Americans and the Dragon: Lessons in Coalition Warfighting from the Boxer Rebellion Uprising
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Generally neglected in historical scholarship and, with few notable exceptions, overlooked by military professionals, the China Relief Expedition of 1900 provided warfighters with valuable lessons soldiers, sailors, and marines used to strengthen their profession of arms. Operations in China also provided Americans with a firsthand look at the military capabilities and organizations of nations that later fought in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05) and World War I (1914–18). As a result, participation in this multinational coalition afforded US service personnel opportunities for critical self-reflection, and American soldiers wrote detailed analyses in national outlets that rated the capabilities of their armed forces against the qualities of armies put into the field by their partners and competitors.

Indeed, articles describing the China experiences of American servicemembers in such venues as the Journal of the United States Cavalry Association, Military Engineer, North American Review, Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute, Quartermaster Review, and United States Army and Navy Journal and Gazette of the Regular and Volunteer Forces are instructive for how the articles illustrate the inventive, practical, and scientific turn of mind that characterized the officer corps of the US military in the early years of the twentieth century. These commentaries signal a maturing force in an era of American warfighting falsely noted for gradual advances in military thought and a distinctly antiquarian character.

Lessons learned from the American military experience in China for warfighters in the twenty-first century are several and descend from the highest levels of policy to the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. If the Joint Force adapts and builds for future peer-on-peer conflicts that feature primarily state actors and belligerents, still, US ground forces must retain impressions of the kind of violence that results from religiously motivated, nonstate actors. To whatever extent the human element of warfare constitutes an actual domain of warfighting, the land domain is the realm where military power is waged against and felt by ordinary people seeking to build communities and governments. Absent cultural sensitivity, adapting to future operational environments in which religiously motivated actors exert considerable influence on political affairs will be difficult for US forces.

Military professionals seeking to understand the history of armed conflict in China may
also draw lessons from the political history of China at the turn of the twentieth century. Histories of China that emphasize the nation’s authoritarian turn and military modernization obscure the tension between political centralization and local autonomy in China that varies with its geographical expanse. In 1900, the Boxers enjoyed popular and imperial support in northern China but found a cooler reception in southern and central China at the provincial levels; this pattern is suggestive of the ancient kingdom’s diversity and unpredictability. As military professionals consider possibilities and limits to international competition with China and prepare for the contingency of high-intensity, peer-on-peer war, they should remember political volatility will exert considerable, if unpredictable, influence on the course of future military operations.

At the operational and tactical levels of war, force protection emerged as one of the more salient issues during the China Relief Expedition. The well-documented sufferings of sailors and US marines who participated in British Admiral Sir Edward Seymour’s failed expedition in June 1900 also testify to the importance of force protection, as do the physical challenges endured by American servicemembers during the march from Tientsin to Peking (present-day Beijing). Such environmental challenges are natural and inherent in all military operations, but the urgency of the diplomatic crisis in Peking presented American commanders with few good options for moving American artillery, cavalry, and infantry to China and, once there, fewer options still for the employment of these resources in the theater of operations. The campaign to relieve the legations put American servicemembers under severe physical strain, but US forces managed well, made the most of a difficult environment, and drew from a logistical and supply network that made the American force the most well-equipped member of the multinational coalition. Above all, American commanders’ willingness to accept risk—potential harm to their forces and threats to the campaign itself—in the face of danger enabled mission success.