

# PRISM

VOL. 8, NO. 2 | 2019

THE JOURNAL OF COMPLEX OPERATIONS

## PRISM

VOL. 8, NO.2 2019

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In November 2012, EU Naval Force flagship ITS SanGiusto captures suspected pirates as part of Operation Atalanta—also known as European Union Naval Force Somalia (EU-NAVMFOR-ATALANTA)—part of a larger global action by the EU to prevent and combat acts of piracy off the coast of Somalia. (EU-NAVMFOR-ATALANTA)

# Taking Responsibility in a Dangerous World

## Europe's Evolving Transatlantic Partnership

By Federica Mogherini



For as long as I can remember, I have heard my U.S. colleagues ask we Europeans to take greater responsibility for European and Transatlantic security. I have always agreed with that sentiment. Seventy five years ago, hundreds of thousands of Americans sacrificed their lives to liberate Europe from Nazism and Fascism. The United States contributed to rebuilding our devastated continent and to preserving freedom in Europe after the war. Such debt is impossible to repay. But after decades of American support to Europe, the transatlantic partnership has become more mature. Europe is now a global power, one of the three largest global economies, the biggest market in the world, and we invest in development aid at twice the level of the United States, and more than the rest of the world combined. Taken together, the 28 Member States of the European Union have a defense budget second only to that of the United States. We feel the responsibility that comes with greater strength. When America came under attack on 9/11, we immediately showed our full solidarity: for the first time in history, NATO's collective defense clause was activated in support of the United States. And in recent years we Europeans have taken unprecedented steps to fulfill our responsibility and increase our contribution to global security.

Since the beginning of this century, our security environment has continued to change at an astounding pace. The principle that borders should never be changed by military force has been violated by Russia on our very continent: once again, an armed conflict is taking place on European soil. Instability has spread around our region, from Syria to Yemen, from Libya to the Sahel. Cyberattacks have become more and more common, and represent a risk to our power grids as well as to our bank accounts. In this complex and dangerous world, European and American security are connected. Any nuclear proliferation crisis poses a threat that is global by definition. Tension along global trade routes—for instance around the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, or in the South China Sea—affect both our economies. The crisis in Venezuela is having a direct impact on the lives of one million European citizens, even though it is occurring in another hemisphere. The European Union and the United States share the same interest in peace and security—in the Balkans as well as in Afghanistan

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An Italian politician, Ms. Federica Mogherini is Vice President of the European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

or the Korean peninsula. We share the same interest in discussing China's role in global trade. And when human rights are violated in any corner of the world, it is an attack against the principles upon which both of our democracies are built.

The transatlantic partnership is indeed evolving, and some analysts describe a growing rift across the ocean. Yet transatlantic cooperation today is more important than ever. Beyond any disagreement we might have, European and American interests very often coincide. On most foreign policy issues—from Ukraine to Syria, from Africa's security to North Korea—transatlantic cooperation is in great shape. During the five-year term of the current EU leadership, the European Union and NATO have signed two historic Joint Declarations, which have opened a whole new phase in our partnership. Our two organizations share 22 Members and the same set of values: our mandates are different but—most importantly—they are complementary. While NATO remains the pillar of Europe's collective defense, there are tasks that can only be performed by an organization of a different nature, such as the European Union (EU). The EU contribution to our common security is unique and increasingly relevant in our dangerous world.

Our security today requires a complex mix of military and civilian tools. Addressing the crises of our times requires not only a traditional security component, but also the economic capacity to engage in post-war reconstruction and to reconvert a war economy. Sustainable security requires diplomacy and mediation as well as the capacity to rebuild state institutions. Sustainable peace has to be rooted in local realities, but must also be supported by an adequate multilateral framework. This complex mix is what I call the European way to peace and security. None of the security challenges our world faces today can be effectively addressed with a purely military approach. However, the old adage—"Americans are from

Mars, Europeans are from Venus"—does not correspond to a changing reality. The European Union is not any longer a mere civilian power. We aspire to be a global security provider, in cooperation and complementarity with our partners, and we have taken substantial steps to strengthen our military capabilities.

Three years ago, I presented a Global Strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy, which stated explicitly that Europe should take greater responsibility for European and global security. The only way to do so was to harness the untapped potential of European cooperation on defense matters. The Strategy has triggered an unprecedented set of new cooperative initiatives to make Europe stronger and safer. We have set a new "level of ambition" for our European security and defense policy, and this is good news for our American friends. Europe is finally taking greater responsibility, and we are doing this in a spirit of partnership and cooperation with our allies, starting with the United States and NATO. That Europe has embarked on this journey is profoundly in the U.S. interest.

### More Equal Burden Sharing

The European Union cannot dictate to its Member States how much they should invest in defense. I have always believed that, when it comes to our common security, Europeans need not only to spend better, but also to spend enough. Yet this decision does not belong to the European institutions: it is for national governments and parliaments to decide, in line with their international commitments—including within the NATO framework. What the European Union can do is to help Member States make the most out of every euro that they invest. This is exactly what we have done in the last five years. And for the first time in decades, European defense budgets have started to increase again.



