Operating Successfully within the Bureaucracy Domain of Warfare: Part One

Jeff McManus

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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 five warfighting 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.¹

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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<th>LAND Domain</th>
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<td><strong>BUREAUCRACY Domain</strong></td>
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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 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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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.9

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.10 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.11 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.12 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.

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.

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


