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General Charles A. Flynn

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Exploring the Nexus of Military and Society at a 50-Year Milestone
Patricia M. Shields

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Welcome to the Summer 2024 issue of *Parameters*. We open this issue with a special “In Memoriam” by General Charles A. Flynn, Commander US Army Pacific, honoring the life and legacies of our director and consummate colleague, Carol V. Evans. We dedicate this issue to her. General Flynn’s memoriam is followed by an *In Focus* commentary entitled, “What American Policymakers Misunderstand about the Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), by Zenel Garcia and Phillip Guerreiro; they argue the grand-strategic and geopolitical framing American policymakers typically use to interpret the BRI ignores the origin of the program and its fragmented nature.

Our first forum, *Russia-Ukraine War*, includes two articles. The first of these, “The Combat Path: Sustaining Mental Readiness in Ukrainian Soldiers,” by Oleh Hukovskyy et al. reviews the Combat Path Debriefing technique developed by the Armed Forces of Ukraine to support psychological resilience, unit readiness, and combat performance. The second article, “Understanding Russian Disinformation and How the Joint Force Can Address It,” by Michael Kelley suggests several proactive measures US defense leaders can take to counter Russia’s disinformation strategy. Kelley warns Russia will continue to dominate information warfare if the United States fails to take steps to negate its influence.

The second forum, *Middle East*, features three articles. In the first, “The Dynamics of US Retrenchment in the Middle East,” Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent examine existing retrenchment theories to determine if the current geopolitical environment in the Middle East supports that approach. In their view, conditions favor American retrenchment because forward military deployments do not positively influence potential threats in the region. The second article, “Iraq’s Ministry of Interior: NATO, Capability Building, and Reform,” by Andrea Malouf, outlines 10 NATO and Allied failures that stymied efforts to reform Iraq’s police and the Ministry of Interior. The forum closes with “*Raven Sentry*: Employing AI for Indications and Warnings in Afghanistan” by Thomas Spahr, who shows how a talented group of military personnel collaborated with commercial-sector experts to develop an AI model called *Raven Sentry* to predict attacks on Afghan district and provincial centers.
The third forum, *Professional Development*, contains two articles. In the first, “Closing the Gap: Officer Advanced Education STEM+M (Management),” Leon Robert and Carl Wojtaszek claim the Army has made little progress in providing the current officer corps with a science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and management (STEM+M) education. They offer recommendations for closing the STEM+M gap through advances in higher education and the adoption of talent management practices. The second article, “Operating Successfully within the Bureaucracy Domain of Warfare: Part One,” by Jeff McManus, discusses the first three of 10 fundamentals (politics, personalities, and pressure) that policy professionals should consider when navigating the bureaucratic domain of warfare and maintaining trusted access to senior decisionmakers.

The Summer issue concludes with two new forums—*A Major’s Perspective* and the *Civil–Military Relations Corner*. In the former, Brennan Deveraux discusses the challenge of revitalizing professional discourse within the Army, codified as the four-point platform by the Harding Project, and shares his personal experiences with professional writing. Carrie Lee then provides an overview of the US Army War College Civil–Military Relations Center and its annual conference.

Finally, in a special review essay, Patricia Shields, a friend and contributing editor of the *Parameters* editorial board, offers her unique perspective as the editor in chief of *Armed Forces & Society* for 23 years and reflects on the 50-year evolution of this field of study. ~AJE
In Memoriam

Dr. Carol V. Evans

US Army Pacific (USARPAC) is grateful for the enduring relationship it has with the folks at the US Army War College and the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI). We were all shocked and deeply saddened to hear of the sudden death of Dr. Carol Evans, the director of SSI. I considered Carol both a terrific colleague and a close friend.

Carol had a firm grasp of the security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. Her knowledge spanned across military domains and sources of national power. She also had an agile mind and wrote prolifically to help decisionmakers think, share professional discourse, and ultimately collaborate on solutions—from security cooperation to economic drivers of instability. She routinely offered keen insight and unmatched energy at our exercises, conferences, and war games. Carol did not meet problems, she attacked them, from the tactical to the institutional—even if it meant an operational deployment with the Navy—Carol was game.

Carol was also an extraordinary partner for my command and left an enduring legacy with many of us. She was a key contributor at our most important conferences. She regularly penned articles outlining tangible ways we could strengthen ties with specific Allies and partners as well as ways to deter our adversaries better. Her efforts in standing up the China Landpower Studies Center at the Army War College earlier this year will expose more thinkers to the challenges of our region—and our adversary. I consider this one of Carol’s signature legacies. Carol, like the leaders of US Army Pacific, understood the institutional Army needed a better grasp of our pacing threat’s ground forces—she led the charge and was indeed a change agent. We needed advocates like Carol to guide our profession of arms intellectually, and Carol delivered!

I will remain grateful for her extraordinary legacy and her positive impact on generations of leaders and thinkers. Carol made a difference with her kindness, intellect, and determination—at SSI, at USARPAC, and throughout the world. My team and I will sorely miss her.

One Team!

Sincerely,

Charles A. Flynn
General, US Army
Commanding, US Army Pacific
In Focus

What American Policymakers Misunderstand about the Belt and Road Initiative

Zenel Garcia and Phillip Guerreiro
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ABSTRACT: American accounts of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) contend that it is a coherent grand strategy that reflects Beijing’s geopolitical ambitions. These accounts ignore the BRI’s fragmented nature, whereby Chinese provinces have been pivotal actors in its development and implementation. Furthermore, these accounts disregard the agency of participant countries and their capacity to shape the BRI. This article illustrates this fragmentation and agency by studying the Yunnan province and its domestic and international neighbors. It contends that these dynamics indicate that the BRI lacks coherence and that Beijing’s capacity to extract geopolitical benefits will remain limited.

Keywords: China, Belt and Road, fragmented authoritarianism, geopolitics

President Joe Biden attended the Summit for the Americas on November 3, 2023, promoting the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity initiative his administration had announced the previous year. He sought to differentiate American and Chinese lending in the region, stating he wanted to “make sure that our closest neighbors know they have a real choice between debt-trap diplomacy and high-quality, transparent approaches to infrastructure and development.” Empirical research consistently demonstrates no evidence of Chinese debt-trap diplomacy but continued reference to this alleged practice reflects wider anxieties in Washington stemming from the perception that Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides China with greater geopolitical influence at Washington’s expense. This perception reflects the consensus in American policy circles that the BRI represents a coherent grand strategy encapsulating China’s geopolitical ambitions to reshape the international order.1

As a result of this growing consensus, the Biden–Harris administration has increasingly coalesced around two policy approaches to address the perceived challenge. The first involves promoting alternative initiatives to compete with the BRI, such as the Build Back Better World, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, the US-Africa Partnership in Promoting Two-Way Trade and Investment in Africa, and the Americas Partnership for Economic
Prosperity. The second involves a diplomatic campaign to deter countries from seeking deeper economic engagement with China. This campaign has been encapsulated in its promotion of the debt-trap diplomacy discourse in the Global South. These policy approaches miss the mark because they fundamentally misdiagnose the nature of the BRI. The first approach is a zero-sum competition policy based on a flawed assessment of the BRI—particularly its degree of coherence. The second promotes a false discourse poorly received in the Global South. More problematically, it disregards the agency of participant countries and undermines the American capacity to engage them positively.

We argue that the BRI’s grand strategic and geopolitical framing is inherently flawed for two reasons. The first is that provincial-level officials addressing the growing development gap between the country’s coast and interior have shaped the BRI’s origins and evolution. These officials have lobbied central authorities by appealing to institutionalized discourses within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that link security and development. In doing so, they have elevated their development priorities to the national level to extract additional resources and have situated their provinces as pivotal to national development. For example, Xinjiang’s 1990s “double-opening” provincial-level initiative sought to integrate the province with the rest of China while deepening economic links to its Central Asian neighbors and was incorporated into the Great Western Development Strategy in the early 2000s and into the BRI in 2013 via three economic corridors. This dynamic illustrates China’s competitive, fragmented nature of policy making and implementation. In fact, “fragmented authoritarianism” is widely known to researchers of Chinese politics but remains underappreciated in American policy circles.

The second reason is that BRI participants have exercised their agency in ways that fundamentally shape the initiative’s development and implementation. The selected projects and the locations and routes of the transportation and logistics corridors demonstrate this agency. For example, with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the initiative’s flagship, Pakistani authorities lobbied the Chinese government for funding, selected the corridor’s routes within Pakistan, and prioritized energy projects for its first phase. A similar pattern emerges in other participant countries, including Sri Lanka and its controversial Hambantota Port project. Here again, the Sri Lankan government was the first to initiate the funding request from the Chinese government and lobbied for investment at the desired location. Far from exhaustive, these examples provide insight into the growing body of empirical work analyzing how local players in participant countries have shaped Chinese investment through the BRI. Strategic coherence is limited due to domestic and international actors, but more importantly, it is driven by them. While we do not reject the argument that the
CCP may desire to extract geopolitical benefits from the BRI, we contend that these two factors will limit their capacity to do so effectively. These factors enable US policymakers to diagnose the BRI’s characteristics accurately and capitalize on its inherent advantages.¹

To illustrate our argument, we first discuss the role of provinces in Chinese domestic politics and present the case study of Yunnan to demonstrate how provinces have shaped the BRI’s development and implementation. We then illustrate how BRI participant countries exercise agency in consequential ways. Lastly, we explore the implications of our findings for US policy.

**China’s Provinces and the Belt and Road Initiative**

Tracing the BRI’s origins and evolution complicates conventional accounts focusing on its professed grand strategic scope and geopolitical effects. Discursive and empirical analyses indicate that domestic needs that link security with development drive the BRI. In essence, Chinese officials view underdevelopment as a source of insecurity and insecurity as a source of underdevelopment. The BRI represents the most recent iteration of China’s three-pronged approach to address this security-development dilemma. First, the BRI accelerates the simultaneous integration of China’s frontier with the rest of China and its neighbors through infrastructure to generate economic activity while enhancing the state’s reach. Second, it establishes new supply chains that link China’s underdeveloped interior provinces to international markets, reducing the burden of capital-intensive investment by central authorities. Third, it helps secure new markets for Chinese goods through greater connectivity and more efficient logistics to sustain economic growth.²

Despite this seemingly centralized approach, provincial-level officials drive and shape these processes, have been pivotal in promoting what ultimately became the BRI, and are now shaping its evolution. By the time Xi Jinping announced the Silk Road Economic Belt in Astana, Kazakhstan, and the “Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century” in Jakarta in 2013, more than two decades of provincial-level officials bringing economic development to their provinces had already laid much of their foundations. In the 1990s, central authorities became increasingly concerned with the development gap between the coastal and interior provinces. Provincial officials seized the opportunity to fund development in their region through three strategies that evolved into the BRI and still influence its evolution.

The first strategy was to create initiatives that situated their provinces as gateways or hubs linking China’s coastal provinces with its neighbors. These initiatives regularly involved competition between adjacent provinces
that sought to capitalize on their geographic, demographic, and resource endowments. The foundation of these policies was the discourse linking security and development, which appealed to central authorities. By appealing to this discourse, provincial officials employed the second strategy, which involved lobbying central authorities for additional resources to facilitate the implementation of their initiatives. In essence, they contended that these initiatives were necessary to bring economic development to their provinces and ensure social stability. These efforts sometimes involved collective bargaining by blocks of regional provinces but could also be undertaken individually. In both cases, it still involved competition between regional blocks or individual neighbors. The third strategy involved further lobbying central authorities to elevate these provincial initiatives to national-level priorities, legitimize the initiative, and grant additional access to resources.  

The result of these strategies is evident in a Chinese 2015 white paper, “Visions and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.” The document, the first official outline of Beijing’s position on the BRI, identifies six multimodal economic corridors. All six were derived from provincial-level initiatives that originated in the 1990s and were then incorporated into national development initiatives in the early 2000s, such as the Great Western Development, Rise of Central China, and Northeast Revitalization strategies. All six arose from frontier provinces, highlighting the BRI’s fundamentally domestic logic. Xinjiang and Yunnan have been, and remain, central to developing five overland BRI corridors. Here, we focus on Yunnan due to its incorporation into the “Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century.”

Yunnan as a Bridgehead

The Yunnan province borders Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam in China’s southwestern region. The province is ranked 17th in GDP (third quarter 2023) but 23rd in GDP per capita. Yunnan also has the 12th-largest population in China, with approximately 47,222,000 people (about twice the population of Texas), and ranks as the eighth-largest province in China. Although Yunnan’s terrain and higher altitude present development challenges, its size, population, ethnic diversity, geopolitical positioning, and its capital’s potential to function as a land port into Southeast Asia made the province a natural investment choice.

As early as 1943, leaders saw Yunnan’s potential to become China’s pivot into Southeast Asia. Fast forward to the 1980s, and the topic of Yunnan opening up had become more popular, further fueled by the central authority’s approval
to create border trade zones with neighboring states. While the prospect of cross-border investment was a boon for Yunnan officials and elites, the central government’s focus on coastal development dampened their enthusiasm. As a result of coastal priority, Yunnan had to supply the coast with raw materials at low rates. This dissatisfaction prompted provincial officials to take its development into their own hands.\(^9\)

In 1989, He Zhiqiang, Yunnan’s governor, called for greater cross-border integration with Southeast Asia. His desire came to fruition in June 1992 when China’s State Council decided that the opening policies reserved for the coast should apply to some interior provinces, such as Yunnan. This decision opened the floodgates for Yunnan’s autonomy to seek cross-border ventures, leading to a convergence of multilateral interests. While Myanmar saw original cross-border investments, Yunnan officials wanted to cast a wider net westward. Multilateral trade discussion was underway with provincial representatives of Yunnan, Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar. The discussion eventually progressed to creating the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Forum, whose first meeting took place in Kunming in 1999, where representatives from all four states signed the Kunming Initiative. Although it lacked practical applications, the initiative represented the province’s ability to foster regional relations. The BCIM Forum’s 2004 meeting led to the Kunming Cooperation Declaration that resulted in the creation of a BCIM regional coordination office in Kunming. Consequently, Yunnan officials could position their province as a hub linking China’s interior provinces to South and Southeast Asian markets.\(^10\)

As Yunnan cemented its centrality in Southeast Asia, its role as a bridge elevated to the national policy level, which is evident in the national discourse on Yunnan’s emergence as a “Bridgehead” (桥头堡) into Southeast Asia. After General Secretary Hu Jintao visited Yunnan in July 2009, the designation of Yunnan as a Bridgehead was nationally cemented. Beijing’s recognition of Yunnan’s Bridgehead strategy validated the province’s approach to cross-border development. In 2011, two years before Xi’s BRI speech in Kazakhstan, the CCP leadership issued an opinion supporting Yunnan’s desire to pursue a Bridgehead strategy to accelerate construction and economic development in Yunnan by promoting the construction of connective infrastructure and financial investments in Southeast Asia, thereby turning Yunnan into the Bridgehead linking China and Southeast Asia. The State Council’s opinion eventually became part of the CCP’s 12th Five-Year Plan (2011–15), which emphasized developing the border regions by leveraging regional advantages and “speeding up the ‘opening up’ of border areas.” The lineage of Yunnan’s cross-border development reflects the BRI’s fragmentation, whereby provincial leaders can steer and shape Chinese foreign policy priorities and leverage local advantages for greater success.\(^11\)
This fragmentation also produces competition between provinces seeking to raise their development priorities to the national level to extract more resources. The Guangxi region, Yunnan’s neighbor, suggests this dynamic. Much like Yunnan, Guangxi is underdeveloped. While it does have access to the sea, it shares borders with the more economically dynamic Guangdong province, making it difficult for Guangxi’s officials to make a unique value proposition. Nevertheless, Guangxi officials outmaneuvered their Yunnan counterparts in 2004 in their bid to host the annual China-ASEAN Expo permanently in Nanning, Guangxi’s provincial capital. Later, the Pan-Beibu Gulf Economic Cooperation Forum, which Guangxi officials lobbied central authorities to upgrade to a national strategy, complemented the China-ASEAN Expo. These efforts collectively positioned Guangxi as an important actor in China-ASEAN economic and trade relations and a direct competitor to its neighbors.

Guangxi officials further leveraged these gains after Xi announced the BRI. They utilized their province’s position and growing cross-border links to promote a “four-dimensional support and four-alongs interaction” strategy. The “four dimensions” refer to:

1. positioning Guangxi as the gateway to Southeast Asia for neighboring interior provinces;
2. increasing connectivity with major domestic trade centers;
3. deepening cooperation with interior provinces; and
4. strengthening cooperation with developed countries to increase the internationalization of the province and facilitate the implementation of the BRI.

The “four-alongs” refer to opening areas along the coast, river, border, and the BRI to situate Guangxi as a central hub in the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century and the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor.

Yunnan and Guangxi demonstrate how provincial officials navigate the fragmented nature of Chinese domestic politics to promote their political agenda, sometimes in competition with their neighbors. Importantly, it shows how this dynamic changes domestic policy and deeply affects Beijing’s foreign policy. The BRI is not just a product of provincial official efforts but continues to be shaped by them. While central authorities have greater political and financial capital, this case illustrates how domestic factors limit their capacity to centralize policy formulation and implementation. International actors further complicate this dynamic.
Southeast Asian Agency and the Belt and Road Initiative

Like Yunnan and Guangxi, their Southeast Asian neighbors have leveraged their advantages to shape the BRI. As the recipient parties agree to the construction of infrastructure projects, they possess the agency to shape how the projects unfold in their territory. Despite conventional discourses framing the BRI as a coherent strategy, implementing a cross-border infrastructure project is complicated. Chinese state-owned enterprises, provincial officials, national regulators, and negotiators must deal with similarly fragmented counterparts with differing government models and civil society strengths. For projects spanning more than two states that require overlapping bilateral negotiations, the agency of Southeast Asian states becomes clear. Through a combination of negotiations, route selections, lobbied investments, diplomatic embarrassments, and local protests, Southeast Asian states can mold the BRI to their needs.

To illustrate this dynamic, we will focus on high-speed rail (HSR) and hydropower infrastructure. Both embody connectivity and facilitate the flow of trade, people, labor, and capital. Furthermore, they offer a cascade of development by enabling urbanization and incentivizing the construction of industrial zones. Importantly, both HSR and hydropower projects have a limited geographic scope that gives Southeast Asian states leverage in those projects. For HSR, if China wants to connect Kunming to Singapore with Bangkok as the central hub, then Chinese developers have limited alternatives for route selections. When Chinese negotiators began to hammer out deals for HSR routes in Southeast Asia, Thailand and Malaysia presented challenging hurdles and were able to alter deals and renegotiate established agreements to shape the project.

For example, geopolitically, Thailand hedges its relationships with large powers (such as the United States and China) to avoid overcommitting to or becoming dependent on a single power, which results in drawn-out negotiations and tepid commitments. Chinese negotiators have had episodic negotiations with Thailand for more than a decade. Thai officials know Bangkok is the central hub of the Southeast Asia HSR project, as it connects the North-South and East-West routes and is an economic center for the route. Furthermore, Thailand is not as underdeveloped as its immediate neighbors, making it less dependent on Chinese investment for infrastructure projects. In 2014, the Thai government signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with China on a $5.5 billion HSR project. Bangkok was unsatisfied with the 2.5 percent interest rate on the loan it received, so it began construction with its funds. As such, Thailand maintained ownership of its section of the HSR and retained rights of operations and stations within its borders, highlighting
to Chinese negotiators that Thais can build and operate the HSR without depending on external actors.\textsuperscript{14}

Outside steering the development of infrastructure projects, Southeast Asian states can influence the BRI through public outcry and local opposition. If we accept the fragmentation of China’s side of the BRI, we must also accept the recipient states’ fragmentation. Fragmented domestic politics in Southeast Asia steer the BRI’s direction. From government changes to opposition over environmental impacts, Southeast Asian actors have the agency to delay, modify, or cancel BRI-facilitated projects.

Negotiating and implementing cross-border infrastructure projects with authoritarian one-party systems may be seamless, but negotiating with multiparty democracies where the governing authority’s political attitudes change has proven difficult for China. Malaysia gave China firsthand experience of democratic volatility. Malaysian officials have repeatedly negotiated with China over HSR integration since the mid-1990s. With extensive plans already underway, HSR in Malaysia initially appeared well secured. In 2018, however, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak was defeated, and the Mahathir administration took control. After campaigning on the corruption in Kuala Lumpur, Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad promised to review and renegotiate previously established deals with China. Since the goal was to connect Kunming to Singapore, Malaysian officials understood they had a sizable advantage, as the HSR route would have to go through their nation. Mahathir focused on renegotiating to obtain a more favorable deal for Malaysia and his constituents and, in the process, delayed the project long enough to field more bids from other international builders.\textsuperscript{15}

Outside HSR projects, hydropower projects also present a unique view of the BRI. Unlike HSR, where routes must be negotiated and some states can be bypassed, hydropower is restricted to suitable sites on rivers that can generate a substantial electrical output. Dam developers must first find feasible locations and then negotiate to use that site. While constructing a regional HSR line will have clear environmental impacts, developing a hydropower cascade will have ecological challenges that span farther than the immediate construction zone. In Southeast Asia, the main hydropower resource is the Mekong River. It spans six states (Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam), functions as an agricultural lifeline, and is the second most biodiverse basin after the Amazon River, making it a key feature of Southeast Asia. Since dams force people to relocate, flood large swaths of land, and damage river health, local populations often protest these projects. Negative pushback on widespread dam building has altered, delayed, or canceled projects integral to the BRI.
In some cases, constructing a dam forces Chinese state-owned enterprises to construct relocated villages and facilitate their compensation, removing that burden from the recipient state. Part of PowerChina’s Nam Ou River dam cascade construction and operation deal included constructing the village where impacted locals would need to move. Since the Nam Ou River cascade was also built to power the Northern Laos HSR section’s construction and operation, negotiators could likely leverage that project linkage and place the responsibility of village construction on PowerChina.16

In Cambodia, environmental impacts have dealt a significant blow to BRI ambitions for the near future. Cambodia has an impressive hydropower potential of 10,000 megawatts, with approximately 90 percent of it in the Mekong basin. Cambodia is geopolitically close enough to China to be called a full-blown Chinese client state. Beijing has many financial commitments in Cambodia—“it invested $9.6bn in the decade to 2013; and about a further $13bn is yet to come.” As an authoritarian state, negotiations on BRI projects should be easier than negotiations with multiparty democracies. Nevertheless, the environmental impacts and concerns over hydropower have changed that equation. With more than a dozen projects completed, under construction, or planned, the realities of hydropower and its impacts have become clear. Being further downstream, Cambodia would be hit hard by the effects of dams on the Mekong River. If hydropower development continues uninterrupted, Cambodia could lose approximately 35 percent of its fish catches.17

Cambodia’s portion of the Mekong River is also tied to Tonle Sap Lake, one of Southeast Asia’s largest and most biodiverse lakes. The lake is also central to the local economy and food security due to its fish production. In one year, Tonle Sap Lake produces approximately 500,000 tons of fish, comparable to the 450,000 tons produced annually in North America. Given the clear vulnerabilities to hydropower, Cambodian officials had to reexamine their commitment to it. The conclusion was a shocking 10-year moratorium on mainstream Mekong River dams in 2020. If an underdeveloped, authoritarian, geostrategic ally was able to halt a major infrastructure leg of the BRI in Southeast Asia, imagine how much more a participant country that does not have all these factors could disrupt the project.18

Whether through high-speed rail or hydropower, if the BRI’s purpose is to pursue connective infrastructure across an array of states, it will be impossible to dictate a single coherent set of standards upon recipients. Southeast Asian states have agency in project selection, approval, and negotiation. Exercising that agency has allowed them to shape the BRI in the region to fit their needs rather than China’s.
Implications

Research exploring the degree of influence Beijing has extracted from the BRI indicates it has had limited success due to fragmentation caused by domestic actors and the agency of its foreign partners. That dynamic does not mean the BRI does not generate geopolitical effects. The BRI has been the primary vessel through which Chinese construction and technology companies have emerged as industry leaders. This situation has clear geopolitical implications in the context of setting standards across a range of industries. It also does not mean Chinese officials do not seek to produce and exploit geopolitical effects through the BRI. As the BRI has matured, there has been a greater desire by senior leaders to do so. We argue, however, that Chinese policy making’s fragmented nature and participant countries’ agential capacity make it difficult for Chinese leaders to generate a coherent grand BRI strategy and to extract geopolitical benefits unilaterally.19

Chinese officials recognize this reality—to a degree. Since its announcement in 2013, Chinese officials have produced two BRI vision documents and several white papers expanding its scope to include the Arctic, climate change, and digital spaces. They have also made hundreds of individual and joint statements about its aims, signed hundreds of memoranda of understandings with participant countries, and hosted three Belt and Road Forums. The discourse in each document, statement, and event indicates that Chinese officials lean toward a broad, inclusive framing of the BRI to facilitate engagement with partner countries while mitigating challenges. Although one could argue that this broad and inclusive language is a strategic choice, it also reflects the realities of domestic and international constraints.20

Recognizing the domestic and international dynamics that shape the BRI allows for a more holistic understanding of the initiative’s characteristics and global impact. This realization also has important implications for American foreign policy. The BRI’s fragmented nature indicates that US officials must tailor their response to account for local conditions. For example, while it is expedient to produce an overarching economic policy like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, implementing such policies should account for signatories’ individual needs. A country that reaps economic benefits from the BRI is unlikely to respond positively to American “debt-trap discourses” or overtures to limit engagement with China.

That said, American firms can easily benefit from BRI infrastructure that lowers their barrier to entry, such as readily available energy generation, transportation infrastructure, and logistics hubs. Western firms have participated in the BRI for the past decade through joint ventures, as have
Western banks and financial institutions through their lending projects. For example, Standard Chartered, a British multinational bank, has supported “nearly 650 BRI-related projects with a total value exceeding $111 billion,” including “$515 million project financing for a power plant in Zambia, a $200 million loan for an electricity plant in Bangladesh, and a $42 million export credit facility for a Sri Lankan gas terminal.” What has been lacking is a more coherent policy that capitalizes on the agential capacity of participant countries. Washington can exercise its agency as a direct participant, but it can also empower host countries to exercise their agency in ways that maximize benefits for the local population while mitigating concerns about sustainability and transparency. This approach would be beneficial in places where BRI projects have had limited to mixed economic results.21

Even if American officials continue the direct-competition approach across the world’s regions, understanding the BRI’s domestic and international constraints provides two important benefits. First, it exposes the initiative’s fundamental shortcomings, thus allowing for better policy formulation and implementation. For example, incorporating these findings could benefit the regional economic frameworks outlined in the introduction. It also drives home the point that Washington does not need to play Whac-A-Mole across the globe vis-à-vis China. The second point is that it allows for a clearer picture of the BRI’s effects, thus facilitating US prioritization and resource allocation to mitigate risks to national interests. This prioritization and resource allocation is important because America’s global commitments innately produce resource constraints.

Conclusion

This article and other studies suggest that the realities of the BRI belie the grand strategic and geopolitical framing American policy circles typically rely on to characterize China’s influence; its origin and evolution indicate that it is too fragmented. Domestic and international actors further complicate the BRI’s coherence since they shape the BRI and are primary drivers of its processes and implementation. Given that key actors outside Beijing drive the BRI, it is difficult to make a case for the existence of a grand strategy, much less a coherent one. Furthermore, the BRI’s political and economic effects vary too significantly worldwide to assume China is reaping geopolitical benefits unilaterally. In the decade since its announcement, rigorous empirical research has demonstrated that every economic corridor has different characteristics and that every participant country has had different experiences due to various factors.
Although trends indicate that massive BRI investment has slowed significantly, a number of projects have been completed, and Chinese officials are keener to focus on smaller-scale projects in the coming years. Furthermore, despite reduced lending, Chinese firms are still turning over projects at a growing rate, signifying that private lending has gradually overtaken the lending from major policy banks. The BRI is unlikely to disappear; Xi recently designated it as a pillar of the “Global Community of Shared Future.” Furthermore, it plays a pivotal role in China’s interior development. American policymakers need to understand what the BRI is and what it is not. Grand strategic and geopolitical framings misdiagnose the BRI and undermine prudent American policy formulation and implementation.\textsuperscript{22}

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Endnotes


5. Garcia, China’s Western Frontier, 1. Return to text.


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The Combat Path:
Sustaining Mental Readiness in Ukrainian Soldiers

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ABSTRACT: In Ukraine, soldiers’ psychological resilience is of paramount concern. Therefore, the Armed Forces of Ukraine have developed a new intervention, Combat Path Debriefing, designed to address combat stress and promote unit readiness for soldiers returning to combat. This article outlines the components of Combat Path Debriefing and discusses how it is rooted in principles of combat and operational stress control and the unique characteristics of Ukrainian military life. This perspective offers US and allied leaders real-world experience that can inform future efforts to support soldiers’ mental health and combat performance.

Keywords: debriefing, resilience, combat stress, psychology, recovery

The psychological resilience of soldiers is central to the fight in Ukraine. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022, more than 700,000 soldiers have deployed to the front lines as volunteers or conscripts. Their units routinely complete monthslong frontline rotations, with periodic one- to three-week cycles for reconstitution before returning to the front. Relentless exposure to warfare’s ongoing demands endangers Ukrainian soldiers’ mental health, which can interfere with their mental readiness to continue fighting.

As defined in Holistic Health and Fitness, US Army Field Manual 7-22, mental readiness, or “the capacity to adapt successfully in the presence of risk and adversity,” can help “soldiers manage severe stress and grow mentally tougher in the process.” Mental readiness is an essential component of Ukraine’s response to Russia’s full-scale invasion. One example of this response is Ukraine’s Combat Path Debriefing, which is rooted in widely accepted combat and operational stress control (COSC) principles and designed to support teams while reflecting Ukraine’s cultural and geopolitical context.

This article addresses combat stress in the Ukrainian military context and how Western COSC principles can be a foundation for understanding Ukraine’s approach to stress management. It also introduces Combat Path Debriefing, a new intervention that can be rolled out at scale, is adapted
to Ukrainian culture, and is designed to help the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) mitigate warfare’s psychological toll on their soldiers. Collectively, these insights provide the United States and its allies key lessons for mental health support during large-scale combat operations (LSCO).

The Ukrainian Context

The relationship between Ukraine and Russia must be considered to understand the current war’s context. Ukraine gained independence following the 1990 “Revolution on Granite” and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although independent, the political, social, and economic boundaries between Ukraine and Russia remained somewhat blurred, and people on both sides of the border continued to regard the two countries’ fates as inextricable.

In 2004, millions of Ukrainians mobilized to defend free elections and staged the Orange Revolution, dramatically recalibrating those lines. Through the Orange Revolution, Ukraine established itself as an independent state that valued free and democratic elections. This event profoundly affected Ukraine’s self-perception, and its development began to diverge sharply from the increasing authoritarianism in Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

In 2014, Ukraine’s Euromaidan protests and the “Revolution of Dignity” forced its pro-Russian president to flee the country to escape justice following the killing of the “Heaven’s Hundred” protesters. In response, Russia sent unidentified troops (“little green men”) to Crimea (and the Donbas region) in 2014 to support pro-Russian separatists. They took over local authorities and police, ultimately annexing Crimea and proclaiming two “separatist” republics in the Donbas. Thus, in 2014, Ukraine launched the “Anti-Terrorist Operation” (ATO), in which approximately 430,000 citizens served, and more than 10,000 died defending against these separatists. In 2018, the mission was renamed the “Joint Forces Operation.” While active fighting became less intense, some attacks continued. Russia claimed the “Kyiv Regime” threatened Donbas’s safety.