**FIGURE 1: The Business Case for Defence Cooperation, a European Union Perspective.**



Source: European Union External Action, "Security and Defence Infographics," September 11, 2017. Reproduced as is.

The European defense markets have historically been fragmented along national lines. This has generated several inefficiencies over time. The lack of coordination among national armies and governments has led to a multiplicity of defense systems. For instance, while the United States has only one model of battle tank in use, European nations have seventeen. The same goes for fighter jets (six models in the United States, twenty in Europe), and for all weapon systems: in total, we Europeans have 178 active weapon systems, while the United States has only 30. The consequences are easy to understand: from duplications to inefficiencies and interoperability issues. The cost of non-cooperation on European defense budgets is estimated to exceed \$28 billion per year. Studies conducted by the European Defense Agency show that potential savings in the acquisition, operation, and maintenance of capabilities range from 20 to 50 percent, depending on the model of cooperation. This European efficiency deficit has proven to be a challenge for both the

European Union and NATO. It has led to duplication and lack of interoperability in certain areas, while investment was insufficient in other strategically crucial fields.

European cooperation has a unique potential to address these shortfalls. A growing awareness of the need for EU cooperation emerged during the two-year consultation that I launched at the beginning of my mandate and that led to the 2016 Global Strategy. The European Union could provide both financial incentives to cooperation and a framework for Member States to coordinate their spending decisions. This is exactly what has happened since 2016.

On the one hand, we identified our collective military needs and shortfalls. This process—led by the European Defense Agency—was carried out in constant coordination with NATO, to avoid duplication and synchronize our priorities. The European Union's needs largely overlap with NATO's. For instance, we identified deficits in areas ranging from force protection to medical support, from air and missile defense to communications and information systems, from strategic air and sea transport to maritime interdiction, from command and control to air-to-air refueling assets. Cyber defense has also been identified as a key joint priority: in the event of a cyber-attack, we are collectively only as strong as the weakest link of our cyber-defense chain. We have a duty to ensure that the highest cybersecurity standards are met all across Europe and the transatlantic space. In the words of the Global Strategy, we Europeans agreed on the need to invest in the "full-spectrum (of) land, air, space and maritime capabilities, including strategic enablers" and to do this "in full coherence with NATO's defense planning process."

On the other hand, we developed three main tools to fill these gaps. First, we created an economic incentive for Member States to conduct research together, develop together, and buy together, particularly in those sectors where we identified capability shortfalls. To this aim, the

European Commission—that is, the executive branch of the European Union—created the first-ever European Defense Fund (EDF). The Fund’s precursor is already supporting projects such as the euro-drone, and the full-fledged program should be worth more than \$14 billion in the next EU budget. The EDF will focus in particular on small and medium enterprises, and will help address a recurring gap in European defense research and technology: investments in research and technology by Member States are still far from our collective benchmark of 2 percent of total defense spending, hovering around 0.8 percent. Europe needs an innovative and competitive defense industrial base, if it is to take responsibility for its own security. The EDF is a contribution in this direction.

Second, we created a mechanism for European governments to synchronize their defense spending plans. The Coordinated Annual Review of national defense budgets is a monitoring mechanism that allows our Member States to identify new opportunities for cooperation among them, at the moment when budgetary decisions are taken. It is a tool to align national defense planning with the EU-wide Capability Development Priorities that Member States have agreed together. The Coordinated Annual Review makes use of information that our Member States already make available in the NATO context, but its focus on identifying opportunities for cooperation between national capitals is unique.

The third new tool that we have developed has attracted most of the attention from policymakers and pundits—and rightly so. Back in 2007 EU Member States agreed on the Lisbon Treaty, the new “constitution” of the European Union. The Treaty foresaw the possibility for groups of Member States to set up a “Permanent Structured Cooperation” (PESCO) among them on defense issues. This possibility was ignored for a decade, until the Global Strategy brought it back on the European agenda. Twenty five out of 28 EU Member States have joined

this new form of cooperation. They have signed on to 20 binding commitments, for instance to increasing their defense budgets and making forces available for joint operations. And they have launched 34 concrete cooperation projects to develop new military capabilities that we currently lack.

These three initiatives provide a new framework and incentives to reduce the long-standing fragmentation of Europe’s defense sector. This should not be seen as a threat to transatlantic collaborative initiatives. It is not a zero-sum situation: on the contrary these initiatives will help make NATO stronger, by strengthening its European pillar. The impact is already visible: Member States participating in PESCO have increased their defense budgets of 3.3 percent in 2018 and of 4.6 percent in 2019, with plans to further increase them in the short term. Moreover, cooperative European initiative can make defense spending on our side of the Atlantic more effective and more focused on the strategic capabilities that we all need. European nations only have one set of forces: this means that any new capability will be available not only for EU-led operations, but also in the NATO context for those countries that are part of the Alliance. All our work aims at making Europe a more credible security provider, also in line with earlier calls for more balanced burden sharing. It is about strengthening our forces and strengthening the European contribution to NATO.

