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The US Army War College
QUARTERLY

PARAMETERS



Vol. 55 No. 1 Spring 2025

Contemporary Strategy & Landpower

In Focus

Soldiering and Silences: Witnessing Child Sexual Abuse in Afghanistan

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Bruce Busler

Civil-Military Relations Corner

Carrie A. Lee



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The US Army War College
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From the Editor in Chief

Welcome to the Spring 2025 issue of *Parameters*. The issue consists of one *In Focus* special commentary, three forums (*Russia, Ukraine, and NATO*; *Strategic Competition and Managing National Security*; and *Joint Sustainment Strategies*), and the regular *Civil-Military Relations Corner*.

In our *In Focus* forum special commentary, “Soldiering and Silences: Witnessing Child Sexual Abuse in Afghanistan,” Caroline Kennedy-Pipe and Martin Thorp draw on interviews with United Kingdom veterans of the Afghan war to offer a new interpretation of war trauma based on the effects of witnessing sexual abuse by military partners.

The first forum, *Russia, Ukraine, and NATO*, features three articles. In the first of these, “Ukraine’s Not-So-Whole-of-Society at War: Force Generation in Modern Developed Societies,” Ilmari Käihkö and Jan Willem Honig argue that Ukraine offers a cautionary tale for national force generation, both for the professional high-tech war and the whole-of-society war approaches. They examine how both models are problematic and raise fundamental issues about force generation and sustainability that should inform NATO. In the second, “Russian Novel Nuclear Weapons and War-Fighting Capabilities,” Spenser Warren uses publicly available assessments to evaluate Russia’s novel nuclear-capable weapons individually and collectively alongside Russian war-fighting concepts to determine their possible impact on war fighting, deterrence, and arms control. The third article, “Measuring Interoperability Within NATO: Adapted Off-the-Shelf Tool or Bespoke Solution?” John Deni, Matthew MacLeod, Sarah Stewart, Katherine Banko, and Adrian Jones confront NATO’s lack of a common interoperability measurement and assessment tool and question what a standard would involve and whether NATO could draw on an existing tool.

The second forum, *Strategic Competition and Managing National Security*, contains two articles. In the first, “Adapting US Defense Strategy to Great-Power Competition,” Ionut Popescu outlines the trade-offs involved in competing defense planning priorities and argues for developing a US military strategy, doctrine, and force structure optimized for the needs of the great-power competition era—in other words, a great-power competition-oriented defense strategy. The second article, “Tyranny of the Inbox: Managing the US National Security Agenda,” Neil Snyder uses a novel data set to analyze the frequency with which contemporaneous crises are discussed at National Security Council

meetings and claims that crisis management attenuates the council's attention. The article concludes that presidents focus on crises at the expense of other strategic matters.

The third forum, *Joint Sustainment Strategies*, showcases two articles. In "Bridging Sky and Sea: Joint Strategies for Medical Evacuation in the Indo-Pacific," Mahdi Al-Husseini, Samuel Diehl, and Samuel Fricks contend that the US Army should coordinate agile and expeditious Joint medical evacuation operations in the Indo-Pacific and develop novel capabilities to do so effectively. In the second article, "Deploying and Sustaining the Joint Force from a Contested Homeland," Bruce Busler argues that the United States must prepare for "the fight to get to the fight," focusing on deploying and sustaining military forces from a contested homeland amid near-peer threats. He provides actionable insights into fortifying logistics systems crucial for strategic mobility and operational success, ensuring readiness and deterrence in contested environments.

The Spring issue concludes with the *Civil-Military Relations Corner*. In "Civil-Military Relations and Democratic Backsliding," Carrie Lee identifies a gap in the field of civil-military relations—the relationship between the military and the quality of a democracy. ~AJE

Soldiering and Silences: Witnessing Child Sexual Abuse in Afghanistan

Caroline Kennedy-Pipe and Martin Thorp
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ABSTRACT: Based on interviews with United Kingdom veterans, this special commentary offers a new interpretation of war trauma. Few studies investigate the emotions soldiers experience when witnessing child sexual assault. During the Afghan campaign, personnel witnessed acts of rape by allies in the Afghan security services on boys—usually excused as the local practice of bacha bazi—and were directed not to intervene. This special commentary examines the effects of these actions on soldiers and the mission, highlighting how soldiers were impacted by what they witnessed but could not stop.

Keywords: bacha bazi, Helmand, trauma, UK troops, veterans

There are silences in war: some are deliberately cultivated by the state to deny the horror of war. There are intimate silences such as those invoked by people who experience sexual violence in and after conflict but are too ashamed to articulate their experience or seek redress for the assaults on their minds and bodies. Often, no one is listening. Historically, those who have perpetrated violence in uniform and those we may describe as unbadged have, across the record, been notably absent from narrations of war. Silences abound. Some are justified by institutions, politicians, and groups reluctant to acknowledge the consequences of war or, as in our case study, by those unwilling to recognize the character of chosen allies.¹

To date, no psychology or psychiatry literature has discussed the associations between UK forces witnessing abuse and rape in Afghanistan with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or moral injury. Our findings introduce unexplored causes of war trauma not typically associated with combat experiences. Nonetheless, the literature on moral injury resonates with veterans' thoughts and feelings.

There are different interpretations of what constitutes moral injury, but there is consensus that moral injury refers to the intense psychological stress certain situations provoke that transgress an individual's ethical values. It is important to note that moral injury is not yet a clinical diagnosis. Research shows, however, that it may lead to mental illness, including depression and PTSD, and these conditions can even lead to suicide. It might have profound effects

on a person's emotional, psychological, behavioral, social, and spiritual functioning. Moral injury is caused in three ways: acts of commission (doing something), acts of omission (not doing something), and feeling betrayed. These causes may be related to moral dilemmas that soldiers face, including instances when they may witness intense human suffering and cruelty that undermines their core beliefs. These situations associated with moral injury are known as potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs). Several risk factors increase the possibility of suffering moral injury. These may include events involving vulnerable people such as children, feeling unprepared for the situation, or believing there is a lack of support during or after experiencing traumatic events.²

Moral injury, PTSD, or the long list of medical and emotional issues experienced after military service now receive scholarly investigation. We extend this literature by adding a study highlighting what soldiers say or cannot bring themselves to say about the experience of being ordered not to intervene and to stand as silent witnesses to human rights violations. Drawing on interviews and reports with personnel who witnessed, and were ordered not to intervene in, the rape of boys and young men in Afghanistan as part of *bacha bazi* (boy play), we examine how this moral injury contributes to PTSD. Moral injuries caused by witnessing a child's suffering and pain can be as traumatizing to the witness as the trauma which may be experienced during combat. Acknowledging those silences around this issue may allow us to understand existing trauma better and prepare for future deployments.

Bacha Bazi

Bacha bazi is a practice in which pubescent boys are hired to dance and entertain older men. Their masters dress the boys as women and, in addition to dancing, the boys submit to their masters' sexual whims. After the boys grow beards, they are undesirable and no longer fulfill the function of sex and servitude.³

Many explanations account for how the practice of bacha bazi developed in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and across Central Asia. The origins of bacha bazi could theoretically stretch back to the invasion of Alexander the Great in 330 BCE due to the well-documented practice of pederasty in ancient Greece. Scholars, however, theorize that Afghanistan's more recent and turbulent history rendered boys vulnerable to the vagaries of war, endemic conflict, and widespread poverty and enabled the emergence and ongoing practice of bacha bazi. In destitution, boys (usually illiterate) found themselves unprotected by their families and forced into any employment they could find,

including sexual services. Sometimes, boys were given to men of influence, such as warlords or government officials, by their fathers in return for money; many boys were trafficked by pimps. Sexual abuse was a reality plotted and acknowledged by everyone involved.⁴

Social theories can account for these male relationships. Scholars point to the consequences of a society in which women are excluded from public life. Displays of affection are forbidden between males and females; women are prized for their chastity, so open demonstrations of affection between males was tolerated and regarded as commonplace. In the absence of females, powerful men pursued alternative sexual opportunities.⁵

The Taliban publicly condemned the practice. In 1994, the founder of the Taliban, Mullah Mohammad Omar, famously rescued a young boy who was about to be raped by two military commanders. Opposition to bacha bazi facilitated his popularity throughout the 1990s. When the Taliban came to power in 1996, they made bacha bazi illegal as a violation of Islamic law. After the Taliban seized Kandahar, Mullah Omar issued a fatwa that made sodomy (which included consensual relationships and the rape of children) a capital offense.⁶

After the 2001 US invasion which, with the help of the Northern Alliance, a loose coalition of militias in Afghanistan who opposed the first Taliban regime, removed the Taliban, bacha bazi reappeared across Pashtun customs. Boys were kidnapped and raped without the pretense of entertainment that had previously denoted bacha bazi. Powerful men in the Northern Alliance, many of whom became figures of considerable influence (such as governors or police chiefs), used a bacha boy to reflect their status and authority.⁷

Through interactions with the police and military, International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) became familiar with bacha bazi across the Afghan security services. Troops deployed to mentor and build Afghan forces learned of the sexual relationships between men and boys on military bases. Incidents and confrontations with Afghan allies occurred over this abuse. Travis Schouten, a corporal in the Canadian Armed Forces, reported the 2006 rape of a boy by members of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in Canada's Forward Operating Base Wilson, just outside of Kandahar. The *Ottawa Citizen* and other press outlets reported the incident, and Schouten demanded clear guidelines as to how Western troops should and could protect these children. Schouten also revealed that he had been driven to the brink of mental collapse after witnessing the brutal sexual assaults. Alongside Schouten, other military personnel and chaplains objected to the sexual abuse but were,

on a routine basis, told that these sexual relationships were a matter of local cultural norms and lay within the jurisdiction of Afghan law.⁸

In 2010, in Helmand, Major Jason Brezler, a US Marine, identified a local police chief, Sarwar Jan, as a threat to children and his contingent. Jan had arrived at Forward Operating Base Delhi with an entourage of boys and moved into the barracks one floor below the Marines. Aware of the obvious abuse, Brezler expelled Jan from the base and returned to the United States. Two years later, when a colleague informed him that Jan had reappeared at the same base in the Garmsir District, Brezler sent an e-mail to a fellow Marine stationed at the base detailing previous sexual abuse by Jan. In August 2012, four marines were shot in the base gym by a boy who had been a “bacha” for the Afghan National Police (ANP) commander. During the trial of the perpetrator, there was little mention of bacha bazi, and the boy was referred to as a radicalized individual.⁹

Concern over the practice prompted the US Department of Defense to investigate bacha bazi. The department charged social scientist Anna Maria Cardinalli to produce a report on Pashtun sexuality. Cardinalli served with a Human Terrain Team and identified widespread sexual abuse and the related risks of radicalization among the victims of boy sexual abuse. Members of the US government criticized Cardinalli’s work, claiming that she lacked expertise on Pashtun customs.¹⁰

The abuse of boys became public in 2015 when *The New York Times* published “US Soldiers Told to Ignore Sexual Abuse of Boys by Afghan Allies.” The coverage shocked the US public and drew attention to Congress’ 2014 authorization of a special waiver to the Leahy law. The Leahy law explicitly bans US assistance to units of foreign security forces when there was credible evidence that gross human rights violations had been committed. The waiver, the so-called “notwithstanding clause” was invoked to ensure Afghan security partners continued to receive funding.¹¹

In January 2018, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) published a report instigated by the Obama administration. It was entitled “Investigation into Child Sexual Abuse by Afghan Security Forces and US Military Inaction.” The report was heavily redacted and initially embargoed until 2024, highlighting how institutions can enforce silence. The report found that Afghan security forces had participated in at least 75 gross violations of human rights from 2010–16, including murder and child sexual assault.¹²

This controversy included several important features. The first was the proposition that the persistence of child sexual abuse by Afghan allies rested solely in local politics. Regardless of Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the coalition governments presented the plight of boys as an issue of cultural practices and preference that had to be respected. This position was instituted despite the duty of all agencies and organizations to uphold the existing international and national laws to protect children in Afghanistan. At the time, Afghan President Hamid Karzai argued that there were more important issues than bacha bazi and that the boys were a secondary concern to ensuring that the Afghan Army and the police could continue the war against the Taliban.¹³

That position remained the priority despite evidence that bacha bazi damaged popular support for the Afghan security services. Catherine Norman's 2012 report about the Afghan National Police in Helmand provided evidence that families complained and lacked trust in local police because of the threat posed to their sons by the widespread practice of bacha bazi. While acting as the guardians of women and their virtue, the Taliban also claimed a protective role for boys abused by the Northern Alliance while using boys as a way of infiltrating and disrupting security forces, including so-called "honey trap" bachas to ensnare police. These boys, who sometimes were the bacha of commanders on remote bases or at checkpoints across the Uruzgan Province (where American, Australian, and Dutch forces were deployed), were used as suicide bombers or to allow Taliban into bases to attack police. In one case, a bacha went on a shooting spree, killing seven police officers, including his abuser—the commander. These insider attacks facilitated or undertaken by these boys were also reported in Helmand and Kandahar.¹⁴

Insider attacks proved disruptive, but the Taliban also used bacha rape as a recruitment tool, highlighting how the police abused boys—some police demanded the presence of a bacha as a condition of taking the position. Practically all of the 370 local and national checkpoints in the Uruzgan Province had boy slaves. Indeed, jealousy over the boys could occasionally produce deadly encounters between members of the Afghan police, with reports of public gunfights over bachas.¹⁵

Despite the weaknesses that bacha boys in tandem with the Taliban introduced into security arrangements, Coalition leaders ordered ISAF troops to ignore the ongoing sexual abuse. Canada, the United Kingdom, and other European partners, such as Norway and the Netherlands, were aware of the issue, with bacha bazi raised in debate in the UK Parliament. Nonetheless, Western allies did not wish to condemn a vital security partner and instigate investigations, which could have deepened mistrust,

undermined cohesion, and potentially derailed the fragile process of building Afghan security structures.¹⁶

Significant scholarship on the strategies and mistakes that led the Afghan police and military forces to fail and PTSD research focused on the lasting effects of fighting the Taliban insurgency already exists. At the intersection of these two subjects resides a silence regarding the emotional trauma experienced by soldiers who witnessed the rape of children and whose leaders ordered them not to intervene. To that end, the rest of this special commentary draws on a case from the United Kingdom that shows soldiers were, and continue to be, emotionally affected by witnessing the systemic rape of boys by their Afghan allies.¹⁷

Evidence

Our evidence emerges from a UK study centered on understanding how commanders psychologically impacted British soldiers exposed to combat and trauma during the Afghan and Iraqi campaigns. Researchers collected data by interviewing veterans who served between 2006 and 2014 and by interviewing psychologists, psychiatrists, and therapists who treated veterans. The project examined the effects of command, both good and bad, on these individuals. Nonetheless, throughout the interviews with British veterans (who had served in the Helmand Province), accounts of bacha bazi in the Afghan National Security Forces and its consequences emerged. It was striking during these conversations how veterans recalled the plight of and narrated the everyday abuse of children. Although this study originally focused on PTSD relating to combat experience during the interviews, a majority of the respondents shared a set of emotional responses to the witnessing of child rape.¹⁸

Building on that material, our research examines how witnessing the abuse of children engendered a range of feelings. It illustrates how witnessing the practice of bacha bazi emotionally affected military men during and after their tours of duty in the Helmand Province. In that period, statistically, male soldiers primarily encountered such practices, so the sample draws mainly from male veterans in frontline positions and the mentoring teams formed by Ground Close Combat (GCC) troops. During the study, 37 veterans were interviewed and 14 therapists. We were interested in how, when mentoring Afghan colleagues, commanders and their subordinates became aware and then distressed by the abuse.¹⁹

British Experiences (2006–14)

The United Kingdom played a significant role in the ISAF mission. By October 2006, approximately 5,845 British personnel were in the country. Soldiers operated alongside ANSF personnel, often at isolated patrol bases. The UK forces, with other coalition partners, were heavily involved with training and mentoring the Afghan National Security Forces. Often, these teams were embedded within ANSF units. The UK forces coordinated training and operated alongside various Afghan National Army, police, and specialized units. Building the ANSF capacity to provide its own security eventually became a vital component in the ISAF strategy.²⁰

The Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams (OMLT), an expansion of the American led Embedded Training Teams (ETTS) and Police Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams (POMLTS), conducted much of the training. The Afghan government and its Western allies established the Afghan Local Police (ALP) in August 2010 to complement the national police and to relieve the unsustainability of a heavy footprint counterinsurgency force by increasing local responsibility for security. This move formed part of a broader strategy to engage with the population. These units were recruited locally and received minimal training; some units successfully delivered security, while others did not. Discipline could be poor, and some members of the local police behaved in a predatory fashion by intimidating, extorting, and taxing villagers in ways that reinforced support for the Taliban. The Afghan Local Police disbanded in 2020 due to a change of strategy directed by the Obama administration. The controversial termination of funding created repercussions for local defense and, indeed, security nationally.²¹

Before our study, there had been some descriptions of how UK troops responded to witnessing child sexual abuse in Afghanistan. In his book *Unwinnable*, Theo Farrell refers to this issue. He recounts how a British Battle Group was sent to secure Sangin District Center in 2006. Part of that mission entailed protecting the District Police Chief, whom locals wanted to lynch for abducting and raping children. After hearing the accusations of child rape, soldiers questioned why they had been sent to protect a child rapist. One of the platoon commanders recalled the emotions expressed by soldiers, “Why the hell are we going to support this guy? We should go and kill him, and then we would get the locals on our side straight away.” Interestingly, the platoon commanders showed a clear appreciation of the strength of local feeling about the topic and the concerns over the local police, who soldiers described as lacking discipline and “going feral.” It was reported that there was abuse of “little boys off the street,” behavior which the soldiers found both abhorrent and distressing. Farrell’s work

provided some useful background to our own study. Of the veterans interviewed for this project, most said they became aware of the sexual abuse of children in Helmand Province. Abuse, however, was also reported in Faryab Province, where ALP members were accused of raping teenage boys.²²

One concern was whether troops were adequately prepared for what they would witness once stationed in the country. Before deployment, training included cultural awareness training, which consisted of basic language skills presentations. Some service personnel learned to speak Dari or Pashtun. Yet, none of the veterans interviewed remembered receiving information on the prevalence of sexual misconduct and child rape as a feature of Afghan society, though other sources recalled lectures by military lawyers on male sexuality and male friendship, which was described as a result of local cultural preferences and was not to be interfered with or mocked.²³

When deployed, the soldiers interviewed for this project became aware of the abuse, initially through rumors such as in the following recollection: Within the Afghan platoon, that was attached to our company, I observed several very young members of the platoon wearing makeup and looking very feminine. Although I did not personally witness any sexual assaults, it was rumored that these young soldiers were being used for the sexual pleasure of the rest of the platoon on a Thursday night.²⁴

Veterans remembered being taken aback when they had noticed older men constantly accompanied by much younger men or boys. So, witnessing was a matter of discovery, as over time the man-boy relationships became obvious. For instance, one explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) commander recalled that he found it disturbing when he saw an older man on policing duties accompanied by a very young man.²⁵

While several avenues of discussion arise from our data, including the nature of pre-deployment information provided to the soldiers, we are interested in the emotional impact that being forced to stand by and witness sexual abuse and misconduct has had on veterans. (We do not discuss the consensual male-on-male relationships within the society here). Instead, we analyze the operational and human impact, but we acknowledge that other factors could have impacted operations in addition to the emotional effect of witnessing abuse. Coalition forces began to question the loyalty of their Afghan partners. Mentoring or working alongside Afghan security forces posed considerable risks to ISAF personal safety. Along with the obvious threats from Taliban attacks,

mentoring teams were at risk from the Afghan “insider threat,” also called green-on-blue attacks.²⁶

In 2007, ISAF personnel recorded two green-on-blue attacks; the number surged to 37 in 2012, with more than 60 NATO soldiers and civilian contractors killed. To place that figure in perspective, in 2012, green-on-blue attacks accounted for 15 percent of coalition casualties. The UK newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* reported that 24 UK service personnel were killed by an “insider attack.” As of June 2014, roughly 87 insider attacks had occurred on US bases after 2008. The political impact of green-on-blue deaths became significant and provoked considerable media attention. These attacks led to questions in the UK Parliament over Afghan competence to assume security duties from NATO troops in the future and calls for a clear exit strategy intensified.²⁷

In March 2012, a tactical directive issued in response to the growing concern about insider attacks included provisions for improvement in force protection, close-quarter combat, and active-shooter training for personnel working closely with the Afghan National Security Forces. Individual ISAF soldiers were assigned to ANSF advisers from within units to be “guardian angels” standing by to protect against a would-be attacker. The guardian angels protected military advisers on their way to and from meetings and during meetings with Afghan personnel. The necessity for guardian angels highlighted the need to increase troop numbers.²⁸

In a 2012 *CBS News* interview, General John Allen, who led ISAF Afghanistan from July 2011 to February 2013, emphasized “We are willing to sacrifice a lot for this campaign, but we are not willing to be murdered for it.” Allen made these comments in response to insider threats, highlighting concerns over trust between coalition forces and the competence of Afghan allies.²⁹

Our interviews reveal veterans experienced considerable disquiet about mentoring ANSF personnel, including reflections on purpose, safety, and losses. For instance, the veterans questioned the purpose of the mission in Afghanistan, asking, “Why are we here? Why are we doing this? Why am I sending a patrol out every day where people could [get], and are getting, killed and maimed and injured for these people?” One referred to corrosion in the sense of mission.³⁰

When asked about his experiences mentoring the police, a medical sergeant who was part of the Police Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams responded, “I wouldn’t call it mentoring; I would call it watching them get high on drugs. And, put it this way, the Thursday night thing is true.” An officer argued that, in his view, mentoring the ANP in 2010 was a “fool’s errand . . . as . . .

tactically, operationally, and strategically, we had minimal effect mentoring the police on that tour.” The war was already lost, and he revealed that ensuring everyone stayed alive became the most important thing—not the mission. The same officer claimed he believed that in 2012, NATO policy had changed. He interpreted policy to mean, “if you see young boys at a checkpoint on a Thursday night, do nothing.”³¹

“Thursday night” was an important occasion; it was the day before the religious day and regarded as an excuse to celebrate. It was reported that boys were brought into camp to entertain the officers and were on occasion openly picked from a line waiting outside the base. While this Thursday night ritual was an open secret tolerated by Western allies, it often caused tension because of the blatant sexual abuse. One platoon commander working alongside an Afghan National Army (ANA) unit in 2010 remembers having to “calm” his soldiers, as they were aware of that abuse. He believed the abuse was inherently wrong, but he could not intervene. Nonetheless, while determining who to include on his mentoring team, the same platoon commander became so concerned about the behavior of Afghan personnel that he refused to have a female medic on his team, fearing for her safety.³²

While mentoring ANSF officers, British commanders arranged meetings with their Afghan counterparts. In 2013, one commander regularly met with the local chief of police. On many occasions, he observed a clean, well-dressed young boy in the room (a *chi boy* / *bacha*). He recalls that the boy was there while he drank tea. He knew the boy had been sexually abused, but he tried to ignore it even though he found such behavior disgusting. He went on to explain that “the average soldier will find it very difficult to reconcile this. Telling them that there’s nothing we can do and that’s just the way they are. That’s their way of life, it’s like boys are for fun and women are for babies. That’s just how they see the world.”³³

It is important not to underestimate the potential psychological impact seeing or hearing abuse can have on a witness. One Army welfare officer who supported wounded, injured, or sick service personnel between 2012 and 2015 stressed the profound psychological impact on soldiers witnessing or even knowing of such abuse. During our interviews, we found that witnessing children undergoing harm was particularly traumatic for these soldiers. It was common; therapists pointed out that harm to civilians, especially injured children, caused soldiers extreme distress, especially if the children were killed. One psychologist noted that if soldiers had children of their own, witnessing a child being killed or severely injured during operations was especially traumatic. Another psychiatrist argued that if soldiers witnessed

harm to children the same age as their children, the psychological impact could be deepened.³⁴

After witnessing harm to children, soldiers experienced an initial reluctance to recall incidents that was further compounded by a reluctance to discuss the incidents. One therapist recalled, based on his experiences treating veterans, that soldiers seemed resistant to revisiting the trauma. This finding contrasted starkly with the attitude of torture victims he had also treated. The therapist had no answer for this resistance or why soldiers were inclined to suppress these feelings.³⁵

One therapist described a veteran's account of witnessing an Afghan police officer taking a boy (around 6 or 7 years old) into a cave and raping him. The veteran said he "couldn't process that in his head." Another disturbing eyewitness account came from a reserve soldier who witnessed the gang rape of a local child by an Afghan civilian and two ANA soldiers. He recognized the child from an innocent interaction the day before when he had blown up a surgical glove to make a balloon for the child to play with it and given him sweets. He then saw a farmer, who he believed to be the owner of the compound, drag the same screaming child into the compound, throw him over the table, and start to rape him. He thought the ANA soldiers would stop the rape, but they joined in. A third soldier walked over and pulled across a makeshift curtain. He, too, raped the child. Throughout the ordeal, the child screamed. The soldier recalled that the platoon commander was concerned about the insider threat and reprisals if they had tried to stop the attacks, so he instructed his team not to intervene. The soldier, though, felt like he was protecting the men as they raped a child.³⁶

Understandably, the reserve soldier was distressed by the event. He was instructed by his commander "to forget about it." In the interview for this project, he expressed feelings of betrayal and guilt. After that tour, he said he tried to "bury" the trauma. He recalled feeling disgusted, yet he wrestled with why his commander had let it happen and why he did nothing. The soldier now suffers from PTSD and has attempted suicide; he relates that he feels socially isolated and is unable to cope with the sound of children crying because it reminds him of the rape. During the interview, the veteran mentioned another soldier who had witnessed the same rape. He was 18 years old, and he said that he was "in a bad way" and had also attempted suicide. Interestingly, this incident triggered memories of a previous 2009 Afghanistan tour, where he witnessed a close friend blown to pieces by an improvised explosive device (IED), thus compounding his trauma.³⁷

Soldiers who knew or witnessed sexual abuse of either children or young men experienced a range of emotions, including anger, disgust, frustration, and feelings of powerlessness. These emotions later, from our interview sample, seemed to develop into guilt, shame, and regret. In certain cases, soldiers believed they were complicit, as in the case of the soldier who witnessed the gang rape.

Reflections

The Taliban's return to power following the United States and allied withdrawal has driven bacha bazi back underground: unacknowledged and silent, but still present. Although British authorities now recognize that condoning bacha bazi constituted a failure to protect the children of Afghanistan adequately, the abused remain marginalized in the histories of the campaign. That attention is welcome, but we wish to highlight, as we have throughout the commentary, that deployed soldiers drawn from a variety of countries, not just the United Kingdom, have suffered trauma because of what they witnessed.³⁸

According to *The New York Times*:

*the stress of knowing the boys are sexually abused is taking a toll on certain US military members. They are returning to America conflicted and confused, struggling with the fact that they did not or could not save young boys from being exploited or molested.*³⁹

While the existing literature on trauma acknowledges how soldiers suffer after combat, after killing, and after injury, it does not address the trauma caused by moral injury. Our UK-based submission substantiates the claims made in *The New York Times* and extends the literature on war trauma by considering the trauma originating from being forced to stand witness to the sexual assault of children and unable to intervene.⁴⁰

This project is novel, and avenues for further research exist. We may add to masculinities studies, deepening the understanding of traditional masculinist ideology within Western thought, which has emphasized achievement and prohibited what may be regarded as “weakness,” including expressions of vulnerability. An endorsement of traditional masculinist values creates a culture in which experiencing a traumatic event may be emasculating, creating psychological distress when a man fails to meet role expectations. Our data demonstrates that witnessing and not intervening to stop child abuse engendered feelings of trauma and helplessness over many years. We acknowledge that it is not easy to disentangle “witnessing” from other effects of deployment in a combat zone.⁴¹

Questions about how the military prepares troops for deployment into societies alien to Western norms, expectations, and traditions are important. The absence of guidelines for military personnel entering the complex society of a deeply conservative, religious, and tribal environment meant that the responsibility for how to act in response to bacha bazi fell to the soldiers in the field, leading to confusion about the values which should govern the mission, a point raised in the reported US cases. Coalition partner nations failed to provide a framework for dealing with the abuse of boys. This neglect ran from direct instructions not to intervene to a “don’t look, don’t tell” attitude and a convenient moral relativism that the sexual abuse of boys was a cultural matter. Beneath this moral relativism lay the view that vital partners in the war against the Taliban should not be provoked.⁴²

Some militaries deployed during the Afghan War recognized that ignoring, if not condoning, this abuse was harmful for the mission and the soldiers. The Dutch military, for example, has reflected on its own failure to comply with the responsibilities of the responsibility to protect (R2P) and the core principles of human rights embedded in the international mandate for intervention in Afghanistan.⁴³

One avenue that may be of future benefit is for militaries to learn from the best practices of other actors. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are not militaries, have a different status, and a particular mission. As a starting point, scholars can draw valuable information on the impact of witnessing on NGO personnel in conflict-torn areas. The organization Open Democracy, for example, has found evidence of trauma—with levels of distress comparable to the veteran population—in human rights advocates working in war zones.⁴⁴

There is a wider recognition that training on sexual violence needs improvement and that military ethics should be taught more effectively and systematically. In the case of Norway, there was and is a lively debate about the roles of respect and responsibility as core values guiding deployed soldiers. The suggestion is that respect would and should effectively trump any form of moral relativism. There has also been debate in the United Kingdom about moral relativism and its application in war zones, with one scholar commenting that “ethical relativism does not require us to stand back and watch acts that are abhorrent to us.”⁴⁵

Witnessing and Coping

Military commanders and scholars have worked in partnership to develop ways to limit the psychological costs of conflict, including psychological decompression, psycho-education, and screening. At a national level, the United Kingdom introduced Trauma Risk Management (TRiM), which is a peer-led occupational mental health support process that identifies and supports anyone exposed to traumatic events. The United States has implemented Combat and Operational Stress Control (COSC) interventions. These strategies and interventions mitigate common or expected combat stresses that soldiers have experienced. The subject of our commentary, witnessing the sexual abuse of children and feeling powerless to intervene, likely falls outside these frameworks. It is possible many of the stress controls in place are or may be beneficial. Nonetheless, because of the unique nature of witnessing, we suggest military leadership afford more attention to how soldiers may cope after witnessing such events.

Williamson et al. assert that there is an increased risk of experiencing trauma in response to PMIE if an individual feels unprepared and lacks social support. Our research indicates that veterans who witnessed the abuse of children demonstrate a response consistent with those suffering the effects of a potentially morally injurious event. Strong leadership, cohesion, and social support can help individuals, so too can considering what tools were provided to soldiers before deployment. Notably, individual and team interventions have been associated with reduced PTSD and moral injury. It can be challenging treating those who suffer mental health problems that are caused by potentially morally injurious events. Existing standard treatments such as cognitive behavioral therapy may not be effective. Interventions might require a co-design approach. Considering the possible causes of moral injury, spiritual care may also be beneficial.⁴⁶

The data from our research—in the form of anxiety and trauma surrounding the act of witnessing the sexual abuse of children—indicates that moral injury could play a significant and unacknowledged role in the study and treatment of PTSD in veterans. This recognition is important because the soldiers interviewed (and those who spoke out in the United States) believed that there had been a transgression of their values in tolerating the abuse of boys. The effects of this transgression are demonstrated by our research and the voices of the veterans who now experience distress, guilt, and trauma because of what they have witnessed.⁴⁷

Military practitioners and scholars need not remain silent and should widen the scope of understanding trauma to include witnessing. Sadly, the sexual abuse of children, women, and men—on and off battlefields—remains woven into contemporary warfare.⁴⁸

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Ukraine's Not-So-Whole-of-Society at War: Force Generation in Modern Developed Societies

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ABSTRACT: This article argues that Ukraine offers a cautionary tale regarding the two main modern models of force generation. Neither the professional high-tech war model, favored by Western militaries, nor the whole-of-society war approach, said to have saved Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, proved successful formulas for Ukraine. Considering that Ukraine is fighting for survival, with Russian forces inside the country, the failure of both models in action has serious implications for NATO member states as they deliberate on their choices regarding future force generation.

Keywords: strategy, sociology of war, militias, contemporary war, Ukraine

When Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, volunteers not serving in the military rushed to halt the invaders. Ukrainian society was soon praised for saving Ukraine for the second time. The first time volunteers were lauded for playing a decisive role in war was in the aftermath of the 2014 Maidan protest movement when Ukrainians fought Russian-supported separatists to a halt in the Donbas region. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the commander in chief of Ukraine's military, quipped in 2022 that "military theory does not account for regular dudes with track pants and hunting rifles."¹

Historically, there have been two main models of national force generation: a professional, regular force that relies on quality through training and technology and a conscription-based force that emphasizes quantity obtained from a whole-of-society willingness to mobilize. To date, the Ukrainian experiences have been interpreted as the validation of the second model. Ukraine seemed to exemplify a "rush to the colors," revolutionary *levée en masse* mobilization, recalling the elementary fervor expressed by the French people when "la Patrie" found itself in mortal danger from foreign invasion after the French Revolution. What Clausewitz wrote about those wars also appeared to apply to Ukraine in 2014 and 2022: war appeared, once again, to have become a matter of the people.

Yet, even if many would like Ukraine to constitute a successful popular mobilization and resistance case, it does not. In 2014–15, the Ukrainian combination of regulars and volunteers stopped the Russians but could not evict them from the country. Even after 2022, it was not the whole of society that resisted but only parts of it. This article argues that Ukraine offers a cautionary tale for the professional high-tech war *and* the whole-of-society war approach. Both models are problematic and raise fundamental issues about force generation and sustainability for NATO and its member states, which are ruminating on the relative benefits of the models.

The natural outcome of the failure of the two models in Ukraine has been a problematic hybrid model of force generation. The first section, which focuses on Ukrainian military reforms from 2014–22, discusses its evolution. The persistence of the hybrid model has contributed to a protracted war of attrition that is unlikely to allow any quick military decision. Considering that Ukraine's survival is at stake, one of the main questions arising from the largest war in Europe since 1945 is that if Ukraine cannot make the war a whole-of-society affair with the Russians fighting inside the country, can or should NATO countries take for granted that they can do so with the Russians still outside their borders?