Three days after officially recognizing these separatist states as independent, Russia initiated a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. This invasion led to a large-scale military mobilization in Ukraine, and civilians suddenly needed to develop a military identity.

In Ukraine, military identity is rooted in the desire for self-determination and in the Zaporozhian Cossacks. The fearsome Cossacks’ fifteenth-to-eighteenth-century war-filled exploits inspire much Ukrainian lore. Zaporozhian Cossacks are the archetypal Ukrainian warriors: courageous, tough, and decisive. While embracing this cultural ideal of bravery, Ukraine has had to grapple with combat realities, which have significantly strained its military’s mental
health. In this context, the AFU recognized the need for more robust yet relevant combat-stress interventions.4

**Combat Stress**

Warfare’s history is replete with soldiers experiencing combat stress or the transient emotional, physical, and behavioral responses to combat’s psychological demands. This history dates to Achilles’s emotional outbursts in the *Iliad*, “soldier’s heart” in the American Civil War, “shell shock” in World War I, and “battle fatigue” in World War II. After the Vietnam War, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) became a recognized diagnosis to describe the persisting consequences of combat stress.5

A combat-stress reaction, however, is distinct from PTSD. Combat stress is a typical and expected reaction to a set of physical and mental stressors in war. Physical stressors include environmental demands (such as heat, cold, and arduous terrain) and physiological demands (such as sleep deprivation, dehydration, and injury). Mental stressors include cognitive demands (such as sensory overload, ambiguity, and time pressure) and emotional demands (such as fear, grief, and anger). Symptoms include restlessness, panic, irritability, rage, confusion, memory problems, fatigue, insomnia, palpitations, shortness of breath, and dissociation, all of which vary in severity, intensity, and duration.6

In contrast, PTSD symptoms are more severe, last longer, and may interfere with a soldier’s functioning over time. Combat stress and PTSD are essential to recognize and treat, but combat stress is not a diagnosable condition. Although not a disorder, combat stress is of immediate concern because prompt intervention can restore a soldier’s effectiveness, support team and individual safety, and optimize readiness.7

In Ukraine, complex combat and operational stress is ubiquitous. Soldiers get little rest or time away from the front lines, and the combat operations in their homeland concurrently threaten their families and communities. The nature of warfare in Ukraine has put soldiers under extended artillery barrages and repeated waves of assault, resulting in continuous, prolonged combat stress. Soldiers are also under difficult conditions with overlapping fields of fire, close-quarters fighting, and difficulty distinguishing enemy forces from friendly forces. Medical care, mental health support, and opportunities for respite are limited. Ukrainian soldiers are fighting inside their country’s borders, watching their country be destroyed, grieving multiple personal losses, and worrying about their families and communities. While this existential threat can fuel the drive to fight,
it can also contribute to potentially incapacitating anxiety. Thus, integrating interventions to combat stress into military operations is relevant for Ukrainian military leadership.  

Combat Operational Stress Control

Self-help, peer support, leadership behaviors, and sometimes clinical care influence servicemembers’ well-being and functioning. The United States and other NATO countries have made efforts to manage combat stress through combat and operational stress control (COSC) principles. Within the US Army, COSC assets are embedded within brigade combat teams and the medical battalion. Standard COSC teams are comprised of 18 personnel, including mental health providers and specialized medics to support individual units in managing operational stress. These teams can be broken into smaller sub-teams to support individual units. Developed in the early twentieth century, the COSC approach originally used the acronym PIES:

- Proximity – treatment geographically close to operating units to reinforce attachment and warfighter identity
- Immediacy – intervention provided as rapidly as operations permit
- Expectancy – emphasizing the belief that individuals will recover and return to duty
- Simplicity – focusing on the “five Rs,” 1) rest, 2) rehydration and replenishment of nutrients, 3) restoration of confidence through meaningful work, 4) reassurance that recovery is likely, and 5) return to duty

More recently, the US military has adopted BICEPS, which incorporates two additional components to PIES to guide COSC interventions. These components are: 1) brevity, implying that treatment time should be limited (treatment is generally limited to 96 hours before additional interventions or evacuation); and 2) contact, which ensures soldiers sustain a connection to their unit and retain a warfighter identity as they recover.

Another COSC principle includes embedding mental health personnel within units to support prevention efforts, offer consultation with leaders, create a rapport with unit members that can facilitate unit members reaching out for assistance, and identify soldiers who need intervention. Quantifying the effectiveness of any of these stress-control principles
is challenging since successful outcomes may be defined in various ways and at different times. Return-to-duty rates, which reflect the proportion of soldiers deemed sufficiently recovered to return to combat, have been significantly greater in recent conflicts compared to World War I, and small and otherwise methodologically limited studies demonstrate a rapid reduction of symptoms when COSC principles are employed. Evidence is mixed, however, regarding the impact of rapid return to duty on long-term mental health. Although further studies are needed to determine the long-term effectiveness of forward psychiatry, COSC principles provide a framework for managing combat stress. Using COSC principles promotes operational continuity by including mental health providers in forward-deployed locations.¹¹

**Combat Operational Stress Control: The Ukrainian Experience**

Like their North American and Western European counterparts, Ukraine has developed combat-stress interventions. Nevertheless, these programs are relatively new, not integrated with other health care practices, and almost exclusively focused on the current mission rather than longer-term recovery. Thus, there is a need to promote resilience within the constraints of available resources and culturally engrained skepticism regarding psychology. Resilience, or “the mental, physical, emotional, and behavioral ability to face and cope with adversity, adapt to change, recover, and learn and grow from setbacks,” has been associated with better mental health outcomes under conditions of high combat exposure. Combat and operational stress control principles can promote such resilience.¹²

Historically, the Ukrainian military has not provided frontline mental health support. Instead, mental health support grew out of the old Soviet model of political officers. These officers were responsible for military-political training and indoctrination, monitoring and policing servicemembers’ psychological states. Political officers contributed to a climate of mistrust by reporting their findings to political and military leadership. Following independence from the Soviet system, Ukrainian political officer units were redesignated and given responsibility for social and psychological well-being.¹³

In 2016, these units were renamed “Moral and Psychological Services” (MPS; Морально-психологичне забезпечення [МПЗ]). Moral in the Ukrainian military context refers to ethical conduct and following rules and orders. This redesignation intended to modernize Ukraine’s approach to mental health and signal a shift from a propaganda-based entity. Given the historical role of MPS officers, soldiers have remained wary. Senior leaders within the newly formed AFU have limited experience with embedded mental health models and are typically unaware of how contemporary MPS officers might benefit their
units. In 2021, the AFU addressed this challenge by forming “combat stress control groups” in some brigades, integrating COSC principles into unit practices. The COVID-19 pandemic slowed this modernization effort, and positions for new psychologists were delayed or canceled. Following Russia’s full-scale invasion, however, the expansion of combat stress control groups resumed.

Combat stress control groups are not part of AFU Mental Health Medical Services, which enables them to provide support close to the frontlines, but this means both organizations need to be especially deliberate in coordinating care. Furthermore, Ukrainian efforts to counteract combat stress necessarily focus on the immediate operational urgency to reestablish soldiers’ fighting capabilities rather than on preventing long-term mental health consequences. While some efforts focus on prevention and pre-deployment training, there is little focus on sustaining the Ukrainian military over the full arc of military operations.

Despite these challenges, Ukraine’s combat stress control groups have leveraged their unique position to develop novel ways to approach the problem of supporting soldiers repeatedly exposed to extreme circumstances. The need is apparent. Soldiers experience high levels of environmental, physiological, and cognitive stressors, as well as emotional stressors such as anger, grief, and frustration. As a result, combat stress control groups have turned to group debriefing to provide support to many soldiers across several topics.

**Unit Psychological Group Debriefing**

Most militaries are familiar with after-action reviews, where units systematically examine what went well and what did not, following a particular mission. These reviews commonly have a tactical focus, identifying lessons learned and improving processes for the future. In contrast, unit psychological debriefings, another kind of group-oriented review of events, are focused on managing combat stress, particularly following adverse events—such as a firefight or the death of a team member. Effective unit psychological debriefings achieve a collective understanding, normalize a complex, difficult experience, describe reactions soldiers may have, review resources, and create a future orientation for the unit.

Numerous models within the US Army’s Traumatic Event Management system for such groups and various terms describe these activities, including Walter Reed Army Institute of Research (or WRAIR) psychological and leader-led debriefing. There is a debate in the scientific literature about whether psychological debriefing is suitable for individual victims of trauma, and some models (including Critical Incident Stress Debriefing) have been criticized for their potential to cause vicarious traumatization by bringing
together individuals from disparate groups. Still, there is evidence regarding debriefing’s utility in a military setting where units expect to deal with potentially traumatic events as part of their occupation, train together before a mission, encounter potentially traumatic events together, and continue to work together as a unit afterward. Despite differences in the number and focus of steps characterizing trauma-informed after-action reviews, most of these methods direct unit members through some discussion or reflection of their shared experience.¹⁴

Unlike event-driven interventions focused on supporting recovery from a specific traumatic event, a unit’s repeated trauma exposure during a prolonged combat deployment requires a different intervention. During the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research developed Time-Driven Psychological Debriefing, a method that did not focus on one event. Instead, after a brief introduction, unit members were asked to identify whatever event was still “sticking with” them and then discussed common stress reactions. Afterward, facilitators reviewed self- and buddy-care for sleep, social withdrawal, and anger. Finally, soldiers were reminded of their strengths and the need to return to a mission focus.¹⁵

**Combat Path Debriefing**

Building on Time-Driven Psychological Debriefing, the AFU developed “Combat Path Debriefing,” which incorporates unique aspects of the Ukrainian context. Oleh Hukovskyy designed each step in the model based on US Army doctrine, the scientific literature, and his experience piloting the technique. Like other debriefing models, a series of questions guides the distinct steps. Fundamental features include a) articulating events to ensure a shared understanding, b) the opportunity to correct misperceptions, and c) the opportunity to hear other team members’ reactions as a way of normalizing their experience. Other unique characteristics include emphasizing a military identity, acknowledging grief, and introducing simple stress-reduction techniques.¹⁶

Combat Path Debriefing provides a constructive way of meeting soldiers’ mental health needs and recognizes that while facilitators might not be able to address all soldier concerns, they can start by assessing the unit’s needs and then guide it on track. Facilitators describe the journey of individual unit members as they shifted from a civilian to a military identity and joined the unit. By conceptualizing the warrior’s journey as a metaphorical path, the intervention offers a platform for units to think about their stories as part of a longer, shared trajectory.
The debriefing requires the participation of platoon or squad members and typically takes 90 minutes. Sessions can occur during the reconstitution phase, during a brief rest and recovery cycle, or when a unit’s leadership requests them. Although near the front lines, the debriefing takes place in a protected location where unit members can self-reflect. This trauma-informed intervention occurs soon after units withdraw from the front lines, satisfying the COSC principles of proximity and immediacy. Embedded military or civilian psychologists working with the unit facilitate the sessions. Table 1 describes the five main steps, each takes approximately 15–20 minutes, consistent with the COSC goal of brevity.  

Table 1. Steps in Combat Path Debriefing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| **Introduction**                                             | - Introduce facilitators, focus on the civilian-to-military transition  
- Explain session goals  
- Have unit members introduce themselves, including length of time in the military and their jobs as civilians  
- Check in with unit members about current health-related concerns (such as headaches, anxiety, and sleep problems) |
| **Narrative***                                                                                             | - Review unit history and combat path (including mobilization, key training events, key operational events, casualties, and reconstitution periods)  
- Create a timeline of the unit’s combat path  
- Appreciate the sacrifice of individuals by name  
* The “Narrative” and “Reactions” steps typically co-occur as units move back and forth between describing specific events and their reactions. |
| **Reactions***                                                                                              | - Identify physiological and psychological responses to combat stress  
- Summarize themes using psychoeducation  
  - Normalize common stress reactions  
  - Acknowledge personal loss and grief  
  - Address the tendency to engage in second guessing  
  - Reflect on near misses  
  - Recognize the chaotic nature of war  
* The “Narrative” and “Reactions” steps typically co-occur as units move back and forth between describing specific events and their reactions. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Care Strategies</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Discuss effective coping strategies</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ Reinforce the basics (sleep, nutrition, exercise, connection, and purpose)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Train mind-body approaches (such as breathing, grounding, Kevlar massage, and tactical clapping)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ Focus on acceptance (including “control the controllables”)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Emphasize benefits of “appreciating the small stuff”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Discuss group rituals for managing grief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Review the tradition of writing farewell letters and planning their own funerals should they be killed in combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Consider group rituals for supporting moral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Consider what was learned from these experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resetting</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Express gratitude for their service</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Set positive expectation for return to duty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Set expectation they will use lessons learned in follow-on missions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Provide resources (such as military hotlines and educational materials)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Offer physical affirmation of connection (including handshakes and hugs)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the first step, facilitators introduce themselves, explain the session goals and format, and ensure a shared understanding of confidentiality and respectful communication. Next, facilitators have unit members briefly introduce themselves and describe their backgrounds (where they are from, how long they have been in the military, and their civilian jobs). Facilitators then consult with unit members about common war-related health concerns they may be experiencing, such as headaches, anxiety, and sleep problems. By asking about these common concerns, facilitators paint a picture of the unit’s collective mental health. These initial conversations build rapport and establish trust between the unit and facilitators. In this first step, the facilitators also acknowledge their civilian-to-military transitions to foster trust with the unit and underscore their shared experience.18
In the second step, the combat path narrative is constructed, with the facilitators discussing the team members’ journey from a civilian identity to that of a defender of Ukraine. Facilitators ask unit members to recall their mobilization, the formation of their unit, key training events, significant combat operations, casualties, and reconstitution periods. Reflecting on this sequence of events allows unit members to structure their memories and reinforces the shared nature of the experience and sense of military identity, consistent with the COSC goal of facilitating unit-level contact. The narrative allows new members to understand the unit’s history and contribute to its collective story moving forward. There is also an explicit recognition that the warrior’s path is a continuous series of steps. Like all journeys, the expectation is that it will continue.¹⁹

Combat Path Debriefing also emphasizes camaraderie. For Ukrainians, camaraderie reflects the tradition of the Cossacks and other warriors in their commitment to caring for one another. In Ukrainian military slang, units are even called “організми” (organisms). By creating a history of the unit, not just the individual, the narrative supports the traditional focus on cohesion.²⁰

The third step is the reaction phase, in which soldiers reflect on how they have changed. Facilitators ask participants to identify psychological and physiological responses to combat stress, such as anger, withdrawal, or hyperarousal, and then provide psychoeducation about common stress reactions. Facilitators also discuss topics like the tendency for unit members to second-guess themselves. This approach is useful when dealing with the loss of a unit member in combat since soldiers often ruminate about what might have happened if they had done something differently, like being on the mission, in a different vehicle, or faster to respond. Decreasing rumination and clarifying misperceptions can help reduce feelings of guilt and anger.²¹

In the reaction step, facilitators also focus on acknowledging the unit’s experience of loss. High casualty rates among civilians and military personnel and exposure to atrocities mean soldiers experience loss in multiple domains, often with little time to grieve. This trauma occurs within the larger context of mass relocation, community devastation, and a dramatic shift in the Ukrainian way of life. Other debriefing models do not specifically target grief. In Ukraine’s combat environment, where grief is pervasive, it needs to be addressed directly.²²

The fourth step provides strategies for care—self-care, buddy-care, and group rituals. Facilitators ask unit members to describe their effective coping techniques and then remind them of basic self-care, such as sleep, nutrition, exercise, interpersonal connection, and a sense of purpose. Basic self-care is consistent
with the COSC goal of simplicity. Another goal is to develop “body awareness,” an essential element of performance. Body awareness enables individuals to regulate their physiological arousal to optimize their activation levels to meet the needs of the task in front of them.²³

Soldiers are also encouraged to use self-regulation strategies to balance the body’s stress response. Different techniques from mind-body approaches like Bodynamic psychotherapy are introduced to support this balance, including soft-belly breathing to support the parasympathetic nervous system and ability to sleep, while controlled diaphragmatic (tactical) breathing helps soldiers manage panic attacks and anxiety. Other mind-body techniques include psychological grounding, which encourages soldiers to engage with a sense of being present in the moment, such as feeling their feet on the ground, and progressive muscle relaxation.²⁴

Soldiers also learn tactical massage, a simple technique that applies pressure along certain muscles. Combat Path Debriefing uses the “Kevlar massage” developed by the Ukrainian combat stress control team. Facilitators explain the need to relax the suboccipital muscles linking the back of the skull to the top of the neck. Massaging these muscles can enhance blood flow, reduce headaches, and release tension that can contribute to uncontrolled instinctual emotions (like rage). This simple and brief massage can be implemented as self-care and buddy-care. It is beneficial because concussions are a common problem for Ukrainian soldiers who encounter repeated and sustained artillery fire. Another form of buddy-care is tactical clapping, in which one soldier pats the torso of another soldier to reset body awareness. Tactical clapping can orient soldiers to the present moment by focusing their attention on their bodies.

Other forms of self-care include cognitive techniques, such as mastering the ability to “control the controllables.” To help soldiers develop this skill, facilitators discuss the need to recognize the limits of what soldiers can control. This awareness is important when unit members are stuck in a vortex of negative emotions like blame, guilt, and anger. Extending their recognition of the chaos implicit in combat can be helpful. By recognizing the limits of individual control, facilitators help unit members focus on what they can control.

Another self-care skill is “appreciating the small stuff” to maintain positivity. Soldiers can appreciate finding an energy bar in their backpacks, sharing a joke with friends, or looking at a colorful sunset. Remembering to value small moments can provide soldiers support even when confronted with adversity. Throughout this step, facilitators describe how unit members can use these self-care strategies as a form of buddy-care. In this way, psychology provides practical tools for operational units.
The care step also reviews the role of group rituals. Although the rituals have transformed over time, they are cornerstones of Ukrainian identity. In war, these rituals involve remembering fallen heroes, reminding soldiers of their roles in a long, historical fight against oppression, and maintaining a reverent attitude toward state symbols. The Combat Path Debriefing session represents a form of ritual to remember the lost and acknowledge their sacrifices. These rituals are powerful because they are not pro forma. They are genuinely felt and strengthen unit cohesion and adherence to military values.

In discussing the loss of fellow soldiers, facilitators ask whether unit members attended funerals or had contact with the fallen soldiers’ relatives. Following this sober conversation, facilitators honor this loss with a ritualistic phrase (for example, “rest in peace”) and mention the names of those lost. A moment of silence follows this acknowledgment, a tradition aligned with the national minute of silence observed daily since the start of the war. In this step, facilitators ask unit members how the fallen should be remembered and what rituals the unit can follow to honor them, such as creating a memory wall with photos, planting a memorial tree, or initiating a petition for honoring the individual as a “Hero of Ukraine.” For many soldiers, this conversation is the first acknowledgment of these losses. This opportunity, however brief, allows them to know that a soldier’s sacrifice is valued.

Depending on the unit’s openness to addressing grief and death, facilitators may also introduce the idea of completing a set of documents called the “Last Will of the Warrior.” This practice, adopted from the Danish military, provides family members with messages and guidance for managing in the event of the unit member’s death and helps soldiers feel they have done all they could to support their families in the event they are killed in combat.

The fourth step concludes with a discussion of what participants have gained by joining the army and what they have learned along their combat path. Although the topics addressed are difficult, there is an explicit recognition that individuals may also grow from joining the army. Focusing on positive change also supports a sense of strength and esprit de corps. Soldiers typically discuss having new skills gained, a sense of connection with their teammates (brothers-in-arms), and increased resilience. Collectively, soldiers describe many dimensions reflected in the concept of post-traumatic growth, such as relating to others, personal strength, appreciation of life, and spiritual change.

In the fifth and final phase of the session, resetting, facilitators express gratitude for the soldiers’ service and set a positive expectation about soldiers’ ability to resume their mission, satisfying the COSC principle of expectancy.
Likewise, soldiers are encouraged to use lessons learned from Combat Path Debriefing in their missions and reflect on their military identity. Facilitators offer a forward-looking perspective supporting the expectation that the soldiers will be healthy and rebound successfully following the reconstitution phase. Finally, facilitators offer physical affirmation of connection through handshakes or hugs, express appreciation, and provide handouts on mental health resources and the military mental health hotline number.\textsuperscript{28}

To date, Combat Path Debriefing has been well accepted by professional soldiers and recent recruits. Soldiers engage actively in the sessions and report that they feel understood. Anecdotal observation suggests these units are more organized and disciplined following the sessions, though there is no empirical evidence available testing the sessions’ effectiveness.

Combat Path Debriefing appears most effective when unit leaders are supportive. To that end, leaders are included in the sessions, giving them a chance to receive support and hear directly about the stressors and reactions their soldiers are experiencing. Future development of Combat Path Debriefing will explore ways to incorporate leaders more fully and prepare them to lead by example during the sessions.

**Lessons Learned**

Ukraine is responding with ingenuity to counter Russia’s invasion, rapidly redefining the role of mental health support, focusing on high-priority concerns and integrating cultural foundations to enhance the acceptability of mental health strategies. To that end, Combat Path Debriefing is one intervention with the potential to sustain Ukrainian soldiers’ mental health.

While Combat Path Debriefing has not been systematically assessed, it is an evidence-informed adaptation of existing COSC practices from allied countries. Given the pressing need to address mental health on the front lines, Ukraine has begun using the prototype of this intervention and integrating lessons from the field. While feeling acknowledged and learning stress-release strategies may contribute to soldiers’ well-being and resilience in combat, the long-term impact is unknown.

This technique is being refined amid a national crisis. With support from other countries, including the United States, mental health professionals responsible for enacting COSC principles in Ukraine are learning quickly and pivoting to adapt best practices. Such interventions and group rituals help inform a new Ukrainian military culture and community of care. Sustaining support of leadership at all levels and the continued role of international partners is critical for combat stress
control groups to become part of the fabric of life in the Ukrainian military and the foundation of the military’s journey along the combat path.

Western military leaders may find Combat Path Debriefing an effective technique mental health professionals can integrate into combat units’ battle rhythms. Many Ukrainian professionals, like their fellow soldiers, have recently mobilized from civilian roles. Having a structured intervention like Combat Path Debriefing available to newly recruited professionals can help them to improve their units quickly. Other countries may similarly mobilize civilians for health care and combat roles in future multidomain LSCO with near-peer adversaries. In the context of hastily mobilized forces, militaries must adapt and implement interventions to address the diverse scope of potential challenges. Ultimately, these advances can promote mental health, strengthen unit cohesion, and sustain long-term military readiness for the long-term.

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Endnotes


17. West and Warner, “Combat and Operational Stress Control.” Return to text.


19. HQDA, “Combat and Operational Stress Control.” Return to text.

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Understanding Russian Disinformation and How the Joint Force Can Address It

ABSTRACT: Russia will dominate information warfare if the United States does not treat disinformation as central to Russian strategy. This article examines the vital role disinformation played in post–Cold War Russian strategy, including its strategy in the current Russia-Ukraine War, and in a departure from previous scholarship, this article observes that US defense leaders are aware of Russian disinformation but have failed to assess its impact or sufficiently negate Russian influence. The article also reviews current US efforts and suggests proactive ways to counter Russia’s disinformation strategy.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, information operations, disinformation, information literacy

Following the 2022 Ukraine invasion, BBC reporters launched a yearlong investigation into Yala News after it posted a story alleging an American plot to conduct biological warfare against Russia by releasing infected birds that would fly into Russian territory. The investigation was prompted by a remarkably similar story broadcast by Russian state media two hours earlier. The investigation revealed that Yala’s most popular stories mirrored sources owned by or affiliated with the Russian government, including false accounts of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky giving a drunken speech and Ukrainian soldiers fleeing the front lines, both of which appeared on Yala shortly after originating from official Russian sources. Belén Carrasco Rodríguez, one of the BBC’s contacts, coined the term “information laundering” to describe the phenomenon of false narratives gaining credibility through repetition by multiple sources. In the United States, most observers likely dismiss stories about bio-weaponized birds. Can the same be said about information consumers outside the West?

Alongside traditional national power elements like military and economic operations, Russia generally controls perceptions among targeted audiences to shape the environment to its benefit. While every country controls narratives to some extent, few emphasize information operations on par with Russia. The United States could have taken advantage of this knowledge when Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election surfaced. Instead, partisan
squabbling about which side Russia preferred to win muted those reactions. Subsequent fighting over “fake news” in media, political parties, and across American kitchen tables has provided Russian disinformation practitioners with cover as they ply their craft.

Lagging behind the Russian adversary, the United States has slowly realized that the information element can be crucial to outcomes, with the US Army only recently releasing a doctrinal publication on the topic. Perhaps this document represents a dawning realization in the defense establishment that lethality alone is unlikely to be decisive. This new publication begins by refreshing a lexicon for information operations, including disinformation, a key aspect of Russia’s information operations campaigns.

Disinformation is incomplete, incorrect, or out of context information deliberately used to influence audiences. Disinformation creates narratives that can spread quickly and instill an array of emotions and behaviors among groups, ranging from disinterest to violence. Relevant actors employ disinformation to shape public opinion, attract partners, weaken alliances, sow discord among populations, and deceive forces. Disinformation has a malicious intent.

While news stories like the one about the infected birds may seem ridiculous, especially to Western audiences, repeating such narratives to vulnerable audiences erodes global trust in the United States. For the United States to succeed in the information domain, it must recognize that disinformation is central to Russian strategy and address it proactively. This article begins by reviewing disinformation’s central role in Russian strategy from the Cold War to the Russia-Ukraine War. It then examines the steps the United States has taken to counter Russian disinformation and recommends ways the US defense community can meet the challenge Russia poses in the information domain.

The Russian Approach to Disinformation

Not to be confused with Western debates surrounding the term, Russian doctrine embraces hybrid warfare, which it defines as “a strategic-level effort to shape the governance and geostrategic orientation of a target state in which all actions, up to and including the use of conventional military forces in regional conflicts, are subordinate to an information campaign.” A 2016 RAND Corporation report described the contemporary Russian approach to information operations as a “firehose of falsehood” due to the number and diversity of communication channels and Russia’s willingness to broadcast
partial truths and complete fiction. Contrary to typical communication strategies, Russian information campaigns demonstrate no commitment to consistency among narratives. Instead, they focus on the volume and repetition of many themes, seeking acceptance from familiarity with the message.\(^3\)

Disinformation has been a pillar of Russian strategy since the Cold War, with significant time and treasure spent on disinformation relative to other forms of espionage. Journalist Mark Hollingsworth devotes a chapter to the KGB’s use of disinformation in his book *Agents of Influence: How the KGB Subverted Western Democracies*. He cites a former KGB disinformation chief who claimed the KGB spent around 25 percent of its budget on traditional espionage, spending the remainder on “a slow process focusing on what we called ideological subversion or active measures.”\(^4\)

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union effectively employed disinformation to undermine American legitimacy around the world. In one campaign, the Soviets convinced many that the AIDS epidemic was born in a US lab and released by the FBI to target minority communities. Russia uses disinformation to damage trust in the US government abroad and exploit the American fascination with conspiracy theories, damaging trust regarding the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the COVID-19 pandemic, election security, and other events. Russia has also repeatedly used disinformation campaigns to legitimize military operations. Its actions in the Republic of Georgia and Moldova’s Transdniestria region exemplify a common theme: protecting ethnic Russians from various questionable threats.\(^5\)

While Russia broadcasts facts that suit its purposes, it uses disinformation in its efforts to employ reflexive control strategies. Reflexive control theory was born in the Soviet era and is used to convince another actor to make decisions against its own interests. Russia accomplishes this strategy by manipulating the information environment to allow its adversary to perceive that Russia’s desired outcomes are the best choices the adversary can make. Russia often employs this method to mask or obscure the true risks and rewards of an adversary’s courses of action. Since reflexive control is designed to influence decisions, disinformation can temporarily or durably alter perceptions that drive a given decision. Given that facts do not constrain its information campaigns, Russia can manufacture anything necessary to yield desired decision outcomes.\(^6\)

Russia uses the full spectrum of disinformation tactics to shape the environment to its benefit. Through direct seizure of control or forced shutdowns of outlets that oppose the government’s actions, the Russian government exerts
near-total control of media within its borders. Russian outlets such as Sputnik and Russia Today own or influence proxy outlets around the world not explicitly branded as Russian. These outlets range from newspapers to blogs to YouTube news channels. Each repeats pro-Russia talking points, with each medium using its unique style to appeal to specific, targeted audiences. Russian information warriors create false social media personas and think tanks to sow discord among adversaries, as they did before the 2016 US presidential election. These fabricated sources often strike a chord with nonmainstream Western media outlets, which echo the messages to further their agendas and unintentionally promote Russian causes.  

Western audiences are unfamiliar with the media environment inside Russia. The control and coordination across channels are alien to those accustomed to a free press. Iuliia Iashchenko has written about Russian media from Sapienza University of Rome.

The [Russian] state-run national TV has a few very important primetime political shows that serve one purpose: to spread disinformation among Russian citizens to support the main ideological track of state propaganda. The most popular channel is Russia 1, with shows like “Duel” (Vladimir Solovyov), “60 Minutes” (Olga Skabeyeva), “Evening with Vladimir Solovyov” (Vladimir Solovyov), the same ideological content is also prominent on Channel 1, with shows like “Time Will Show” (Artem Sheynin), and many others. Usually, the level of subtlety of the disinformation is much higher for international audiences. Meanwhile, in Russia, in these shows, the creators present pure ideological propaganda without any proof, and with a heavy usage of simple or vulgar speech. These shows never end up in the global feed mostly because they are too open and would ruin the political goals of the Russian government.  

Controlling all information spaces within its borders and having significant influence over other outlets allow Russia to exert an outsized influence over its neighbors. Many former Russian Empire or Soviet Union countries have seen the benefits of turning westward, something Putin’s regime strongly opposes. Russia has used various methods centered on information warfare to prevent this theme from continuing.
Russia’s first salvo in the Ukraine invasion was a disinformation operation. As Russia built up combat power along the border, Russian spokesmen announced it was a large-scale training exercise and insisted that troops and ships would soon return to normal activities. Russian officials kept up this line, objecting more stridently as Western officials pointed out inconsistencies between their statements and activities on the ground. As the world knows, Russia’s statements proved false; nonetheless, its messaging prevented Ukraine and the West from responding to the buildup until Russia launched the assault. This situation is a prime example of reflexive control laden with disinformation. Russia understood its adversaries’ decision processes and self-image and realized it could lie long enough to freeze their willingness to move beyond words, allowing it to seize the operational initiative. After all, it would seem unreasonable for the US European Command or NATO to respond aggressively to a training exercise. Fortunately, that disinformation initiative was insufficient to consolidate the rapid military victory Russia expected. Western intelligence sharing allowed Ukraine to steel itself at the last minute while preparing the world to see through Russia’s narratives regarding the invasion.9

Consistent with the “firehose of falsehood” approach, Russia initially explained its actions through several competing narratives, including reuniting ethnic Russians with the motherland, maneuvering to counter NATO expansion, and fighting to excise the Ukrainian government’s “Nazi” influences. Putin even tried to deny Ukraine’s very existence, claiming, “Ukraine never had a tradition of genuine statehood.” None of these narratives survive scrutiny, and they all represent Russian disinformation to legitimize blatant efforts to expand territory and delegitimize opponents. The last significant NATO expansion occurred in 2004—hardly a credible reason for Russia to panic nearly two decades later.10

In 2004, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and former Soviet republics Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined NATO. Since then, only six new countries have joined, including Finland and Sweden, which joined only after and because Russia invaded Ukraine. At the other end of the reasonableness spectrum, Russia has signed several agreements affirming Ukrainian sovereignty, which undercutts Putin’s statements about its right to exist and his fanciful claims that Ukraine was never a legitimate state. Still, NATO has repeatedly had to debunk claims that the Alliance is trying to threaten and encircle Russia, lest other countries take these assertions at face value.11

Russia has used disinformation to attack the global coalition aligned in support of Ukraine by undermining that support within those countries and
sowing disunity among them. One independent analysis of Russian messaging determined that French, German, Polish, and Turkish audiences were heavily targeted through at least five specific themes, which aligned with those shown in an alleged Russian document published by Ukrainian intelligence services. The themes addressing the costs of Ukrainian aid and dealing with refugees could be dismissed as competing narratives. Still, one theme listed in the document is clearly disinformation:

Update information about neo-Nazis in Europe, make a comparison with Ukraine in order to show the European community how Nazism is born and ask why they ban Nazis in their countries, but support them in Ukraine? For these purposes, it is advisable to use BBC documentaries about neo-Nazis and Nazis.