Twenty out of 25 Member States that have entered the Permanent Structured Cooperation are also NATO Allies: they have a natural interest in ensuring that the capabilities they develop under PESCO are fully compatible and interoperable within the NATO context. On top of that, we have set up an assessment mechanism to ensure coherence between new PESCO projects and NATO priorities.

The U.S. Administration has raised some concerns about the impact of these new initiatives. It should be clear though that none of them amount



to a “Buy European Act.” They all boost European defense cooperation without excluding any partner per se. Neither the European Defense Fund nor the Permanent Structured Cooperation affect the EU defense procurement market. The restrictions within the EDF Regulation for non-EU companies are similar to those imposed by the United States on EU companies aiming to access publicly funded U.S. programs. In fact, the U.S. system is much more discretionary than ours, which results in an extremely limited presence of EU companies in the U.S. defense market. The European defense market will continue to be considerably more open to foreign companies than the U.S. market. Meanwhile, we will continue our technical dialogue with the United States to clarify some of the legal aspects that concern both sides and, within these constraints, to also facilitate transatlantic industrial cooperation.

To be fair, the progress that we have so recently achieved on European defense cooperation was long overdue. The first plan for a European Defense Community dates back to 1950—but it was sunk by European divisions a few years later. At that time, General Dwight D. Eisenhower was NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe. He made his views on European defense cooperation very clear in 1954 when he said: “I am convinced that the coming into force of the European Defense Community Treaty will provide a realistic basis for consolidating Western defenses and lead to an ever-developing community of nations in Europe.” Eisenhower believed that European integration had the potential to benefit NATO and the transatlantic community. Some 65 years later, his views are still valid.

### A Closer Partnership with NATO

NATO has just turned 70 and I have no doubt about its relevance to our contemporary security environment. My friend the German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen—now President-elect of the European Commission—recently wrote: “If NATO

did not exist, those in favor of a free world would have to invent it.” NATO is the pillar of Europe’s collective defense, but it is a security provider well beyond the transatlantic space. It is training Iraqi security forces, has contributed to the territorial defeat of *Daesh*, and assists Afghan security forces and institutions. NATO matters to America and to Europe alike. As a consequence, it is in the European Union’s interest to work with NATO and to strengthen its European pillar.

These two goals go hand-in-hand. It is no coincidence that, as we took unprecedented steps to intensify European defense cooperation, we also brought our cooperation with NATO to a whole new level. NATO’s Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was the first person to receive a copy of our Global Strategy, just minutes after I had presented it to the European Union’s Foreign Ministers. A month after the Global Strategy’s presentation, the EU and NATO signed a historic Joint Declaration in Warsaw, then a second Joint Declaration in Brussels two years later: we left behind the “theological” debates about compatibility between NATO and EU defense cooperation, and opened the way for closer collaboration on the ground.

Our organizations play complementary roles in providing security in Europe. The European Union’s broad toolbox complements NATO’s core tasks. Article V remains the cornerstone of collective defense for NATO Allies: this is recognized in the EU Treaty, and the European Union is not in the business of territorial defense. At the same time, the Brussels Joint Declaration of 2018 explicitly welcomed our work at the EU level to bolster European security and defense, including through PESCO and the EDF. The complementary nature of our action is evident in Iraq: while NATO is training the local military, our EU mission to the country is providing expertise on civilian security sector reform. These two tasks are equally important to consolidate the new Iraqi institutions and prevent a resurgence of *Daesh*.

The two Joint Declarations have launched 74 common actions for NATO and the European Union. Twenty of these focus on countering hybrid threats, and we have run our first parallel and coordinated exercises. Part of this work aims at ensuring coherence of output between our planning instruments and processes—the three new tools that the European Union has set up (PESCO, EDF, and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defense) and respective NATO processes such as the Defense Planning Process and the Partnership for Peace Planning and Review Process.

A particularly good example of our new level of cooperation is military mobility. Today more than ever, rapid response has become an essential requirement for our security. Acting fast may be vital to prevent a crisis, to respond to a threat, or to avoid an escalation. Effective deterrence and defense depend not just on the quantity of deployed forces: they also very much depend on the ability to move them quickly if needed. If we invest in the best military capabilities and the most advanced defense systems, but they get stuck at borders for customs checks—we clearly have a security and an efficiency issue. Improved military mobility in Europe is a priority for NATO. Yet the obstacles against military mobility—both physical and bureaucratic—needed to be tackled through cooperation on a continental scale that only the European Union can provide. All Member States that are involved in our Permanent Structured Cooperation have taken part in a Dutch-led project to improve military mobility, and the European Commission has mobilized its own resources to support the ongoing work. In doing so, we have coordinated constantly with NATO experts to ensure coherence between our respective sets of military requirements for new infrastructure and regulations. Today, national regulations are being reformed to speed up permission procedures, and infrastructure is being upgraded all across Europe. It is no surprise that military mobility has been

labelled the flagship of EU–NATO cooperation in the past three years.

