territory and the probability of war. The unpredictability of outcomes does not mean states will step back rather than commit to winning a dispute. Instead, aggressor states increase their odds of success by manipulating the market, increasing the possibility of a fait accompli. Yet even a defending state must keep the other side’s computed value from rising too much, too quickly. For instance, Taiwan’s de facto independence is not publicly proclaimed based on beliefs that a Chinese invasion would follow. A claim of independence would “officially” make Taiwan a breakaway province, and the value of the territory would shoot up for China since the Party could not countenance the humiliation of formally losing a province. At the same time, Chinese pressure can increase Taiwanese nationalism, perhaps over time, making it harder for Taiwanese leaders, who are responding to their populace, to hint at independence. So the status quo is never entirely stable, and states’ actions and reactions can be hard to anticipate.

Regardless of the unpredictability of outcomes, states will engage in market manipulation to shift the calculations of the other would-be-claimant. For example, an American-Japanese joint maritime exercise would improve the interoperability of both forces, raise the Japanese Self-Defense Forces’ confidence that they may prevail in a limited direct conflict over the Senkakus with China, and lower Chinese expectations of victory as they reassess the danger posed by the Japanese naval forces, making the value of the Chinese Senkaku claims decrease, all other factors being equal. For an aggressor to resolve a territorial dispute in its favor, an optimal solution would be to raise the value of the territory for its state—making the risk of a conflict more worthwhile—while convincing the defender the territory is not as valuable—making the risk of a conflict less likely. To maintain the status quo, however, a defending state may also need to convince its population that the disputed territory is worth claiming and the would-be aggressor state that war is not in its interest.

Using the Market Model to Deter Faits Accomplis

States wishing to maintain the status quo must shape the environment for themselves and their adversaries by attempting to increase the value of the territory, lower the cost of a losing war, or lessen the probability of war. The defending state wins by convincing the aggressor that the territory is not worth the fight. States can manipulate the value of disputed territory by making historical claims, military modernization, and troop deployments—all of which can help counter faits accomplis.

Manipulating the Current Value of Territory by Historical Claims

A state’s historical claims and narratives regarding a given piece of territory are intimately connected to the value of that territory. Both aggressor and defender states will employ historical narratives to support their claims and justify any actions taken. For instance, the Chinese government’s well-known “Nine Dash Line” for maritime claims was submitted to the United Nations in 2009, based on a 1947 map. However, China decided 1947 did not provide sufficient weight for its claims. In 2016, *China Daily* reported the 1947 map had its provenance in a 600-year-old book called *An Arcane Book about the South China Sea*, giving China “ironclad proof” of its rights in the region. Although China is a United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea signatory, it

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refused to follow a 2016 tribunal ruling in favor of the Philippines in a maritime dispute based on this spurious historical claim.

More recently, in January 2022, the Wall Street Journal reported on a desperate search for the bones of Yaroslav the Wise, an eleventh-century Ukrainian saint, taking place in New York City. For the Ukrainian government, Yaroslav is a sign of nationhood and separation from Russia to oppose, in the words of the Ukrainian foreign minister, “modern Putinist myths and illegitimate territorial claims.” The Ukrainian search is a response to Putin’s insistence the previous year that the Russians and Ukrainians are “one people—a single whole.” In Putin’s view, as early as the late ninth century (even during the fragmentation of Ancient Rus), “both the nobility and the common people perceived Rus as a common territory, as their homeland.” Both sides appeal to history to explain their actions, suggesting history has a high degree of resonance—whether for defending a sovereign state or justifying the encroachment and seizure of another state’s territory.

Historical narratives strengthen a nation’s claims while signaling what a state decides it cannot give up. National histories can also build the confidence and will to prevail against another state. Both China and Russia have invested heavily in efforts to develop a nationalist population ready to make sacrifices for the state’s needs. China stresses its grievance-themed history against the West and national humiliation, while Russia has made and continues to make increasing efforts in this arena, imposing a legally mandated “military-patriotic upbringing” for the nation’s education program in 2020. If our strategic partners involved in territorial disputes, particularly with China and Russia, are not consistently “talking the talk” about the reasons why a disputed territory is theirs, we should be wary and not value another state’s disputed territory more than the state itself. The tedious explanation by Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs about its rights to the Senkaku Islands will not convince the rival claimants of China and Taiwan, and perhaps not even Americans, but does serve as a signal by Japan that it is committed to these claims.

Manipulating the Cost of War by Military Developments

States can raise the cost of war by investing in improving and expanding their military. This buildup might lead to an arms race, as both defender and aggressor seek to increase deterrence rather than fall behind. However, scholarship on this security dilemma posits abstract states starting from value-neutral positions rather than states already in competition. When two states are already in an adversarial relationship, where disputed territory is only one area of contention, concerns about a security dilemma are less urgent than the possibility of being outpaced by an opponent. It is difficult to imagine a convincing policy argument that a status quo state should not improve its military because possessing a stronger military might foster a fait accompli by the other disputant. There are arguments that a state seeing the gradual shift in the balance of power in an opposing state’s favor might choose to go to war in a “better now than later approach.” Such cases of preemptive war are rare, possibly because striking first comes with the political cost of being perceived as an aggressor.

Although America does not have territorial disputes with China or Russia, many of our strategic partners do. To best support our allies and raise potential costs against Chinese or Russian territorial aggression, the American military would be prudent to reconsider its “threats-based or capabilities-based” strategic planning models and begin with geography. There are a finite number of locations where China and Russia may attempt faits accomplis, and a conscious decision of where to deter and contain will lend itself to shaping future force development needs. Projects such as the US Army’s Long-Range Precision Fires or practice using pre-positioned floating stocks show the potential for US forces to adapt and develop a more geography-based strategy for the future.

Manipulating the Cost of War by Broadening the Quarrel

A defending state can expand the quarrel by increasing the number of participants supporting its side, linking the dispute to other matters where their state has a comparative advantage (even if those issues are unrelated to the territory). This approach might seem strange: relating reactions to actions has value in helping bound the nature of a conflict and not confusing opponents. There is

something logical about keeping South China Sea disputes located in the South China Sea amongst South China Sea disputants. However, as Schelling notes, there are times when “breaking the rules is more dramatic, and communicates more about one’s intent, precisely because it can be seen as a refusal to abide by rules.”

Determining how to expand the quarrel can be particularly important when one state has a comparative advantage. Chinese proximity to Fiery Cross Reef gives it a logistical advantage in resupplying its entrenched forces. An effort to erode this advantage might make matters increasingly uncomfortable for the Chinese forces, perhaps by routine aggressive US air patrols, which would be a direct retaliatory consequence, clearly connected with Chinese behavior. A less-direct approach to expand the quarrel could be developing and selling containerized missiles (like those of the Russian Club-K) to Vietnam and the Philippines and announcing the change is due to new Chinese military capabilities on Fiery Cross Reef. The linkage is less direct but still serves to change the Chinese cost-benefit calculus.

Changing the current rules of the conflict can also expand a quarrel, possibly enabling future faits accomplis. For example, China’s 2021 Coast Guard Law changes the nature of its maritime disputes by directing the Chinese Coast Guard to perform defensive operations based on the orders of the Central Military Commission. This action adds to Chinese naval power in the region and increases the number of Chinese vessels claiming the latitude offered to military activities under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Other states have disputed that Chinese domestic law can be applied to other nations. Still, the Coast Guard Law will add legal hurdles for states seeking to challenge China under the dispute-settlement procedures of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The overall muted response to the China’s suggests another successful gradualist step by Beijing in its campaign to dominate its near abroad—increasing its naval power will make it harder for other states in the region to dispute Chinese maritime claims.

The occasional overreaction by a defending state also has merit when attempting to hamper a fait accompli by keeping redlines in place. For example, there is a stark contrast between Israeli and American willingness to accept probing

32. Schelling, Arms and Influence, 149–51.
attacks from Iranian-supported militias. Israel has launched hundreds of attacks against Iranian targets in Syria to maintain its redlines.\footnote{Ilan Goldenberg, Nicholas Heras, Kaleigh Thomas, and Jennie Matuschak, “Countering Iran in the Gray Zone: What the United States Should Learn from Israel’s Operations in Syria,” Center for a New American Security (website), April 14, 2020, https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/countering-iran-gray-zone.} The United States has shown less willingness to respond kinetically to attacks on its forces unless there are US causalities. The perception of US unwillingness to risk war has permitted a tacit acceptance of Iranian-sponsored provocations, making war more likely to occur as Iranian elements become less risk-averse over time.\footnote{Goldenberg, Heras, Thomas, and Matuschak, “Countering Iran,” 19–20.}

Discussions about the gray zone often miss that calculated acts of retaliatory violence in response to gray-zone activities by an aggressor state leave the aggressor state with the unappealing choice of escalating or absorbing the costs. The Russian reaction to the defeat of its mercenaries and Syrian forces in a fight against US forces deployed in Syria to fight the Islamic State is one example. As then-Defense Secretary James Mattis observed afterward, the decision for the United States to destroy the force came after the Russian high command in Syria had stated the massing forces were not their own.\footnote{Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “How a 4-Hour Battle between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria,” \textit{New York Times} (website), May 24, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html.} Rather than dispute the fighters’ real provenance with Russian leadership in Syria, US forces acted boldly in self-defense, and the Russian response was muted.

**Manipulating the Probability of War by Troop Placement**

Garrisoned territories make faits accomplis more difficult since the presence of armed troops suggests violence may be required to dislodge them, raising the potential scale and cost of an operation. Garrisoned troops may function as trip wires—their deaths may lead to a war, which the aggressor state would rather avoid. Schelling asserts the purpose of US troops stationed in West Berlin during the Cold War was to die “in a manner that guarantees that the action cannot stop there.”\footnote{Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}, 47.} More recent US deployments to Eastern Europe and the Baltics have adopted the same logic, employing forces small enough that even the most modest Russian effort could defeat.\footnote{Paul McLeary, Quint Forgey, and Connor O’Brien, “U.S. Deploys Troops to Eastern Europe; Thousands More on Standby,” \textit{Polito} (website), February 2, 2022, https://www.politico.com/news/2022/02/02/biden-troops-europe-ukraine-tensions-00004630.} According to Altman’s recent research, since 1990, undefended areas are those most frequently targeted by aggressor states.\footnote{Altman, “Evolution of Territorial Conquest,” 516.}
Beyond Conventional War

Even if troops are not permanently garrisoned near the disputed territory, US and allied troop movements can affect an aggressor’s force calculus. A recent study of post-1991 US troop movements suggested that when dealing with weaker targets, deployment of air and naval assets by the United States was “unequivocally positive” for achieving the goals of the United States in deterring or compelling the weaker state. In dealing with states categorized as “stronger targets,” the movement of US ground forces had a more significant effect—perhaps because of a perceived signal by the United States that it was willing to accept causalities and escalate the conflict.41 Historically, Americans have been supportive of US contributions to defending friends and allies compared to interventions that are perceived as more internal affairs—consider the bipartisan lack of support for involvement in Syria in 2012, for instance.42

Regardless of the state’s power, changing the status of a garrison at or near a disputed territory is a complex matter since moving troops into the territory can lead to unintended consequences. Unfortunately, an adversary will not be able to determine the purpose of force buildup—it could be to deter a fait accompli, or it could be to launch one. Even if one state could have confidence in a more peaceful motive for the other, they have no guarantee that over time the state’s motive will not change and lead to an attempt to claim the territory. If the territory is already garrisoned, this is a strong deterrent against a fait accompli. Moving troops in is a complex calculation for a state trying to keep the status quo in a territorial dispute. If allies of the United States are unwilling to garrison troops in a disputed area—or at least near a particular disputed area—they signal to rivals they have decided not to fight over the territory.

Resources, Technology, and Social Change

The various efforts to increase the value of a piece of territory by historical claims—raising the cost of war for an opponent while lowering it for their state and increasing the probability of war for the territory by having troops in place—are all means that states can employ to affect the value of a disputed territory. However, another factor likely to affect faits accomplis that states have little control over is when technological or social changes unexpectedly shift the value of a piece of territory for one or both states. I call this the gold rush, and at least three overlapping categories could lead to a gold rush: resources, technology, and social change. In terms of resources, imagine a scenario where

previously unknown resources were discovered in a particular territory, such as in the East China Sea between Japan and China. As the economic value of a particular territory increased, both states would have more incentive to claim it, even if the risks of war remained the same. In the longer term, a climate-change scenario could shift the value of water-sharing arrangements between states, making it more urgent to resolve the status of a disputed territory.

In addition to a resource-driven scenario, changes in military technology might increase the value of one piece of territory over another. For instance, China’s development of hypersonic missiles might lead to a previously disputed territory between China and a South Sea claimant becoming an ideal site for an early-warning radar system for the United States. Military technological change could be biological as well.43 Suppose Chinese efforts to change the biology of its soldiers succeed in developing troops who can exert themselves at high altitudes without the need for supplemental oxygen. These physical changes could make it easier to gain and hold terrain—without needing firepower—in the Line of Actual Control, which is disputed with India. Physical stamina can be a game-changing advantage in fights voluntarily limited to non-gunpowder weapons.44

Besides resource shifts and changes in military technology, social changes might change the value of the territory, particularly under nationalist governments. For example, Narendra Modi’s 2019 electoral victory in India seems to have led to a steady increase in Indian pushback against China in disputed territorial regions. Of course, China’s increasing willingness to use force in the disputed border region was another factor in his party’s rise to power.45 Other plausible scenarios could change the value of territory in unanticipated ways besides social, technological, or resource changes—what is important to emphasize is that a state might not be able to manage how the value of a given territory may change. Nonetheless, attempting to control the available variables will put the state in a stronger position than drifting with the status quo.


Conclusions and Implications

Faits accomplis are widespread and difficult to counter. A quintessential gray zone technique, faits accomplis present states that wish to see the status quo continue with a dilemma: acquiesce or start what could become a major war. If a fait accompli does occur, the losing state may conclude the potential benefits of regaining the status quo are outweighed by the possibility of its military response escalating into a wider war. This conclusion is a valid concern based on the empirical record of failed faits accomplis leading to war. Yet, hesitation in response favors the belligerent state. On the other hand, faits accomplis that take place gradually are difficult to counter because drawing a line in the sand at one irritant might seem disproportionate.

Changing the perspective on how states compute the value of disputed territory offers a different frame by which to understand the problem of faits accomplis. A state wanting to keep matters as they now stand would be wise to increase the relative value of the territory to its population while simultaneously lowering the value for its adversary. The use of garrisoned troops, a convincing justification narrative, expanding the quarrel to go beyond the obvious issue at hand, and raising the costs for the opponent are all means that can deter a fait accompli. Regardless of states' efforts, unexpected events can still shift the value of the territory, which requires states to be alert for possible changes (particularly in their rivals) and prepared to move rapidly. Not all techniques used to counter faits accomplis directly apply to countering every gray-zone tool available to states, but seeing contested issues as contests of value has wide application. Discouraging our opponents’ advance means convincing them that “it”—whatever “it” may be—is not worth the cost. Careful study of the factors that encourage states’ seizure of disputed territory can help us change our adversaries’ calculations and discourage them from risking war.

In addition to thinking of contested issues as issues of value, Department of Defense leaders should consider that an opponent’s means to pursue an end is a form of indirect communication. An attempted fait accompli does risk war, but the aggressor state also communicates that it would prefer to avoid war if possible, which means a robust response from a defender may well lead it to back down. Attentive listening to indirect communication can give us better insight into the true redlines of our adversaries. Russian direct communication that arms provisions to the Ukrainian military would result in NATO forces being treated as cobelligerents has, to date, resulted in nothing. Russian

46. Schelling, Arms and Influence, 126–89.
47. Altman, “By Fait Accompli,” 888.
indirect communication (by the lack of a response) is that Russia lacks some combination of capability or intent (or both) to respond to Western support to Ukraine: indirect communication may have provided better information about Russian redlines.

Listening to our adversaries’ indirect communication may help us discern when we have room to escalate. At other times, we should take our opponents at their word and act accordingly. Russian claims that it had no means to control the volunteers about to attack American troops in Syria were a factor in ruling out a strong Russian reprisal against the American military response.49 Proclaiming that one is not responsible makes it difficult to claim responsibility subsequently. Similarly, Beijing’s insistence that its military buildup on artificial islands in the South China Sea is not a military buildup provides the United States with the option of using similar explanations when responding to Chinese complaints about US force posture in the region.50

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49. Gibbons-Neff, “4-Hour Battle.”
Select Bibliography


ABSTRACT: Drone swarms, which can be used at sea, on land, in the air, and even in space, are fundamentally information-dependent weapons. No study to date has examined drone swarms in the context of information warfare writ large. This article explores the dependence of these swarms on information and the resultant connections with areas of information warfare—electronic, cyber, space, and psychological—drawing on open-source research and qualitative reasoning. Overall, the article offers insights into how this important emerging technology fits into the broader defense ecosystem and outlines practical approaches to strengthening related information warfare capabilities.

Keywords: information warfare, drone swarms, unmanned systems, cyberwarfare, electronic warfare

Drone swarms are here. In Israel’s 2021 conflict with Gaza, the country’s military became the first to deploy a drone swarm in combat. During the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Russia deployed the Kalashnikov KUB-BLA loitering munition, which reportedly is (or will be) capable of swarming. Russia also possesses a yet-to-be-deployed Lancet-3 munition with the potential capability to create aerial minefields to target drones and other aircraft.