One major challenge—the subject of the second section—is long-standing tensions in the relationship between political elites, society, and the armed forces. Traditionally, elites and military professionals have harbored suspicions regarding mobilizing society for war that have centered on a fear of escalation—that the participation of the people in war would inescapably lead to violence spiraling out of control. Simultaneously, they regard the people to be of insufficient quality to constitute a strategically effective instrument. Civilian citizens cannot be made to do what must be done in war efficiently and precisely. Consequently, a professional, regular force has usually been deemed a superior alternative. Finally, the people may also harbor suspicions about the motives and competence of political and military elites and about the usefulness of war. Ultimately, they might not be ready to put their lives at risk for their state.²

The obvious alternative is to rely solely on selected parts of society. This choice, however, comes with another major challenge: the elements willing to fight may represent, in ideological terms, the more politically extreme parts of society. Selective force generation, too, has implications for strategy and control, as the third section discusses.

These two challenges are examined through Ukrainian examples. While one could argue that what transpired in Ukraine is an isolated problem

peculiar to the corrupt, divided, and impoverished society of Ukraine, this interpretation would be mistaken. Many specifics of the Ukrainian case are unique, but the fundamental challenges are more general. They are directly applicable to NATO countries, which almost all went wholesale for the regular force generation model in the past 30 years and are now considering the reintroduction of conscription and even touting whole-of-society-based resilience models. The concluding section discusses the implications for NATO forces.

Ukrainian Military Reforms That Targeted Society Prior to 2022

If Ukrainian society played a central role in saving the country in 2014–15, a first puzzling feature is that the Ukrainian state and its armed forces did not develop and harness its potential further from 2014 to 2022. Due to various pressures, Ukrainian policy flip-flopped and struggled to find a balance in the various lines pursued.³

First, it is important to remember that in 2014 Ukraine possessed what the Ukrainian Chief of the General Staff Viktor Muzhenko that year described as “a literally ruined army, [with] Russian generals at the head of the Armed Forces and security agencies, [and with] total demoralization.” The enormity of the task of reform was one reason for the sluggish and haphazard progress made until February 2022. A second reason was economic difficulties. Between 2013 and 2015, Ukraine lost more than half of its comparatively meager GDP, which raised defense expenditures from 1 percent to 2.5 percent of GDP with little effect in real terms. A third factor was the low-intensity war in Donbas that festered from 2015 to the 2022 invasion. It required the maintenance of a sizeable standing force, which provided a continuous distraction from pursuing military reforms.⁴

At the same time, the Ukrainian government, military, and society had a difficult relationship with conscription. Following its independence in 1991, Ukraine retained the Soviet conscription model, though its duration was halved from two years to one. It was unpopular. Conscription was commonly compared to slavery. Training and treatment of conscripts were poor, and the system was, in practice, selectively applied and, thus, considered unfair. In 2013, it was abolished. However, the year after, with the Crimea and Donbas crises, it was re-introduced. It was again selective but meant that in 2022 a pool of trained reserve manpower existed, though much smaller than the 900,000 soldiers often mentioned.⁵

There was a further major pressure: foreign influence. Since the early 2000s, a main driver behind Ukrainian military reforms was Ukraine's desire to join NATO. From that desire flowed an intent to adopt NATO practices and structures. Adopting Western standards of military professionalism strengthened after 2014 when NATO armies began training and equipping the Ukrainians in a manner familiar to them. Since these military bureaucracies were biased in favor of regular professional military practices and Western styles of operations, the trainers were not sympathetic to utilizing conscripts or irregulars.⁶

The Ukrainian government also actively reinforced the move toward a NATO-type regular professional force. It believed that such a force would be more politically reliable than the one it possessed. In 2015, the presidential administration invited RAND to assess the Ukrainian defense sector. Western and Ukrainian government biases found a common voice in the report. The RAND experts emphasized quality over quantity and implanted their (and their funders') ideas of military professionalism in training and doctrine. Their report opined that "for both the current conflict and most likely contingencies, Ukraine would find an all-volunteer professional force to be more effective." Universal conscription was deemed too expensive for Ukraine and judged to remain unfair and societally contentious because those with means or political connections could avoid service.⁷

Economic realities, foreign and domestic military preferences, and the general unpopularity of conscription affected perceptions of the practicality of universal conscription among the political elites. Ultimately, the military and political elites opted for building a professional force as a declared intent but, in practice, continued with a mixed model of regulars reinforced with selective conscription. As late as February 1, 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky told parliament his plans to professionalize the military, which included 100,000 new personnel to be contracted over the coming three years. By January 2024, instead of conscription, youngsters could opt for a three-to-four-month period of "intensive training." Ukraine seemed to be moving toward marrying a core professional army with an organized volunteer element.⁸

When Russia invaded in 2022, the active Ukrainian forces reportedly consisted of just under 200,000 personnel. The 200,000 figure, perhaps affordable and societally acceptable, appeared woefully insufficient against a large-scale invasion. What saved the nation was not the official system of force generation or the conscript reserves but the 100,000 volunteers who, in the first 10 days after the invasion, unplanned and unexpected, rushed to support the outnumbered professionals.⁹

Mobilizing Whole Societies for War

Historically, views of the roles of the people fighting in war have been ambivalent, with conservative and revolutionary military thinkers valuing their power differently. Conservatives—a camp to which most military professionals belong—regard the people with suspicion. Fearing loss of control, they sought to curb the people’s direct participation in matters of war. Wars were best left to technocratic military professionals. Revolutionaries, in turn, saw the power of the people as a means that could transform war and, through war, politics. Once in power, politicians of all stripes have become suspicious because they fear that mobilizing and arming the people can endanger all regime types. Generally, popular mobilization is regularized through conscription systems, which, by demanding long training periods, attempt to integrate volunteers into the tight, disciplinary embrace of the regular armed forces.¹⁰

In Ukraine, the Maidan protest movement and the war that followed forcefully re-introduced the people into thinking about war. Yet, Ukrainian political and military elites felt society overstepped the mark—first politically by challenging and then toppling the pro-Russian Yanukovich regime, and then, militarily by escalating the war in Donbas.

The political and military elites soon put the people back into their proper place. Most so-called “volunteer battalions” were disbanded or integrated into official military structures by June 2015. Since the disbanding and integration of volunteers was not followed by substantial reforms, the continued Soviet practices in the military disillusioned many volunteers with Ukrainian politics and state bureaucracy.¹¹

The state simultaneously struggled with mobilization. Despite the early wave of volunteers, numbers soon dwindled, and society’s suspicion toward its political and military leaders began to manifest as draft dodging, and anti-conscription protests became widespread. Ukraine aggressively deployed soldiers to pursue draft dodgers in public. The situation worsened until the sixth wave in August 2015 called up half of the planned conscripts. President Petro Poroshenko later admitted that one-third of the conscripts deployed to Donbas in the first wave had deserted.¹²

The mobilization of volunteers in 2014 has been described as a “premodern” and “neo-medieval” way to generate force: the volunteer battalions consisted of ideologically motivated fighters paid by local notables to fight on behalf of the state. The volunteers, nonetheless, bought time for the state to conduct a partial mobilization. While this plan helped the military stave off further advances by the Russian-supported separatists, it also laid bare the deficiencies

of Ukraine's mobilization system—it did not offer a reliable solution for long-term force generation.¹³

The regular military considered the volunteers poorly trained, difficult-to-control radicals. Leaders expected any short-term benefits they might bring to be less than the long-term damage they would cause. The volunteers, in turn, were suspicious of the military professionals' politics and deemed the military commanders poorly motivated careerists out of touch with reality. The perception of unreliability is clear from the way Ukrainian defense officials pinned the responsibility for the critical Ukrainian defeat in Ilovaik in September 2014 on the volunteers, whose independence they claimed had hampered efforts to coordinate with the regular military. The defeat forced the Ukrainian government to accept the Minsk ceasefire agreement.¹⁴

After the Russian invasion in 2022, the Zelensky government sought popular mobilization by opening weapons depots to citizens. On orders from the president, anyone presenting a Ukrainian passport would be handed an assault rifle. Leaders brushed aside potential risks with the argument that in case of defeat, the Russians would seize the arms anyway. The hope was that arming "patriots" would inflame popular resistance and deter collaboration with the enemy.¹⁵

However, government doubts about the reliability of the population surfaced when it sought to bar most men between 18 and 60 years old from leaving the country. The fear was justified. According to European Union figures, by the end 2023, some 768,000 Ukrainian male citizens between 18 to 64 years old had been granted temporary protection status in the EU. As the threat of a Russian capture of Kyiv receded, Ukrainian authorities collected the weapons they had distributed to re-assert control and reduce friendly fire incidents by inexperienced and panicked citizens.¹⁶

Manpower demands did not abate, however. Not only did much of the professional army perish on the front lines, but with their loss, the training establishment also largely vanished. The armed forces felt forced to mobilize the teaching staff of the military academies with the officer cadets to generate additional infantry battalions. Ukraine paused conscription. Even if Ukraine had mobilized substantial manpower, it would have faced a major challenge in training them.¹⁷

As a result of the reduction in training standards and then the decreasing morale as mobilization began to rely increasingly on coercion rather than ideology, a simplification or primitivization of war emerged. The Ukrainians struggled to coordinate formations larger than company level, and these units

were forced to employ not very artful and bloody attritional tactics. In a perverse way, the Ukrainians were fortunate to find the same dynamic also applied to the Russian side: Their regular forces suffered high casualties, too, concomitantly, training capacity deteriorated, and the Putin regime's distrust of its population restricted mobilization, with stagnated numbers on the front line and reduced operational quality and coordination.

In interviews, Ukrainians who first fought as volunteers in 2014–15, and who immediately remobilized to fight the Russians in February 2022, admitted they were pleased about Russian atrocities and missile attacks against Ukrainian civilians because they assumed their fellow Ukrainians would now be forced to take an active role in the war. This did not happen.¹⁸

By 2023, the same volunteers began to talk about the emergence of a “weird” social contract characterized by a live-and-let-live attitude on the home front. Ukrainian politicians did not demand sacrifices from society, and society, in return, demanded little from its leaders. This ambiguous situation left the military, especially the volunteers who had mobilized early on, with the short end of the stick. Without an influx of recruits, troops could not demobilize (or rotate from the front to rest at regular intervals). Recruits increasingly felt they had been handed a one-way ticket to the front.

Civil society, however, gave conflicting signals. Between 2022 and the end of 2024, more Ukrainians opposed peace negotiations than favored them. A Ukrainian poll conducted in June 2024 claimed that six out of 10 of those questioned thought a general mobilization was necessary to prevent defeat in war. Yet, according to the same poll, fewer than one-third felt it was shameful to avoid mobilization orders. One explanation was that half of the respondents did not trust the military's ability to provide sufficient training and equipment. Paradoxically, other polls continued to show sky-high trust in the military. In January 2024, no fewer than 95 percent trusted the armed forces—the highest of all institutions—followed by volunteer units at 85 percent. By comparison, three-quarters distrusted state officials. Ukrainian society seemed to display a peculiar form of dissociative disorder. While being convinced that the military could do its job and required national mobilization, many people simultaneously believed that the war did not need to involve them. Even a war generally deemed existential remained, in practical terms, a matter for only a part of Ukraine's people.¹⁹

Meanwhile, desertion from the front lines increased. As one volunteer explained, many in the armed forces felt the politicians and society sought to wash their hands of the war and delegate the responsibility for winning it to the military. In September 2024, the public desertion of Serhii Hnezdilov

brought the dire plight of the exhausted military to light. Hnezdilov volunteered for the military in March 2019 on a three-year contract. Because of martial law, however, he had become stuck in the army for the duration of hostilities. Hnezdilov's public protest reflected the deep discouragement felt by many volunteers because of lukewarm societal support and continued corruption and incompetence among officials involved in the war effort. They sympathized with Hnezdilov and noted that other erstwhile highly-motivated volunteers had also abandoned the front lines.²⁰

Overall, the war was not going well for Ukraine. After the failure of the long-awaited Ukrainian counteroffensive in the summer of 2023, Russia regained the initiative. Ukraine increasingly struggled to find frontline infantry. Then-Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Valerii Zaluzhnyi was fired in February 2024 after speaking about the challenging situation and demanding the mobilization of 500,000 new recruits. Later in the year, the Ukrainian prosecutor general's office reported that between January and September 2024, some 51,000 soldiers left their units without permission—more than twice the number from the entirety of 2023. The nomination of a new commander of Ukraine's ground forces and his promised "massive transformation" of training, management, and recruitment in December 2024 was welcomed, but came too late.²¹

The Ukrainian experience illustrates how difficult it is for a democratic state fighting for its survival to introduce a system of conscription that bears fairly on society and is supported. In Ukraine, whole-of-society mobilization was an aspiration in peacetime and in wartime, but, consistently deemed impossible to implement. The alternative of relying on regulars and advanced technology similarly failed. A well-trained professional force equipped with advanced weapons was too expensive and inadequate for anything but a short war. Resilience could only be gained from greater societal involvement. Yet instead of whole-of-society participation, Ukraine came to rely critically on a form of highly politicized volunteerism not reflective of society as a whole.

Mobilizing Parts of Societies for War

If mobilizing whole societies for war is difficult and professional forces alone are insufficient for the likely challenge, the logical alternative is to augment professionals from selected parts of society. Ukraine was not the only country pushed in this direction. In the absence of a popular surge of support and a willingness by the Putin regime to enforce universal conscription, Russia came

to rely on paid paramilitary organizations, especially the Wagner Group, and individual volunteers attracted by monetary gain.

The immediate issue with such schemes is that while volunteers may serve in structures that resemble—and may even formally constitute—official military units, they primarily serve a political (or, as in Russia's case, monetary) cause instead of the state. Their personal politics and interests do not necessarily represent or align with the whole of society or the government in power.²²

The ideological motivations of volunteer forces raise three particular issues. First, suppose the people in general are deemed difficult to transform into effective, disciplined, and obedient soldiers. In that case, this concern is likely to worsen with politically driven volunteers whose agendas may differ from the state's political and military leadership. For example, in Ukraine, volunteers actively sought to escalate the conflict with separatists to drag an unwilling state and its military into an expanded war. On the home front, they first opposed the Minsk agreements in 2014–15 and then threatened another revolution if Ukraine made political concessions to Russia. After 2022, control issues persisted. While centralized mobilization measures initially covered losses during 2022–23, Ukrainian military units increasingly looked for recruits and funding independently. Such practices affected the relationship between the regular armed forces and these units, which in Ukraine was one of negotiation and relative independence, both matters inconducive to central operational control. Cohesion also suffered from the practice of trying to glue different military units together in a piecemeal manner. The resulting problems with coordination and control affected defensive performance, but they were especially revealed when forces went on the offensive. The reliance on volunteer recruitment reinforced the primitivization of the war dynamic.²³

Secondly, mobilizing only part of a society may cause domestic polarization, hindering whole-of-society mobilization. Social cohesion will likely suffer if the political agenda pursued by those mobilized is not reflective of broader societal values. For instance, the Ukrainian 3rd Separate Assault Brigade, formed in January 2023, was based on the remnants of the Azov Regiment, a unit associated with far-right views before 2022 and, later, the heroic defense of Mariupol. When individual units attract recruits through their recruitment centers and media channels, they risk exacerbating the issue of national political cohesion. The composition of the military affects the trust it receives from society. Traditionally conservative military professionals, therefore, strive to project an apolitical image by stressing that their service is to the nation as a whole irrespective of partisan political opinion.

Thirdly, volunteers, especially of an ultranationalist persuasion, are often more concerned with internal than external enemies. In Ukraine, for instance, volunteers focused much less on the Russians occupying Crimea in spring 2014 than the Russian-supported domestic enemy of the separatists in eastern Ukraine. This domestic obsession also had to do with the volunteers' relative military weakness. It was easier to battle separatists and establish order in Donbas than successfully fight a war with Russia over Crimea. Furthermore, extremists perceive the world with little nuance; one is either a friend or an enemy. Historically, a division of labor has often emerged, whereby the regular military defends against foreign threats, and volunteer paramilitaries task themselves with combating perceived domestic threats.²⁴

If volunteers focus on an external enemy instead, their best hope of victory may come from forcing popular resistance by playing up enemy atrocities and perhaps inviting indiscriminate responses. As noted, setting off an escalatory spiral is what several Ukrainian volunteers hoped for in 2022. Recognizing their limited numbers, one described the volunteers as catalysts. Paradoxically, their failure to set off a whole-of-society mobilization underlines their limited political appeal and the vital importance of societal support.

While ideologically motivated volunteers can compensate for manpower shortfalls, they may simultaneously undermine control over the frontline armed forces and support of the home front. These risks are considerable, especially when set against their likely benefits. In Ukraine, volunteers may have held the front at key moments in 2014–15 and 2022, but their numbers were too small to tilt the balance of the war and lead the country to victory. Instead, they reduced the effectiveness of the regular armed forces and failed in their efforts to inspire, cajole, or trick the people of Ukraine into full societal mobilization. Moreover, once the fighting stops, whether through a ceasefire or a peace agreement, they will likely pose a significant danger to national political stability because they are unlikely to be satisfied with either outcome.

Conclusion

The hypothesis promising an easy victory behind Russia's plan to invade in 2022 was the presumed existence of a weak relationship between Ukrainian society, the military, and the political leadership. The firm belief in the truth of the hypothesis is apparent from Putin's speech broadcast on the morning of the invasion in which he addressed Russians *and* Ukrainians. Putin called the Zelensky administration a "junta," which held Ukraine "hostage," and urged

the Ukrainian armed forces to serve the Ukrainian people by laying down their weapons and disobeying the “criminal orders” of the “neo-Nazis” in power.²⁵

Putin had a point, but it was not as telling as he believed. While some Ukrainian officials and citizens heeded his advice, enough did not. The ensuing conflict was a reminder that war is the business of the people. Yet, as this special commentary has argued, the war did not become the business of *all* the people. As a result, Ukraine suffered manpower shortages. What is more, to the extent that people were mobilized, the force generation practices led to problems with operational control and what we labeled a primitivization of warfare. It contributed overall to Ukraine’s inability to turn the war around on the battlefield and acquire a strong position at the negotiating table. Ukraine has found itself between a rock and a hard place. It has not found a viable defense solution derived from generating a state-controlled professional force relying on advanced technology or creating one based on a classical universal conscription model. Instead, it fought with a hybrid force of regulars, some conscripts, and volunteers—a force over which the first struggled to exert full control and direction over the last, with the conscripts generally as an ill-motivated and ill-trained entity in the middle. The volunteers played a critical role, but their motivations made them a mixed blessing. Their willingness to fight did not necessarily originate from a sense of shared national interest as represented by the state with its elected government and regular military but often from partisan political concerns.

NATO member states would be wise to learn from Ukraine’s struggles. NATO forces, especially in Europe, require a greater involvement of society and militaries that can sustain themselves over the long(er) haul. The traditional approach relied on convincing society the threat was clear and present and, then, using long, coercive conscription terms, to socialize and discipline very young civilians into an obedient state instrument. As Ukraine illustrates, those recipes no longer work effectively. Instead of blaming society for its unwillingness to serve, or opting for forced conscription models, some key points require thorough consideration. Military establishments have little choice but to attune their command style and training methods more closely to societal norms to achieve maximum social traction. That means a return to the “warrior ethos” and the emphasis on the social exclusivity and uniqueness of the military profession that is seeing a renaissance should be viewed with skepticism. Training must necessarily be short and the reliance on mobilizable reserves high, including systems of territorial defense. Equipment and tactics should be adapted to minimum training and large numbers. A socially and politically realistic model of national force generation reinforces the need to prioritize resilient, easily mass producible and standardized equipment for large numbers

of personnel over the highly advanced, expensive, and hard-to-produce weapons systems that NATO's armed forces prefer.²⁶

Ukraine (and, for that matter, Israel's war against Hamas and Hezbollah) also illustrates the difficult balancing act that must be struck between maintaining a standing force that can hold off the likely forms the first enemy blow can take and the simultaneous maintenance of a training establishment of reserves that can replenish and rotate the frontline fighting forces over a possible long haul.

While this hybrid model does not favor the clean and short, decisive, or shock-and-awe kind of war advocated by professional Western militaries, it will increase state survivability. Admittedly, though, bloody attrition would be a hallmark of this model of force generation which is, sadly, not unfamiliar to democracies. The war in Ukraine emphasizes the strength of defense over offense and illustrates how soldiers with a couple of weeks of training have been able to hold their ground. And since NATO is on the political defensive and aims at war prevention and dissuasion, there is one possible bright spot: The prospect of attritional warfare may be so unappetizing to potential aggressors that it offers prospects for the effectiveness of conventional deterrence.

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Endnotes

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Russian Novel Nuclear Weapons and War-Fighting Capabilities

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ABSTRACT: This article argues that Russia's novel nuclear-capable weapons will have a minor but real impact on Russian war-fighting capabilities in Eastern Europe. Using publicly available assessments, it evaluates the weapons' characteristics individually and when taken together to determine their possible impact on war fighting, deterrence, and arms control. Additionally, it analyzes Russian war-fighting concepts to project how Russian strategists think about their use and how they might integrate them into Russian war-fighting concepts. The study's conclusions will assist military strategists and policy practitioners as they plan for a potential regional war on NATO's eastern flank.

Keywords: nuclear strategy, Eastern Europe, hypersonic weapons, Russian strategy, European security

Russian President Vladimir Putin announced five novel nuclear delivery systems during his annual address to the Russian Federal Assembly in 2018. At the time of his speech, only one system—the Kh-47Ms2 Kinzhal hypersonic aeroballistic cruise missile—was reportedly in service. Russia deployed three of the five systems in 2023 and claimed to have completed testing on the remaining two by the end of 2023. To date, the Russian military has used two of these novel weapons—the Kinzhal and the 3M22 Tsirkon hypersonic cruise missile—as part of its war in Ukraine.¹

How will these novel weapons affect Russia's war-fighting capabilities in Europe? I argue that these nuclear-capable weapons will enhance Moscow's war-fighting capabilities—to a limited degree. While novel weapons are technically revolutionary, they only provide a minor evolution in Russian capabilities. Hypersonic weapons could increase the speed of Russian attacks, and Russian leaders allege they improve precision abilities. Both may complicate air and missile defense efforts, potentially undermining Allied deterrence by denial strategies along NATO's eastern flank.

Additionally, their performance may not match Russian claims. The Kinzhal and Tsirkon have proven more effective than older weapons at overcoming rudimentary Ukrainian air and missile defense systems in Ukraine. Neither has met Russian expectations, and both remain vulnerable to advanced

American-made defense systems such as the Patriot missile. This performance could indicate that Russia's novel weapons are not as advanced as claimed and that their current impacts may be strategically unimportant. Nevertheless, Russia could learn from these setbacks and improve weapons technologies and use in future conflicts.

In this article, I consider five novel systems: the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle, the 9M730 Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile, the Kinzhal hypersonic aeroballistic missile, the Poseidon unmanned underwater vehicle, and the Tsirkon hypersonic cruise missile. Each system has a nuclear-armed variant, and several are also confirmed to have a conventionally armed version. Russia claims that each system has some novel characteristic—either hypersonic velocity or nuclear power—that makes it impervious to missile defenses. The performance of the Kinzhal and the Tsirkon, however, suggests that Russian claims about their invulnerability are either intentional disinformation or misperceptions of their own capabilities. It is likely that some element of disinformation or misperception is also present in Russian comments about the Avangard, Burevestnik, or Poseidon, even if it is not guaranteed that such comments are as disingenuous or inaccurate as those regarding the Kinzhal and the Tsirkon.

The first section of this article provides background information about the five novel weapons. The second section discusses how Russia has used the Kinzhal and Tsirkon missiles in Ukraine. The third section explores how Russia may use these weapons in a regional war with NATO—including for escalation management, aerospace defense, naval warfare, or limited nuclear use for battlefield purposes. A broader theoretical discussion about why these weapons will neither dramatically alter how Russia wages war nor impact the regional balance of power follows. The article concludes with recommendations for US and Allied policy.

Russia's Novel Nuclear Weapons

Russia has deployed or is developing five novel nuclear weapons systems as part of its recent nuclear modernization efforts. The primary drivers of this modernization are maintaining Russia's nuclear deterrent, attaining international status aspirations, and promoting the interests of domestic actors. Nevertheless, Russia may use these weapons for reasons other than their initial intended use, including war fighting.²

The Avangard is a hypersonic-boost glide vehicle launched by a missile to an altitude of approximately 100 kilometers. The glide vehicle then separates from the missile and maneuvers through the atmosphere

toward its target along an erratic trajectory. Avangard reportedly travels at speeds of up to Mach 20 during the glide phase. The maneuverability of Avangard may make it difficult to track and intercept.³

The Tsirkon, a ship-based hypersonic nuclear-capable cruise missile first tested in February 2020, became operational in January 2023. Land and underwater tests have also occurred. Like the Kinzhal, Russia has used the Tsirkon in Ukraine, though its use has been more and Ukrainian forces have not reported the same level of success intercepting them. The maneuverability of the Tsirkon likely makes it more effective than the Kinzhal, which relies on speed alone to overcome air and missile defenses. The Admiral Gorshkov-class frigate and the smaller Buyan-M and Karakut-class corvettes can carry the Tsirkon, while Russia has used land-based launchers to strike targets in Ukraine.⁴

Russia claims that the Kinzhal is a hypersonic aeroballistic missile. The Kinzhal can reportedly carry a nuclear or conventional payload. Currently, deployed missiles are conventional. The MiG-31K or variants of the Tupolev Tu-160 can fire Kinzhal in theory. The Kinzhal was the first of these weapons that Russia used in combat, striking targets in Ukraine. The Kinzhal may not be a true hypersonic because it lacks the maneuverability of the Tsirkon and the Avangard—which some analysts state is a defining feature of a hypersonic weapon—and because its speed may drop below the hypersonic threshold of Mach 5 during flight.⁵

The Burevestnik is a planned nuclear-powered cruise missile. Nuclear propulsion is intended to increase the missile's range. The Burevestnik could have a range of 10,000 to 20,000 kilometers, allowing it to be fired from anywhere within the Russian Federation to hit any point in the continental United States. The Burevestnik's propulsion system consists of a miniaturized nuclear reactor. Significant testing problems have plagued the development of the Burevestnik. In early tests of the Burevestnik, which Putin lauded as significant national accomplishments, the missiles reportedly missed their targets and crashed in the Arctic Ocean off Novaya Zemlya. An accident that occurred while working on the missile's propulsion system at the Nenoksa naval missile testing site in the Russian Arctic killed five Rosatom staff members and injured three others. Roshydromet, the Russian Federal Service for Hydrometeorology and Environmental Monitoring, recorded a cloud of radioactive fallout over the Arkhangelsk region in the Russian far north associated with the accident.⁶

Under development, the Poseidon is a nuclear-armed and nuclear-powered unmanned underwater vehicle with a speed of approximately 100 miles per hour. The Poseidon is often referred to as a "doomsday weapon" in Western and Russian sources. The unmanned underwater vehicle would not

strike the target if used in a conflict. Instead, it would detonate some distance offshore. Instead of creating a nuclear explosion over a population center or military target, the Poseidon produces a devastating radioactive wave. Russia produced the first batch of Poseidon unmanned underwater vehicles by early January 2023, and Russian media reports that the Russian Navy will field a group of Poseidon-armed Belgorod nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) with the Pacific Fleet by 2025.⁷

Kinzhal and Tsirkon Use in Ukraine

Russia has used the Kinzhal and the Tsirkon as part of its war in Ukraine. Russia reportedly first used the Kinzhal in Ukraine in March 2022, though some non-Russian sources question the validity of these claims. Moscow launched its largest Kinzhal salvo in March 2023, striking several military and civilian targets across Ukraine. Despite Russian claims of high-precision abilities, the Kinzhal has struggled with accuracy. Most Russian uses were against larger military or civilian targets, such as fuel depots or apartment blocks, where precision is less important. The Kinzhal produced significant kinetic damage, though not more significant than other Russian weapons with similar payloads. While Ukraine's air and missile defenses were unable to counter Kinzhal, this failure is not significantly different from the impact of other ballistic missiles Russia has used throughout the war.⁸

The deployment of Patriot batteries in the spring of 2023 significantly reduced the Kinzhal's effectiveness. The Kinzhal likely slows during its descent, making it vulnerable to Patriot. Patriot batteries destroyed five of six Kinzhal missiles that Russia fired at Kyiv during the batteries' first engagements with the Kinzhal. The sixth Kinzhal damaged a Patriot battery. Contrary to Russian reports that the Kinzhal destroyed it, the Patriot battery was operational shortly after the engagement. The Patriot batteries damaged or destroyed additional Kinzhals in later engagements. Russia has also used the Kinzhal to strike targets away from Patriot protection, where it has had similar success rates to earlier uses. In August 2023, Russia attempted to strike targets in and around Kyiv with three Kinzhals, one of which was intercepted by a Patriot battery, while an additional strike beyond the range of Patriot killed an 8-year-old boy in the Western region of Ivano-Frankivsk.⁹

Russian and Ukrainian officials also claim that Russia has used the Tsirkon in the war. Putin referenced previous Tsirkon use in late February 2024, which is consistent with Ukrainian reports that Russia used the Tsirkon in early February 2024. According to these reports, Russia used the missile to strike residential buildings and energy infrastructure. Earlier use is possible.

Some analysts claim wreckage from a December 2023 attack suggests potential Tsirkon use, but neither Russian nor Ukrainian officials have made similar claims.¹⁰

Maneuverability and higher speed make the Tsirkon more sophisticated than the Kinzhal. Ukrainian officials have claimed the ability to intercept the Tsirkon, though such claims are suspect. Specifically, Ukrainian Air Force spokesman Ilya Yevlash claims that Ukrainian Sol-Air Moyenne-Portee / Terrestre (SAMP/T) and Patriot systems can degrade or destroy Tsirkon. There are unverified reports of a possible Tsirkon interception by Ukrainian air defense in March 2024.¹¹

Potential Uses of Novel Nuclear Weapons in War Fighting

Russia's novel nuclear systems could play a role in Russian war fighting, as the Kinzhal and the Tsirkon already have. The dual-capable nature of these systems allows Russia to use them as conventional or nuclear war-fighting tools. Beyond continued use of the Kinzhal and the Tsirkon in Ukraine, Russia may choose one or more of these weapons in a regional war, using strategic non-nuclear weapons—including conventional variants of the Kinzhal, the Tsirkon, or the Avangard—or limited nuclear strikes if a local conflict inadvertently escalates, Russia misperceives the resolve of the United States to defend NATO allies, or an irrational leader decides to wage a war despite the anticipated costs of US or NATO involvement. Some systems could also be used in a local conflict if Russian leaders believe the systems to be useful tactically with no expected direct American or Allied response. This section explores how Russia may integrate these systems into escalation management strikes, naval warfare, aerospace defense, and limited nuclear warfare.

Russian Nuclear Modernization and Escalation Management

Due to the symbolic nature of novel weapons and their perceived ability to counter missile defenses, Russian strategists may consider their use for escalation management. Should American or Russian deterrence fail and a regional war between Russia and NATO break out, Moscow is likely to pursue actions intended to end the conflict, prevent the spread of the conflict to other regions, or limit escalation. Russia's escalation management theories have generated significant discussion within Russia's strategic community and academic and policy circles abroad. Some analysts tie escalation management to an escalate-to-de-escalate strategy, arguing that Russia will likely use limited nuclear strikes to de-escalate regional conflicts before they threaten Russian regime survival. Others have argued that no Russian policy exists and Russian military thought has moved away from considering nonstrategic nuclear weapons

as tools for de-escalation. Others argue that nuclear use is possible but not guaranteed and that while Russia accepts the role of nonstrategic nuclear strikes in regional conflicts, the use of strategic non-nuclear weapons is more likely. Recent statements by Putin suggest that a revised Russian doctrine may explicitly include escalation management as a reason for nuclear use.¹²

Whether by conventional or nuclear means, Russian escalation management has four primary goals:

1. to deter direct aggression against Russia,
2. to prevent the expansion of a lower-level conflict,
3. to prevent the use of capabilities that could jeopardize state or regime survival, and
4. to terminate a conflict in a manner that Russia finds acceptable.

Russia is likely to target critical military and economic infrastructure (including military weak spots, transportation nodes, or energy facilities) in an attempt to deter further aggression against Russia. Strikes with strategic non-nuclear weapons or nonstrategic nuclear weapons, both which may include the novel nuclear weapons covered here, may also target capabilities Russian leaders perceive as threats to regime or state survival, such as forward-deployed nuclear weapons in NATO European countries.¹³

Some novel weapons may significantly impact escalation management. Russia could use weapons that improve precision-strike capabilities and that are more challenging for missile defenses to counter in a strike against missile defense sites, improving Moscow's ability to launch rocket attacks against US allies in Eastern or Central Europe. While this ability would not erode the conventional retaliatory capability of the United States in the region, Russian leaders may perceive that it negates the ability of missile defenses to deny operational success, thus eroding deterrence-by-denial capabilities. This ability would require the weapons to work as advertised, an outcome called into question by Russia's experience in Ukraine. Additionally, these systems are unnecessary to erode deterrence-by-denial capabilities. Russia could employ several options instead, including overwhelming systems with numbers, deploying special forces, or using existing precision-strike capabilities.

Since the Kinzhal's vulnerability to advanced air and missile defenses has been confirmed in Ukraine, the Avangard and the Tsirkon may prove more advanced and effective but unlikely to alter the strategic status quo between Russia and the United States. Russia claims the Tsirkon's speed makes it impossible to counter.

While the Tsirkon may be more difficult to counter, speed alone has not given other Russian systems—such as the Kinzhal—similar capabilities. The Tsirkon's range also limits its use in a strike against American intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). A ship carrying the missile would need to be within a few miles of the US coast to reach the western edge of American ICBM fields. Additionally, Russian claims regarding the speed of other novel systems have proven exaggerated, casting suspicion on claims of the Tsirkon's speed. The Avangard would likely pose significant challenges for missile defense systems, as its speed and novel maneuvering trajectory would make it difficult to track and intercept.