This is one of many examples showing that stronger EU defense cooperation is not an alternative to the transatlantic bond. On the contrary, a stronger European Union makes NATO stronger. There is no competition, only cooperation and complementarity. A stronger Europe in defense terms is essential towards a more equal burden sharing within the Alliance. For us Europeans, strategic autonomy and cooperation with our partners—starting with NATO—are two sides of the same coin. We have chosen the path of cooperative autonomy.

### Choosing Cooperative Autonomy

A more responsible EU needs to be militarily capable of acting autonomously should this be necessary. “Autonomously” does not mean “unilaterally.” all our military and civilian missions have either been requested by the host country or mandated by the United Nations. I have already mentioned our cooperation and complementarity with NATO in Iraq, and other examples abound. For eight years, NATO Operation *Ocean Shield* worked side by side with EU Operation *Atalanta* to fight piracy off the Horn of Africa. In eleven other theaters, for instance in Mali and in the Central African Republic, our forces are acting together with United Nations’ peacekeepers: in some cases, we even share camps. The European Union is a cooperative power by definition. We believe in multilateralism, and we believe that international cooperation is essential to addressing all the major issues of our times, including security issues. But to do our part and take our fair share of responsibility, we also need the capacity and the capabilities to act autonomously. This is the core idea behind our definition of “cooperative autonomy.”

Autonomy means that the European Union should be able to take full responsibility for its own security, but also to act whenever there is a unique EU added value in responding to a particular

situation. We cherish the ambition of making the European Union a global security provider, and we see a growing demand from our partners—including the United States—for a global engagement of the European Union on security matters. Our mix of civilian and military tools is increasingly valued and requested worldwide. The European Union must not only develop the full spectrum of military and civilian capabilities, but also ensure that we have the right command and control structures and adequate financial instruments to support our action. For this reason, alongside the new initiatives that I have already mentioned, we have also created a new unified command center for all EU military training and advisory missions, which mirrors our command center for civilian missions. We have also proposed to establish a European Peace Facility, as a funding mechanism that should close some of the gaps we have experienced in our past military deployments. The Facility will first and foremost cover the costs of all EU military missions and operations—that are now financed on an *ad hoc* basis by Member States—to facilitate and speed up their deployment. It will allow us to contribute to peace operations led by other international actors, and to support the armed forces of partner countries with infrastructure, equipment, or military assistance. Once again, a stronger European Union means primarily a more reliable and cooperative partner in global security affairs.

Investing in partnerships and in multilateralism is the heart of our security and defense policy. In these years we have developed closer ties not only with NATO and the United Nations, but also with other regional organizations in all corners of the world. For the first time ever, we took part in a military naval drill with ASEAN. Our security cooperation with the African Union is closer than ever, and we have helped establish transnational military forces in the Sahel and in the Lake Chad region, to tackle security challenges such as

terrorism and organized crime across the porous borders of those regions. We see this kind of international cooperation as essential to advance our national and European interests. For this reason, we want our contribution to these partnerships to be as effective and valuable as possible for our partners.

This is even more true in case of our partnership with the United States. No other world powers are as close as we are. For 70 years we have been one transatlantic community—and this will not change. We share the same values and we share a common destiny, in spite of our current disagreements on certain policies. The United States is and will remain our closest partner and ally, and we want to be the closest partner and ally for the United States. Where others see a transatlantic rift, I see the potential for a more mature and equal relationship between Europe and the United States. Since World War II, the United States has been like an older brother to Europe. American support has made us the global power we are today. It is time for us to show that we have grown up, and enter into a more adult kind of relationship. We want to be partners, not free-riders. We want to take up our responsibilities in a spirit of fairness and cooperation. We do not believe that Europe alone can carry the weight of the world on its shoulders—no global power can, in today's world. Behaving like an adult also means being fully aware of our strengths and of our limits. Europe should approach security and defense with no complexes of inferiority. We should be confident in our means, while recognizing that we need each other, and we need to be as close as possible to our partners, starting with our oldest and strongest partner, the United States. This is Europe's cooperative autonomy. It is a European interest and it is—I believe—a crucial American interest as well. **PRISM**



In February 2019, foreign ministers listen to U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo deliver opening remarks at the Meeting of the Ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. (U.S. State Department/ Ron Przyucha)



# The Business of Terrorism

By Stanley McChrystal and Ellen Chapin

**T**he aphorism “If you’re not growing, you’re dying” has long ruled the American business mindset. This principle, however, is contextualized quite differently by traditional bureaucratic companies and (by-design) volatile startups. Today, we tend to view startups as having a culture all their own, and while they may be plentiful, only the rare few will have the good fortune to thrive for any period of time. Meanwhile, the more plodding hierarchical organizations struggle to match either the notoriety or the innovation that startups produce, taking a longer-term view of company success and hoping not to fail before that success is possible. As businesses evolve, we apply new labels to them accordingly—monopolies, franchises, networks, startups—reflecting a range from fully hierarchical bureaucratic to entrepreneurial networked organizations.