This analysis lists dozens of information operations tied to official and proxy Russian sources that do everything from claiming imminent NATO aggression against Russia to discrediting Western media. Weaponizing the US military’s credibility, it was likely Russia behind a 2023 leak of US military documents modified to make Russian casualty numbers look better than the original documents represented.  

Although many Russian disinformation narratives may seem unlikely or even ridiculous to Western countries and allies, they may seem more plausible to audiences in countries already predisposed to dislike and distrust the West. The disinformation about bio-weaponized birds was not aimed at the West and is unlikely to affect public opinion. It is among hundreds of Russian-origin fake news designed to cause distrust of Russian adversaries. When water falls on a rock, erosion occurs one drop at a time. It is impossible to notice changes at first, but the rock is completely reshaped over time. Similarly, in spaces where the West is less likely to detect and contest its narratives, Russia employs disinformation like the bird story more aggressively. Where these narratives take root, American combatant commanders will likely find more resistance to their actions in their respective regions.

Russian support has propped up the Alexander Lukashenko regime in Belarus to control messaging and the electoral process. Lukashenko expresses his appreciation for these efforts by making Belarus a vassal state to serve Russian interests. Russian military forces have occupied portions of the Republic of Georgia for several years to buffer the Russian border and have sufficiently managed the information surrounding the operation to prevent
worldwide outrage. In 2014, Russia used a combination of special operations forces and information operations to manipulate a referendum, forcing Ukrainian citizens from Crimea to give Russia control of the strategically important peninsula in the Black Sea. Having effectively seized Crimea, Russia did not need a referendum to hold power there. Nonetheless, the façade of legitimacy represented an information operation targeting those who may have considered intervening to eject Russia by force or other means. Before and after the 2022 Ukraine invasion, Russia undertook similar operations within the Ukrainian Donbas and Luhansk regions along the border with Russia.\(^\text{13}\)

Given Russia’s potency, observers may expect a certain amount of “cognitive dissonance” within the population should Ukraine recover control of these places. The liberation of Russian-held territory is, therefore, more than a kinetic concern. Winning the fight will be insufficient. Russia understands the population must be convinced to be liberated, as demonstrated in its approach to Crimea, Donbas, Luhansk, and Transdniestria. Russia’s ability to wield information to achieve its strategic goals poses challenges for regional governance. Both inside and outside Russia, information manipulation challenges many vital aspects of governance, including transparency, accountability, inclusion, public participation, and the rule of law.\(^\text{14}\)

**Does Disinformation Work?**

It may be that the American national security establishment has failed to focus on the disinformation problem because its effects are unquantifiable. Despite ample examples of Russian actions, cause and effect in the information environment is not always clear. Disinformation does not exist in a vacuum; it is one variable in the information environment that influences and is influenced by culture, previous events, bias and opinion, misinformation, and the observed truth. The same channels that deliver disinformation deliver all these factors, resulting in great difficulty associating a singular cause and effect. Most disinformation campaigns are not designed to yield precise results but to create chaos, doubt, mistrust, and confusion. Clearly, Russia places great emphasis on shaping the environment in this manner. With the past as a prologue, Russia will conduct information operations using disinformation in concert with more conventional power in future military operations, as it has attempted in Ukraine, with mixed results.

One way to assess effectiveness is to see whether disinformation enters public discourse. For many years, Russia claimed biological research facilities in Ukraine were centers for biological weapons production. In 2022, a viral Twitter (now X) hashtag led to a US Senate hearing. These claims were
subsequently repeated on Tucker Carlson’s popular show on *Fox News*, using selectively clipped testimonies to bolster those claims. The following day, Russian state television cited Carlson’s program. Following an explosion that damaged a gas pipeline in the Baltic Sea, Russian officials quickly lashed out at the United States, publicly accusing it of sabotage. Carlson also picked up that story, again bolstering Russia’s sensationalized version. Carlson had tremendous reach as the host of America’s most popular infotainment program. His Kremlin-friendly approach led to Putin’s first Western interview since the Russia-Ukraine War began, despite multiple previous requests from other journalists worldwide. Carlson’s programming offers a stark example of Russian disinformation creeping into American mainstream media, but there are also more subtle ones.\(^\text{15}\)

Recent analysis revealed the Russian promotion of anti-immigration themes in the United States to weaken support for Ukraine assistance funding. These efforts are evident in *Sputnik* and *Russia Today* broadcasts, on X (formerly Twitter), and other Russian-affiliated social media sites. Russian efforts in the Western Hemisphere are not limited to the United States. A recently declassified US intelligence product demonstrated how Russia deliberately fed stories and talking points to media outlets across Latin America, a charge Russia quickly denied. To borrow the BBC’s term, each example represents a form of information laundering. Although challenging to quantify, Russian disinformation efforts seem to be sowing a measure of chaos and distrust in the United States at home and abroad. The Joint Force plays a role in resolving this problem.\(^\text{16}\)

**Considerations for the Joint Force**

The Joint Force has already addressed information as a critical feature in future conflict by acknowledging, in written doctrine, the value of information operations. In 2022, the US Department of Defense published *Information in Joint Operations* (Joint Publication 3-04). The Army followed with *Information* (Army Doctrine Publication 3-13), the next year. (The Navy is still developing its information operations community, and the Marine Corps and Air Force have their supporting doctrine.) The Army publication cites the Joint document early on, stating, “[t]he essence of informational power is the ability to exert one’s will through the projection, exploitation, denial, and preservation of information in pursuit of objectives.” The development of specific doctrines means the Department of Defense and the services intend for commanders to use information in their plans and operations.\(^\text{17}\)
The Army’s *Information* publication lists reasons Joint commanders should apply “informational power.” The first item, “[t]o operate in situations where the use of destructive or disruptive physical force is not authorized or is not an appropriate course of action,” bears the greatest need for emphasis. Except within US Central Command with continuing strikes in Syria and Yemen, no US combatant commander is using destructive physical force. Often, most commanders are not engaged in combat operations, leaving information among the few tools available for daily operations, including cyber and space efforts. As such, combatant commanders should allocate more of their organizations’ daily focus to the information environment. With that additional focus, combatant commands will more likely detect and understand disinformation campaigns directed toward the United States and its allies and disarm them more rapidly and effectively.18

American information warriors counter disinformation in real time by deliberately and aggressively employing truthful information. Critically, they must act rapidly to counter disinformation and even to anticipate it and “pre-bunk” expected narratives. In the age of 24-hour news cycles and memes that seize attention and fade quickly, velocity matters. The current processes for preparing, clearing, and approving information releases are woefully unresponsive and slow, leaving the initiative to the bad actors on the information battlefield. At the same time, combatant commanders must coordinate these efforts among other commands and interagency organizations with the authority to act within the information space. This approach will require inviting other commands and interagency organizations into the process at a level high enough for information releases to happen with appropriate rapidity.

The US intelligence community recognizes the need for change in this arena. While being mindful of protecting sensitive sources and methods, it has challenged previous paradigms to declassify and release classified information to counter disinformation rapidly. When Russia initiated its invasion of Ukraine with lies regarding its reasons for aggregating combat power along the border, the United States and the United Kingdom partnered to share sensitive intelligence, including intercepted communications, demonstrating that Russia was misleading observers about their intentions. Since then, the United States has continued this approach on a limited basis, including providing a warning that Russia intended to employ chemical weapons in Ukraine.19

These releases are not without risk. Astute intelligence services like those in Russia can use them to find and address intelligence vulnerabilities. For some in the intelligence community, this concept goes against long-held preferences to keep intelligence buried deep, lest the collection
method get “burned” and become unusable. Still, the rapid declassification and release of select intelligence has been effective enough that commanders and leaders across the US government should continue to use this approach judiciously. It fits well with the idea that sharing the truth benefits the United States and the West. Note the word “judiciously” here. The intelligence community must continue considering risks to sources and methods, and the secondary effects of publicizing the information. Nevertheless, by changing the intelligence community’s culture to value this approach, the United States can find additional success in the information contest.

Other US government efforts to counter disinformation have yielded mixed results. On April 24, 2022, the Biden-Harris administration launched an official “Disinformation Governance Board” within the Department of Homeland Security. Political opposition forced it to disband after 25 days (on May 18, 2022). The Foreign Malign Influence Center came to life in September 2022 and has been spared partisan flames. Congress approved the center, which was placed under the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Its principal mission is coordination and analysis across the interagency and intelligence community, but it relies on other agencies to intervene against foreign actions.

In 2017, the FBI set up its Foreign Influence Task Force. Unlike the Foreign Malign Influence Center, the task force can direct and conduct investigations leading to criminal convictions that disrupt disinformation and other influence operations. In 2019, Maria Butina was sentenced to 18 months in prison for operating as an unregistered agent of Russia. Butina used Russian connections to access and influence American politicians associated with the National Rifle Association organization until an FBI investigation undid her efforts. Agents of influence like Butina represent more precisely directed information operations than those designed to create chaos. Joint Force authorities must collect and share information about these matters to support counter-disinformation efforts.

The proposals to coordinate pre-bunking disinformation across US government agencies have limitations. This approach relies on using the truth to repair or prevent damage wrought by disinformation. Unfortunately, research indicates that challenging false narratives with the truth is largely ineffective. Target audiences of disinformation campaigns must be better prepared to avoid their effects to overcome this limitation. To this end, a new program supporting information literacy should be launched. Combatant commanders are charged with promoting various strategic programs within their areas of responsibility. An information literacy program would be an important tool in their arsenals. The Association of College and Research Libraries defines
information literacy as “the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning.” Information literacy is a growing area of interest within academia, given the increasing prevalence of faulty information sources, including certain AI-generated information.\(^{23}\)

Combatant commanders are well positioned to champion this effort. The Joint Force has various options for delivering such an effort, either unilaterally or in partnership with other agencies, such as the US Agency for International Development. Alongside psychological operations professionals, US Army Civil Affairs personnel represent one potential source of forces to execute such a campaign alongside foreign partners. Charged with promoting civic and social conditions necessary for the Army, civil affairs practitioners work with foreign partners and populations on governance, infrastructure, and civil population concerns. They could be trained to roll out information literacy packages to inoculate foreign partners against infusions of disinformation.

In constructing this program, the United States should avoid the hubris of acting alone and collaborate with allies and partners with Russian experience. By combining best practices with the amplification uniquely available in the United States, this campaign may succeed over time. If we believe telling authentic stories about the West’s conduct is a powerful attraction tool, people must absorb and accept those attractive narratives. Partners prepared to evaluate information sources, challenge narratives, differentiate fact from fiction, and approach information with appropriate skepticism are less likely to fall for Russian fake news designed to dissuade them from working with the United States.

**Conclusion**

Russian disinformation is here to stay. The Soviet Union and Russia have relied on hybrid warfare and reflexive control throughout modern history. Disinformation is a critical tool for those strategies. Now that the need to join the information fight has been officially acknowledged, operational commanders must implement the Joint Force’s doctrine in the ongoing, daily information contest. Regular, timely, and accurate intelligence and information releases can blunt the effects of Russian operations and improve conditions for the United States worldwide. A well-designed global information literacy program would support this campaign.
This proposal may raise the ire of those who believe the US military’s only purpose is to fight and win kinetic wars. The Joint Force is involved in many other activities to advance America’s strategic interests. The recent publication of information operations doctrine across the Joint Force represents the realization that information is a critical tool for commanders. From this perspective, an information literacy campaign can be seen as battlefield preparation. Correctly done, this campaign will better prepare allies, partners, and others to accept truthful Western narratives and reject disinformation disseminated by adversaries.

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Endnotes


18. HQDA, Information, 1-5. Return to text.


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The Dynamics of US Retrenchment in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT: This article argues that conditions favor American retrenchment from the Middle East because the United States can shift burdens to capable states in the region, there are few areas where US commitments are interdependent, and the local conquest calculus favors defense. Forward military deployments do not positively influence potential threats in the Middle East, and maintaining deployments there will detract from meeting challenges from China. Through comparisons to prior cases of great-power ordinal decline, this article puts America's modest decline in historical perspective and finds that retrenchment policies will likely have positive consequences.

Keywords: retrenchment, decline, Middle East, grand strategy, US foreign policy

The United States, at the height of the war on terrorism, had more than 250,000 troops deployed across the Middle East. Today, it maintains a tenth of that number. This instance of retrenchment, or the purposeful reduction of foreign policy costs, is even more dramatic than the American drawdown of forces in post–Cold War Europe, when those numbers fell to a quarter of their Cold War peak. What impact will this retrenchment have on America's position in the world? Risks loom on either side: excessive retreat from the Middle East could damage US interests in the region and threaten American credibility globally, while inadequate retreat could exacerbate ongoing regional problems and endanger greater American interests and credibility elsewhere.

History offers a helpful guide. Many states have retrenched from regions around the world and have done so after military defeats, with varying levels of success. For the most part, grand strategy literature has not systematized American retrenchment in historical or regional contexts. Deep engagement proponents argue that the United States benefits from forward deployments of military power, while advocates of restraint contend that the United States can secure its interests at a much lower cost by pulling back from foreign

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commitments in the Middle East and elsewhere (though other regions invoked in these debates are often relegated to the background).²

In this article, we draw on existing retrenchment theories to assess whether the contemporary Middle East represents a favorable or unfavorable geopolitical environment for that strategy.³ Our core argument is that conditions broadly favor retrenchment, though with limitations. Because the rate of American decline is comparatively modest and because the United States is declining from the highest position in the geopolitical system and a dominant position within the region, we expect retrenchment to be gradual.

At the same time, specific regional conditions in the Middle East favor readjustment. American interests there are discrete and relatively independent from America’s global commitments, capable states in the region can help buttress US interests, and the conquest calculus favors the defense, which limits adversaries’ abilities to exploit regional power vacuums. Compelling domestic factors aid these international ones: the American public has a decreasing appetite for involvement in the Middle East, and there is an emerging bipartisan consensus on the need to confront China. Of course, unexpected events, such as a further escalation of violence in the Gaza Strip, could modify these calculations. It is critical to know which conditions to focus on to react prudently.

The following section outlines key lines of argument regarding America’s defense posture in the Middle East. The subsequent section surveys the specific regional factors that would incline the United States toward or against retrenchment. We conclude with thoughts about how much further the United States might be willing to go in terms of retrenchment in the region and speculate about what events might reverse current trends and compel the United States to reengage.

**Contending Interpretations of America’s Role in the Middle East**

The literature on American grand strategy often uses the Middle East to differentiate competing claims for the wisdom of each grand strategy.⁴ For example, deep engagement advocates highlight the positive impact of American involvement in the region. They point to how American naval power helped preserve the relatively free flow of affordable oil from the Middle East, thus fueling growth in the global economy. Advocates of deep engagement also emphasize the critical role American diplomacy has played—for example, through the Camp David Accords—in managing disputes between countries in the region. The same advocates believe that America’s disengagement with the region might undermine its ability to cooperate with others in counterterrorism or incentivize regional actors
to pursue nuclear weapons programs or lash out aggressively against their neighbors.

In contrast, proponents of restraint use the Middle East as a poster child of all that can go wrong. From their perspective, American involvement in the Middle East conforms to the classic dynamics of overstretch, wherein a great power becomes excessively involved in peripheral places. Advocates of restraint criticize how the United States has favored military instruments, especially in cases of foreign-imposed regime changes, which have a losing track record. They condemn the American tendency to prioritize ambitious ideological goals, such as democracy promotion and regime change, which can spark anti-Americanism, incur staggering costs, and lead to failure.5

The assumptions scholars make about the tools of statecraft drive part of this debate. Proponents of deep engagement assume that US military assets preserve a delicate regional balance of power. Proponents of restraint counter that military assets are redundant or harmful and point to the positive record of multilateral diplomacy as a more effective and affordable alternative.6

Scholars' assumptions about the relationship between regions drive another part of this debate. For deep engagers, the United States needs large forward deployments because withdrawal sends a poisonous signal to states judging US credibility. Deep engagers also worry that instability in the Middle East will spill into other regions or entice Russia or China to exploit the power vacuum left in America's wake. Conversely, restrainers argue that America's post-9/11 obsession with the Middle East has diverted time, resources, and attention from more pressing issues elsewhere. Part of the Obama administration's logic to “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia, which would have required a diminished presence in the Middle East, was that it would address this purported misallocation of resources.

Notably, neither the literature on deep engagement nor restraint possesses developed theories of regional politics. With few exceptions, most advocates of either strategy think all good things go together for their preferred strategy. If the United States plays a stabilizing role in Europe or Asia, it should also do so in the Middle East. Regions provide useful theaters for grand strategic debates, but generally, the show is not tailored to the theater, as though regional dynamics are marginal matters.

Retrenchment and Regional Conditions

Despite these theoretical assumptions, great powers frequently draw distinctions between regions when debating whether and how to retrench.
They modify their global postures to track shifting geopolitical rivalries, withdrawing from regions of less geopolitical importance to focus on those with greater salience. They tailor their tools to regional conditions, availing themselves of whatever geographic and technological advantages they have. Declining powers can shift from a posture that relies on brittle forward defenses to one that relies on flexibility, strategic depth, reserve forces, and key strongholds. They can consider regional balances of power and delegate responsibility for regional stability to friendly successor states.

Although not necessarily focused on the Middle East, previous work has identified four structural conditions that might encourage or discourage a declining great power to adopt a retrenchment strategy:

- **Ally availability** – Where local powers are willing and able to contain rising regional powers, great powers are better positioned to shed burdens and draw down forces.  

- **Commitment independence** – Where commitments are independent rather than interdependent, great powers can retrench without fear of a negative domino effect.

- **Conquest calculus** – When defense predominates, great powers can retrench with confidence, knowing it will be more difficult for rising rivals to use military instruments to exploit power vacuums.

- **Relative rank** – Low-ranked great powers have stronger incentives to react quickly and decisively to signs of their decline, lest they fall from the great-power ranks.

Individually, these conditions are poor predictors of retrenchment, but collectively, they have solid explanatory power. Great powers with zero to two favorable conditions retrenched in 44–67 percent of historical cases, while those with three to four favorable conditions retrenched in 100 percent of historical cases. While these findings relate to retrenchment at the global level, they have yet to be applied to regional politics. In what follows, we adapt these conditions to the contemporary Middle East, describing how their assessment would affect the prospects for retrenchment. The result of this analysis is that three of the four conditions appear to favor the prospects for retrenchment in the
Middle East—though, as always, domestic political dynamics, international shocks, and unexpected events can complicate assessments.

Ally Availability

Local allies are clearly favorable to American retrenchment in the Middle East. Several Middle Eastern states are capable of containing one another and have some history of aligning with the United States. Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye head the list. If one widens the circle to smaller states that have shown willingness to cooperate with the United States, that list includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Because many of these countries depend on energy exports for state revenues, they support the maintenance of the free flow of oil from the region. Similarly, although some of these countries have previously espoused extreme ideologies and supported violent non-state proxies in local conflicts, they broadly oppose jihadist groups (such as al-Qaeda and ISIS) and could be useful partners in US counterterrorism intelligence sharing and operations. There are ample opportunities for the United States to work with regional allies and partners to advance American interests and maintain regional stability.

Still, the capability, stability, or unity of America’s friends should not be overstated. Most of America’s partners in the Middle East have militaries designed for homeland security and regime security—not for protecting distant sea lanes or conducting complex expeditionary operations. To the extent that these countries exercise military power beyond their borders, it is often by supporting non-state proxies, which comes with limitations and liabilities.

Few of these countries are models of stability. Israel, one of the more stable countries in the region, was rocked by widespread protests last year, and Israeli protests show no sign of abating. In 2020, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman detained senior members of the royal family to quash potential threats to his rule—three years after locking up hundreds of wealthy Saudis and royal relatives in a hotel for similar reasons. In 2022, Jordan’s King Abdullah II wrestled with an alleged coup by former Crown Prince Hamzah bin Hussein, his half brother.

Moreover, America’s allies and partners are often at odds with one another in ways that blunt American policy and security. America’s support of Israel creates friction with Arab allies, who have long-standing commitments to Palestinian nationalism, and with recent Israeli-Palestinian violence flaring up, the US State Department has issued an advisory for all Americans to exercise increased caution when traveling abroad. In turn, US arms sales to the Gulf countries prompt Israeli concerns that those weapons will be turned against
them. In addition, the Gulf countries often clash, as seen in the 2017–21 Qatar blockade and Qatar’s backing of rival proxy groups in Syria and Libya.

Nor should the risks or costs associated with outsourcing America’s security to others be underestimated. America’s partners are sometimes tempted to pursue destabilizing policies. For example, even before American retrenchment, Israel repeatedly threatened to use force against Iran to slow its nuclear program. During US retrenchment, Saudi Arabia intervened ill-advisedly in the civil war in Yemen, which provoked a humanitarian catastrophe. The United States can try to limit the ways its support can be abused—by refusing to sell certain kinds of military hardware or by attaching conditions to foreign assistance—however, American partners might evade these constraints, perhaps even dragging the United States into an unwanted regional conflict.

Even if allies largely align their actions with US interests, there can be material and moral costs to backing regional partners. Support for regional allies is not cheap. The United States provided roughly $7.6 billion in assistance to Middle Eastern and North African countries in fiscal year 2023, a number that will likely rise, given the war in Gaza. The United States often sells arms to regional allies at a discount, and such sales risk the diffusion of sensitive technologies and fearsome weapons. Moreover, American support for some governments opens it to accusations of hypocrisy, such as when the United States mutes its criticism of Israeli settlement expansion or Saudi human rights abuses.

American allies and partners can counterbalance these risks by promoting energy security, pursuing counterterrorism, and maintaining a stable regional balance of power. Absent these countries’ varied contributions, the United States might be reluctant to retrench from the Middle East, but with them, it can feel more comfortable doing so.

**Commitment Independence**

Similarly, the largely independent and disconnected character of America’s commitments in the Middle East favors retrenchment. The prospect of an American drawdown in the region prompting a series of falling dominoes is relatively remote. For example, a resurgent ISIS following American retrenchment would not necessarily endanger other US interests in the Middle East, such as preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. Nor would a more uncertain or unstable Middle East necessarily jeopardize American interests elsewhere. Although some cases (such as transnational terrorist groups and refugee flow) of Middle East instability can spill into neighboring regions, these spillovers are uncommon and better managed through policy initiatives in Europe and elsewhere.
Some observers worry that American commitments in the Middle East are tightly coupled and contagious. Their central concern seems to be that a regional rival could exploit a power vacuum created by a drawdown of American presence. An ascendant Iran, so the argument goes, could imperil oil flows through the Strait of Hormuz, fuel terrorism through its support of violent non-state proxies (such as Hezbollah), upend regional nonproliferation efforts by sprinting to acquire the bomb, and thus come to dominate the region. We will later discuss the claim that Iran would be a credible regional rival to the United States, but first we want to stress that the underlying premise of this view—that events in the Middle East are tightly interconnected—is easily exaggerated.

Take, for example, concerns about how regional instability might imperil energy supplies. Such an argument assumes that emboldened regional actors would likely disrupt export routes and snarl markets. Research suggests that blockading the Strait of Hormuz would be a demanding operation that few Middle Eastern states could sustain. Moreover, temporary disruptions could be offset through alternate routes and suppliers. Global energy markets are resilient, as evidenced by the market’s rapid rebound in the wake of Iran’s drone attacks on Saudi oil installations in 2019.

Another concern is that terrorist organizations could exploit shifts in the regional balance of power. This concern assumes that violent non-state actors are creatures of regional backers, but that idea is easily exaggerated. Most terrorist organizations rise or fall based on local circumstances—the ability to exploit local grievances, attract local recruits, and target local governments. There are exceptions; Hezbollah famously benefits from Iranian support. Even the exception supports the rule: Hezbollah’s activity substantially depends on Shia support in southern Lebanon. The Taliban leverages Pakistan’s resources and safe havens but is also firmly entrenched in rural social networks in southern Afghanistan. Every state in the region resents extreme jihadist groups like ISIS, though they disagree about how to counter them. Overall, violent non-state actors are only somewhat connected to the Middle Eastern balance of power.

American interests in the region are broadly independent from one another, and events in the Middle East tend to be relatively contained from global power shifts. For example, it is hard to see how Russia could leverage its ties to regional actors, such as Syria or Iran, to overturn the balance of power. Russian meddling in the Middle East has proven to be increasingly affordable and has elicited pushback from regional powers such as Türkiye, which suggests that intervention, far from being an asset, is a liability. For the Russia–Ukraine War, Iran has provided drones to Russia, but these have made little difference
in Russia’s performance. Ultimately, events in the Middle East only tangentially impact America’s ability to achieve its interests in Europe or Asia.

Spillover effects are gravely concerning. Ties between violent non-state groups such as ISIS and terrorist cells in Europe highlight the global and transnational character of jihadist groups. Civil wars in Syria and Libya have also generated refugee flows, and states sometimes weaponize these flows for foreign policy advantages. Although most refugees remain in the region, some also reach Europe, generating xenophobic backlash and controversial debates about European asylum and resettlement policies. It is unclear whether large forward deployments of US troops are the best way to manage these regional spillovers.

Military assets can intimidate violent non-state groups and thus disrupt potential terrorist attacks, but recent plots in Europe were directed by homegrown actors. This problem suggests a greater role for domestic policy: better intelligence sharing, improved deradicalization programs, and broader efforts to address the social roots of extremism. Along the same lines, American military action has not stemmed the flow of refugees fleeing violent conflict. NATO intervention set the conditions for recent outflows from Libya. At the same time, America’s bombing campaign against ISIS in eastern Syria did little to help civilians fleeing government violence around Damascus or in the Idlib province.

**Conquest Calculus**

Another condition that inclines the United States toward more retrenchment in the region is the conquest calculus, or the relative utility of military power. International borders have rarely been so stable, especially in the Middle East. The last coerced cession there was in 1922, and the region has averaged one minor land grab per decade over the past 50 years. Most of the major conflicts in the Middle East—the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the 1980 Iran-Iraq War, the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait—did not reward attempts to change borders. The time since the last major invasion (30 years) suggests sturdy defensive dominance.

The conquest calculus is constantly in flux, but we think it is unlikely to swing dramatically in a different direction. Most armies in the Middle East lack the capabilities to engage in effective offensive operations, either because these capabilities are difficult to develop or because they are more oriented toward internal regime security than external conquest. Most regional navies focus on defensive and disruptive operations, such as mine laying, rather than offensive or expeditionary missions. Although several Middle Eastern states have stockpiled ballistic missiles for their accuracy and reliability, these weapons are more useful for deterrence than coercion. The relatively
circumscribed nature of opportunities for aggression affords the United States greater latitude when deciding whether and how to retrench.

Defensive dominance applies to the Chinese, too. China has formed strategic partnerships with key Middle Eastern states, including Saudi Arabia and Iran. It has also prioritized outreach to countries in Central Asia and the Middle East as part of its One Belt, One Road economic program. China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, and the People’s Liberation Army Navy has participated in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. None of this activity has significantly altered regional dynamics, however. As Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader argue, China is more of a “reluctant dragon” in the Middle East, conservative in its diplomatic engagement, and generally reluctant to take on a greater role.  

China’s primary interest in the Middle East—preserving the flow of affordable oil—overlaps with that of the United States, making unclear whether escalating superpower competition would help Beijing. Conversely, it is unclear whether staying in the Middle East gives the United States significant leverage over China. China has diversified its energy suppliers, refining capability, and transportation routes, in part to blunt the potential impact of a possible US-orchestrated oil embargo. A defense-oriented conquest calculus does not mean peace will always prevail, only that any conflict will be largely self-limiting and unlikely to upend the regional balance of power.

If the Iraqi, Libyan, and Syrian civil wars are an indication, the conquest calculus also favors defense in internal conflicts. Violent non-state actors can exploit the opportunities afforded by guerilla tactics to harry or harass government forces. These activities, however, do not necessarily translate into a capacity to hold territory or govern populations. Even when non-state actors develop or engage in rebel governance, as ISIS did in eastern Syria, local opposition to rebel rule, combined with ethnic and sectarian differences, often provides a check on how far and how fast these groups can expand their influence. Limited resources, internal divisions, and military counterpressure from states, who are reluctant to cede control to non-state rivals, also hinder rebel groups from engaging in offensive land grabs. Thus, while non-state actors can carve out territorial enclaves, as Hezbollah has in southern Lebanon or al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has in southeastern Yemen, these bases do not necessarily provide them with further capacity to expand.

While the conventional balance appears to favor the defense, there are also nuclear proliferation concerns to consider. If a state such as Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, it could employ its conventional capabilities more aggressively.
Iran could harass shipping in the Persian Gulf and escalate support for proxies in Lebanon, Yemen, and elsewhere, knowing that Israel, Saudi Arabia, or the United States would be reluctant to retaliate for fear of escalation.

While these concerns are valid, we think the likelihood of nuclear proliferation in the region and the assessment of the destabilizing consequences that would follow an attack have been overstated. In terms of the likelihood that regional actors will acquire nuclear weapons, observers have been warning that the Middle East is ripe for proliferation for some time—however, there are inherent limitations to potential proliferators: nuclear programs are expensive, difficult to develop, and hard to hide. Acquiring nuclear material does not mean a potential proliferator can solve the technical challenges of building and testing a device, let alone develop and deploy a sizable, credible, and secure arsenal. Nuclear programs also inevitably draw scrutiny and backlash from regional neighbors and the broader international community.

Iran provides a helpful illustration of these nuclear impediments. Tehran could not maintain a clandestine program, and its facilities at Natanz and Fordow were disclosed to the international community. Iran also struggled to maintain its older centrifuges and deploy newer ones, slowing uranium enrichment. Some describe Iran’s program as a case of “nuclear hedging,” in which a state acquires nuclear capabilities for diplomatic rather than military influence. These hurdles are not unique to Iran; similar political, economic, and technical challenges impeded incipient nuclear programs in Algeria, Iraq, and Syria.

Even if a state such as Iran were to acquire a nuclear weapon, it is unclear whether its nuclear capability would significantly alter the conquest calculus. As political scientists have long stressed, nuclear weapons are primarily for homeland defense, and states have struggled to use them to compel others. In Iran’s case, nuclear weapons would be a guarantor of regime survival. Given the relatively small size of Iran’s arsenal, however, weapons would be vulnerable to Israeli or American strikes. Thus, Iran would probably proceed cautiously. Iran might exploit the stability-instability paradox, taking advantage of nuclear deterrence to engage in provocative behavior at the conventional level. Barriers to using conventional capabilities would remain. If the much better-armed United States could achieve so little when occupying Iraq, Iran should not expect to do better.