Russian Nuclear Modernization and Naval War Fighting

Novel nuclear-capable weapons may provide the greatest benefit for Russian naval war fighting. The Tsirkon could notably improve Russian capabilities if Russian claims about its abilities are accurate. Conventional and nuclear variants of these weapons may play a role in naval war fighting. The primary purpose of the Tsirkon is to eliminate an adversary's surface ships that are equipped with air and missile defense systems. The destruction of these capabilities would reduce an adversary's ability to launch a disarming first strike or intercept a retaliatory Russian strike. The Tsirkon's ability to fly exclusively at high altitudes reduces the effectiveness of air and missile defense systems countering the weapon. Carrier groups could be another target of the Tsirkon or the Poseidon. Russian strategists are concerned that existing capabilities would be insufficient to counter American carrier groups, making new and advanced weapons such as the Tsirkon tempting war-fighting tools. Sea-based intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and command-and-control systems could also be key targets for precision-guided capabilities.¹⁴

The Tsirkon is the most obvious choice for counter sea-based threats due to its successful tests against sea-based targets and Russian plans to deploy the weapon on a series of surface ships and, potentially, submarines. The Tsirkon, like the Kinzhal and maybe the Avangard, has nuclear and conventional variants. Russia could use a conventionally armed Tsirkon with its precision and missile defense evasion capabilities to strike critical naval targets without crossing the nuclear threshold. The Kinzhal may have similar uses, but its underperformance in Ukraine suggests its unreliability for striking carrier groups protected by advanced air and missile defenses. The Poseidon unmanned underwater vehicle could provide Russia with another naval nuclear war-fighting option. While the Poseidon's most likely use is as a second-strike weapon, it could also target aircraft carriers or carrier groups. Russia is less likely to use the unmanned underwater vehicle than the Tsirkon as it may be challenging to strike moving targets without

the Belgorod getting close to the carrier group, potentially placing it in danger of American antisubmarine warfare capabilities.¹⁵

Russian Nuclear Modernization and Aerospace Defense

Beyond escalation management and naval war fighting, Russia may incorporate novel nuclear-capable weapons into its aerospace defense. Russia is far more likely to use conventional variants of these systems than nuclear variants for aerospace defense. While the use of a nuclear weapon cannot be ruled out completely, the likelihood of conflict escalation, the depletion of useful second-strike capabilities, and the threat of radioactive fallout to the Russian environment and population incentivize the use of non-nuclear capabilities.

Conventionally armed novel weapons could be used for a preemptive strike against an adversary's forces. Dmitry Adamsky argues that the best Russian aerospace defense in many circumstances would be an effective offensive strike against enemy air capabilities while they remain on the ground. The Avangard, the Kinzhal, and the Tsirkon could be used to eliminate critical targets that require a high-precision strike to defeat. This strategy suffers from drawbacks, including an ambiguity problem and the cost of depleting useful retaliatory weapons.¹⁶

Russian Nuclear Modernization and Limited Nuclear Strikes

While Russia is unlikely to use nuclear weapons for battlefield purposes beyond escalation management and aerospace defense, such use is not impossible. The Russian military could use limited strikes with low-yield weapons if leaders believed it would provide significant battlefield benefits and would not draw an unacceptable response from outside actors. Russia's novel nuclear weapons could carry smaller payloads, making them options for a limited nuclear strike.

The ability of several of these systems to evade and penetrate missile defenses, combined with their precision, may incentivize Russia to use them to deliver a single low-yield nuclear strike for battlefield purposes. If they exist in practice, these abilities would make the weapons more reliable than rudimentary options. Evading missile defenses would allow Russia to conduct a strike with a single weapon and limit the broader damage that using multiple weapons to strike a target could cause. In theory, limiting damage would reduce the risk of vertical and horizontal escalation in a war. Additionally, Russia would not need to launch a large missile salvo that confuses US and Allied missile defenses to ensure a single nuclear-armed missile hits its target, reducing the risk of the

United States and nuclear-armed NATO members misperceiving the strike as a more significant theater-wide nuclear strike.

The use of these systems is not guaranteed in the event of a limited nuclear strike, as Russia has plenty of other limited nuclear options not covered in this article. The primary role of these systems is to give Russia a tactical nuclear capability, whereas the main purpose of Russia's novel nuclear systems is to deter American nuclear aggression at the strategic level. Given the limited number of Avangard hypersonic glide vehicles and the primarily naval role of the Tsirkon, Russia is more likely to use these other land-, air-, or sea-based systems for battlefield purposes. The Kinzhal may be the most likely option among the novel nuclear systems for delivering a limited nuclear strike during a conflict, given its conventional use in Ukraine and questions about its ability to deliver a strategic nuclear strike due to its underperformance against Patriot batteries.

Burevestnik: A Poor Tool for War Fighting

Russia's hypersonic weapons are potential war-fighting tools. The Poseidon may also have some naval warfare uses. The Burevestnik, however, would provide more limited options for realistic use if developed. The system would combine a near-unlimited range with the ability to evade most current US missile defense systems if Russia can develop the weapon and its capabilities meet the Kremlin's expectations. The Burevestnik could use this range to reach targets in the United States while circumventing most US radar sites, potentially allowing it to strike with little to no warning. The missile would also emit dangerous radioactive isotopes along its flight path, irradiating a broad swath of enemy territory before reaching its target and adding to its destructive potential.

These capabilities make the Burevestnik a strong option for a nuclear second strike. It can reach countervalue targets in the United States or Europe, penetrate missile defenses, and produce additional damage to territory and population centers along its flight path but outside its blast radius and potentially beyond the area contaminated with fallout from its detonation. Nonetheless, it also makes the missile a poor choice for first strike, escalation management, or war-fighting purposes.

The extra damage may produce a greater response from the United States and, contrary to the goals of escalation management, increase the risk that a limited nuclear war becomes a total nuclear war. Additionally, radiation would fall along the entire flight path, not only the part of the path that takes the missile over enemy territory. Since the missile would be launched from Russia, Russian territory and population centers would be irradiated. While this issue

may not impose significant additional costs in a second-strike scenario—when an American nuclear strike would have already irradiated much of that territory, and the survival of the state is on the line—it would be costly in any other scenario, as Russia would need to deal with the ecological damage, public health crisis, and political resistance that would follow from choosing to irradiate part of its territory when other options were available.

Recommendations

While novel nuclear weapons are deterrence tools and status symbols, Russia may use them for war-fighting purposes. Russia could use the nuclear or conventional variants of dual-capable weapons in a regional war in Eastern Europe; Moscow could also use the three hypersonic systems—the Atvangard, the Kinzhal, and the Tsirkon—for escalation management and aerospace defense. Nonetheless, the weapons are unlikely to be game changers, given that other Russian capabilities can accomplish these tasks with similar effectiveness.

Deploying Patriot batteries, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), or other advanced defense systems to protect critical assets could diminish the threats posed by the Kinzhal and Tsirkon systems already in use. The primary thrust of American efforts to deter their use should focus on signaling resolve to respond to Russian aggression. Preparations to defeat a Russian escalation if that deterrence fails should continue to focus on establishing and maintaining local conventional superiority. As such, strategies to counter potential Russian use of hypersonic weapons for escalation management should not be fundamentally different than current efforts to maintain conventional deterrence and win regional wars if deterrence fails.

The United States and NATO should consider a range of deterrence-strengthening measures. NATO could bolster conventional forces on its eastern flank, while the United States could increase the number of forward-deployed nuclear weapons. Alternatively, additional countries (such as Poland) could host these weapons, possibly signaling American resolve to defend Eastern European allies. Each option could enhance regional deterrence. Each also comes with risks that American and Allied leaders should consider.

The Tsirkon may meaningfully improve Russian anti-ship capabilities, potentially increasing its ability to destroy American carrier groups. These capabilities may jeopardize the lives of American sailors, decrease American power projection, and erode American regional deterrence and compellence. The United States should invest in ways to offset these

risks by expanding or improving naval missile defenses and learning from Ukraine's experience countering Tsirkon strikes. Should Ukrainian claims that the SAMP/T and the Patriot can down the Tsirkon be true, the United States and its NATO Allies should place such systems (or more advanced ones such as the THAAD) where they could potentially intercept land-based missiles before they strike critical naval assets.

Additionally, the United States could deploy improved sea-based missile defenses (such as the newer variants of the SM-6) to counter the Tsirkon threat. These variants can intercept hypersonic weapons and reduce the effect of hypersonic attacks. The United States may also benefit from the continued development of an advanced Hypersonic and Ballistic Tracking Space Sensor (HBTSS) to detect and track hypersonic weapons and increase the effectiveness of ground and sea-based missile defenses. The United States launched two satellites as part of a prototype HBTSS in February 2024.¹⁷

Multiple systems may be used for limited nuclear strikes beyond escalation management, aerospace defense, and naval war fighting. Countering such strikes will likely rely on continued deterrence by communicating American resolve to respond to them. The Burevestnik, however, is a poor choice for limited nuclear strikes or other war-fighting purposes. As such, American and Allied leaders should not consider threats to use the Burevestnik as credible unless they believe Russian leadership is irrational. Rather, leadership should consider threats centering on hypersonic weapons as more serious.

Conclusion

Russia has developed several new nuclear-capable weapons to maintain its nuclear deterrent and to provide the country with recognizable symbols of international prestige. The Russian military, however, may employ these weapons for uses other than their initially intended purposes, including conventional, or possibly nuclear, variants for regional war fighting. Russia has already used two systems—the Kinzhal and the Tsirkon—in its war against Ukraine.

These capabilities are not strategically revolutionary. Some may be evolutionary, providing benefits to the speed, precision, or reliability of a Russian attack. The United States and its NATO Allies must overcome these threats, especially in the Arctic region or on the Alliance's eastern flank. Investments in missile defense improvements and continued signaling of regional resolve and ability should be attainable. The underperformance of the Kinzhal and the Tsirkon, the limited deployment of the Avangard, and the Burevestnik

and the Poseidon remaining in development grant the United States and NATO time to respond. This time is not infinite.

Responding to Russia's novel nuclear-capable weapons will not require drastic new action. Instead, the United States should increase investment in capabilities it is already pursuing and work with allies to strengthen regional deterrence in Eastern and Northern Europe. For example, during this limited time, the United States should consider deployments of advanced regional missile defenses, further develop Hypersonic and Ballistic Tracking Space Sensors, and determine what actions best improve regional deterrence while limiting risks.

Improving regional missile defenses and hypersonic tracking abilities would mitigate the threats posed by Russia's novel weapons. Doing so would reduce the damage such a strike would cause. Additionally, these improvements may improve deterrence-by-denial abilities, making Russian leaders less likely to think such a strike could succeed and, therefore, reduce the chance they would consider a strike in the first place.

Expanding defenses, developing sensors, and improving regional deterrence will cost money and require extensive planning. The requisite brainpower and financial resources are not finite. Nevertheless, the United States must consider these now investments to reduce the likelihood of a Russian strike and blunt the effectiveness of a strike should deterrence fail. The importance of addressing this threat continues to rise, as Russia's expansionist war against Ukraine, its frequent use of information warfare against American and European targets, and its employment of hawkish rhetoric point to an increasing risk of a Russia-NATO conflict.

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Measuring Interoperability Within NATO: Adapted Off-the-Shelf Tool or Bespoke Solution?

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ABSTRACT: Despite decades of work on interoperability, NATO Allies cannot measure, assess, and build upon it fully and accurately. The lack of agreed formats or standards for collection, management, and the communication of findings have prevented the Allies from developing common interoperability measurement and assessment tools. Nonetheless, NATO could adopt extant standards, methodologies, processes, or tools to achieve its interoperability objectives. Testing this notion through use cases, the authors identify practical and conceptual hurdles to adopting an off-the-shelf solution. They conclude that the Alliance may need to create assessment standards, methodologies, processes, and tools from scratch, despite the difficulties of doing so.

Keywords: NATO, interoperability, US Army Interoperability Measurement System (AIMS), Multinational Interoperability Assessment Tool (MIAT), Standing NATO Maritime Group (SNMG)

NATO's expansion to 32 nations, its re-embrace of collective defense since Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and its acceleration of defense and deterrence adaptation since the full-scale Russia-Ukraine War began in February 2022 have made interoperability among Allies more important than at any time since the Cold War. Early in the Cold War, the Allies recognized that if they intended to fight side by side, they needed to be able to share things like ammunition, fuel, spare parts, intelligence, battlefield tactics, standard operating procedures, and radio frequencies. The benefits—and, arguably, necessity—of being able to operate side-by-side have thus been evident for decades, and the Alliance has established bureaucratic structures, policies, and guidelines designed to achieve interoperability. Today, interoperability remains crucial, as military personnel rely on proven interoperable systems to allow them to focus on planning and executing operations across all war-fighting functions, domains, and echelons.¹

Authors' Note: This article draws on the authors' participation in a NATO Science and Technology Office coordinated project (SAS-156) on interoperability measurement and assessment. The issues the authors address in this article differ somewhat from the issues the research task group examined and do not necessarily reflect the consensus views of all the research task group members. The task group's final report is available to NATO members and partners at <https://www.sto.nato.int/publications/Pages/default.aspx>.

Many Alliance documents explain how interoperability leads to improved readiness, effectiveness, efficiency, and reduced costs. Despite pursuing interoperability for decades, the Allies remain unable to measure it, assess it, and build upon it fully and accurately. This predicament is especially ironic given the critical role that interoperability has played in Alliance exercises, training events, and operations. It would be reasonable to assume that “the most successful alliance in history” would have formed a consensus on how to measure and assess whether and how its members’ forces can operate together. NATO has not yet closed this significant gap, however, in part due to the lack of a standard format for interoperability data. Large amounts of data are collected at NATO interoperability events and exercises, but without a standard, interpreting that data across time, nations, and domains is a challenge that impairs NATO’s ability to leverage the information fully. When conducting interoperability analyses, bespoke data collection and analysis takes away from time and resources that could be spent identifying lessons and acting upon them.²

In addition to lacking a standard format for interoperability data, NATO lacks a common interoperability measurement and assessment tool. Some of its member nations and other entities have developed their own tools, however, which raises the question of whether any could be modified for NATO use or whether their output could provide the basis for a standard data format that could be implemented by multiple tools.

Agreed formats or standards for collection, management, and the communication of findings and a common interoperability measurement and assessment tool would help to solve many of the interoperability challenges facing NATO, especially if they could be applied across multiple war-fighting domains (land, air, and maritime). For example, they would allow military planners to assess and understand the state of interoperability with their partners and leverage the findings to address shortcomings. Additionally, interoperability assessments could inform the resourcing decisions of individual nations pursuing unique interoperability objectives across their military services.

This article examines what methodologies, processes, or tools already exist for interoperability measurement and whether they might be modified for NATO’s use. It further considers whether such a tool could be a basis for standardizing interoperability assessment or, alternatively, what a standard would involve.

The article first establishes key concepts and definitions with respect to interoperability, standardization, and assessment. It then examines current practices within NATO and the available scholarly or professional literature regarding extant interoperability data collection, data standardization, and data

management tools. The next section analyzes how interoperability methodology, processes, and tools might be used in practice within NATO, given existing Alliance operations in the land, air, and maritime domains. Subsequently, the article asks whether a military off-the-shelf option, such as the US Army Interoperability Measurement System (AIMS), could do the job across NATO's many Allies and among all major war-fighting domains. The final section looks forward and asks: If an off-the-shelf solution is unfeasible, what key factors should be addressed in an agreed data standard for Alliance interoperability, and what should a NATO interoperability measurement and assessment system consider?

Concepts and Definitions

This section lays out how we will use terms in three broad categories: interoperability, standardization, and measurement and assessment. Each of these fields is detailed in its own right, so we will limit ourselves to key points.

NATO views interoperability in terms of three dimensions: technical, procedural, and human. *Technical interoperability* refers to systems and equipment, such as communication and information systems, and their ability to operate together. For example, if French forward observers cannot provide Spanish artillery units location data regarding enemy formations in a format and method that is usable, missed shots or, much worse, friendly fire could occur. Similarly, if Polish early-warning radar systems produce data that is unrecognizable to German missile defense systems, Allied troops could suffer catastrophic casualties from an enemy's incoming missiles. Allied units in the field often cite interoperability in the technical dimension as the most challenging and persistent. In particular, the Alliance has long been plagued by a lack of sufficiently interoperable secure voice and data communications. Interoperability in sustainment and logistics—for example, common fuels—are also typically mentioned as significant and enduring.³

Procedural interoperability is based on measures such as common doctrine, procedures, and terminology. If different Allies have different expectations of who can authorize or disallow a military strike, an Allied operation could be either inappropriately blocked or improperly authorized. Similarly, if Dutch forces based in Rotterdam follow different procedures for loading, securing, and transporting military equipment headed east by rail to reinforce Allied defenses, Polish forces off-loading the equipment could experience inefficiencies, confusion, or injury.

Human interoperability concerns concepts such as mutual trust and understanding that are achieved by developing and strengthening relationships during training and operations. If troops do not know either

of NATO's two official languages (English and French) well enough to convey critical information to each other, Allied units cannot operate side by side in the field or in a common headquarters, where basic communication is vital. Human interoperability challenges can take more pernicious forms as well—for example, whether and how subordinates can raise concerns with orders. Interoperability in the human dimension—manifest, for example, through liaison officers or relationships built through shared experiences—can reduce friction created by more limited interoperability in the technical and procedural dimensions.⁴

The Alliance identifies several levels of interoperability, from 0 (not at all interoperable) to 3 (fully integrated). At level 3, forces operate together effectively without technical, procedural, or human barriers. This level is characterized by common networks, capabilities, procedures, and language. Level 2 is referred to as *compatible* and exists when forces operate together without prohibitive technical, procedural, or human barriers. It is characterized by similar or complementary processes and procedures. Level 1 is referred to as *deconflicted* and exists when forces operate in the same operational area in pursuit of a common goal but with limited interaction due to prohibitive technical, procedural, or human barriers.

While often a prerequisite for interoperability, standardization is a major concern for the Alliance, with several different offices and committees dedicated to the topic. At the highest level of formality, nations may enter a standardization agreement (or STANAG) by which they commit to implementing a specified standard to meet an interoperability requirement. Implementing standards is often necessary but not always sufficient to achieve interoperability, and, indeed, NATO has a separate set of three levels defined to measure standardization (compatibility at the lowest level, with interchangeability and commonality at the higher levels). Education, exercises, training, evaluations, lessons learned, cooperative programs, demonstrations, trials, and tests are all ways in which conformance to a standardization agreement can be evaluated and enhanced. Conducting evaluations and learning lessons is a fundamental component of military activity and, in particular, training for and conducting operations, yet measuring and assessing the outcomes of military operations is often problematic.⁵

Transitioning to the field of measurement, for assessments to be useful, the measures and means of collecting that information must be valid, reliable, and as free from biases as possible. That information, or data, can be in a quantitative or qualitative form. Quantitative data are measures of values or counts and are expressed as numbers; this type of data tends to have higher credibility among decisionmakers. Qualitative data describe qualities or characteristics and can be expressed through text, graphics, audio,

or video recordings; they are often (incorrectly) viewed as subjective and of lower value than quantitative data. A critical challenge in evaluating interoperability is to craft a measurement and assessment framework that allows for sufficient quantitative measures and adequate qualitative detail while not being overwhelming or impractical for assessors to use in practice.

Finally, while people often intuitively perceive *more* as *better*, achieving a high level of interoperability may be unnecessary or even undesirable. At times, a lower level of interoperability will suffice to meet the desired strategic, operational, and tactical objectives. For example, for humanitarian aid and disaster relief, in a low-threat environment, a deconflicted level of interoperability may suffice across military forces. Further, in some humanitarian scenarios, including search and rescue, NATO members may need to deconflict with nontraditional allies and even adversaries (for example, we may want radios that are “compatible” in the standardization sense with our adversaries to communicate with them, while they almost certainly will not have “commonality”).

Interoperability and Standardization Efforts in NATO

NATO Allies perceive interoperability as a critical means to achieving operational effectiveness and efficiency. Reflecting this view, the Alliance has many highly developed interoperability entities and initiatives in certain areas, most often technical. For example, the NATO Defence Planning Process is one of the primary sources for top-down interoperability requirements. Its task force on interoperability coordinates Alliance-wide efforts to ensure a holistic, consistent, and coherent approach to interoperability. It also ensures interoperability requirements and solution development are addressed coherently and harmonized with supporting measures in the NATO Standardization Organization Programme of Work. The program is the Military Committee’s lead agent for the development, coordination, and assessment of operational standardization. As noted, standardization is often a prerequisite for interoperability, and the bodies pursuing each goal have substantial overlap in objectives. In addition to the NATO Standardization Organization, NATO has several Military Committee Standardization Boards: Joint, Land, Maritime, Air, Medical, and Terminology.⁶

Elsewhere in NATO, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe writes an annual report on standardization and interoperability that identifies shortfalls but is not prescriptive in how to address them. NATO’s Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre publishes a lessons-learned handbook and maintains the NATO Lessons Learned Portal, “NATO’s single tool for collecting, managing, tracking, monitoring, and sharing of lessons.” While several hundred entries

in this database are tagged for interoperability, there is no structured way to pull out the observations and use them. Notably, the lessons are essentially crowdsourced and based on observed opportunities for improvement, meaning reports tend to emphasize what is *not* working rather than what is working well, while a good assessment tool should address both.⁷

Allied Command Transformation conducts various events through which standardization can be tested. For example, the Coalition Warrior Interoperability Exercise allows Allies and partners to focus on command-and-control aspects of interoperability and to test interoperability specifications that are hardwired into experimental and near-fielded capabilities. The Allied Command Transformation also conducts TIDE Sprints and Hackathons, weeklong biannual events focused on furthering NATO and partner nations' command-and-control and information technology interoperability.⁸

Finally, in 2014, the Alliance started a Partnership Interoperability Initiative, which provides a standing format for NATO-partner cooperation on interoperability and related issues. Its centerpiece, the Interoperability Platform, "brings together all partners that have contributed to NATO operations or have taken concrete steps to deepen their levels of interoperability with NATO. . . . Currently, 21 partners are members."⁹

Despite all the above activities and initiatives, the Alliance lacks the ability to measure, assess, and communicate the state of interoperability across all three dimensions and across all major domains in a way that is easily understood, comparable across time and nations, and actionable for improvement.

Interoperability Assessment: Among the Allies

In addition to Alliance-wide initiatives, some NATO members have developed their own initiatives in the fields of interoperability data standards or assessment tools. For example, Canada assesses elements of cross-service, interagency, and multinational interoperability based on the Canadian Joint Task List, which describes all activities that may be performed by a Joint headquarters during the development, coordination, and conduct of operations and training. The task list is organized under five operational functions: Command, Sense, Act, Shield, and Sustain.¹⁰

Similarly, the British Army's Future Force Development organization developed the Multinational Interoperability Assessment Tool (MIAT) to measure interoperability between the British Army and its partners. This question-based tool uses the American, British, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand (ABCANZ) Armies' program's critical question lists

(or CQLs), grouped by ABCANZ-defined priority focus areas along three interoperability levels (deconflicted, compatible, and integrated). The tool was designed for self-assessment and bilateral assessment at battlegroup, brigade, and higher echelons among armies and land forces. Although MIAT was developed and tested, resource constraints halted further development.¹¹

At the same time, the US Army built its own tool—the Army Interoperability Measurement System. The AIMS tool has four components:

1. Sets of multiple choice, select all, and dichotomous questions broken out by priority focus area, such as command and control, fires, or intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. The responses to each question are completed by trained observers and correspond to the defined levels of interoperability.
2. A form that allows for the collection of observations or notes for clarification.
3. A Microsoft Excel-based dashboard whereby questions from the first component are assigned a score and an aggregated interoperability score is given for each priority focus area.
4. An exploitation panel, in which the US Army's Mission Command Center of Excellence analyzes the results of the first three components, identifies interoperability deficiencies, and offers participating nations recommendations on how to improve.

Interoperability Assessment: Others

In addition to the Alliance and individual Allies, other entities have also attempted to build interoperability data standards or assess and measure interoperability. For example, the ABCANZ Armies' program focuses specifically on interoperability. A key activity of ABCANZ in recent years was its development of a critical questions list, designed to analyze interoperability levels within a training environment. This list laid the foundation for the question lists used in AIMS and MIAT.¹²

Aside from national and intergovernmental bodies, other public and private-sector entities have tried to build interoperability measurement and assessment tools. Developers of interoperability assessment models tend to address primarily—and sometimes only—technical interoperability, however, as it is more straightforward to accomplish, and disregard the other dimensions due to the difficulty in measuring them. One exception to this tendency is the

enterprise interoperability measurement approach. This model addresses multiple dimensions of interoperability and “categories of barriers” to interoperability—conceptual, technological, and organizational—which correspond, to some degree, to NATO’s dimensions of interoperability (human, technical, and procedural).¹³

Another option that addresses nearly all interoperability aspects is the maturity model for enterprise interoperability. It differs from many of the military tools outlined above in that it evaluates an organization’s hypothetical potential to interoperate with partner organizations before those partners are known.¹⁴

Nonetheless, a systematic, repeatable, empirically based measurement and assessment tool and the underlying data standards that would make such a tool useful across nations and domains are still missing. Developing from scratch common data standards and, ultimately, a common tool for Allied interoperability measurement and assessment across the major domains could prove time consuming and difficult. It would arguably be more efficient and more effective to adopt an existing data standard or an existing measurement and assessment tool—with necessary adaptation—to achieve NATO’s objectives. Given development by the US Army of the AIMS tool and its familiarity to the British and Canadian armies, NATO could consider adopting it. Whether NATO adopts an existing tool as a *de facto* standard or develops a *de jure* standard, users must agree on what is to be measured, and experts must validate that the tool measures what it intends to measure.¹⁵

Use Cases for NATO Interoperability Assessment

To determine whether any potential data standard, method, or tool for measurement or assessment of interoperability, such as AIMS, could meet Alliance requirements, it is important to have a sense of the types of operations or activities the Alliance engages in. The required level of interoperability is necessarily context specific. For example, the requirements for Canada and the United Kingdom to interoperate in a multinational army training mission differ from the requirements of operating together in a Standing NATO Maritime Group (SNMG) and differ again when they are operating as framework nations in enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroups in neighboring nations.

For the purposes of this article, we will outline one use case from each major military operational domain—air, land, and maritime.

Enhanced Forward Presence in Eastern Europe

In response to Russia's first post-Cold War invasion of Ukraine in 2014, NATO enhanced its presence in the eastern part of the Alliance, with four multinational battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. In 2022, after Russia unleashed its war on Ukraine, the Alliance expanded the initiative to field battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. A framework nation leads each battlegroup—Canada, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States, respectively. The eFP consists of a range of deployed multinational forces at high readiness in a high-threat environment with climatic extremes. These forces have a wide range of units, varying in size and capability, from more than two dozen Allies.¹⁶

Interoperability between each multinational battlegroup, its subordinate units, host nation military forces, and the NATO command structure is critical. The focus areas for interoperability are command and control; communications; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; fires; and sustainment. We assume all units involved must be at an integrated level of interoperability in each of the focus areas. The greater the degree of interoperability, the more effective the battlegroups will be in terms of force preparation, assurance of readiness, assurance of capability, deterrence of Russia, and reassurance to the host nations.

Standing NATO Maritime Groups

Each of the two Standing NATO Maritime Groups generally consists of four to six destroyers and frigates with associated support vessels but is scalable depending on the nature of the operation. They are under the control of Allied Maritime Command, based in Northwood, United Kingdom, which reports to Allied Command Operations in Mons, Belgium. Although they are standing deployed forces, their leadership and membership is rotational.¹⁷

We assume contributing nations need to be at an integrated level of interoperability between the SNMG headquarters and Allied Marine Command, within the SNMG task group, and between the individual assets, as the task groups provide NATO with an immediate maritime operational response capability. The focus areas for interoperability, in this case, are doctrine; terminology; command and control; communications; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; fires; and sustainment. The stronger the degree of interoperability within the task groups, the better their readiness, assurance of capability, credibility in terms of deterrence, and force and capability development will be.

Baltic Air-Policing Mission

The Alliance's Baltic Air-Policing mission has been ongoing since 2004. NATO air policing is a peacetime mission designed to maintain the security of Alliance airspace. Fighter aircraft and crews are kept at a high level of readiness, prepared to respond quickly to any violations of Allied airspace. NATO air-policing forces also assist civilian aircraft in distress. Baltic Air Policing is part of the NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defence System. Allied Air Command at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, which reports to Allied Command Operations, exercises operational control. Two regional Combined Air Operations Centres exercise tactical command and control.¹⁸

Allies with the requisite air-defense capabilities contribute aircraft and crews to the Baltic Air-Policing mission on a rotating basis, typically changing every four months. The deployment of NATO fighter aircraft to Šiauliai Air Base in Lithuania established the capability for the mission in the Baltic states. Since 2014, NATO has also been using Ämari Air Base in Estonia for the deployment of additional air-policing assets. Baltic Air Policing consists of a deployed national force in Lithuania or Estonia at high readiness in a high-threat environment. The force operates under international aviation regulations and a NATO mission mandate and doctrine. Allied and partner nations need interoperability among fighters; air surveillance and control systems; the Combined Air Operations Centre in Uedem, Germany; deployable air command-and-control systems; and NATO and national airborne early-warning forces.

The focus areas for interoperability in the Baltic Air-Policing mission are command and control; communications; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; fires; and sustainment. We assume the interoperability ambition required for Allies and partners involved in this mission must be at an integrated level for each focus area. Ideally, increased interoperability in this mission will lead to improved force preparation, assurance of readiness, assurance of capability, deterrence of Russia, and reassurance to the three Baltic states.

Could the US Army Interoperability Measurement System Satisfy These Requirements?

In light of the use cases outlined above, AIMS is the most mature and applicable tool available that could be adapted to meet NATO's needs for joint interoperability assessment, given that MIAT is no longer under development. There are, however, significant practical and conceptual challenges to adapting this tool.

Practical considerations include issues pertaining to ownership of, and nomenclature within, the system; adaptation for peer-to-peer relationships; and the echelons of interest. Currently, the US Army maintains control of the tool and the ability to accept or reject any proposed changes or extensions to the question set and the assessment tool. This control is a potential barrier for its use in NATO standardization efforts since the system could change without NATO input or, conversely, may not be changed in ways NATO deems necessary or relevant. A NATO-relevant system would, at minimum, need to adapt the US focus and terminology. Since some use cases involve NATO acting with partners outside the Alliance, or NATO members acting with each other outside the NATO Command Structure, this terminology should be deliberately broad.

A further practical issue is that many AIMS questions are phrased in terms of one-to-one (or, in some cases, one-to-many) relationships between a lead nation—implicitly, the United States, in the current version of AIMS—and another party. Although this structure may map reasonably well onto NATO task forces reporting to a higher NATO headquarters, or troop-contributing nations within a framework-nation construct, it does not map well onto peer-to-peer relationships within task groups (where communicating through the headquarters is not always practical) or peer components within a command structure. In reality, battlegroups may report to NATO headquarters on some issues and to the host nation or their home nations on others. What further confuses the issue is that although AIMS is nominally designed for assessing bilateral interoperability, some questions and responses refer to partners in the plural.

A final practical challenge is that while in the SNMG use case national boundaries remain relatively distinct—in essence, separate ships operating in a task group—in the eFP use case, the multinational integration is at a much lower organizational level. Some NATO members, and participants in various NATO partnership structures, will need to assess their interoperability at a different organizational scale than that for which AIMS is presently designed.

In addition to the practical issues identified above, there are a wider variety of conceptual challenges to adapting AIMS to a NATO joint context. Some of these requirements include adaptation to other environments and services, more complete coverage of the interoperability dimensions, consistent question wording and question scoring, and appropriate data aggregation. A conceptual question that also influences the practical is the required frequency and sequencing of opportunities to conduct assessments.

Tackling the first conceptual requirement—the extension of the question set used in AIMS beyond the land domain to the air, maritime, and other domains—will require going beyond replacing terms and jargon with their rough equivalents in other contexts. For example, several questions in AIMS do not address the nuance that naval vessels and military aircraft often operate at various electronic emissions control levels where connectivity is intentionally limited. Observation-based systems conducted at specific points in exercises or operations may, therefore, be unable to evaluate these connections or inaccurately score certain links as not having been established.

Second, to remedy the preponderance of the AIMS questions assessing the technical dimension, more procedural and human-dimension questions should be added, with some consideration given to reducing the number of technical questions that may have conceptual overlap. There is also an implicit element in many questions where the highest-rated option has a technical solution and working human-to-human is considered a lower level of interoperability. Further confusing the issue, some questions in the knowledge and information management set require the exchange of liaison officers to receive the highest rating, whereas, in most questions relying on liaison officers the result is a lower score.¹⁹

Third, questions should, to the extent possible, be written clearly using plain language. Technical terms and jargon must be avoided, and words like *interoperable* or *integrated* should not be used in the questions or responses, to avoid circularity of definitions. Also, in places where a specific US Army regulation, procedure, system, or other similar US Army-centric terminology is used, this type of reference would need to be generalized or at least refer to a NATO, or Joint, equivalent.

Fourth, most AIMS questions have four ordinal response levels, which one might assume correspond to the definitions of the four levels of interoperability (for example, a score of 3 on a question would represent *integrated* interoperability). Some questions, however, have only three levels, some questions are nominal and of the form “yes,” “no,” and “N/A,” and still others are multiple response (such as “check all that apply”). These different types of responses are not co-measurable, which implies they should not be added or averaged together. This prohibition does not mean that different types of questions should not be asked, only that they cannot be mathematically aggregated (as is done within AIMS).²⁰

Fifth, the current interpretation of data aggregation in AIMS would benefit from being formally documented. The overall score in AIMS is generally de-emphasized, but as long as such aggregation is done and presented

to decisionmakers, it must be logical, clear, and, most importantly, correct. Given also that not all responses map clearly onto the definitions of the levels of interoperability, that the questions are not balanced across the dimensions of interoperability, and that questions may be dropped from any given assessment, score distributions should be provided, rather than attempting an overall aggregation.

Finally, with respect to data collection, observers and assessors will likely fulfill multiple duties or functions than specialize in data collection or assessments.

This reality has implications for how complicated the tool can be—or how much time is required for training. Currently, AIMS training seems to focus more on the mechanics of entering responses into the tool and less on how to deal with issues of inter-rater reliability and consistency. On a related point, there are also data collection issues pertaining to trust. Individuals and nations may change their behavior based on the knowledge they are being assessed or evaluated and may resist being formally scored if they know or believe the ratings will reflect negatively. Although the developers of AIMS are clear that it is a *measurement* system rather than an assessment or evaluation system, this nuance will not necessarily assuage concerns. More specifically, although evaluating command relationships is critical to understanding effectiveness in the human dimension, commanders sometimes have difficulty accepting this type of assessment, different nations may delegate more decision-making authority to lower levels, and NATO members may measure Ally-to-Ally relations differently than Ally-to-partner relations, where trust may necessarily remain lower. Lastly, even though AIMS questions and responses are captured and processed in Microsoft Excel, which can save to common formats, the formal output of AIMS is presently in the form of a flat slide deck in Microsoft PowerPoint or PDF. These types of formats do not allow for easy storage, processing, and comparison of results across multiple events.²¹

To be clear, a question-based instrument can form at least part of an effective multinational interoperability assessment, though other forms of data collection are possible and could (and likely should) be combined. Assuming a common data format can be developed, it is also likely unnecessary to ask certain questions every time a given combination of nations or units interoperate. This avoidance of unnecessary repetition is perhaps particularly true in the procedural dimension, where the adoption of common or compatible procedures is a relatively slow-moving, formalized process that can be documented outside any specific exercise or operation.