The same principles and roles can be applied to a more dangerous business—the business of terrorism. Two of the deadliest and most notorious terrorist organizations, al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS), have boasted many of the same structures and utilized tactics common to organizations in the business world. While AQ (having existed and thrived longer) has gradually built a global network of operatives, IS has focused on rapid expansion. Circumstances have forced the two organizations to compete for influence, resources, and success. In this, article we will reconceptualize terrorist groups as business organizations and explore how such organizations can best be countered, based on insights from the business world.

To frame this argument, we will first outline the existing literature on organizational theory and extend that theory to terrorist organizations, viewing them as business and management enterprises. We will apply that theory to IS and AQ, describing how they came to have such different organizational structures. Specifically, while both groups were initially committed to top-down structure and rules, their respective evolutionary paths resulted in quite different organizational models and shapes—IS developing as a startup, and AQ emerging as a well-established global network.

The article will then describe how IS, at its peak, operated like a startup—and how even today, it retains startup characteristics, despite suffering tremendous losses. We argue that the organization’s ideas are tailored to a population’s stated needs, that it relies on disrupting the status quo, and that it builds engaged

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communities to spread its messages. These three priorities allowed IS to develop at a rapid pace; even deprived of its former territory, IS dominates the news cycle and “punches above its weight” to compete with AQ.

By contrast, AQ, after its initial successes culminating in the September 11, 2001, attacks, developed into a monopolistic global network, similar to many traditional large American businesses. While AQ’s central leadership remains shrouded in mystery today, it has pursued the strategic vision laid out by its founders while also evolving in response to the rise of IS. In particular, we highlight AQ’s recognition that its survival hinges on risk aversion, the success of its efforts to make meaningful and long-term connections, and its willingness to empower execution by its lower-ranking members.

As a result of their respective organizational idiosyncrasies, both AQ and IS have vulnerabilities. To defeat these organizations, counterterrorism efforts should be tailored accordingly to address them and their respective weaknesses. First, we must seek to recognize and destroy startups before they enjoy the rapid success that IS had in 2014. However, there is a danger in focusing exclusively on the most visible and seemingly urgent threat. In ignoring the quieter networking of AQ, we risk oversimplifying a broader problem. By balancing our responses to the immediate as well as the long-term threats that these two kinds of organizations pose, academics and policymakers can reshape their understanding of the business of terrorism.

### **Terrorist Groups: Businesses, Not Just Organizations**

Applying organizational theory to nontraditional structures is not novel. From rebel-to-party transformations<sup>1</sup> to jihadist social networks,<sup>2</sup> many scholars have sought to understand how to superimpose well-known organizational frameworks on otherwise unconventional, violent entities. Jacob

Shapiro’s *The Terrorist’s Dilemma* recognized the commonalities between terrorist groups and more traditionally defined hierarchies, balancing their need for secrecy with their desire to function efficiently and effectively.<sup>3</sup> The relevant scholarship on terrorism, though, has focused narrowly on organizational structure.<sup>4</sup> Few have studied what organizational variance in other sectors, such as the traditional business sector, might tell us about our response to terrorism. To explore this angle, let us examine why terrorist groups can morph into such differently structured groups.

Both AQ and IS began with a certain adherence to structure. According to founding documents, AQ leaders had a hierarchical, rules-based organization in mind when they first conceived of the group.<sup>5</sup> Minutes from AQ’s first meetings reveal emphasis on the importance of “statutes and instructions” and on commitment to following these rules.<sup>6</sup> Early AQ documents also contain detailed specialization charts that outline the roles and responsibilities of each individual, committee, and branch.<sup>7</sup> This zealous emphasis on rules was, in part, an effort to improve upon the efforts of other jihadist groups—in particular, the Maktab al-Khidamat al-Mujahedin—given that Osama bin Laden and others were frustrated with the “mismanagement and bad treatment” that by 1988 had created division in all levels of that group.<sup>8</sup>

IS, having grown out of one of AQ’s first affiliates, also recognized the importance of traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic norms at its outset. According to Shapiro and Danielle Jung, the group’s “formal administrative capacity [was] a substantial strength” during its years of prime influence.<sup>9</sup> IS thrived on being administratively savvy—in 2014, IS administrative officials even went so far as to write parking tickets and to tax those living in their proclaimed caliphate.<sup>10</sup> Since its territorial holdings have dwindled, IS has been less successful in maintaining a central leadership structure. As the



International Crisis Group has described, “Though central leadership claims to directly control every fighter, in practice, local governors ran the Islamic State in individual territories.”<sup>11</sup>