The United States and its allies and adversaries are pursuing collaborative drone-swarm technology. This pursuit is no surprise. Drone swarms have applications for every military service across every area of conflict, from infantry support and logistics to nuclear deterrence. Military leaders across the Joint force must consider how drone swarms relate to existing capabilities and forms of warfare as the technology matures and enters the battlefield. These ideas should inform future concepts, acquisition decisions, exercises, training, plans, and operations to account for friendly and adversarial use. This article examines one aspect of a larger challenge: drone swarms and information warfare.

Although drone swarms may operate on land, at sea, in the air, and even in space, they are fundamentally information-dependent weapons. The common denominator of every swarm is the need to maintain stable communication links between drones and ensure information is processed efficiently and appropriately. Indeed, swarms are “multiple unmanned systems capable of coordinating their actions to accomplish shared objectives.”

Many of the unique strengths of swarming also derive from information sharing.

The advantages of drone swarms stem from three key areas: swarm size, customization, and diversity. Each area depends on effective information management. Larger swarms with more sensors and munitions are more capable and can enable mass attacks; however, the swarm must handle inputs from more drones. Flexible swarms add or remove drones to meet commander needs, may break into smaller groups to attack from multiple directions or strike different targets, and handle changes to information inputs as drones are added or removed. Diverse swarms can incorporate different types of munitions and sensors and allow closely integrated, multidomain strikes, add new types of information sources, and create coordination challenges when the drones move at different speeds with different environmental risks. Information failure means risk of collision and loss of capability.

These capabilities enable novel tactics supported by information sharing. As Paul Scharre writes, “Swarming will be a more effective, dynamic, and responsive organizational paradigm for combat.”

Support technologies depend on information as well. Machine vision—the ability of machines to see—requires a high volume of data to train the algorithms. Sensor drones use these algorithms to collect and share information on adversarial defenses, possible targets, and environmental hazards. Like individual drones, the swarm as a whole or the external control systems must process the high volume of information collected in the field. Processing speeds affect the swarm’s battlefield value because slower algorithm speeds mean slower decision making.

7. Scharre, “Swarming Will Change Warfare.”
a swarm may not incorporate machine vision, human controllers will face similar challenges as the swarm scales in size.

Information dependence means drone swarms must be considered in the context of information warfare. According to the Congressional Research Service, the US government does not have an official definition for information warfare. Practitioners typically define information warfare as “strategy for the use and management of information to pursue a competitive advantage, including both offensive and defensive operations.” This strategy includes electronic warfare, elements of cyberwarfare, and psychological warfare. Space warfare is included here because position, navigation, timing information, and satellite-based communication are critical information sources for unmanned systems.

Of course, noting the information dependence does not mean actors will successfully recognize or exploit this dependency. Although the Russian military has long recognized the importance of electronic warfare in countering drones, the military appears to have struggled in implementing this knowledge during the Ukraine conflict. For example, video released on social media seems to show Ukrainian drones in close proximity to Russian vehicles with no Russian electronic-warfare protection. The Russian military and others may also struggle to implement this knowledge in the cyber, space, and psychological warfare domains.

This article examines the relationship of drone swarms to the four dimensions of information warfare (electronic, cyber, space, and psychological) and explores artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, which support the other areas and affect drone-swarm information-warfare vulnerabilities. Policy recommendations conclude the article.

**Electronic Warfare**

In the Center for the Study of the Drone at Bard College’s review of counterdrone systems, electronic jamming was the most popular counterdrone interdiction system. This popularity is no surprise; electronic jamming represents a potentially cheap, reusable approach to defeating drones, swarming or not. Humans must provide drones with mission parameters, firing decisions, and, sometimes, physical control. Interrupting control and information sharing within

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12. Samuel Bendett (@SamBendett), “If these are indeed Ukrainian drones in such a close proximity to Russian vehicles, where is the Russian counter-UAV and EW protection?,” Twitter, March 19, 2022, 8:54 AM, https://twitter.com/SamBendett/status/1505165776814288897.
the swarm disrupts the drones. If communication is disrupted, humans cannot set or revise the mission or direct strikes or issue retreat orders. Drone swarms depend even more on communication—particularly, communication on the electromagnetic spectrum.

Although drones can create swarms according to simple rules, communication is essential for complex behaviors, particularly for swarming in a military context in which battlefields have varied terrain, combatant numbers and configurations shift, and a range of combat tactics are employed.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, communication is necessary to prevent drone-swarm collision and coordinate movements and attack decisions. If the drones cannot communicate, the swarm cannot function as a coherent unit, coordinate searches for targets, or share successful identifications. In addition, the drones cannot coordinate strikes in which some drones attack one target and others another. The value of a drone swarm is lost without communication.

Electronic attacks can mimic friendly signals and manipulate the communication of the whole swarm. For instance, Iran reportedly captured a Lockheed Martin RQ-170 Sentinel drone by jamming the drone’s communication and manipulating the Global Positioning System to force it to land in Iran in 2011.\textsuperscript{15} False signals could steer an aerial swarm into a mountain, building, or other obstacle. If a state allows drones to fire without human control (which is by no means certain), adversaries could also send a signal indicating an adversary is at a friendly position, potentially causing the swarm to fire on the position.

The communication architecture—and, therefore, the methods of disrupting or manipulating the drone swarm—vary among different swarms.\textsuperscript{16} Swarm communication typically relies on the electromagnetic spectrum—radio waves (for example, Wi-Fi), infrared, and optical—but acoustic signals are likely necessary for underwater drones because electromagnetic signals do not propagate well underwater.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, spectrum management is important to ensure signals within and among the swarm and any control station are deconflicted. The swarm control architecture requires signal delivery to the correct drone, which presents a challenge if drones in the swarm are disabled or destroyed.

\textsuperscript{14} Maaike Verbruggen, \textit{The Question of Swarms Control: Challenges to Ensuring Human Control over Military Systems}, Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Paper no. 65 (Brussels: EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium, 2019).


How information propagates throughout the swarm may vary, too, which may affect the mechanics of disrupting or maintaining communication. In a swarm with centralized control, a single leader may coordinate tasks assigned to each member of the swarm. In swarms with decentralized control, drones communicate with the drones nearest them, leading to emergent flocking behaviors. In theory, this action removes the need for global communication. But the simple algorithms that enable decentralized control may be insufficient for complex, dynamic military contexts.

Future developments may reduce swarm electromagnetic spectrum dependence. New technologies offer communication channels according to different physical principles, such as quantum communication. Alternatively, drones could coordinate their actions indirectly through stigmergy. Insects such as ants leave pheromone traces on potential food sources. The ants that follow hone in on the traces and leave their pheromones if they, too, find food. Advanced drone swarms could adopt similar methods.

Ants offer another lesson for drone swarms: diversity in roles. Ants in a colony adopt specialized roles, most obviously between queen and worker ants. Likewise, swarms may incorporate communication drones that dedicate available onboard power to strengthening signals, serve as alternate nodes to exchange communication, or use a different signal type to issue retreat orders. Drone swarms could also blend centralized and decentralized communication approaches to increase resiliency. For example, the swarm may rely on decentralized communication and have a backup centralized communication system to combat jamming. This approach would require significant technical development to prevent conflict between the two communication approaches.

As drone swarms grow more autonomous, less information from electromagnetic spectrum-based sources originating outside the swarm is necessary, and less need for human input means less need for some communication channels. This autonomy, however, comes with a trade-off in new opportunities to manipulate or disrupt the autonomous systems.

In theory, an advanced drone swarm could become independent from external control, but policy and technical challenges place an upper bound on autonomy. Current Department of Defense policy does not allow semiautonomous weapons aboard unmanned platforms to select and engage targets if communications are

18. Verbruggen, Swarms Control.
degraded, nor can autonomous weapons target human beings with lethal force without meaningful human input.\textsuperscript{21} Popular resistance will likely constrain change because people already fear robots gone wild. Autonomous, complex strategic decisions such as assessing the value of a target to an overall war effort are likely to be impossible without generalized AI, which is unlikely to emerge in the near term, if ever. So, some electronic communication will be needed for the foreseeable future. Electronic warfare is also increasingly tied to cyberwarfare.

**Cyberwarfare**

Cyberattacks may seek to disable, control, manipulate, or exfiltrate information from drone swarms. Swarms necessarily possess all the cybersecurity vulnerabilities of individual drones, including vulnerability to deauthentication attacks (preventing the controller from operating the drone), code injection, and code alteration, exploitation of zero-day vulnerabilities, and exfiltration of data.\textsuperscript{22} The incorporation of swarming introduces the interception, manipulation, and disruption of interswarm communication and the algorithms that manage collective swarm behavior, thereby broadening the attack surface. More drones also means more opportunities to attack the system.

Cyberattacks could drone control systems through deauthentication attacks or code injections or alterations. Disabling human control or code alterations that immobilize drone engines or propellers may cause the swarm to crash. Falling drones could collide with other drones or other friendly assets. Disabling sensors could cause the drone swarm to fly blindly, resulting in collisions or preventing the identification of adversary defenses and other targets of interest. As a civilian example, researchers in July 2015 exploited cyber vulnerabilities to disable the brakes on a Jeep Cherokee\textsuperscript{®}.\textsuperscript{23} Limiting drone movement provides adversaries with a battlefield advantage. More subtly, cyberattacks may exploit drone-swarm information processing algorithms. Simple manipulations of drone control and task allocation algorithms achieved through the provision of incorrect data, replay attacks (repeating or delaying valid information transfers), injections of nefarious code, or the alteration of existing code could cause significant disruptions. If a manipulation prevents drones from detecting one another, they may collide. A failure to detect an environmental hazard may cause a crash by simply feeding old video or image data so the swarm does not “see” the building in front of it. Because errors are inevitable, code alterations that increase the risk of


error (but that do not necessarily cause one) may go undetected for a long time. An adversary-induced error may appear as a normal computer error.\textsuperscript{24} Alternatively, cyber manipulations may slow information processing, decision making, or object recognition and make the swarm more vulnerable to counterswarm defenses. Algorithm sabotage could even occur during the production process.

Advances in machine learning and related technologies allow adversaries to create and disseminate highly sophisticated fake images and videos or use cyber infiltration to inject them into data collections.\textsuperscript{25} Fake data may lead image and video analysis software to incorrect conclusions, missed threats, or noncombatant targeting. If the same software is used in multiple unmanned systems, adversaries could cause massive harm.

Most significantly, adversaries could redirect the drone swarm to attack friendly targets through code alteration to the control algorithm or feeding incorrect data so the swarm believes a friendly target is an adversary.\textsuperscript{26} Adversaries would turn the swarms’ capabilities to their gain. Alternatively, adversaries could order the swarm to leave a threatened area or move into adversarial fire. Adversaries might also render the swarm safe for collection and study to gain unique intelligence on the swarm’s capabilities. Vulnerability to cyber manipulation and levels of autonomy are interrelated.

More autonomy means more complex computing systems with more opportunities for exploitation and greater risk of error. Drones with autonomous navigation, movement, or targeting systems can operate without human control and can be manipulated. Likewise, coordination is likely to be more difficult with larger, heterogeneous swarms, which raises the risk of catastrophic failure. Identifying infiltration is also more challenging with larger swarms because adversaries may attack only one drone within the swarm.

Finally, adversaries could seek to exfiltrate data from the swarm by accessing communication links between the drones or between the drones and the control station or software and firmware in the internal control system of the drones themselves. These tactics could allow adversaries to collect intelligence on the location and activity of the swarm to improve defenses, retreat from an anticipated attack area, or prepare countermeasures as appropriate. Data exfiltration may


\textsuperscript{26} Scharre, “Counter-Swarm.”
also enable more disruptive operations through a better understanding of the algorithms and programs that enable multiple drones to operate as swarms. This understanding would also better enable actors to create their own swarms.

**Space Warfare**

Drone swarms typically rely on space assets for geolocation, and swarms that operate over the horizon require space assets for command and control. If satellites are disabled or destroyed, the swarms may not operate effectively—or at all. Recent technological developments, however, suggest the space domain may be less of a dependency over time and the most likely dimension of information warfare to stop being a drone-swarm requirement.

Many drone swarms rely on the Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) to guide them, and GNSS waypoints can be used to define the paths followed or the areas to avoid, identify targets of interest (such as the location of adversarial installations for intelligence collection), and y guide the swarm back to launch positions. Satellites may also serve as relays for command-and-control information.

Currently, drone swarms operate at relatively short ranges at which satellite communication is unnecessary. As the technology evolves, swarms may operate at longer ranges and these greater distances will likely require satellite-based communication for updating mission objectives, giving permissions, or providing other commands. In the future, communication among drones in a swarm may even require space assets to cover long distances.

Disabling or destroying satellites would prevent swarms reliant on satellites for geolocation or command orders from operating effectively. The drones would become ineffective and start wandering without knowing what to do or where to go. In a world where adversarial military force depends largely on unmanned systems, disabling geolocation over a wide area could prove devastating.

Advances in technology may reduce or possibly mitigate space-based risks. Swarms could use external GNSS nodes to aid in localization. One research team used Global Positioning System-linked buoys to allow underwater drones to locate their positions without direct access to the system. The buoys released a periodic signal that underwater drones sensed to infer their location. A similar concept could aid ground or aerial vehicle geolocation by using signals transmitted from a known location (such as a support vehicle). Alternatively, new navigation concepts may remove the need for GNSS, though the degree

to which these concepts will be successful in a military context is unclear. As with electronic warfare, greater drone autonomy lowers the need for external, space-based signals.

**Psychological Warfare**

Drone swarms have the least relevance for psychological warfare. The exception is for possibly spreading propaganda pamphlets, however, swarms appear to have few, if any, meaningful advantages over existing means of spreading propaganda. Nevertheless, drone swarms—and autonomous weapons more broadly—may be objects of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation to the extent global and public norms form around the use of swarms and autonomous weapons. Growing movements are seeking to ban autonomous weapons due to concerns over risks to civilians and the ethics of abandoning human control. Increasingly large constituencies support the movement, including in some NATO member countries. For instance, 72 percent of Germans oppose the use of autonomous weapons, according to a January 2019 Ipsos poll. Likewise, armed, fully autonomous swarms may pose psychological impacts and risks akin to traditional weapons of mass destruction due to the combination of mass casualty potential and the brittleness of current machine vision systems. The term “weapons of mass destruction” carries strong normative implications with stigmas around their use and proliferation.

Regardless of whether these public movements translate into changes in global policy, they may create opportunities for strategic information operations to sow division. For example, actors may amplify claims about the use of swarms and autonomous weapons to encourage opposition to a war effort, both internally and with partner nations. Conversely, actors may make false accusations against others to achieve the same effects. The challenges of verifying whether an autonomous weapon is truly autonomous make separating truth from fiction difficult. The autonomy of a drone swarm may be easier to prove because a person could potentially control a small swarm consisting of dozens of drones, but no person could reasonably control a few thousand drones. Disproving false claims about autonomous drone-swarm use would be much harder.

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Artificial Intelligence and Robotics

Advances in AI and robotics underpin all aspects of drone swarms and affect vulnerability and resilience to information warfare. Improvements in these technologies may lead to better targeting algorithms, swarm task allocation algorithms, and larger and more complex swarms and also affect electronic warfare, cyberwarfare, and space warfare systems that may be used by or against swarms. Greater use of AI and robotics on the battlefield may also create more opportunities for psychological warfare.

Robotics and AI could improve offensive electronic warfare and cyberwarfare capabilities. Machine learning could strengthen electronic warfare targeting and create more effective and automated cyberattacks. For instance, machine learning can enable better spectrum and power allocation, phishing detection, network intrusion detection, and other activities.33 Indeed, China’s People’s Liberation Army Strategic Support Force is reportedly integrating machine learning with both cyberwarfare and electronic warfare.34 Additionally, advances in machine learning could allow users to add better deep fakes to friendly or adversarial data sets via cyber means.35 Researchers are also exploring the use of robots as platforms for electronic attacks and cyberattacks.36

Advancements in AI are also likely to improve electronic, cyber, and space countermeasures. Cyber defense techniques based on AI offer significant benefits to cyber intrusion detection, including improved accuracy, automated response, and throughput.37 Alternatively, robotic systems could be used to form an ad hoc communications network where other systems are degraded or destroyed. For example, Swarm Technologies’ SpaceBEE satellites form communication networks for Internet-connected devices.38 Individual or multiple robots could serve as intermediaries to support stable communication.

Robotic systems are great for space warfare; they do not need life-sustaining equipment, which makes them less costly. Space-based robots could be used to attack or collect information on adversarial satellites. Multiple space-based robots could maneuver space debris into an orbit to hit adversary satellites or mount distributed, coordinated attacks. Of course, a space-based swarm may have different technological challenges than a terrestrial swarm—especially successful movement and coordination.

More AI and robots on the battlefield means more opportunities to accuse adversaries of violating nascent norms of autonomous weapons and, therefore, more opportunities to wage psychological warfare. Improvements to AI might counter some of this concern. One concern of activists is machine learning is known to be brittle because training data may be biased or otherwise incomplete. Enhanced testing and evaluation, synthetic data, and data sharing may reduce the risks and provide opportunities for countermessaging. Judging how robust machine learning systems are would be difficult, if not impossible, without closely examining the training data. Adversaries may falsely claim the machine learning systems are untested and poorly designed, leading to high risks to civilians, and disproving such a claim would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. Thus, extensive deployment of these systems may lead to increased claims of violations of the laws of war.