Conversely, customs can vary within—and between—nations and services and between individuals, suggesting responses in the human domain are likely to vary

more between, and within, events. Aspects of the technical domain may also lend themselves more to expert evaluation while systems are being established, rather than (or in addition to) having them observed indirectly. However the level of interoperability is assessed, it must be clear how response levels on each question correspond to the definitions of the levels of interoperability.

Given ever-present resource constraints, usability and simplicity must be considered throughout the design, implementation, and training for any interoperability measurement or assessment system. Although the existing AIMS question set could be adapted to at least the NATO land domain with relatively minimal changes, more significant changes to the question content and balance would be needed to adapt it to other domains and the joint context.

Toward a NATO Standard Method for Assessing Multinational Interoperability

As discussed in the previous section, it may be unfeasible to take an interoperability measurement and assessment tool off the shelf and incorporate it directly into NATO processes without significant adaptation. Moreover, while standardizing an extant tool may seem like less work, it may leave parties vulnerable to the whims and preferences of the tool developers, potentially leading to incompatible version upgrades, increased costs, and limited user support.

An alternative approach may be to define a common standard, allowing various nations to bring their interchangeable tools to the table. In this way, NATO could benefit from a common interoperability assessment method or process without resorting to the central development of a common tool. Standardization of the data format can allow for interoperability assessment tools to be interoperable (*interchangeable*, in the language of NATO standardization) without requiring the adoption of single tool or system (*common*, in the language of NATO standardization).

Data Collection

If NATO were to pursue this option, several elements or processes must be considered, foremost among them data collection. As discussed, multiple potential collection methods exist. Given that a question set is likely to form at least part of the interoperability assessment, however, it is worth standardizing how these question sets are defined and stored. The specific questions that are relevant may change over time and may be different between nations, organizations, and services. The key, therefore, is to allow for flexibility while

recording sufficient metadata to understand what was asked, how, and when. The questions could form fields in a table, stored in a standardized file format. Finally, there is often a gap in training in data collection and assessment for those tasked to conduct it, particularly with how issues such as inter-rater reliability and consistency can and should be managed.

Data Storage and Sharing

Data storage and sharing are fundamental to addressing the lack of a uniform, repeatable, and structured method to document interoperability. While one or more tools could be used to collect responses to a question, these tools should be capable of a) loading questions specified in a standardized format, and b) writing the responses in a standardized data format. Ideally, the data format would be human readable and machine readable and should be developed in accordance with applicable NATO metadata standards. The NATO metadata standard covers general issues such as security classification and copyright while providing guidance to communities of interest on how to develop their own specific standards.

Data Analysis and Visualizations

Assuming a standard is produced for a common storage format, NATO organizations, nations, or individual analysts can then create data analyses and visualizations of the data to suit the needs of their supported commander or other relevant authority. Nations and organizations may use their own tools to collect data, their own questions, and their own categorizations, but having a standard data format will enable an Ally or NATO body to load and analyze data easily from multiple events with their tool of choice and analyze interoperability differences over space and time. Although visualizations of quantitative responses may be intuitively appealing, they must be supplemented by contextual qualitative information and a synthesis of expert judgment. Tools can be built to facilitate drilling into which questions had lower scores, aiding discussion on what problems need to be resolved. In situations where a given mission depends critically on the ability to send digital calls for fire from one nation's ground troops to another nation's aircraft, the planners and commanders may value the answers to questions about the specific network links and procedures required more than what the overall scores may be.

Conclusion

NATO needs a standard for interoperability data (including definition, collection, and management), which would help military planners understand and discuss their state of interoperability with their Allies and partners. The good news is that NATO nations have broad agreement on the four levels of interoperability across the major domains, if not their detailed definitions. Likewise, there is broad agreement that there are three dimensions to interoperability across the major domains—technical, procedural, and human. There is less agreement, however, on how to categorize interoperability information and how those categories are best defined. Assessment methods and tools must, therefore, be flexible to these categories if they are to be broadly useful.

In considering assessment methods and tools for NATO, it is logical to first review and consider any existing methodologies, processes, and tools among international organizations, Allies, and the private sector. Of all the options considered in this article, the most promising, for various reasons, may be AIMS. Practical and conceptual challenges to NATO's adoption of AIMS remain, however, and NATO would need to devote personnel and other resources to tailoring or adapting AIMS to the variety of Alliance operations, domains, and activities that would benefit from greater interoperability.

With respect to creating a NATO standard for interoperability information, specific data elements for questions and responses would need to be stored in a standardized file format with appropriate metadata. This form of processing would remove the dependence on any specific tool or system, allowing nations and organizations to develop them to their own needs and interests. It would also greatly simplify the ability to conduct interoperability comparisons across space and time.

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Adapting US Defense Strategy to Great-Power Competition

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ABSTRACT: American defense strategy must shift to face the challenges of the new era of great-power competition. This article outlines the trade-offs involved among competing priorities and regions and proposes five strategic pillars to guide the development of a US military strategy, doctrine, and force structure optimized for the needs of the great-power competition era. Without the strategic planning needed to align the Pentagon's investments and decisions according to great-power competition requirements, the United States may fail to prevent an avoidable strategic disaster by not preparing properly for China's likely military quest for regional and, later, global hegemony.

Keywords: grand strategy, Department of Defense, China, great-power competition, US foreign policy

Long-term successful strategic planning depends on the close connection between grand strategic objectives and military budgets, doctrine, and operational plans. After the September 11 attacks, US defense strategy emphasized preparation for irregular conflicts against insurgents and terrorists while some high-end conventional warfare capabilities atrophied and not enough investment occurred in cyber warfare, space, or artificial intelligence (AI) futuristic technologies. In recent years, the Pentagon's primary mission has made the needed shift to great-power competition, as witnessed by the strategic guidance spelled out in the *2018 National Defense Strategy*: "Long-term strategic competitions with China and Russia are the principal priorities for the Department, and require both increased and sustained investment, because of the magnitude of the threats they pose to U.S. security and prosperity today, and the potential for those threats to increase in the future."¹

This shift has been more rhetorical, however, rather than reflected in the force structure, posture, investments, budgeting, and force employment decisions of the Department of Defense or the White House over the past few years. Despite moves in the right direction, such as the Replicator initiative, the focus of US defense resources on Eastern Europe (Ukraine) and the Middle East (Iran/Houthis) betrays a lack of a strategic shift toward China, the only great-power rival capable of rising to peer-rival status.²

In this article, I outline trade-offs involved in competing priorities and argue for developing a US military strategy, doctrine, and force structure optimized for the needs of the great-power competition era—in other words, a *great-power competition-oriented defense strategy*. I propose the following five interrelated strategic pillars to guide this change.

1. American defense strategy must be predicated on a “deterrence by denial” approach vis-à-vis China in the Asia-Pacific theater and a buck-passing approach vis-à-vis Russia and Iran. The US military in the near-to-medium term cannot afford to fight two major conventional wars, and pretending otherwise is strategically dangerous.
2. Military-strategic planning in the great-power competition era must center around great-power war and admit the challenges such a conflict would realistically pose to the current US military.
3. The Taiwan scenario should be the main driver in posturing US troops and in weapons acquisition decisions where trade-offs are inevitable.
4. In addition to preparing for a great-power war, the United States should prioritize winning the new naval arms race against the PLA Navy to maintain its maritime supremacy and deny China global peer-rival status.
5. America’s fiscal budgetary realities must be incorporated more honestly into the Pentagon’s planning decisions, and trade-offs must be made to counter China at the expense of other threats.

The most fundamental implication of the great-power competition-era grand-strategic paradigm for Department of Defense strategic planning efforts is the prioritization of high-end, conventional conflict against another great power. For the United States to deny China’s quest for regional hegemony, it must be able to deter—and, if deterrence fails, defeat—the People’s Liberation Army in a potential military conflict in East Asia. That goal should be the number one priority for Pentagon defense planners and should be reflected throughout the military’s doctrine, planning, and procurement plans. The latest *National Defense Strategy* (published in 2022), building on its 2018 predecessor, appears to identify the need to adapt to the new strategic realities of the great-power competition era: “The Department will act urgently to sustain

and strengthen deterrence, with the People's Republic of China (PRC) as our most consequential strategic competitor and the pacing challenge for the Department." Despite strong rhetorical warnings about the increasing dangers of a Chinese invasion and renewed commitments to come to Taiwan's aid, the Biden-Harris administration has failed to speed up preparations for this scenario.³

Currently, the Pentagon neither invests sufficient resources to match the PLA's increased capabilities nor prioritizes those resources toward the Asia-Pacific theater. For example, in 2022, the then-Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Michael M. Gilday testified that "even the most optimistic option in the navy's latest shipbuilding plan would be unable to meet the operational requirements for defeating a Chinese attack against Taiwan before the 2040s." Unless the Department of Defense aligns its limited resources with its most important priority during great-power competition, which is the core of competent strategic planning, the US military runs the unacceptable risk of losing the one war that would most damage US national security for decades.⁴

The "Strategy of Denial" Doctrine in Asia

First, the United States must shift its defense planning paradigm toward a "strategy of denial," in which it focuses its military planning primarily toward denying China the ability to conquer Taiwan or coerce Taiwan (or any other neighboring country) militarily into accepting Beijing's regional hegemony. Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development Elbridge A. Colby developed this concept in detail in his excellent book on US defense strategy in the new great-power competition era. Other experts have also recently promoted the strategic concept of a "denial" approach to China's rise, such as RAND military analyst David A. Ochmanek, former Congressman and Marine Corps officer Mike Gallagher, and two Australian scholars.⁵

Deterring Chinese aggression by convincing Beijing it would lose a war against the United States and defeating the PLA, if deterrence fails, should, therefore, be the Pentagon's main goals in the current strategic era. This type of military strategy is best suited for the objectives of a grand-strategic framework focused on great-power competition because it best matches the means and ends available to the United States. Compared to the common alternative of "deterrence by punishment," the denial approach is superior because it presents a credible and cost-efficient response to potential

PRC aggression. The signaling mechanism in a denial approach is more direct and, therefore, more effective than threatening massive retaliation.

How to address America's relative decline in conventional military power vis-à-vis a potential peer rival is one of the most important grand-strategic controversies of our great-power competition era. A vigorous debate has emerged between scholars representing the various schools of strategic thought outlined here. The Department of Defense, following its internal strategic reviews, made a major doctrinal shift in its force-planning construct by abandoning the so-called "two-war standard" in favor of a "one-war" standard. The *2018 National Defense Strategy*, according to one of its authors, Jim Mitre, intended to transition from the "unipolar era" (1991–2014), when the United States prepared for "the two-war construct—winning two near-simultaneous regional wars against rogue states," to the great-power competition era (2014–present), when the United States began to prepare for winning one war against a major power like China or Russia. Focusing on two simultaneous wars left the US military potentially underprepared to fight against a modern great-power foe because it ignored new conceptual developments and needed high-tech investments to focus on achieving dominance against two low-tech, nonnuclear adversaries, such as Iran, Iraq, or North Korea. Given the new geopolitical realities, the *2018 National Defense Strategy* tried to reverse this trend by refocusing on great-power foes, but the shift was inadequate because it did not recognize the modern limits of only being able to fight one great-power war at a time.⁶

The contours of the debate on US defense strategy mirror the higher-level grand-strategic debate. At one end of the spectrum, defensive realists call for reducing defense spending and abandoning what they see as a self-defeating quest for "military primacy." At the other, conservative internationalists (and, particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, many hawkish liberal ones, as well) argue that the United States needs to return to a strategy of global military supremacy and the two-war standard. Along these lines, Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery advocate that the United States should remain committed to preserving stability simultaneously in three theaters (Asia, Europe, and the Middle East), in addition to other "world-ordering" interventions, such as punishing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or preventing the collapse of states like Venezuela. If that is the case, Brands and Montgomery are correct that designing a "one-war" military focused on China poses an unacceptable risk to other global commitments. Similarly, Thomas G. Mahnken argues for increasing defense investments to be able to fight Russia and China simultaneously and employs the analogy

of having had to fight two other authoritarian regimes (Germany and Japan) during World War II.⁷

On the contrary, a great-power competition-oriented defense strategy resolves this strategic planning conundrum by making clear that the United States will abandon the global liberal hegemonic strategy along with the “world-ordering” interventions associated with defending the liberal order. Instead, the Pentagon will optimize defense planning for winning one major high-end war while shifting the burden to regional partners for lesser contingencies. It is crucial to realize that the Asia-Pacific region is the only key geopolitical area where America’s capable allies cannot balance against a would-be regional hegemon without significant direct US military assistance. Therefore, it makes strategic sense to focus on the PLA as the number one adversary for planning purposes and consider other scenarios as “lesser included” (as the Pentagon refers to secondary missions). Military commitments to important theaters where a regional hegemon is unlikely to arise, such as Europe and the Middle East, will, therefore, be reduced and will focus on supporting local partners.

The limits and risks of the “deterrence by denial” approach to great-power competition lie in the narrow and focused approach it takes to defense planning in an uncertain world. Prior US combat experiences in the Pacific (the Philippines, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam) all had significant Landpower contributions, and if deterrence fails, the US military would likely be underprepared for a drawn-out conflict. A cynical but strategically ruthless argument could be made, however, that if deterrence fails in Taiwan, the United States should cut its losses instead of pouring massive numbers of troops into the island. Setting up defenses in South Korea and Japan, while boosting nuclear deterrence, would be the right move in that unfortunate eventuality. The denial defense has the best costs-benefits ratio of deterring the invasion, thus making it the best option.

Preparing for the Return of High-Intensity Great-Power War

The second required adaptation to the great-power competition era in defense strategy is coming to terms with the type of warfare in which the US military would have to engage in a great-power war, the type of conflict that is now the main priority. Unlike the previous 20 years of fighting low-tech insurgents in the greater Middle East, the United States must be ready to fight a complex multidomain battle against a sophisticated technological adversary that could deny US and allied forces the situational awareness, air dominance,

and freedom of maneuver they enjoyed in the post-9/11 wars. While parts of the US military (like the Navy and Air Force) were not directly, or heavily, involved in counterinsurgency and continued investing in their legacy programs, other major military components and the defense industrial base focused on improving US capabilities to track and kill terrorists, not to fight peer adversaries.

The American military technological advantage over its great-power rivals has reduced dramatically over the past two decades, and the Washington Defense establishment should admit to this new reality and adjust its strategic planning accordingly. Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., one of Washington's most senior defense analysts, warned that the United States can no longer assume it will enjoy local superiority at the high-end conventional end of the warfare spectrum against the PLA. Former high-level Pentagon strategists are sharing the same dire warnings more frequently. For example, Michèle A. Flournoy predicts the PLA will continuously try to "disrupt and degrade U.S. battle-management networks" across all domains—sea, air, space, and cyber. The US Office of Naval Intelligence also sounded the alarm in recent years that "China's military has become 'a formidable, highly lethal fighting force' that is 'very much a peer' of the US military."⁸

Moreover, the Russia-Ukraine War has raised the alarm about how underprepared the US military industrial base is for modern conventional warfare against a great power.⁹ The amount of advanced ammunition expended in the fight between Kyiv and Moscow has strained US manufactures to the breaking point in what Seth G. Jones accurately describes as a real munitions crisis:

The number of Javelins transferred to Ukraine over the first six months of the war is the same number the United States would normally produce over seven years In addition, the rate at which several weapons systems are being exported—such as Javelins, Stingers, HIMARS [high-mobility artillery rocket systems], Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (GMLRS), and Harpoon antiship missiles—may mean there will not be enough munitions in stock to match the requirements of U.S. war plans for China and Russia.¹⁰

The same is true for less sophisticated munitions, such as 155mm rounds, of which Ukraine is firing as many "in five days as the United States produces in a month." Unsurprisingly, a series of war games the Center for Strategic and

International Studies (CSIS) conducted in 2023 warned that the United States “would likely run out of some munitions—such as long-range, precision-guided munitions—in less than one week in a Taiwan Strait conflict.” The Russia-Ukraine War awakened the US Defense establishment to how low the stockpiles are for some advanced weapons that would be needed in a Taiwan scenario.¹¹

Prioritizing great-power conflicts at the strategic level must impact the Department of Defense’s planning decisions more directly and urgently. As far as a potential objection to downgrading global war on terrorism-era counterinsurgencies and the global counterterrorism campaign in favor of great-power competition-derived conventional requirements, one must admit the objectively immense costs and paltry strategic benefits of military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the broader Middle East. This admission is painful for the current generation of US military leaders, but a ruthless costs-benefits calculus of the risks of losing a great-power war compared to more instability in secondary theaters points to a needed shift in priorities.

Optimizing Around the Taiwan Strait Scenario

Third, while there are several ways the United States and China could end up in a direct military conflict, including contingencies in the South China Sea or cyberspace, none is more likely or more dangerous than a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. If Washington cannot stop Beijing from conquering Taiwan, it cannot prevent China from becoming a de facto regional hegemon. Australia, Japan, and South Korea would have to accommodate China in that scenario.

Assuming the PLA’s best strategy for taking over Taiwan is attempting a *fait accompli*, Colby argues the United States should focus all its efforts on making it extremely costly for Beijing to succeed in the early stages of what would be a difficult amphibious operation. The United States should pre-deploy its forces in the area and enhance its intelligence and surveillance capabilities, stock up on necessary munitions, and conduct more credible complex military exercises “to demonstrate to Chinese military planners that launching an attack would be unlikely to succeed.”¹²

A Marathon Initiative study by Austin J. Dahmer fleshes out the US military requirements of the “deterrence by denial” approach to China: since the main goal is preventing the invasion of Taiwan, “Forces that can credibly sense, target, destroy, degrade, or otherwise neutralize PLA ships and aircraft” are critical.¹³ Therefore, the most-needed US platforms and forces would include:

- surface combatants that can generate long-range fires, such as
 - frigates/FFGs
 - destroyers/DDGs, and
 - cruisers/CGs;
- submarines;
- long-range, long endurance aircraft (especially stealthy ones), including
 - B-21, B-2, B-1, and B-52 bombers,
 - unmanned aerial vehicles, and
 - maritime patrol aircraft (P-8s);
- surface-to-surface strike systems (high-mobility artillery rocket systems / HIMARS and multiple launch rocket systems / MLRS);
- surface-to-air systems (maneuver short-range air defense systems / MSHORAD and Patriot);
- and counter-space and offensive cyber capabilities.¹⁴

Defending Taiwan will ultimately rest on Taiwan's military preparedness and will to resist. This observation is one of the main conclusions of the recent series of CSIS war games where a Chinese assault was simulated 24 times. In the simulations, the PLA invasion was usually blunted and defeated at a high cost to American, Taiwanese, and Chinese forces, contingent on Taiwan's initial ability to hold the line until US forces arrived. To achieve that outcome, the CSIS authors recommend strengthening the Taiwanese army's ground forces. Strengthening these forces should be the main priority of Taipei's investments, as opposed to buying advanced aircraft or other flashy purchases.¹⁵

Currently, Taiwan's forces show "severe weaknesses" that must be addressed by increasing their ability to conduct rigorous combined armed exercises. Another lesson from the war game is that "[t]here is no 'Ukraine model' for Taiwan"; in other words, the United States and its allies (mainly Japan) must provide Taiwan with everything it needs *before* the war starts and quickly

join in once hostilities begin. To be in a position to join in short order, the United States should pre-position more forces and materiel in theater. Former Pentagon official Michael Brown recently argued that to strengthen its ground forces, Taipei must take its commitment to deterring China more seriously: “Taiwan should double the proportion of its budget reserved for defense and double its current troop strength of 169,000. At present, Taipei spends about \$19 billion on defense, a figure that pales in comparison with China’s \$293 billion.” Lastly, others suggest helping Taiwan to adopt a “porcupine” strategy that would render it virtually impossible to invade at a reasonable cost. Supplying Taiwan with large quantities of American-made anti-ship missiles, sea mines, and Stinger missiles would go a long way toward implementing this approach.¹⁶

Even with all these measures, the United States must prepare for a longer and messier war than many anticipate, if the history of great-power conflicts serves as a guide. Strengthening US deterrence by convincing the PLA leadership that such a war is unwinnable for them should, therefore, be the Pentagon’s most urgent priority. Unfortunately, there are increasing signs that deterrence is failing, and President Xi Jinping and the PLA leadership are growing more confident that they could militarily annex the island in the near future.¹⁷

While it may sound like hyperbole, in 2021, Admiral Philip S. Davidson, the then commander of the United States Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), predicted China might invade Taiwan “during this decade, in fact in the next six years.” Indeed, Xi now speaks more menacingly about preparing for “extreme scenarios,” including conflict with the West. The PLA no longer maintains direct channels of communication with the Pentagon to improve military-to-military understanding and avoid accidents and purposely acts aggressively around its coast to increase the risk for US forces patrolling international waters in the area. In conclusion, reversing these trends by strengthening deterrence in the Taiwan Strait should be the US defense strategy’s primary objective.¹⁸

The Return of Naval Arms Races

Fourth, in addition to a direct conflict over Taiwan, the other concerning trend in the American-Chinese military balance of power is the PLA’s naval buildup. Implementing a great-power competition–focused defense strategy requires the United States to maintain dominance over its main rival in this area of military competition. Dominance is key for ensuring Beijing cannot militarily conquer or coerce its neighbors or challenge the United States for global hegemony in the military domain. Maintaining “command of the sea” is a strategic necessity

in terms of ensuring China cannot become a true peer rival of the United States in the decades to come. The Indo-Pacific, the most strategically important region for the United States, is fundamentally a maritime theater, from a military operational planning point of view. Any Chinese attempt to establish hegemony by force in Taiwan or the South China Sea will involve intense naval combat against the US Navy and its allies.

The PLA's ambition to push the US Navy out of Asia is arguably its most important military operational goal, as it would make its invasion of Taiwan and its *de facto* regional hegemony all but certain, which is why, in turn, America's main goal must be to counter it. Moreover, Beijing's assertive global naval presence in the last few years is increasingly concerning for the United States, as most recently evidenced by China's basing agreement with the Pacific nation of Solomon Islands.¹⁹

In addition to the Western Pacific theater, China's naval presence allows it to interfere with the United States in its backyard in Latin America. As US Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro warned:

The Chinese are everywhere: they're down the Pacific coast of Central and South America, they're down the West Coast of Africa, for example, and it's so important for us to be able to continue to engage with our maritime partners around the world to better understand why is it their countries are making the investments they're making.²⁰

More important than its global presence is that the PLA Navy "consistently attempts to violate the maritime sovereignty and economic well-being of other nations, including our allies in the South China Sea and elsewhere."²¹

The recent trends in the naval balance of power between the PLA Navy and the US Navy reveal a dangerous level of risk: the US maritime supremacy is waning, or, worse, the United States has already lost the "command of the seas" to the Chinese, as former Congressman and retired Rear Admiral Joe Sestak provocatively stated in a 2020 article. Indeed, although war-fighting capabilities are measured by more than just numbers, the Chinese navy has surpassed the US Navy in its number of ships and, by some estimates, is scheduled to reach 400 ships by 2030, compared to approximately 300 for the United States. Moreover, China's shipyards have a much larger capacity than American ones.²²

Unsurprisingly given these numbers, INDOPACOM head Davidson testified before Congress in 2018 that “China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States” and that “there is no guarantee that the United States would win a future conflict with China.” Moreover, as Bruce D. Jones of the Brookings Institution shows in his latest book, China’s naval ambitions expanded from operating in its own littoral to global projects, like exploring the Arctic or Indian Oceans, laying undersea cables, and building a network of global ports. Lastly, as PLA Navy expert Toshi Yoshihara warned, “Chinese strategists envision future naval combat as ‘extremely intense, extremely lethal, and very quick,’ involving the launch of ‘hundreds of missiles by both sides within about ten minutes’ that could destroy an entire fleet in an afternoon.” Therefore, the US Navy must prepare for a level of high-intensity conflict unmatched since World War II.²³

To counteract China’s naval buildup, the Pentagon should first shift resources from other parts of the US military not directly involved in a China fight (like the ground forces, mainly the Army) to the Navy to fund the 367 ships that are part of its “unconstrained” 30-year shipbuilding plan.²⁴ The Navy should, in turn, reform to optimize for great-power competition and the Indo-Pacific theater. For example, a group of experts from the Pentagon-funded think tank Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments recommends:

Instead of mainly operating in CSGs [Carrier Strike Groups] and ARGs [Amphibious Ready Groups], naval forces should be separated into forward-postured Deterrence Forces of submarines, surface combatants, and unmanned vehicles that rely on missiles for defensive and offensive fires; CSGs and ARGs should be postured in a Maneuver Force outside littoral areas such as the East and South China Seas or Mediterranean.²⁵

This recommendation implies the Navy should abandon or reconfigure the traditional geographical basing of its fleets to reflect the new priorities by shifting more aircraft carriers to the Pacific theater and away from the Middle East and Persian Gulf, the Atlantic, and the Mediterranean.

Confronting Fiscal Realities and Budgetary Constraints

Fifth and last, the US defense budget and force allocations must reflect the emphasis on containing China. Although at the level of rhetoric and *National Security Strategy* documents China is considered the main priority,

this prioritization has arguably not yet fully permeated the decision-making and budgetary processes inside the national security establishment, which still overreact to daily headlines or legacy commitments to NATO or the Middle East.

Evidence of this lack of the necessary laser-focus attention on China abounds. For example, Washington sent so many weapons to Ukraine that it depleted its stockpiles of advanced weapons, as noted above. Similarly, Congress appropriated a \$40 billion aid package to Ukraine larger than Australia's or Italy's entire defense budget. And when Iran seized foreign oil tankers in summer 2023, as they often do, the Department of Defense rushed to send more warships and marines to the area to deter this behavior. Spending these precious resources in the European or Middle Eastern theaters would be fine if the United States would still benefit from what defense analysts call "overmatch" in the Asian theater, but that is not the case anymore. Moreover, Russia's military limitations were made obvious during its recent botched invasion of Ukraine. Moscow's military inability to pursue hegemony over Eastern Europe should make it easier for the United States to outsource European security to other NATO members and focus on the main priority, China's PLA.²⁶

A great-power competition-oriented grand strategy, unlike the current internationalist strategy of defending the rules-based order, does not require higher levels of defense spending but rather a divestment of some commitments in Europe and the Middle East to free up resources for preparing to fight the PLA. The Marathon Initiative think tank analyzed three scenarios:

- keeping defense spending about the same,
- decreasing it by 10 percent, and
- increasing it by 9.5 percent.²⁷

Its study then shows how a strategy of denial could be financed with the current level of defense spending, assuming some cuts are made to programs not essential for a Taiwan scenario (mostly Army programs and United States European Command resources) and that those funds are used for Navy, Air Force, and INDOPACOM requirements.²⁸ Table 1 shows the report's specific proposed cuts and additions.

Table 1. Major adjustments from baseline FYDP, forces and capabilities

	Adds	Cuts
Army	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Add 1 SFAB 2. Accelerate hypersonic development 3. Stockpile PrSMs and Javelins 4. Stockpile PAC-3 and add Patriot force structure 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cut 2x AC SBCTs, 2x NG SBCTs, 1x AC IBCT, 5x NG IBCTs, 2x NG Aviation BDEs 2. Terminate AMPV, OMFV, PIM 3. Reduce AH-64, H-60, M-1 upgrade procurement 4. Reduce Stryker procurement then terminate 5. Reductions in EDI funding 6. Reduce rotational deployments 7. 5 percent reduction in civilian and contractor personnel
Navy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Industrial base investment 2. Accelerate/procure LAW 3. Extend 17x, CGs, 3x Ohio SSGNs 4. Add 2 more FFGs, 3 more Virginia SSNs 5. Convert 1x retiring Ohio SSBN to SSGN 6. Accelerate development of USVs and hypersonics 7. Accelerate procurement of UUVs, MQ-25, P-8, MQ-4 8. Stockpile LRASM, Tomahawk, SM-6, Stormbreaker, Mk48, Mk54, and mines 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reductions in EDI funding 2. 5 percent reduction in civilian and contractor personnel
Marine Corps	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Accelerate procurement of NMESIS, ROGUE Fires, LRF, MADIS, and KC-130J 2. Stockpile Tomahawk, NSM, PrSM, Javelin 3. Accelerate conversion of 2x infantry regiments to MLRs 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reductions in EDI funding 2. 5 percent reduction in civilian and contractor personnel
Air Force / Space Force	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Accelerate B-21 development/procurement 2. Add or extend 5th generation fighter capacity 3. Accelerate development of NGAD, JADC2, hypersonics, LRSO 4. Add tanker capacity (KC-135 and KC-46) 5. Stockpile JASSM, LRASM, AMRAA, Stormbreaker 6. Additional counterspace systems development/procurement 7. Divest all A-10Cs 8. Reductions in EDI funding 9. 5 percent reduction in civilian and contractor personnel 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Divest all A-10Cs 2. Reductions in EDI funding 3. 5 percent reduction in civilian and contractor personnel
Defense-Wide	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Add THAAD capacity 2. Add CYBERCOM teams (full spectrum) 3. INDOPACOM infrastructure investments (PDI) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reductions in EDI funding 2. 5 percent reduction in civilian and contractor personnel 3. Cancel commissary program in CONUS

Source: Austin J. Dahmer, *Resourcing the Strategy of Denial: Optimizing the Defense Budget in Three Alternative Futures* (The Marathon Initiative, 2023), 22, https://themarathoninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/FINAL_Resourcing-the-Strategy-of-Denial_Dahmer.pdf.

Therefore, the realist strategy of “defense by denial” could be resourced within the current level of defense spending scheduled to increase by 3.6 percent over the five-year Future Years Defense Program (FYDP). Defensive realists at places like the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft would prefer a decrease in spending, while conservative internationalists at places like the American Enterprise Institute would prefer an increase in spending. Increasingly, liberal internationalists are also advocating for an increase in spending and have been since the Russia-Ukraine War began. Reducing defense spending in an era of heightened geopolitical competition would be shortsighted, particularly as China is constantly increasing its military power. Given the ever-larger debt threatening the US economy and the dollar as a reserve currency, however, increasing defense spending would not be optimal, either, because domestic politics considerations mean an increase will worsen the deficit (as opposed to being financed by cutting other types of discretionary spending).

Conclusion

The top defense policymakers must make the tough calls needed to adapt military strategic planning for the new era of great-power competition now. The unipolar era of US military global hegemony is over. In the emerging multipolar world, the United States does not have the luxury of avoiding painful trade-offs between competing priorities in various regions of the world. Moreover, the US advantage in high-end conventional warfare can no longer be taken for granted; as the war in Ukraine shows, new tactics and technologies, such as ubiquitous cheap drones, pose unique and unexpected challenges to the conduct of conventional military operations.

The military balance of power has been shifting steadily in China’s favor in East Asia, and Beijing has often stated that it desires to establish itself as a regional hegemon by controlling the South China Sea and bringing Taiwan under its control. China’s ambition represents the greatest grand-strategic threat to US security and prosperity because losing control of Asia to the Chinese Communist Party would mean losing global superpower status. High-level strategy documents and speeches in Washington often repeat this assessment. Without the strategic planning needed to shift defense investments and force employment choices according to great-power competition requirements, however, the United States runs the risk of failing to prevent an avoidable strategic disaster.

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Tyranny of the Inbox: Managing the US National Security Agenda

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ABSTRACT: Presidential management style, foreign policy preferences, and domestic political interests all affect the national security agenda. International crises, however, are particularly likely to garner the attention of the National Security Council. This article analyzes a novel data set of all the issues raised at National Security Council meetings from 1947 to 1993 and finds that contemporaneous crises are very likely to be discussed, but that crisis management attenuates the Council's attention to noncrisis national security matters. The results suggest presidents focus on crises at the expense of other strategic matters, and they do so when political conditions favor crisis management.

Keywords: national security, presidency, international crises, political science, strategic studies

National security affairs place an enormous burden on US presidents. Waging wars, engaging in diplomacy, and practicing economic statecraft are daunting responsibilities. Managing national security today also means dealing with highly complex issues like quantum computing, artificial intelligence, biodefense, terrorism, cyber, arms control, and nuclear deterrence.

Although many of today's national security issues are relatively new, challenging national security conditions are not. A litany of global challenges and a barrage of crises plagued the United States at the dawn of the Cold War and may have motivated President Harry S. Truman's appeals to Congress to reform the national security system. After a fight within the defense community, Congress passed the National Security Act of 1947 and created the modern National Security Council (NSC) system. Today, the NSC is the principal means for presidents to orchestrate national security policy. Presidents cannot and do not personally address every dimension of US national security.¹

In this article, I address the factors that affect the number of issues presidents address and analyze a novel data set of issues raised during presidential NSC meetings from 1947 to 1993, encompassing the Cold War and its immediate aftermath. The historical record offers insights into the national security agenda, conceptualized here as the issues addressed during presidential meetings of the NSC. The NSC takes on a broader agenda when international crises are more

prevalent, and presidents are more likely to address crises when their co-partisans have a majority in Congress (for example, during periods of unified government). Presidents also address fewer noncrisis national security issues when the NSC tends to ongoing international crises. These findings account for the unique aspects of each president's NSC. The NSC's focus on crises and the consequences of that focus for the breadth of the national security agenda remain persistent features of the NSC system that practitioners must contend with while navigating the complexities of national security policy. This challenge of how to retain strategic breadth amidst crises is the tyranny of the president's inbox: Presidents focus on crises at the expense of other strategic matters, and they do so when political conditions favor crisis management.

This article addresses a dilemma for national security: tending to crises is often a strategic necessity but may result in less strategic breadth. It also advances a novel explanation for the national security issues that presidents address, considering the confluence of international security conditions, institutional features, and US domestic politics. It tests that explanation with rigorous statistical analysis of a large and comprehensive data set while acknowledging the limits of what the data can reveal.

National security practitioners will find this research significant because the issues addressed by the NSC involve important strategic choices. How, why, and under what conditions issues make it onto the agenda is consequential because NSC deliberations involve presidential decisions about wars, crisis interventions, covert actions, economic coercion, diplomacy, and other national security behaviors of global consequence. Scholars will also find this research significant because it speaks to the broader literature about presidential agenda-setting, executive power, and institutional behavior.

The article begins with an abbreviated case study on the Berlin blockade to motivate thinking about the conditions affecting national security agendas. From there, it builds toward an informal theory of the national security agenda and the NSC and presents three views of the national security agenda. First, the national security agenda is presidential. Second, the agenda is shaped by presidents' political incentives to attend to international crises. Third, resource constraints affect the breadth of the agenda because of tradeoffs between crisis management and other strategic matters. Then, it introduces a novel data set of all NSC meeting agendas from 1947 to 1993, describes the inference strategy, and presents the results of hypothesis testing. The article concludes with a summary of the findings and a discussion of potential implications.