Iran would still find it challenging to blockade the Strait of Hormuz or make political inroads in other countries. Should Iran feel more comfortable unleashing its proxies if it possessed the bomb, Iranian nuclear weapons would not imbue these proxies with greater legitimacy or enhanced capabilities. The Hezbollah military threat along Israel’s northern border would be the same regardless
of Iran’s nuclear status, and threats by Tehran to retaliate against Israel should it strike Hezbollah would face the credibility challenges that always bedevil extended deterrence.

Most importantly, regardless of how destabilizing an Iranian bomb could be, forward deployments may help bring it about. Intelligence assessments suggest Iran was most interested in acquiring nuclear weapons in the early 2000s, at the height of American military operations in the region. Conversely, the negotiations that resulted in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the most successful multilateral effort to limit Iran’s nuclear program, took place in the mid-2010s when the United States was drawing down its presence in the region. In short, the best way to prevent nuclear weapons from upending the conquest calculus in the Middle East is through diplomacy, not sizable deployments.

Relative Rank

The only condition pushing against retrenchment is relative rank. In global terms, the United States is slowly declining from first to second place in the system relative to China, though whether it already has done so or when it might do so depends on the measure used. Despite Russia’s long-standing military ties to Syria or the Chinese military’s acquisition of a base in Djibouti, the United States still retains a commanding position in the Middle East. Although China brokered a diplomatic agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, American regional influence remains significant. Consequently, the United States might be tempted to drag its feet in the Middle East because it has larger reserves of power than other potential great-power competitors.

We think three factors make foot-dragging less likely. The first is that US involvement in the Middle East over the past few decades has come with a high price in blood and treasure. A 2014 congressional report estimated that Congress had appropriated more than $1.6 trillion to support the first 13 years of military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Factoring in the budgetary burden of the wars across the entire federal government and operations beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, this number could be as high as $6.4 trillion. Moreover, nearly 7,000 American servicemembers lost their lives in these wars, and an additional 53,000 were wounded, costing roughly $1 million per year for each soldier deployed to Afghanistan. On the other side of the ledger, US stabilization efforts in the region have been a conspicuous failure. In Afghanistan, they were even less effective than Soviet efforts in the 1980s.

The second factor is that America’s changing interests in the Middle East complicate the case for maintaining a large residual force. This complexity is most notable in the case of two common justifications for maintaining
a forward-deployed American presence—energy politics and counterterrorism. Regarding the flow of oil, scholars have long questioned whether a robust American military presence is necessary to maintain a stable global energy market, given the resilience of supply networks, large stockpiles, and alternative suppliers. The advent of fracking, which made the United States a net-energy exporter, has further reduced the importance of Middle Eastern exports for sustaining global prices and has afforded the United States something close to energy independence.

When it comes to counterterrorism, the environment has shifted in similar ways. Jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS have endured military pressure from the United States and other regional states, which has weakened their core organizations, deprived them of territorial safe havens, and impeded recruitment, organization, and planning operations. More active combatants increasingly divert such groups in the Middle East. Israeli actions in Gaza are a lightning rod, and ISIS recently ravaged Russia’s Crocus City concert hall, killing at least 130 people because of Russia’s military intervention in Syria.

Moreover, America’s counterterrorism capabilities—which include more stringent border regulation, more active intelligence operations to identify and disrupt plots, and greater intelligence sharing among different agencies, allies, and partners—have reduced the vulnerabilities terrorist organizations exploited in the past. The rise of domestic terrorism threats has also siphoned off the stress formerly placed on foreign terrorism.

The third factor is the growing bipartisan recognition among politicians in Congress and the public in general that America’s core interests lie in the Indo-Pacific. The partisan debates regarding US commitments in the region (for example, in 2007 when President George W. Bush ordered the “surge” in Iraq or 2009 when Obama adopted a similar policy in Afghanistan) have lost steam. President Donald Trump’s decision to negotiate an agreement with the Taliban and announce a timeline for the complete withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan received little pushback from both sides of the aisle. The public has likewise soured toward deployments in the Middle East. Seven in 10 Americans believe the Afghanistan War mostly failed to achieve its goals, and a majority supported the withdrawal of US forces.

The emerging consensus on the need for retrenchment in the Middle East is matched by a parallel agreement surrounding the need for more engagement elsewhere. Congress passed a bipartisan bill designed to bolster US competitiveness vis-à-vis China, and the Biden-Harris administration’s calls to reallocate US defense spending toward weapons systems designed for “great power competition” have been met with
widespread support. Meanwhile, the importance of managing a rising China has emerged as one of the few areas where the attitudes of different parts of the American public align. Two-thirds of Americans have a negative opinion of China, and nearly half say China is America’s greatest threat—almost double what they consider to be the next most threatening state, Russia. American leaders, therefore, have a fairly free hand to face greater dangers.

### Conclusion

China’s rise has come chiefly at the expense of Europe’s share of relative power, but the United States cannot continue as if nothing has changed. The cockpit of great-power politics has shifted to the Asia-Pacific, and the United States now faces a near peer in the region. This gravitational pull was bound to affect other regions, and American forces’ massive footprint in the Middle East predisposed the region to major US retrenchment. Over the past few years, retrenchment is largely what has happened. Despite alarmist calls to the contrary, leaving Afghanistan was a timely and rational response to geopolitical conditions, and the United States has paid a small price for paring back.

This article argues that current US force levels in the Middle East are prudent. The warnings from deep engagers that pulling back would compromise US security have not been borne out, and we fall more on the restraint side of the spectrum. Defense is the best defense for a heavily indebted heavyweight with domestic disunity. At the same time, we would not fully endorse restraint either. While the United States has dramatically cut back its presence in the Middle East and could eliminate it, we think that would be unwise. Maintaining military facilities in Bahrain and Qatar allows the United States to respond quickly to unexpected events and can bolster deterrence during unanticipated crises. The recent deployment of two carrier strike groups to the region to “serve as a deterrent signal to Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and any other proxy across the region” in the wake of Hamas’s attack illustrates the wisdom of maintaining the capacity to surge military assets to the region when events warrant it.

Ultimately, it is up to American voters to decide what is worth its blood and treasure in the region. We will close by outlining two possible courses of events that might reverse current trends and compel the United States to reengage in the region. The first potential scenario is if local efforts to contain a hegemonic bid were to fail and a regional aggressor such as Iran were to make a bid for hegemony. If the conquest calculus shifted to favor offense, available allies collapsed, and commitments grew suddenly interdependent, the United States
would have a strong incentive to ramp up its military footprint and help stymie such an attempt at regional dominance.

The second possible scenario is if regional calamities in the Middle East begin to threaten global stability again. Overwhelming refugee flows, humanitarian disasters, financial contagion, and nuclear exchanges could all necessitate a strong or swift American response, which would rest on long-standing relationships, forethinking strategies, and prepositioned resources. If the current Israeli-Palestinian violence escalates further, drawing in other armed actors such as Hezbollah or other states such as Iran, it could become more difficult for the United States to maintain a more restrained posture in the region. The causes of the current crisis reside more in Palestinian and Israeli politics than in the degree of American military deployments across the region. Indeed, the most recent round of conflict erupted despite the attacker’s massive military inferiority. Many problems do not have a military solution.

Retrenchment from the Middle East is neither inevitable nor an end in itself. Its main benefits are that it can provide the United States with greater flexibility and strategic solvency. Washington faces an exceedingly complicated global security environment: a rising near-peer challenger in China, an aggressive nuclear-armed spoiler in Russia, and now an unexpected war in Israel and Palestine. Managing these collective challenges will require setting clear priorities, accurately assessing threats, closely monitoring conditions, and judiciously allocating resources. Since the US military is not bogged down in multiple Middle Eastern quagmires, these tasks will be easier, though the road ahead remains hard.

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Endnotes


11. MacDonald and Parent, Twilight, 56. Return to text.


ABSTRACT: The ongoing, 20-year effort to reform Iraq’s Ministry of Interior through capability building is an underreported but critical aspect of NATO’s mission. This article identifies 10 strategic errors or “lessons” from this mission related to ends, ways, means, and assumptions. NATO’s involvement was flawed from design to delivery, including its myopic focus on training, systemic disregard of politics, relegation of civilian expertise, and inadequate measurements of its effects. As a result, police legitimacy in Iraq eroded, potentially exacerbating instability. Capability building is becoming more attractive as a non-kinetic tool; the success of future NATO missions—in Iraq and elsewhere—will, therefore, rely on avoiding similar mistakes.

Keywords: Iraq, Ministry of Interior, institutional reform, security sector reform, NATO

Changing State Structures in Iraq

From the perspective of the US-led “coalition of the willing,” reforming Iraq’s state structures was a novel endeavor. To Iraq, however, Western experts had been reforming its state structures since the 1922, when the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty gave Britain direct control over Iraq’s military and foreign policy and influence over the rest of the state.

Prior to the Ottoman Empire’s collapse in 1917, it administered three provinces (or wilayat) in present-day Iraq: Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul. The British government installed Faisal I as king of Iraq in 1921 and confirmed him as the constitutional monarch in a 1922 treaty, laying the foundations for consolidating Iraq’s three wilayat into a single state and developing administrative structures.1

British advisers were stationed in key ministries, including “important posts in the police and army . . . staffed by British and Indian officers on contract.” Under Gertrude Bell’s vision, bureaucratic reforms went alongside profound economic reforms. British actions aimed to centralize state power and transform the largely nomadic society into a settled agrarian society. These were significant changes in a limited space of time.2

Reforms to Iraq’s political, social, and economic order created new fissures. They eroded the traditional powers of the tribal chiefs, whom the king attempted
to placate, first by vesting them with greater local administrative powers, then by gifting them state land. Locally, policies created a rift between tribal leaders and ordinary tribal members: leaders began to amass land and power, but citizens lived in relative poverty.\(^3\)

The monarchy’s attempt to build legitimacy and control the executive also created fissures between the king and the executive and between the executive and the local government. In 1958, after the monarchy was overthrown and army officers executed Faisal II, rival political factions began to vie for state control. Saddam Hussein ultimately emerged victorious in 1979.\(^4\)

**Iraq’s Ministry of Interior**

Under Saddam, the Ministry of Interior (MoI) remained “a relatively small organisation” with limited security and budgeting functions. It managed approximately 60,000 staff with a “fairly easy life, policing routine crime.” It was also responsible for quotidian public order tasks, such as regulating traffic, public works, and issuing residence permits. Major security threats were handled by the 8,000–strong Iraqi Intelligence Service (the Mukhabarat) and Saddam’s Republican Guard.\(^5\)

Initially, corruption was also limited, but the country’s coffers were drained by the Iran–Iraq War, which killed between 250,000 and 500,000 Iraqis, particularly poor southern Shia, and cash-for-oil sanctions pushed the economy to its knees. These sanctions essentially created state-sponsored, monopolistic organized crime networks to smuggle goods. This situation fuelled corruption, exacerbated wealth inequality, increased dependency on the state, and centralized and empowered Saddam. Since then, these networks arguably formed the foundations for al-Qaeda, the Hashd al-Shaabi, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and doubtless many such organizations to come.\(^6\)

After the 2003 US–UK coalition’s invasion of Iraq, the ill-judged de-Ba’athification policy (especially disbanding all security institutions) created a new security problem for the state. It also vastly degraded human capacity across all state structures and left lucrative government positions open to political and militia appointees with no experience, and little interest, in public administration. This “deliberate exclusion of a section of Iraq’s society . . . . [and] the exclusive elite bargain imposed on the country by the United States and its formerly exiled Iraqi allies” increased corruption and incompetence and precipitated the civil war.\(^7\)

In this context, in an inversion of Carl von Clausewitz’s famous dictum, politics became an extension of war by other means. Competition over state
resources abounded, and with the United States controlling the country’s Ministry of Defence (MoD) and Counter Terrorism Service, the MoI was the only security structure under rival Shia factions’ control. The MoI was the structure through which militias would grant themselves weapons licenses, receive political and administrative cover, and exact retribution on rivals of all sects, in Baghdad and beyond. It became a site for bloody internal battle for control among rival militias, with regular shoot-outs in its corridors and parking lots.\(^8\)

Enter the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), essentially the coalition’s occupation administration—staffed largely by American and British technocrats and army officers—which sought to rebuild state institutions wholesale. The profound challenges the CPA would face—especially the push-pull relationship between central government and provincial (and tribal) authority—were seeded in UK involvement in Iraq from the early twentieth century.

**Reforming the Ministry of Interior in Iraq**

This may seem an impossible task in any environment . . . we must not kid ourselves about the scale of the task we have set ourselves and our Iraqi counterparts.\(^9\)

United States and United Kingdom coalition partners initially led MoI reforms then transferred control to NATO. NATO’s involvement in security sector reform (SSR) began in 2004, when the Alliance began working with the MoI and MoD, and largely comprised capability building and partner-force assistance. SSR evolved into the NATO Training Mission in Iraq (or NTM-I) under the overall NATO Mission Iraq (NMI, or “the mission”), a noncombat-training and capability-building effort intended to strengthen Iraq’s security forces and stability and resilience to terrorism.\(^10\)

The mission’s strategy and scope was most recently designed in 2017 and 2018 through a so-called NATO “activity” and work with Iraqi and Allied partners. At the time, NATO focused on developing demand for—and defining the scope of—assisting the MoD. NATO also supported MoI assistance led by the EU and the United Nations Development Programme. In 2021, Allies agreed to increase the mission’s size and scope. The Alliance wished to increase personnel from 500 to 4,000, broaden its work beyond Baghdad, and enhance its support of the MoI and the Ministry of Justice.\(^11\)

Then, as now, NATO channeled the bulk of its efforts toward the MoD. Within the realm of MoI support, NATO mainly directed support toward the Federal Police with some assistance going to the Facilities Protection Service.
In August, NATO establishes training implementation mission; deploys a team of 50 officers. In December, authorizes additional 300 trainers and staff; changes mission name to NATO Mission Iraq (NMI).

Assessment describes NATO’s presence as comprising a team of 85 personnel in Baghdad and 12 in Brussels. Same assessment credits NMI with training 516 officers in Iraq and 126 officers overseas (Lynch, 2006). Unclear which portion of those trained hailed from the Ministry of Interior (MOI).

Introduces gendarmerie-type training to the Iraqi Federal Police to bridge the gap between routine police work and military ops.

Expands its navy and air force leadership program.

Agrees to provide specialist training on oil policing (led by Italy).

In April, grants Iraq “partner” status December, discontinues NMI due to disagreement on the legal status of NATO troops in Iraq.

Iraq submits its individual partnership and cooperation program to NATO in June. One-year NATO transition sell established to identify capability gaps. NATO provides limited training support on countering terrorism, counter-improved explosive devices, and defense institution building.

In April, provides international security force (ISF) training in Jordan for 350 officers. In July, agrees to start training and advising ISF forces and institutions in Iraq (Warsaw Agreement).

Deploys core team from headquarters to coordinate in-country training and capabilities development.

In July, launches noncombat training and capabilities development mission following US Secretary of Defense request for NATO support to scale up training and advisory.

Support paused following the Soulaimani assassination. Government of Iraq requests expansion in training and advisory mission.

Decision taken to increase the mission’s size and expand its training activities.

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NATO had trained approximately 15,000 individuals by 2011, though a hiatus in substantive activities followed from 2011 to 2018. The United Kingdom and United States also heavily supported the MoI through the CPA and their own bilateral activities.\textsuperscript{13} Despite these efforts, capability building yielded limited results. Multiple reviews found corruption endemic and described the continuing lack of 1) a clear organizational structure, 2) basic management functions, 3) a clearly defined mission, 4) a strategy for policing, and 5) a culture of accountability and transparency.\textsuperscript{14}

Much ink has been spilled unpacking the reasons behind failed security sector reform in Iraq. The focus has been on the “chaos” of the Iraqi system and the intercommunal nature of the conflict or its political settlement. Governance in Iraq is complex, but focusing on this factor has orientalized and “primordialised” Iraq, its government, and institutions and has given cover to international actors for their limited achievements, thereby absolving them of blame. Critically, foreign forces threw many resources into a conflict context, which further destabilized the country.\textsuperscript{15}

This article demystifies some of the reasons for the MoI reform efforts’ limited success, considering specifically the factors within NATO and Allied control. The remainder of the article is structured against the four interrelated tenets of any successful strategy: clarity of ends, ways, means, and assumptions (see figure 2). Colonel Arthur Lykke Jr. developed the first three components of this strategic planning framework in 1989, deployed here as a device to structure this article.\textsuperscript{16}
Ends: Defining a Clear and Coherent End State

**Lesson 1**
The political factors that triggered NATO’s involvement in MoI reforms in 2004 significantly constrained its ability to determine clear, coherent, and relevant objectives for this reform. This failure limited the nature, scope, and effectiveness of support.

In 2004 and in 2018, NATO’s interventions were triggered by a desire to downscale US and UK efforts rather than an independent or problem-driven strategy. In 2004, the US and UK governments wanted to reduce their commitments to the Iraq War. This goal required them to build Iraq’s security structures and involve more allies in defense capability building.

NATO inherited America’s design-related baggage in its takeover of reform efforts, specifically, a myopic focus on quantity: the numbers of officers recruited to the MoD and MoI and of individuals trained. This quantitative focus had profound consequences on building the muscle, not the mind, of the MoI.17

Two interrelated imperatives prompted the 2017–18 activity: a desire to relieve pressure on the Counter-Daesh Coalition (CDC) so that it would focus on tactical counterterrorism and counterinsurgency and a need to lower the American profile to maintain support for the CDC. Stakeholders also understood that a training mission would require a longer time commitment to Iraq, which would be more appropriate for NATO than the CDC.18

Sir John Chilcot outlined the absence of a coherent strategy for SSR reform in the UK public Iraq Inquiry (known as the Chilcot Inquiry). This inquiry found that “there was no-one in Whitehall pulling together knowledge of policing to design the kind of police operation needed in Iraq” and that the United Kingdom could not engage or influence the United States to create a coherent approach. Instead, the United Kingdom agreed (as others had) to provide a “small number” of police to provide training and advice on SSR. The Chilcot Inquiry argued that this lack of a strategy precipitated failure.19

Guillame Lasconjarias reinforced this point in his review of the use of partner-force training in Iraq and Afghanistan to project stability. Lasconjarias argued that instead of delivering support in a strategically coherent way, all actors “moved away from the strategic level to the tactical means at hand . . . [and] the aim became to find ways to ensure a proper ‘exit strategy’ out of Iraq . . . leading to a misunderstanding about what should eventually be done.”20
NATO’s deficient capability gap analysis occurred squarely within a framework focusing on training as an objective rather than a means to an end. An effective strategy would have outlined “the desired operating standard for each function” and stated “how that differs, if at all, from what exists.” Doing this legwork early paves the way for analyzing the resources and methods needed to bridge the gap.21

Ultimately, NATO focused on the numbers of individuals trained and failed to define a robust or coherent organizational end-state for either the police or the MoI; it then grew those structures so quickly that its numbers outpaced the MoI’s organizational progress and security institutions’ broader developments.22

Ways: Training, Political Will, and Trust in the Security Sector

Lesson 2

The focus on training came at a cost to holistic institutional reform. “Holistic” did not need to mean “more”; it could have meant “better” or “better integrated.”

Rather than taking a training-driven approach, institutional development is the only way to generate any consequential or sustainable results in SSR. This development is needed because developing institutions that shape the state’s local, individual, and personal experiences (such as policing, health care, and education) is unlike—and vastly more complex than—developing institutions “insulated from society and/or with a narrow technical function, such as militaries and central banks.” The Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) reinforced this idea in a report finding that MoI reform was more difficult than building the entire MoD from scratch. That point was lost on NATO structures staffed largely by military officers.23

By 2007, with the incorporation of the Facilities Protection Service (until then, an independent unit responsible for critical national infrastructure), the MoI had to manage more than 500,000 employees and was responsible for internal security, internal planning, and budgeting. The MoI needed to carve out an effective role in Iraq’s complex, and often confusing, partially decentralized model. In this context, its legal and practical mandate was unclear. To add to this complexity, in part motivated by America’s influence over the MoD, actors vied for influence in the MoI to accumulate resources and project their own power. Even so, training efforts did not adequately account for MoI’s vast scope and mandate and treated it like the MoD, applying similar tools.24
It is beyond this article’s scope to consider the many institutional development models that exist. At their core, these models include the need to identify and align relevant events or actions, knowledge, systems, incentives and processes, and norms necessary to shift organizational culture and practice. Technical assistance and strategic planning are only minor components of effective institutional development; instead, intervening actors must also engage on security-sector governance, systems (including procedures and law and regulations), and the norms that incentivize denial of error or failure and corruption.\textsuperscript{25}

As with the United States and United Kingdom, NATO was unfamiliar with institutional reform and failed to adopt a comprehensive, systematic, or even integrated approach to its intervention. As Robert M. Perito argued, the “failure to reform Iraq’s interior ministry resulted from a failure to understand the ministry’s role and the steps involved in successful ministerial reform.” In this context, training risked being irrelevant or ineffectual at best and destabilizing at worst.\textsuperscript{26}

Lesson 3
Donors failed to identify and focus efforts on areas where training would have the greatest impact and value.

NATO’s deep expertise in training-based capability building has meant that it has taken supply-centric rather than problem-driven approaches to capability building. These tool-led approaches hindered MoI development. Even within the training rubric, NATO’s wheelhouse is defense, and much support has been directed toward the Federal Police. With the MoI lacking in competent mid-level management, operational training was of a much lower value and yielded poor results. Despite some Italian-led Carabinieri-type training that developed capability beyond the merely operational, the scope remained narrow and took place within a problematic counterterrorism framework (see lesson 5).

Leading with existing tools rather than a clear understanding of how training could create \textit{behavioral change in defined areas} (beyond improving knowledge in the abstract) would be key. As Kevin Koehler stated, both parties in an assistance-based relationship have specific interests “and the degree to which these interests converge” bears heavily on the success of the intervention. The framework in figure 3 helps deconstruct or interrogate the convergence of interests. Three core tenets of organizational development and effectiveness are: political will, organizational interest, and technical capacity. Reform is most likely to be effective and sustainable where there is a convergence of political will, organizational interest, and technical capacity.\textsuperscript{27}
For a successful intervention, two of these three variables must be conducive to change. Technical capability building will, therefore, only succeed where there is political will and organizational interest to reform. Conversely, focusing training or capability building on areas of internal organizational interest or technical gaps (usually identified through the very narrow training needs analysis, or TNA), diminishes the likelihood of success.

Lesson 4

The focus on technical training turned politics into an irritant to be managed, rather than a force to lean into. This statement is not intended to diminish the Iraqi security sector’s complexity but to outline the opportunities this complexity creates.

The MoI’s internal political dynamics are complex. Even at a superficial level, a minister must share power with deputies, independent influential ministry figures, and influence networks. This power distribution results in inertia and organizational pushback against reforms that threaten—or are perceived to threaten—“the interests of other parties, key individuals or patronage networks in the ministry,” and “[m]any decisions are therefore negotiated rather than directed.” Security structures are also complex business networks, with clear equities at all levels among “officers” in Iraq’s security, human resources, and military-industrial complex.²⁸

Toward the end of its 2011 mission, NATO continued to provide MoI capability development and broader SSR support even while politically motivated assassinations were taking place in the ministry’s stairways and parking lot. This support was a stoic attempt to ignore politics and “continue the good work.”²⁹
Evidence has shown, however, that when project or program staff embraced complexity, they identified areas for genuine and longer-lasting or sustainable reform. For example, in the late 2000s, a British effort identified “organisational discipline” (primarily in Baghdad) as an area in which Iraqi and British interests aligned. The MoI wished to instill greater organizational discipline among its staff and police, while the United Kingdom wished to reduce the volume of arbitrary attacks on Sunni community members by local police. Although the motives behind the alignment differed, interests converged, and the United Kingdom helped establish an internal discipline system granting police leaders some command and control across the hierarchy. Coalition Provisional Authority representatives believed this policing reduced indiscriminate attacks against Sunni community members.\(^{30}\)

This scenario contrasts with the more sweeping UK and US efforts to “modernize” MoI systems. For example, much money and time was directed toward improving governance through increasing management capacity by promoting merit-based recruitment, procurement, and promotion through workshops, training courses, study courses, and drafting new procedures. The effort was judged a failure: “We knew the political economy, we just couldn’t really impact it,” said one stakeholder.\(^{31}\)

The successful counter-Daesh effort reinforced the effectiveness of problem-driven approaches to targeting capacity development. This effort demonstrated the unity that could be achieved across the political, institutional, and individual spheres in response to a shared threat and a focus on a distinct problem set in a defined time frame and geographical scope. Focusing on distinct micro-level problem sets (for example, communications, trust, gun licensing, targeting Daesh leaders, and response times) requires thoughtfully exploring priorities to identify practical areas where political will and organizational interests converge. The impulse to lead with the usual tools, such as training (which may or may not be relevant to the problem at hand) must be avoided.

Finally, objectives for change must intersect with an area where consensus is possible, that is, where MoI powerholders can and want to progress. International donors should also be willing to support this effort through parallel political influencing. NATO and others must go with the grain to identify and agree upon clear (problem-driven) change areas with local stakeholders. Changemakers must not hide behind the cover of so-called politicization and complexity. Institutions function in their own ways—they evolve and adapt; actors either choose to understand them on their own terms or cease trying to change them.
Lesson 5

The focus on training may have had counterproductive consequences, principally, reducing police legitimacy among the public.

Focusing on police force development in terms of numbers and physical infrastructure without an equal emphasis on developing the systems, incentives, norms, and management capacity necessary to manage enlarged forces resulted in a Popeye-like structure with more muscle than mind. There is evidence that the ministry and its police structures have been used to mete out group-level reprisals. In 2005, then Brigadier General Karl Horst found a secret MoI detention facility in Jadariya in which 169 individuals—166 of whom identified as Sunni—were held and tortured.32

The focus on brawn has significantly affected public trust in the state, undermining the very stabilization objectives that the United States, United Kingdom, NATO, and other allies had sought. As Robert Byrd warned, this approach to police development encouraged:

. . . corruption, apathy, poor leadership and counter-productive business practices. In the short-term, the process undermines public support for the government when citizens view the police, arguably the most visible representation of a fledgling government, as dishonest and incompetent. Over the long-term . . . negative habits that form due to rapid and unbalanced development [of the MoI] become institutionalized, which makes future course correction more difficult.33

The need for public support of the police was recognized as one of five priority areas for MoI development in a 2009 UK government paper. Failure to mainstream and link public trust and accountability into the training effort overlooked an additional level of influence on the police and MoI: it insulated the structure from public accountability and reinforced the inaccurate narrative that the demand for competent and less corrupt institutions was driven by external actors rather than by Iraqi citizens.34
Mean: Applying Human and Financial Resources

Lesson 6

The focus on counterterrorism training naturally resulted in an inappropriate overreliance on trainers and mentors (“experts”) with a military background and the relegation of civilian or diplomatic expertise. The early and appropriate use of individuals with a broader suite of skills is critical to success.

Support to Iraq’s security structures was driven by the need to “get security quick” in 2004 and to increase resilience against Daesh in 2018, which naturally resulted in an overreliance on defense personnel with a defense or wartime mindset to deliver training. This overreliance is inappropriate for developing a public-facing institution with a public security responsibility.35

Historically, individuals have been selected due to their narrow technical expertise; they have often lacked an understanding in institutional reform and have been unaware of Iraq’s complex framework of laws, regulations, and norms that enable or limit the MoI’s sphere of operations. As such, the international community has delivered many MoI courses and strategy papers with little regard for their practicality.

The lack of appropriate pre-deployment training, coupled with short rotations, has increased the probability of staffers operating as “pioneers,” all with their own assumptions about the best way forward, missing opportunities to multiply effects across training silos and taking valuable institutional memory with them when they leave.

To carry out responsible and effective SSR in any context, it is critical to have individuals in place who are trained and able to invest time in relationship-building and identifying areas of genuinely overlapping interests. Crucially, individuals who understand the basic principles of institutional reform must be placed in leadership positions and empowered to drive a coherent plan accordingly. Once appropriate staff are identified, prior to their deployment, time must be invested in training, “forming, norming, and storming” experts.
Lesson 7

Staffing levels and expectations about commitment timelines must be commensurate with the scale of the task; instead, optimism bias has pervaded.

Had training been the most effective and appropriate way to increase Iraq’s stability and resilience to terrorism, the support was disproportionate to the challenge. Instead, support to the MoI has been beset by the so-called “small footprint, small payoff” problem common to security sector assistance programs.³⁶

A US Department of Justice pre-war assessment, on which the Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction reported in 2009, had recommended that 5,000 international police advisers be deployed to Iraq to reform the system, but the US National Security Council planners rejected this recommendation on the basis that Iraqis would better administer Iraqi law. Frank Miller, then head of the National Security Council’s Iraq group, later said: “We had bad intelligence. . . . We believed that the Iraqi police were a corrupt, but generally efficient police force. It turns out they were both corrupt and not a particularly efficient police force.”³⁷

In May 2003, a team of 25 experts arrived in Iraq to find the MoI and police stations across the country looted and destroyed. The CPA recommended deploying 2,500 international police officers to restore order and recruiting 360 professional trainers and 6,600 international police advisers. This recommendation was entirely rejected. Instead, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III requested funding for 1,500 police advisers, including 1,000 American advisers; it is unclear how many were then deployed.³⁸

The ambition was to train 70,000 police officers in three months, and efforts focused on Baghdad. Driving home the pervasive optimism bias, the budget for Iraq’s entire police force in 2003 stood at a mere $2.4 million, and the MoI was expected to fund its training as part of this budget. By the April 2004 uprising, 200,000 Iraqi security personnel had been rushed into service, but no more than 5,000 were fully trained and equipped.³⁹

NATO inherited the United States and United Kingdom’s optimism bias. As the Chilcot Inquiry found in 2005, the United Kingdom seconded 11 personnel to the NATO training mission. Instead of recruiting these individuals to surge overall Allied capability, the United Kingdom could have re-badged them from Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq
(MNSTC-I) involved in basic officer training as NATO personnel. This decision effectively robbed Peter to pay Paul.\textsuperscript{40}

By 2010, Lieutenant General Michael D. Barbero warned of a significant manpower shortfall in the NATO training mission. He described the mission as “a relatively small tactical force of 177 personnel representing 14 member states at four deployed locations in Iraq.” He also warned that NATO’s estimated 2011 trust fund requirement of EUR 5.73 million was a “very small contribution compared to the strategic benefit to the Alliance and Iraq.” By the end of 2011—for political reasons—NATO’s mission was over.\textsuperscript{41}

Staffing is part of the problem, but culture and planning is a greater challenge. NATO and allies failed to internalize the expectation that even the most basic capability building should be planned on a 5-to-10–year time frame, which cascaded appropriately with plans and budgets put in place accordingly. On a sub-strategic level, NATO employees should take a long-term view and understand that deployment and planning timelines need to be appropriate to Iraq rather than to NATO.\textsuperscript{42}

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Lesson 8

Inadequate monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems resulted in a lack of clarity of the actual effect of the international effort’s support to the MoI.