While both AQ and IS recognized the importance of rules and regulations, they emerged in very different contexts, which determined the course of their diverging structures. Prior to September 11, 2001, terrorism was studied with far less intensity. Even after the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in East Africa, few Americans knew of AQ, and even fewer knew of its leader, Osama bin Laden.<sup>12</sup> After the September 11 attacks, AQ was essentially operating in a league of its own, with a monopoly on Salafi jihadism against the West. Because of the secrecy and efficiency that AQ required to survive, a zealously rigid organization was necessary, spawning the classic hierarchy reminiscent of large corporations or a government bureaucracy that remains the organization’s backbone. While some experts argue that AQ is no longer a unified network and now more closely resembles a franchise-based organization,<sup>13</sup> we counter that a franchise must, by its very definition, operate as a network to grow and survive. Today, AQ’s initial hierarchical structure, which allowed it to spread across the globe, has helped the group and its affiliates to remain cohesive over time and space.<sup>14</sup>

By contrast, IS has not retained its original organizational structure. Al-Qaeda in Iraq, as a young affiliate, gave the AQ leadership a tremendous struggle and resisted submission to central control. After the 2006 death of its leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, his fighters remained hidden in the foothills on the Syria–Iraq border.<sup>15</sup> Once U.S. forces left Iraq and violence broke out in Syria, those fighters worked with AQ to regroup and reorganize. However, much like al-Qaeda in Iraq had, those remaining fighters maintained their autonomy and pursued the goal of a caliphate of their own. The reincarnated organization developed a new

set of organizational principles and became what we now call IS.<sup>16</sup> Emerging independently of AQ’s entrenched structure, IS was shaped by its effort to behave more like a startup than a bureaucratized, hierarchical organization. Even today, as its fighters survive dispersed and disconnected, the distinctive ideals and operations of the group endure. In that sense, IS is as powerful as the ideas that it seeks to promulgate throughout the world—until its ideology is defeated, the group cannot be truly eradicated.

While both groups began with a similar commitment to structure, AQ and IS look very different today due to the differing contexts in which they rose to prominence. Nonetheless, their evolution and organizational behavior reveal a great deal about their intentions and next steps. We will examine the current structure of AQ and IS and how those structures map onto familiar business models of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By so doing, we can apply business solutions to the challenge of terrorism.

## The Startup: Islamic State

Both during its prime and even today, IS has shared many of the common characteristics of the modern startup. For example, startups aggressively seek gaps in existing markets, unlike established companies, which are largely responsive to customer behavior. Startups are also known for disrupting the status quo, since they benefit by destabilizing existing industries in their effort to carve out a business niche for themselves. Startups also build engaged communities, where even the lowest ranking members feel as if they have a stake (and a say) in the direction of the organization. These commonalities between IS and a successful startup can help identify the group’s vulnerabilities as they compete with AQ.

### *Islamic State Aggressively Searches for Market Gaps*

Startups must inspire followers to latch on to their movement, either by investing themselves in the

organization or by fulfilling a need that is unmet in a given space. For example, the company Groupon® began as a startup named “The Point,” which hoped to unite individuals around social causes.<sup>17</sup> When a group of users banded together to buy an item in bulk, its founders saw the need for the retail service Groupon became.<sup>18</sup> Such market awareness parallels the ways in which IS has gained prominence, by filling ideological voids that AQ vacated or left unfilled. By so doing, IS positioned itself as a competitor to AQ, despite their founders holding similar world-views and objectives.

Startups often choose an end goal that resonates with many potential followers. IS leveraged the notion of shelter for its citizens to win this resonance. Its stated goal was broad and ambitious—a global caliphate won through a world-wide war.<sup>19</sup> In articulating such an ambitious endgame, IS ensured that its vision would appeal to Muslims across the Middle East. The concept of a caliphate, or more simply a space where politics and Islam are not in tension with one another, has broad salience among Muslim populations.<sup>20</sup> While IS has since changed its definition of a caliphate, the prospect of a “historical political entity governed by Islamic law and tradition” existing in today’s world is a powerful idea, “even among more secular-minded Muslims.”<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, this same idea was one of the initial goals of AQ. In a 2001 video, Osama bin Laden declared that “today, with the grace of Allah, we are redrawing the map of the Islamic world to become one state under the banner of the caliphate.”<sup>22</sup> However, despite the similarities in goals, the early IS met a need that AQ did not—immediate dramatic action toward building that caliphate.

Similarly, AQ’s initial popularity was driven by its goal of destroying the U.S.-led Westphalian order. Although the ultimate goal of AQ was to overthrow the corrupt “apostate” regimes in the Middle East and replace them with “true” Islamic governments, its approach relied on pushing the United States out

of the Middle East region.<sup>23</sup> IS recognized that this long-term approach, focusing on the “far enemy,” might be unsatisfactory to some and set more immediate and tangible goals.