**Policy Recommendations**

The dependence of drone swarms on information warfare has several implications the military should consider for successful operations.

More in-depth studies of the relationship between drone swarms and information warfare are necessary and should explore the technical characteristics of informational interactions, how the information environment shapes tactical usage, and how tactical uses influence the operational and strategic environments. Some studies could perform modeling and simulation to assess the resilience of different drone-swarm configurations to informational attacks. Simulations and war games could explore the relative value of drone swarms in specific information-related roles (such as electronic attack) or as anti-satellite weapons.

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Analysis should focus on how the information competition changes in different types of conflict (peer versus peer, peer versus near-peer, and asymmetric), the resilience of different forms of communication to electronic attack and how drone swarms fit into broader spectrum allocation, and new concepts incorporating drone swarms and how they interact with information warfare.

Research and development of friendly drone swarms must include hardening to informational attacks. Intraswarm communication channels, information processing systems, and longer-range, command-and-control systems must all be protected. Certain systems (such as object detection algorithms) will not be specific to swarms. Some promising research on information hardening has begun, such as the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency’s work on swarms that are operable in GNSS-denied environments. These projects should be expanded. The degree to which a drone swarm is hardened should depend on the mission and the likelihood and type of information-based attacks the swarm may face.

The United States should also conduct a comprehensive review of information warfare capabilities across each service. Indications point to electronic-warfare challenges for the US Air Force and the US Army, though not the US Navy. Major General John Morrison, commanding general of the US Army Cyber Center of Excellence, bluntly stated, “When it comes to electronic warfare, we are outgunned . . . We are plain outgunned by peer and near-peer competitors.” Recent reports also paint a negative image of military cybersecurity. An October 2018 Government Accountability Office report “found that from 2012 to 2017, [Department of Defense] testers routinely found mission-critical cyber vulnerabilities in nearly all weapon systems that were under development.” Department of Defense difficulties in recruiting cyberwarriors and a growing divide between Silicon Valley and the department exacerbate the challenge. The United States faces increasing opposition in space, too. A recent unclassified Defense Intelligence Agency report found the following.

44. Pomerleau, “US Is ‘Outgunned.’ ”
Chinese and Russian military doctrines indicate that they view space as important to modern warfare and view counterspace capabilities as a means to reduce US and allied military effectiveness . . . Both have developed robust and capable space services, including space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance . . . Both states are developing jamming and cyberspace capabilities, directed energy weapons, on-orbit capabilities, and ground-based antisatellite missiles that can achieve a range of reversible to nonreversible effects.\(^47\)

The review should assess the true state of military information warfare and its alignment with adversarial developments, identify concrete recommendations to improve information warfare capabilities and organizations, and provide an unclassified set of recommendations and guidance for the defense industry and intelligentsia on how their efforts may support broader information warfare activities.

According to the review results, the US military would be able to make targeted investments in the study and development of offensive information warfare capabilities (for example, electronic jamming and offensive cyberweapons) to disrupt, manipulate, or otherwise defeat adversarial drone swarms that may be used against American forces. Such investments would also benefit other aspects of future warfare—from countering unmanned systems and information-dependent warfare concepts to disrupting adversarial supply chains.

Relevant capabilities should be integrated organizationally, and developments in robotics, electronic warfare, cyberwarfare, and space warfare should inform drone swarm acquisition, research and development, war gaming, concept and doctrine development, and related training. Activities should take place at the Joint level to the extent possible because the drone-swarm information challenge is the same for each service. Better integration across the components of the information domain would also be useful for nonswarming, unmanned systems because much of the analysis in this article also applies to them.

Intelligence collection on adversarial drone swarms and related information warfare aspects would be important, too. Intelligence collection aimed at drone-swarm technical operations would help the military understand how to manipulate or disrupt adversarial drone swarms and identify opportunities for covert action, such as poisoning data collections used for machine vision algorithms.\(^48\) Other obvious targets for intelligence collections are adversarial

organizations that combine information warfare capabilities (for example, the People’s Liberation Army Strategic Support Force). Information gathered would help the military understand the capabilities potentially deployed against American and strategic partner drone swarms.

Before deploying a drone swarm, future commanders should evaluate the information warfare situation on the battlefield to inform the types of swarms to be used and their composition. For instance, commanders could include more communication drones to increase survivability. Training, exercises, and war games should be created to help commanders develop and exercise this judgment. In addition, incorporating information warfare elements into broader readiness and training activities would allow commanders to appreciate the challenges of losing control of the information environment. Commanders could also consider the deployment of counterelectronic warfare weapons to support the drone swarm in denied environments.

If the US military seeks to employ drone swarms in large numbers, it must also plan for the mitigation of the resultant psychological warfare risks and adopt measures to make these operations more transparent and to ensure appropriate human control, provided the transparency does not deliver advantages to adversaries. For example, the United States could adopt stronger restrictions on autonomous weapons by turning current restrictions under Department of Defense Directive 3000.09, *Autonomy in Weapon Systems*, into binding law or adopting new transparency policies on autonomous weapon capabilities.49 These restrictions could be accompanied by costly commitments, such as investment in verification measures for autonomous weapons.50

**Conclusion**

More than any other weapon system, drone swarms are dependent on information. Virtually every swarm-related capability requires mastery of information flows that let swarms grow in size, adopt complex behaviors, and operate in multiple domains simultaneously. These advantages, however, also pose a significant vulnerability. Disabling, disrupting, or manipulating swarm communication, information processing, and geolocation can disable or defeat a swarm.

No military technology exists in a vacuum. The military is a highly complex system of systems, and numerous technological areas are interdependent.

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Senior leaders must consider the role of new technologies within the broader military ecosystem because myopia and failure are fast friends.
Select Bibliography


Character Traits Strategic Leaders Need

Tami Davis Biddle

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ABSTRACT: Strategic leaders must possess a range of skills to work successfully in complex environments. To use those skills to best effect, they rely on character traits that enhance the likelihood of their effectiveness as leaders and maximize their success when working in teams. Certain character traits facilitate work in demanding settings that rely heavily on communication, integration, and cooperation. Programs designed to educate senior leaders must help future national security professionals identify these character traits and then practice and hone them. Highlighting individuals with challenging roles in World War II, this essay analyzes the character traits that enabled them to succeed in their work.

Keywords: character, leadership, self-awareness, effectiveness, self-development

When national security professionals develop and implement strategy, they are engaged in an intensely analytical and human activity. While a strategist’s successful practice requires an understanding of logistics and geography, for instance, it also requires a sound grasp of human perception and decision making. Strategists must be broadly educated; they must be able, in particular, to grasp and analyze readily the complex environments in which they work. However, as they look outward, they must also look inward to develop a sense of themselves—including their strengths and weaknesses and ability to work in groups, among allies, and across key networks. Since strategy demands cooperation and coordination among many actors, its success depends heavily on leadership and communication. Yet undergirding these—and the skills they require—are important elements of character.

Any curriculum designed to teach national security professionals to be successful strategic leaders should incorporate lessons that heighten their self-awareness and give them time to understand and appreciate the elements of character that have served them well so far in their careers. They must also be given opportunities to reinforce these attributes and develop the new ones they will need in the future. This article identifies the most essential elements of character needed by strategists. Working at the senior level of the American professional military education system for 20 years, I developed a strong sense of the skills and abilities my students would

need for success. These skills were supported and facilitated by personal attributes and qualities that might be thought of as “character.”

Many individual elements of character, including honesty and integrity, are moral and ethical in nature; they support an individual’s leadership ability by building a foundation upon which subordinates can place their trust. Other qualities, such as a willingness to accept responsibility, have an important ethical component but are not strictly ethical in nature. A third set of attributes is most closely related to perception, analytical skill, and cognitive ability. These elements can be highlighted, discussed, and reinforced in the classrooms so that students hone and refine the strengths they will rely upon when facing challenging tasks in the future.

Using historical case studies can be beneficial since they help national security professionals recognize the elements of character that influence a senior leader’s likelihood of success in a given situation. Once the positive qualities are recognized and understood, they can be embraced and practiced. Additionally, the development of these elements of character will help these individuals successfully frame complex issues as members of strategy and planning teams. Drawing on the rich history of World War II, I identify several key leaders and highlight the character traits that helped them achieve success in the challenging roles they performed. By providing specific examples drawn from the not-so-distant past, I hope to offer future strategists a way to grasp and retain the information more readily than if it were presented solely in general or theoretical terms.

The first quality a strategist needs is the ability to discern what is salient in a given situation. In a complex scenario, where many problems are intertwined and competing for attention, it is difficult to see right to the heart of the matter and then discern how to make ways and means match desired ends. Yet, this is an essential skill for creating, articulating, and implementing strategy. While more instinctive for some than others, this ability can be learned and developed with practice. It demands focus and a keen analytical sensibility. An able strategist will help others to stay fixed on the core elements of the problem at hand.

Harry Hopkins, the closest adviser and confidant of President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), was noted for his qualities of discernment, and FDR gave Hopkins a central role in the “New Deal” program aimed at coping with the worst effects of the Great Depression. As war engulfed the world, Hopkins took a leading role in US national security, and the US relationship with its World War II allies. Traveling often to meet with key leaders, he became the eyes and ears of a president with limited mobility. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill formed a bond with Hopkins that helped facilitate
Anglo-American relations throughout World War II. In tribute to Hopkins’ bird-dog ability to find the objective and stay fixed on it, Churchill named him “Lord Root of the Matter.”

While chief lend-lease administrator in the early years of the war, Hopkins was responsible for ascertaining the most urgent needs of the allied leaders fighting Hitler, to include weapons, equipment, and materials. After discerning these needs, often in face-to-face talks with leaders, Hopkins had to make the case for them in the highest councils in Washington, DC. In addition, Hopkins helped prepare the president for summit meetings and wartime conferences, and, while attending those with the president, would ensure the most pressing and consequential issues were prioritized and given full attention by senior decisionmakers. When Hopkins was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal after the war, the citation noted the “piercing understanding” he had displayed in tackling the many strategic problems posed by the war.²

Two other qualities Hopkins possessed in abundance were determination and commitment. Strategists need these qualities to initiate and sustain all-consuming projects that will be buffeted by many winds and subject to frequent change due to adaptive enemies, contingencies, and forces that strategists cannot wholly control. Hopkins, plagued by poor health and the acute aftereffects of surgery for stomach cancer in 1937, carried out his weighty tasks with a determination that belied his physical condition. Indeed, the greater the burden upon him, the more he seemed able to transcend the limits of his frail body.³ General George C. Marshall remarked that Hopkins, through his energy, determination, and unflagging commitment to the way forward, “rendered a service to his country which will never even vaguely be appreciated.”⁴ In a deft sketch, Churchill said Hopkins was “a crumbling lighthouse from which there shown the beams that led great fleets to harbor.”⁵

Strategists work within complex networks of actors, agencies, and stakeholders; they must win and hold the trust of others. This trust, in turn, enables them to influence others and develop successful initiatives. Marshall, who served as Chief of Staff of the Army during World War II, had impeccable integrity that earned him the respect and trust of those with whom he worked. No one who knew Marshall ever believed his judgments or actions were self-serving, publicity-seeking, or narrowly-conceived.

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Marshall could speak with frankness and authority in the highest councils and win broad support for his decisions. His colleagues had faith his behavior was motivated only by pursuit of the nation’s good. He was able to tell the president hard truths about the need to improve the functioning of the military services rapidly by giving them the resources they needed to defend the nation. Additionally, he dramatically restructured a stale, bureaucratic interwar army by pulling in talented new leaders and relieving those who had outlasted their usefulness. As a senior leader in the newly formed Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marshall made key decisions about the allocation of resources among competing services and commanders who often fought over those resources.

A successful strategist must have self-confidence, since this quality enables decisiveness in times of trial and crisis; however, it must be tempered by humility. If self-confidence errs toward arrogance, it becomes suspect—even poisonous. Born into wealth and high social standing, Roosevelt had the confidence and shrewdness possessed by most successful politicians. He also bore an acute physical burden brought on by polio in young adulthood. Illness strengthened his determination, but it also humbled him and helped inoculate him against overweening arrogance, even while he served as president of the United States. It also enabled him to feel empathy for others who suffered. This capacity for empathy, in turn, helped FDR during the Great Depression when he battled vast unemployment and mass misery. The New Deal, designed to relieve national suffering, and restore confidence in the nation’s financial system, was a jolt to Americans who believed the national government should play only a very small role in the lives of citizens. Roosevelt, therefore, had to contend with numerous critics in Congress and the press—and among businesses, local politicians, and local government agencies opposed to change. As fire tempers steel, these experiences prepared him for the even greater challenges he faced during World War II.

An ability to overcome hardship also builds courage, another essential quality for the strategist. In one of the most powerful statements in On War,


Clausewitz observed that courage was of two kinds: “courage in the face of personal danger, and courage to accept responsibility, either before the tribunal of some outside power or before the court of one’s own conscience.” Those who serve successfully in the military learn quickly that great leaders need both physical courage and the courage to accept responsibility. Courage enables leaders to make and live with choices that involve the highest possible stakes and allows them to handle and even thrive in fraught and dangerous environments while inspiring others to do the same.

Before troops landed in Normandy in June 1944, Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower drafted a letter to be sent if the assault failed. It read:

Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold. I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based on the best information available. The troops, the Air and the Navy, did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt, it is mine alone.

He revised the first draft of his second sentence, changing it from “the troops have been withdrawn” to “I have withdrawn the troops.” This change from the passive to the active voice highlights his willingness to carry the full weight of responsibility on his shoulders. The brief statement is a marvelous example of leadership that jumps off the page and wins instant respect. Words matter, and in a situation with the highest possible stakes, the individual in charge had the courage to accept responsibility fully.

The strategist, whether military or civilian, must be constantly aware that each strategic decision, particularly in crisis and/or war, may involve life and death and affect the lives of others for generations to come. Field Marshal Sir William Slim, Britain’s talented World War II commander who took on a nearly hopeless situation in Burma and turned it around, also divided courage into two types: physical courage and moral courage. Of the latter, he wrote: “Moral courage simply means that you do what you think is right without bothering too much about the effect on yourself. . . . You must be as big as your job and you must not be afraid of losing it.”

Leaders entrusted with weighty decisions must also have the humility to adjust course or change direction if new information and evidence require it.

Here humility facilitates and pairs with a particular kind of courage. Those who dig so deeply into a position that they never change their minds will be a liability in the fluid and dynamic world of strategy, where leaders must constantly reassess their assumptions, and weigh outcomes against expectations. In a speech delivered at the US Army Command and General Staff College, Slim argued that where events develop and change quickly, as in war, one must possess an openness to new information. He explained, “What you have to cultivate is imagination, but a controlled imagination, and a flexibility of mind. There is an obvious conflict between flexibility of mind and strength of will. You have to be very careful to see that your strength of will does not become just obstinacy, and your flexibility of mind does not become mere vacillation.”

Slim understood the challenge here: on the one hand, leaders are told they must commit themselves fully to what they believe is the best course of action; on the other hand, they must be adroit and adaptive. Despite this seeming paradox, Slim believed leaders at the highest levels must cultivate a willingness to tack in a new direction if the wind changes. Inflexibility or brittleness when clear evidence warrants change is a sign of insecurity. Genuinely self-confident leaders are willing to adjust when sound and sufficient information tells them to do so.

Slim also realized that when leaders cloud the truth, their subordinates will see through them. Military leaders feel this especially keenly, because soldiers will quickly sense any attempt to mask or manipulate reality. Drawing on his extensive experience, he argued that “when you are in command and things have gone wrong, there always comes a pause when your men stop . . . They don’t say anything—they just look at you. It’s a rather awful moment for the commander because then he knows that their courage is ebbing, their will is fading, and he has got to pull up out of himself the courage and the willpower that will stiffen them and make them go on.” Slim insisted that no commander “would ever get over that moment unless he has the confidence of his men.” This confidence derived from a “massive and simple honesty.” He added: “All the really great commanders who have held their men have had it because the only foundations under man which will stand under great stress are the moral ones.” Those trying to pick their way through wickedly difficult problems will face moments like this. They may not be as acute or consequential as they are on the battlefield, but they will occur nonetheless. In these moments, strategists will require the stores of honesty and integrity they have earned among those around them.

Slim’s stress on moral foundations takes us back to honesty and integrity. Truth is the bedrock upon which rests all the moral and legal codes supporting

advanced societies. Attesting to the truth of a statement, either by giving one’s word or by signing one’s name to a document, has moral and legal standing. Both adherence and enforcement of laws make possible predictability and thus social advancement. Based on collective, widely supported interpretations of justice, codified standards and practices offer progress and security for political communities. Foundational documents such as the Magna Carta, and singularly important practices as habeas corpus, reflect the core principles that were the foundation stones of later democratic societies in Britain and the United States.