By the end of the so-called “Year of the Police” in 2006, the United States had trained 187,800 Iraqi police and accumulated around 100,000 advisory hours. NATO had also trained more than 5,000 military staff and more than 10,000 police at a cost of more than EUR 17.5 million, equivalent to EUR 1,166 per person trained.\textsuperscript{43}

Despite these on-paper results, the reality was “troubling.” According to the Chilcot Inquiry, until 2009, the United Kingdom could not qualitatively measure the effectiveness of training; instead, the quantitative focus on the number of officers trained “was simplistic and gave a misleading sense of comfort.” In relation to the US effort, the SIGIR report (referenced here by Robert M. Perito) found that “[n]either the U.S. military nor the MOI could account for the number of trainees who had actually entered the police, the number of police currently serving, or what had happened to the uniforms, weapons, and equipment that had been issued to training center graduates.”\textsuperscript{44}
Effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is a perennial problem in security sector assistance. Even the most transparent and effective partners hesitate to open their security apparatuses to domestic scrutiny, let alone to external inspection. Countries with a complex history of monarchy and authoritarianism are more reluctant still.45

The transparency challenge compounds the problem that comes with the usual focus by international actors on first-order effects, essentially the “countables,” meaning the money and time spent training and the number of people trained. In development jargon, this result-class is known as “output.”

Interventions have tended to ignore the second-order effects of capability building, which are more complex to quantify but give a material sense of effect: they require monitoring skills, whether training is being used at all, let alone in the right way and at the appropriate time. This level of change is also known as the “outcome.” Monitoring whether the relevant skills are used at the appropriate time is key to understanding whether the effort has a meaningful effect on the ground and ensuring that skills and technology are not misapplied in a way that erodes at human rights.

Finally, few security sector reform models have attempted to consider the higher-level effects of change, including risk or threat reduction and the public perception of the security sector. Predictably, this type of result in a theory of change or results chain is called the “impact.”

Discussing and agreeing on monitoring systems at the outset is critical even to the most basic understanding of change and impact. Where external monitoring systems are challenging to implement, as in the MoI, they are better embedded within a partner organization’s checks and balances (for example, via human resources and parliamentary oversight mechanisms, such as the Defence and Security Committee, and so on). Discussing and appropriately embedding monitoring mechanisms bolsters the effects of training and emboldens the usually emaciated accountability structures and checks-and-balances systems in Iraq.
Interrogating Foundational Assumptions and Complementing Partner Efforts

Lesson 9

Failures to improve security institutions’ capacity are rooted in and stem from a failure to interrogate the primary assumption implicit in capability building—that improved knowledge results in better practice.

Weak M&E processes mean that the assumptions behind the logic chain of international support to the MoI have been inadequately interrogated and, therefore, have remained weak.

The NATO intervention’s implicit “logic chain” can be summarized as follows:

\[
\text{if we improve knowledge in the MoI and MoD, then} \quad \text{we will increase the professionalism of the Iraqi security forces and improve Iraq’s security and ability to fight terrorism. This thereby prevents the re-emergence of Da’esh while also building sustainable defence and security related structures.}^{46}
\]

This type of logic chain is common to interventions that focus on capability building (many also focus on improving management capacity, and some focus on maturing internal systems and processes). The primary assumptions here are that training is effective, that training improves knowledge or increases professionalism, and that improved knowledge will be applied and will result in appropriate behavior at the relevant point in time. The most important element here is timeliness. Despite many years of training, the MoD disintegrated when confronted by Daesh. Knowledge, therefore, failed to translate into behavioral change. Simply put, a more knowledgeable police officer is not necessarily a changemaker, whereas a police officer who applies certain practices, policies, or procedures (whether or not the officer understands why these practices matter) is a changemaker.

Other critical and unchallenged assumptions underlying these interventions and precipitating their failures are that the political climate will enable the translation of knowledge into action, that the MoI has the right incentives in place to enable the use of that knowledge, and that training is provided in the areas most conducive to change (see lessons 2 through 5).
Lesson 10
With other partners also working with the MoI on organizational change—principally the EU and United Nations Development Programme—allies’ work must be carefully shaped. NATO should have ensured that member states’ independent activities cohere and that they amplified the mission’s objectives.

The EU has been perceived to be more successful than NATO in its engagement with the MoI. The Minister and Deputy Minister of the Interior have both been described as active and proactive in working with the EU on strategic reforms. Reasons for this collaboration are complex; the EU is perceived to be more supportive of the Iran nuclear deal, perhaps making them more positively received, and it has engaged more consistently andconcertedly with the MoI. It remains unclear whether the EU’s focus on strategy development will create any practical changes.\textsuperscript{47}

Beyond the EU, the United Nations Development Programme has also attempted to coordinate all SSR activities in Iraq, working to improve security sector governance and supporting community policing through work with the MoI. The United Kingdom and the United States have also intermittently supported security sector reforms through specific units, with a focus on MoD.

In relation to the MoI, the need remains great, and there is a gap between linking strategic planning and action on specific priority areas to strengthen the MoI’s command and control over the police and enhance both structures’ public credibility. NATO could helpfully contribute to this area.

To be effective, NATO needs a clear and robust strategy and must engage with other actors to further its objectives. Although the NATO mission’s strategy is independent of member states’ activities, NATO must influence member states and multilateral partners to cohere their activities with the NATO mission. In practice, NATO must take a proactive intellectual lead in designing support and influencing member states.

Recommendations

This article outlined 10 NATO and Allied failures that have stymied efforts to reform Iraq’s police and MoI. These failures corresponded to four tenets of good strategy: ends, ways, means, and assumptions. In Iraq, the scale of the challenge is such that international actors could help the MoI mature into a more credible, effective, and trusted institution that supports peace rather than being a destabilizing force.
Any future support to the MoI must course correct, starting with identifying and analyzing problem sets through an institutional reform and systems-based approach and determining a clear, even if ambitious, end-state. This analysis requires experts in institutional reform and systems-based thinking.

Once a certain end-state is defined, actors must identify specific, discrete convergences of political will and technical interest to orient and prioritize efforts. These areas might include licensing systems, intelligence sharing with the police, arbitrary arrests in a certain province, or counterterrorism operations against a specific group. There should then be further analysis to understand what entrenches that problem. This analysis should be based on systems thinking and consider the 1) specific behaviors manifested; 2) trends and context; 3) systems and structures (including laws and reporting processes); and 4) institutional and social norms shaping the environment.

With the MoI’s relative caution about working with NATO (rather than with the MoD, for example) it is important to understand and interrogate the areas in which national, political, and technical interests converge with Allied interests and to prioritize accordingly. NATO must also leverage the strength of its partners (direct and indirect), such as the EU, to further common objectives.

NATO and other actors must avoid the trap of defining a problem to meet the tools already in place or through the political prism of a member state. At a time when NATO contributions must be prioritized ruthlessly, this process may require adeptly and diplomatically holding member states at bay to avoid wasting critical resources or even undermining broader strategic effects. Once actors have set their objectives, defined specific problems, and identified where their priorities intersect with national ones, they can develop and define their methods to move the needle in the right direction.

In terms of applying the tools in its arsenal, NATO and its allies must recognize that improving knowledge may not be unnecessary, and is entirely insufficient for improving practices, and NATO actions should reinforce, amplify, and be reinforced by member states’ actions. Developing an effective and credible police force and MoI that promote stability could only succeed if training occurred within a coherent SSR effort. Actors should ensure that direct actions (such as training) and supporting actions (such as political engagement) address these issues systematically. NATO must then shape its mission and the staff or cadre it selects and support the actions needed to effect change.
Critically, any SSR effort must focus on public perception. As Perito argues, security and legitimacy cannot be decoupled:

SSR is the key to security and to establishing the legitimacy of the state. The police are the face of the state to its citizens, and if citizens have confidence that the police will protect them and provide emergency services, citizens are likely to be loyal to the state. Similarly, if citizens believe they can rely on the judicial system to provide justice, they are likely to view the state as legitimate and worthy of their support. . . . If the ministries that support the police and the judges are dysfunctional, corrupt, or politicized, police and courts will have little chance of fulfilling their missions and will impede efforts to rebuild the state.48

The focus on public perceptions must, therefore, be foregrounded and run through the way NATO and others prioritize activities and how they implement their SSR support. NATO must then systematically ignore output-based reporting and have laser-like focus on outcome-based and impact-based change. This process includes measuring public perception related to the reform being supported.

A well-trained cadre is rarely (if ever) an acceptable end unto itself, and even the best training must be scrapped if it does not result in the desired operational changes (for example, reduced terrorist attacks in a designated location, increased intelligence sharing in specific areas, a decrease in weapons licenses issued, and so on). A common argument for focusing on activities such as training and outputs such as improved knowledge from the training sessions is that outcomes take years to achieve. This argument must be rejected. Change is rarely linear, and taking an adaptive, problem-driven approach to reform will increase the pace of change and enable teams to see evidence of second-order change taking root.

Finally, NATO must remember the public. Strengthening a security structure that undermines the state, alienates the public, enhances corruption, or further depletes public trust is counterproductive. NATO must, therefore, measure public perception toward the institutions it supports and ensure that its efforts increase trust rather than empower bad actors or undermine the public perception of state institutions. Whether NATO wishes to, or can, provide the reforms necessary to support effective capability development is to be seen.
NATO’s capacity-building efforts will likely play a more prominent role as the Alliance shores itself up and supports its allies in the coming decade. At its best, NATO capability development can cohere and align activity, enhance collective security, distribute and reduce risk, and amplify effects. NATO training missions must reorient radically and ensure that they have the right mix of staff with extensive civilian and academic capabilities to design and deliver interventions. Otherwise, capability building is unlikely to be effective, except possibly in the narrowest in-classroom sense.

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Endnotes


12. For example, the December 2018 NATO fact sheet summarizing these efforts described activities as being with the Ministry of Defence, the Office of the National Security Advisor, “and relevant national security institutions” and made no explicit mention of the MoI. Return to text.


16. Arthur Lykke, “Defining Military Strategy = E + W + M,” Military Review 69, no. 5 (May 1989): 2–15. Note that this model has been widely criticized for being deficient or incomplete—but it is a reasonably good device for the purposes of structure. The inclusion of “assumptions” is mine. Return to text.

17. Byrd, “Foreign Police,” 4. “In Iraq, the USG [US government] instituted wildly ambitious and unrealistic hiring programs in the fall of 2003, such as ‘30,000 in 30 days’ and ‘60,000 in 60 days.’ In these two instances, the USG ordered military commanders to hire 30,000 and 60,000 IPS [Iraqi Police Service] in 30 and 60 days, respectively, which they did with the utmost of zeal. Though this approach resolved the short-term problem of getting unemployed Iraqis to work, it was the beginning of the end of any coherent plan to carefully and deliberately assemble the IPS,” in Rathmell, Iraq’s Internal Security, 5. Return to text.


22. Byrd, “Foreign Police,” 1; Committee of Privy Counsellors, Iraq Inquiry, vol. 10, para. 420, quoting then Prime Minister Tony Blair’s message to then President George W. Bush: “The numbers in the police are there. But not the quality or equipment, e.g. only 7,000 of the 80,000 police are Academy trained: 62,000 have no training; only nine percent have proper body armour; only 30 percent of the required vehicles are in place. Apparently, the logjam on resources and equipment is now broken.” Return to text.


24. For an illustration of the complexity, see Robert M. Perito, The Interior Ministry’s Role in Security Sector Reform (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, May 2009), 7, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Special%20Report%20223_The%20Interior%20Ministry’s%20Role.pdf. See also James A. Baker III, Lee H. Hamilton et al., The Iraq Study Group Report (New York: Random House, 2006), 6, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-IRAQSTUDYGROUP/pdf/GPO-IRAQSTUDYGROUP.pdf. According to the Iraq Study Group, the Iraqi Police Service numbered about 135,000 individuals responsible for local policing but without the authority to conduct criminal investigations or the clout to tackle organized crime; the National or Federal Police numbered around 25,000 trained in counterinsurgency rather than police work; Border Enforcement numbered 28,000 individuals; and Facilities Protection Services numbered 145,000 uniformed and armed Iraqis to guard various ministries and national infrastructure with differing capabilities and broad alliances. See also Rathmell, Iraq’s Internal Security, 3. This complexity remains the case. Return to text.


27. Technical capacity includes knowledge, systems, and processes. See Koehler, “Projecting Stability,” 2. Return to text.

28. Rathmell, *Iraq’s Internal Security*, 9. This is particularly the case in the MoD where commissions are known to be purchased and chains of corruption follow the chain of command but exists also in the MoI. Return to text.

29. Author interviews with a former high-ranking British Coalition Provisional Authority member (phone-based, August 2022). Return to text.

30. Author interviews with a former high-ranking British Coalition Provisional Authority member (phone-based, August 2022). Although even this example of impact has been disputed by those who argued that the civil war was winding down in the late 2000s, so the reduction in intercommunal violence in Baghdad was part of a larger nation-wide trend. Return to text.

31. Author interviews with a former high-ranking British Coalition Provisional Authority member (phone-based, August 2022). This was reinforced by multiple conversations with CPA occupation officials in Iraq in research trips between 2016 and 2018. Return to text.


34. See Committee of Privy Counsellors, *Iraq Inquiry*, vol. 10, p. 216, para. 715, discussing the importance of building public support along with improving operational and technical capability. The strong sentiment against corruption was again evident in the October 2019 protest movement and its violent suppression in Baghdad and across the south of Iraq. Return to text.


38. SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, 125; and Committee of Privy Counsellors, *Iraq Inquiry*, vol. 10, p. 85, para. 96 outlined how challenging it was for the United Kingdom to deploy police officers. Return to text.

39. SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, 127: by 2004, this budget had become 122.4 million. See also Committee of Privy Counsellors, *Iraq Inquiry*, vol. 10, p. 114, para. 262; p. 217, para. 723; and p. 423, para. 40. On p. 194, para. 631, the same report states that the NATO mission had trained 10,000 police officials in the seven years up to 2011. Return to text.


42. About 10–15 years would be a more appropriate time frame for more sustainable partnerships and results. Return to text.


46. See “NATO Mission Iraq (NMI),” and “NATO in Iraq.” Return to text.

47. Author interview with former high-ranking NATO official (phone-based, August 2022). This information is reinforced by observations from the author’s work on an EU-funded SSR project between 2016 and 2017. Return to text.


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ABSTRACT: This article examines Raven Sentry, a project that employed artificial intelligence to provide advance warning of insurgent attacks in Afghanistan. During 2019 and 2020, the Resolute Support Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence (J2) benefited from a command culture open to innovation, the urgency created by the US drawdown, and a uniquely talented group of personnel that, aided by commercial sector experts, built an AI system that helped predict attacks. The war’s end cut Raven Sentry short, but the experience provides important lessons on AI and the conditions necessary for successful innovation.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, Afghanistan, military intelligence, innovation, culture

Historian A. J. P. Taylor argued that “war has always been the mother of invention.” This statement is commonly associated with the advent of the tank during World War I or the atomic bomb in World War II but is no less true of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the twenty-first century. Soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines innovated throughout these conflicts, including with artificial intelligence (AI). As US and NATO forces began to draw down in Afghanistan, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence (J2) sought ways to maintain awareness and advance notice of enemy attacks. The command culture throughout the Resolute Support headquarters in Kabul was particularly open to testing emerging concepts, and the intelligence team consisted of a unique group of personnel who understood the promise of AI and had a network of contacts throughout the Department of Defense (DoD) and in the commercial sector who could help.¹

Under pressure to solve the growing challenge of maintaining awareness with fewer intelligence resources, the Resolute Support team developed an AI model called Raven Sentry using only unclassified data sources to predict future attacks on Afghan district and provincial centers. Raven Sentry began operating in late...
2020, but the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 cut the experiment short. In that brief time, the project demonstrated how AI could benefit military analysts working in a coalition environment with access to large volumes of sensor data. As an active participant in the project, I witnessed several valuable lessons and believe the case study presented here can help leaders understand the potential value and challenges of employing AI and the organizational conditions necessary for successful innovation during future conflicts.

### The Problem

During 2019 and 2020, US and coalition forces decreased the number of military personnel in Afghanistan as part of their exit strategy. Over the previous 18 years, the coalition developed a robust human intelligence (HUMINT) network throughout Afghanistan that would be nearly impossible to maintain without ground forces. Further, intelligence units could “soak” areas at risk of attack with aircraft-mounted collection platforms stationed in Afghanistan and warn local forces of pending attacks. As the drawdown accelerated, touch points with the population decreased, intelligence-gathering aircraft relocated to higher-priority regions of the world, and fewer analysts were available to process information. Consequently, maintaining awareness of events in many regions became more difficult. Insurgents exploited the degraded intelligence collection and analytical capabilities to attack government centers, generating press attention that undermined the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan’s credibility. Except for the seven-day reduction in violence related to the peace agreement signed in February 2020, insurgent-initiated violence exceeded the norms during late 2019 and throughout 2020.²

During late summer and fall of 2019, as the United States neared a withdrawal agreement with the Taliban, intelligence officers at the Resolute Support headquarters and the Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan (SOJTF-A) sought ways to maintain situational awareness with fewer analysts and collectors. Around the same time, members of the Intelligence Community (IC) contacted Resolute Support and informed the intelligence leadership that the IC was making progress in developing AI-enabled warning models that could create efficiencies in the US Forces Afghanistan analytical processes. Shortly thereafter, the intelligence team assessed that a well-designed and trained AI model could recognize insurgent patterns and predict future attacks by processing open-source intelligence (OSINT) surrounding these events. The Resolute Support J2 (intelligence) leadership sensed the emerging challenge of maintaining awareness and directed the analytical team to explore how to develop this AI-enabled capability.
AI, the Military, and Intelligence

Artificial intelligence is rapidly changing the world and could revolutionize warfare. General Mark A. Milley, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently argued, “Today, we are witnessing another seismic change in the character of war, largely driven by technology.” He went on to cite “[l]ow-cost automation platforms, coupled with commercial imagery and behavior tracking data augmented by artificial intelligence (AI) and analysis tools,” as central to this change. Although narrow in scope (the AI focused on high-profile attacks on district and provincial centers), *Raven Sentry* provided important groundwork for the type of AI development Milley referenced.\(^3\)

Much of the military’s current research focuses on increasing the speed of the sensor-to-shooter link, or the period from when US forces collect intelligence on a target to the arrival of lethal effects. The 2023 *DoD Data, Analytics, and Artificial Intelligence Adoption Strategy* identifies “battlespace awareness and understanding” and “[f]ast, precise, and resilient kill chains” as two of its five decision advantage outcomes. *Raven Sentry* was an early attempt to achieve these goals by increasing intelligence analysts’ speed and efficiency at processing large volumes of information by employing an AI algorithm that could predict future attack locations.\(^4\)

The team developing *Raven Sentry* was aware of senior military and political leaders’ concerns about proper oversight and the relationship between humans and algorithms in combat systems. Experts continue to debate the necessity and degree to which humans must be “in the loop” when making decisions on managing tasks, allocating resources, or, most importantly, releasing weapons. Early AI prototypes for intelligence, such as the Algorithmic Warfare Cross-Functional Team (Project Maven) established in 2017, were narrow in scope, meaning they solved a specific problem. For Maven, innovators enhanced analysts’ ability to process large volumes of imagery data using object-recognition software. Humans remained central to the process. *Raven Sentry* used environmental factors, open-source imagery, news reports, and social media posts to predict areas at risk of insurgent attack, which would then focus analysts’ attention on that region. Like Maven, it focused on increasing the efficiency of intelligence analysts trying to solve a specific problem. It was human–machine teaming with humans making decisions.\(^5\)

A 2018 Center for Strategic and International Studies report identified a friendly organizational “ecosystem” as necessary for successful AI innovation. As intelligence leaders contemplated investing in an AI system in Afghanistan, they were concerned that the ecosystem in military units was unconducive to this type of experiment. A healthy ecosystem includes the digital infrastructure
to support the processes, a culture committed to building trust between humans and technology, and a skilled workforce that understands AI. If the right talent is not present, individuals are closed to the idea that an algorithm can increase their efficiency, and leaders are unwilling to tolerate experimentation and change, then AI tests are doomed to fail. NATO’s Resolute Support intelligence leaders questioned if the culture would tolerate early failures and if they could assemble the necessary talent. As such, they cast a wide net for talent across the task force and looked to the commercial sector for help. Finally, intelligence leaders sought and found an environment conducive to experimentation within the Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan (SOJTF-A).6

Besides organizational culture and technological talent, the team encountered other obstacles common to AI experiments. The data curation challenge throughout Raven Sentry’s development was only overcome by limiting the algorithm’s geographic focus and dedicating considerable time to data curation early on. Difficulty with data formats, particularly when attempting to ingest a variety of information, is a regular theme of AI application studies. In 2018, Cortney Weinbaum and John N. T. Shanahan argued, “Future intelligence tradecraft will depend on accessing data, molding the right enterprise architecture around data, developing AI-based capabilities to dramatically accelerate contextual understanding of data through human–machine and machine–machine teaming . . . .” Weinbaum and Shanahan also predicted OSINT would become the prevalent form of intelligence in the future. In early 2020, the innovation team in Afghanistan witnessed these predictions come to fruition.7

**Developing Raven Sentry**

Collecting a skilled workforce was a top priority as the Resolute Support team explored an AI solution to mitigate the drawdown’s effects. Intelligence leaders decided early on to consolidate efforts and searched the task force for data-savvy personnel. In late 2019, the intelligence leadership assembled an innovation team at the special operations headquarters, where the culture seemed friendliest to experimentation, and the unit seemed willing to tolerate early failures. The Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan (SOJTF-A) commander and senior intelligence officer were deeply interested in artificial intelligence and willing to expend resources to experiment. After relocating several analysts to the SOJTF-A headquarters, the team affectionately dubbed the talented innovation office the “nerd locker.” The SOJTF-A leaders required that these team members pull shifts on the operations floor. This integration attuned the analysts to operational needs and built trust with those who eventually executed missions using Raven Sentry’s reports. As the experiment gained momentum and pressure increased from the pending drawdown, senior SOJTF-A leadership
recognized the AI experiment’s potential and directed resources and prioritization of manpower to its development.

This new model required a deep understanding of insurgent behavior. The first step was to develop a detailed event matrix for district and provincial center attacks. Most team members had served repeated tours in Afghanistan over the 18-year conflict and were aware of patterns that could help predict insurgent attacks. For example, one analyst built attack templates with Lester Grau at the US Army’s Foreign Military Studies Office, which then helped train units deploying to Afghanistan. They based these templates on recurring patterns of attacks dating back to experiences with Russia during the 1980s.

The team found it could reliably predict when insurgent activity would occur based on static or repeating factors (such as weather patterns, calendar events, increased activity around mosques or madrassas, and activity around historic staging areas) and influencing factors (such as friendly forces’ behavior, activity at Afghan National Police bases, and civilians closing markets early or avoiding mosques). In some cases, modern attacks occurred in the exact locations, with similar insurgent composition, during the same calendar period, and with identical weapons to their 1980s Russian counterparts.

During this process, the Foreign Military Studies team observed that they could predict larger-level attacks (for example, attacks on a district center) by tracking a series of events happening close together in time. The challenge was that these warning signals were widely distributed, faint, and typically imperceptible to current sensors and analytic tools.

By 2019, the digital ecosystem’s infrastructure had progressed, and advances in sensors and prototype AI tools could detect and rapidly organize these dispersed indicators of insurgent attacks. The identification process for additional indicators included discussions with Afghan military personnel who provided cultural context and warning signatures not always evident to non-Afghans. Further, there was 18 years’ worth of historical OSINT data in the national databases to conduct initial training and testing of the model.

Even with the expertise gathered at the Special Operations Joint Task Force, the team quickly determined it would need commercial-sector support to design and deploy an AI-enabled warning system and curate data into a usable format. Technological advances in business and university experiments simply outpaced military expertise. Using their professional networks in the commercial sector,
and with help from the Defense Innovation Unit in Silicon Valley, the innovation team identified an industry partner capable of developing the model.

In late 2019, US Forces Afghanistan leadership agreed to fund the AI experiment, including the cost of engineers from the commercial sector. The Silicon Valley Defense Innovation Unit helped contract a team of engineers. Convincing the intelligence community in Washington to support the project was a larger challenge. Some critics questioned the value and technical approach as the Afghanistan conflict drew to a close. Others cited bureaucratic reasons, including the rapid-contracting approach and classification concerns of working with uncleared civilian engineers. Finally, familiar concerns about using AI in combat systems emerged, and there were questions over who would control the development, how units would use the outputs, and who was authorized to approve the model’s deployment. Support from top commanders in the Resolute Support headquarters and senior SOJTF leaders eventually overcame these objections, but not without several briefings and high-level phone calls late at night in Afghanistan.

From the start, the analysts in Afghanistan decided to use only unclassified inputs so the uncleared engineers could work with the data, and so the team could share all its findings with the Afghans. They briefly experimented with classified databases like the Combined Information Data Network Exchange (CIDNE) that was foundational to much of the trend analysis conducted by intelligence analysts in Afghanistan but found the process of moving this information to an unclassified network too onerous and slow.⁸

Open-source press reports acted as a gateway for historical attacks that could train the model. If the press reported an attack on a provincial or district center, it was likely significant enough for commercial sensors to notice. Press reporting from commercial databases proved foundational to identifying historic provincial and district center attacks. If an attack hit these databases, the team could go back and gather commercial imagery and social media posts and convert them to data to train the algorithm.

Commercial imagery included electro-optical (visible) and synthetic aperture radar. The satellites with higher refresh rates (how often images are captured and available) could better detect changes in activity. Social media reports came from popular platforms and group messaging applications. While social media seemed promising and occasionally contributed, its inconsistent quality and lack of precision made it less helpful than the imagery sources.
Making open-source intelligence data usable was foundational to 
*Raven Sentry’s* success. While data formatting is a normal challenge for 
AI experiments, the variety of formats from disparate commercial sources made 
this process even more difficult. Further, the analysts had to deconstruct many 
historical events and label individual parts for the machine to read them. Using 
reporting of historical attacks, these analysts could then go back several weeks 
from the event and focus on activities at associated locations (such as mosques, 
madrassas, insurgent routes, and known meeting places) where they could gather 
and format more indicators. Understanding insurgent tactics and techniques, 
including insights from Afghan partners, and limiting the geographic scope 
around district and provincial center attacks made this task manageable. In time, 
the engineers developed software that could translate open-source reporting into 
data the algorithm could read. Even so, data curation and adapting to new report 
formats was a continual process.

The team also created “influence data sets,” which included factors like weather 
and political instability that analysts knew were relevant based on templates 
of previous attacks. For example, attacks were more likely when the temperature 
was above 40 degrees Fahrenheit, lunar illumination was below 30 percent, 
and it was not raining. The algorithm used the influence data sets to increase 
or lower the attack risk, but these sets did not contain direct signatures 
of pending attacks.

Leaders of the innovation cell prioritized standardizing event details, such 
as codes for provinces and standard naming conventions for provincial and 
district centers. Analysts used the Military Grid Reference System (or MGRS) 
grid squares (one kilometer–by–one kilometer) as the base unit for location 
indicators for attacks (as demonstrated in figures 1 and 3), then focused data 
pulls on these regions, limiting the historical data analysts needed to break 
down. The data were curated manually into Excel spreadsheets and then data 
files for mapping applications (comma-separated values [CSV], Keyhole 
Markup Language [KML]), which the engineers could then input into the 
system. Meanwhile, the engineers perfected the software that could process 
ewn commercial imagery or social media messages into data that fed the 
AI workbooks.
Early on, the nerd locker team and Silicon Valley engineers had to curate much of the data manually. The analytical team in Afghanistan regularly led development meetings with stakeholders in Washington, US Central Command Headquarters, and Silicon Valley to make decisions on data standardization as new reports flowed into the system. Restricting data inputs to only unclassified sources facilitated the exchange between different entities involved in the curation. They exchanged files using DoD-SAFE (Secure Access File Exchange) and stored curated data in a DoD cloud service.

Once built, analysts and engineers trained the prototype Raven Sentry warning system using three unclassified databases of historical attacks, then set it to monitor 17 commercial unclassified geospatial data sources, OSINT reporting, and global information systems (GIS) data sets. Neutral, friendly, and enemy activity anomalies triggered a warning. For example, reports of political or Afghan military gatherings that might be terrorist targets would focus the system’s attention. The model learned to detect movement activity from one place to another along historic insurgent infiltration routes, which triggered warning signatures for a region. Likewise, actions of a local population anticipating an attack could trigger a warning. Usually, several anomalies, often combined with influence data sets, were necessary to push the risk above the warning threshold, as demonstrated in figures 2 and 3.
The AI warning agent continued to learn from real-world events to improve accuracy. Further, analysts improved the AI tool by identifying key warning inputs of insurgent aggression and highlighting them for the system—comparable to how a listener “likes” a song in the Pandora music application, triggering Pandora to feed the listener more music from that genre. The analysts and engineers constantly tuned the algorithm and curated the data to improve performance. The team could have moved the AI to a classified system and fed it information from more sensitive sources, but the system did not require secret reports to achieve good performance, and using classified information would have excluded the uncleared engineers and delayed sharing with Afghan partners.

In October 2020, analysts determined that Raven Sentry had reached approximately 70 percent accuracy and believed reports could add value to the analytical effort. The analysts monitoring the AI system’s results built weekly reports predicting windows of time when specific government centers were at increased risk. For example, Raven Sentry predicted insurgents would likely attack the Jalalabad provincial center between July 1 and July 12 (see figure 1). The report also predicted the number of casualties with a confidence level based on historic attacks with similar indicators. For example, the warning from July 1 to July 12 might predict 41 fatalities, with a 95 percent confidence interval of 27 to 55. The system would also highlight the grid square where the sensor detected abnormal activity. The designers called these grid squares warning named areas of interest (WNAs) and the more precise locations warning risk activity anomaly points (WRAAPs), as demonstrated in figures 1 and 3. The analysts who created the weekly reports then compared the results with other available intelligence to corroborate the model’s output.
Along with the developers, intelligence officers would continually monitor the data health and review the results before distributing them. They tuned the model similar to cancer screenings designed to identify a wide array of possible incidents, even if that means accepting some false positives to cover all eventualities. They treated warning summaries as raw reporting intended to focus an analyst’s attention. The warning model said, “I have been trained to look for regions at risk for aggression, and you should check here.”

The AI-enabled model used old-school warning methodologies enhanced by new technology, making the analyst more efficient at processing indicators. Intelligence analysts deconstructed warning events for historical attacks on district and provincial centers to identify indicators of attacks, then taught the machine to identify these indicators independently and highlight the locations at risk. The AI model would learn over time and improve its predictions.

Once running, the system identified likely regions for insurgent attacks and assisted operators in focusing collection assets and strike platforms. The goal was to provide at least 48 hours of warning for insurgent attacks on district and provincial centers. During testing, the model demonstrated sensitivity and alignment to more than 41 insurgent aggression events in five historically violent provinces, providing more than 48 hours of warning in most cases. The model began operating full-time in October 2020. Although the war’s abrupt end in August 2021 ended the experiment, the lessons learned contributed to future analytical tools.
Lessons Learned

The *Raven Sentry* operational model, likely the first of its kind, increased analysts’ efficiency in predicting insurgent events. While the up-front cost was high, a well-tuned algorithm can significantly reduce the number of analysts required to overwatch enemy activity. In this case, the model could rapidly review terabytes of data and make warning predictions, increasing the analysts’ efficiency. Further, the team learned valuable lessons about developing and deploying artificial intelligence for military use. Among these lessons are the importance of command culture to successful innovation, techniques for building trust in AI models, and the feasibility of using only unclassified information from commercial systems to produce valuable intelligence, a lesson that foreshadowed the role of commercially produced, open-source intelligence in the Russia-Ukraine War.9

*Raven Sentry* demonstrated that an organizational culture committed to experimentation and tolerant of risk and failure is critical for successful innovation. Locating the nerd locker inside the special operations unit, where the culture was roughly analogous to a start-up business, proved crucial. Moving these analysts from other positions across the task force required sacrifice elsewhere in the intelligence mission. The uncertainty of the pending drawdown provided urgency that convinced leaders to assume risk in other missions to run the experiment. Throughout this process, entities inside the national intelligence community and DoD bureaucracy objected to investing large sums of money to employ the Silicon Valley engineering team for an experimental military project. Moving the funding forward took multiple briefings, phone calls, and senior leader interventions that could only have happened in an organization committed to innovation.