IS sought (and currently seeks) to remove “apostate” regimes in the Arab world—namely, the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria and the Haider al-Abadi regime in Iraq.<sup>24</sup> Rather than attacking well-guarded Western targets in the Middle East, IS leveraged the tribalism of the region and provided an opportunity for individuals to turn against neighbors with whom they disagreed. IS encouraged adherents to attack anyone, including fellow Muslims, who disagree with its efforts to pursue a caliphate. In the first issue of its propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, IS listed a five-step process to creating a caliphate. Unlike any process articulated by AQ leadership, *Dabiq* instructed fighters to focus on wreaking havoc on local populations rather than on targeting international troops. The message was that “this has always been the roadmap toward *Khilafah* (caliphate)” and that all IS members should be critical of “other famous jihad groups” that did not attempt to capture and rule territory.<sup>25</sup> Like a startup, IS recognized that it could tap into the population’s unfulfilled desires, all the while tailoring those desires to its own end goals.

### *Islamic State Demands a New Status Quo*

Startups also are intentional in their efforts to disrupt the status quo in any given industry. They lean into innovations that change the landscape for its competitors so they can exploit emergent opportunities in previously stable industries. Before the appearance of Instagram, IS delivered its disruptive impact through Facebook and eventually carved a niche that drove traffic to the new Instagram app when it became available.<sup>26</sup> Today, the social media landscape looks very different than it did even a decade ago.<sup>27</sup>

In order to gain followers (and loyalty) from Syrians and Iraqis, IS recognized that it needed to

exploit the conflict that disrupted the daily lives of everyday men and women. In June 2014, IS forces shocked policymakers when they swept across Iraq, “capturing important resources like hydroelectric dams and oil refineries, and several strategic border crossings with Syria.”<sup>28</sup> This also bolstered its financial capabilities, as IS fighters seized banks and financial institutions along their path.<sup>29</sup> Suddenly, IS controlled not only land, but also jobs and resources—tools it could use to gain inroads with the local populations and to remove a level of disruption from their lives.

But IS sought to do more than disrupt its foes—it also sought to disrupt the broader landscape of terrorism by refusing to align with AQ. With newfound territory and power, IS fighters saw no reason to remain under the umbrella of what had become the world’s most-discussed terrorist organization. Like a subsidiary frustrated with the rules and bureaucracy of its parent company, IS struck out on its own. Its ability to do what AQ had never seriously attempted—holding territory and governing—gave IS newfound confidence. Within a month, IS officially declared the establishment of a caliphate in the territory under its control, naming Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the caliph and “leader for Muslims everywhere.”<sup>30</sup> Baghdadi rejected AQ’s authority and split the already fractious jihadist movement. Rather than partnering in a joint venture, IS sought to outperform AQ in a new era of terrorism, much like a modern startup might do (we know today that they did so with mixed results).

### *Islamic State Engages Followers and Communities*

Startups require their employees and followers to be invested in their cause. As a newcomer to San Francisco in the early 1990s, former IBM employee Craig Newmark created an email list for local events to help him meet people—from this small following came the behemoth of crowdsourcing, Craigslist.<sup>31</sup>

In the same way, IS has used its movement to build an engaged community of fighters and followers, often embedded in unexpected locations and reaching far beyond the Middle East.

An effective way to inspire confidence in a mission is a pattern of strong performance and success. Investors want to make a safe bet, and employees want to join an organization that is in the best position to achieve long-term viability. IS boldly signaled its strength, especially in its infancy, to any potential recruits. Its online propaganda system uniquely sought to make the concept of jihadism “go viral”<sup>32</sup> and detailed its operations in spaces where anyone could follow.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, celebrating its progress in Syria, IS hung black flags in every neighborhood to signify its victories.<sup>34</sup> This gave the impression that IS was a winning team, one that promised success upon joining. Quickly, foreign fighters flocked to the region to receive an assignment from IS. Today, while having been declared “defeated,” IS still retains an enduring following—experts estimate that thousands of fighters remain committed to IS in the Middle East alone.<sup>35</sup>

This foreign fighter connection is especially important in the wake of IS losing its territory. The United States, the United Nations, and any other outside power likely is only a temporary presence in the Middle East. By contrast, IS is committed to its staying power, with or without the territory it held at its peak. One way that IS has continued to signal its strength is through the use of shock and awe tactics.<sup>36</sup> Public beheadings and suicide missions are not simply acts of brutality. Such violent incidents send a clear message to followers and to potential recruits: “Our organization is as strong as ever, and we will stop at nothing to achieve our mission.”<sup>37</sup>

With this “staying power,” even without the same level of success it enjoyed in 2014, IS continues to inspire those who hope to live in its eventual caliphate. As Abdel Atwan writes, IS uses propaganda to describe the organization as “an emotionally

attractive place where people ‘belong,’ where everyone is a ‘brother’ or ‘sister.’”<sup>38</sup> The “most potent psychological pitch” of its media campaign, though, is “the promise of heavenly reward to dead jihadist fighters.”<sup>39</sup> For some Muslims in Europe who feel marginalized and do not experience a sense of belonging in the countries of their residence, this could be a particularly compelling alternative.<sup>40</sup>

Like a startup, IS carefully connects to and cultivates its followers to survive and to expand its power and influence. In each of its organizational choices, IS intentionally highlights the new world order that it seeks to create. IS has focused on meeting the need for a new and long-term status quo—a level of stability that it controls. In the Middle East, a region that has been plagued with turmoil and unpredictability for as long as many of its young citizens have been alive, this is a powerful notion. The promise of a caliphate that governs legitimately is a prospect that could have far-reaching impacts for a long-term investment. IS relies on these investments to stay competitive with the better established AQ, especially as its perceived strength has diminished.