The Berlin Blockade, Politics, and National Security

At the dawn of the Cold War in the spring of 1948, the United States was entering a new era of global strategic competition with the Soviet Union. At that time, Truman faced reelection and was fighting for his political life: his public approval rating stayed below 40 percent throughout the spring. The post-war economy was flagging, with inflation close to 10 percent and unemployment nearly 4 percent. The Republicans, Truman's partisan opposition, held the majority in the House and the Senate. In July, the Democratic Party would hold a convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where Truman expected strong opposition to his nomination as the Democratic presidential candidate in the November elections.²

Truman's problems ahead of the 1948 convention were not limited to his domestic political misfortunes. A crisis with the Soviet Union was brewing over Berlin, but the NSC system had just been established in the fall of 1947 and was in its infancy. Between January and June 1948, Truman convened the NSC nine times but never held a dedicated NSC meeting about the brewing Soviet situation. The NSC's inattention to strategic competition with the Soviets that spring was surprising. There had been a communist coup in Czechoslovakia in February 1948. In March, General Lucius D. Clay, the theater military commander, sent an alarmist cable to Washington, DC, warning that the Berlin situation had changed. Clay argued that war with the Soviets "might come with dramatic suddenness." His prediction was leaked to the press, further exacerbating Truman's already precarious domestic political situation.³

The Soviets established a complete blockade of Berlin on June 24, 1948, cutting off supplies to US military forces, other Western occupation forces, US citizens, and Berlin's citizens. Clay, acting without guidance from Washington, initiated operations to sustain Berlin by air, a seminal chapter of the Cold War. Although Clay started the Berlin airlift, his recommendation to the NSC was to resupply Berlin by ground with an armed convoy (a forcible test of the Soviet blockade). Washington saw Clay's "shoot our way to Berlin" plan as synonymous with starting a war with the Soviets.⁴

Four days after the crisis started, Truman met with the Secretaries of State and Defense for a dedicated session about the situation in Berlin. The Secretaries gave Truman three military options: withdraw, continue the airlift, or prepare for war with the Soviets. Truman chose to stay in Berlin but did not hold a formal NSC meeting on the crisis until July 1. The crisis lasted for 322 days—until May 1949, when the Soviets ended the blockade (though the United States continued the Berlin airlift for four more months, thinking that the Soviets might resume the blockade).⁵

Over the 11-month Berlin crisis, Truman's NSC met 25 times, including 16 sessions on Berlin. General Omar Bradley, then-Chief of Staff of the Army, later concluded that Truman had failed to give Berlin "his fullest attention" due to the "enormous distraction" of Truman's domestic political fight. Yet, Truman's handling of Berlin is hard to fault: he averted war, won reelection (credited by some to his handling of Berlin), and Western allies formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization shortly before the crisis abated.⁶

In the spring of 1948, Truman faced a hostile Congress, opposition within his political party, unpopularity at home, and the specter of renewed war in Europe. Truman and his advisers gave serious consideration to the use of nuclear weapons if the Soviets escalated further. On the one hand, analysts today might have expected Truman to be particularly attentive to the situation in Berlin because of domestic pressure at home and the national security risks presented by the crisis. On the other, domestic opposition may have shaped whether Truman thought he could act decisively without congressional opposition. Truman was inattentive to Berlin as the situation developed ahead of the Soviet blockade. Yet, Truman's NSC sustained remarkable focus on the Berlin crisis from the onset until the Soviets lifted the blockade. Truman's thinking may have been affected by America's relative military power (then the world's sole nuclear power), domestic economic challenges, or competing international concerns—such as the Chinese Civil War and the 1948 Arab-Israeli War that led to the establishment of the Israeli state, which Truman formally recognized as Israel in May 1948.⁷

The Berlin blockade and Truman's use of the NSC before and amidst the crisis raise profound questions about the effect of domestic politics and international conditions on when and how presidents engage on national security issues.

What Factors Explain a President's Agenda?

Since Congress passed the National Security Act of 1947 and created the modern national security system, the NSC has been the president's forum for national security policy making and implementation, as the one institution designed to "knit it all together." Although US presidents share agency over national security with Congress, and although our national security capabilities reside with multiple relevant executive branch agencies, the NSC bears the president's authority and is the focal point for national security matters.⁸

Presidents personally chair formal meetings of the NSC, distinguishing these meetings from principals' meetings, deputies' meetings, interagency policy coordinating committee meetings, or others under the Scowcroft system.

Presidents have other venues to consult with advisers, such as informal meetings like President Lyndon B. Johnson's infamous Tuesday lunches, and scholars have presented a mix of quantitative and anecdotal evidence that presidents vary in how frequently they hold NSC meetings. Since 1947, every American president has held formal NSC meetings.⁹

Presidents might address national security matters in other venues, such as during press conferences or State of the Union addresses, but these other means are often platforms to announce policies or actions. In contrast, NSC meetings are deliberative and held in secret, allowing presidents to consider issues in ways that may or may not lead presidents to direct national security actions. The set of issues that presidents deliberate over during NSC meetings, regardless of whether presidents act on those deliberations, is a measure of the president's national security agenda.¹⁰

Following Kingdon's theory of the presidential agenda, this conception of the national security agenda is distinctive from the big ideas or intellectual architecture that animates national security policy over long periods, such as grand strategy. The agenda, as a set of issues, is also distinct from individual issue positions or policies that the United States pursues. Whereas issue positions reflect preferences over singular topics, the agenda reflects strategic choices over the set of national security issues that presidents will address during NSC meetings.¹¹

For these reasons, a first view is that the national security agenda is the *president's* agenda. Because presidents have strong agency over the NSC and vary in their approaches to national security, national security agendas likely follow the conditions unique to each presidency.

Differences between presidents' approaches have prompted a rich literature about presidential management styles, including typologies related to presidential experiences, preferences, and delegation patterns, among other dimensions. Presidents have had diverse backgrounds and have varied greatly in their approaches to the NSC. There is evidence that politics shaped the NSC's formation and evolution, as well as presidents' ability to exercise control over the national security bureaucracy. Presidents have varied in their approaches to appointments of the NSC staff and how they interact with the NSC staff. This variation extends to presidents' interactions with the various presidential national security agents, such as the Advisor to the President for National Security Affairs; the Secretary of Defense; senior military leaders such as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and other cabinet officials, among others to include informal or nongovernmental sources of information and influence on presidents' thinking. The National Security Advisor may have

a particularly significant role in managing the “White House warriors” of the NSC staff. Various factors may also affect the relative influence of different presidential advisers (or the character of presidents’ deliberations over issues with advisers). Nevertheless, the issues addressed at presidential meetings of the NSC are the president’s issues.¹²

This complex of factors suggests that the set of issues addressed at NSC meetings, the strategic choice over the breadth of the national security agenda, is likely to be affected by the unique conditions of each presidency and the peculiarities of each president. Returning to Truman’s NSC during the Berlin blockade as a motivating case, these intuitions would suggest that Truman’s initial aversion to the NSC system and the relative youth of the NSC system in 1948 likely resulted in Truman-unique sets of issues handled at NSC meetings.¹³

Despite these many reasons to believe that the NSC’s function varies by presidency, other factors are likely to affect the breadth of the national security agenda. The uniqueness of each presidency is a condition that we should control for, to make general inferences about what factors influence the breadth of the agenda regardless of who is in office. We should look to other factors that influence the size of the agenda, conditions that practitioners can look to for insight into how the NSC might function as conditions change within or between presidencies.

Consequently, a second view is that the national security agenda likely varies with changing international security conditions. Existing theory suggests that problems, such as international conditions affecting US interests, make the agenda when problems converge with politics and policy making. Moreover, presidents are likely sensitive to the political capital or other resources of the presidency that might be consumed to attend to issues. This logic suggests that the national security agenda is shaped by the nature of issues that arise, presidents’ political incentives and costs to attend to those issues, and how emergent issues interact with existing initiatives and policy planning. Consequently, presidents are likely to take on emergent issues that present opportunities for presidents to take national security actions that might yield political benefits or policy gains toward presidents’ preferences and when the anticipated political costs to take on additional issues are low.¹⁴

Crises, episodes characterized by emergent conditions, uncertainty, high stakes, and threats to national interests, allow presidents to fulfill their national security responsibilities while also taking national security actions—like employing military power—that can have domestic political benefits, such as the well-known “rally ’round the flag effect” (whereby presidents are thought to gain increased public approval for decisive national security actions). While scholars are divided

over the conditions under which presidents can expect “rally” effects, research indicates that presidents are more likely to hold NSC meetings when domestic political conditions make attending to international crises politically expedient. Moreover, a sizeable qualitative literature, often relying on insider accounts, attests to the NSC’s focus on international crises. Not only do presidents have incentives to take on crises for political gains, they also have incentives to be attentive to ongoing crises to avoid political losses that can follow disasters like the Bay of Pigs invasion which plagued Kennedy’s relationship with his NSC, or the Iran Hostage Crisis, which beleaguered Carter during his 1980 reelection campaign. Truman likely sought to avoid creating a military disaster over the 1948 Berlin blockade, hence his decision not to take the “shoot our way into Berlin” option preferred by Clay (an option that might have precipitated renewed war in Europe).¹⁵

Given presidents’ incentives to act on crisis opportunities, presidents are likely to address international crises when political or policy gains are possible. However, Congress shares oversight of the national security enterprise, so presidents are likely sensitive to whether Congress will support or oppose the initiatives presidents take through the NSC due to the political costs and resources associated with overcoming congressional opposition (costs that can outweigh the gains presidents otherwise expect from crisis action).

A critical indicator of the president’s anticipated support in Congress is whether the president’s party enjoys a majority in the Senate and the House (unified government), a measure of anticipated political support among elites that matters because of the institutional design of the separation of powers system. When the president’s co-partisans control Congress, the president’s opposition is less likely to be able to mount serious challenges to the president’s agenda. However, under a divided government, serious challenges to the president’s agenda may be more likely, and the president may have to consider exhausting resources to prevent or overcome that opposition (such as outreach to opposition leaders and providing political inducements on other issues, among other options whereby presidents take on resource costs under risk of opposition). Congress can constrain presidents in a variety of ways, from reporting requirements to demanding consultation. Presidents know these constraints and likely consider whether Congress will impose political costs for presidents to pursue their preferred national security agendas. During the Berlin blockade, Truman was likely sensitive to the likelihood of Republican opposition to his national security direction during the first six months of the crisis (until Truman’s party gained a majority in Congress during the November 1948 elections).¹⁶

Together, these ideas build from existing theories of agenda-setting, crisis management, and resources to a theoretical framework for the breadth of the national security agenda. The breadth of the national security agenda is likely to increase with the prevalence of international crises, conditional on the president's partisan support in Congress. Crises give presidents an opportunity to lead on national security matters and "act presidential," but leading on national security through the NSC can consume presidents' resources, including time to generate political support or overcome opposition in Congress. Consequently, presidents' attentiveness to crises is likely to be tempered by anticipated support or opposition in Congress.

Hypothesis 1 (Crisis Prevalence): The breadth of the national security agenda is likely to increase with the number of ongoing international crises.

Hypothesis 2 (Unified Government): The breadth of the national security agenda is likely to be greater during periods of unified government than under divided government.

Hypothesis 2a (Crisis Prevalence x Unified Government): The effect of crisis prevalence on the breadth of the national security agenda is likely greater during periods of unified government than under divided government.

Increased NSC attention to international crises, as reflected in the breadth of the NSC agenda, may reduce attention to other national security matters. If presidents are careful about expending resources, such as political capital, then taking on emergent issues like international crises may deprioritize other efforts in ways that reduce the rest of the national security agenda.

There are also bureaucratic reasons to think that taking on emergent issues might be costly to the presidency. Staffing the president is intensive. Although NSC staff capacity is robust, emergent national security matters consume NSC staffers' resources to provide the analysis, options, and policy coordination necessary to support the president's agenda. Moreover, the prospect of adding new issues on the national security agenda compels the NSC staff (or the president's other agents at the Departments of State, Defense, and Treasury or within the Intelligence Community) to coordinate positions with other key national security officials and their staffs. The realities of staffing the president for NSC meetings may constrain the NSC's ability to address emergent issues like crises without impinging on others.

This dilemma is the tyranny of the national security inbox: attending to emergent issues like international crises is likely to reduce effort toward all other national security matters because crises invoke an opportunity cost or tax on the work of the NSC. While the agenda is likely sensitive to the prevalence of national security crises and domestic politics, bureaucratic reality may attenuate the inclusion of non-crisis matters.

Moreover, noncrisis matters may not require the same degree of domestic political support as crises. Unlike international crises wherein conditions demand urgent response and political calculus over what Congress will support (or not oppose), noncrisis matters may be more fungible. Presidents and the NSC staff likely have greater leeway to delay or defer noncrisis issues (a consequence of relatively less urgency), and those issues are likely less politically salient than whether to respond to an international threat to US interests under crisis conditions. An example is the contrast between deliberating over a long-running diplomatic negotiation and a pressing crisis: the former might be delayed (or delegated away from the president) without sacrificing potential policy gains or incurring domestic political costs, whereas the NSC may have little perceived ability to delay addressing an ongoing crisis without damaging national security or the president's domestic standing.

Hypothesis 3 (Crisis Attentiveness): The national security agenda will likely include fewer noncrisis topics when NSC meetings address ongoing crises than when ongoing crises are not addressed.

Data and Analysis

To test these hypotheses, I analyzed the issues addressed at presidential meetings of the NSC from September 18, 1947 (when the modern NSC system was enacted) to January 20, 1993 (at the end of President George H. W. Bush's administration). The data are the complete record of issues that presidents addressed at NSC meetings for nine presidencies, up to the most recently concluded administration, for which a complete record is available.¹⁷

During this period, presidents held 1,010 NSC meetings. Table 1 presents the number of NSC meetings and NSC topics or issues by presidency. Presidents have varied dramatically in how frequently they convened NSC meetings and how many issues they addressed per meeting. Presidents addressed

between 1 and 11 issues per meeting, for a total of 2,738 agenda items over the period, for an average of approximately 2.7 issues per meeting.¹⁸

Although NSC meeting frequency varies between presidencies, table 2 also shows variation in NSC meeting frequency within presidencies, an indication of support for the theoretical framework advanced earlier. Here, the number of NSC meetings is grouped by presidents' year in office. As a generalization, presidents are likely to hold more NSC meetings early in their tenures than later. Scholars have previously argued that presidents have good reasons to set the agenda early in their administrations, which frees time to wage reelection fights (for first-term presidents) or to cementing legacies (for second-term presidents). Table 2 supports these intuitions, with the caveat that the number of NSC meetings tends to increase early in a president's second term (years 5-6), and I account for these trends later in the analysis.¹⁹

Table 1. NSC meeting data (1947–93) by council meeting and issue count
(Source: Created by author)

President	Number of Meetings	Number of Issues	Average Number of Issues per Meeting
Truman	128	501	3.9
Eisenhower	354	1,227	3.5
Kennedy	46	88	1.9
Johnson	75	108	1.4
Nixon	88	96	1.1
Ford	43	51	1.2
Carter	41	98	2.4
Reagan	159	435	2.7
Bush	76	134	1.8
Total	1,010	2,738	2.7

Throughout the period, presidents deliberated over many issues during NSC meetings, from strategic issues related to competition with the Soviet Union, management of ongoing wars, arms control matters, and economic concerns like export control regimes. Figure 1 presents the 25 most frequent NSC meeting topics. Unsurprisingly (given the Cold War), the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was the era's most frequent NSC agenda issue. International crises feature among the most frequently addressed topics, including the crises over control of Berlin under Truman, Cuba (including the Cuban Missile Crisis and other matters), and Iran (the hostage crisis under Carter).

Table 2. NSC meeting data (1947–93) by meeting count and issue count by presidents' year in office
(Source: Created by author)

Office Year	Number of Meetings	Number of Issues	Average Number of Issues per Meeting
First	256	605	2.4
Second	180	438	2.4
Third	144	350	2.4
Fourth	107	283	2.6
Fifth	92	255	2.8
Sixth	105	334	3.2
Seventh	68	251	3.7
Eighth	58	222	3.8

Note: Office years are calculated as sequential 365-day periods from inauguration or assumption of office to allow fair comparison of tenures for presidents who assumed office offset of the normal electoral cycle (Truman, Johnson, Ford) due to their predecessors' deaths (Roosevelt, Kennedy) or resignations (Nixon).

I paired the NSC meeting data with the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) data set to assess variation in the national security agenda related to international crises. The ICB project is an independently assembled set of international crises—episodes characterized by emergent threat, urgency, and uncertainty. For each NSC meeting, I assembled a count of the number of ongoing international crises as a measure of crisis prevalence. During the study period, there were 292 crises, including 47 directly involving the United States. On average, approximately 2.3 international crises were ongoing on NSC meeting days. Figure 2 presents the average number of topics per NSC meeting and the average number of ongoing crises by presidency.²⁰

Figure 2 indicates a strong correlation between the number of ongoing crises and the number of issues presidents addressed at NSC meetings. However, not every crisis made an NSC agenda, and NSC meetings did not cover every contemporaneous crisis, indicating variation in the NSC's attentiveness to ongoing crises.

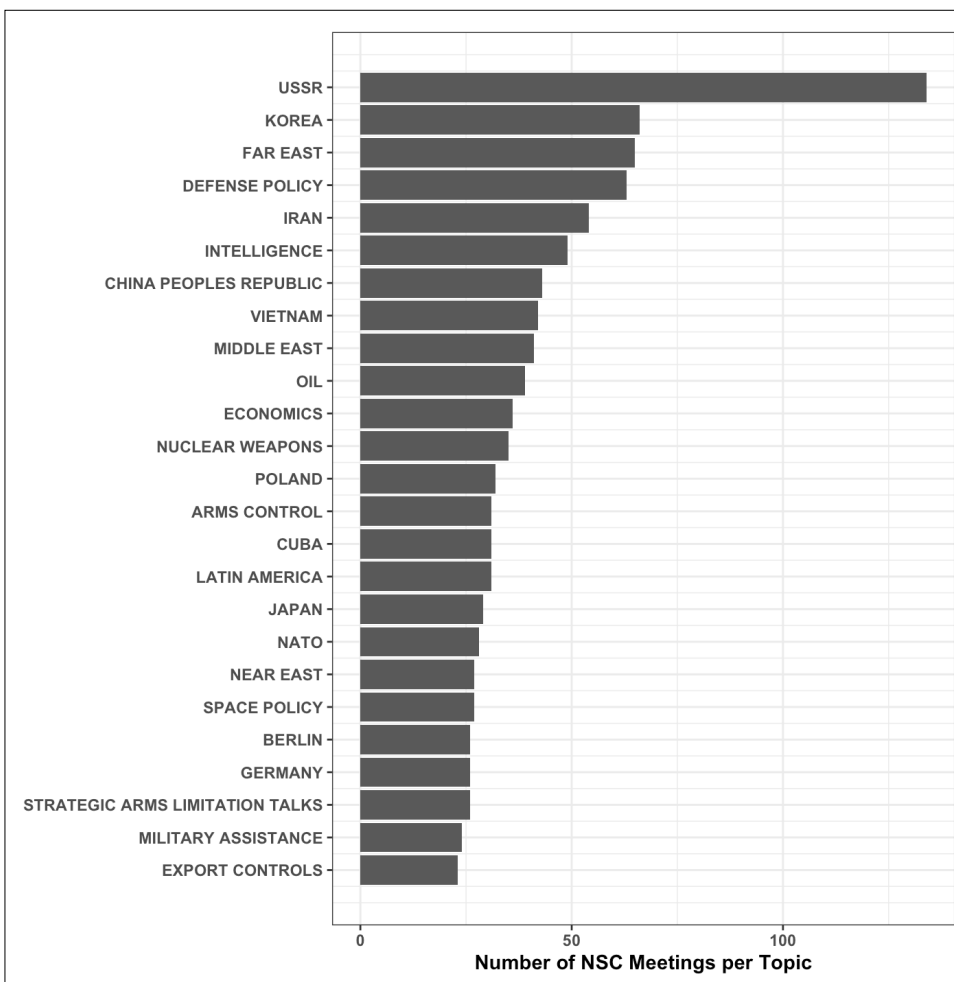


Figure 1. Top 25 NSC meeting topics by frequency
(Source: Created by author)

To assess the inclusion of contemporaneous crises on NSC agendas, I compared each meeting's issue set against contemporaneous ICB crises (by whether meetings fell within the dates of an ICB crisis) by analyzing whether any keywords associated with each crisis of the era were in the issue set for each meeting. This analysis, a dictionary method of text analysis performed by algorithm, enables automated detection of whether ongoing crises made NSC agendas. For example, during Truman's 1948–49 crisis over the Berlin blockade, I checked whether the terms "Berlin, Germany, Soviet, or USSR" appeared among each meeting's list of issues. As noted earlier, this algorithmic approach enabled me to identify that Truman discussed Berlin with NSC members 16 times during the 25 NSC meetings held during the Berlin crisis.

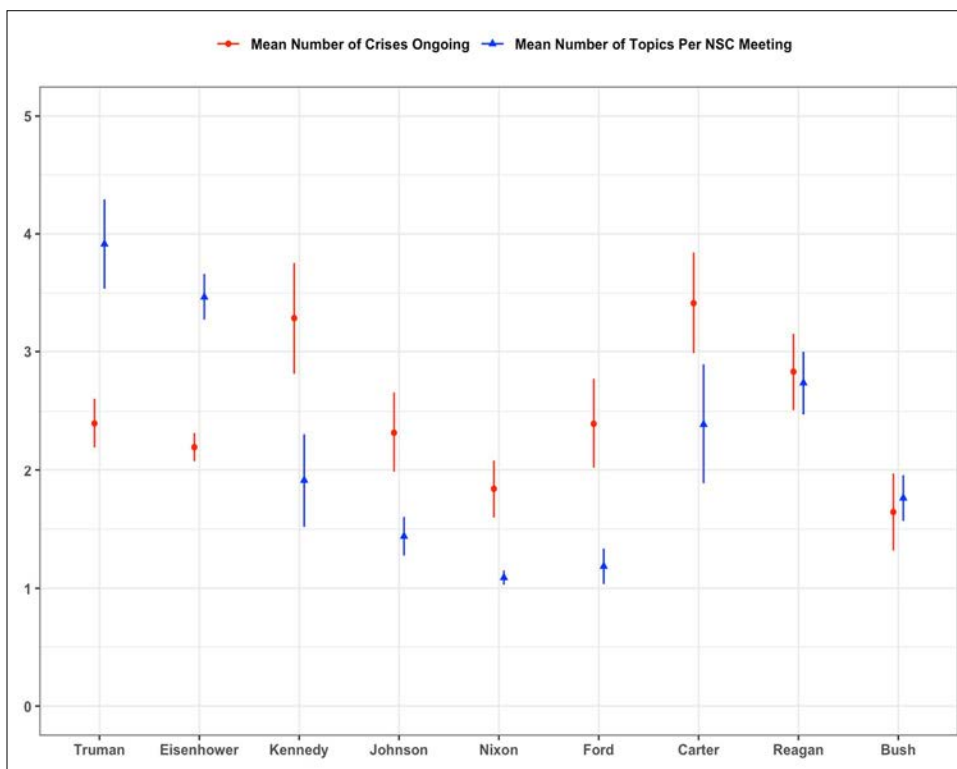


Figure 2. Mean number of ongoing crises and issues addressed per NSC meeting presenting 95 percent confidence intervals

(Source: Created by author)

Coding each NSC meeting to measure which NSC agenda items involved contemporaneous crises yields two other measures of the national security agenda: a count of the number of crises addressed at each meeting and the number of noncrisis agenda issues addressed per meeting.

Table 3 presents a cross-tabulation of the NSC meeting data using these measures. Approximately 90 percent of NSC meetings occurred during international crises. When I examined the number of NSC meetings per day for the period of study (the 16,562 days from September 18, 1947, to January 20, 1993, a period that included 14,855 days of crises), there were approximately .06 NSC meetings per day regardless of whether crises were ongoing or not (a rate of approximately 1 NSC meeting every 17 days). NSC meetings were not more likely during crises, despite the ubiquity of crises during the Cold War.²¹

Table 3. NSC meetings and issues by crisis prevalence
(Source: Created by author)

Period	Number of Meetings	Number of Issues	Number of Crisis-Related Issues	Number of Non-Crisis-Related Issues
Crises Ongoing	901	2,502	277	2,225
Non-Crisis Periods	109	236	N/A	236

When presidents hold an NSC meeting, they implicitly choose to engage on a set of topics. So, following hypothesis 1 earlier, the question is whether crisis prevalence affects the breadth of the NSC agenda due to presidents' deliberation over crises. Table 1 shows that presidents address approximately 2.8 topics per meeting during crises, and 2.2 topics per meeting during noncrisis periods. This evidence is initial empirical support for hypothesis 1.

Table 4 further disaggregates the 901 crisis-period NSC meetings into two types: when ongoing crises made the agenda and when they did not. While only one-third of crisis-period NSC meetings addressed contemporaneous crises (236 of 901 meetings), presidents averaged 3.4 crisis-related issues or topics per NSC meeting when crises made the agenda and 2.6 crisis-related topics when crises were not on the table. This result might initially appear unsurprising, but there were between two and three ongoing crises on most days of the Cold War (an average of 2.4 per day), suggesting that much less than half of ongoing crises make NSC agendas. This inattention to crises is surprising, given the generally heightened risk perceptions of American leaders during the Cold War. Later analysis explores this relationship further.

Table 4. Crisis-period NSC meetings by type and number of NSC issues by type
(Source: Created by author)

Crisis Condition	Meeting Type	Number of Meetings	Number of Issues	Number of Crisis-Related Issues	Mean Number of Crisis Issues per Meeting	Number of Non-Crisis Issues	Mean Number of Non-Crisis Issues per Meeting
Crises Ongoing	Crisis on the Agenda	236	793	277	1.2	516	2.2
	Non-Crisis on the Agenda	665	1,709	N/A	N/A	1,709	2.6
Non-Crisis		109	236	N/A	N/A	236	2.2

The number of *noncrisis*-related issues is also telling. During noncrisis periods, presidents averaged 2.2 issues per meeting. During crises, but when ongoing

crises did not make the agenda, presidents averaged 2.6 noncrisis topics per meeting, suggesting that presidents are generally more sensitive to national security matters during crises (even when they do not address crises during NSC meetings). Finally, during meetings that addressed ongoing crises, presidents averaged 2.2 noncrisis topics: significantly fewer noncrisis topics are addressed when presidents attend to crises, as compared to crisis-period meetings that do not address ongoing crises. This difference is small on the scale of a single NSC meeting but becomes a non-trivial difference when the number of noncrisis topics is extrapolated over many NSC meetings. Over time, crisis myopia significantly reduces the number of noncrisis topics the NSC addresses. Although this summary data does not control for other factors, this observed crisis myopia provides initial empirical support for hypothesis 3, the intuition that crisis attention during NSC meetings may attenuate the noncrisis part of the president's national security agenda.²²

A final set of contrasts for this NSC meeting and issue data concerns presidents' support in Congress. Table 5 contrasts the number of NSC meetings during unified government with the number under divided government. Most Cold War NSC meetings occurred during divided government. The data suggests, however, that NSC meetings addressed more topics per meeting under unified government. This correlation between unified government and increased NSC agenda breadth provides initial empirical support for hypothesis 2, the claim that presidents' attention to national security issues may increase when Congressional opposition is less likely or, conversely, when support in Congress is more likely due to co-partisan control of Congress).²³

Table 5. NSC meetings and issues by government type
(Source: Created by author)

Government Type	Number of Meetings	Number of Issues	Mean Number of Issues per Meeting
Divided	647	1,677	2.6
Unified	363	1,061	2.9

This description of the data yields several insights. First, the NSC addressed more topics during crises than noncrisis periods, regardless of whether ongoing crises make the agenda, suggesting that crisis conditions increase the NSC's overall sensitivity to national security issues. Second, the NSC addresses fewer noncrisis topics when crises make the agenda (compared to the relevant counterfactual condition, a crisis-period meeting that does not address a contemporaneous crisis). Although this data is descriptive, it provides initial empirical support to the hypothesis for the tyranny of the inbox

(that crisis-attentiveness attenuates the inclusion of noncrisis topics on the agenda).

Statistical Results

The number of issues per NSC meeting is a compound outcome, and various factors may affect the issue set placed on the national security agenda. To address this concern that many factors other than crisis conditions might affect NSC agendas, I estimated the effect of key variables (crisis prevalence and unified government) on the number of crisis and noncrisis issues per meeting while controlling for the unique aspects of each presidency and each president's time in office (fixed effects or separate intercepts, which in theory account for all time-invariant conditions common to each presidency and each president's year of office).²⁴

I used a series of ordinary least squares regression models that test the effect of crisis prevalence and government type on the number of issues presidents address at NSC meetings. These results confirm what the descriptive data already shows: NSC agenda breadth increases with crisis prevalence and the NSC addresses fewer noncrisis issues when the NSC is crisis attentive. For nontechnical readers, I summarize the findings at the beginning of the next section.

To account for other factors that might affect the issues raised at NSC meetings, I assembled a battery of statistical controls (tests for whether the estimated effects of unified government or crisis-prevalence are robust to possible other sources of variation in NSC meeting issue counts). These variables relate to three broad categories of influence on national security behavior—domestic politics, political economy, and international security. Statistical controls included presidents' approval ratings, reelection periods (defined here from the major party primaries started until election day), economic indicators (unemployment and the consumer price index, a measure of inflation), and periods of ongoing war (Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War were the three major wars of the period involving the United States). Additionally, because existing studies suggest that presidential notational security behavior may vary with the US relative power, I include hegemony, a measure of the US share of global power, an annual index on a percentage scale from the composite index of national capability found in the National Military Capabilities data set, version 6.0.²⁵

Table 6 presents the results of statistical tests for whether crisis prevalence and periods of unified government affect the number of issues that make the

US national security agenda, as measured by the number of issues presidents address during NSC meetings.²⁶

Models 1 and 2 test the effect of various conditions on the number of crisis-related issues raised during NSC meetings. Here, we find that crisis prevalence and unified government are associated with a statistically significant increase in the number of crisis-related agenda items, evidence in support of hypotheses 1 and 2. Model 2, for example, suggests each additional ongoing crisis is associated with an approximate 10 percent increase in crisis-related topics on NSC agendas. Unified government is associated with approximately 0.4 more topics per meeting than divided government. While the practical magnitude of this effect at the unit of a single NSC meeting is small (because NSC meetings average two to three issues per meeting), over time, this effect aggregates to the large differences observed earlier in table 4. Models 1 and 2 also indicate the number of crisis-related issues at NSC meetings increases with periods of war (when national security is already at risk), increases when US relative power is low (as indicated by the negative coefficient on “Hegemon”), and increases with inflation (as per the coefficient on CPI). These results comport with a traditional view of the NSC as a holistic forum for presidential national security management.²⁷

Models 3 and 4 address the conditions affecting the number of noncrisis issues per NSC meeting. Because the outcome variable here is the number of noncrisis issues per meeting and, given that some meetings involve both crisis-related topics and noncrisis topics, these models allow introducing a new variable, crisis attention, which captures whether noncrisis topics shared agenda space with crisis matters during specific NSC meetings. In model 4, crisis attention during NSC meetings is associated with .6 fewer noncrisis topics per meeting, evidence that supports hypothesis 3. That effect is significant when extrapolated across the 236 NSC meetings of the period that involved crisis attention, resulting in approximately 141 fewer total noncrisis agenda items than might otherwise have been taken to the president (had crisis attention not been a negative influence on noncrisis topics’ inclusion at NSC meetings).

Noncrisis issue count is also uncorrelated with other variables related to security risk (wartime, hegemony) consistent with a view of noncrisis topics as qualitatively different than crisis issues. Importantly, model 4 shows that the count of noncrisis topics on NSC agendas is not correlated with political variables (unified government or approval rating) at conventional levels of statistical significance, suggesting that politics does not play into when presidents address noncrisis matters. The insignificant effect of political conditions on noncrisis NSC topics strongly contrasts model 2, wherein congressional competition affects the NSC’s attention to crises. Paradoxically, the topics involving the greatest risk

and urgency (crises) are conditional on politics in Congress, whereas noncrisis matters are not.

Table 6. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models of NSC topic counts
(Source: Created by author)

Explanatory Variable	Dependent Variable			
	Number of Crisis-Related Issues per NSC Meeting		Number of Non-Crisis Issues per NSC Meeting	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Crisis Prevalence (ICB Crisis Count)	0.114***	0.102***	0.006	-0.007
	(0.020)	(0.017)	(0.059)	(0.042)
Crisis Attention			-0.493***	-0.600***
			(0.129)	(0.136)
Unified Government	0.224**	0.402***	-0.169	(0.136)
	(0.067)	(0.058)	(0.153)	(0.224)
Low Approval Rating (<45%)		0.086		0.022
		(0.108)		(0.218)
High Approval Rating (>65%)		0.044		0.132
		(0.043)		(0.083)
Reelection Period		0.074		-0.140
		(0.091)		(0.213)
Wartime		0.378**		0.259
		(0.128)		(0.141)
Hegemony		-8.352***		-0.284
		(2.377)		(8.244)
Unemployment Rate		-0.045		0.080
		(0.035)		(0.098)
Consumer Price Index (CPI)		0.046***		0.087**
		(0.012)		(0.028)
Num.Obs.	1,010	1,000	1,010	1,000
R2	0.158	0.216	0.080	0.084
Fixed Effects: Presidency	X	X	X	X
Fixed Effects: Office Year	X	X	X	X

Note: Cluster robust standard errors reported. *p < .1. **p < .05. ***p < .01

Altogether, the statistical results presented in table 6 support the earlier hypotheses, particularly regarding NSC issues by type. I find that crisis prevalence and unified government likely increase the number of crisis issues addressed during NSC meetings, but also that attending to crises has the predictable effect of reducing the attention paid to noncrisis issues.

These results have limitations. To address readers' potential concerns with the main results, I performed multiple tests to assess the robustness of the results. I have omitted those results for brevity but will describe some of the tests briefly to reassure readers.²⁸

My robustness checks included controlling for the tenure of each National Security Advisor during the period, on the intuition that presidents' National Security Advisors strongly influence NSC operations. Second, I estimated alternative models on data limited to US, NATO, or Soviet-involved crises on the intuition that only crises were salient during the Cold War and might be more likely to drive NSC agendas. Third, I estimated models while accounting for protracted or recurring crises of the era (such as the Taiwan Straits or the various Arab-Israeli conflicts) to assess whether agenda breadth was equally affected by truly emergent crises and by recurrent or known flashpoints. Fourth, I estimated models using Poisson regression (a model specifically designed for count data), an alternative to the linear models used in the main results. Each of these tests, as well as others not detailed here for brevity, affirmed the main results in table 6.