In early May 1940, Britain faced an existential crisis. With Germany in control of most of Europe, many British leaders felt there was no option but to seek terms with Hitler—even though they understood by then how little they could rely on any agreement with him. Soon-to-be British Prime Minister Churchill argued otherwise. Facing his fears of what lay ahead, he rallied the British people on behalf of a noble cause, arousing in his countrymen an instinctive desire for justice, independence, and self-determination—even if these would require great personal sacrifice. Remarking on Churchill’s speech of May 13, 1940, the Philadelphia Inquirer observed on its editorial page: “He proved in this one short speech that he was not afraid to face the truth and tell it. He proved himself an honest man as well as a man of action. Britain has reason to be enheartened by his brevity, his bluntness, and his courage.” Above all, Churchill persuaded his countrymen that even if the fight proved to be long and hard, fighting for these principles was the only choice that would rest easily on the British conscience. By accepting Churchill’s arguments, the British people could steel themselves and embrace a necessary battle.

Early on, a handful of others shared this courage and forthrightness in the face of the Nazi threat. Though she is not a household name, American writer Dorothy Thompson should be remembered for her clear-eyed and fearless writing about Nazism, which predated Churchill’s speeches. In her outspoken, prescient columns and radio speeches of the 1930s, Thompson sounded the klaxon about Hitler and the threat he posed to the world. She argued Nazism placed will above reason and appealed unremittingly “to totem and taboo; elevating tribal fetishes; subjugating and destroying the common sense that grows out of human experience.” She explained that both lying and bullying were central to the movement Hitler had created in Germany; the Nazis would erode Enlightenment principles and moral values and would be a direct threat to democracy. For National Socialists, she explained, “the Lie is openly accepted

as a useful means to an end.” Nazism, she argued emphatically, could not be appeased—only opposed—since appeasement “would only strengthen it, never satisfy it, and breed in it an enormous mocking contempt for the world it would destroy.”

Thompson forced herself to face things others at the time refused to countenance. Her biographer Peter Kurth noted that in early 1933 in Germany, she had “with unbelieving eyes” witnessed the seduction of a nation, the triumph of “hatred, envy, greed, vanity, and cheap heroics.” She said what others would not say, that “post-war Europe was finished, and pre-war Europe had begun . . . the boiling kettle had exploded.” Yet, Thompson avoided despair: “To be conscious of serious danger, and to be ready to look it in the eye, is not pessimism. It is the way one gathers one’s strength. For when one looks it in the eye, it becomes, interestingly enough, less ominous.” She was forthright and powerful, too, in her arguments against American isolationism, insisting the United States was “not a forgotten Elysian island.” She argued:

Our two oceans connect us with the rest of the world; they do not separate us. . . . They protect us, still, from armed attack upon our soil, but they do not protect us from assaults upon our economy or upon the public mind. They in no way relieve us of the responsibility of doing everything that a great nation can do to maintain a world order in which the interests of its people, and the values they cherish, can survive and improve.

Implementing strategy requires immense energy, determination, and resiliency in the face of setbacks. Despite the many doubts he faced privately during World War II, Churchill found courage in himself, and gave it a voice. His speeches moved a nation, instilling in the British people the grit, cohesion, and moral strength they needed to commit to an immense project requiring great and continuing sacrifice. They needed all of these in a harrowing war characterized by immense risks and (in the early years) aerial threats, and daunting land and naval defeats. In the realm of strategy, the stakes are rarely so high as they were for Britain in the first years of World War II, but every successful strategy will require the ability to cope with setbacks and nasty surprises.

In late 1943, during and after the Tehran Conference, where all three Allied leaders met for the first time, Churchill was burdened by two concerns: his acute fear a cross-Channel attack into France might fail and his worry over the looming threat of German “secret weapons.” These burdens taxed his body, and,
in the wake of the summit, he succumbed to pneumonia and heart arrhythmia so acute he nearly died. Indeed, Lord Moran, Churchill's personal physician, noticed the physical impacts of stress on all three Allied leaders at that time. Nevertheless, each one rallied repeatedly throughout the war, finding the strength to lead their nations forward. Determination and a strong commitment to a cause can undergird physical strength and resiliency. In today’s environment, with the relentless 24-hour news cycle, senior leaders must learn how to take care of themselves physically and emotionally, so they will have the endurance they need in crises and wars.

An able strategist will not only cultivate a broad worldview, but will seek advice from those who have knowledge and expertise on alternative perspectives. That expert knowledge, which comes through study and, if possible, the experience of living in a foreign culture, is invaluable. Some of the worst mistakes in the history of American national security occurred because decisionmakers did not take the time to understand what drove an adversary’s behavior or chose to ignore those who had such insights. Indeed, a frequent cause of strategic setback is a propensity to “mirror image,” to assume an adversary has a frame of mind similar to one’s own. All actors in the international system, even close allies, have unique interests and priorities and will assess stakes and risks in unique ways. If strategists can see only their perspective, they are likely doomed to strategic failure. Moving beyond one’s perspective is vital, but it requires a combination of broadmindedness, agile thought, and empathy. The latter, in particular, is crucial.

Field Marshal Sir John Dill, who headed Britain’s wartime Joint Staff Mission to the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington, DC, is not well known today—but he ought to be. Dill had been Chief of the Imperial General Staff during the first years of Britain’s battle against Hitler, when the situation was relentlessly grim. During the interwar years, the British, unwilling to countenance another fight with Germany so soon after World War I, had not prepared themselves adequately to face the Nazi threat. Dill’s job, therefore, had been exhausting and frustrating. In December 1941, as he was about to be replaced and sent to India as the governor-designate of Bombay, he was asked to travel to the United States with Churchill. The prime minister was anxious to hasten to Washington, DC, in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor to gain early influence on the Americans with

respect to the grand strategy of the war. This last-minute decision to include Dill among the traveling party was contingent and providential.19

A mechanism for ongoing strategic cooperation between the British and the Americans would be required, and it made sense to set up a permanent mission in Washington, DC, to represent British views. The individual at the helm would need experience, wisdom, diplomatic instincts, impeccable integrity, and the ability to speak for the prime minister himself. Dill was selected for the position and stayed in Washington after Churchill sailed back to London in early 1942. Both Harry Hopkins and Marshall had met Dill on previous occasions and had formed a high opinion of him. Their enthusiasm and Hopkins’s endorsement no doubt influenced Churchill’s thinking on the matter. As it turned out, the role suited Dill’s personality exactly and leveraged his greatest strengths, enabling him to become an immense and irreplaceable asset not only to the British but to the Americans as well.

Among Dill’s talents were empathy and broadmindedness. Working closely with Marshall, he transmitted and translated British interests to the Americans and American interests to the British. Marshall found a kindred spirit in Dill—a man who equaled him in integrity, loved and understood armies and army life, and could serve as the kind of sympathetic confidant those in elevated positions are rarely are fortunate enough to find. Dill had overseen the British military in the difficult early years of the war and understood the great pressures and the challenging, consequential choices and tradeoffs that Marshall faced.

Dill also assisted his American colleagues in coping with FDR’s less-than-ideal administrative instincts. When the president would convey information to Churchill he had not shared with his own chiefs, Dill’s colleagues in London could relay the information to Dill, who could then share it with Marshall—giving the latter insight into the thinking of the US president he otherwise would not have had. In the view of one astute historian, Dill was the “fulcrum” of the combined machinery giving central direction to the war effort.20

Dill died of aplastic anemia on November 4, 1944, despite the most energetic efforts of the best American doctors available. On the day of Dill’s memorial service, flags flew at half-mast throughout Washington, DC. The US Joint Chiefs of Staff were his pallbearers, and Dill was one of only a few foreign nationals to be buried in Arlington National Cemetery. The US Joint Chiefs of Staff

told their British counterparts they “shared equally with you the loss to our combined war effort resulting from the death of Field Marshal Sir John Dill,” and added: “His character and wisdom, his selfless devotion to the allied cause made his contribution to the combined British-American war effort of outstanding importance. It is not too much to say that probably no other individual was more responsible for the achievement of complete cooperation in the work of the Combined Chiefs of Staff.”

Six years later, an equestrian statue of Dill, meticulously overseen by Marshall, was erected on a beautiful site in the Arlington National Cemetery. On that occasion, Marshall, then-secretary of state, said in his dedication speech: “Here before us in Arlington, among our hallowed dead, lies a great hero, Field Marshall Sir John Dill. He was my friend, I am proud to say, and he was my intimate associate through most of the war years. I have never known a man whose high character showed so clearly in the honest directness of his every action. He was an inspiration to all of us.” During the war, Marshall worked at the highest levels of grand strategic planning and implementation. Dill not only helped Marshall bear the weight of enormously consequential decisions but, through his “honest directness,” he could help shape those decisions—and also serve as a model for those around him.

Finally, a strategic leader can benefit from a sense of humor, or simply an appreciation of humor. A sense of humor will not only support resiliency but can help create hope and sustain morale in challenging times. Writing in 1944, E. E. Reynolds argued that FDR’s “good fellowship, cheerful spirits, and ready laugh are great assets.” In addition, those blessed with a sense of humor can help foster cohesion and loyalty within groups. The two exceptionally able men who, under Dill, initially ran the Secretariat of the Washington-based Combined Chiefs of Staff in World War II, US Brigadier General Walter Bedell Smith, and UK Brigadier Vivian Dykes, formed a close bond for many reasons, but one of them was a shared appreciation for humor. Dykes, in particular, had a sparkling wit, an easy and likable manner, and a talent for winning the loyalty of those around him. One colleague noted he was, “a grand man in a tight place.” He also possessed a remarkable talent for benign comic impersonation of some of the more irascible senior officers on the Combined Chiefs of Staff. Bedell Smith

21. Joint Chiefs of Staff to Chiefs of Staff, November 5, 1944, printed in the New York Times (November 19, 1944) and quoted in Danchev, Very Special Relationship, 3.
23. There is extensive scientific and medical literature supporting the claim that humor and laughter are important for stress management. See “Stress Relief from Laughter? It’s No Joke,” https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-relief/art-20044456.
and Dykes, “who worked at the very epicenter of Anglo-American decision making . . . swiftly established one of the keynote relationships of the military alliance.”26 Dykes’ conviviality, perceptiveness, and wit injected energy into long hours of stressful and often delicate work. Wit and humor became the lubricant that allowed smooth operations between Dykes, representing British interests, and Smith, representing American interests. Moreover, humor created a close tie between them. Their relationship proved crucial to moving the Anglo-American alliance onto a sound footing, thus facilitating the successful prosecution of the war in the longer term.

Qualities of character matter: integrity, honesty, determination, self-confidence, and the ability to see beyond one’s own perspective are the core qualities that a strategist needs above all others. These qualities, along with an unfailing instinct for the most salient, relevant, and pressing elements of a complex problem, give the strategist a powerful tool kit. Strong communication skills are essential, but so too is the ability to build trust among subordinates, superiors, and peers. Great ideas brilliantly articulated will not be accepted unless their advocate is respected and trusted by those who will share and implement those ideas. Great administrative and planning skills are hollow unless they are accompanied by a capacity for empathy and broadmindedness.

It is rare to see all these abilities and qualities present equally in a single individual. However, strategy is never a solo endeavor. As the vignettes above illustrate, the character of successful strategists contributed to their individual effectiveness and served as a catalyst for strategy formulation among diverse stakeholders. Today, careful team-building can help ensure that personnel entrusted with vital matters in the life of a state—including developing strategies for its long-term security and prosperity—will possess the array of strengths they need for success.

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Select Bibliography


ABSTRACT: Distilling lessons from the author’s book, *The Media Offensive: How the Press and Public Opinion Shaped Allied Strategy during World War II*, this article provides applicable suggestions for the US military today. As in World War II, the press is both a weapon and a possible vulnerability in modern warfare. Consequently, this article offers practical suggestions for how the press can be used by public affairs officers, commanders, and policymakers to achieve victory in coming conflicts.

**Keywords:** press, World War II, public affairs, TikTok, media

Lieutenant General George S. Patton Jr. began a November 6, 1944, press conference by asking the assembled reporters for a favor. The purpose of the press conference was to brief the correspondents on the Third Army's coming offensive to capture Metz, France. Patton asked if the *BBC* correspondent was present and explained “you can do me a very great favor by lying for me when we attack by saying we are straightening our lines for a winter position.” He hoped the deception would gain his army 24 hours. Other reporters reminded the general their stories were also broadcast on the radio, and Patton agreed they could help.¹ Major General Hobart Gay, the Third Army’s deputy chief of staff, recorded that Patton “gave them practically all the details of the proposed attack.” Gay added “the purpose of this statement is to mislead the enemy and not the public.”² Patton had an additional request, “Another thing is to give the Corps, Division, and Regimental Commanders credit for what they do.” Giving individuals or specific units’ publicity would uplift the morale of both soldiers and civilians. After reminding the reporters that everything he had told them was secret, he ended by saying “I know I can trust you.”³

Seventy-seven years later in the early morning hours of May 14, 2021 (Jerusalem time), the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) announced “air and ground troops are currently attacking in the Gaza Strip.” Hamas reacted by ordering their ground forces into a maze of defensive tunnels to repel the assault. No ground attack came. Instead, the Israeli Air Force subjected the tunnels to 40 minutes of bombardment. Meanwhile, the IDF corrected their statement. No ground attack was afoot. Only artillery

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3. “General Patton and Third Army Correspondents.”
fire from outside Gaza, which, in the fog of war, had been misinterpreted as a
ground invasion. Despite the IDF denial, the international media were outraged
and claimed the military had deliberately used the press to mislead Hamas into
their crosshairs.4 Whatever the truth, the erroneous report had worked to Israel's
tactical advantage.

As the above examples demonstrate, the press has played a role in past conflicts
and will continue to be an important factor in future wars. Although the two
stories have notable differences, they also contain striking similarities. With
changing technologies and the onset of social media and content apps (such as
TikTok), the press's role in warfare continues to grow.

Opinion Shaped Allied Strategy during World War II*, I argue the onset of total war
made World War II combatants attempt to use the press as a weapon.5 At the
same time, press and public opinion increasingly influenced the battlefield
decisions of commanders. In this article, I argue that both observations are
valid today, explore how lessons from the World War II media war can guide
future conflicts, address perennial issues in military media situations (not function
as a critique of current US Army public affairs policies), and provide lessons drawn
from history while acknowledging the vastly different media landscape that has
emerged since World War II.

For this article, the definitions of what is “news” and “public opinion” have
been left deliberately opaque. Most people, military officers included, do not
have a formal definition for either term, but view where they get information on
current events as news. Public opinion can be in the eye of the beholder. As this
article shows, what an officer believes news and public opinion to be is more
significant for explaining his or her actions than what news and public opinion
actually are.

**News Will Influence Battlefield Decisions**

Dwight D. Eisenhower, Ernest King, and George Marshall were hardly
publicity hounds. During World War II, however, they allowed their military
decisions to be influenced by the media as much as limelight-loving Mark Clark,

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Douglas MacArthur, and George Patton. As Francis de Guingand, Bernard Law Montgomery’s chief of staff, wrote after the war, “It is well that the press should realise how even the most dogged and determined characters are influenced by what they say.”

Even strong-willed commanders who ignore the press will have to answer to military and political leaders who do the opposite. As Saddam Hussein’s forces retreated from Kuwait during the Persian Gulf War, for example, they were caught in the open by the US Air Force. The press labeled the subsequent destruction the “Highway of Death.” It did not take long before coalition commander General H. Norman Schwarzkopf heard his superiors were beginning to worry public opinion might be negatively affected by the graphic images. Schwarzkopf concluded, “Washington was ready to overreact, as usual, to the slightest ripple in public opinion. I thought, but didn’t say, that the best thing the White House could do would be to turn off the damned TV in the situation room.” Clearly, the press is a weapon that cuts both ways and understanding how the media influences military decision making is a necessary precursor to wielding the media as a weapon.

During World War II, overseas commanders rarely had access to editorials, opinion polls, or timely news. However, this lack of access did not stop them from guessing what public opinion was and responding accordingly. For example, near the end of the North African campaign in spring 1943 the British announced logistical problems prevented British and American forces from taking part in the final battle for Tunisia and explained they would take the Axis surrender. Major General Omar Bradley, who commanded the US II Corps, visited Eisenhower to complain. Bradley told Eisenhower, “The people in the United States want a victory and they deserve one,” Bradley argued. “After playing an important part on the North African invasion and in the early Tunisian campaign, they would find it difficult to understand why the American forces were squeezed out in this final campaign.” Instead of inquiring how Bradley knew public opinion so conveniently supported his argument, Eisenhower changed the battle plans to include the II Corps. In this case, as in others, perception of public opinion mattered more than its reality.

Today, social media provides a new pressure—and danger—of influencing commanders and policymakers. Although it is easy to equate social media and public opinion, they are not the same. A 2019 Pew study of Twitter found 22 percent of American adults who have a Twitter account are more likely to be young, highly educated, wealthy, women, and vote for Democrats. A more stunning fact is that 10 percent of Twitter users are responsible for 80 percent of all the tweets created. Additionally, the study observed, “Individuals who are among the top 10 percent most active tweeters also differ from those who tweet rarely in ways that go beyond the volume of content they produce . . . Compared with other US adults on Twitter, they are much more likely to be women and more likely to say they regularly tweet about politics.” More significant is the size of this group. With 22 percent of the US adult population, the group numbered 56,153,082 in 2019. Ten percent of this number means 5,615,309 people made 80 percent of all the tweets on Twitter. This number is hardly insignificant, but when it is compared to the US adult population of 255,241,278, it is not impressive. Twitter activity may represent something, but it does not represent American public opinion.