Military leaders must trust the system to employ AI models successfully in combat. Developing *Raven Sentry* revealed several methods to build that trust. First, military personnel must know enough about data, machine learning, and AI to provide focus to commercial engineers involved in development. Further, military analysts must have the communication skills to explain the system’s outputs to operators and leaders. Pulling shifts on the operations floor helped *Raven Sentry’s* developers understand mission requirements and build relationships with the operators responsible for directing reconnaissance platforms against *Raven Sentry’s* predictions and possibly ordering combat missions. Trust in the people running the system led to trust in the system’s output.
This experiment validated that commercially produced, unclassified information can yield predictive intelligence, which is helpful when working closely with foreign partners and the commercial sector. The *Raven Sentry* team used databases of unclassified news reporting to train the algorithm on attacks likely covered by commercial satellites and would generate social media posts. Analysts refined attack templates by working closely with embedded Afghan partners who had better awareness of local customs and often better knowledge of the enemy. Afghan partners identified indicators the US analysts could not recognize. Further, by limiting data inputs to unclassified, commercially produced information (in this example, imagery, press reporting, and social media), *Raven Sentry* produced intelligence in a format shareable with Afghan partners and the commercial sector. Finally, building and employing AI-based methods takes a team of engineers and operational analysts—neither could have developed these systems alone. The engineering team connected *Raven Sentry* to the latest algorithms emerging from academia and business, but the engineers were not cleared to access classified information. Relying exclusively on open-source data was critical to *Raven Sentry*’s success.

The final lesson involves the maintenance of AI models, which is important for leaders who allocate resources to this type of technology to understand. The upkeep and improvement of an AI model is a continual process that requires dedicated personnel and time. As the environment evolves in combat and competition, sources of information emerge and change, and it takes analysts and engineers to recognize changes and update the algorithm and data inputs continually. AI models are not fire-and-forget: the military cannot purchase an AI algorithm and expect it to work without constant maintenance.

**A Word of Caution**

As with all AI systems, there is a delicate balance between the desire for efficiency and maintaining human oversight. In this narrow case, human-machine teaming worked best. *Raven Sentry* made the analysts more efficient but could not replace them. As the speed of warfare increases and adversaries adopt AI, the US military may be forced to move to an on-the-loop position, monitoring and checking outputs but allowing the machine to make predictions and perhaps order action.

Regardless of the level of supervision, humans must be aware of AI’s weaknesses. There are numerous commercial and military examples of AI systems making mistakes. Several studies have found that facial recognition software is less effective on people with a darker skin color. GPS employing AI to direct vehicles occasionally provides routes that do not account for emerging traffic...
or weather, and self-driving vehicles have caused fatalities. Especially in the early testing phases, *Raven Sentry*'s predictions were hard to understand and occasionally wrong. If properly employed, however, AI will reduce human error. Still, operators must understand the weaknesses and remain involved enough to detect errors.\textsuperscript{10}

As *Raven Sentry* improved, the system’s analysts had to be aware of automation bias. As they become accustomed to using an AI system, humans may stop critically examining a system’s outputs and blindly trust it, especially in time-sensitive situations common in combat. An investigation of Patriot missile friendly-fire incidents in 2003 found that operators were trained to trust the auto-fire software, which would be necessary during high-volume missile attacks but contributed to misfires on their own aircraft and were unnecessary for low-volume incidents. The same effect exists in the medical field. Medical researchers ran several experiments that found radiologists using AI were biased toward the AI’s recommendations—which were intentionally incorrect for the experiments—and often produced incorrect diagnoses.\textsuperscript{11}

*Raven Sentry*'s creators were aware of the system’s weaknesses, especially in its nascent form and thus treated results as just one input requiring corroboration from traditional intelligence disciplines, such as classified imagery or signals intelligence. They also experienced difficulties as new analysts rotated into Afghanistan and educated them deliberately on *Raven Sentry*'s vulnerabilities so the new personnel would not blindly trust outputs. Basing decisions on multiple sources remains paramount to military intelligence, and an AI-produced report should be cross-checked whenever possible.

For all these reasons, leaders employing artificial intelligence must understand essential system functions. Since the innovation team developed *Raven Sentry* in a unit engaged in active combat, most of its leaders learned about the system as it developed. In peacetime, or as personnel rotate, growing an AI system alongside the leaders employing it might not be possible. Military leaders and analysts should train on how these tools work to understand their limitations and should read case studies of past successes and failures to mitigate this learning curve. Finally, they must remember that war is ultimately human, and the adversary will adapt to the most advanced technology, often with simple, common-sense solutions. Just as Iraqi insurgents learned that burning tires in the streets degraded US aircraft optics or as Vietnamese guerrillas dug tunnels to avoid overhead observation, America’s adversaries will learn to trick AI systems and corrupt data inputs. The Taliban, after all, prevailed against the United States and NATO’s advanced technology in Afghanistan.
Conclusion

The Resolute Support team took advantage of a culture open to innovation, the urgency created by the drawdown, and a unique set of resident capabilities and contracted skills to experiment with promising technology—but this progress was only the beginning. Further Army studies on intelligence processing and speeding the sensor-to-shooter loop have built upon this initial experiment. Advances in generative AI and large language models are increasing AI capabilities, and the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East demonstrate new advances. To remain competitive, the Joint Force must educate its leaders on AI, balance the tension between computer speed and human intuition, and create ecosystems within their organizations to enable this technology.\textsuperscript{12}

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Endnotes


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ABSTRACT: The Army has made insufficient progress in arming its officers with science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and management (STEM+M) knowledge. The contemporary battlefield is faster paced, technologically enabled, and data driven, requiring officers to possess more skills, knowledge, and experience. We examine the Army’s history with STEM education and show that, in terms of education, the current Army officer corps has fallen behind its requirements for technology-enabled forces and modern society. We conclude with recommendations on how the Army can close the STEM+M education gap through advances in higher education and adopting talent management practices.

Keywords: STEM+M, education, technology, human capital, higher education

Since the 1980s, America’s world ranking in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) has declined, placing our once unquestioned supremacy in technological innovation and application on par with or behind those of our economic and military adversaries. A recent warning from the Office of the Secretary of Defense Acquisition and Sustainment Industrial Policy declared the paucity of STEM-educated Americans may lead to a “permanent national security deficit.” The lack of STEM education extends to Army officers. In 2018, the Army Strategy assessed the strategic environment to include partners, allies, and adversaries leveraging “advanced capabilities” such as cyber, counter space, electronic warfare, robotics, and artificial intelligence (AI). This assessment has proven true in the Russia-Ukraine War, an artillery-heavy war interwoven with the burgeoning development and implementation of new and evolving technologies that demand innovative thinking, alliances, and strategy informed by STEM+Management (STEM+M).¹

“If you don’t like change, you’re going to like irrelevance even less.”
—Army Chief of Staff General Eric K. Shinseki, 2001²
Meanwhile, the evolving character of the American workforce demands greater proficiency in STEM+M, from the mechanic repairing a hybrid car with the aid of a computer and the IT professional building web applications to the general manager or military commander employing data-driven decision making. The decline in STEM+M education, as determined by the Department of Defense (DoD) and national education organizations, is not just a national security problem but one shared by US industry and business leaders. Both sectors recognize the significant gap between the number of jobs requiring a STEM+M background and education and the number of laborers possessing these skills—a shortfall set to exceed one million jobs this decade.³

The president, Congress, the Department of Education, the Department of Defense, and the Army have acknowledged this trend and instituted programs to build, support, and partner with educators to increase primary and secondary school STEM+M participation and engagement. While these and other programs (the most recent example being the Biden–Harris administration’s Department of Education “Raise the Bar: STEM Education for all Students”) exist to change the long-term trajectory of national STEM+M education over decades, the Army should not overlook emerging opportunities to solve its current STEM+M gaps internally.⁴

A higher level of STEM+M education within the officer corps provides three benefits:

1. it increases the technical knowledge required of Army officers in scientific, engineering, and management fields;
2. it enhances the development of problem-solving and critical thinking skills, such as human judgment, to address ill-defined, ambiguous, and complex, multilayered challenges; and
3. it fosters integrating new ideas, technologies, and social interactions into the greater context of officer professional development.⁵

Military officers, especially commanders and senior leaders, must be comfortable navigating this third pillar, as they often sit at the apex of driving innovative technological systems and connecting ideas, employing technology, and updating doctrine for present and future conflicts. These benefits demonstrate the value of STEM+M education within the officer corps and the value to the Army of having highly educated officers who are adept thinkers and problem solvers.
Technological advances have increased the number of professional specialties and subspecialties (such as hypersonics, drone and anti-drone technologies, cyber, AI, and systems integration) required to understand and apply new bodies of knowledge. The military must ensure its officers possess the requisite levels of STEM+M education to keep pace with the expanded scope and specialization and fully leverage its capabilities. The military needs an officer corps with a STEM+M education commensurate with the technical requirements of their work to meet the demands of an evolving security environment.

We will first examine some factors the Army considers when funding STEM+M education. Then, we will provide a brief history of STEM education in the Army and current statistics about STEM education in the officer corps to give readers the appropriate historical context and demonstrate that the Army is behind in STEM+M education. Third, we will discuss new and emerging STEM+M graduate education options the Army should use to help close the STEM education gap in the officer corps. Finally, we will conclude with recommendations for changes in personnel policy and educational opportunities that can help the Army close this gap.

**Framing the Army’s Officer Education Investment Decision**

To understand the factors that impact the level of STEM+M education within today’s officer corps, we will first provide a simple framework for the trade-offs the Army faces when choosing how much to invest in officer education. Some of these factors are unique to the Army, given its personnel policies and constraints. Others are universal, such as the expense of paying for employee education or the difficulty of investing in future needs when facing more pressing, near-term requirements. All, however, play a role in the Army’s past and future decisions regarding the education of its officer corps within the STEM+M fields.

When an organization cannot hire the skills or access the education it requires, it faces a human-capital investment decision. Like buying new equipment or constructing a larger building, the decision to build the requisite human capital comes at an opportunity cost. Unlike the other services, the Army does not have a centralized, enterprise-level office for managing its officers’ graduate education needs. Instead, the Army model is decentralized, relying on an individual organization (for example, the Corps of Engineers or the United States Military Academy), to define graduate education needs and select and fund employees to meet these needs. While this decentralization has advantages (such as allowing individual
branches more control over their educational investment), it often leads to an underinvestment in the overall STEM+M education the Army needs since the individual branch bears the full cost of losing officers when they pursue additional education that may have long-term benefits for the Army.6

The opportunity cost of creating its technology-enabled officers has been two-fold for the Army, in money and the allocation of manpower. Sending officers to graduate school requires that the Army pay for two- or three-year advanced degrees. While costs vary between programs and schools, the Army must allocate funding to this investment. Always in competition with the other programs, the DoD budget and requirements for everything from equipment modernization to personnel readiness are based on stagnant education requirements (the positions coded within the Army that require an advanced education have been nearly unchanged for 30 years) and advanced education funding has been insufficient to allow a substantial increase in STEM+M education within the Army to meet war-fighting requirements.

The time required to make this investment is more critical for the Army than money. Due to the Army’s previously immutable up-or-out promotion system capping the amount of time officers can serve at any grade, any time officers spend outside of operational assignments is time lost in filling operational assignments—the core of the Army mission. To invest in officers’ advanced education requires the Army to remove officers from the operational force and place them in a schooling status for two to three years.

This process has two effects. First, it removes officers from the available pool to fill required operational assignments. In times of excess officers, schooling costs little in terms of manpower. In times of an officer shortage, however, removing officers from the operational force to attend school poses a long-term (strategic) investment and a significant readiness cost. The second effect is the constraint on meeting critical career milestones for officer promotion. Until recently, the Army managed officers on a rigid time line built around its promotion system. From the officers’ perspective, advanced academic education meant a reduced opportunity to serve in career-enhancing operational assignments.7

The Army’s opportunity cost of investing in the advanced education of its officer corps has constrained its ability to grow its human capital. Under this limitation, the Army has made the strategic choice to allocate this human-capital development to the areas it needs today and to forgo developing human capital in areas that are more strategic in their potential return to the Army. The result is an Army able to meet its current manning requirements but lacking an officer corps that can identify, understand, and
integrate emerging technology and science into future readiness, doctrine, and war-fighting capabilities.⁸

Civilian graduate education for Army officers is of first-order importance for the Army to adapt to emerging threats, modernize continually, and incorporate new science and engineering advancements in a country that leads the world in technology. This education imparts analytical skills and critical thinking that complement and enhance what is learned in traditional military training. More importantly, this investment in STEM+M education connects officers with civilian professors and graduate students, helping create an Army more integrated with STEM+M expertise, advances, and uses. These elements generate a learning organization and an officer corps that is more comfortable, creative, agile, and adept in a technologically advanced environment.⁹

A History of Army STEM+M Education

The trade-offs and investments required to change the level of officer education are not new to the Army—neither are the debates about how much and what kind of education officers should possess. Since its inception, the Army has routinely questioned, researched, and enacted policies to adjust its officer corps’ educational requirements to keep pace with, and sometimes catch up to, technological advances and changes to its operational requirements.

The Early Years

Army civilian graduate education began in 1775 when “medical officers” began attending civilian schools to study as military physicians for the Continental Army. In 1802, the United States Military Academy was established to fulfill the nation’s engineering needs. Later, a review of Civil War operations pushed the Army to expand its civilian education to include medicine and technical fields like ballistics, metallurgy, and engineering sciences. Between the Civil War and World War I, the Army invested in civilian schooling in engineering and other technical fields to help its officer corps keep pace with technological advances.¹⁰

In 1916 and 1920, the National Defense Act authorized up to 2 percent of the Regular Officer Corps to undertake studies at technical, professional, or other educational institutions, though the actual number of officers sent to civilian schools was limited. They also mandated that this education meet officially recognized, specific Army requirements. The graduate training was intended to fill specific needs, not enhance officers’ academic credentials.
These policy restrictions and congressional cost-cutting measures reduced the number of officers entering graduate education from 1920 until World War II, when the Army recognized the need for “greater depth and breadth” of officer education.\(^\text{11}\)

**Post–World War II**

The Army’s Advanced Civil Schooling (ACS) Program has operated since 1946, in large part due to the Gerow Board recommendations. Since then, Army leadership has directed separate boards to determine officer corps’ educational needs. From the Gerow Board of 1945 to the Officer Personnel Management System XXI Board of 1996, the Army has studied and implemented recommendations involving officer education informed by manpower constraints as often as by recognizing the benefits of a more educated officer corps.\(^\text{12}\)

In 1949, the Department of the Army Board on Educational System for Officers (known as the “Eddy Board,” after Lieutenant General Manton S. Eddy, the board’s president) recommended that, “within reasonable limitations,” select officers be provided the opportunity to acquire graduate degrees via full-time study. This suggestion was part of a larger recommended plan that the Army maintain a sufficiently flexible military educational pattern for its commissioned personnel to ensure a smooth transition from peacetime to full mobilization.\(^\text{13}\)

The 1958 report of the Department of the Army Officer Education and Training Review Board (known as the “Williams Board”) supported raising the limit of Regular Army officers attending civilian schools to no more than 8 percent. The board reaffirmed that civil schooling was intended to enhance an officer’s value to the service. It also stated that the purpose required broadening—to include the intellectual development of potential liberal arts and social science leaders capable of coping with “the political, economic, scientific and social problems”—to coordinate the Army’s exploitation of advanced knowledge in the physical and social sciences and prepare officer specialists in various geographic, ethnic, and cultural areas of the world.\(^\text{14}\)

In January 1958, there were 567 officers (approximately 0.6 percent of total Army officers) enrolled in civilian colleges and universities under the ACS program. This number would continue to grow following the 1966 Haines Board that saw more than 900 officers (approximately 1 percent of total Army officers) pursuing full-time graduate education per year, producing an officer corps in which more than 28 percent possessed a master’s degree or higher.\(^\text{15}\)
The 1970s Army had an even greater need for officers with graduate degrees, and officers had a corresponding desire to obtain those degrees. The 1971 Norris Review cited the “educational explosion” evidenced by the significant increase in graduate enrollment in US schools. Major General Frank W. Norris provided some forward-looking advice to the Chief of Staff of the Army on the importance of a robust graduate education program, citing “highly education-conscious” junior officers and the need for the Army not to fall “behind the educational power curve of the nation at large.” During the Vietnam era, the Army’s commitment to graduate school deepened, with the number of validated slots growing fivefold. A fundamental shift in thinking occurred so that officers no longer perceived graduate school as only for specialists who chose school over a chance for promotion to the Army’s top ranks; highly competitive officers began pursuing master’s and doctoral degrees to strengthen their professional résumés.¹⁶

Still, the Vietnam War left many senior Army leaders with the perception that the Army had unsatisfactory officer training and that education was not producing officers with “the desired level of military competency.” There was a call for a renewed emphasis on military proficiency and tactical competence for the all-volunteer Army. The Government Accounting Office report of 1970 and 1978 Review of Education and Training for Officers report pointed to a “broad and permissive” graduate education policy and reemphasized the importance of producing officers with mastery of the knowledge and skills “unique to the military profession.” Consequently, civilian graduate education in the officer corps took a sharp downturn with the renewed emphasis on military skills, the rising costs of fully funded graduate education, and decreasing defense budgets. Officer graduate civilian education opportunities decreased again during the Army drawdown in the 1990s.¹⁷

Post-September 11 Attacks and Beyond

A US Army War College strategy research project paper from 2000 proclaimed, “The challenges faced by the Army of the 21st century will be vastly different from those faced over the last two hundred years.” Few appreciated how prophetic these words would become as Army officers wrestled with military operations requiring new and diverse educational requirements and thinking. The conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and now in Ukraine further underscore the importance of exploiting and defending against emerging systems and technology on the battlefield. To deliver a modern adaptive Army, STEM+M education is needed to guide systems development and integrate organizational innovation. Since 2000, the Army has made several formal attempts to address its understood shortfall in STEM+M officer education. In 2006, the Army established the Career
Satisfaction Program and Graduate School option as a retention incentive for officers that would increase advanced education within the officer corps; the Graduate School program was discontinued in 2013 after producing hundreds of advanced degrees. Ultimately, these two programs and similar efforts suffered the same challenges: funding, manning, and officer career timelines.  

The lack of a strategic, forward-looking, concerted effort to increase officer advanced education, coupled with the immediacy for manning the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has allowed the Army’s STEM+M graduate education level to remain essentially unchanged despite the increasing need for STEM+M knowledge within everyday tasks (civilian and military) and repeated reports of a lack of STEM+M education across labor sectors and our military. Figure 1 (below) shows the percentage of officers within the Army who hold a STEM+M degree, which has declined since 2000. This chart contrasts sharply with what is occurring in US colleges and the labor market, where STEM+M graduate education has doubled over the last decade and where the number of jobs requiring a STEM+M background has grown by more than 30 percent.

![Figure 1. Officer corps STEM+M over time](Source: Defense Manpower Data Center)

The consequences of this backslide are significant. Figure 2 (below) shows the percentage of officers, by rank, who possessed a STEM+M-related degree in 2020. Fewer than 14 percent of field grade officers and fewer than 16 percent of senior grade officers possess graduate-level STEM+M education.
At these levels, 55 percent of Army battalions and nearly 15 percent of brigades are unlikely to have any staff officers possessing advanced STEM+M degrees. This shortage will become more important as the use of disruptive technologies increases during military operations where critical decisions are under accelerated time lines.

Figure 2. STEM+M degrees distribution across grades, 2020
(Source: Defense Manpower Data Center)

The Emergence of New STEM+M Graduate Education Options

Over the past two decades, the Army has faced unprecedented technological change, yet advanced civil schooling—specifically, STEM+M education within the officer corps—has decreased. Now is the time for new thinking and better planning to ensure Army leaders and their staffs have adequate levels of resident STEM+M education to draw upon.

The traditional money, manning, and career time line constraints on the Army’s progress in educating its officer corps have been relaxed by recent changes in Army policy and STEM+M education. Changes in Army personnel policies and the delivery of talent management initiatives allow officers more flexibility in their career time lines. Likewise, the change in STEM+M education, traditionally only accessible through full-time graduate programs at brick-and-
mortar schools, is now less costly, more flexible, and more tailorable than ever at many schools. The Army has yet to leverage these new opportunities fully in ways that could reverse the current trend in education and provide the Army with the requisite amount of STEM+M education demanded by modern warfare and national defense policy.

Talent management and The Army People Strategy have unshackled the Army from many long-standing, rigid personnel practices. While breaking with tradition takes time, officers today can opt out of promotion boards and participate in service breaks (through the Career Intermission Program, or CIP), allowing them to pursue broadening assignments and educational opportunities that were previously unavailable due to career time line concerns. Officers and the branches that support them can pursue graduate education and create bold new alliances with educators, researchers, and Army and DoD laboratories leading innovation and disruptive technologies while remaining (or becoming more) competitive for future promotion boards. Leveraging these and similar policies and their potential for collaboration and partnerships will ensure that the Army has the thinking needed in its officer ranks to bring new technologies, skills, and ideas to the battlefield and national security strategy.

In addition to the Army’s recent policy changes to reduce the tradeoffs between education and career time lines for officers, the STEM+M educational environment has changed significantly, becoming less costly, more flexible, more accessible, and more tailored than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected higher-learning institutions, requiring them to invest substantially in distance-teaching capabilities and to develop new, more flexible curriculum models. Asynchronous classroom lectures, robust online platforms and learning management systems, and a shift in student demand have enabled greater responsivity to student needs and help deliver education where and when students need it at a fraction of a traditional program’s cost. For example, the University of Illinois offers its full MBA program online for a total tuition of $22,000, and Georgia Institute of Technology has pioneered a master’s degree in computer science for a total tuition of $7,000.

Well-regarded public and not-for-profit universities offer hundreds of graduate certificate and credentialing programs and provide officers flexibility and tailoring. Certificate programs provide individuals or organizations with a competitive advantage, benefiting officers who wish to upgrade their skills, make a career-field shift, or better position themselves for a promotion. These programs can educate officers in specialty areas such as hypersonics, cyber, engineering science, AI, and many others. Since there is no degree track, students can enroll directly in their preferred program, many of which are online, thus allowing students to learn where and when they choose. Students
can complete these programs in weeks or months while fully employed, allowing on-the-job innovative education exactly when needed. Adapting Army policy and culture to leverage these new educational opportunities can increase STEM+M education without the financial or workforce costs of the traditional two-year, full-time master’s degree model. In addition to the Army’s current ACS program, giving major commands additional funding for officer education would allow senior commanders to tailor their officers’ advanced education to fulfill their technological warfighting needs.\textsuperscript{21}

There are other benefits associated with the officer corps increasing its education through more modern education delivery modes. Universities have developed innovative programs and pedagogy to enhance educational opportunities in science and technology, making research and collaborative work more virtual, connected, decentralized, and multidisciplinary. Comfortability and learning to work in this world are as important as the education received.

As an example of these practices, the Purdue Military Research Institute practices the pedagogy of “purposeful design and inquiry” as a component of integrative STEM+M education. The integrative STEM+M education methodology is grounded in constructivism and decades of cognitive science findings. At Purdue University, groups of officers from various military branches collaborate in a “Joint” environment to increase diversity of thought and address strategically important operational problems. These research teams allow for diverse connections across unrelated fields, a hallmark of innovation. Purdue deliberately developed this educational strategy as an innovation initiative to position the university as a strategic national asset.\textsuperscript{22}

**Recommendations**

The changing nature of twenty-first-century work and warfare demands a more technologically adept workforce and increased STEM+M education. To its credit, the Army is not immune from this trend and has recognized these needs. Past internal Army policy constraints and limited educational options offered by US universities have hindered the Army’s ability to address its STEM+M gap. Opportunities are now available to increase the number of officers with STEM+M degrees in a more meaningful way. Money and manpower have traditionally constrained the Army, and changes in education and
Army manpower policy have reduced both. Given this fact, we recommend that the Army consider the following four actions (which we will discuss below).

- Increase the use of low- or no-cost civilian schooling options.
- Update current Army education requirements and decentralize graduate certificate program education.
- Incentivize officers to complete self-structured, developmental technical certificate programs to account for emerging technology and strategic needs.
- Support promotion board deferral and sabbatical programs that create career flexibility and can enable graduate education.

Low- or No-Cost Civilian Schooling

The current global environment and technology’s role in US national security have encouraged partnerships between academic, government, and private organizations to boost STEM+M education. Graduate programs at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Lincoln Laboratory and Carnegie Mellon University’s AI Professional Scholars program are two examples of partnerships that provide military officers access to top-tier STEM+M education while they study and work on defense-related topics with university scholars. Traditional US graduate programs routinely provide substantially reduced tuition to officers funded by the Army as a service to the country and to intersperse their graduate student population with mature, motivated practitioners. The Air Force Institute of Technology and the Naval Postgraduate School also provide excellent curricula at a fraction of the cost of equivalent degrees from civilian institutions. Nonetheless, the number of no-cost or reduced-cost educational opportunities exceeds the number of officers the Army is willing to send. For example, the Purdue Military Research Institute allows more than 100 active-duty military officers to attend their graduate program at no cost, yet the Army has never exhausted its allotment.

Update Army Education Requirements and Decentralize Graduate Certificate Program Education

The Personnel Management Authorization Document (PMAD) codes the number and type of officer education requirements governing Army advanced
education funding and slots. While this document’s requirements allow branches and major commands to manage graduate education programs toward its authorizations, it often prevents education outside its bounds. Major command and career fields should manage and fund broader STEM+M education opportunities to help fill the gap. Army ACS funds are currently focused on traditional graduate degree programs for validated Army requirements.

Still, today’s STEM+M requirements necessitate a more decentralized program to complement the ACS program, which can respond more quickly to senior commanders’ needs and take advantage of the modern education landscape. The Army can provide soldiers with non-degree-granting civilian education and training opportunities. For example, Signal officers can attend certificate programs that will keep them current on the latest cybersecurity advances or better themselves for their work requirements. Increasing unit education, funding for training, and broadening the ability to pay for civilian graduate certificate programs and other certificates would allow senior commanders to access the STEM+M-educated officers they need when they need them.

Encouraging the use of these decentralized funds would allow two things. First, it would create and imbed in commands the educational flexibility needed as missions and world events change, such as the Russia-Ukraine War and its dependence on hypersonics and drone, anti-drone technologies. Instead of waiting years to propose, validate, fund, and assign an increase in officers familiar with hypersonics, commanders can close this STEM+M knowledge gap as soon as they identify it. Second, it would help the Army understand the true demand for the type of education its officer corps needs. Instead of attempting to predict the number of hypersonic graduate education slots it might need in the future, the Army could use the signal generated by commands currently sending officers for certificates to guide their changes to the Personnel Management Authorization Document, ACS funding, and officer education.

Incentivize Self-Structured, Developmental Technical Certificates

Officers will pursue more educational opportunities if the costs decrease or benefits increase. The rise in educational opportunities requiring less than two years to complete, a decrease in residence requirements, and decreased costs for attendance work toward increasing STEM+M education in the Army’s officer corps. The Army, however, must also incentivize officers to pursue this education by demonstrating its benefits to the individual and the enterprise. The Air Force recently included and highlighted
officer education and degrees as part of its promotion board to encourage
the value of STEM+M in its ranks. Although the Army already includes
degree-granting education in its promotion board, it does not include
certificate and professional courses. Its Assignment Interactive Model
2.0 (also known as AIM 2), where commanders can select officers for their
unit, does let officers list their certificates and degrees, allowing commanders
to select them based on their educational background and expertise.
Finally, the Army’s Voluntary Transfer Incentive Program (or VTIP) can
incentivize STEM+M by encouraging officers looking to transfer to those
functional areas to pursue and complete certificates that will make them
more valuable to the functional area as part of the VTIP application.²³

Support Promotion Board Deferral and Sabbatical Programs

Despite legal and policy changes, Army culture has resisted
encouraging officers to defer their promotion board or take advantage
of the Career Intermission Program. Much of this resistance is likely
because these programs did not exist for most mentors who are advising
young officers and because of fear of the unknown consequences for those
officers’ careers. Nevertheless, uninformed fears should not be imposed
on officers for whom these programs may fit personal and professional
goals. Instead, commanders and mentors should encourage officers
to consider the opportunity we did not enjoy: the ability to pursue
advanced education and job expertise without jeopardizing an Army career.
Today’s officers can do both, and the Army would benefit from more
officers deferring their promotion board to pursue education, gaining the
human capital officers receive without sacrificing manning years in the
pursuit of education.

Conclusion

The Army no longer enjoys a clear technological advantage over its
competitors—a fact that has been acknowledged in National Defense Strategy
language as far back as 2017. Absent a clear hardware advantage, the US military
must ensure its human-capital advantage remains intact—starting with its
officer corps. Like past wars, future wars will be won by officers who are adept
at integrating emerging technologies and comfortable with technology that
allows for rapid adaptation and application in support of military strategy.
The benefits of a graduate-level education lie in intellectual growth, cognitive
development, and learning practical, relevant, and transferable skills that
officers can leverage throughout their careers. Complementing these efforts,
the Army should modernize its human capital (our people)—one of the remaining differentiators between our Army and those of our adversaries.

Constraints on the Army to grow its own STEM+M-educated officer corps have been loosened and present an opportunity for the Army to increase its science, technology, and management expertise significantly. In response to the COVID-19 lockdowns, US educational institutions and programs deliver high-quality, on-demand, asynchronous STEM+M education that increases access, is cost efficient, increases flexibility for learners, and provides rich learning experiences and careerlong learning opportunities. Civilian and military colleges and universities now offer low-cost alternatives to graduate school—four- or five-course certificate programs in technical fields, such as hypersonics, cyber, and energetics. Also, no-cost fellowships (at institutions like Purdue, military support programs, and others) have eliminated the cost of STEM+M education for certain individuals and the military. Army talent management has created flexibility in the officer promotion time line, reducing the trade-off between schooling and operational assignments. Unlike any time since World War II, conditions exist today for the Army to increase STEM+M education significantly, and with it, preparedness to fight and win on a future battlefield.

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Endnotes


6. Academic, Degree-Granting Graduate Programs. Return to text.


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Operating Successfully within the Bureaucracy Domain of Warfare: Part One

Jeff McManus

ABSTRACT: Policymakers in the defense community should approach bureaucracy as a sixth domain of warfare because, in doing so, they can successfully handle its processes and procedures. Part one of this two-part article discusses the first three (of 10) fundamentals these professionals must develop to navigate the bureaucratic domain and address and balance the complexities of the policy-making process for the overall benefit of US national security.