Discussion

This article yields two main findings. First, the summary data and modeling results suggest that crisis prevalence and periods of unified government are likely to result in increased crisis attentiveness during presidential NSC meetings. Second, noncrisis issues are significantly less likely to make NSC agendas when presidents address ongoing crises.

Although these findings might seem obvious to national security practitioners, they provide insight into a consequential feature of US national security decision making that is prevalent across the declassified history of the NSC: focusing on crises constrains the president's strategic breadth. This consequence should guide how practitioners approach strategic issues during future periods of crisis. Issues discussed at the NSC can lead to presidentially directed actions to employ the US instruments of national power for strategic effect or, when issues are deferred, inaction with arguably equal strategic implications.

These results have limitations. First, the focus is on the US NSC. As an institution, the NSC is unique to the American political system, and the results likely would not hold for other countries (even for other mature democracies with established national security advisory systems). Moreover, the data is from the Cold War, and it has been more than 30 years since it ended. Given China's rise and Russia's revanchist aggression in Ukraine, today's environment has unique features that depart from the conditions of the Cold War. Future research may benefit from extending this research into the post-Cold War period, when additional records become available from the NSC, to test whether the results hold for later periods.²⁹

Second, there are good reasons to be concerned with endogeneity between NSC agendas at one time, international conditions that follow from NSC-directed actions, and the NSC work that follows. This inter-relatedness is relevant when considering that the NSC's work could affect the duration of crises (NSC-directed actions like an intervention or NSC inaction could reduce, perpetuate, or otherwise change conditions affecting how long a crisis lasts). While the modeling approach takes reasonable steps to mitigate concern for bias, the models assume each observation (in this case, each NSC meeting) is independent. Future research may benefit scholars by employing qualitative methods or advanced text research to assess the continuities between NSC agenda topics and how NSC actions affect crisis duration or outcomes. Moreover, the analysis excludes how presidents might engage with national security matters in non-NSC fora, such as during informal meetings with cabinet members or advisers. Future work may benefit from using case studies to compare presidents' informal (non-NSC) deliberations with their NSC discussions during crises. If scholars and practitioners could identify the issues that are only addressed informally or only addressed in NSC meetings, we may learn more about how presidents operate.

Third, this research addresses NSC issues during crises. There are good questions of whether NSC attentiveness to specific strategic issues might help avoid crises from occurring (precrisis measures to prevent or mitigate) as well as good questions of whether there is a hangover effect from NSC crisis attentiveness (post-crisis effects on the NSC's work). This research does not address those questions, though these are promising areas for future research.

Finally, future research may benefit from studying the issues addressed in NSC meetings and the national security actions that an administration takes. Practitioners and scholars would benefit from understanding whether crisis

severity and NSC crisis attentiveness affect the kinds of national security actions that presidents take.

The results have significant implications for national security scholars and practitioners. One implication is that because presidents are less likely to attend to international crises during a divided government, scholars and practitioners may benefit from accounting for a diminished US national security agenda that during periods of divided government. Divisive domestic politics undermine US foreign policy decision making, conditions likely exacerbated when presidents defer from addressing specific issues. Specifically, there is a vital question of whether periods of diminished national security focus due to divided government (or just contentious politics) might contribute to or aggregate into a progressive strategic decline for the United States in ways that complicate its standing in the international order. Moreover, inattention to a broad range of strategic matters may make future crises more likely. As Kissinger noted, “in high office competing pressures tempt one to believe that an issue deferred is a problem avoided; more often it is a crisis invited.”³⁰

A second implication is that practitioners will likely benefit from appreciating how the tyranny of the inbox can attenuate the NSC’s attention on noncrisis matters—a consequence of domestic institutions and international conditions. Considering known challenges with US national security planning and national security elites’ suggestion that presidents must “protect time on the schedule” for regular NSC meetings, practitioners would likely benefit from incorporating measures to structure NSC deliberations in ways that enable sustained attention to strategic matters that have yet to become crises.³¹

Finally, scholars and practitioners may benefit from applying the insights from this Cold War NSC data to the contemporary era of great-power competition. Crises were pervasive during the Cold War competition with the USSR, and when presidents addressed those crises through the NSC, attention to noncrisis national security matters suffered. Politics and competing national security commitments can affect the US ability to pursue national security priorities amidst emergent challenges. Organizing national security processes to account for this dilemma may help the US national security community “walk and chew gum,” as articulated by former Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in his description of the US ability to simultaneously manage competition with China and reassure Europe amidst Putin’s aggression in Ukraine. The United States will need to find ways to deal with ongoing crises like Ukraine, Gaza, or others without sacrificing the overall management of strategic competition.³²

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Endnotes

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4. Jean Edward Smith, *Lucius D. Clay: An American Life* (Henry Holt and Co., 1990), 499; “A Report to the National Security Council by the Secretary of Defense on U.S. Military Course of Action with Respect to the Situation in Berlin” (National Security Council, July 28, 1948); and Bradley and Blair, *A General’s Life*, 479. [Return to text.](#)
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6. Robert T. Davis II, ed., *U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security: Chronology and Index for the 20th Century*, vol. 1 (Praeger, 2010), 275–84; Bradley and Blair, *A General’s Life*, 479; and Miscamble argues that Truman did not consult with political advisers over his Berlin blockade decisions and that there was no evidence that Truman deliberately acted to curry favor with voters, though his successful handling of the crisis neutered partisan criticism of his foreign policy acumen. Miscamble, “Harry S. Truman,” 311–12. [Return to text.](#)
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9. Miller, “The Contemporary Presidency” 592–95; John W. Rollins, *The National Security Council: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report 44828 (CRS, October 19, 2022); and David Auerswald, “The Evolution of the NSC Process,” in *The National Security Enterprise: Navigating the Labyrinth*, ed. Roger Z. George and Harvey Rishikof (Georgetown University Press, 2017), 31–54; Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Avalon Publishing, 1980), 145–58; Morton H. Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Brookings Institution Press, 1974), 105, 109; Peter W. Rodman, *Presidential Command: Power, Leadership, and the Making of Foreign Policy from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009); and David M. Barrett, “Doing ‘Tuesday Lunch’ at Lyndon Johnson’s White House: New Archival Evidence on Vietnam Decisionmaking,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 24, no. 4 (1991): 676–79. [Return to text.](#)
10. National Security Council secrecy is likely a good reason why there is limited existing empirical scholarship on the NSC. Andrew Rudalevige, *The New Imperial Presidency: Renewing Presidential Power After Watergate* (University of Michigan Press, 2005), 174–75. However, as will be evident in the empirical section, NSC records do become available after US governmental declassification processes, which generally restrict availability of classified records for 25 years; “A Rule by the Federal Emergency Management Agency on 07/30/2014,” Exec. Order 13526 (Classified National Security Information), *Federal Register* 72, no. 2 (December 29, 2009): 707–31. As secret governmental documents are released, large volumes of data become available for scholars to analyze. Matthew Connelly, *The Declassification Engine: What History Reveals About America’s Top Secrets* (Pantheon Books, 2023). [Return to text.](#)
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17. I assembled NSC records from Robert T. Davis's national security anthology Davis, *U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security: Chronology and Index for the 20th Century*, 2010, vol. 2 (Praeger, 2010), after checking against other public sources for accuracy, including "National Security Archive," 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/>; and "National Security Council Historical List of NSC Meetings with Agenda Topics," 2021, <https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/WH/EOP/NSC/html/historicall/Meetings.html>. I constructed a data set from these NSC meeting records to enable statistical analysis. The data assembled for this article, and associated scripts or coding for statistical analysis, is available on request from the author. Davis's records provide post-meeting accounts of topics addressed at NSC meetings, topics that are distilled from primary source documents, including archival copies of NSC meeting minutes at presidential libraries. The data is the set of topics (discrete areas of discussion during an NSC meeting), not the complete NSC meeting minutes, which are not uniformly available across the period of study as of this writing. Because source records come from declassified sources such as government-internal records that were previously classified or restricted from public access for reasons of US national security, there is little reason to believe topics have been omitted or excluded from the declassified record. By the US declassification guidelines, records are declassified after 25 years unless specific exceptions are applied, according to *Classified National Security Information*, Executive Order 13526. Analysis of completed/concluded presidencies with declassified sources precludes analysis beyond the George H. W. Bush administration until further declassified records are made available to researchers. [Return to text.](#)

18. The number of issues or topics addressed per NSC meeting is a measure of the breadth the NSC's work. An alternative might be to measure the duration (in hours and minutes) of NSC meetings, or the time spent per topic. While issue counts measure whether the NSC addressed certain topics, the duration of meetings (or duration on topics) measures or characterizes how the issue was addressed. That is because duration likely reflects other factors like the amount of information the NSC had on a topic, the complexity of that topic, or perhaps the degree of NSC principals' consensus on a topic. For example, we might think a topic got less attention if a meeting on that topic was brief, but instead a concise meeting might follow because there were limited strategic options or strong consensus on the topic. To prevent the measurement from being distorted by these other factors, the analysis here focuses on a simple measure of number and type of issues raised per NSC meeting. [Return to text.](#)

19. Office years are calculated as sequential 365-day periods from inauguration or assumption of office, to allow fair comparison of tenures for presidents who assumed office offset of the normal electoral cycle (Truman, Johnson, Gerald Ford) due to their predecessors' deaths (Theodore Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy) or resignations (Richard Nixon); Burke, "Transition Challenges," 314; Light, *President's Agenda*, 38–46; Philip A. Odeen, "Organizing for National Security," *International Security* 5, no. 1 (1980): 114; and Russett, *Controlling the Sword*, 47. [Return to text.](#)

20. Michael Brecher et al., "International Crisis Behavior Data Codebook, Version 14," 2021, <http://sites.duke.edu/icbdata/data-collections/>; and Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis* (University of Michigan Press, 2000). [Return to text.](#)

21. While prior statistical results suggested that NSC meeting frequency is positively correlated with the number of ongoing military disputes (particularly acute episodes involving the use of military force at onset), NSC meeting frequency is not correlated with ICB crisis frequency at any conventional level of statistical significance. Snyder, "National Security in Presidential Time." [Return to text.](#)

22. A two-tailed t-test for the difference in means, between noncrisis topic counts by meeting type, suggests a statistically significant difference (at $p = 0.008$). [Return to text.](#)

23. "Party Division of the United States Senate"; "Party Division of the United States House of Representatives"; Prior research suggests NSC meeting frequency is not affected by periods of unified or divided government with statistical significance (the positive correlation between NSC agenda issues and unified government is not likely to be biased by meeting frequency. Snyder, "National Security in Presidential Time." [Return to text.](#)

24. Including fixed effects for each presidency and each office year provides a panel-like estimator, controlling for conditions across each presidency and over time within each presidency. Additional models were estimated with only fixed effects for each presidency. Those results, excluded for brevity, affirm the main results presented later in table 6. [Return to text.](#)

25. "Presidential Approval Rating Data Set.," "Bureau of Labor and Statistics"; Coding for wartime periods is as follows. The Korean War was from onset in June 1950 until armistice in late July 1953. The Vietnam War was from the Tonkin Resolution in 1964 until US troop withdrawals were completed in 1973. The Gulf War started with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, which prompted Operation Desert Shield, through cessation of US-led combat operations at the end of February 1991. Barbara Salazar Torreon, *U.S. Periods of War and Dates of Recent Conflicts*, CRS Report RS21405 (CRS, June 5, 2020); J. David Singer, "Reconstructing the Correlates of War Dataset on Material Capabilities of States, 1816–1985," *International Interactions* 14, no. 2 (1987): 115–32; J. David Singer et al., "Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820–1965," in *Peace, War, and Numbers*, ed. Bruce M. Russett (Sage, 1972), 19–48. [Return to text.](#)

26. All modeling was completed using the R statistical computing language and the Fast Fixed Effects package for R. Laurent Berge, “Efficient Estimation of Maximum Likelihood Models with Multiple Fixed-Effects: The R Package FENmlm,” *CREA Discussion Papers*, 2018; and “R: A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing” (2023), <http://www.R-project.org>. **Return to text.**

27. In addition to the model 2 results, additional models were estimated with the interaction of the ongoing crisis count and unified government, to test formally whether unified government moderates the effect of crisis prevalence on the agenda count of crisis issues. Those results, omitted for simplicity of presentation and interpretation here, show the main effect of crisis count and the interaction term are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), consistent with the view that government type (unified or divided) moderates presidents’ attentiveness to ongoing crises at NSC meetings. The significance of the interaction effect (of crisis prevalence by unified government) is support for hypothesis 2a. **Return to text.**

28. Results for these robustness checks, along with other supplementary results, are available on request. **Return to text.**

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Bridging Sky and Sea: Joint Strategies for Medical Evacuation in the Indo-Pacific

Mahdi Al-Husseini, Samuel J. Diehl, and Samuel L. Fricks

ABSTRACT: This article contends that the US Army should coordinate agile and expeditious Joint medical evacuation operations in the Indo-Pacific and develop novel capabilities to do so effectively. There has been limited discussion among scholars and practitioners on modern maritime medical evacuation tactics and techniques inspired by history and informed by contemporary threats. This article introduces three new medical evacuation capabilities and makes six recommendations to advance a Joint maritime medical evacuation operating concept. It provides a framework for medical planners developing evacuation systems in maritime theaters and justifies how and why the US Army should play a substantial role in these systems.

Keywords: medical evacuation, maritime operations, novel capability, World War II, Joint health service

The endemic problems that complicated medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) operations in the Pacific theater of World War II warrant professional study and consideration as the US military prepares again for potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific region. In this theater, evacuation systems must overcome vast distances, limitations of transport capacity, an ever-evolving enemy threat, and the complexities of Joint and multinational command structures. Lessons learned in combat and concomitant advances in military medicine and logistics allowed our predecessors to perfect amphibious medical support for a daunting island-hopping campaign against the Imperial Japanese. The strategic coordination of aerial and maritime evacuation and treatment assets enabled the expedient movement and hospitalization of large numbers of casualties across dispersed island chains and clusters. Today, faced with a different adversary and supported by a different inventory, the US Army and US Navy must coordinate as equal partners beginning at the littorals to find ways to do the same. The availability and maturation of rotary-wing aircraft and fast transport ships, the proliferation of networked systems, and advancements in autonomous vehicles and reinforcement and machine learning suggest new and improved Joint approaches to an old, if intensified, problem set.¹

At present, the Joint publication on Joint health systems has assigned the Navy the responsibility for coordinating patient movement within the maritime environment. Harkening back to World War II, the Army should also play a critical role in facilitating intra-theater evacuation operations in the Indo-Pacific, thereby freeing up naval resources in a theater where naval capabilities are vital and often overextended. This article has three primary objectives. We first apply history and modern-day threat considerations to identify obstacles to the timely and effective evacuation of wounded, beginning at the littorals. We contextualize these considerations by outlining the Army's role in maritime evacuation and propose three promising Joint aerial-maritime evacuation capabilities—the overwater ambulance exchange point, the maritime area support MEDEVAC platoon (M-ASMP), and the tail-to-topside transfer to a roaming medical ship. We demonstrate the overwater ambulance exchange point at MEDEVAC Projects Week 2023, a first-of-its-kind training exercise on the Hawaiian Islands organized by the 3-25 Aviation Regiment (as seen in figure 1). We conclude with six recommendations that span DOTMLPF (doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities), including emphasizing deliberate Joint health service and support training objectives at theater security cooperation exercises and developing a Joint maritime evacuation operating concept. To understand the difficulties ahead, we first review the atolls and archipelagos of the Central Pacific in 1944.



Figure 1. A 25th Infantry Division crew chief in the cabin of an HH-60M medical evacuation Black Hawk helicopter studies Logistics Support Vessel 3 during MEDEVAC Projects Week (Source: Charlie Cook / ©2023 Charlie Cook)

The Island Campaigns

While much has changed in the last 80 years, the Central Pacific World War II campaigns continue to provide insights into amphibious operations in the littorals and evacuation best practices in front of, across, and beyond the reefs. The Allied strategy to invade and secure the Gilbert, Mariana, and Marshall Islands formed the core of three successive and successful Central Pacific campaigns designed to break through Imperial Japan's outer perimeter. Victory did not come easy, and sustainment was challenged at every turn. Mary E. Condon-Rall and Albert E. Cowdrey write of the capture of the Mariana Islands, "Hardly an aspect of the evacuation story could be cited that did not reveal failures of foresight and unnecessary suffering inflicted on the wounded." Those operations exposed a taxed evacuation system slow to respond to contingencies related to natural obstacles, destructive weather, and a spontaneous and far-reaching enemy threat. Nonetheless, the Joint Army-Navy medical enterprise performed well in theater. They overcame materiel shortages and manning shortfalls, demonstrated tremendous resolve, and learned the art and science of multimodal evacuation in the littorals while advancing between heavily fortified islands.²

Evacuation in the Central Pacific proved difficult for several reasons. While each invasion was short in duration and constrained in space, the requirement to move patients from the front line to the beachhead and across the reef to the rear required a complex network of unique evacuation assets. Moving patients from the beachhead to beyond the reef involved a dizzying combination of small assault craft and amphibious vehicles, tank landing ships, tank landing craft, transports, and hospital ships. At Saipan, smaller ships transferred patients as many as five times prior to arrival at larger transports and hospital ships. Treacherous coral reefs, inclement weather, and tidal considerations prevented landing craft from approaching the shore. Enemy air and submarine attacks kept transports well offshore after dark, and a threatening Japanese naval fleet forced the transports to withdraw early.³

Although evacuation by fixed-wing aircraft became commonplace as airfields were built, poor planning and synchronization marred early operations. Coordinating Joint evacuation assets was haphazard and sometimes absent, leaving some transports filled to the brim while others sailed empty. Similarly, many wounded left the beachhead without adequate treatment, arriving at transports and hospital ships in critical condition. Overcrowding at key treatment facilities complicated patient regulation, and many servicemembers were returned to the fight prematurely, while others were evacuated too far for their medical disposition.⁴

The Allies learned many valuable lessons from the island campaigns and, in time, the Allied evacuation system matured into a modular structure that could support atolls and archipelagos. Enhanced command and control of evacuation and treatment assets enabled improved evacuation across and around obstacles, while predictive realignment of assets provided more efficient regulation of patients. Every amphibious operation provided opportunities to standardize and refine medical support concepts. These refinements included an increase in the number of ships and hospitals allotted to assault divisions, additional security for medical facilities near the front lines, and amphibious planes to transport patients near the shore until the military could construct airfields. Medical planners began coordinating aerial and maritime assets for evacuation routing, with a combination of amphibious aircraft and watercraft moving the wounded to secured islands with airstrips, followed by intra- and inter-theater air evacuation by large military transport aircraft.⁵

New Rules

Although the twin problems of distance and dispersion that plagued our predecessors in the Pacific remain relevant today, America's ability to overcome both is challenged by China's burgeoning anti-access / area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. China has spent the last 20 years extending its reach and influence in the South China Sea by building artificial islands and offshore bases. Its unmanned aircraft systems, land-based fighter aircraft, and diesel-electric submarines inhibit freedom of maneuver and power projection in the Western Pacific. With a ballistic missile arsenal capable of striking Guam—well beyond the second island chain—and heavy investment in blue-water naval forces arrayed throughout the Central Pacific, fixed sites and large, predictable movements are especially vulnerable to ballistic missile threats. Any mitigating strategy must involve mobile and distributed forces capable of operating in the Western and Central Pacific.⁶

While deterring Chinese aggression remains the focus of the *National Defense Strategy*, Joint medical plans, including medical evacuation concepts, must present strategically acceptable options if deterrence fails. The US Air Force maintains a global fixed-wing aeromedical evacuation presence to facilitate inter-theater patient transport from Guam, Japan, and the Philippines. Nonetheless, evacuation efforts will face opposition when moving patients from the littorals to fixed-wing transfer points. This reality presents an opportunity to develop Army-supported Joint maritime evacuation capabilities that prioritize modularity, adaptability, and speed.⁷

A Joint State of Mind

While the Navy and Air Force will project substantial sea and airpower in forthcoming maritime conflicts, the Army will also play a significant role. Former Secretary of the Army Christine E. Wormuth outlined a prescient vision involving five combat and support tasks the Army should assume in an Indo-Pacific conflict. One task involves logistical support for the Joint Force, a familiar role the Army dutifully fulfilled during World War II. Logistics, however, is only one of the four elements of the sustainment war-fighting function.⁸

The Army's health service should have a central role in coordinating agile and expeditious health service and support operations throughout the Indo-Pacific, with an emphasis on evacuation, for two reasons. First, the Army is the only service branch with a rotary-wing medical evacuation fleet. *Joint Health Services*, Joint Publication (JP) 4-02, describes medical evacuation as "the movement of wounded, injured, or ill persons to medical treatment facilities on marked medical platforms with en route care provided by medical personnel." In contrast to medical evacuation, casualty evacuation is unregulated, may occur via nonmedical platforms, and may not provide en route medical care. Additionally, timely and efficient multimodal evacuation, whether medical evacuation or casualty evacuation, will require a high degree of command and control. The sheer magnitude of expected casualties will further complicate the logistics of medical regulation in the Indo-Pacific. Fittingly, another of Wormuth's five tasks is to provide command-and-control capacity for the Joint Force. The emerging capability of the 18th Medical Command (Deployment Support) in the Indo-Pacific provides the Joint Force the opportunity to codify authorities that will provide clarity and efficiency in future fights.⁹

Means and Ways

Medical planners in the Central Pacific theater of World War II demonstrated tremendous ingenuity and resourcefulness by developing evacuation capabilities befitting their inventory, manning, and training. Consider the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System definition of *capability*: "the ability to achieve a desired effect under specified standards and conditions through combinations of means and ways to perform a set of tasks." The "combination of means and ways" suggests that evacuation capability is a function of the assets used and the manner of their employment, especially in tandem with other assets. Similarly, we find that novel maritime evacuation capabilities arise from combining strategic multimodal dispatching with capable aerial and

maritime evacuation platforms. Those platforms include existing and future long-range rotary-wing aircraft and dedicated medical watercraft. Emerging platforms of note include the Future Long-Range Assault Aircraft (FLRAA) and the Expeditionary Medical Ship (EMS). The FLRAA, to be fielded in 2030, is a tilt-rotor utility aircraft with roughly twice the range and speed of the UH-60 Black Hawk. The EMS, the first of which will be fielded in late 2026, is a medical variant of the Expeditionary Fast Transport ship and enables prolonged care of onboard patients while cruising at up to 43 knots.¹⁰

Drawing inspiration from existing doctrinal tactics and techniques, we introduce three multimodal medical evacuation capabilities designed to support distributed operations in a maritime theater, primarily in the littorals:

1. the overwater ambulance exchange point,
2. the maritime area support MEDEVAC platoon (M-ASMP), and
3. the tail-to-topside transfer to a roaming medical ship.

While each capability supports a different problem set, the three capabilities are linked and collectively comprise a modular tactical evacuation system best enabled by a combination of Joint platforms.

Ambulance exchange points are pre-identified locations, typically fixed in space, where patients are transferred between two evacuation platforms en route to a higher echelon of care. The overwater ambulance exchange point uses watercraft as transfer sites for evacuation aircraft transporting patients between distant islands, should at least one island lack a runway to facilitate fixed-wing transport, or between an island and a hospital. The location and movement of intermediary watercraft, sometimes underway in support of their own mission requirements, can complicate ambulance exchange point selection. If the intermediary watercraft does not possess a helicopter landing pad, hoist operations from the evacuation aircraft are necessary to move patients to and from the deck. Consecutive overwater ambulance exchange points with two or more evacuation aircraft form an evacuation chain, enabling longer transfer distances. While few operational scenarios would necessitate such distances without an opportunity for fixed-wing transport, hypersonic weapons may prevent fixed-wing airfield accessibility into the third or fourth island chains. Simulations suggest a high density of nonmedical watercraft between two islands is a sufficient substitute for a single controllable medical watercraft, with minimal impact on patient transfer times. A dense network of watercraft supporting air evacuation between echelons of care forms a dynamic evacuation opportunity zone.¹¹

The new maritime area support MEDEVAC platoon (M-ASMP) is based on the traditional area support MEDEVAC platoon (ASMP), which moves patients between treatment facilities on an area support basis on land. Area support relationships are determined by the geographic location of units requesting support. The maritime area support MEDEVAC platoon postures one or more MEDEVAC aircraft and supporting crew on an offshore EMS, larger hospital ship, or other medical aviation-capable watercraft for an extended duration. Much like its counterpart, the maritime area support MEDEVAC platoon serves as a centralized node within an established area of operations rearward of one or more forward support MEDEVAC platoons (FSMP). The maritime area support MEDEVAC platoon can support a large island or archipelago, while the forward support MEDEVAC platoons (FSMP) service smaller individual islands. The maritime area support MEDEVAC platoon may transfer patients from its host ship to a larger medical treatment facility. Using supplemental aircraft fuel systems can further extend the operational reach of the maritime area support MEDEVAC platoon.¹²

The expeditious nature of the forthcoming EMS, combined with its onboard medical capabilities, makes it uniquely relevant to the Indo-Pacific operating environment. Rather than be relegated to an overwater exchange point between air ambulances, the EMS and similar fast-moving medical ships can replace the delivering or receiving air ambulance in ferrying patients to a hospital ship or multidisciplinary general hospital on land. This process, which we call the *tail-to-topside* transfer, resembles the tail-to-tail transfer between air ambulances conducting patient handovers at ground ambulance exchange points. The tail-to-topside transfer may overcome limitations in evacuation throughput. For example, the ship can simultaneously transport more than 100 patients while facilitating tail-to-topside transfers continuously en route to its next destination. Each ship can be restricted to operating within defined zones or, alternatively, may sequence into a circuit after delivering patients to a hospital ship via ship-to-ship transfer. The watercraft zone boundaries and circuit routing may then be optimized to reflect the evolving tactical environment. There are several combinations of forward and area-based medical evacuation aircraft and medical ships that may be adopted to support a campaign's geography and casualty estimates.¹³



Figure 2. An HH-60M MEDEVAC Black Hawk helicopter executes hoist iterations to Army Logistics Support Vessel 3, which is traversing the open ocean south of Honolulu, Hawaii, at 5 knots (Source: Mahdi Al-Husseini / ©2024 Mahdi Al-Husseini)

MEDEVAC Projects Week

The C/3-25 Aviation Regiment “Lightning DUSTOFF” planned and executed the inaugural MEDEVAC Projects Week exercise in October 2023. An ambitious first for the Army, this exercise demonstrated how the military can use underway watercraft as overwater ambulance exchange points to facilitate patient transfers between medical helicopters over long maritime distances. Exercise partners included 8th Theater Sustainment Command, Army Futures Command, and 18th Theater Medical Command. After months of preparation, and as seen in figure 2, Lightning DUSTOFF crews executed mock litter patient handovers between two HH-60M MEDEVAC Black Hawk helicopters conducting dynamic hoist operations over Army Logistics Support Vessel (LSV-3) General B. Somervell, which was underway approximately 10 miles south of Honolulu, Hawaii.

The combination of deliberate and progressive aircrew training and mission-enhancing equipment helped minimize risk and enable safe initial deployment of the overwater ambulance exchange point capability. The logistics

support vehicle initiated the exercise by routing a nine-line medical evacuation request through Starlink commercial satellite Internet to the DUSTOFF command post. Upon arrival to the ship, the first aircrew used a load stabilization system during delivery and pickup to preclude oscillation of the hoist load. Subsequently, they transferred all patient data digitally using a battlefield-assisted, trauma-distributed operation kit and transport telemedicine tablets sourced from the Air Force. After the overwater ambulance exchange point transfer was completed, the second aircrew delivered the patient to Tripler Army Medical Center for follow-up care. Both aircraft were dispatched in accordance with an artificially intelligent dispatching algorithm designed by Stanford University researchers specifically for overwater patient transfers. The use of underway watercraft to facilitate the flow of casualties to the rear significantly expands aeromedical evacuation reach and flexibility.¹⁴

The United States Development Command Army Research Laboratory has agreed to pursue two patent applications related to MEDEVAC Projects Week. They are titled “Systems and Methods for Optimally Facilitating Patient Transfers in Non-Contiguous Maritime Environments” and “System and Method for Continuously Reallocating Heterogeneous Evacuation Assets Across Dispatching Subsystems.” The Lightning DUSTOFF team also submitted a paragraph on the demonstrated value of the overwater ambulance exchange point for addition to *Medical Evacuation, Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 4-02.2. Lessons learned from MEDEVAC Projects Week* are further informing an active cooperative research and development agreement between the Army Research Laboratory and Stanford University titled “Hierarchical Framework for the Dynamic Resource Allocation of Heterogeneous Medical Evacuation Assets.”

Distributed medical evacuation operations in a theater as vast and complex as the Indo-Pacific can be challenging. Developing and deploying a diverse repertoire of maritime tactics and techniques for the Joint evacuation enterprise provides medical planners flexibility in operations. The ongoing research at Stanford University and the Army Research Lab involves developing novel models and planning and reinforcement learning algorithms to help identify promising means for conducting evacuation operations in noncontiguous environments. Outcomes include matching evacuation requests to evacuation platforms, selecting and placing land and overwater ambulance exchange points, and allocating and organizing evacuation platforms on a dispersed battlefield in a manner befitting the maneuver commander’s tactical plan. Exercises like MEDEVAC Projects Week help shape evacuation operations in unique environments and demonstrate how analyzing and evaluating new capabilities can have an outsized and lasting influence on an entire theater.¹⁵

Recommendations

Coordinating effective multimodal evacuations across large swaths of the Indo-Pacific in a heavily contested environment will require a return to form. The Joint operating concept for health services must continue to evolve with an eye toward evacuation in a maritime environment, especially the littorals. Although the military has made significant strides in developing new platforms like the EMS and FLRAA, it still needs to improve how they are employed to overcome the challenges of distance and dispersion that characterize maritime theaters. The remainder of this section proposes six ways the Army can address these challenges and enhance medical evacuation operations in the Indo-Pacific. First, the Army should integrate deliberate Joint health service and support training objectives into theater security cooperation exercises. Joint multimodal evacuation is challenging, but opportunities to train abound. The 25th Infantry Division MEDEVAC aircraft in Hawaii regularly conduct deck-landing qualifications with Navy vessels, and capability demonstrations like MEDEVAC Projects Week have explored novel methods for integrating non-medical assets like Army watercraft into the concept of health service and support. We encourage additional capability demonstrations, such as posturing a MEDEVAC aircraft and crew on an aviation-capable Navy vessel for an extended period during Rim of the Pacific and other Joint exercises. In support of future Joint integration, the Joint Force should develop an understanding of how MEDEVAC aircraft can operate in tandem with ships like the EMS before they are fielded.

The Army should introduce maritime and littoral evacuation operations into doctrine and curricula. The Army last updated *Medical Evacuation*, ATP 4-02.2, in July 2019, and it features only a brief mention of maritime operations. Currently, a small subsection on “Shore-to-Ship Evacuation Operations” is delegated to Section XI: “Other Types of Medical Evacuation Support Missions.” The Medical Center of Excellence Doctrine Literature Division’s recent efforts to add maritime considerations to ATP 4-02.2 are commendable, and we suggest that future additions include overwater evacuation capabilities such as the overwater ambulance exchange point, physical characteristics of maritime environments that influence medical evacuation, planning considerations for the littorals, and common illnesses and injuries in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, professional medical military education, including the Army Medical Department Captains Career Course and the Medical Evacuation Doctrine Course, must emphasize maritime evacuation operations and the Indo-Pacific in lesson plans and practical exercises.¹⁶

The military should enlarge the inventory of logistics watercraft and medical and hospital ships with an emphasis on expeditious and expeditionary operations. The number of logistics vessels and hospital ships in the current inventory is inadequate for sustaining the Joint Force during a future war in the Indo-Pacific. Currently, the Army's fleet of 132 watercraft is about three orders of magnitude smaller than the World War II fleet. At the height of World War II there were a combined 34 Army and Navy hospital ships; today there are only two Navy hospital ships—the *Mercy* and the *Comfort*. While the Army and Navy have recently undertaken laudable watercraft-building initiatives, doing so independently and in a manner that does not support the Joint logistics concept is perilous. The Navy's EMS is a high-quality addition to the fleet, but only three were approved in the 2023 military budget, and none have been fielded; more will likely be required for a sprawling maritime conflict. In contrast to the EMS, Army watercraft move at 8 to 12 knots, making them easy prey for Chinese air, naval, and rocket attacks. Additionally, any requirement to operate at a functioning port will be a nonstarter in a contested environment where ports and airfields are likely to be high-value targets.¹⁷

The military should build on existing research agreements with academic partners to develop and assess new evacuation capabilities at scale in noncontiguous theaters. Capability is complicated; multimodal patient movements between Joint assets will require a high degree of command and control and an informed approach to sequential decision making. The adoption and deployment of operationally informed data analytics and AI tools enable military leaders to make rapid and well-informed decisions. The partnership between Stanford University and the Army Research Laboratory, partially in support of the 25th Infantry Division, is developing decision support structures and their underlying models and algorithms for maritime evacuation planning. Existing software systems, like the Medical Planners' Toolkit (MPTk) and Joint Medical Planning Tool (JMPT), have also been used to determine how emerging platforms and treatment facilities can improve operations in a given health system.