The real power of Twitter is not so much the number of people that post, but the power they have to drive news stories. Indeed, Twitter and other social media sites have provided politicians, business leaders, and others with a platform that bypasses traditional news outlets. Tweets can be picked up by different news sources and have much wider influence than they would have on Twitter. These posts, however, come from already-famous users who could attract media attention without Twitter. In addition, this group is much smaller than the 2 percent of the population that creates most tweets. At best, Twitter shows the opinions of the elite who post and should not be mistaken for public opinion.

Enemy actors can also use social media to create public pressure to end a war, amplify domestic unrest, create disinformation, highlight rumors, and spread havoc. The use of fake or stolen social media accounts by the Chinese and Russian
governments is well documented. One 2021 study found that “[a] coordinated influence operation on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube is using a mix of fake and repurposed accounts to push pro-China narratives and distort perceptions on important issues.” The same report estimated Chinese influence operations employed between 40 to 55 Facebook accounts, 300 to 500 Twitter accounts, and 12 YouTube accounts. In other words, opinion gleaned from anecdotal social media posts no more represents public opinion than the anonymous notes Shakespeare’s Cassius left for Brutus to find to convince him the masses wished him to save Rome from Caesar.

While commanders cannot always avoid letting public opinion influence battlefield decisions, they should exercise careful judgment over what is public opinion, what they assume is public opinion, and what is a loud minority or enemy disinformation.

**Today’s Media Is Different from the World War II Press**

In 1987, journalists Peter Jennings and Mike Wallace participated in a discussion about combat ethics. The moderator asked Jennings what he would do if he were covering a hypothetical enemy unit preparing to ambush US soldiers. Jennings responded he would do everything in his power to warn the Americans. Wallace disagreed asserting, “I am astonished, really, to hear Peter say that. You’re a reporter. Granted you are an American. But you are a reporter covering combat . . . and I am a little bit at a loss to understand why, because you are an American, you would not cover that story.” The moderator asked if Wallace did not have a higher duty “as an American citizen” to save the lives of his country’s soldiers. Wallace replied he did not, and at this point, Jennings had changed his mind as well.

Four years later, Saddam Hussein apparently had no more qualms about allowing an American news outlet to cover the Persian Gulf War from Baghdad than CNN had in providing the coverage. A few days after the United States began bombing Afghanistan in October 2001, National Public Radio’s senior

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foreign editor Loren Jenkins was asked about the ethics of reporting the secret positions of US military units. Jenkins did not hesitate in responding he would expose the units’ positions, explaining “I don’t represent the government. I represent history, information, what happened.”

Such attitudes stand in stark contrast to those of the American press during World War II. When discussing the soldier-slapping scandal that might hurt or end Patton’s contribution to the war effort, Demaree Bess of the Saturday Evening Post spoke for a different generation of reporters when he explained “we’re Americans first and correspondents second.” The 60 journalists in the theater apparently agreed, and the story was only broken months later by a stateside commentator. The Vietnam War, combined with Watergate, made the press much less trusting of government authority. Likewise, large media corporations followed the trend of other international businesses within the United States in seeing themselves as transcending national boundaries.

More importantly, technology has fundamentally transformed the news business in terms of speed, accessibility, and who can influence news. Television changed who in news organizations influences editorial opinion. During the first half of the twentieth century, newspaper editorials were largely shaped by editors, media company presidents, and shareholders. The television format gave reporters greater latitude in interpreting the meaning of news. Years later, the need to fill the 24-hour cable news cycle added to the increased focus on opinion shows and the competitiveness of journalism. At the same time, the proliferation of new outlets, including online news, has amplified the use of opinion over facts in reporting. A 2019 RAND Corporation empirical study comparing broadcast television to cable news found post-2000 cable news coverage “exhibited a dramatic and quantifiable shift toward subjective, abstract, directive, and argumentative language and content based more on the expression of opinion than on reporting of events.”

The same study compared print and online journalism between 2012 and 2017 and found online journalism tended to be “more argumentative, with an eye toward persuasion.” While older news models focused on trying to attract the largest audiences possible through objectivity, the RAND study found the opposite

trend to be true today. As news became increasingly opinionated, it also became more partisan and led to fragmentation. 24 There are more ways to get news than ever before, but with each outlet reaching smaller audiences. It is uncertain how much TikTok and social media platforms will continue to wrest control of news content from professional journalists. Real philosophical, technological, and structural differences, therefore, exist between the World War II press and the media today.

Given the press’s hostile attitude, it might be tempting to advocate some form of censorship. If censorship saves military lives, would not the American public come to demand it? World War II censorship methods today, however, are as untenable as they are undesirable. During World War II, the military controlled the means of communicating written and broadcast news to the American people, which often took time and allowed for prepublication censorship. The advent of the Internet, live coverage, satellites, and other technological advances makes anything approaching World War II censorship impossible. News is no longer the sole domain of professional journalists. Censoring every blog or Twitter account would prove very difficult.

Despite these changes of the press in outlook and technology, World War II can still impart important lessons for the military leaders who are dealing with today’s press. To begin with, commanders during that conflict were working with new forms of media (such as newsreels and radio) and the increasing speed of information. As Eisenhower discovered, modern communications meant the “commander in the field is never more than an hour away from home capitals and public opinion.” 25 Nor was the World War II press nearly as subservient to the military as supposed. 26 Commanders had to deal with scandals, mistakes, and reporters hostile to the military. Finally, the basic task of reporters has not changed, nor has the power of news to shape warfare.

The Press Is a Weapon

Fortunately, there are less draconian and more effective ways than censorship for the press to contribute to victory. To start, the military should establish channels to major news organizations long before any conflict begins to create trust and provide a way for dangerous or false new stories to be blocked or managed. After heavy criticism of the US military’s agreement to allow Vichy French officials

24. Kavanagh et al., News in a Digital Age, 8–9.
to retain power temporarily in North Africa in exchange for keeping order, journalist Alexander F. Jones of the Washington Post helped establish a committee with the American Society of Newspaper Editors to work with the military to get more accurate angles on controversial stories.27 A modern equivalent could help prevent needless scandals while fostering greater understanding between soldiers and reporters.

The best public relations officers during World War II tended to be former reporters, or at least officers who were somewhat sympathetic towards journalism. Due to the massive growth of the US Army during the war, most high-level commanders had at least one former reporter on their personal staffs to facilitate contact between both groups and help commanders understand the needs of journalists. Although direct recruitment of professional journalists would be difficult, today’s public affairs officers should have some experience or training as journalists to help meet the needs of both the military and reporters. Initiatives such as the PAO Program, which provides public affairs officers with additional training in journalism schools, is an excellent start.

Lessons learned from World War II led to the creation of the Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DVIDS), which continues to cultivate goodwill with journalists.28 Before D-Day, Allied public relations officers compiled a massive library of photos and information to be made available to fill the incredible demand for news the landing in France would generate.29 Journalists sympathetic to both the military and their profession, such as CBS’s Edward R. Murrow, worked as liaisons between news organizations and military officers planning press accommodations.30 Modern news driven by constant television and online media will continue to need the important service DVIDS provides.

Directing organized media attention toward ordinary soldiers, which the US military has done successfully in recent wars, also has its origins during World War II. For example, Patton tried—not always successfully—to direct media attention away from himself and toward his soldiers. He wrote the head of War Department Public Relations, stating “It is my opinion that in spite of our large conversation about the psychology of war, we utterly fail to utilize the

simplest means of stimulating pride and valor in the troops.” 31 Patton took for
granted that the names of commanders and units would already be known to the
enemy, and thus there was no harm in criticizing or praising them in the press.
He argued:

> if the people at home know that the boys from Lensville [sic],
Illinois or Junction City Kansas are fighting and doing well, they will
get a great kick out of it and will write to the soldiers with the result
that the soldiers will fight harder than ever. If, on the other hand, they
learn that certain units have not done well, they will also write, and
these units will do better.32

As Patton stated during a press conference in 1944, stories of individual
heroism “are the things we should get to the people at home and they would
have a tremendous uplifting influence on the people and on the soldiers.”33
Eisenhower agreed, concluding “no thing . . . so improves the morale of the
soldier as to see his unit or his own name in print—just once.”34 He made an
effort to have his photo taken with ordinary GIs and then had the pictures sent
to their hometown newspapers.35 By the end of the war in Europe, the US Army
had formed bands of war correspondents who interviewed ordinary soldiers and
sent the stories to hometown newspapers.36 At the peak of the program, nearly
20,000 stories were sent home each week. One reporter recalled that “I’ve met
soldiers who’d show me well-worn clippings about some story I’d written about
them months before.”37

Today, as in World War II, accounts of ordinary soldiers make excellent
news stories. Although news—particularly hometown newspapers—is different
than during World War II such stories provide journalists with an inexhaustible
supply of exciting and appealing articles.38 It was no accident that Ernie Pyle
became the most famous war correspondent of World War II by writing almost
exclusively about ordinary GIs. These stories are limited when it comes to the
larger context of the conflict, and they cannot help the war effort.

Commanders should take every opportunity to bring public attention to
their subordinates and staff. The US Army released few division or regimental

33. “Conference between General Patton and Third Army Correspondents,” November 6, 1944, folder 7,
box 53, George S. Patton Papers.
35. Patton, diary, June 26, 1944, folder 5, box 3, George S. Patton Papers.
Lawrence Papers.
37. Unpublished Lawrence memoir, page 219,
commander’s names to the press through most of World War II. Patton and other commanders spent a lot of time trying to get the policy changed in order to highlight their hard work and successes. When Marshall visited him in fall 1944, Patton startled the chief of staff by facetiously saying the wife of one of his generals wanted a divorce. When Marshall offered to intervene, Patton replied that the only thing he could do was release the general’s name to the press because his wife thought her husband was a slacker. Patton got his general’s name in the press but remembered belatedly that Marshall had “no sense of humor.” Nevertheless, such actions built loyal and highly motivated subordinates. Conversely, generals such as Clark and MacArthur created lasting resentment by failing to spread praise in the press about their officers and men.

Directing media attention toward the officers and soldiers one commands is good press policy and one of the basics of leadership. One reason for the success of “embedded” journalists during the Iraq War was the focus it placed on ordinary soldiers. American troops are not saints, and there will also be stories that reflect badly on the US military. Nevertheless, the best public affairs specialist is the American soldier in combat. Commanders should remember two additional points. First, troops performing vital work (such as logistics) also deserve press attention. Second, praise and criticism must be merited. Honesty, in this regard, separates praise from propaganda.

**TikTok Wars**

In fall 2021, schools across the United States experienced a wave of vandalism inspired by “devious licks,” a TikTok “challenge” that encouraged students to steal from—or destroy—bathrooms and post videos of the results. During the week of September 13–17, for example, the school resource officer for Hempfield School District in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, made six arrests and questioned numerous students in connection with extensive bathroom vandalism. The “devious licks” episode is a warning that TikTok can quickly spread influential messages with destructive consequences. The Russian invasion of Ukraine provided evidence of TikTok’s influence in military affairs. As the *Washington Post* noted, “TikTok videos offered some of the first glimpses of the Russian invasion, and since then the platform has been a primary outlet for spreading news [of
the war] to the masses abroad.”44 Some commentators even began labeling the conflict a “TikTok war.”45 As of this writing, the role TikTok will play in warfare is unclear, but a few preliminary results are apparent.

TikTok poses a much more serious challenge than other social media sites because it is not a “social media” app. Instead of connecting people, TikTok tailors content to individual users by employing an algorithm that attempts to find out what the consumer wants to see.46 When a user scrolls through a line of short films, the algorithm notes how long the viewer lingers on a video and begins showing similar content. A Wall Street Journal investigation found these suggestions led users down “rabbit holes, which are hard to escape.”47 Hence, it is difficult for a consumer to stop using TikTok because it is designed to release dopamine. University of Southern California Professor Julie Albright compares this effect to playing slot machines.48 Finally, TikTok operates out of an authoritarian state with a record of human rights violations and an adversarial relationship with the United States. In other words, an addictive information site created in China feeds tailored content to users around the globe.

So far, the use of TikTok in warfare suggests it is the latest technological innovation for news to influence conflict. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, a former comedian, skillfully used the platform to connect with his people and the world. He also used TikTok to speak to the enemy, encouraging the Russian people to end the invasion.49 His success was demonstrated when Russia enacted a “fake news” law. The law punished anyone knowingly propagating false information with years in prison, levied hefty fines, and drastically limiting news from outside countries.50 Meanwhile, the White House briefed 30 TikTok “influencers”—one as young as 18 years old—on the war in Ukraine. “Saturday Night Live” quickly produced a skit ridiculing the meeting.
but the influencers did not appear surprised. The Washington Post quoted Kahlil Greene who explained his “generation gets all our information from TikTok.”

No Such Thing as a “Noble Lie”

Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbels was deservedly called the “father of lies” by the Allies. Yet, his diaries suggest Goebbels understood spreading misinformation as news was a position of weakness. For example, when the Japanese began to refer to their defeats as “successful evacuations,” Goebbels fumed that such obvious lies made the Axis a “laughing stock.” For their part, the Japanese militarists also understood the need for honesty. After Pearl Harbor, for example, the Japanese government publicly admitted they had lost all the midget submarines involved in the attack. As Admiral Matome Ugaki reasoned, “Since the Washington press reported” the story, “Japan could not but announce it.” While the Axis nations habitually lied in their press and propaganda, they also knew lying had its limits.

Radio made it easy for combatants to listen to the other side’s news. To avoid looking foolish, news and propaganda had to be kept close to reality. During the war, US General Robert Eichelberger wrote, “I listened to one of their [Tokyo Radio] broadcasts and it is comparatively conservative. Noting they knew their enemy was listening he observed, “I guess they try not to let it sound foolish, although of course they present an improper picture.” While the press of the Western Allied democracies was freer and more honest than the Axis, technology also made the US government release information that it otherwise would have kept secret. As Professor Steven Casey notes, when the American government refused to release casualty figures, Allied news outlets reported Axis claims. After the Battle of the Coral Sea, for example, the US Navy was reluctant to release any information about the battle. When the Japanese began falsely claiming a great victory with high Allied losses, MacArthur felt obliged to release accurate information to refute the enemy propaganda.

51. Lorenz, “Briefing TikTok Stars.”
54. Lochner, Goebbels Diaries, 461.
New technologies have made deception more difficult, but truthful news—news reporting that accurately depicts events—has a power that defies human invention. Goebbels’s and Ugaki’s statements tacitly acknowledged truth’s power, even if they understood it was a weapon they could not employ. Lying to the public may yield short-term gains, but it comes at significant risk. For example, in the Battle of Waterloo, Napoleon Bonaparte learned the Prussians were advancing to assist the Duke of Wellington’s troops. Nevertheless, he ordered the story spread that French Marshal Emmanuel de Grouchy was arriving with reinforcements. Napoleon’s soldiers believed him until defeat arrived, along with reality. It was enough to shatter French morale and turn defeat into a rout.

Deceiving the enemy is an important and legitimate part of warfare. The media can help fool the enemy, as the examples at the opening of this article demonstrated. As the journalists Patton spoke to understood fully, he was not trying to deceive them, his soldiers, or the Allied public. Today’s media is not the World War II press corps, and commanders should use media deception with extreme caution. Deceiving the enemy is necessary, but lying to one’s side is dangerous.

Lessons Learned

Have new media technologies made the lessons from World War II military-press relations obsolete? As of this writing, the war in Ukraine is still raging, meaning any lessons drawn from the conflict must deal with incomplete information. Nevertheless, the war has clearly shown that the media is still a weapon in modern warfare, and new technologies have increased the media’s power. As noted, Zelensky has brilliantly used TikTok to build support for Ukraine. Not since Churchill has a leader exploited media technology to link himself closely to resistance in a desperate cause. As evidenced by Russia’s persistent efforts to kill him, Zelensky has succeeded in placing himself at the center of gravity for Ukrainian endurance. Making one person the focal point of resistance is dangerous; it leaves a vacuum if that person is killed. This technique, however, has served the Ukrainian cause well.

Zelensky is not the only Ukrainian using social media. Thousands of ordinary Ukrainians have uploaded videos and posts to Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and

59. Lovelace, Media Offensive, 5–6.
Twitter, giving the war immediacy to those watching thousands of miles away. Studies have also found disinformation on social media sites and TikTok. Persistent efforts to root out misinformation suggest the importance of truth in warfare has not ended.

Commanders and policymakers should mentally prepare for making difficult decisions that might counter editorial or public opinion. They should remember social media and Twitter storms do not necessarily represent popular sentiment and realize they are more knowledgeable about events than stateside critics. They must also resist the temptation to remove competent subordinates to satisfy public opinion.

Commanders and policymakers should resist any attempts at prepublication censorship. Nazi Germany tried to stop BBC radio broadcasts in World War II and failed. Russia’s repeated unsuccessful efforts to block Western social media in Ukraine indicate modern Internet censorship will be ineffective. Instead, journalists should be accredited or embedded with units and provided guidelines on what they cannot publish—and removed from their assignments if they violate the guidelines. Criticism, and even disinformation, should not be silenced. Opposition opinion in the United States was not restricted during World War II, and this policy should continue in future wars.