Keywords: bureaucracy, fundamentals, policy, politics, strategy

According to US military doctrine, there are fivewarfighting domains: land, maritime, air, space, and cyberspace. Students within US professional military education institutions are familiar with the parameters and precepts of battles and strategies in the land and maritime domains—from the battles of Megiddo and the Tet Offensive to Salamis and Jutland. The air domain emerged in the late eighteenth century when the French used the hot-air balloon invented by the Montgolfier brothers for aerial observation and reconnaissance during the Battle of Fleurus. Still, militaries did not realize the full scope of the air domain until the Wright brothers invented the airplane in 1903 and aerial combat began in World War I. Similarly, the space domain can trace its origins to the Chinese military’s use of rockets in the thirteenth century. After Wernher von Braun and his team developed the V-2 rocket for Nazi Germany, the world powers began to realize the full scope and potential of the space domain. Their discoveries powered the Space Race and the Soviet Union’s 1957 launch of Sputnik, the first successful satellite. Cyberspace, the most recent addition to the warfare domains, evolved from the integration of computers, communications, networks, and control systems in the late twentieth century. It provides the newest means by which militaries and other actors can inflict damage, destruction, and death. Further, the land, maritime, air, and space domains are bound by their physical nature. Cyberspace integrates numerous layers that span the first four domains, including the physical layer (for connection and transmission), but also includes functional layers related to the logical processes of software (code, logic, programs) and the specific use of data (information). For civilian and military policy professionals within the US national security policy enterprise,
an equally important sixth domain of warfare exists—the bureaucracy domain (illustrated in figure 1).

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**A military domain of warfare** is a medium that actors need to access, maneuver within and through, and dominate or control, in order to achieve a military objective.

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The **Bureaucracy Domain** is the intellectual space in national security where policy professionals develop, coordinate, and recommend courses of action or statements of guidance for the US government to review, approve, and implement through national-level strategies, policies, and programs to achieve national objectives.

**Figure 1. The domains of warfare**
(Source: Created by author)

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**The Bureaucracy Domain**

Although the Department of Defense has formally defined the five specified warfighting domains, it has not yet formally outlined the components of a domain—or what makes a realm or medium a domain—in the warfighting context. Domains have definite physical attributes and boundaries and can also have functional and logical elements, as in cyberspace. A military domain is a medium actors need to access, maneuver within and through, and dominate or control to achieve a military objective. Conflict occurs within each different type of domain in accordance with the unique elements of that medium. Adversaries struggle and contend with one another within and across warfighting domains, with moves and countermoves “based on the agency of competitors.” All domains have a uniquely human element, “encompass more than just their physical manifestations,” and therefore are “constrained by the actions and decisions of humans.”

Policy professionals should think about bureaucracy as a domain of warfare. Like any other warfighting domain, the bureaucracy domain has a physical environment (defined by the organizations it encompasses), which, for this article, refers to the policy components in the primary departments and agencies of the US executive branch. Like cyberspace, bureaucracy consists of functional layers—the processes and procedures governing
its operations. Bureaucracy’s organizational constructs and its functional processes and procedures make up the medium through which policy professionals can conduct and achieve results. We can, therefore, define the bureaucracy domain as the intellectual space in national security where policy professionals develop, coordinate, and recommend courses of action or statements of guidance for the US government to review, approve, and implement through national-level strategies, policies, and programs to achieve national objectives.

Like the other warfighting domains, people—the policy professionals of the national security environment—operate within the bureaucracy domain. For this article, the term policy professional refers to US federal civil service career members or US military officers assigned as policy advisers to mid-level or senior government decisionmakers in the US executive branch. These policy professionals assist the machinery of government. “Positively seen, a bureaucracy . . . is a group of individuals who operate by a set of rules and standards to achieve certain agreed upon goals; they are expected to be professionals, sometimes technocrats, who hold their positions by virtue of their expertise, education, or training and other unique characteristics of those professions.”

The bureaucracy domain in US national security policy making, ultimately led by the National Security Council, comprises the key departments and agencies of the executive branch. Given the scope and breadth of US national power in global affairs, including diplomacy, information, military, economic (DIME), financial, intelligence, and legal elements, policy professionals can and do wield significant influence in the development and implementation of US policy. To paraphrase Sun Tzu, policy professionals who operate in the bureaucracy domain need to recognize and appreciate that battles can and will be fought internally and won or lost in Interagency Policy Committee meetings before any fighting occurs with an enemy on any battlefield.

The 10 P’s of Policy

Like the other domains of warfare, policy professionals must understand the fundamental elements for operating within the bureaucracy domain to be adept personally and professionally in function and successful in practice. It remains important for civilians and officers at our professional military institutions to study and understand the strategic aspects of Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, Antoine-Henri Jomini, Carl von Clausewitz, Helmuth von Moltke, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Giulio Douhet, William “Billy” Mitchell, and emerging theorists
for the space and cyberspace domains. They must master the strategic aspects of the bureaucracy and the 10 key aspects (referred to here as the 10 P’s of Policy) to influence and make policy. This article outlines the first three; part two will explore the remaining seven. Navigating through the fundamentals can mean the difference between success and failure when operating within the US national security enterprise. The first three fundamentals, discussed below and highlighted in figure 2, are external to the policy professional and must be understood and handled carefully. The remaining seven fundamentals are internal, malleable, and deployable as a foundation for enhancing success.

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<td>Separation of powers</td>
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<td>Coordination</td>
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<td>Desired timeline</td>
<td>Win-win/win-lose</td>
<td>Integrity</td>
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Figure 2. The 10 P’s of Policy: fundamentals for successfully operating in the bureaucracy domain of warfare (Source: Created by author)

**Politics**

*Politics, the science or art of government, is the “use of intrigue or strategy in obtaining any position of power or control.”* Policy professionals must carefully operate as non-partisan actors within this political environment. Politics is a serious business by its nature, dealing with critical issues of significant consequence. At the core, the system has purposely embedded politics and partisan agendas into the internal interactions of every executive branch department and agency of the US federal government.

All presidential administrations have approximately 4,000 politically appointed positions (1,200 requiring Senate confirmation), which comprise the decision-making echelons of middle- and upper-level management of the executive branch. These individuals, most of whom are highly qualified, experienced, and knowledgeable, are purposely selected by the president or his senior advisers to advance the administration’s agenda.
Politics and partisan agendas do not stop with the internal dynamics of each executive branch department or agency; they are extended and expanded, moving across and between the interagency. Congress’s significant role in developing and implementing policy and the influence of think tanks, lobbyists, the media, and the public further compound the political and partisan aspects.

Deep-rooted partisan ideologies drive priorities, and policy professionals should operate within this environment in an objective, unbiased, nonpartisan way, helping political leadership develop options to meet challenges within the risk framework of what is suitable, acceptable, and feasible. Partisan ideology in our country is nothing new—it has existed since the founding of our Republic, addressed as “faction” by James Madison in Federalist Number 10. Regardless of political leanings or priority, be they left versus right, conservative versus liberal, or progressive versus establishment, policy professionals work within the political environment to fulfill their oath to “well and faithfully discharge” their duties. Power in politics is fungible, enhanced by success and reduced by failure. This last element regarding real or perceived failure is critical for policy professionals—losers never forget.

Dealing with politics can be difficult for policy professionals, as partisanship can quickly escalate to a blood sport. Recent examples include the House impeachment proceedings of then President Donald Trump, in part due to his alleged actions involving security assistance for Ukraine, or the numerous House committee investigations into the Benghazi attack and death of US Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans. Both examples show how career civilians or military officers can be subpoenaed, scrutinized, and subjected to the rigor (and vitriol) of extreme partisanship, sometimes at personal expense.

Another challenge faced by policy professionals in dealing with their political superiors is the say-do gap, which refers to situations when what senior decisionmakers say differs from what is actually (and intentionally) being done. Many reasons exist for this discrepancy between senior decisionmakers’ actions and words. Successful policy professionals quickly learn the differences, knowing when and when not to drive forward based on their superiors’ words.

Politics is an unavoidable and integral part of the bureaucracy domain. Federalist Number 51 articulated the importance of the checks and balances that are woven into the fabric of the US Constitution. The separation of power between the branches of government and between and among the various departments and agencies of the executive branch means antagonism is inherent to the policy-making and implementation process. Edward Samuel Corwin famously described the separation of powers as “an invitation to struggle.”
To navigate the bureaucracy domain effectively, policy professionals must learn their appropriate roles in the conduct of this political struggle.¹³

**Personalities**

*Personalities* reflect dealing with the complexities of the characteristics that distinguish a person. *Personality* is defined as the sum of the physical, mental, emotional, and social characteristics of an individual. Policy professionals are constantly forced to deal with the personalities of their leadership. Central to the policy-making process, senior decisionmakers' personalities drive who and what they are and how much risk they are willing (or unwilling) to take. Self-confidence, one side of the personality spectrum, trusts in one's expertise and experience as a guide, especially when there is a lack of complete information, which is often the case when making policy. Ego, on the other side, is being overconfident in one's ability and, therefore, exposed to potential blind spots. Ego can be particularly dangerous when combined with belittling of subordinates and staff, who are there to provide differing views and perspectives for consideration. While egos should be checked at the door, not everyone can or will do that. The negative ramifications of ego are real, since subordinates are afraid to tell the emperor he has no clothes.¹⁴

Relationships are key to analyzing personalities. Do senior decisionmakers tend to be confident and open, having broad professional networks, or are they cautious and closed, having few trusted advisers or keeping their own counsel? Networks matter, whether they are broad or narrow, and can have good and bad aspects. Good networks are based on trust and take time and effort to establish and maintain.¹⁵ A professional network must be sought out and cultivated and exists in three dimensions. The first dimension of a network is “up,” seeking leaders and mentors to guide and watch over one's career. The second dimension of a network is “horizontal,” with colleagues and peers, within which one can collaborate and operate. The last dimension of a network is “down,” developing protégés from the following professional generation to leverage and lead. Knowing and understanding the relationship and network structures of senior decisionmakers is as important as knowing one's own, if one desires to support them successfully in achieving their policy priorities.

The key to good relationships is trust, the “coin” of the bureaucratic realm of policy making.¹⁶ Without the trust of senior decisionmakers, policy professionals will not be included in the substantive discussions. While trust within the bureaucracy is generally assumed, it is not automatic and must be earned over time. Trust in a relationship always starts small, with the granting
of access to insights of little or no risk. Policy professionals must first demonstrate trustworthiness in the small things to be included in big ones.

As stated, trust must be earned before it will be granted in any real measure. While trust takes time to establish, it can be lost in a moment. Individuals can and do have long memories, and leaders who feel betrayed can hold grudges for a long time. While there is a time and place to challenge the boss, pushback must be tactful. Knowing the boss’s enemies is as important as knowing the boss’s friends. In some cases, policy professionals might serve as a bridge within these challenging relationships, but this role must be navigated carefully. Vengeance and vendettas in the bureaucracy domain are real, and successful policy professionals must avoid getting caught up in conflicts between superiors.

Pressure

Pressure is inherent in the policy-making process due to the nature of the issues addressed and debated. The higher policy professionals rise in the national security environment, the larger the issues and the bigger the strategic risks—lives are at stake. Current examples demonstrate the importance of key policy issues to US national security, such as the decision by the Biden-Harris administration to end US operations in Afghanistan, managing the global rise of China and strategic competition through diplomacy, or dealing with the response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Other examples of US strategic interests include constraining Iran’s destabilizing actions and working with allies to deter North Korea, all while supporting regional partners to combat violent extremism. These issues pose strategic opportunities and significant risks and consequences for US national security.

On top of the strategic nature of the issues, the pressure on policy professionals is compounded by the fast-paced tempo. In the global security environment, situations can and do develop into crises—and even catastrophes—in rapid succession. Policy professionals rarely have adequate time to prepare in an environment where tasks come with little warning and require professionals to develop possible options and courses of action. Notwithstanding the normal plans for national security decision making, in reality, the principals and deputies are often called together with limited agendas or background information. Policy professionals routinely prepare their principals, deputies, or other senior decisionmakers with the necessary information within days, or sometimes hours, to inform their decisions on the most complex and challenging situations. Tight timelines to develop options are inherently stressful, since the least-worse option is often the only real option available to decisionmakers.
The requirement to obtain coordination and achieve consensus is also a significant cause of pressure. Not only do options and courses of action need to be developed quickly, intra-office staffing within departments and agencies are also required, as recommendations work their way up an organization’s structure, allowing key offices to shape them based on the multitude of equities at stake. In most cases, there is not enough time for internal debate, so hard points and disagreements are usually elevated quickly. The usual lack of time for consensus building puts principals, deputies, and other senior decisionmakers in the position of adjudicating between opposing views, and the higher the level one rises within an organization, the more difficult it can become to be viewed as losing an argument. The policy stakes increase as the coordination process moves from the internal intra-organization debate into the inter-agency coordination environment. These policy debates almost always pit one department or agency against another, given the different available tools of national power, spanning diplomacy, economics, development, trade, and the military. Successful policy professional recognize that this process is an art, not a science, and work hard to build as much consensus as possible as options are refined, resource decisions are made, and lead-follow responsibilities are finalized.20

Finally, three interdependent elements of policy making compound the pressures of intra- and inter-departmental coordination for policy professionals: necessity, feasibility, and legality. The first and inherently difficult question of necessity—the “should we” question—is the primary domain of policy professionals. Feasibility—the “can we” question—is the domain of technical experts, program managers, and military operators. For any end that policy professionals think should be achieved, there must be sufficient capability and capacity, which come from resources—people, equipment, supplies, and money. The final necessary component to consider is legality, the “may we” question, which is the domain of the legal community, such as the lawyers working in various offices of the general counsel. The Interagency Lawyers Group must provide the identified statutory authority from Congress to the executive departments and agencies through authorizations or appropriations. All three questions must be answered before any option can be approved.21

**Conclusion**

Being in the room representing a federal department or agency during an interagency policy committee meeting or making policy proposals to senior decisionmakers behind closed doors can have significant strategic and operational impacts on US national security. To be successful, policy professionals must learn to navigate the critical elements of the bureaucracy domain.
This first article in a two-part series began by addressing the first three fundamentals of the 10 P’s of Policy—Politics, Personalities, and Pressure. These fundamentals are external to policy professionals and must be understood and navigated carefully for success. The remaining seven fundamentals are influenced internally, are in the policy professionals’ control, and can be developed and deployed as a foundation for enhancing success. Principles, Perspective, Prediction, Persuasion, Privacy, Programming, and Permanence will be addressed in the second part of this series. Taken as a whole, the 10 P’s of Policy allow policy professionals to maintain trusted access to senior decisionmakers, provide reliable and objective advice, give realistic options and recommendations, and speak truth to power in a manner that will be well received and an overall benefit of US national security.

Jeff McManus

Dr. Jeff McManus is an assistant professor of strategic studies in the Department of Distance Education at the US Army War College. He educates and develops civilian and military leaders for service at the strategic level while advancing their knowledge in the global application of Landpower. He is an experienced policy professional who has worked in the Department of Defense for 36 years, including more than two decades as a civilian policy professional within the Office of the Secretary of Defense.
Endnotes


The Army is transforming. While today’s senior leaders have set the service on a modernization path, future problems belong to the next generation—and we must own them. Professional writing is a way to do so, a tool enabling leaders of any rank to influence change at the macro level by contributing meaningfully to Department of Defense (DoD) conversations. Those embarking on this challenging adventure are not alone; writing is a team sport. The journey is as important as the destination, and most who take up this charge find participation in professional dialogue highly rewarding.

A Call to Professional Discourse

Army leaders promote the revitalization of professional discourse within the service, mainly through the service’s 16 trade journals. In September 2023, Chief of Staff of the Army General Randy A. George, Training and Doctrine Commander General Gary M. Brito, and Sergeant Major of the Army Michael R. Weimer highlighted the service’s complex and uncertain environment. To help the Army navigate this environment, these senior Army leaders challenged soldiers to share “innovative tactics, techniques, and procedures more widely than just within your unit or group of colleagues.” They outlined an initial plan for institutional changes to enable this desired dialogue and steward the journals, subsequently refining and codifying it as a four-point platform managed by the Harding Project:

1. Modernizing venues and emphasizing a web-first and mobile-friendly format.
2. Updating archives to make historical journal articles more accessible.
3. Increasing staffing for the journals, including creating competitively manned editor assignments for uniformed personnel.
4. Incorporating professional journals into established Army education requirements, like adding a military journal citation requirement for writing assignments.
The movement, however, depends on the force’s bottom-up work. So, the Harding Project team is developing a Military Review “How To” special edition to help inexperienced writers, and the Army Chief of Staff publicly recognizes three articles per month in the Army University Press, in addition to sending authors a coin and a personal note congratulating them on their work. Moreover, the Army’s most senior leaders issued an unambiguous call to action: “Write for your branch magazines and professional bulletins. Look for opportunities to volunteer as an editor. Spread the word. And join us as we commit to renewing one of our Army’s greatest assets, our culture of professional military writing.” Still, many potential authors will hesitate to answer this call, and first-time authors may need a mentor’s push to begin the process.

**Professional Writing Is a Team Sport**

I would never have begun my professional writing journey without the encouragement of those around me. In 2015, I expressed concern to my boss that the artillery community’s liaison teams were undermanned. My leadership agreed and challenged me to craft an argument for the community, offering support as I wrote and published my first article. My career would likely have taken a drastically different path without that invaluable mentorship and encouragement. Because of this first experience and others since, writing has become a defining characteristic of who I am, personally and professionally.

I experienced something similar while completing the Art of War Scholars program at the Command and General Staff College. Near graduation, the director informed students of a long-standing informal graduation requirement to submit out our research for publication to share our findings with the broader DoD community. He proudly displayed a tracker highlighting each article’s submission and publication status and shared that information with previous graduates. This process incentivized professional discourse at the individual level and created a cultural shift for our small group. Many officers were surprised at their success.

Professional writing mentorship can come in many forms—from basic encouragement and support to broad, structured programs incentivizing leaders to write. For a more personal approach, mentorship can simply involve writing an article together. One of my most rewarding writing experiences was coauthoring an article with my first sergeant about our leadership philosophy. The project forced some difficult conversations as we codified our exact goal for the unit. Writing together also created a unique bond, and the program we developed was something we both believed in, not just an initiative the other supported.
Regardless of one’s role, coauthoring is an educational experience. I have been in the lead, coached through the process, and on a team of peers. Group writing shaped me as a writer, and I am proud I helped others cross the finish line with their first publications. Each project was rewarding and changed my relationships with the other authors, regardless of whether they were superiors, subordinates, or peers. Some articles were read more than others, but we took the conversation beyond our little circle every time, and the accomplishment of joining an important DoD discussion has intrinsic value.

Conclusion

Publishing articles has opened doors for me professionally, made me a confident writer, and helped me grow as a subject matter expert in niche areas. Professional writing has become a part of my identity as a military officer, and I strongly encourage everyone to take up the Army Chief of Staff’s charge. Beyond the personal satisfaction of doing one’s part, the DoD community needs to know what military leaders of all ranks think. Our Army leaders recently stated, “...[W]e cannot solely depend on the thoughts and voices of senior leaders in high command, as we can assure you: we do not have all the answers.” Professional discourse will shape the direction the Army is headed, even if it is only a minor adjustment. More soldiers must look to mentors or teammates to gain the courage to take a stance and add to the conversation. Publishing your ideas now will help shape the future environment the next generation will lead; future leaders must contribute to this vital dialogue.

Brennan Deveraux

Major Brennan Deveraux is an Army strategist and an Art of War scholar serving as a national security researcher at the US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute.
Endnotes


The United States is experiencing an era characterized by civil-military tension and conflict. From the increasing politicization of the military, to declining public trust in the military and recruiting crisis, to the erosion of norms meant to protect civilian control and a perceived lack of accountability within the profession, healthy civil-military relations in America today are under assault. In many ways, these challenges are to be expected—civil-military relations after major wars have never been free from conflict—but the degree of friction and long-term trend lines have drawn the attention of currently serving and retired senior leaders. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Q. Brown Jr. has prioritized regaining public trust in the profession of arms, and Chief of Staff of the Army General Randy A. George has named “strengthening the profession” as one of his key issue areas. Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth has similarly stated that modernizing the recruiting and retention mission is a top priority for her, while the National Security Strategy mentioned healthy civil-military relations for the first time as key to maintaining American security and power.

In response, the US Army War College established the Civil-Military Relations Center (CMRC) in summer 2022 to “sponsor and promote the development of a healthy, sustainable relationship between the American military, society, and political leaders through education, research, and outreach.” In two years, the center has hosted two major conferences, attracted more than 20 faculty affiliates, live streamed 25 workshop sessions, published a podcast series with the War Room, cosponsored a writing series with the United States Military Academy, and reshaped civil-military relations education at the US Army War College. There is still much to do, however—particularly in research and writing. In this corner, I will highlight the terrific new work and research being done by scholars and practitioners alike and will also identify some gaps. Where can scholars contribute—both empirically and normatively—to the national security debate in civil-military relations? What do practitioners need to know about new
thinking in civil–military relations? This corner, therefore, will further bridge the gap between the academy and the Beltway to improve each endeavor.²

Civil-Military Relations in Modern War

I would be remiss, however, if I did not kick off this corner with a discussion of the CMRC’s premiere event: its annual conference. On May 3–4, the center hosted more than 100 scholars, practitioners, and civil–military relations students for a two-day conference on “civil–military challenges in modern war.” The conference theme intentionally placed civil–military relations at the heart of the discussion about the future of war—a conversation that too often sees challenges as technical or operational problems to be solved. Instead, the CMRC encouraged scholars and practitioners to change the debate and think about modern war as a series of strategic civil–military problems, from the changing nature and need for recruiting to the integration of civilian and military infrastructure accelerated by new domains like space and cyber to the impact of a polarized public on America’s ability to wage war effectively.³

As the Army struggles to meet end-strength numbers for the third year in a row, and with propensity and fitness to serve appearing to be at all-time lows among American youth, we asked scholars and strategists to consider the question: Who fights modern wars? Given the significant demographic and social trends in American society today, what kind of people will the Army need to attract? What role can autonomous weapons play, and what functions can the military outsource to civilians? These critical questions will determine whether the military is prepared to deter and, if necessary, fight and win the nation’s next war—yet there is a remarkable lack of research and evidence upon which policymakers can draw to inform their choices.⁴

We also raised issues related to integrating civilian and military infrastructure and technology in modern war. The introduction of space and cyber as warfighting domains raises essential questions about the degree to which the military and civil society are in tension during modern war—particularly given the commercial sector’s reliance on technologies with military applications like GPS, the Internet, and satellite communications. To implement its first-ever industrial strategy, the Department of Defense will need to consider private-sector incentives and how the future of war may impact the commercial space. It may even need to adjust its own strategy to ensure that the civil–military relationship helps, rather than hinders, America’s ability to wage war.⁵
Finally, we asked scholars to think about modern war at home. The United States is the most politically polarized it has been since the 1960s, and the rise of social media and subsequent disinformation campaigns have led to a significantly contested information environment. What risks do domestic political challenges pose to military effectiveness? How should military and civilian leaders adjust to ensure the United States can sustain the public’s trust and fight effectively? While it is often tempting for military leaders to ignore domestic politics for fear of partisanship accusations, research shows that domestic politics and public opinion can significantly affect a country’s military strategy and ability to wage war effectively. We argued that any discussion of modern war must assess how that war may unfold at home.6

Going Forward

The May conference raised critical questions and highlighted gaps in the existing research and the national security debate on modern war, but it cannot be the end of the conversation. With posture season upon us, military leaders and civilian principals in Congress must recognize that preparation for modern war requires strengthening the civil–military relationship and identifying how civil–military discord may compromise deterrence and effectiveness. Leaders across the Department of Defense should require civil–military relations education across professional military education institutions—particularly at the senior service college and general officer levels. We need more research on the sources of the recruiting crisis, the relationship between industry today and the military, and on ways to strengthen and develop norms that can combat politicization in all its forms.

Carrie A. Lee

Carrie A. Lee is the director of the US Army War College Civil-Military Relations Center and chair of the Department of National Security and Strategy. Her award-winning research and writing has appeared in publications such as *Foreign Affairs, Texas National Security Review, Journal of Conflict Resolution, War on the Rocks*, and the *Washington Post*. She is a term member with the Council on Foreign Relations, contributing editor for War on the Rocks, and an adjunct fellow with the Center for a New American Security. She received a PhD in political science from Stanford University and a bachelor of science degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
Endnotes


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Exploring the Nexus of Military and Society at a 50-Year Milestone

Patricia M. Shields
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ABSTRACT: There is an ongoing dependence and tension between the military and the society it protects. This article examines the relatively new “military and society” field using the 50-year anniversary of the journal Armed Forces & Society as a focal point. This dynamic field is influenced by world events, cultural trends, and politics. Civil-military relations is at the heart of the discourse. An international and interdisciplinary journal, Armed Forces & Society reflects the changing nature of the field over the last 50 years. I have edited the journal since 2001 and bring this experience to the discussion.

Keywords: civil-military relations, Morris Janowitz, Afghanistan War, all-volunteer force, postmodern military

Armies and societies are connected within a common culture and across time. The ancient Greek epic poem, the Iliad, well demonstrates this connection. This link becomes apparent when soldiers return to their communities as veterans. It also manifests at the strategic level when generals advise or take orders from civilian leaders. The formal and systematic scientific study of the relationships and connections between the military and society, however, is relatively new. This contemporary field of study (military and society) traces its origins to World War II and the early Cold War period.

The military and society field of study is about 80 years old. The academic journal Armed Forces & Society has reached a half-century milestone in 2024. Having edited the journal since February 2001, I will reflect on the evolution of the field. This important area of inquiry lies at the intersection of military and society and involves the policy-informed empirical and theoretical concerns that arise as “military and civilian sectors negotiate their shared role in society and on the world stage.” Its wide berth incorporates “all aspects of relations between armed forces, as a political, social and economic institution, and the society, state, or political ethnic movement of which they are a part.”

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This interdisciplinary field of study claims military sociology and the civil–military relations subfield of political science as founding pillars. Early works include Samuel Stouffer’s landmark 1949 book, *The American Soldier*, which surveyed more than 500,000 World War II soldiers. Samuel P. Huntington’s influential *Soldier and the State* helped define the Army’s position on civil–military relations for many decades and is a staple in Army professional military education. These two founders illustrate the field’s wide scope, which ranged from the combat soldier to relationships between generals and presidents.2

The field grew and reached maturity throughout the Cold War. The Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, the first academic professional organization devoted to this topic, emerged in the 1960s. In 1974, against the backdrop of the divisive Vietnam War’s conclusion, the new all-volunteer force (AVF), and the twilight of the Cold War, professor and veteran Morris Janowitz founded *Armed Forces & Society* journal. This international and interdisciplinary journal brings the theories and systematic, rigorous empirical methods of social science to questions that connect the Army and society. It also includes soldiers’ voices, such as those of retired Army General David Petraeus and the late retired Army Reserve Colonel James Griffith.3

The European Research Group on Military and Society was founded in 1986. Sweden and Israel also established research organizations devoted to this topic in 2012 and 2011, respectively. In 2020, Springer’s open-access online *Handbook of Military Sciences*, financed by the Norwegian Military, devoted a major section to “Military and Society.” Clearly, this field of study has matured since the 1960s when Janowitz first gathered a handful of scholars to share their work.4

Societal shifts such as the civil rights and women’s movements and the growth of social media have influenced this dynamic field. War and Black Swan events, like the September 11 attacks, have also expanded the field in scope and nature. I view the journal’s scope or mission using the metaphor of a dartboard: the most salient subject matter is in the center—soldiers’ and veterans’ welfare, the reserves, recruitment and retention, civil–military relations, military professionalism, and military families are bull’s-eye topics. Other important examples include sexual misconduct, ethics, unit cohesion, casualties, contractors, public opinion, force health, and domestic military deployment during a crisis. *Armed Forces & Society* is also defined by the topics it does not cover, such as strategy, tactics, and weapons system design. The journal’s 50th anniversary offers an opportunity to examine this timeless and modern field of study’s nature and contributions.

Events like the transition from conscription to an all-volunteer force have an immediate impact but also have surprising rippling effects across decades. Over time, published research and commentary can capture and elucidate
past policy innovations’ unanticipated consequences. This article identifies and emphasizes triggering events and explores how they interact with the security environment and manifest as institutional change.

My reflection unfolds chronologically, beginning with the Vietnam War’s passion-filled ending and the AVF’s beginning. The second section explores the immediate end of the Cold War and the late 1980s a key transitional time. Third, I examine how the post–Cold War military was tested after the September 11 attacks, focusing especially on the impact of the long, so-called small wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Next, civil-military relations trends are examined. The conclusion discusses emerging topics within the military and society field of study, such as the simultaneous overlapping of police and military roles worldwide.

From Vietnam to the End of the Cold War

The Vietnam War evoked protest for many reasons. The pervasive risk of the draft drew universities and their students into center stage. It was no accident that *Armed Forces & Society* was born at the end of the Vietnam War. The selective service college deferment policy inadvertently filled campuses with men trying to avoid a tour in Vietnam. The resultant anti-war movement on college campuses eventually erupted into violent protests and made it challenging for military academics, like faculty at the United States Military Academy, to find publication outlets. Janowitz established *Armed Forces & Society* to provide current and future scholars with an academic journal focused on military-related social science questions. While the Vietnam War protesters called for the draft to end, influential conservative economists led by Milton Friedman supported ending conscription for different reasons. They argued the draft interfered with the free market by mandating that citizens serve at a below-market wage. Econometric studies also supported the volunteer force’s viability. The new volunteer force represented a cosmic shift in military manpower policy that reverberated through the pages of *Armed Forces & Society*.

Almost immediately, the Army’s demographic makeup changed. Significantly more women and minorities filled its ranks. During conscription, women were restricted to 2 percent of the force and segregated into organizations like the Women’s Army Corps. They were also channeled into work that was traditionally dominated by women, such as nursing. The Army faced shortfalls in recruitment during the volunteer force’s early years. Female soldiers closed a crucial gap. Societal changes like increased female labor force participation and the women’s movement encouraged young women to consider
the Army as a career choice. In 2022, women made up 15.6 percent of the active-duty Army. During the draft period, Black soldiers accounted for approximately 18 percent of the force. By 1977, four years after conscription ended, 31 percent of Army recruits were Black, perhaps unsurprisingly. During the Korean War—well ahead of the civil rights movement—the military dropped Jim Crow-type policies and opened opportunities to African-American men. The Army had less discrimination and offered more choices to young Black men than the civilian labor force, particularly in the South. The econometric studies had not predicted that the all-volunteer Army would have proportionally more women and minorities than the draft-era Army. Starting with the first issue, *Armed Forces & Society* has been filled with AVF studies.

The all-volunteer force also changed incentive structures and the nature of the institution. Military sociologist Charles Moskos ushered in a practical theory that captured these changes. In 1977, he wrote a landmark article proposing a developmental model to help the Army navigate the changes. He showed how the military was transforming from an “institutional” organization committed to “values and norms” or a “purpose transcending individual self-interest in favor of a presumed higher good” to an “occupational” organization dominated by the marketplace and monetary rewards. This practical theory provided a useful lens through which to view these changes and has guided the design of recruitment and retention strategies in militaries around the world. As it turns out, soldiers’ motivations to join and serve are a combination of transcendent values and marketplace rewards.