The feasibility of evacuation decision support structures is related to their performance in a denied, degraded, and disrupted communications environment. Reinforcement learning is an interdisciplinary subfield in AI that is concerned with how an intelligent agent should make decisions in an evolving environment. In the language of reinforcement learning, an inability to communicate results in partial observability and decentralized control. Partial observability indicates limited knowledge of the system state; for example, the surgeon cell not knowing the location of all friendly evacuation platforms during a wide area jamming event. Decentralized control means agents decide on actions based on local

observations, such as a jammed evacuation platform making evacuation decisions with only the operational environment knowledge it possesses, independent of a higher-echelon medical planner or centralized controller. The robustness of a decision-making support structure for an evacuation system is tied to how it performs when the Medical Common Operating Picture is temporarily, or even permanently, degraded or when the operating environment suddenly and substantially changes.¹⁸

The military should pursue mature autonomous evacuation solutions and develop the policies to guide and constrain their employment. Technology outpaces policy. It is, therefore, crucial that military leaders facilitate the difficult conversations that result in policies enabling technologies that provide an asymmetric advantage over our adversaries. Trust in autonomous platforms does not, and should not, come easy. This trust is especially true in the case of evacuation aircraft that tend to the sick and wounded. Still, the upside is too great to sidestep the role autonomous evacuation platforms will soon play in facilitating patient movement, especially from high-risk areas and across long distances. Consider that many autonomous evacuation solutions, while incipient, already exist. The Aircrew Labor in-Cockpit Automation System is a drop-in kit for existing aircraft that enables multiple levels of autonomy to minimize pilot workload, improve mission performance, and enhance aircraft safety. A Black Hawk helicopter equipped with this drop-in kit completed its first uninhabited flight in 2022 and continues to be flight-tested in support of diverse mission sets, including medical evacuation. The Army Medical Robotics and Autonomous Systems Division has a portfolio of modernization efforts organized under “RAS Transport” designed to augment medical evacuation and resupply efforts. Such efforts should be expanded to support operations in maritime environments. Shaping enabling requirements and policies and educating military leaders across the force can accelerate the Army’s adoption of autonomous evacuation solutions in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁹

Finally, and most critically, the military should develop a Joint maritime medical evacuation operating concept. Lieutenant Colonel Ian Natkin observed, “Even the current concentration on Joint service efforts has not generated the needed written guidance” in his 1989 US Army War College study project on the role of health service in support of theater campaign planning. Natkin’s concerns ring true today, although progress has been made since his paper was published. JP 4-02, updated in August 2023, enables the planning, preparation, and execution of health service operations across the Joint Force. Only minimal written guidance for facilitating operations in maritime environments exists. JP 4-02 introduces a general framework whereby a Joint movement center defines evacuation requirements and passes them to service transportation control centers

for scheduling, tasking, and monitoring. At its most detailed, JP 4-02 compels the Navy to facilitate patient movement “within the maritime environment.” This stipulation belies the critical role the Army, especially its MEDEVAC aircraft and substantial capacity for planning and synchronization of theater operations, should play in any maritime evacuation system that begins at the littorals.²⁰

The three novel maritime evacuation capabilities introduced will require extensive collaboration between the Army and Navy, as shown during the World War II Pacific campaigns. A more in-depth intra-theater maritime evacuation operating concept should be developed that reflects this Joint integration, accompanied by defined service authorities for patient operations and regulation across echelons in noncontiguous environments. Just as there is a section on operations in chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear environments, there should similarly be a section on operations in maritime environments.

Conclusion

Maritime medical evacuation planning is an old game with new rules. Many challenges our World War II predecessors faced in the Pacific remain relevant today, namely, maneuver-inhibiting coral reefs and tides, destructive weather, a pervasive enemy threat, and the need to evacuate dispersed assets across vast distances. Yet, much has changed. The enemy air, naval, and long-range fires threaten the Western Pacific and beyond, forcing a transition from fixed sites and consolidated movements to mobile and expeditionary platforms, facilities, and operations. The modern-day inventory is complete with long-range rotary-wing platforms and fast transport ships, which, when coordinated strategically, can form a modular and adaptable intra-theater evacuation system. The three evacuation capabilities (overwater ambulance exchange point, the maritime area support MEDEVAC platoon (M-ASMP), and tail-to-topside transfer) introduced here are analogous to existing capabilities (ambulance exchange points, area support MEDEVAC platoon (ASMP), and tail-to-tail transfers) but applied to a maritime environment and enhanced by emerging evacuation platforms.

Revitalizing Joint maritime evacuation operations begins with the deliberate development of a comprehensive Joint maritime medical evacuation operating concept. Army and Navy medical planners, research partners at academic institutions and military research laboratories, and military capability developers must coordinate their diverse efforts and objectives to advance any such operating concept successfully. Key institutions to be brought together include the

18th Medical Command (Deployment Support), Stanford University, the Army and Naval Research Labs, the Medical Evacuation Concepts and Capabilities Division, and the Defense Medical Readiness Training Institute. Supporting the Joint maritime medical evacuation operating concept must be a multifaceted approach to implementation that integrates Joint health service training into theater security cooperation exercises, introduces maritime evacuation into doctrine and curricula, expands the inventory of watercraft and medical ships, develops relationships with academic partners to explore novel evacuation capabilities, and matures and guides the employment of autonomous evacuation platforms. Now is the time to bring the Joint health service enterprise together to develop, demonstrate, and train capabilities that bridge the sky and the sea. Our servicemembers—and the outcome of the next conflict—depend on it.

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Deploying and Supplying the Joint Force from a Contested Homeland

Bruce Busler

ABSTRACT: This article argues that the United States must prepare for “the fight to get to the fight,” focusing on deploying and maintaining military forces from a contested homeland amid near-peer threats. It extends existing literature by emphasizing US Transportation Command’s role in mitigating cyber, kinetic, and infrastructure vulnerabilities. The methodology includes scenario-based analysis of adversary actions, leveraging intelligence estimates and modeling for resilience in transportation networks. This piece provides actionable insights into fortifying logistics systems crucial for strategic mobility and operational success, ensuring readiness and deterrence in contested environments.

Keywords: USTRANSCOM, Transportation Command, contested homeland, conflict, Joint Deployment and Distribution Enterprise

Imagine the dark clouds of war have roiled into a storm with the future uncertain. A nation’s security objectives are at stake as it postures its forces across the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean against a formidable adversary. The opening blows of conflict play out with quick strikes and counterstrikes along the expected and distant lines of battle. And then, the unthinkable happens: an audacious adversary musters the cunning and stealth to employ unexpected weapons that circumnavigate defenses with strikes directly against the homeland—strikes that shake the foundation of the populace and cause the nation’s leaders to recoil in surprise and dismay. The unexpected attack diverts resources from executing the nation’s planned strategy against its adversary; military capabilities are instead expended to secure those near regions from which any future attacks may emanate against the homeland, and a realization arises that military forces may be inadequate to fight abroad and secure the homeland at the same time.

Although this narrative could be the beginning of America’s next war, this scenario played out in April 1942 when the combined US Army Air Forces and Navy effort successfully launched the Doolittle Raid against Japan following the stunningly successful Japanese attack against Pearl Harbor just months

before. In Doolittle's surprise raid, 16 B-25s struck multiple Japanese cities, including Tokyo, the emperor's home, and the national capital. Although the strategic implications of the Doolittle Raid may not have been significant, they exacerbated an already complex dilemma in that "... Japan felt compelled to act to save face and prevent future attacks on the homeland by ruthlessly eradicating any threat of future raids emanating from Chinese airfields."¹

The Continental United States (CONUS) has enjoyed relative impunity from attacks on the homeland in almost every conflict since the Civil War. Even during World War II, despite five documented categories of attacks on US soil, none of them generated significant damage or had measurable impacts on the outcomes of the conflicts.²

In the post-World War II era, the United State has deployed and sustained military forces with little to no interference, building combat capability and commencing military operations on America's timelines with few hinderances other than the fog associated with conflict. Over the last decade, the potential of near-peer conflict with China, the acute threat from Russia, and the ever-present regional threats from North Korea or Iran have driven changes in the character of war and accentuated the need for effective deterrence. These adversaries continue to expand their increasingly potent arsenals of weapons for use against the United States, and they will employ them early and often to disrupt and delay America's ability to project power.

The Fight to Get to the Fight

The United States Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM) is tasked to deploy and sustain the Joint Force and overcome these adversary-imposed impediments by leading collaborative planning efforts across military, commercial, and governmental partners in the Joint Deployment and Distribution Enterprise (JDDE). The organization leverages this enterprise to gain access to fleets of military and commercial transportation providers for airlift and sealift, along with road and rail conveyances and networks of civil highways, rail lines, seaports, airports, and operations centers.³

An assessment of plausible enemy courses of action in a potential conflict with a near-peer adversary indicates kinetic and non-kinetic threat activity are likely against US power-projection operations, with almost certainty that significant non-kinetic attacks will happen across a diverse and wide-ranging set of targets. These non-kinetic capabilities are further delineated as cyberspace operations, economic and other adverse pressures, and information operations. Since defending against all possible attack vectors is not feasible, a reasonable contested environment mitigation strategy for large-scale deployment operations

is to understand resilience and points of consequence in our transportation networks better. This approach is built on other proven constructs, such as those espoused in the National Infrastructure Protection Plan, which offers well-developed approaches to remain secure and resilient by reducing vulnerabilities, minimizing consequences, identifying and disrupting threats, and hastening recovery.⁴

Minimize-Maximize-Optimize

The following risk-management approach applied to defense transportation provides specific opportunities to promote resilience and manage points of consequence in three primary areas for deploying and supplying the Joint Force from the homeland:

- Minimize the impact of high-probability and consequential cyber threats on vulnerable elements of the Joint Deployment and Distribution Enterprise.
- Maximize the Joint Deployment and Distribution Enterprise's ability to recover rapidly or execute alternate transportation solutions given the likelihood of node / network infrastructure degradation.
- Optimize relationships with critical transportation providers and leverage federal, state, and regional transportation agency interactions to support elevated levels of deployment activity rapidly when faced with disruptions.

To employ this approach, USTRANSCOM assesses power projection operations where roughly 85 percent of the Joint Force originates from the continental United States, which requires the Department of Defense to prepare for large-scale combat operations with the added complexity of contested force flow. Understanding the scope and friction of contested deployment and sustainment is essential to exploring and appreciating fully the inherent challenges of these operations.⁵



Figure 1. Deploying US Army soldiers on commercial airlift
(Source: Gabrielle Kuholski, Military.com, 2016)

Given that America's adversaries' goals are to gain time to achieve their objectives by delaying US power projection, USTRANSCOM leads collaborative planning efforts across diverse military, commercial, and governmental partners in the Joint Deployment and Distribution Enterprise to achieve the desired end-to-end mobility effects.

The Transportation Command has developed a structured methodology to incorporate contested environment (CE) effects into wartime transportation analysis, which has been adopted as a best practice for depicting adversary threat activity impacts on deployment operations conducted via the Defense Transportation System (DTS). This approach uses a combination of plausible enemy courses of action informed by multifaceted intelligence estimates on adversary capabilities and intent to employ those capabilities against US transportation operations in time and space on a global scale. Threat categories are broadly addressed as either kinetic or non-kinetic activities, with weapons effects attributed in detail to each adversary capability.⁶

While the details remain classified, it is reasonable to assume that direct kinetic attacks with weapons such as air or maritime-launched missiles *may* occur against the homeland, however, there is near certainty that non-kinetic attacks *will* happen across a diverse and wide-ranging set of targets. These non-kinetic capabilities are further delineated as (1) cyberspace operations, (2) economic and other adverse pressures, and (3) information operations. Once threat activities are defined, blue force protection or mitigation actions are applied to determine

the residual impact experienced within the Defense Transportation System. Authoritative sources in areas such as missile defense and defensive cyberspace operations provide blue-force mitigating attributes.

The ensuing product is a leaker analysis for CE effects that include the depth and duration of degradation on assets, nodes, routes, command-and-control facilities, and decision making. Additional assessments capture the effectiveness of recovery efforts, such as expeditionary airfield and port repair or reconstitution of information systems, nodes, and routes. The result is a catalog of impacts with delays (temporary) or attrition (enduring) diminishing transportation output as reflected in modeling and simulation. Instead of worrying about what harm the adversary might impose in the homeland, Transportation Command can employ this CE assessment on large-scale deployment operations to understand resilience and points of consequence in the transportation networks. Typically, results from these efforts are used in classified mobility studies or operational plan assessments to articulate risk to mission outcomes. These, in turn, inform DoD critical infrastructure protection requirements and mission assurance measures enabling continued operations in the face of degrading adversary actions. The fruition of these efforts allows Transportation Command to embrace this minimize-maximize-optimize framework to create resilience and manage consequences with high benefit for the Defense Transportation System.⁷

Minimize Cyber Domain Vulnerabilities

Transportation Command's focus on cyber domain mission assurance has been a recurring focus area over many years, with significant effort focused on continuity of operations—especially in command-and-control centers. Securing and protecting information networks is also a top priority because Transportation Command and its component commands, by necessity, conduct a considerable volume of operational activity for transportation operations on the unclassified DoD Information Network. While military DoD information networks enjoy elevated protective measures, America's commercial transportation partners are more vulnerable in cyberspace given the preponderance of activities occurring on unclassified networks. Commercial partners enrolled in emergency response programs such as the Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF), Voluntary Intermodal Sealift Agreement (VISA), Voluntary Tanker Agreement (VTA), and the Universal Services Contract (USC), along with other transportation service providers (TSPs), gain significant daily and wartime contributions. These partners are so critical they are termed the "Fourth Component," in addition to Transportation Command's three primary military air, surface, and maritime component commands. Transportation Command's risk is intimately linked to these

commercial partners. That is, their risk is our risk, prompting the need to raise the bar for cyberspace discipline as a key element in gaining resilience in our partnerships.⁸

Since 2018, USTRANSCOM has contractually required commercial transportation service providers to submit annual self-assessments of National Institute of Standards cybersecurity controls with significant improvements observed in recent years. Currently, self-assessments on the National Institute of Standards controls are voluntary. Under proposed rules for Cybersecurity Maturity Model Certification 2.0, however, the future may require more stringent compliance. Additional measures beyond these contractual requirements address roles between government and industry as elements in multiple executive orders, with a recent one indicating “much of our domestic critical infrastructure is owned and operated by the private sector, and those private-sector companies make their own determination regarding cybersecurity investments.” While these executive orders encourage industry to make ambitious investments in cybersecurity, they also commit to improving information sharing between the US government and the private sector relating to cyber threat information. In that vein, a best practice gleaned from the financial and electrical power industries, sharing cybersecurity information and assistance, has been adopted with transportation industry partners. Transportation Command actively promotes federal assistance via the National Security Agency DoD Cyber Crimes Center and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. Participation is voluntary and confidential with benefits realized for those who choose to utilize the tools and services from these organizations at no cost. These cybersecurity measures elevate the cost and effort for advanced persistent threat actors, with the expectation that the depth and duration of an inevitable cyberattack will have reduced consequences and allow recovery for continued military power projection operations.⁹



Figure 2. Commercial roll-on / roll-off vessel preparing to load Army vehicles
(Source: Private First Class Carlos Cuebas Fantauzzi, 22nd Mobile Public Affairs Detachment, Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, 2020)

Maximize Infrastructure Resilience

While cyberattack disruptions are the most likely and pervasive threat to power projection from the US homeland, other threats or hazards may also create impacts, necessitating a comprehensive mission assurance approach with a focus on transportation infrastructure integral to the Joint Deployment and Distribution Enterprise. Transportation Command is designated to lead Department of Defense efforts to conduct assessments and identify transportation-related strategic risk issues, and the command performs this task through several designated programs.¹⁰

Three national defense programs mandate that the Department of Defense work closely with the Department of Transportation, state and local agencies, and private-sector transportation providers to address national defense needs regarding highways, railroads, and seaports. These programs define the minimum infrastructure requirements to conduct major power projection operations under wartime conditions using civil and commercial capabilities. The Strategic Highway Network (STRAHNET) comprises more than 64,200 miles of interstate and connecting highways. Its origins date to 1919 in the aftermath of World War I when America's expeditionary requirement to use the highway system rapidly and reliably resulted in the War Department publishing the "Pershing Map" that captured military movement needs. A similar effort for rail called the Strategic Rail Corridor Network (STRACNET) incorporates 32,000 miles of privately owned rail lines and connectors that service 141 key military

installations, defense sites, and strategic seaports across the United States. Transportation Command proactively works with government agencies to address potential impediments to surge operations, such as relief for truck and rail operator time-in-service limitations or processing of waivers for oversize and overweight highway loads at the state level.¹¹

At the nodal level, a strategic seaport program with 18 commercial and 6 military ports, including 2 Military Ocean Terminals, is designated to meet military movement needs. Unique to high-net explosive weight ammunition movements at the Military Ocean Terminals is sufficient standoff distance from surrounding infrastructure, which makes them unique from their commercial counterparts. Each designated strategic seaport has an approved Port Readiness Plan identifying the port facilities necessary to meet the largest anticipated military movement. The Department of Transportation's Maritime Administration, in conjunction with Transportation Command and other interagency partners, monitors the readiness of the commercial seaports under the National Port Readiness Network. Under contingency conditions, timely access to civil and commercial infrastructure is paramount and a rated order under the Transportation Priority Allocation System can prioritize necessary access if voluntary measures are insufficient.¹²

These national defense programs lay the foundation for accessing the necessary infrastructure for major deployment operations but by themselves are insufficient to deal with the inevitable disruptions expected in modern warfare. Department of Defense reliance on civil and commercial infrastructure networks, with numerous embedded networked components such as industrial control system / supervisory control and data acquisition (ICS/SCADA) systems, introduce exploitable vulnerabilities. The criticality or consequence of these network exploits to movement operations become a key factor in designing resilient network paths. While it would be daunting to identify every possible exploit, a macro-level assessment about how road and rail networks degrade is a useful approach to discover when and where brittle outcomes contribute to an escalating loss of throughput in the transportation system. Transportation Command has completed route vulnerability analyses on the highway and rail networks for military movements associated with specific wartime scenarios. Insights from this work determined that *simultaneous* interdiction of a considerable number of road and rail segments would be necessary to degrade wartime military movements significantly. With more than 15,500 total road and 18,000 rail segments in the Strategic Highway Network and the Strategic Rail Network, these well-established civil infrastructure networks afford a consequential foundation of resilience in the continental United States. For the few areas where degraded flows were

discovered, they occurred in the vicinity of installations or ports where routes converge to limited points of access, requiring more robust workarounds. Airfields to support deployments are also critical, with the majority of them either on installations or in close proximity, thereby limiting the same opportunity for route exploitation.¹³



Figure 3. Highways, railroads, and seaports for power projection operations
 (Source: US Army, Surface Deployment and Distribution Command, Transportation Engineering Agency, 2024)

This analysis illuminates alternatives that, if recognized, can expedite the ability to fight through disruptions while elevating critical paths warranting greater protections or mitigations. Whereas the model used in this analysis rapidly identified degradation and found alternate paths innately, in the real world, the ability to assess disruptions and reroute cargo flows relies on commercial providers and nodal operators to act autonomously for the desired throughput. In the pursuit of resilience, disruptions are expected with recovery or rerouting alternatives readily discernable across multiple echelons of activity—all core elements in USTRANSCOM transportation engineering methodologies.

Seaport resilience is achieved with a similar approach reflected in a DHS report indicating that “a cyber attack on networks at a port . . . could result in port disruptions . . . which could last days or weeks,” noting that the impact depends on the ability to divert shipments to other ports. Transportation Command sizes the number of ports on the East, Gulf, and West coasts so that the aggregate port capacity is more than the peak wartime demand, thereby providing sufficient port

output to accommodate the loss of several ports. Seaport assessments address all the port features necessary to support the deployment of military equipment landside and waterside. They also parse out port capabilities not critical for loading or discharging roll-on / roll-off vessels—such as gantry cranes, which may cause port vulnerabilities writ large, especially for container shipments, but are not required for military equipment movements. Congressional interest in seaports has always been high, with the most recent 2020 USTRANSCOM report indicating most ports in the Strategic Seaport Program have no significant deficiencies and are capable of supporting DoD requirements. Ongoing assessments indicate the condition of the road and rail connectors to the ports are also sound. If a port has limitations for any reason, the Department of Defense would use “in-lieu-of” infrastructure at the impacted port or shift to another strategic seaport, given the robust footprint designed for each coastal region. Transportation Command’s Army component, Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command, reinforces this approach with a “port diversification” practice to shift movements routinely across a range of ports to ensure they are ready and create a diverse pattern of operations that contributes to resiliency. The value in this approach is having tools to assess the impact on node and network degradation and developing courses of action to recover or divert across nodes and networks, which can be decisive in negating the consequence of potential port disruptions.¹⁴

The two ammunition ports operated by Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command in California and North Carolina are unique in their high-net explosive weight capability, limiting potential use of commercial seaport alternatives. Therefore, greater scrutiny placed on key cyber terrain assessments and evaluations of other dependencies to decrease vulnerabilities is coupled with the development of in-depth mitigation playbooks to reduce the consequences if either terminal were in jeopardy.

These examples reinforce Transportation Command’s position that resilience can be engineered and consequences managed. This resilience is gained through concerted efforts to understand how the transportation network responds to disruptions and identify where elevated points of concern are found when the system is operating under wartime demands and timely transportation output matters.

Optimize Relationships

The time that will challenge the effectiveness of the Defense Transportation System will certainly be at the beginning of a major deployment in the homeland when national security is on the line. Relationships with key transportation partners matter, and the time to develop and solidify those relationships is before they are tested. Transportation Command has developed excellent working relationships at the executive and operational levels with DoD transportation industry partners and government counterparts in every portion of the Joint Deployment and Distribution Enterprise. The National Defense Transportation Association fosters multiple venues across committees with industry partners from airlift and sealift to surface, including seaports, rail, trucking, and functional areas such as cybersecurity.

Transportation Command also hosts a recurring set of engagements through executive working groups designed to allow frank and open dialogue about classified and unclassified areas of mutual interest or concern for the timing and tempo of crisis or wartime operations. These are clearly differentiated from acquisition venues to avoid the perception of constructive changes to contract terms while providing the necessary basis of shared understanding. These working group sessions are scheduled on a recurring basis multiple times per year and embrace every industry sector to ensure robust dialogue and mutual trust sustain these critical relationships. During periods of greater intensity, these engagements increase to enhance situational awareness and posture for future operations. Several examples illustrate the power of these relationships, allowing the Defense Transportation System to operate effectively even under duress.

In August 2021, coincident with the final withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, the United States evacuated more than 79,000 people from Kabul International Airport in C-17s, with commercial long-range passenger aircraft needed to complete the movement for Operation Allies Refuge to the United States. Commercial airline partners were contacted at the onset of planning to determine how much capacity they could make available. In the end, the Department of Defense activated Civil Reserve Air Fleet Stage I for the third time in history to enable this intense airlift effort. Similarly, in 2022 and 2023, US support for Ukraine swung into high gear with increased airlift required to provide military assistance. A steady rate of deliveries was made using numerous commercial Boeing 747 cargo aircraft to avoid further saturating heavily tasked United States Air Force C-17 Globemaster IIIs and C-5M Super Galaxies, achievable only with strong commitments from several air carriers. More recently, in late 2023 and early 2024, with heightened tensions in the Levant, Transportation Command engaged

its sealift industry partners in classified discussions about elevated threats in the Red Sea to apprise industry with risk-informed options and safe-passage protocols. On any day, carrier calls are made between operational-level planners across all modes of transportation, intimately connecting Transportation Command with Fourth Component commercial carriers. They know us, and we know them.

While USTRANSCOM's relationship with the commercial transportation industry is solid, there will likely be concerted efforts by adversaries in the early stages of a conflict to create confusion and sow seeds of doubt. In her 2023 congressional posture statement, USTRANSCOM Commander, General Jacqueline Van Ovost indicated that, "DoD's ability to project military forces is inextricably linked to commercial industry," and the relationships built and sustained over many years provide the strong foundation that, together, we will deliver even when adversaries contest our ability to operate.¹⁵

An often-overlooked set of relationships essential for generating Transportation Command's wartime output are linked to Reserve and National Guard units found throughout the Department of Defense mobility force structure. These reserve component forces compose about 65 percent of military airlift and air refueling capabilities, 85 percent of the aeromedical evacuation forces, and 90 percent of the soldiers to manage seaports under wartime conditions and are fully integrated into daily operations, with volunteerism being critical to providing non-mobilized capacity. These total force relationships are seamless and a testament to the professionalism of reserve component members. However, under crisis or wartime conditions, the ability to gain timely access to these forces is based on a series of national-level decisions. A key consideration for the USTRANSCOM commander is when and at what levels to request the mobilization of mobility-enabling forces from the Secretary of Defense. Not only is this a major decision impacting the Reserve and Guard forces, but it is also a signal to adversaries that the United States is gearing up for a possible conflict. Early mobilization facilitating the movement of deterrence forces is likely fraught with uncertainty and potential for undesired escalation, while delayed decisions will impact the force flow with the likelihood for cascading delays. Confounding these mobilization decisions is the potential for a simultaneity gap on competing missions. This conundrum exists when the expectation of support from the Department of Defense for the US civil populace during crisis may rely on the same Reserve and National Guard forces being mobilized to deploy. Thus, the final set of relationships that matter demands a firm exercise of the protocols and expectations at the national level of leadership for timely access

to the reserve component forces necessary to commence and maintain large-scale deployment operations from the homeland.¹⁶

Conclusion

The homeland is no longer a sanctuary, so the entire enterprise must prepare for the inevitable when engaged in the process of deploying from a contested homeland. The Department of Defense must now embrace a diverse set of activities, along with civil and commercial partners, to bolster resilience and manage points of consequence. Transportation Command's approach to this reality is to deter adversaries who believe they can cripple the United States at the starting gate by taking actions in three areas:

1. minimizing the impact of high-probability cyber-threat actions on vulnerable elements of the Joint Deployment and Distribution Enterprise, with a concentration on commercial transportation providers;
2. maximizing the Joint Deployment and Distribution Enterprise's ability to maintain alternate transportation solutions across degraded node or network paths no matter how the disruption occurs; and
3. optimizing the contributions of critical transportation providers along with federal, state, and regional transportation agencies through strong trust-based relationships that can withstand the friction of modern conflict and operate in a distributed manner.

While this approach allows for the collective pursuit of tangible actions that enhance the nation's power-projection posture, it is not a panacea. The potential for debilitating or cascading black swan events remains a concern that the enterprise must continue to explore. Correspondingly, increased whole-of-government mission clarity and improved capabilities to protect, defend, and respond against ever-increasing adversary threats to the homeland are necessities to preclude being overwhelmed and stymied during a contingency. Nonetheless, these concerns are not an excuse for inaction. In the end, when it really counts, if we embrace this approach as the foundation, the USTRANSCOM motto "Together, we deliver," will be more than a tagline—it will be a path to success when the Joint Deployment and Distribution Enterprise must fight to *get to the fight*.

Bruce Busler

Bruce Busler retired in 2024 as a member of the Senior Executive Service after serving nearly 14 years as the director of United States Transportation Command's Joint Distribution Process Analysis Center as well as the executive director of the US Army's Transportation Engineering Agency under the Surface Deployment and Distribution Command. He is also a retired US Air Force colonel and command pilot with more than 3,800 flight hours in airlift and trainer aircraft. Busler is a graduate of the US Air Force Academy, the Air Force Institute of Technology, and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces.

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Civil-Military Relations and Democratic Backsliding

Carrie A. Lee

Keywords: civil-military relations, strategy, decision making, recruiting, defense budget

Why do we think about civil-military relations? Civil-military relations impact strategic assessment, strategy and decision making, and professional ethics and effectiveness.

The military's relationship with society influences recruiting and retention (and, therefore, the sustainability of the force), defense budgets, and foreign policy preferences. Moreover, the military's relationship with political leaders influences the quality and content of military advice, oversight, and accountability, and even decisions about whether and how to go to war. Civil-military relations, put broadly, underpin any country's ability to make decisions about and support its national defense.¹

Yet, in addition to its functional importance, civil-military relations also matter for democracy. After all, the military is the most coercive instrument a state has—it is an enormously powerful institution with ready access to weapons and training designed to suppress and repress. Peter Feaver identifies this paradox as the central problematique of civil-military relations: How do you develop a military capable enough to defend the state while ensuring that it does not overthrow the regime?²

This traditional characterization of the challenge puts the onus on civilian leaders to either train or entice the military to remain out of politics. Nevertheless, if one makes a small but important shift in framing the problem, it reveals a new set of questions. If, rather than asking, “how can civilians entice the military to stay out of politics,” we instead ask, “what are the factors that encourage militaries to support the regime,” it opens up a new set of questions and an avenue of study that could prove critical to understanding political change across the world.

There is no shortage of normative discussion about the importance of maintaining civilian control of the military and the need for the military to stay out of domestic politics—particularly in the American context. There is, however, a noticeable lack of empirical work in civil-military relations and comparative politics that either describes or explains the military's domestic political power and role as an institutional guardrail in democracies. To the degree

that scholars have studied it, it is usually in the context of outright military coups and the coup-proofing techniques employed by civilian leaders. Short of a coup and subsequent military rule, though, the field has paid relatively little attention to the military's role in facilitating or denying other forms of regime change. Yet by definition, any military capable of overthrowing the state must also be—at a minimum—complicit when the regime or form of government changes. How can we understand what motivates the military to intervene during times of crisis to protect the existing government or step aside?³

This omission is most glaring when we look at the now robust and growing literature on democratic backsliding. Over the last 10 years, the global regression in the prevalence and quality of democracy has drawn the attention of scholars and journalists seeking to understand and explain how and why democracies die. So, it is particularly curious that none of the dominant explanations for democratic erosion explore the critical role the military plays as a guarantor of state security—both internal and external. It is instead either ignored outright or assumed that the military is aligned with the dominant party (and therefore the consolidation of power by would-be authoritarians goes unchallenged). Yet, recent examples in Brazil, South Korea, Türkiye, and the United States challenge these treatments. Indeed, in professional militaries like the United States, where officers swear an oath to the Constitution (that is, a form of government) rather than an individual leader, any study of democratic erosion that does not include an explanation of how the military is either coopted or circumvented is necessarily incomplete.⁴

A few scholars are investigating the relationship between the military and the quality of a democracy, but the literature is nascent. Risa Brooks has been doing interesting work with a variety of coauthors on civil-military relations, autocracy, and democracy. David Auerswald, Philippe Lagasse, and Stephen Saideman have a forthcoming comparative book on the relationship between legislatures and ministries of defense, with a particular focus on the (lack of) oversight that would normally be seen as a check and balance on executive power. Even beyond these promising projects, there are still critical questions to be asked and answered.⁵

At a time when democracy around the globe is receding rapidly, understanding the role that militaries play in its decline (or sustainment) is more important than ever. As I and others have argued elsewhere, healthy democracies on average make for more reliable long-term strategic partners—and *better war fighters*. To that end, a better understanding of the relationship between militaries and democracy may then help the United States to target security assistance and partnerships abroad more effectively, ensuring that the militaries of our partner nations remain committed to democratic norms and principles. In this era of strategic competition, every extra advantage could make the difference.⁶

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By All Means Available: Memoirs of a Life in Intelligence, Special Operations, and Strategy

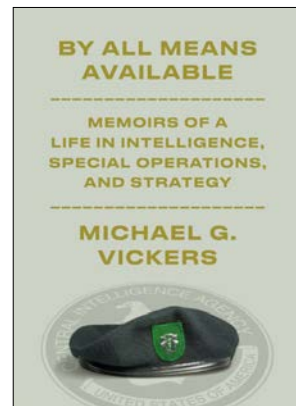
by Todd Greentree
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Keywords: intelligence, special operations, strategy, Afghanistan, gray zone, Cold War

Mike Vickers is an American national security legend. His memoir tells the story of how he earned his status among the current generation of military and civilian leaders.

Memoirs are a special form of literature. Military commanders, senior officials, and statesmen write them to tell their versions of how their lives intersected with history. Comprehensibly, they desire to place themselves in the best light, even when admitting to faults and errors. The modern form has its exemplary antecedent in Ulysses S. Grant's *Personal Memoirs*, written after his two terms as president while he was dying of cancer, and culminating with his account as Union commander in the Civil War. In contrast to Grant's authenticity, some authors subject their memoirs to reputation-protecting distortion. For example, see Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, *Years of Upheaval*, and *Years of Renewal*. Vickers largely avoids crossing that line, using as his model *From the Shadows* and *Duty*, the two outstanding memoirs by Robert Gates, who served every president from Jimmy Carter to Barack Obama, was Secretary of Defense and Director of the CIA, and one of Vickers' much-admired bosses.¹

The book is a soldier's story written large. A lover and guardian of the secret world, Vickers scrupulously thanks the Department of Defense and CIA classification review boards and frequently keeps the curtain closed. Overall, however, he is straightforward and convincing. He tells readers he has written an "analytical memoir" out of duty—to history, to the American people, and to future intelligence officers, special operators, and strategists (8). The first half tracks the unique evolution of his career, beginning with the later years of the Cold War through September 11, 2001, and its aftermath. The second half cycles



thematically through the nation's contemporary experience of war, arriving at the challenges of great-power competition and future war that are with us today.

Vickers is informative, detailed (including extensive notes), and matter-of-fact in style, with the pragmatic perspective of a soldier and intelligence officer. This pragmatism does not mean that he lacks romance. Although *By All Means Available* is no *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, T. E. Lawrence does turn up. And, as might be natural for someone who came of age beneath the big white sign in Hollywood, California, Vickers seeds the narrative with TV and film references such as *Mission Impossible* and *The Magnificent Seven*, and James Bond appears as a role model, albeit not in the index. *Charlie Wilson's War*, the stylish 2007 Mike Nichols film about America's first Afghan war, starring Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts, and Phillip Seymour Hoffman, based on the book by George Crile, portrays Vickers as a nerdy CIA weapons expert—which is roughly accurate by Vickers's accounting. Notwithstanding the Hollywood version, young Mike Vickers was the real-life architect of strategy in the hot war in Afghanistan that helped bring the Cold War to a peaceful conclusion. It made his reputation.²

Vickers's uncommon trajectory from high school student with strabismus (crossed eyes) to senior defense and intelligence official was much more than being with the right people in the right place at the right time. He undertook a hero's journey from the beginning, heeding a call to adventure, ready to face adversities with courage and determination and dedicate his life to something larger than himself. He also possessed a native aptitude for strategy, starting with always looking up and ahead in his life. Inspired by a teacher and aspiring to the elite, Vickers decided to become a CIA officer, but lacking a college degree, he determined his best route was to first join the Army and become a Green Beret. It worked, and he reported to the Special Forces Qualification "Q" Course" in December 1973. By that date, the last US combat troops had departed South Vietnam, the anti-war movement divided the country, and the US military was deep in crisis. Vickers confesses to mixed feelings about Vietnam but does not reflect further.

Vickers' hyper-focused dedication to mission became a hallmark of his entire career—and a critical strength. The patriotism is implicit. With his head in the game, he quickly jumped onto the fast track, learning the arts of guerrilla warfare from storied Vietnam warriors, becoming a weapons specialist and 10th Group Soldier of the Year in 1974, leaping from Officer Candidate School to first in his Special Forces officer class and, in effect, transforming himself into an accomplished instrument of war. (I first crossed path with Vickers in the early 1980s, when he was a lieutenant in command of a 7th Group counterterrorist Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) conducting an embassy

survey and intelligence collection mission in El Salvador, where America's new counterinsurgency strategy was still a gamble.)

In 1983, Vickers joined the CIA, where, instead of becoming a case officer, his Special Forces skills quickly led him to the paramilitary International Activities Division (now Special Activities Center.) He soon found himself accompanying US troops and getting a taste of combat during Operation Urgent Fury, the haphazard invasion of Grenada to expel the Cubans from the island and demonstrate President Ronald Reagan's Cold War prowess.