Likewise, commanders must be honest with the press. Within the limits of operational security and with an understanding that deception is part of warfare, commanders should avoid lying to the media. Recently, there has been much discussion of “fake news,” disinformation, or misinformation. The cure for such problems is trust in institutions built on their personnel being honest. Even when it is distasteful, humans want the truth, and honest commanders will serve their country better than liars.

Nor is bad news necessarily detrimental when it comes to public relations. Military leadership during World War II worried that if the press were too optimistic, Americans would believe the conflict was almost won and lose interest. This belief led to the release of photographs of dead American soldiers during the

65. Sardarizadeh, “Ukraine War.”
middle of the war. Negative news stories can keep the civilian population from taking victory for granted in long conflicts.

During a war, all commanders should direct media attention toward their subordinates. Most importantly, the military should provide access to ordinary soldiers and encourage journalists to write about them. These types of stories make exciting news and will improve military morale. Although local newspapers are less relevant today than during World War II, the Internet has opened new avenues to reach audiences. Business and nonprofit organizations have long used Facebook groups, Patreon, YouTube, and other social media to connect with specific audiences by following the day-to-day lives of individuals in pursuit of a particular goal. The military can do the same to highlight the accomplishments of units and soldiers.

Finally, these conclusions are the result of an academic historical study. They come from the past, but practitioners must be careful how they are applied in the present. If they are tested in future wars and found wanting, they must be discarded. Military leaders should remember that orchestrated violence wins wars, not media strategies. The press is simply one weapon in the arsenal of modern warfare.

**Conclusion**

Just as today, World War II military leaders sometimes viewed a free press as a liability. “It's one of the disadvantages of democracy that it can't conduct politics or war according to logic and intelligence,” smirked Goebbels, “but have to respond to the up-and-down swings of public opinion.” Marshall worried over the same issue. After the war he recalled, “the leader in a democracy has to keep the people entertained.”

Despite the annoyance and danger the press can cause the military during a war, this article has argued that a free press is a powerful weapon in modern warfare. Like all weapons, the media should be used and understood carefully. Commanders, unduly influenced by public opinion—or what they believe to be public opinion—may make unwise battlefield decisions. *The Media Offensive* provides a deeper exploration of these topics; however, this article has briefly outlined some lessons from the book that may be helpful. Studying the

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military-press relationship during World War II provides excellent intellectual training for anyone considering the possible and probable challenges the press will pose in future conflicts.

Alexander G. Lovelace

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Russia’s Strategy and Its War on Ukraine

George Shatzer

Review of

The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace
By Oscar Jonsson

and

Learning from Russia’s Recent Wars: Why, Where, and When Russia Might Strike Next
By Neal G. Jesse

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, Russian military theory, integrated warfare, NATO

Watching Russia’s buildup of combat power around Ukraine in January and February this year, I, like many others, presumed that if Russian forces ever invaded, they would swiftly defeat the Ukrainian military and readily achieve their objectives. The so-called “correlation of forces” so greatly favored the Russian military that the outcome of a potential war in their favor seemed certain. Nearly.

Three months into Russia’s brutal war against Ukraine, all such easy judgments are so far proving wrong. With limited but vital military backing from the United States and NATO, the Ukrainian armed forces have managed to push the Russian military to its apparent limit. Russia has suffered heavy personnel losses—perhaps as much as 10 percent of Russia’s invasion forces have been killed or wounded if Ukrainian Defense Ministry estimates can be believed. Equipment and vehicle losses have been substantial, too. More importantly, Russian advances seem to have been halted, and Ukrainian forces appear to have reclaimed some previously lost ground. As a bonus, Russia also seems to be losing the information war as most international opinion is critical of Russia’s aggression.

These unexpected developments have led to many questions. How did Russia so badly misjudge Ukrainian military strength? Why does the Russian military seem to be struggling with even the fundamental aspects of combat operations? Why did Russia invade Ukraine? What is Russian President Vladimir Putin...
Thinking? While much media speculation has focused on these questions, even informed voices, such as those of former US and NATO senior commanders, have yet to provide satisfactory answers. As strategists and military professionals, we must find these answers. Such insight will provide Ukraine and NATO an edge in the current war; it may also provide critical advantages in future conflicts with Russia. Barring a radical change in Russia’s national leadership, the West should reasonably expect the primary challenge to European security to continue to come from Russia.

Knowing one’s enemy is such a basic concept in strategy it becomes easy to forget. Dealing with one’s issues and the myriad preparations for war can be all-consuming, leaving little time to look outward beyond them. Because understanding the enemy is exceptionally difficult, intelligence preparation of the environment fixates on more readily measured material and technical factors such as combat power. Even strategic assessments are woefully lacking in their examination of enemy strategy, thinking, and motivation. These assessments rely on simplistic rubrics such as DIME or ends, ways, and means. They often forget careful consideration of history, psychology, or the moral and spiritual factors driving the human choice to wage war. This oversight is not surprising given how fraught these areas are with subjectivity and the risk of misinterpretation.

Even “understanding the enemy” as a concept itself is misunderstood. It is a mistake to think the aim is to predict how an enemy will behave in a given situation. Not even the enemy can predict this about themselves. Instead, it is about knowing their habits and weaknesses to understand better how they are vulnerable. It is about appreciating their motivations, so the limits of their will are made clearer. These things suggest points for an attack that will be more effective in damaging the enemy and changing their behavior. Understanding the enemy is also a pathway to understanding oneself because it frees us from our limited perspectives. All this is the starting point for understanding the kind of war on which we are embarking.

How Russia understands war is the focus of Oscar Jonsson’s The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace. This short yet detailed book provides a comprehensive examination of the modern evolution of Russian military theory and strategy. Jonsson, a Swedish security policy researcher, delivers a startling assessment that Russian political and security leaders have developed a fundamentally different appreciation of war than that of the West. In essence, Jonsson claims Russia believes the actual nature of war, not just its character, has changed. He provides a convincing analysis of Russian military writings from pre-Soviet years through today that shows Russian leaders and strategists have rejected the classical view that war is defined by armed
violence. He reinforces this conclusion quite convincingly with evidence from Russian government strategic documents and statements from leaders such as Putin and General Valery Gerasimov, the current and long-serving chief of the Russian General Staff.

Jonsson corrects the common misperception in the West that Gerasimov’s popular works, especially certain speeches from 2013 and 2014, constitute a doctrine or that they describe how Russia should conduct its wars. Instead, Jonsson asserts Gerasimov is describing from the Russian point of view how the United States and the West subvert legitimate rule in countries to generate uprisings and eventually impose liberal democratic systems. Jonsson clarifies that this notion well predates Gerasimov’s statements by citing several others who previously have written about this topic (especially General Makhmut Gareyev, former president of the Russian Academy of Military Sciences). This body of Russian military thought concludes the West has mastered information and psychological warfare to such an extent that these operations are now as effective as armed violence in overthrowing governments. Hence, the very nature of war has changed from one defined by armed violence extending from policy to one of a policy of subversion, essentially constituting violence against the government and people of a target nation. As Jonsson puts it succinctly, this new Russian understanding of war is “a shift with a larger focus to the political goal of war rather than its means (the armed violence)” (154).

Jonsson then illustrates how Russia has also shifted its views on the new means of this redefined war. He contends Russia has assessed the “color revolution,” as a supposedly popular democratic uprising, as the preferred method of the West to topple legitimate governments it opposes. Jonsson dedicates an entire chapter to the Russian analysis of color revolutions and the methods the West allegedly uses to foster them. At its core, a color revolution is a product of information warfare—liberal democratic ideas trampling traditional societal values and cultures to create “controlled chaos” in the target state. These effects are supported by various financial, social, training, and media measures to drive the color revolution forward. The supporters of the revolution are convinced (mainly due to influence from nongovernmental organizations and the media) that their actions are spontaneous and natural. Supporters also engage in their brand of fascism and become irregular forces imposing conformity and attacking anyone with traditional views. In effect, Russia believes the West employs “reflexive control” against these countries.

This summary of Jonsson’s assessment of Russian views of US and Western strategies might sound strange to anyone used to hearing Russia uses these same methods in its operations against others, especially in Georgia and Ukraine in recent years. Jonsson makes an important point that could use further
attention—that Russia is describing itself but projecting onto others to legitimize its view. Jonsson notes the Soviet government commonly employed this practice (75). Still, the book is eye-opening and provides relevant insights into the war in Ukraine this review will return to later.

Where Jonsson tends to focus on the why behind Russian strategy, Neal Jesse centers more on the how of Russian strategy in Learning from Russia’s Recent Wars: Why, Where, and When Russia Might Strike Next. Jesse’s book is similarly concise but still impressively detailed even in the breadth of topics it covers. He opens with a brief comparison of political science theories to explain Russian foreign policy. His conclusions are barebones: Russia seeks to rebuild its military while creating a buffer zone of friendly countries to increase its influence as it strives to return to great-power status.

More expansive are Jesse’s recounting and analysis of Russian aggression in the post–Soviet era from Chechnya to Georgia to Ukraine (the 2014 intervention). Assessments of Russian key capabilities, especially cyber and nonconventional means, thoroughly describe how Russia has subverted and aggressively coerced its smaller Eastern European and Baltic neighbors. Not surprisingly, these methods mirror Russia’s view of Western-generated color revolutions. A key difference is that Russia has used its forces in conventional and unconventional ways to support the supposedly popular resistance movements in the target nations.

Jesse also includes an entire chapter on Russian efforts to rebuild its military. Like many others, he points to the war in Georgia as a major impetus to reform and notes many reforms were well underway prior to 2008. He asserts that Russian leadership was already wary of NATO’s intentions even by the mid-1990s and realized the shortcomings of its military because of its performance in the Chechen wars. So, while its military shortcomings were evident in Georgia (and again in Ukraine in 2014), Russia has actually been attempting to improve its armed forces for nearly the past 25 years. Jesse concludes Russia still has a long way to go with these reforms, which have been hampered by Western economic sanctions since the 2014 intervention in Ukraine and the deeply ingrained corruption of the Russian defense industry.

Impressively, Jesse arrives at conclusions about the situation in Ukraine in 2020 (when the book was published) that are very relevant to the Russian decision to go to war there today. He assesses that despite some success from Russian efforts to destabilize the Ukrainian government, Ukraine responded reasonably well and stabilized the security situation even in its Eastern oblasts. As a result, the state of the pro-Russian position in Ukraine has not improved substantially since the 2014 intervention. Further, Jesse asserts that Russia would be motivated to act more overtly if an opportunity (such as with Crimea) or a
need arose (for example, continued Ukrainian tilting toward the EU and NATO). He correctly judges the “Russian threat to Ukraine is the most obvious and the most constant” of all the potential threats to other nations (158).

Both authors’ combined analyses and conclusions provide a beneficial understanding of Russian views on war, in general, and the motivations for its war on Ukraine, in particular. Jonsson and Jesse describe Russian thinking as more holistic than American or Western thinking. While the United States tends to view individual components separately and then aggregate them into a larger system, Russia considers all constituent elements inherently connected in a synthesized whole. This belief predisposes Russia to perceive the United States and the West have developed a new, integrated form of warfare that combines information and armed means and fundamentally changes the nature of war.

Reinforcing this view is the Russian assessment that the West uses this form of warfare in a campaign ultimately aimed at ending the Russian nation as it exists today. Both authors note Russia accuses NATO of reneging on alleged promises not to expand its membership following the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially to include former Soviet republics. It also perceives the United States readily violates international law and nations’ sovereignty when it suits its security interests. Russia further believes the color revolutions in Europe (and the Arab Spring) were crises manufactured by the West intended to oust legitimate governments and propagate liberal democratic beliefs antithetical to traditional spiritual and moral values held in those countries.

As Jonsson and Jesse point out, this belief makes sense because Russian leaders perceive that “soft power” and influence are tools of the state and thus cannot be spontaneous or naturally occurring. Russia views the color revolutions as fascist movements that purposefully aim to oppress the rights of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking peoples—and fracture the Russkiy Mir (the Russian World or core Russian culture). Russia even perceives the United States has interfered in its elections. It certainly recalls the US, UK, and French intervention in its civil war in support of the White, anti-Bolshevik army. In essence, Russia believes the United States and the West are at war with it today, even if that war is undeclared and involves primarily unarmed offensives.

This worldview makes most any action permissible because that action would necessarily be defensive. And this is how Russia frames its actions today in Ukraine—a special military operation first intended to defend the Russian people in Ukraine from a repressive, illegitimate government and, ultimately, as a step to protect Russia from the West’s campaign against it. Further, Russia has traditionally viewed Ukraine as central to its history and at the heart of the concept of Novorossiya (or New Russia), a claimed crown jewel of the Russian nation.
More practically, many factors make Ukraine especially important to Russia. Ukraine is the second-largest country in Europe (its sheer size puts the Russian military’s struggles there in perspective—Ukraine is nearly as large as Texas in land area). Ukraine sits on the Black Sea and borders four NATO member states. About three-quarters of Russian gas exports to Europe flow through Ukraine. Ukraine is a major player in the global agro-economy, producing about 12 percent of the world’s wheat and about 17 percent of its corn. Lastly, Russian shipyards cannot manufacture aircraft carriers. All of Russia’s carriers were built in Ukraine, including the only one in service today (the Admiral Kuznetsov).

Jonsson and Jesse’s enlightening books make Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine appear logical given all these considerations. Controlling Ukraine is essential to defending the Russian people and the Russian state from the West’s war. Russian efforts to control Ukraine have effectively stalled since the 2014 intervention, and Russian measures to destabilize Ukraine have not prevented it from tilting closer to both NATO and the EU. Resistance groups there never coalesced into a viable threat to the Ukrainian government. Russian pledges of support to these groups likely also created pressure on Russia to uphold their promises. Otherwise, Russia risked creating the perception it was not truly serious about the claimed fascist threat to the Russian people. While seizing Crimea was an important achievement, the region remained cut off practically from Russia. Finally, Russia’s access to the Black Sea was still greatly restricted.

In sum, Russia had few good options to improve its position in Ukraine. Continuing to do more of what it had been doing since 2014 must have seemed like a dead end, and disengaging was completely incompatible with its worldview and rhetoric.

Additionally, the risk of a US or NATO military intervention in response to a Russian invasion must have seemed remote, given the West’s previously muted response to Russian operations in Georgia, Syria, Crimea, and Ukraine. Finally, Russia likely judged the resistance potential of the Ukrainian military to be low, given its uneven performance against an unorganized band of resistance fighters who did not have the combat power of the Russian military. And, at any rate, with no decisive intervention from the United States and NATO expected, even a highly capable Ukrainian defense would eventually be overwhelmed.

Both books are solid works that lift the fog shrouding Russian views on war and its strategy in Ukraine. While neither book can predict Russian actions, each volume will help readers better understand Russian motivations and the scope of its will to wage war—a valuable insight as strategists work out how to deal with Russian aggression.
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To Consider—Recent Books on Similar Topics

_Ukraine and the Art of Strategy_
by Lawrence Freedman

_Strategiya: The Foundations of the Russian Art of Strategy_
by Ofer Fridman

_Russian Grand Strategy in the Era of Global Power Competition_
by Andrew Monaghan

_Russia’s Military Revival_
by Bettina Renz

_Putin’s World: Russia against the West and with the Rest_
by Angela E. Stent
On “The Grand Strategic Thought of Colin S. Gray”

Phillip Dolitsky
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This commentary responds to Lukas Milevski’s article, “The Grand Strategic Thought of Colin S. Gray,” published in the Winter 2021–22 issue of Parameters (vol. 51, no. 4).

Keywords: Colin S. Gray, grand strategic thought, grand strategy, military strategy, military power

Few strategic thinkers were as prolific as the late Colin S. Gray. His pen touched the entire gamut of strategic thought—from nuclear strategy to strategic culture to sea power to geopolitics. Future scholars, perhaps this author, will need to consolidate Gray’s life work into the ultimate companion guide to his strategic thought. In the recent Winter issue of this journal, Lukas Milevski tipped his hand at doing just that with “The Grand Strategic Thought of Colin S. Gray.” He argues, “Gray's conception of grand strategy emphasizes the agential context of military strategy” and notes Gray’s view “contradicts the mainstream interpretation particularly favored in the United States, in which grand strategy is identified as the master of policy.”¹ While Milevski argues these points with superb clarity, I write here to highlight two critical areas of Gray’s thought Milevski omitted in his otherwise comprehensive analysis.

The first, and perhaps more serious omission, concerns a matter of first principles. Since grand strategy is synonymous with statecraft, this strategy must consider the nature of the world order it plans to operate within. This consideration is where Gray strayed from “mainstream” international relations thought. Current international relations students have concentrated their study on the Waltz/Wendt debate of international politics, which pits “neorealism” versus “constructivism.” Yet, Gray was not a neorealist, and he disdained constructivism. Indeed, Gray referred to Waltz’s Theory of International Politics as “a book which demonstrates that being elegantly parsimonious in theory building offers insufficient compensation for being wrong.”² He was perhaps the most vocal defender of classical realism, claiming that “flawed though the principal texts of classical realism may be, when compared with more

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contemporary would-be master/mistress-works, they have an overriding virtue. To risk the vernacular, they got the big things right enough.”

Given his embrace of classical realism, Gray had sweeping thoughts on the international system:

As a neoclassical realist I insist that the game of polities (or security communities) does not change from age to age, let alone from decade to decade. I will stop just short of claiming that the game cannot change, but only by way of a token nod in the direction of never saying never. Paradoxically, perhaps, this stance is not a conservative one. It is alert to the facts of cumulative, sometimes apparently non-linear, change in the character of international relations, including international strategic relations. It denies only the likelihood of change in the nature of those relations.