During the draft era, the Army discouraged enlisted men from marriage and fatherhood. The enlisted men and women of the volunteer force brought their families with them. Mady Weschler Segal, in a 1986 *Armed Forces & Society* article, used the “greedy institution” model to capture the nature of the stresses and strains facing Army families. Greedy institutions seek “exclusive and undivided loyalty.” Soldiers with families are caught between two such institutions—their families and the Army. This predicament is particularly stressful for military women and Army wives, who generally shoulder greater responsibility for managing the household and childcare. This influential article helped shape policy and research on military families.

The End of the Cold War until the September 11 Terrorist Attacks

The world changed in the late 1980s as the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact began to dissolve. The bipolar world of great-power conflict faded, as did the
threat to Europe. As the need for mass armies declined, most Western militaries stopped relying on conscription. Many changes the United States experienced as it transitioned to a volunteer system also began to emerge in European militaries, such as the increase in women among their ranks.¹¹

During this period, the Army began to tackle more complex gender issues—sexual harassment and integration of the LGBTQ community into the force. In the 1980s and 1990s, the US gay rights movement pressured the Army to eliminate its ban on homosexuals. An in-between policy called “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was invented and implemented. Following events like the Tailhook scandal, concern about sexual harassment and assault surfaced more prominently. *Armed Forces & Society* chronicled the nature of these evolving gender-related challenges.¹²

Although the threat of a world war appeared to be over, militaries around the globe were facing a different, more varied, and often asymmetrical threat environment. Expeditionary forces traveled to remote locations where they confronted non-state opponents, including terrorists, and engaged in complicated counterinsurgency operations. Other militaries managed the peace as they encountered warlord militias, terrorists, hostile host nationals, and criminal gangs. Operation Restore Hope in Somalia is illustrative of these phenomena. Small wars became the norm.¹³

By the time the post–Cold War period reached a 10-year milestone, military institutions worldwide had adapted to the new environment. These post–Cold War militaries used volunteers, engaged in new missions, belonged to a multinational effort, and were led by international organizations. Scholars referred to this emerging transformed force as the “postmodern military.” All four traits characterized the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, which soon became the longest and most serious test of the West’s postmodern military.¹⁴

**The Afghanistan War Years**

By the time of the September 11 attacks, the Western post–Cold War military transformation had mostly solidified. By 2001, the Western all-volunteer forces had matured and proven themselves. A peacetime military should lay the foundations to ensure the system will not jeopardize performance during war. The transformative Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts seriously strained US and NATO forces. In this section, I will focus on insights that can be gleaned from *Armed Forces & Society*. My tenure as editor began in February 2001 and included the entire Afghanistan War, giving me a unique and long vantage point.¹⁵
The Volunteer Force: The People

The Afghanistan and Iraq wars affected AVF servicemembers and the institution charged with achieving victory. The wars placed significant stress on the all-volunteer force. *Armed Forces & Society* articles revealed how the soldiers who served and their families bore a particular burden. During the Vietnam War, conscription spread combat risks and dangers. The smaller post–Cold War all-volunteer force repeatedly required soldiers to return to the combat arenas. Health, family, and veterans’ articles chronicled the impact of multiple deployments on the people who served and their loved ones.

Veterans are at the intersection of the military and society. They leave service transformed as they navigate the transition into civilian life. *Armed Forces & Society* captured all aspects of this tradition, including serious problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), physical disability and families ill prepared to cope with loved ones hurt by deployments. By the early years of these wars, female veterans had reached a critical mass. The US Department of Veterans Affairs was unprepared for the unique nature of women’s health issues. In addition, female veterans faced higher levels of disability compared to their male counterparts.\(^\text{16}\)

Families of active duty and reserve personnel bore the burden of increased multiple deployments. Spouses and the children of servicemembers across the countries that fought challenges such as domestic violence, depression, and living with a loved one with PTSD. Articles in *Armed Forces & Society* analyzed these subjects and stress mitigators, including childcare, relationship quality, effective leadership, community support, and positive emotions.\(^\text{17}\)

The dangers of deployment to Afghanistan and Iraq took lives and left returning soldiers with missing limbs, PTSD, head and brain injuries, and muscular-skeletal systems disorders. Health is an umbrella topic that intersects with veteran and reserve status, race, and gender. For example, Scott Landes, Andrew London, and Janet Wilmoth discovered that veterans with service-related disabilities had shorter lifespans than their nonveteran counterparts. Mental health issues such as stress, suicide, PTSD, stigma, and problematic behaviors were also studied.\(^\text{18}\)

The All-Volunteer Force: The Institution

The literature on health, veterans, and families focuses on the experiences of individuals or their families. The Army institution also transformed through more extensive reliance on reserve forces and private security contractors. During the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, reserve force engagement evolved
from occasional to “routine full-time military service in support of national
security objective.” Reserve servicemembers, like veterans, lie at the
society-military intersection. These soldiers are “transmigrants” who traverse
military and civilian worlds and often feel like outsiders in both. The betwixt
and between status led to questions about reserve servicemember identity.
Combat stress and the challenges of building relationships with active-duty
servicemembers also complicated life inside the unit. 19

Given the reserve force’s greater involvement in the mission, studies examined
questions commonly associated with active-duty forces, such as enlistment and
retention within the United States and allies like Great Britain. In addition,
articles examined sexual harassment among female reserves and family struggles
with mental and physical health. Before 2000, Armed Forces & Society articles
on the reserves were sparse. In 2024, published studies examining all facets of the
reserve experience have become commonplace, and more will follow. The three
reservists killed in Jordan in January 2024 are fallen witnesses to reservists’
expanded presence and service. 20

Reservists, like their active-duty counterparts, receive a paycheck from the
US government. War-zone contractors are paid by private companies that
support military initiatives and profit from war. The Afghanistan and Iraq wars
propelled contractor use into the combat zone. As contracting work became more
routinized, Armed Forces & Society explored its effectiveness and the hidden risks
and costs of substituting contractors for active-duty military members.

The research on contracting is challenging because contractors have
“proprietary rights” and do not have to make basic data public (for example,
employee demographics). We cracked this barrier with studies on contractor
motivation, medical care, and contractors as “new veterans.” Ori Swed
et al. (2020) creatively used public data on contractor deaths to study
their demographics. 21

Asymmetric, Multilateral War

Up until this point, the discussion has focused on the ways the Afghanistan
and Iraq wars influenced the institution and its people. We will now
consider how these protracted, asymmetrical, and unconventional small wars
influenced the spaces where the military and society interact. These wars
forced the Army to attend to conventional and unconventional or asymmetric
warfare simultaneously. The Army’s shift toward asymmetric warfare can
be observed in the updated field manuals Stability Operations (FM 3–07) and
Counterinsurgency (FM 3–24). Leaders also recognized that the Army operated
in theaters of war where the course of conflict was increasingly influenced
not only by the opposing hostile force but also by operations among the local civilian population. These smaller but intense wars widened the landscape in which society and the military interact. Counterinsurgency operational goals, such as rebuilding a Taliban-free Afghanistan and changing hearts and minds, tested NATO’s multinational International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in daunting new ways.\textsuperscript{22}

These challenges led scholars from allied countries to write articles on topics related to their unique experiences operating in a small war “among the people.” René Moelker’s article describing the Dutch approach to asymmetric conflicts illustrates the diverse ways ISAF forces responded to such a war. American, British, and Canadian forces operated from fortified compounds; the Dutch, in contrast, were “inviting the Taleban round to tea” in their “mud-walled . . . multi-functional qalas.”\textsuperscript{23}

The small wars’ expeditionary environment generated additional articles that challenged assumptions about traditional functions, such as appropriate military skills, training, leadership, multilateral management, and key concepts, such as the nature and definition of victory and power. When war is close to the people, soldiers can be called to assume police functions to keep order in unconventional war zones. Remi Hajjar argues that diplomatic or peacekeeper competencies should also be added to the post–Cold War warrior skill set. Collaboration became a focus of analysis as multilateral forces composed of multiple and diverse cultures operated in fluid environments. Scholars examined various aspects of this environment, including cultural stress and cross-cultural competencies (such as negotiation skills and language proficiency). Bastian Giegerich and Stefanie von Hlatky showed how military and strategic cultures influenced outcomes in provincial reconstruction teams.\textsuperscript{24}

Armies also faced the challenges of working and building relationships with the local population. Celestino Perez explored ethical and political responsibilities toward the “other,” or the “person who lives where troops are deployed.” Effective communication with the Afghan people depends on linguistic competencies. The Army relies on local interpreters to facilitate dialogue and engage local populations. Dutch scholars found that cultural competencies among ISAF military personnel led to better relationships with Afghan interpreters. Local linguists also facilitated communication during advising missions. Hajjar found that leaders of Army advising missions often use linguists as peacekeepers, diplomats, innovators, and subject matter experts. Linguists, interpreters, and their loved ones comprised a significant portion of the Afghan citizens who rushed to the Kabul airport in the final days of the evacuation.\textsuperscript{25}
Assuredly, the 20-year Afghanistan War has left and will continue to leave an imprint on the Army. For example, soldiers who are now being promoted to colonel and lieutenant colonel spent their formative years in an Army engaged in this long small war. The chaotic and ignominious US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 prompts us to ask how we as a society can make sense of this painful experience.

*Armed Forces & Society* responded to this question by devoting a special issue to the Afghanistan War (published online in 2022 and in print in 2023). The 13 commentaries of the “Perspectives on the Afghanistan War” issue, written by an international array of scholars, examined various topics, including why the United States lost, lessons learned about state building, the impact of banning negotiations with terrorists, NATO’s struggle with accurate and effective intelligence, private outsourcing, and civilian casualties, among others.26

The introduction to “Perspectives on the Afghanistan War” encouraged readers to continue the dialogue through critical commentaries. In October 2023, we received a response from three young Afghan scholars in Kandahar and Kabul. Voices from Afghanistan and other regional actors were clearly missing from our initial discourse, and their perspectives were welcome. After a blind peer review process, we accepted their commentary, which was published in early 2024.27

I was struck by three key points in their commentary. First, Afghanistan has historically defeated larger expeditionary foes. To Afghanistan, the United States was just another world power defeated in the “graveyard of empires.” Second, Islamic teachings informed Afghanistan’s approach, providing Afghanistan with a much longer timeline for victory than that of the West. Third, while the authors appreciated America’s need to respond to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, they noted that the deaths of thousands of innocent Afghan civilians over the course of the war eroded and undermined local support for anti-Taliban measures. The value of skill sets such as cultural competency, state building, and winning hearts and minds deteriorated as locals watched their uncles, brothers, and sisters become collateral damage. The Western presence became the primary cause of resistance. The futility of developing effective strategies (such as counterinsurgency) in the presence of ongoing innocent civilian casualties should be a key lesson learned from the Afghanistan experience.28

We will also use the journal’s website to aggregate all *Armed Forces & Society* articles dealing with Afghanistan as a resource for future scholars and policymakers. We believe it is important to keep a focus on and make sense of the Afghanistan War. Ukraine and the contemporary threat environment
might overshadow lessons learned from this longest US war. We hope our focus on Afghanistan will help ensure this war is not forgotten.

Civil-Military Relations

As indicated in the introduction, the military and society field of study traces its origins to military sociology and a branch of political science known as civil–military relations. Up to this point, I have emphasized the sociological perspective. This section focuses on the political science viewpoint.

John C. Binkley recently defined “American civil–military relations” as “a catch-all phrase for those legal and cultural interactions that exist between two sets of partners: the civilian leadership, starting with the president as commander-in-chief and the military professionals that advise that leadership and carry out its orders.” One facet of civil–military relations not caught in this definition concerns a “gap in attitudes, values, perspectives, opinions, and personal background” between the American public and the military and how that gap influences “military effectiveness and civil–military cooperation.” These two factors—the relationship between civilian and military leaders, with an emphasis on the president and the various gaps between the military and public perceptions—are at the heart of informed civil-military relations.

For half a century, Armed Forces & Society has published lively commentaries and hundreds of articles on all facets of civil–military relations around the globe, including the ethics of officer resignation, coop-proofing, the civil–military gap, case studies assessing civil–military relations in every world region, officer education, the behavior of generals, such as Mark A. Milley and Eric K. Shinseki, and the influence of wars and crises like the Arab Spring. Perhaps more importantly, the journal has been a forum to develop, examine, and assess civil-military relations theory.

Practitioners, such as Army officers, often rightfully view theory as suspect because it appears arcane and out of touch with reality. Good theory, however, compared to immediate experience and empirical findings like survey results, has great staying power. For example, survey results shed light on the civil–military gap at a particular point in time. Theory explains the gap as circumstances change. Its concepts and hypotheses can act as useful tools, which help people negotiate real-world puzzles and problems and “shape an undetermined future.” It acts like a map, which is an abstraction representing reality. Theory aids navigation within reality. Useful civil–military relations theories are not accepted as truth or without fault and should be judged by their usefulness. Armed Forces & Society has devoted considerable attention to theory development. In our 50th-anniversary issue, we highlight...
three theoretical articles written by students of Janowitz and Huntington—Peter D. Feaver, Rebecca L. Schiff, and James Burk. 

In 1974, when *Armed Forces & Society* came on the scene, Huntington’s *Soldier and the State* was a well-established founding and enduring civil-military relations and military studies document. In 1991, historian Edward Coffman asserted that Huntington’s work legitimized American military history by providing “a structure for the evolution of the American military institution other than a chronological approach that featured battles and leaders.” Huntington’s subject, “the place of the professional soldier in the United States,” forced historians to stop and examine “the great dichotomy that . . . existed between officers and their civilian contemporaries.” This “structure for the evolution of the American military institution” exemplifies theory that aided in and changed the way scholars and officers have navigated their understanding of military institutions, particularly the relationships between presidents and elite military officers.

At the heart of the civilian supremacy concept lies the paradox of “how to reconcile a military strong enough to do anything the civilians ask them to with a military subordinate enough to do only what civilians authorize them to do.” The system collapses in a coup or when it produces a military too weak to defend the nation. Feaver asks how civilian and military actors can resolve this paradox. In Huntington’s normative theory, responsibility for broad policy decisions, such as the use of force, lies with civilian leaders. Feaver coined a powerful phrase to capture this paradox: “. . . civilians have a right to be wrong.” Military leaders must follow their orders regardless of consequences. In return, civilians grant broad autonomy to the military on how policy objectives are met. The system also relies on laws such as the Uniform Code of Military Justice and professional norms that act as guardrails that reinforce separation. For example, officers should not publicly criticize the president, and civilian leaders should show respect for servicemembers and their traditions.

Huntington’s theory does not account for when the military challenges civilian control in ways that fall short of a coup. The cases of Harry S. Truman and General Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War and Bill Clinton’s desire to end the ban on gays serving in the military during the early 1990s are examples. In the first case, MacArthur was fired, and in the second, a compromise (the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy) was crafted. In both cases, Huntington’s theory was unhelpful. Feaver’s article artfully shows key flaws in his mentor’s theory and paves the way for his path-breaking book, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight and Civil Military Relations*. Here he uses principal agent theory to develop a robust theory that explains when officers disregard orders and the likely consequences.
Huntington’s theory also has limited applicability to civil–military relations outside the United States. A more flexible theory accounting for culture and state characteristics was needed to explain coups and persistent unstable civil–military relations. Schiff, a student of Janowitz, proposed concordance theory as an alternative. Her theory focuses on preventing domestic intervention by incorporating a country’s level of agreement, cooperation, or consistency among political elites, the military, and the citizenry. She uses four key “indicators” of discord: “[1] the social composition of the officer corps, [2] the political decision-making process, [3] recruitment method, and [4] military style.” Disagreement on any of these four indicators among the military, political elites, or the citizenry can increase the likelihood of unstable civil–military relations and lead to coups. Schiff operationalized her theory, showing its relevance in Israel and India. Since its publication in 1995, her theory has proved useful in analyzing civil–military relations cases around the world, including those in Bangladesh, Ghana, Indonesia, Türkiye, and many more.\(^{34}\)

In “Theories of Democratic Civil-Military Relations,” Burk, another student of Janowitz, switches the spotlight from the problem of civilian control to how well civil–military relations in mature democracies “sustain and protect democratic values.” He first considers the conceptions of democracy underlying Janowitz’s and Huntington’s respective theories. Huntington draws on the liberal theories of Thomas Hobbes and John Stuart Mill that position the protection of “the rights and liberties of individual citizens” as an overriding priority. The military’s chief responsibility in this context is to protect citizens from foreign threats. By its nature, the theory has little to say about sustaining democratic values, such as citizen participation.\(^{35}\)

In contrast, Janowitz draws on the civic republican tradition that traces its roots to Plato, Aristotle, and James Madison. This theory “stresses the interconnection of individual freedom and civic participation with the promotion of the common good.” It prioritizes “engaging citizens in the activities of public life.” Service in the military, or defense of the republic, is an essential way to take responsibility for the common good and support a thriving democracy. Citizen-soldiers are instrumental in citizen participation in a healthy democracy.\(^{36}\)

Civic republican democratic theory suggests the military’s composition should mirror society’s and that the military’s and citizenry’s political and cultural views should be similar. Conscription, rather than a volunteer system, is more likely to result in a force representative of the people it protects. It has a greater potential to reinforce and protect democratic values. The key questions then become: how can an all-volunteer force be made more representative, and how
can AVF leaders best ensure that the force protects democratic values? So far, there have been no satisfactory answers to these questions.

Over the 50 years of the all-volunteer force, the US military has drawn more from southern, conservative states and Evangelical Christians. The gap between the military's political, socioeconomic, and cultural views and those of civilian counterparts has grown, as have opinions about the use of force.\(^{37}\)

In 1996, Feaver noted that civil-military relations should receive more attention because “220 years of apparently successful [American] civil-military relations have obscured its importance.” Civilian and military personnel's willingness to follow laws and norms accounted for much of this success and why a military coup seemed almost impossible.\(^{38}\)

Feaver reiterated this theme in a recent commentary, where he assessed the civil-military problematique and its implication—civilian leaders have the “right to be wrong.” He criticized his theory for downplaying the importance of “abiding by and reenforcing norms” and noted that in practice these norms were poorly understood by presidents, their appointees, Congress, and voters. He faults civil-military relations theorists for failing to “build norm awareness in key constituencies.” Further, the “right to be wrong” norm “does not translate into a civilian right to abuse the military.” He identified civilian norms that should be more explicit.

1. Presidents should not “publicly [criticize] the military, especially by name.”

2. Presidents should not “[undermine] the chain of command by criticizing officers while embracing rank and file.”

3. Presidents should not “openly [policitize] the military for partisan gain.”

4. The Senate should “[limit] its use of the privilege of ‘holds’ and not [freeze] the careers of large groups of senior military leaders indefinitely.”\(^{39}\)

Civil-military relations during the Trump administration were among the most contentious in history. Further, the riots at the Capitol that interfered with a peaceful transfer of power on January 6, 2021, raised doubts about the long-term success of contemporary civil-military relations. Two recent *Armed Forces & Society* articles address the unique contemporary challenges to norms and laws designed to enhance and strengthen the relationship between presidents and their military advisers.
Presidents should build their own relationships with military leaders. “Successful partnerships are based on mutual trust,” which generally incorporates respect, candor, technical know-how, and “a shared world view which incorporated a shared understanding of the scope of military professionalism.” Absent these factors, the relationship flounders, as it did during the Trump administration. Although harsh blame came from both civilian and military sides, Binkley argues that Donald Trump, not his generals, ultimately bears responsibility for the shredded relationship between military leadership and the president. For example, when President Trump claimed that he knew more about the military than his military advisers, he was dismissing military professionalism, a cornerstone and font of officer values and identity. Such behavior breaks the civil–military relationship. “From the military’s perspective, the attack upon their professional values was triggered by a commander-in-chief who failed to respect the military and the contours of professionalism.”

Ryan Burke and Jahara Matisek also see a crisis in civil–military relations and place the blame on vocal senior military retirees. They show how retired officers operated outside the law (UCMJ Article 88). Further, Trump’s norm-bending call for inappropriate domestic action fell within the scope of the Insurrection Act of 1807, a law that grants wide presidential authority to use force internally. When military retirees criticized these violations of presidential norms, they “violated Article 88 of UCMJ law for contempt toward officials and the norms meant to insulate the military from partisan politics.”

Retired officers were not charged with a violation under Article 88. This action resulted in a kind of double punch—unenforced laws and disregard for military norms by military actors. Of course, Trump’s behavior undermined the civilian part of the bargain. For example, he called military officers “some of the dumbest people” and suggested the military should be deployed to Chicago and New York to fix crime problems. This situation left an untenable fissure in civil–military relations where the president trampled on norms and retired active-duty officers ignored laws. Burke and Matisek ask that the UCMJ laws be “enforced, rewritten, or abolished because non-enforcement degrades civil–military relations and military professionalism.”

Although I would not anticipate a military coup, the guardrails for civil–military relations to function successfully appear much shakier than assumed. Army leadership must be well schooled in contemporary civil–military relations. I applaud Parameters’ commitment to publishing on civil–military relations. It is clearly a place officers can go to stay up to date and informed on the subject.
Conclusion

From my perch as editor, I get insights into emerging trends and topics within the military and society field of study. First, there appears to be a blending of the military studies and criminal justice fields along many dimensions. In different contexts, soldiers are becoming more like police, and police are more militarized. Small wars, stabilization, and peacekeeping missions often call for both roles. In other cases, the military is more involved in internal security. The criminal justice system collects data on myriad activities, from the initial crime to incarceration. Databases contain information on veteran status, which enables a closer look at criminal and incarcerated veterans. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-related disasters have stimulated increased involvement in disaster response from armies worldwide. Third, recruitment policies around the world are returning to conscription, particularly in Western Europe where the perceived threat has grown. Finally, the submissions I have received from countries in Eastern Europe, India, China, Southeast Asia, South America, and Africa are using more sophisticated research and statistical methods. There appears to be greater potential for evidence-based decision making, particularly in training.

The military and society field of study began at the end of World War II and became established during the Cold War. The fall of the Soviet Union ushered in the postmodern military with its volunteer forces and expeditionary terrorism-informed missions. We seem to be at another inflection point with the Russia-Ukraine War and Israel’s response to the Hamas terrorist attack. The United States is facing a more complicated and volatile threat environment. The links between the military and society will play an important part in shaping the events that follow. Hopefully, over the next 50 years, Armed Forces & Society will continue to provide an outlet for high-quality research and commentary.
Patricia M. Shields

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Endnotes


4. For more information, see Swedish Center for the Study of Armed Forces and Society (2012) and Association of Civil-Military Studies in Israel (2011). All three of these organizations sponsor regular conferences. Israel also has a journal. Sookermany, Handbook of Military Sciences; and Shields, “Dynamic Intersection.” Return to text.


20. Shields, “How Afghaninfluenced,” 898. *Armed Forces & Society* devoted two special issues to reserve forces—one in 2011 (vol. 37, no. 2) and the other in 2021 (vol. 47, no. 2). Return to text.


32. Quotes from Feaver, “Civil-Military Problematique,” 154 and 149, respectively. Note: this right does not authorize a president to violate the Constitution in an order. Return to text.


40. Quotes from Binkley, “Civil–Military Relations,” 57, 72–73. Return to text.


42. Quotes from Burke and Matisak, “Trump(ing) Tradition,” 3 and 1, respectively. Return to text.

Although I was familiar with court intrigue, I was not prepared for the National Security Council’s intrigue. One might enter as an editor in the Executive Secretariat and then leap into a role as a senior adviser for a deputy national security adviser. Others held court in deputies’ or principals’ meetings for many years, deftly staying above the fray. Still others fell, finding knives in their backs as other strivers seized their spots. While this court intrigue is tame compared to the murder and magic of William Shakespeare’s plays, Professor Eliot Cohen shows how much we can learn from the Bard. Indeed, one need not squint hard to see that courts continue to run most human organizations today.

*The Hollow Crown* effectively explores Shakespeare’s political insights into how leaders evolve. While never explicitly stated, Cohen draws on Shakespearean examples to advocate for an ideal arc. Leaders should acquire power legitimately or seize power when a ruler is weak. They should rule through inspiration and manipulation (with only the occasional murder). Then, rulers should depart the stage in their prime. Cohen explores this arc through an expertly organized book divided into parts on acquiring, exercising, and losing power, subdivided into three appropriately named chapters.

Readers will become familiar with the book’s rhythm. In each chapter, Cohen first defines the chapter’s subject, provides motivating modern examples, pivots to illustrative lessons from Shakespeare, and concludes by applying the lessons to recent cases. In the chapter on murder, Cohen explains that murder might literally mean killing others (see Pol Pot, Joseph Stalin, for example), or less literally, the unexpected departure of senior executives to new and undefined opportunities elsewhere. Examples from *Henry VI*, *Richard III*, and *Macbeth* show the early benefits and ultimate risks of ruling through murder, which Cohen compares to the individual rises of Adolf Hitler and Xi Jinping. This effective structure allows chapters to stand on their own while remaining part of a cohesive whole.
A deep appreciation for Shakespeare’s works is not required to enjoy the book. Readers familiar with Shakespeare will enjoy how *The Hollow Crown* integrates and explains his plays related to power. Readers like me, with a passing familiarity from plebe English and high school, will find much to appreciate—and might also find themselves inspired to reread *Macbeth* or *Henry VI*. *The Hollow Crown* occupies an unusual literary space but would rest easily on a bookshelf alongside biographies and excellent leadership texts. Its most direct parallel is likely *Lincoln and Shakespeare* by Michael Anderegg (University Press of Kansas, 2015). Readers will find much in common, however, with books like Robert A. Caro’s *Master of the Senate* (Knopf, 2002), which explores Lyndon B. Johnson’s manipulative leadership style. *The Hollow Crown* also offers a more cynical counterpoint to more affirmative leadership books like John W. Gardner’s *On Leadership* (Free Press, 1990) or Elbert Hubbard’s classic 1899 essay, “A Message to Garcia.”

At its best, *The Hollow Crown* helps readers see common challenges in new ways. Cohen deliberately tackles a common belief that leaders improve with time. Through the examples of *Henry VI* and *Macbeth*, he shows that isolation, arrogance, and poor selection of subordinates can undermine initially savvy leaders. Also relevant to military readers, Cohen expertly explores perceptions of strength and weakness in *Richard III* in his chapter on murder. Richard most admires those willing to murder on his behalf, as these hard men mirror his lack of sentimentality. His reliance on these hard men, however, is his undoing, leaving Richard unhorsed and dead on the battlefield. Leaders today would do well to abide by these lessons.

Cohen’s prose is also a delight. Lines like “Kings who wish they were carefree shepherds often end up as slaughtered sheep” and “Leaders who are lions, however, do not have to tell their underlings that is what they are” demonstrate Cohen’s inspiration from Shakespeare’s excellent writing (188, 194). Most readers will see themselves as courtiers instead of kings, and *The Hollow Crown* focuses more on these “kings,” despite Cohen’s claim that “courts are the central point in the vortex of power” (23). Short sections on court politics and evaluating subordinates are helpful but insufficient for those courtiers on the sidelines.

Eliot Cohen’s *The Hollow Crown* gave me insights into the rise, rule, and fall of members of the National Security Council, and it will help readers understand power, leadership, and the dynamics of courts. Students in scholars’ programs at the Command and General Staff College and US Army War College, anyone preparing to serve on a high-level personal staff,
soldiers with a literary bent, or the ambitious among us would benefit from the book's unique perspective and insights.

New York: Basic Books, 2023 • 288 pages • $30.00

Keywords: national security, leadership, Henry VI, Richard III, Macbeth

Cold Rivals: The New Era of US-China Strategic Competition

edited by Evan S. Medeiros

Reviewed by Dr. Jeffrey Reeves, associate professor, Naval War College, Naval Postgraduate School ©2024 Jeffrey Reeves

American analysts, policymakers, and strategists increasingly tend to define US-China relations as a new “Cold War,” where the international system’s two dominant powers compete for status and influence across multiple regions and domains. While some academics resist this characterization and argue that the Cold War was distinctly ideological and that the US-China competition is primarily material, they agree with its overall premise that US-China relations have become internationalized. As a result, many of the recent best books on US-China relations have eschewed the study of the two states’ bilateral relations for analyzing aspects of their global rivalry. Books like Keyu Jin’s The New China Playbook (Viking, 2023), Chris Miller’s Chip War (2022), Ali Wyne’s America’s Great-Power Opportunity (Polity Press, 2022), and Hal Brands and Michael Beckley’s Danger Zone (W. W. Norton, 2022) come to mind.

Found throughout American policy, a similar reconceptualization of US-China relations concerns itself more with maintaining the US-led international order than the countries’ bilateral relations. Then President Donald Trump first codified this shift in perspective in his National Security Strategy, identifying global great-power competition with China as the primary focus. President Joe Biden maintained this view and developed the concept of “integrated deterrence” with Beijing in mind. While Trump and Biden dealt directly with Beijing, they also expanded their approaches
to China to include alliance relations, outreach to the “Global South,” support for Taiwan, expansion of multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, the development of a global industrial strategy, and policy coordination with the Group of Seven (G7) economies.

Within these new analytic and policy parameters, Evan Medeiros has edited and published Cold Rivals: The New Era of US-China Strategic Competition—an expansive, textbook-like volume that presents an almost entirely bilateral account of US-China relations, despite the title’s reference to the Cold War. While comprehensive (and even repetitive) in its coverage, the book’s lack of international contextualization results in an artificial sense that US-China relations exist in a vacuum—or that Medeiros made the editorial decision to direct his contributors to ignore global affairs, international security, and other indications that great-power relations, in particular, occur within a global order. Regardless of Medeiros’s intent, the book systematically—and dryly—chronicles US-China relations (rather than analyzes them) and is more concerned with documenting the policies, meetings, events, and personnel involved in US-China affairs than commenting on their significance within global affairs.

A counterargument to this critique is the importance of such scholarship, particularly as it provides a historical account of US-China relations and chronicles its evolution. Conceding this point, the question becomes what value Cold Rivals adds to the existing body of scholarship on bilateral US-China ties, such as Robert G. Sutter’s US-China Relations (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), Andrew T. H. Tan’s Handbook on US-China Relations (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016), John Pomfret’s The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom (Macmillan, 2016), or Lyle Goldstein’s Meeting China Halfway (Georgetown University Press, 2015), among many others.

One contribution Medeiros makes is the inclusion of three Chinese authors who offer insights into Chinese outlooks on US-China relations, including contemporary issues. Aside from their different perspectives, they provide an important dissenting voice to the volume’s otherwise American scholars. Including additional perspectives from international scholars would have significantly increased the volume’s utility.

Among the other contributing authors, Arthur R. Kroeber’s and Paul Triolo’s chapters stand out for their treatment of two of the most critical areas of modern-day US-China competition—economics and technology. Their chapters provide important insights into the priorities, policies, and developments underpinning US-China relations during the Biden-Harris
and Xi Jinping administrations. Both authors have published extensively elsewhere on the same issues they cover here.

It is unclear what audience Medeiros envisioned for this edited volume. If it was the Chinese studies community, the book offers little new insight into the nature of US-China relations or how they might evolve. If it was policymakers, the volume falls short, as it almost entirely ignores the broader strategic environment in which US policy must be made and executed—an environment the Biden-Harris administration considers carefully in its policy-making process.

Medeiros likely edited the volume as a potential textbook for university students interested in learning more about US-China relations in all its manifestations, including its contemporary history. Nevertheless, the book’s main fault lies in its overly clinical and dry prose. Rather than exciting the next generation of US-China scholars, the book’s tedious language will likely put them off.

Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023 • 320 pages • $36.95

Keywords: US-China relations, policy, great-power competition, deterrence, Indo-Pacific

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