The next year, Vickers began to make his mark in Afghanistan, far on the geopolitical periphery, where twice in four decades America would go to war, first for better and then for worse. Shortly after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on Christmas Eve 1979, President Jimmy Carter expanded a covert action program by arming the Afghan resistance in an open-ended effort to "bleed the Soviets," as National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski liked to put it. Soon after Vickers joined a team of dedicated CIA Cold Warriors in 1984 as an Afghanistan covert action program officer, he recognized that the highly motivated mujahideen had the potential to do more than impose costs on the Soviet Army. Over the next 18 months, he devised and implemented a strategy to defeat and drive them out of Afghanistan "by all means available" (an NSC review of the Afghanistan program being the source of his title) (8, 141). Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 166 on March 27, 1985, formally turning the gray zone war into black and white.³

Vickers' first-hand narrative of how the asymmetry of US support, combined with a determined insurgency to achieve "escalation dominance," changed history is a signal contribution of the memoir (139). With him in the thick of it, the CIA marshalled resources from Congress as Texas Democrat Charlie Wilson led the charge and won increased commitments from China, Egypt, Great Britain, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. It was his design to acquire and deliver the weapons and enablers mix, including Stinger surface-to-air missiles, that would give the mujahideen the wherewithal for the victory that turned the tables on the Soviets. If not quite what he terms "the decisive battle of the Cold War," the defeat was decisive (3). In Afghanistan, the Soviet Union fell from believing the world was going their way in 1979 to Gorbachev's bleeding wound in 1986, and its humiliating withdrawal three years later was a significant nail in the Soviet coffin. Clausewitz termed the special characteristic that allowed Vickers to conceive and accomplish what he did "coup d'oeil," the inner eye that sees the war, judges the situation, and takes resolute action.⁴

With his mission in Afghanistan accomplished and follow-on prospects with the CIA limited, Vickers departed to increase his intellectual capital.

He completed a master of business administration degree at the Wharton School of Business then studied for his PhD under eminent strategic thinker Eliot Cohen at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC. From there, he expanded his national security horizon, joining the fraternity of master of strategy Andy Marshall in the Department of Defense Office of Net Assessments and, in 1999, cofounding the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, today a highly respected Washington defense think tank.

The blow of the September 11 attacks left Vickers craving from the sidelines to get back into action. His chance came in 2006. In the second of two advisory group meetings with President George W. Bush on the troubled war in Iraq, Bush asked Vickers to stay behind, signaling prized face time and the prospect of influencing an informal moment of decision. Instead, Bush flustered him by citing *Charlie Wilson's War* and asking, "Why did you leave CIA?" (223) Bemused, Vickers confessed that he rose too fast and unconventionally and realized it would take a decade before he reached the level of responsibility he had in Afghanistan.

The encounter led to an invitation from Eric Edelman, Bush's Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, to become Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict. Edelman added Interdependent Capabilities to the job description, which yielded ASD SO / LIC & IC, an awkward acronym even by DoD standards. Vickers' appointment was confirmed in early 2007, and President Barack Obama kept Vickers on during both of his terms. In the job, he became the "secretary of everything," with a portfolio that ranged from overseeing the post-9/11 expansion of Special Operations Forces to reviewing nuclear targeting (223). Vickers offers a close look under the hood of his role in US strategy and operations in the war on terrorism, including the global campaign to dismantle, degrade, and defeat al-Qaeda; and Neptune's Spear, the operation to kill Osama bin Laden. His personal narrative of involvement in the second war in Afghanistan includes friendly reunions with former Afghan mujahideen and more contentious encounters with Pakistani frenemies. (He keeps a greater distance from Iraq). The wingspan of his portfolio encompassed the drone program, cyberwar, counterproliferation, counternarcotics in Mexico, counterinsurgency in Colombia, and military operations in the Middle East. He continued globe-trotting battlefield circulation and added intelligence reform when he moved up the policy ladder to become Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence (USD-I) in 2011. Among the observations he derives from his senior tenure is that the post-9/11 realignment of national security agencies was less important than the new capabilities developed within the organizations, particularly turning

Special Operations Forces, CIA, and new technologies into effective instruments of counterterrorism. He also sounds an alarm, echoed by the congressionally mandated Commission on the National Defense Strategy, calling for urgent and fundamental change to the US military and other government agencies that are not prepared to meet the challenges of what he unhesitatingly calls “The New Cold War”(7, ch. 23, 417–44).⁵

Along the way, Vickers unfailingly reflects a sense of loyalty and common mission among fellow soldiers, colleagues, and partners within the relatively small leadership circle of the national security community. Attributing his success to them, he says, “I was lucky again and again” (471). His individual characterizations tend to stay on the surface, however, and his portrayal of the bureaucracy, while not entirely friction free, is more often scrubbed of the sharp competition that pervades interagency relations in a government of divided authority. He does occasionally bare his steel, fending off a DoD ploy to seize control of the Afghan covert action from the CIA and delivering a blow-by-blow account of Lieutenant General Michael Flynn’s removal as director of the Defense Intelligence Agency in 2014, along with shock at Flynn’s controversial associations with Putin’s Russia and Donald Trump.

Neither does Vickers hold back from evaluating faults at two ends of the spectrum. He criticizes presidents for underreaching and for overreaching: Clinton for pulling punches in the hunt for Osama bin Laden; Bush for invading Iraq; Obama for lacking determination in Syria, Libya and the surge in Afghanistan; Trump and Biden for the botched endgame in Afghanistan. He also shares abundant errors he made at every stage of his career and sprinkles them with lessons taken to heart. These begin, for example, with a parachute embarrassment during Special Forces training that demonstrates failure can be a better teacher than success. He admits that, even as he helped shape the war on terrorism, he missed how the Afghan Arabs in the war against the Soviets would metastasize into bin Laden’s al-Qaeda and how the invasion of Iraq would provoke a virulent insurgency and fuel the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), admissions of participation in collective and individual failure.

Without detracting from Vickers’ accomplishments or suggesting he should have been clairvoyant, these lapses raise cautionary issues that coalesce around the over-militarization of US foreign policy in the larger realm of geopolitics. This long-standing concern of former CIA Director and Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates dates to the early Cold War, when concepts like escalation dominance and proxy wars in the gray zone had their origins in the strategic challenges of great-power confrontation in the nuclear age. In this context, what stands out about the success of escalation dominance through indirect means in Afghanistan is not that it proved a general proposition.

Rather, in an era of containment punctuated by two costly limited wars in Korea and Vietnam, the asymmetric vulnerability that rolled back the Soviet Union came toward the end of four decades and resulted from a unique and complex combination of circumstance and determination.⁶

There are further examples from Afghanistan of the consequences of over-reliance on military power. Vickers gives important new elements about the trials and tribulations of getting Saudi Arabia to fulfill its promise to match US funding for the CIA program in Afghanistan. He does not, however, mention how the Saudi regime's fear of losing political legitimacy motivated its parallel program that channeled Arab jihadis to Afghanistan to keep them away from Mecca after the seizure of the Grand Mosque in 1979. He regrets that greater effort to reconcile mujahideen factions *after* the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan might have prevented the anarchic civil war and rise of the Taliban that followed. Attention to Afghanistan's political future *during* the march to military victory might have led to a different road than the one that resulted in the September 11 attacks. After overthrowing the Taliban emirate in December 2001 and running al-Qaeda to ground, it is not evident that more effective combat would have avoided counterinsurgency quagmire because utility of force was limited in an unnecessary war that no longer hinged on military factors. Vickers supports a popular strategy called "one valley (or one tribe) at a time," in which small Special Forces teams would support the Afghan Local Police and community development projects to engage the population and secure their support. The idea was derived from coherent and venerable irregular warfare doctrine but faced real-world problems. It came up late in the war—when the Taliban had become a virulent insurgency. How much time and how many Special Forces soldiers would it have taken to pacify a country with several thousand valleys? Most importantly for current application, at no time in two decades of the second Afghan war did the United States and the NATO Allies it led achieve escalation dominance, despite an enormous preponderance of military power.⁷

To raise a final issue, as long as the classified wall shields Vickers' robust assertion that enhanced interrogation techniques (EITs) "contributed significantly to CIA's understanding of al-Qaida ... after the 9/11 attacks and provided important intelligence in the hunt for Usama Bin Laden," it remains just that, an assertion (218). In contradiction, the "Torture Report," sponsored by Senate Select Intelligence Committee Chairman Diane Feinstein of California and forcefully supported by Arizona Senator John McCain, declassified and released in 2014, concluded that, "Use of EITs was not an effective means of acquiring intelligence or gaining co-operation from detainees." (There are even dueling Hollywood films: *Zero Dark Thirty*, in which the CIA and DoD—

including Vickers—officially cooperated, and *The Report*, in which they did not.) Again, recognizing the successes of counterterrorism and the indispensable importance of military-intelligence prowess as the foundation of US power, assessing to what extent protecting American values and interests is best served by all means available, the question becomes, at what cost?⁸

The heroic character Vickers invokes as he takes stock of his long and exceptional career is not Ian Fleming's irrepressible James Bond, but rather John Le Carré's discreet bureaucrat-spy of the Cold War, George Smiley. An apt contrast, it is difficult to evaluate Vickers' contribution to national security in altogether tangible terms. His career was largely self-made, more than a sum of ranks or positions on an organizational chart. Whether partnering with Charlie Wilson to supply the mujahideen with weapons, arguing for more Predator orbits to target terrorists, twisting the arms of suspicious Pakistani ISI commanders, or shaping forces for future wars, he showed what a mission-focused, strategy-minded Green Beret can do and the United States can achieve. As a senior civil-military leader at the intersections of policy, strategy, and operations, his impact often amounted to grabbing the pen or making the most convincing, best argument in a room of smart and powerful people. As a master of bureaucratic politics, he demonstrated the highest measure of value—he was effective.

The arc of accomplishments comes across in his acknowledgments:

I still stand in awe of President Reagan and former director of central intelligence Bill Casey for believing that it was possible to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan, dismantle the Soviet Empire, and bring the Cold War to an end. I am likewise profoundly grateful to President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama for giving me the opportunity to return to government service, contribute to the dismantling of al-Qa'ida, deliver justice to Usama Bin Laden, expand our special operations forces, and transform our intelligence and defense capabilities for a new era of great power projection (480).

Arriving at conclusions, Vickers proffers 10 principles of strategic leadership. The last one is, "[T]o leave things better than you found them, and to make a difference" (472). This memoir will help history judge. For the present, accolades abound. His retirement ceremony in 2015 included a reading of the letter signed by Obama, which summed up: "For 42 years, you have displayed a knack for being precisely where our nation has needed you most" (474).

He is rightly proud to have earned the National Security Medal and the prestigious Donovan Award, named after General “Wild Bill” Donovan, who commanded the Office of Strategic Services (OSS)—the progenitor of the CIA and Special Forces—in World War II. Appropriately today, Vickers chairs the OSS Society, founded to honor “the continuing importance of strategic intelligence and special operations to the preservation of freedom.” He leaves no doubt, however, that this job may not be Mike Vickers’ last chapter: “Writing my memoirs . . . has made me realize that I am not ready to give up the fight” (477).⁹

Alfred A. Knopf, 2023 • 559 pages • \$19.45

Todd Greentree

Dr. Todd Greentree is a former US foreign service officer, who served as a political-military officer in five conflicts, including El Salvador (1980–84) and Afghanistan (2008–12). A member of the Changing Character of War Centre at Oxford University, his most recent publication in *Parameters* was “What Went Wrong in Afghanistan?” (vol. 51, no. 4, Winter 2021–22) He is currently writing *The Blood of Others*, a book for Columbia University about the wars at the end of the Cold War in Afghanistan, Angola, and Central America and their consequences.

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Next War: Reimagining How We Fight

by John Antal

Reviewed by Colonel Jeffrey Caton (US Air Force, retired),
president, Kepler Strategies LLC, and *Parameters* editorial board member

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John Antal is a 30-year US Army veteran and author of various military-related publications. His latest book, *Next War: Reimagining How We Fight*, can best be described as historical military fiction interweaved with informed conjecture of how future battles may be fought. More than one-quarter of the book is dedicated to 13 whimsical accounts of tactical engagements ranging from the American Revolution to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War. The author states that “The main aim of this book is to draw lessons and conclusions from the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the Israeli-Hamas War, and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War” (xii). Antal pursues this goal through a paradigm of nine disrupters that he claims are changing the methods of modern warfare: a transparent battlespace; first-strike advantage; artificial intelligence (AI) and the tempo of war; top attack; fully autonomous weapons; super swarming; kill webs; battlespace visualization; and decision dominance (11).



After an introductory chapter, the next nine chapters of *Next War* each address one of the disrupters in a manner that emphasizes descriptions and illustrations at the cost of the analysis of these substantial topics. Simply put, Antal addresses too much scope with too little substance. Not counting photographs and scenarios, Antal spends five pages each on the topics of “Top Attack” and “The Transition to Fully Autonomous Weapons.” While the disrupters framework is easy to follow in concept, the content of individual chapters suffer from avoidable overlap and duplication.

The next five chapters of *Next War* are an eclectic mix of topics presented like the previous nine. The first muses about the contributions of Elon Musk’s Starlink satellite communication system to future battles. Second is a brief view of “Preparing for the Next City Fight” and is primarily limited to the roles of tanks and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms. This overview is followed by a short discussion of “The Big Blue Blanket—Light Tactical Aircraft for Counter Unmanned Aerial Systems Combat,” whereby Antal suggests that the US Air Force should consider procuring propeller-driven piloted aircraft to counter unmanned aerial systems that threaten ground forces. Antal then shifts to the topics

of developing a hybrid human-robotic force and command post rules. These intricate issues receive about 10 pages each and thus offer little depth of insight.

The final chapter presents his concept of battleshock as the “rapid convergence of key disrupters in the battlespace” that occurs “when the tempo of operations is so fast, and the multidomain means so overwhelming, that the enemy cannot think, decide, and act in time” (219). This concept is reminiscent of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s “shock and awe” aspiration for Operation Iraqi Freedom, which Antal does not mention. Despite the technology fetish of the previous 15 chapters, Antal focuses his final 12 pages on the “determined human warfighter fighting as a member of a team” and the need to “lead, design, train, fight, and support to win” (188). While Antal offers copious homilies about future tactical military engagements, he does so in a context void of a strategic view of war that embraces all elements of national power.

While *Next War* includes satisfactory end notes and a bibliography, it falls short of being authoritative in at least two ways. First, Antal offers a monologue of the future supported by facts that buoy his vision; there is little consideration of prudent opposing concepts. His technological solutions are evocative of the Army’s Future Combat System that attempted to incorporate many of the disrupter notions, but Antal fails to mention this failed project. Second, Antal does not discuss how future military battlespace machinations contribute to future war among nations. This omission is evident in his platitude to “focus on winning wars rapidly and decisively, as we did in Desert Storm in 1991” (198). He neglects to relate how the poor termination of this conflict contributed to the need for Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. Further, Antal offers the May 2021 Israeli-Hamas fight as a triumph for AI programs that “dramatically reduces Israeli casualties and ended the war in 11 days” as evidence of clean future wars (81). The October 2023 Hamas invasion of Israel and the ensuing international quagmire of death and destruction clearly temper these prognostications.

Antal asserts that “If *Next War* sparks your imagination, raises your awareness, and impels you to enter a dialogue with others about the changing methods of war, then it has accomplished its mission” (xii). Certainly, *Next War* does appeal to some audiences in this context. If one removes the fictional scenarios, the pictures, and the banality of *Next War*, however, little original content remains for senior members of the defense community to consider.

TECHNOLOGY AND WAR

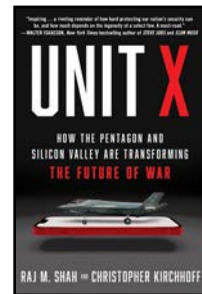
Unit X: How the Pentagon and Silicon Valley Are Transforming the Future of War

by Raj M. Shah and Christopher Kirchhoff

Reviewed by Robert D. Bradford III, associate professor of defense and Joint processes,
US Army War College

How can the US military take advantage of the technological revolution happening around us and provide links to the best innovation ecosystem in the world? *Unit X: How the Pentagon and Silicon Valley Are Transforming the Future of War* provides part of the answer. The book tells the story of the Defense Innovation Unit Experimental (DIUx) and how it connects the Department of Defense (DoD) to Silicon Valley's innovation infrastructure. Authors Raj M. Shah and Christopher Kirchhoff, two former DIUx leaders, tell insider stories of how this important organization overcame bureaucratic inertia and struggled to connect two distinct approaches to putting improved capabilities in the hands of soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and guardians.

The book describes the challenges the DIU (Secretary of Defense General James Mattis dropped the x in 2017) experienced linking two disparate perspectives. In Silicon Valley, tech solves problems, dreams are big, money flows toward teams with promising ideas, developers fail fast and then quickly pivot to new implementations that succeed, and capabilities are swiftly delivered into the hands of users to exploit advantages and learn. It is a place with its own language and its own assumptions. The Department of Defense, on the other hand, is the world's largest bureaucracy. Its acquisition system evolved to minimize the risk of failure, money moves deliberately and according to the long-term plan that is the future year's defense program, and people are trained to adhere to bureaucratic processes that minimize variability and decrease speed of delivery. In 2015, Army Acquisition Executive Heidi Shyu famously described the DoD acquisition system as a bus where all the passengers have steering wheels and brakes but no gas pedal, as everyone seeks compliance to the many rules. How could the Department of Defense connect these two disparate perspectives to bring cutting-edge technologies and capabilities into the hands of the military? To facilitate this interaction, then—Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter stood up an organization located in Silicon Valley—the DIU—that remains an important connector of two distinct approaches focused on delivery of capability to the war fighter.



This accessible and entertaining book is full of insider stories about important players and a small team creatively using authorities to deliver innovative technology to war fighters. It describes DIU clashes with the complex bureaucracy that is the Department of Defense; its engagement with small, agile start-ups determined to provide capabilities but lacking cash flow; the large incumbent defense primes who saw Silicon Valley as a threat rather than a partner; and interactions with the legislative branch (both members and professional staff) who could put up barriers or tear them down for the DIU. Shah and Kirchhoff describe how the original instantiation of DIUx (DIUx 1.0) failed and how they were tapped to resurrect DIUx into a 2.0 version based on their understanding of Silicon Valley (Shah was a start-up leader and a fighter pilot in the United States Air Force Reserve) and the policy system (Kirchhoff led the science and technology portfolio on the then President Barack Obama's national security staff). Even with their uniquely relevant backgrounds and the Secretary of Defense as a champion, the DIUx's struggle with the Pentagon bureaucracy to overcome obstacles and provide important defense capabilities is a compelling story.

Unit X is a tale of organizational change in the largest bureaucracy in the world. The authors' experiences highlight the importance of having a formidable team and a powerful champion—and of achieving quick wins. The book talks about how the organization, championed by one administration, survived changes in leadership and evolved over time to continue today.

This book is relevant to senior DoD leaders, with many lessons about how to change the bureaucracy to speed capability to the force. The assumptions and expectations that the DIU has had to overcome still exist, and battles will continue into the future.

Scribner, 2024 • 336 pages • \$30.00

Keywords: Defense Innovation Unit Experimental (DIUx), acquisition, capability development, Pentagon, Silicon Valley

Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI

by Ethan Mollick

Reviewed by Lieutenant Colonel Zachary E. Griffiths,
special assistant to the Chief of Staff of the Army

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We are all swimming in the US Army’s artificial intelligence (AI) acronym soup. The Artificial Intelligence Integration Center (AI2C) sets policy and trains AI experts. Army Futures Command’s Software Factory (ASF) trains soldiers to develop code. New skill identifiers like 4K, 2U, 2V, 2W, D3, and D4 let the Army track AI talent. These are great resources, but only for a small number of people. Where should the rest of us turn? Ethan Mollick’s *Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI* offers a great place to start.



In a concise, readable volume, Mollick effectively takes readers on a tour of AI as an important new thing in the world (xix). As a professor of innovation at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business, Mollick has led experimentation on today’s frontier large language model with partners like Boston Consulting Group and other researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University.

Co-Intelligence treads new and practical ground in books on AI. While books like *Human + Machine: Reimagining Work in the Age of AI* by Paul R. Daugherty and H. James Wilson explore AI’s role in transforming industries and workforces, *Co-Intelligence* emphasizes AI as a tool for personal and creative empowerment. *Co-Intelligence* also differs from military books like *Army of None: Autonomous Weapons and the Future of War* by Paul Scharre that explore the implications of AI in military settings. Instead, *Co-Intelligence* offers a user’s guide to large language models.

Mollick offers four rules for those who want to learn AI. First, always invite AI to the table. The best way to learn to work with AI is to experiment with different models on as many tasks as possible. Second, be the human in the loop. While it can be tempting to fire and forget with AI, the best results come from iteration and thoughtful prompting. Third, prompting works best if you treat the AI as a person but also tell it who you want it to be. For example, Mollick explains how he revised *Co-Intelligence* with the help of three different AI personas. Fourth, he reminds readers that AI is rapidly advancing, meaning that today’s AI is the “worst AI you will ever use” (61).

He develops these ideas over *Co-Intelligence*’s two parts. The shorter first section introduces the history of artificial intelligence, how we got to today’s large language models, the ethical and legal concerns arising from these models, and Mollick’s four

rules. The second part focuses on six ways to “invite AI to the table” (46). Ranging from coworker to creative to coach, Mollick explores how AI can augment your work.

Fortunately for Army officers, *Co-Intelligence* is aimed squarely at lay readers who want to understand how to use AI. The second section focuses on six ways to integrate AI and offers practical guidance on incorporating it into everyone’s work. For example, summarizing or screening large amounts of text is a common challenge for action officers. Mollick’s example on page 112 shows how AI successfully screened *The Great Gatsby*. By instantly identifying the three sci-fi references he added to the text—and the surprising size of Gatsby’s estate on Long Island—Mollick demonstrates how action officers might adopt AI. Beyond the helpful guides, Mollick also effectively explains terms like hallucinations, sparks, prompt engineering, and other ideas that one might have heard of but may not fully understand.

Despite these strengths, *Co-Intelligence* has a few weak spots. For example, for an organization like the Army, Mollick’s encouragement for individuals to experiment with AI may run afoul of real security concerns. Nonetheless, the productivity leveling aspects of artificial intelligence mean that the Army should not ban them. *Co-Intelligence* would be stronger if it provided guidance for organizations struggling with adoption beyond encouraging experimentation. Moreover, the book is light on ethical considerations. While the second chapter focuses on legal and ethical issues, the ebullient second half and quick conclusion overshadow these important questions. Finally, the book ends with four highly speculative views of the future, ranging from little change to the status quo to the destruction of mankind. While I appreciate Mollick’s honesty in painting the range of potential outcomes, the conclusion is certainly the least useful part of the book. If Mollick had provided indicators to watch for, the book might have at least provided a framework for understanding AI as it evolves toward these potential outcomes.

All Army officers should flip through this quick read. AI is a general intelligence tool that will improve the Army’s productivity—and change warfare’s conduct. The US Army War College’s data literacy program would do well to incorporate *Co-Intelligence* as an accessible introductory text. Likewise, faculty at Army schools seeking to integrate AI into their curriculum should draw lessons from Mollick’s approach to incorporating AI in his classroom. Accessible and informative, everyone should read *Co-Intelligence*.

Portfolio | Penguin, 2024 • 256 pages • \$30.00

Keywords: artificial intelligence (AI), productivity, prompts, data literacy, large language models (LLMs)

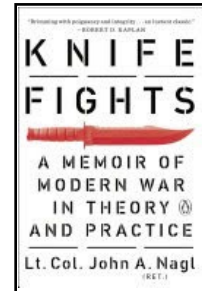
MILITARY HISTORY

Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice

by John A. Nagl

Reviewed by Major Brennan Deveraux,
national security researcher, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College

Counterinsurgency operations defined a generation of war fighters; today's commanders walked the streets of Iraq and Afghanistan as young officers, employing emerging doctrine and leading a force in transition. During this pivotal time for the US Army, the service transformed mid-conflict, driven by the bottom-up refinement of many who lived through the chaos. John Nagl, a US Army War College professor, was one of those voices.



In his book *Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice*, Nagl shares his personal experiences from his time as a young lieutenant in Operation Desert Storm through the rollout and application of the Army's counterinsurgency manual at the twilight of his military career. It is a historical piece, “a book about counterinsurgency and its journey from the far periphery of US military doctrine to its center, for better and, some would argue, for worse” (1). At the same time, it is Nagl's autobiography, “an intellectual coming-of-age story” (1). Nagl argues throughout the book that the United States must be, and remain, prepared to conduct counterinsurgency operations. He contends this often-ignored aspect of warfare will remain a significant mission for the US Army, whether or not the service wishes to prepare for it.

Knife Fights begins as a standard war memoir. As a newly commissioned Army officer at the onset of the first Persian Gulf War, Nagl is thrust into the conflict and forced to navigate the challenges of leading a small unit into battle. He uses Operation Desert Storm and his subsequent post-deployment training, however, to understand the Army's post-Cold War assumptions about warfare, dominated by a vision of future tank-on-tank battles in open terrain. Nagl quickly discovers the Army's vision is lacking and begins his crusade to bring a different aspect of warfare to the forefront of the Army's vision for future war.

While the book continues as Nagl's personal story, including his unit's deployment back to Iraq in 2004, it shifts away from the soldier on the ground to the concept of counterinsurgency. Although Nagl highlights the significant works on the topic, including his own, he does not detail competing theories or address some of the inherent challenges of counterinsurgency. Instead, he provides a firsthand account of the rise of counterinsurgency as a US Army priority. The book is authoritative

on this front, introducing readers to the individuals across the force who made the publication of the counterinsurgency manual possible, and he candidly details the process's inner workings.

Nagl wrote *Knife Fights* when the futures of Iraq and Afghanistan still hung in the balance. A decade ago, this book would have been relevant to senior members of the defense community—one man's plea not to ignore hard-earned counterinsurgency lessons. So, why review it now, 10 years later? Because the impact and meaning are relevant now in a different way, and in this reviewer's humble opinion, the audience has shifted to a much more junior group.

The Army once again finds itself in transition, preparing for an ambiguous future war. With Chief of Staff of the Army General Randy A. George calling on the force to engage in professional discourse, *Knife Fights* provides a tangible example of the impact junior leaders can have on the service. In this context, Nagl's story contributes as much to the field of professional writing as to the field of counterinsurgency.

The next fight for many who wear the uniform will not be on the battlefield; instead, soldiers will fight battles on the pages of the Army's professional journals, in the offices of the Pentagon, and in professional military education classrooms. Regardless, they will be fights. Some are undoubtedly ongoing. These personal battles to change the status quo can make or break careers, but those with the courage to take that risk will, if successful, help shape the force for the next battle. These are the knife fights Nagl writes about, which is why this book remains relevant today.

Penguin Press, 2014 • 269 pages • \$24.00

Keywords: counterinsurgency, Persian Gulf War, professional writing, Iraq, Afghanistan

The World Will Never See the Like: The Gettysburg Reunion of 1913

by John L. Hopkins

Reviewed by Reverend Dr. Wylie W. Johnson, chaplain (retired),
US Army War College class of 2010

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Regardless of the accuracy of the assertion that the Battle of Gettysburg was the “high water mark of the Confederacy,” the Gettysburg Reunion of 1913 is surely the pinnacle of the (all but forgotten) American reconciliation movement. The Gettysburg Reunion was the culminating event bringing large numbers of aging combatants together for the last time.



Hopkins's well-researched book is a marvel of traditional journalism—evenhandedly relating the facts without pounding an ideological drum. He begins the story in spring 1908, when American Civil War veteran Henry Shippen Huidekoper approached then-Pennsylvania Governor Edwin S. Stuart at Philadelphia's storied Union League about organizing a 50th anniversary commemoration of the battle. The narrative unfolds through subsequent years by retelling anecdotes about personalities, sectional suspicions, penurious legislatures, obstinate leadership, local versus national concerns, politics, logistics, heroic individual actions, and the veterans who fought.

The reunion almost did not happen. Governor John Kinley Tener forced Brigadier General Louis Wagner to resign with less than five months remaining and most key decisions unresolved. Once that impasse was removed, the reunion quickly came together, hosting nearly 55,000 veterans and an equal number of spectators. This assembly held the rapt attention of the entire nation.

Gettysburg residents voiced concerns that their community would be wrecked again. One track rail minimally serviced the community. The 1913 road network was judged marginally adequate. Federal, military, state, local, commercial, and individual resources collaborated to realize the reunion. Even the Boy Scouts enlisted in this effort as guides and assistants to the aged veterans.

Many, but not all, of the state legislatures allotted funds for veterans to travel to Gettysburg. Veterans had to provide documentation (for example, an honorable discharge, a pension certificate, or an affidavit from their post or camp commanders) before receiving credentials to attend.

Veterans found quarters in 6,500 military tents carefully laid out on a grid that encompassed 280 acres, with 47 miles of streets lit by 500 electric lights. Organizers took care to locate state regiments adjacent to one another. Approximately 170 field kitchens staffed by more than 2,000 cooks produced abundant food. The event required 90 field latrines, each boasting 40 seats. A temporary post office, pay phones, water points, hospitals, and aid stations provided essential services. Completing the preparations, an enormous 13,000-person main tent was erected for plenary events during the four-day encampment.

President Woodrow Wilson declined his invitation before reconsidering and making a brief appearance. Most of the generals of 1863 were dead or physically unable to attend. Two luminaries participated—Helen Dortch Longstreet (Lieutenant General James Longstreet's widow), who was eager to rehabilitate her husband's reputation, and Union general and New York politician Daniel Edgar Sickles.

Southern veterans, adamant that Black veterans would not participate (very few did), were also offended by the unenforced rule forbidding their Stars and Bars battle flags. By 1913, the prevailing "Lost Cause" rhetoric of why the South lost was generally accepted nationwide. Northerners acknowledged the Southern states' rights viewpoint, cleansed of the defense of slavery, as a moral equivalent to the Union effort of reunification.

During the celebration, bonhomie prevailed; former foes connected and made new friends. Throughout the event, unit gatherings, formal speeches, and presentations were eclipsed by thousands of aged veterans wandering the battleground and sharing their war stories. Then it was over. In less than one day, all that was left was the cleanup.

What is it about the character of the American soldier that seeks connection with former enemies? In 1913, the assumption prevailed that the nation would never forget this reunion event. Few know of it today—however, the spirit of reconciliation continues to thrive among the nation's warriors. Consider the American desire to visit the foreign cemeteries of the fallen, to walk the battlefields of Europe and Asia, and to connect with former foes.

This well-researched book documents the reunion's political wrangling, leadership challenges, and logistical problems—important lessons to bear in mind for future events. The takeaway for senior leaders from this compelling book is the overriding necessity for reconciliation. The American citizen soldier is perhaps unique among the militaries of the world, for when the conflict is done, amends must be made. It is the American way of war.

Savas Beatie, 2024 • 216 pages • \$32.95

Keywords: American Civil War, reconciliation, veterans, personal narratives, event management



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Submissions to the US Army War College Press must address strategic issues regarding US defense policy or the theory and practice of land warfare while exhibiting the highest standards of research and scholarship. Actionable strategic, policy, or instructional recommendations must be included. For more information, visit <https://press.armywarcollege.edu>.

Audience

US Army War College graduates, other senior military officers, policymakers, and members of academia concerned with national security affairs.

Clearance

Members of the US military and employees of the US Department of Defense must provide a memo from the local Public Affairs Office stating a submission is appropriate for public release (see Army Regulation 360-1, ch. 6).

Concurrent Submissions

Submissions must not be available on the Internet or be under consideration with other publishers until the author receives notification the submission will not be published or until the work is published through the US Army War College Press.

Formatting Requirements

Length

Monographs (accepted from US Army War College faculty and staff only): 20,000 words (15,000-word main text, 5,000 words in the foreword and executive summary).

Articles: 5,000 words or less.

Commentaries: 2,500 to 3,000 words.

Book reviews: 500 to 750 words.

File Type

Text must be provided in a single Microsoft Word document (.docx).

Visual Aids

Charts, graphs, and photographs may be provided to clarify or amplify the text. Tables should be presented in the body of the Word document. Microsoft-generated charts and graphs should be submitted in Excel or PowerPoint. Photos should be provided as .jpg images of not more than 9MB (at 300 dpi). For tables, charts, graphs, or photographs that have been previously published, authors must obtain written permission from the copyright holder to republish the content and provide proof of permission to use the content.

Citations

Use the *Chicago Manual of Style – 18th Edition* format to document sources. Indicate all quoted material by quotation marks or indentation. Reduce the number of footnotes to the minimum consistent with honest acknowledgment of indebtedness, consolidating notes where possible. Lengthy explanatory footnotes are discouraged and will be edited.

Submission Requirements

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Include

For each contributor, provide the following information: full name, mailing address, phone number, e-mail address, areas of expertise, and a brief biography or curriculum vitae.

Attach all files, including graphics.

For book reviews, include the author, editor, or translator's name, the book's title, the publisher, and the publication date.

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

- a. What is the thesis/main argument of the piece in one sentence?
- b. How does this piece differ from what has already been published on the topic?
- c. What methodology and sources are/will be used?
- d. Why will this piece be of interest or useful to the readers of the US Army War College Press, who are mainly policymakers and military practitioners?

Time Lines

Receipt

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Review

Articles: 4 to 6 weeks.

Monographs (accepted from US Army War College faculty and staff only): 10 to 12 weeks.

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US Army War College Quarterly

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US Army War College

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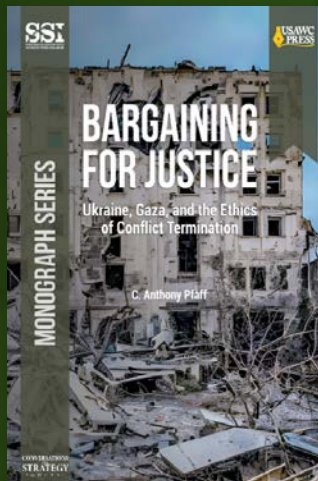
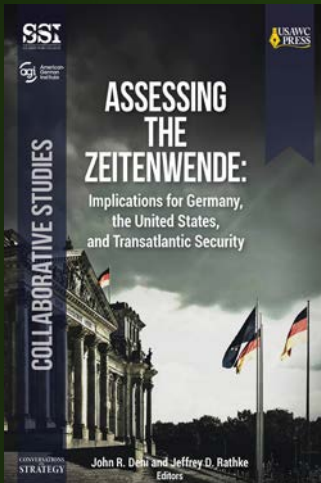


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