Given his embrace of realism and the classic realist works, Gray did not support, for example, global governance as seen in his *Another Bloody Century*. He also did not endorse global governance in his thoughts on grand strategy (more on this below). This is not a small omission. Instead, it stems logically from Gray’s understanding of world politics.

While Milevski synthesized Gray’s thoughts on grand strategy, his analysis lacks the foundation upon which it rests. I contend one cannot understand Gray’s conception of grand strategy by starting with his thoughts on strategy, as Milevski does. Instead, this conception must begin with Gray’s fearless embrace and moving reverence to the great works and scholars of classical realism highlighted so well in the article, “Clausewitz Rules, OK?” Yet, Milevski skips this step entirely, which leaves readers with a watered-down version of Gray’s thoughts on grand strategy.

Milevski’s second omission, as jarring as the first, is not mentioning Gray’s one book on grand strategy, *The Sheriff*. In this short book, Gray outlines his thoughts on what American grand strategy should look like as the “sheriff of the world order.” He deals with the elusive concept of “world order,” noting it is “neither self-enforcing nor is it comprehensively enforceable” and “every such ‘order’ requires a sheriff, or some other agent of discipline.” He also links this notion of what American grand strategy should look like to his conception of international politics, and he makes this point throughout the book (for example, see pages 37 and 55). Furthermore, Gray, from his realist perspective of world politics, sees nongovernmental organizations and multinational organizations (like the UN) as having no use in protecting the current world orders. Milevski also features

5. Gray, “Clausewitz Rules.”
Gray’s essay, “Harry S. Truman and the Forming of American Grand Strategy in the Cold War, 1945–1953,” in The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War that analyzes the grand strategy of Harry Truman. While the essay is incredibly valuable to understanding Gray’s thoughts on grand strategy, it does not carry the same weight as The Sheriff.6

Perhaps Milevski did not mention The Sheriff since he wanted to only discuss matters of theory. Yet, Gray was fond of quoting Bernard Brodie’s quip that “strategic theory is a theory of action.”7 That Gray’s presentation of a grand strategic “theory of action” is missing from Milevski’s essay beggars belief.

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Phillip Dolitsky identifies what he believes to be two significant omissions in my exploration of Colin Gray’s grand strategic thought—ignoring Gray’s classical realist perspective on international affairs and neglecting *The Sheriff* as an example of how he would design a grand strategic theory for action. Neither is substantive.

The classical realist perspective is essentially irrelevant; it is an international relations identification, meaningless to the field of strategic studies. Academically and practically, strategy is international relations-agnostic. Although many practitioners might argue the two assumptions, that conflict and war are inevitable in principle—distinct from saying particular wars are inevitable in practice—and that military power remains relevant reflect a realist perspective, this is not the historical experience of the field or real-world practice. Historically, representatives of all persuasions (realists, liberals, fascists, Marxists, and many others) have thought about strategy and, except for absolute pacifists, have also practiced strategy. The cute paradigmatic/ideological distinctions of international relations collapse in the real world of strategic practice. In this context, the degree to which Gray invoked classical realism is at least as much to translate the fundamentals of his perspective to nonstrategic studies, essentially an international relations audience, as it is a statement of ideational identity.

Dolitsky, with unnecessary force, suggests it “beggars belief” that I ignored *The Sheriff* as an example of Gray’s grand strategic theory of action. Yet, *The Sheriff* is not a book about grand strategy or statecraft. It engages topics related to defense planning, strategy, and defense policy, tied together with a vision of American engagement with the world (the titular sheriff). American academics misguidedly (and typically) consider grand vision to be grand strategy, but in actuality, none of the four themes presented in *The Sheriff*, individually or together, comprise grand strategy. The book does not engage with either nonmilitary issues or nonmilitary power except in a token manner. It pertains to grand strategy only to the extent that defense planning, strategy, defense policy, and visions of one’s role in the world interact with statecraft. *The Sheriff* lacks the necessary breadth to be considered an exploration of grand strategic or statecraft theory of action.
Fundamentally, Gray did not write about statecraft or grand strategy as such; he wrote about military strategy and defense, usually explicitly acknowledging the grand strategic or statecraft context. Since he never substantially engaged with nonmilitary power, Gray never wrote, nor could he write, a theory of grand strategy or a grand strategic (let alone statecraft) theory for action. This fact is not a slight against Gray. Virtually every scholar who has sought to employ the concept of grand strategy has failed to engage with its full conceptual and practical breadth, reflecting how hard it is to theorize grand strategy. As a result, Gray did not compare the instrumental values of military and nonmilitary power—except to identify a degree of fungibility. Although perhaps relevant to statecraft as a concept, the paradigmatic debates of international relations (which essentially concern the relative values of various forms of power) hardly play a part in Gray’s grand strategic thought.

Lukas Milevski
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Hear our authors provide further insights at: https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/decisive/
Read the genesis article at: https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol51/iss4/8/
American-led coalition operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have made clear over the last two decades that interoperability is a crucial alliance capability. Effective coalition military operations are made possible by common defense concepts, doctrine, tactics, procedures, and materiel. Achieving these interoperability objectives, however, has been a singular challenge of the last 25 years, as Central and Eastern European allies have sought to qualify for, join, and contribute effectively to the alliance.

Defense reform has been a critical tool for achieving interoperability across Central and Eastern Europe. Broadly, defense reforms focused initially on adopting Western democratic defense governance (what might be considered intellectual interoperability) and, subsequently, on developing other interoperability objectives. Unfortunately, these reforms have either failed or achieved only minimal success. According to Thomas-Durell Young in *Anatomy of Post-Communist Defense Institutions*, Central and Eastern European governments have been challenged deeply in their ability to build and maintain capable, interoperable military forces. In fact, the military capabilities of most allies have withered over the last quarter century, even as efforts to build them up have accelerated over the same period.

Why? Young argues the key reason is the inability of Western officials to acknowledge and appreciate the “malignant persistence of totalitarian norms” in Central and Eastern European countries (7). In other words, even though the formal structures of communism fell in the early 1990s, the thought patterns, psychological outlooks, and behavioral habits characteristic to a totalitarian state persisted far longer.

In the defense realm, this persistence has resulted in the retention of military concepts contradictory to Western ideas. The blame for the subsequent failure of most defense reforms, as far as Young assigns it, falls largely on the West. He contends Western officials fundamentally misjudged the state of professionalism.
in Central and Eastern European militaries and mistakenly viewed the reform of former communist armed forces as a military problem. As a result, most of the West’s defense reform efforts focused on an overly technical approach geared toward training at the tactical level.

If Young is correct, a generation of Western officials on both sides of the Atlantic fundamentally misjudged the nature of post-Soviet, post–Warsaw Pact, post-Tito societies, governments, and defense enterprises across Central and Eastern Europe, resulting in wasted decades and billions of misspent dollars, pounds, marks, and euros. This damning assessment deserves deep analysis, both to determine whether Western officials really were as ignorant as Young alleges and to identify accurately the key causal variable(s) behind the defense reform failures.

Interestingly, Young presents evidence to support the notion Western officials really did understand the shortcomings of and hurdles facing Central and Eastern European military establishments. Leaked NATO defense assessments—available to every Allied delegation in Brussels—and firsthand accounts of senior Western military officials and experts portray a clear but limited awareness, stemming from latent communist-era thinking and practices, of the challenges faced by the Central and Eastern European defense enterprise (48, 49–52). Young contends, after 1990, the West subsequently made no concerted effort to understand the “cultural conditions” in Central and Eastern Europe (53). If Western officials indeed were aware of persistent totalitarian norms, readers have to wonder if they cared, or if they were overconfident in the ability of Western-promoted defense reform efforts to succeed nonetheless.

At its heart, the book is about change in military organizations, a subject that has seen significant attention from academics and practitioners over the last several decades, particularly since Barry R. Posen’s foundational The Sources of Military Doctrine (1984). While Young does include a brief survey of literature—he specifically references academics Leslie Eliason, Theo Farrell, Emily Goldman, Edgar Schein, and Terry Terriff—he focuses on his preferred explanatory variable: cultural norms. For example, Young compares the explanatory power of cultural norms to that of technology or of politics and strategy (explanatory tools posited by other scholars). In this way, Young seeks neither to test theory nor refine existing theoretical tools.

Instead, Anatomy offers a trove of evidence cataloging the transformation of defense establishments across former Soviet and Warsaw Pact republics and successor states of the former Yugoslavia. Young’s expertise and wide-ranging, in-depth research shine here, allowing comparative analysis between and within the three regions. He analyzes the countries of each region, covering defense institutions, policy frameworks, defense planning techniques, national-level
commands, military decision-making processes, operational concepts, logistical support capabilities, and professional standards. The result is a comprehensive overview of defense reform across nearly all of Central and Eastern Europe.

A second major strength is Young's attention to practical and reasonable recommendations—assuming readers agree the primary reason for the reform efforts' limited success is the West's inability or unwillingness to consider persistent totalitarian cultural norms. From broad recommendations—such as promoting emphasis on achieving defense outcomes—to more regional- and country-specific recommendations, policymakers and security experts will find much utility in the book.

These recommendations naturally beg the question, do defense reform outcomes make a difference in allied and partner military operations downrange? Maybe not: even Young acknowledges, in some cases, impressive operational outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan were not necessarily thwarted by lack of reform progress (68). Nonetheless, Young pulls no punches in noting many NATO allies in Central and Eastern Europe remain security liabilities, consuming more security than they produce (179). Considering Russia's current hybrid operations and the continuing imperative of equitable burden sharing, NATO needs all allies rowing in the same direction. Young's impressively detailed and well-researched book offers guidelines on how to achieve this synchronicity.
In The Blind Strategist: John Boyd and the American Art of War, Stephen Robinson unrelentingly attacks the military theory of the brilliant yet controversial John Boyd and argues “Boyd never applied the discipline of an historian to his research, he was a blind strategist trapped in the darkness of fraudulent history guided by the confirmation bias inherent within the logic of his grail quest” (301). The majority of the book is consequently an examination of the poor use or outright falsification of the history that underpins Boyd’s work, as well as the work of his supporters. Through this study, however, Robinson does a superb job providing a historiography of maneuver warfare.

For readers unfamiliar with Boyd, he was a highly influential US Air Force fighter pilot and military theorist in the second half of the twentieth century. He flew combat missions during the Korean War and his real influence began after the war when developing his military theory. His most important contribution was the observe-orient-decide-act (OODA) loop. OODA loops are tactical decision cycles, and the side that completes these decision cycles faster than their opponent will win the engagement. This theory led Boyd to write the Air Force fighter doctrine, and he subsequently was instrumental in developing the F-16 and the F/A-18. In addition, Boyd expanded the idea of the OODA loop and getting “inside your opponent’s decision cycle” from a simple tactical version to a more robust operational version—the birth of what Boyd and his supporters would call maneuver warfare (15).

In his first chapter, Robinson explores the emergence of maneuver warfare but claims it is “a temple built on sand” (16). He proceeds systematically in 10 chapters to describe the history on which Boyd based maneuver warfare. Highlights include the blatantly fabricated history of the self-promoting Liddell Hart, the Wehrmacht generals’ post-war efforts to distance themselves from Hitler and their failure during World War II, the mythology surrounding German stormtroopers and blitzkrieg, maneuver warfare and the defense of NATO, the absence of
maneuver warfare in the Gulf War (1991), and much more. Robinson conducted comprehensive research to support these chapters, demonstrated by an extensive bibliography and frequent footnotes. Overall, Robinson claims “maneuver warfare, was founded upon mythology, but this became apparent only after professional historians exposed the historical fraud concocted by German generals and Liddell Hart” (300).

Robinson does fine work exposing the issues with the history Boyd and others used, yet there are aspects of maneuver warfare that remain useful. Robinson depicts Boyd’s final OODA loop—which includes feedback loops and is useful for the operational level—but does not explore the broader version of the OODA loop in detail. Other aspects of maneuver warfare remain valuable and underpin the United States Marine Corps warfighting operational concept. This information raises the question of what exactly is an operational concept. In the 2001 Army magazine article, “That Elusive Operational Concept,” David A. Fastabend defined an operational concept as “an image of combat: a concise visualization that portrays the strategic requirement, the adversary and his capabilities, and the scenario by which that adversary will be overcome to accomplish the strategic requirement. It is a governing idealization that addresses those activities necessary to link tactical activities in a purposeful way to address the goals of strategy” (51, no. 6). While Boyd and his supporters would likely argue maneuver warfare was more than an operational concept, aspects of maneuver warfare still have merit as a visualization or set of guiding principles for successfully conducting warfare.

In the cover blurbs, scholarly experts in military theory claim Stephen Robinson’s book is a “must-read” and “Boyd’s advocates will not want to read, but should” (back cover). They are right—military professionals and historians alike should read this book and consider it deeply. Robinson makes a solid case that the history Boyd and his supporters used to support their work was based on falsehoods and even purposeful fabrications by Hart. This historical issue should give anyone considering maneuver warfare cause to reflect if our existing doctrine is built on flawed historical data. Although Robinson effectively hammers the historical underpinnings of Boyd and maneuver warfare, aspects of maneuver warfare are ideals military forces can and should attempt to achieve given appropriate circumstances. The Blind Strategist is an excellent catalyst for thought and debate.
China Risen?
Studying Chinese Global Power

By Shaun Breslin

Reviewed by Colonel Gerald Krieger, US Army Forces Command

There is a cottage industry of books and articles on China written by academics, independent researchers, and think tanks, with more published every month. Shaun Breslin’s China Risen? Studying Chinese Global Power, assesses China’s rising global power while evaluating its effectiveness in achieving its international objectives. Breslin is novel here, using Chinese sources—including academic journals considered obscure even within China—to present the vast and complex opinions within the country. His approach is instructive and parts the complex veil of its internal politics ever so slightly (225). Readers walk away understanding the characteristics of geopolitical discussions within China.

In six chapters, Breslin evaluates China’s global blueprint and depicts the country’s internal politics, grand strategy, ideological language, and soft power quest. Some scholars have indicated China, despite its vast economic resources, is still a partial power. While this point is still disputed, Breslin convincingly makes a case that “whatever the threshold for being a global power is China has already crossed it”—the transformation of the Chinese state is nothing short of miraculous (3).

Breslin examines various aspects of China’s growing influence via hard economic power, normative power, and soft-power ambitions. Over the past few years, its quest for soft power through the popular Confucius Institutes has generated controversy in the United States and Europe. Breslin suggests China’s growing influence cannot be attributed to a single source of power, given the myriad of circumstances and contemporary geopolitics. China’s leaders still struggle to understand that soft power emanates from culture and industry and is not wielded like hard-power economic instruments. Breslin admits his book omits one key aspect of growing Chinese power via the military, but this topic is best treated independently.
Many analysts note China is a threat to American national security, citing its Huawei 5G program or aspirations in the South China Sea. More often than not, the threat is less clear-cut. There are many perspectives on the issue; Breslin writes: “To be sure, it is not always clear what China is being identified as a threat to; perhaps a different type of threat to different things for different people” (229). The headlines surrounding China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), implied to be an example of Chinese “debt-trap diplomacy,” is another example that captures the distortion around Chinese intentions (231).

While evidence shows several countries involved in BRI face loan repayment issues, this discovery is still not proof of a deliberate policy. Breslin suggests there are many actors in China who often act in ways that run counter to the objectives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and “assuming a deliberate debt-trap diplomacy strategy results in a focus on the wrong drivers and at times the wrong actors” (231).

Complicating the narrative are China’s opaque lending practices, which noticeably do not conform to Western lending practices. Within China, financial support to developing nations is viewed as a way to secure national objectives, such as ensuring access to vital natural resources like copper, iron, gold, and manganese from Mozambique, Tanzania, and Zambia. Many state-owned enterprises determine whether commercial activity is designed for profit or for securing natural resources to support Chinese interests (130).

China is not the only influential global actor exerting influence in developing countries, though the point is often missed. The nations of the Pacific Islands, which typically have high debt levels, are an example. While China is the primary lender for Tonga and Japan, other multilateral institutions serve as the primary sources of loans and aid to other Pacific island countries. Breslin writes, “[i]f we are worried about the causes and consequences of debt in these countries, then China is part of the story and any potential solution. But not all of it” (233). Readers can apply this template to the world, including many of China’s BRI partners. While the CCP sets economic performance objectives and tightly controls the economy, its new financial system is not the familiar neoliberal capitalism. In the video, “Is China creating a new type of economic system?,” Barry Naughton dubs China’s new system “capitalism with steerage” (University of Massachusetts Workshop, 2021). While the CCP touts slogans and single-focused objectives, many actors pursue commercial profit-based agendas that at times conflict with state objectives, creating dysfunctional outcomes with national policies (90). It would have been helpful for Breslin to cover this newly emerging scholarship and research.

For the past several decades, countries have been quietly pushing back against an American-led Western world order but have lacked the economic clout to back up these challenges. China’s growing influence makes it the exception. Breslin
admits, “[m]aybe just not being the West is enough to make China’s world view attractive” (236). In the growing Sino-US challenge, there is ample room for a new perspective. Breslin’s detailed analysis debunks the idea the world is shifting to a global order fashioned by the CCP. A more realistic understanding of Chinese intentions underscores a multipolar world where China’s objectives and decisions increasingly influence the geopolitical landscape. The new world order will be complex and challenging for any single country to lead or dominate (239–40). Leaders in the West and the rest of the world must accept China’s new role and influence in global affairs, despite disagreements with CCP leadership. Demonizing China and misreading its intentions will only generate misunderstandings and saber-rattling counterproductive in the new international order. A well-needed addition to all bookshelves, China Risen is an asset to scholarship on China and should be required reading for all senior military and civilian leaders involved in crafting US policy.

Stronger: Adapting America’s China Strategy in an Age of Competitive Interdependence

By Ryan Hass

Reviewed by Dr. Andrew Scobell, distinguished fellow for China, United States Institute of Peace

Ryan Hass—a central figure in early twenty-first century US-China relations—has been engaged in the relationship for two decades, active both in the trenches and at the apex of power. He has written an insightful and illuminating book on the subject, with insights and analysis informed by his firsthand experiences from postings at the US embassy in Beijing and the National Security Council as the China point person.

In an era where the most enduring multidimensional external national security challenge facing the United States is China, almost everyone seems to be an expert. Many of these self-styled experts have penned books purporting to provide key insights or uncover secret schemes. Of all the available tomes, Stronger is a volume every national security professional should read. Why? First, the book—written by an expert in the field—is a succinct primer for anyone seeking to understand contemporary China policy. Hass has produced a masterful overview
with authoritative analysis and sensible recommendations. He explains how Washington and Beijing reached the current state of contention and confrontation and reviews—in sufficient but not mind-numbing detail—all the critical issues, including economics, technology, human rights, and military matters. Second, all serious China policy players in the US government will have read it. Stronger is likely the one book your boss has read or at least skimmed. Anyone who wants to be effective in their job should be conversant with the analyses and recommendations Hass outlines. Of course, not everyone will agree with what Hass writes.

The fundamental assumption of Stronger is “the old policy playbook for managing U.S.-China relations no longer holds answers…” (5). According to Hass, bilateral relations have evolved into a condition of “competitive interdependence” whereby “[n]either country is capable of imposing its will on the other at acceptable cost or risk, and yet both countries hold preferences and priorities that place them at sharp odds with each other” (4). What policy prescription does Hass recommend? He contends: “To compete effectively with China, America’s leaders should focus on fostering greater national cohesion, restoring America’s international prestige, and preserving its historically unmatched network of alliance relationships” (9).

My main quibble with Stronger is the author’s excessive optimism about America’s ability to negotiate skillfully the challenge of competing with China. Hass asserts Beijing faces “the hardest governance challenge on the planet” and contrasts this problem with the multiple factors that should give the United States the clear advantage (192). Yet, Hass may significantly underestimate the array and magnitude of domestic challenges confronting the United States. In other words, America’s governance challenge may be as difficult as China’s. Quibble aside, Hass rightly identifies the precondition for a successful US strategy toward China—Washington must get it right at home.

Hass provides the best overview and analysis of contemporary US-China relations I have seen in many years. In particular, uniformed and civilian professionals of the US defense establishment should peruse the thoughtful and thorough chapter five titled “Mitigating Risks of Conflict” (126). The Pentagon, Hass suggests, will face difficult choices as it seeks “to align its capabilities with its ambitions in an era of growing fiscal restraints” (153). Penned in unpretentious and jargon-free prose, Stronger will appeal to a wide audience including national security practitioners, policy wonks, educators, students, and anyone wrestling with the long-term challenge China presents to the United States.
The sudden collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban’s takeover of the country in August 2021 caught almost everyone off guard. Ashley Jackson, a scholar of armed conflicts with over a decade of experience in Afghanistan, has a provocative explanation for these dramatic events: “An essential part of understanding the Taliban’s once-improbable resurrection and ascent lay in their relationships with civilians” (4). Specifically, in *Negotiating Survival: Civilian-Insurgent Relations in Afghanistan*, Jackson documents through 418 interviews with civilians and members of the Taliban across 15 provinces that, beginning around 2017, Afghan communities and members of the Taliban began to actively negotiate and cut deals with one another as a survival strategy. The end result of these negotiation was what Jackson calls a Taliban “parallel bureaucracy replete with governors, courts, tax collectors and even school monitors” (4). These shadow governments helped pave the way for the Taliban’s rapid takeover of the country once it successfully negotiated the complete withdrawal of the US military by the end of August 2021.

To more broadly explain this process of civilian-insurgent bargaining, Jackson develops a framework that focuses on three variables: interests, including civilians’ desire for survival and insurgents’ need for legitimacy and organizational survival; leverage, including the use of coercion and violence, persuasion (the story or narrative), and incentives, such as social services and other goods; and social capital, which she defines as “not relationships and norms alone but the new options and abilities that arise from them” (38). Through the combination of these three broad variables, insurgents and the population navigate a complicated relationship that recognizes each group’s needs and mutual dependency. Within this theory, Jackson notes a few important caveats that shape these negotiations. Critically, insurgents have far more power and leverage at the negotiation table than do populations. Furthermore, insurgents who want political legitimacy are more willing to negotiate than those that do not. She also contends that the more senior and cohesive the insurgent group, the more likely it can successfully make
and keep its agreements with the population and, similarly, the more unified a community, the more likely it can bargain and negotiate with insurgents. Finally, in most cases insurgents and the population do not easily have the option to walk away from negotiations, unlike in business deals. It is this complicated mixture of incentives, threats, and the dynamic relationship built between insurgents and populations that produce reciprocal arrangements that are, at least in some ways, mutually beneficial.

Jackson applies this framework specifically to Afghanistan to explain why the U.S. led military strategy failed. Through her interviews and time spent in several key provinces, she identifies where counterinsurgent forces failed to understand the complex ways in which the Taliban worked with the population for their own political survival and struck mutually beneficial agreements. She argues that “the Taliban has been consistently underestimated by their opponents, in part because their opponents focused almost exclusively on the Taliban’s acts of violence and terror,” and discounted the many ways in which they collaborated with the population for their compliance (213). She further notes that western strategists assumed that an Islamic movement would be unyielding in its ideological aims and, therefore, their eradication was the only option. By contrast, she finds that pragmatism trumped ideology in Afghanistan, allowing for deviation from maxims and dogma. Ultimately, she concludes that the Taliban succeeded in attaining the population’s compliance through iterative negotiations over time and that “... compliance is not ‘won’ in a decisive victory. Rather it is mediated and maintained through continual negotiation” (215). Jackson notes that bargaining and negotiations worked particularly well for the Taliban in areas where it had a degree of control and where military confrontation was minimal. Under these conditions, the Taliban used negotiations with the population to consolidate its gains. It also had greater responsibility to deliver goods and services to the population, giving the population had some leverage with which to negotiate. In areas that were militarily contested, the relationship between the population and insurgents was less dynamic.

Jackson’s book is essential readings for scholars and practitioners who wish to better understand the central role that populations play in shaping insurgencies and their outcomes. Rather than assume that populations are passive bystanders in an armed conflict, Jackson identifies the agency that they have and seeks to understand the conditions under which populations, including women, can and do negotiate with insurgents to shape their future. Alongside agency Jackson further includes the role that emotions play in armed conflicts and negotiations, which is another critical yet under-investigated topic in war studies.

Jackson’s research demonstrates that discounting or ignoring the role that populations play in counterinsurgencies will most likely result in strategic failure. She summarizes, “The neglect of civilian agency and behavior has fundamentally
impaired our understanding of how wars are fought and won or lost” (212). This observation is particularly important when considering the priorities that the U.S. military and its allies had in Afghanistan, including their focus on building Afghan security forces, elections and the structure of the government for building a viable state. Ultimately, while highly measurable pursuits, these counterinsurgency strategies may not be successful if they do not include actively include the population and recognize their role as active participants in the war and its outcome.

Airpower in the War against ISIS

By Benjamin S. Lambeth

Reviewed by Dr. Conrad C. Crane, chief of analysis and research, US Army Heritage and Education Center

No one is a more respected or versatile commentator about contemporary airpower than Benjamin Lambeth, a nonresident senior fellow with the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments following a 37-year career at the RAND Corporation. He has written books about American air operations in Operation Enduring Freedom, NATO’s air war for Kosovo, and Israeli air operations against Hezbollah. His latest work, Airpower in the War against ISIS, examines Operation Inherent Resolve over a four-year period, 2014–18, as US Central Command (CENTCOM) fought the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). As usual with his work, he provides much to ponder for practitioners of airpower and leaders who want to apply it.

Lambeth pulls no punches. He begins by excoriating the Obama administration for leaving Iraq in 2011 and permitting the conditions that led to the rise of ISIS. After two years of increasing terrorist provocations and expanding incursions resulting in the fall of Mosul, President Barack Obama finally authorized Operation Inherent Resolve. Lambeth characterizes the air strikes in 2014 as “half-hearted” and lacking serious purpose, typified by “unproductive gradualism and misplaced targeting emphasis” (11). This initial “fundamental misjudgment” of the character of the conflict by CENTCOM leadership produced a “needlessly prolonged and costly air war” (218). By contrast, once the Trump administration came into office in 2017, President Donald Trump authorized Secretary of
Defense James Mattis to expand and intensify the air campaign, resulting in the crushing of ISIS in little more than a year.

Lambeth is especially critical of restrictive rules of engagement that seemed more concerned with limiting collateral damage than hurting ISIS. He argues the campaign should not have been envisioned as counterinsurgency, with a focus on winning hearts and minds, but instead ISIS should have been considered a protostate meriting the application of more decisive force. He also argues then CENTCOM Commander General Lloyd J. Austin III—and his chosen US Army commander for the Operation Inherent Resolve Joint Task Force—misdiagnosed their mission as primarily a ground war, and the campaign would have been better served with an airman in charge of at least the initial phase of the operation.

Lambeth’s grasp of tactical details is impressive and less controversial. Air operations to liberate Mosul and Al-Raqqah receive considerable attention, as does the mission that killed jihadist leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He describes the performance of various aircraft and weapons used during the campaign, including the first combat sorties of the F-22 Raptor and new intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems.

The section about the Russian intervention in Syria is particularly insightful. He describes the provocations and airspace challenges that ensued, along with a number of combat actions. In one February 2018 incident, Russian mercenaries and allies attacked an American special operations forces outpost. Americans retaliated with punishing air strikes that killed as many as 200 Russian personnel—but also led to the inadvertent bombing of Syrian government troops, revealing human error has still not been eliminated from increasingly complex targeting procedures. For both sides, the incident was “a windfall opportunity for reciprocal learning” (175). The Russians were able to watch American air warfighting up close and compare aircraft. In turn, US observers analyzed their aerial counterparts for changes in air doctrine and employment. Though the Russians employed new precision technologies, their air operations still had more in common with World War II–era frontal aviation support than more dynamic American targeting.

*Airpower in the War against ISIS* is definitely a book of the COVID-19 era. Its extensive documentation relies primarily on media reports and e-mails to work around travel and access restrictions. Its greatest strength is also its greatest weakness. Lambeth presents the airman’s view of Operation Inherent Resolve in great detail, based on an impressive number of e-mail messages and manuscript reviews ranging from senior US Air Force noncommissioned officers to American and Australian Air Force generals. Lambeth’s analysis of the broader aspects of American policy and the campaign would have benefited greatly from a Joint and interagency approach that better examined other viewpoints for those actions he criticizes. Some Iraqi commentary would also have been useful. While
the book comes across as rather parochial, it is bound to be acknowledged as the seminal work on the contributions of airpower in the war against ISIS, just as the title promises.
Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century
by Anthony King

Reviewed by Dr. Russell W. Glenn, principal, Innovative Defense Research

Anthony King’s *Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century* is an unusual book and a challenge to review. King seeks to provide a new analytic approach to urban warfare, one providing a “sociology of urban warfare” endeavoring “to transcend [previous] disciplinary limitations by analyzing the interplay between cities, weaponry, and forces in order to unite social and military sciences.” The ultimate outcome is less successful in that regard than as a presentation of the challenges and conditions inherent when combat visits urban environments backed by impressive research spanning a broad spectrum of historical contingencies. While King provides fewer revelations for longtime students of urban operations, he presents a potential resource for readers less familiar with city fighting. As such, the book could complement Louis A. DiMarco’s *Concrete Hell: Urban Warfare from Stalingrad to Iraq* (2012), Roger J. Spiller’s *Sharp Corners: Urban Operations at Century’s End* (2000), other resources addressing specific urban battles or other-than-combat urban disasters, and the many studies published over the past 30 years that focus on specific aspects of urban undertakings.

The book lives up to King’s promise to take a force size-centric versus environment-centric analytic approach. Its first half sets the stage writ large, reaching deep into the past before reviewing what comprises a city from both academic and pragmatic perspectives. Threats posed by irregular forces, the evolution of the urban guerrilla, and the influence of city size and structure on combat operations establish a foundation for chapters addressing military capabilities in terms of “Air,” “Fire[s],” “Swarms,” “Partners,” and “Rumour” (considers information and information operations in terms of conflicts in cities). A final chapter, “Armageddon,” briefly contemplates the future of urban combat.

The strength of King’s offering is unquestionably his depth of research and fine pen in presenting fighting during operations in Syria, Marawi on the Philippine island of Mindanao, and Iraq’s Baghdad, Fallujah, and Mosul in addition to many more distantly past operations. Belfast, Marawi, and Mosul receive special attention to good effect. Even longtime students of urban operations will find the occasional revelation rarely—if ever—found in previous publications. King
wisely avoids the oversimplification of presenting cities as organisms, an analogy that quickly breaks down in light of the inherent complexity of urban areas. Interestingly, and perhaps deliberately as a way of sidestepping a related technical discussion despite its relevance to social theory, the potentially illuminating characterization of large urban areas as ecosystems is also foregone.

King rejects viewing cities in terms of their flows. Instead he suggests a more appropriate approach is to appreciate them as consisting of groups and interactions between them. Here his effort to convince regarding the applicability of a sociological approach seems strained. Complexity makes such either-or depictions of the urban character a hard sell. Comprehending this complexity requires an inclusive approach when describing: density (also recognized by King as a key descriptor), social groups and relationships, flows, overarching system considerations (both internal to the city and in terms of the city as a component of larger systems). All these terms offer benefits in pursuit of urban area comprehension; one or two will not suffice to address the comprehension conundrum fully. Anyone believing they fully grasp all that comprises an urban area need only wait for a few moments before a city will present a previously unseen nuance, relationship, challenge, or opportunity. Understanding urban environments and operations is an unending pursuit rather than a condition attained.

Use of *Urban Warfare* as an introductory text could ironically benefit from King’s sometimes too narrow presentation of existing urban theory and practice. Complementing his book or excerpts with readings offering alternative explanations, different approaches, or contrary descriptions would serve as stimulus for student discussions and written assignments. For example, the King’s acceptance of what comprises a city as an entity (based on a threshold of 100,000 population or some combination of density and spread) overlooks the considerable challenge of dealing with dramatically varied definitions of urban area and city employed by academics, nations, and international bodies. Unhelpfully, the United Nations has no single definition of urban area, instead using the country-specific definitions of whatever countries they are operating in at the time.

King’s conclusion that “the congested, multidimensional challenges of urban operations do not pertain below a dense population of 3,000” need not be incorrect, but the implication that so fixed a demarcation holds notable significance implies an operational importance that does not exist. The number, any number, is less significant than other factors collectively meriting consideration during the planning and conduct of urban operations. These and other considerations regarding urban environments and combat in cities (for example, King’s conclusion that urban warfare is more likely given smaller militaries in much of the world today or his belief that “a successful information campaign requires networks of true believers” rather than simply sufficient numbers of the naïve, ignorant, or
gullible) will surprise readers intimately familiar with urban operations. While there is much good in this book, readers looking to *Urban Warfare* as their initial resource regarding urban warfare should read with a questioning mind and plan to complement its reading with others’ thinking on the subject.
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Submissions to the US Army War College Press must address strategic issues regarding US defense policy or the theory and practice of land warfare while exhibiting the highest standards of research and scholarship. Actionable strategic, policy, or instructional recommendations must be included. For more information, visit https://press.armywarcollege.edu.

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Articles: 5,000 words or less.
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File Type
Text must be provided in a single MS Word document (.doc).
Visual Aids

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Attach all files, including graphics.

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Abstract requirements, approximately 200 words, including the following information:

a. What is the thesis/main argument of the piece in one sentence?

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Movement Techniques Training in Ukraine

A Ukrainian Observer Coach Trainer looks on as soldiers from Ukraine’s 1st Battalion, 95th Separate Airmobile Brigade dismount their BTR-3 armored personnel carrier during combined mounted and dismounted movement techniques training at the Yavoriv Combat Training Center (CTC) on the International Peacekeeping and Security Center near Yavoriv, Ukraine on August 21, 2017.

Yavoriv CTC OC/Ts, along with mentors from Lithuania and the US Army’s 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, led the training for soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 95th Separate Airmobile Brigade during the battalion’s rotation through the Yavoriv CTC. The 45th is deployed to Ukraine as part of the Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine, an international coalition dedicated to improving the CTC’s training capacity and building professionalism within the Ukrainian army.

Photo by First Lieutenant Kayla Christopher, 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team

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