### Al-Qaeda: The Hierarchical Global Network

AQ never operated like a startup—after its epochal attack of September 11, 2001, AQ had to organize itself rigidly to maintain the secrecy it needed to survive. Those members of AQ who did treat the organization as a startup (under the umbrella of al-Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI) ultimately became the founders of the breakaway IS. Instead, AQ has used its hierarchical structure to create an entrenched global network. It has used this structure to its advantage, permitting IS to grow at a rapid pace and (almost entirely) burn itself out. Today, AQ resembles those companies that have ruled their industries for decades. AQ prioritizes long-term goals over present growth and innovation, makes meaningful

connections over time, and seeks to build leadership through empowerment.

### Al-Qaeda Prioritizes Long-Term Survival over Short-Term Innovation

Historically, successful companies are more cognizant than others about what they stand to lose from failure. Dickey ventures appear less appealing, and a reliance on stability rules. There is a reason that Amtrak is focused narrowly on keeping its existing trains running—the company depends on its status as the reliable, go-to alternative to aviation.

AQ’s September 11, 2001, attack was a tremendous risk—no matter how much meticulous planning AQ leadership had done, every phase could have failed in multiple ways. AQ has sought to capitalize on its existing reputation rather than embracing further risk with new operations. Unlike IS, which hopes to destroy the status quo, AQ wants to retain ultimate control, keep the status quo, and advance its position therein.

AQ’s emphasis on long-term survival is evident in its earliest literature. As one of bin Laden’s foremost radical Islamic mentors, Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, argued in *Join the Caravan*, the Qur’an mandates that there should be a vanguard that sets out and then keeps walking along the path of faith.<sup>41</sup> This principle was at the core of AQ’s foundation—a long-term effort to sustain the walk to faith would be the organization’s main priority. Azzam further laid out that the vanguard would serve as the “beating heart and deliberating mind,” providing strategic and ideological guidance to the *Ummah* (the community of believers).<sup>42</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden’s successor, has publicly spoken on this concept as well. In his treatise on jihad, he states that AQ is the vanguard of the Islamic revolution, or “the organization leading change.”<sup>43</sup>

While AQ’s current organizational structure is shrouded in secrecy, it is clear from its post-9/11 development that it sought to build a robust

organizational structure to fulfill its mission. Its “command and control” structure ensured that the leadership was (and remains) responsible for its grand strategy but also ensured that AQ priorities have true global reach—a true networked approach. The heart of the organization’s leadership contained a *shura* (a consultation council) that discussed and approved major undertakings, including terrorist operations.<sup>44</sup> It also retained committees for military operations, finance, and information sharing at the center of the organization.<sup>45</sup>

Today, there is a perception that AQ’s true strength lies in its affiliates across the globe—but it would be naïve to think that these affiliates are operating without some direction, suggestion, or advice. As terrorism scholar Bruce Hoffman notes, AQ is busily rebuilding and marshaling its core to continue to shore up its global position.<sup>46</sup> When affiliates were first formalized, AQ “required [those affiliates] to consult with the core leadership before carrying out large-scale attacks,” as the “center” should evaluate the operation’s strategic logic and likelihood of success.<sup>47</sup> Even if, as some have argued,<sup>48</sup> the influence of the AQ core has diminished, its affiliates have stayed in line with the central AQ mission—a testament to the organization’s ability to network its ideology and strategy to foot soldiers around the world.

Bureaucracy may slow down progress or innovation, but it also ensures that rogue affiliates do not damage the group’s credibility. By contrast, the nimble startup IS, in seeking to grow so quickly (and at any cost), has struggled to direct its affiliates abroad.<sup>49</sup> Observing the danger of rapid expansion, AQ’s adherence to its hierarchical structure makes sense—while it may decrease the speed of AQ decisionmaking, it ensures that every decision is aligned with overall AQ goals, both ideologically and practically.

### *Al-Qaeda Makes Meaningful Connections*

Large organizations, especially in the age of startups, are always looking for their next partnership

and collaboration to bolster their overall strength. Google knew it would need to market a smart phone, so in 2014 (as the iPhone was beginning to achieve market domination), the company purchased Andy Rubin’s Android team—after Samsung had “passed on the opportunity.”<sup>50</sup> In a similar way, AQ has leveraged the emergence of IS “into a strategic opportunity, pivoting off of [IS’s] brutality and doubling down on a more low-profile and sustainable approach to growth.”<sup>51</sup> More simply, IS has distracted the world with its shock and awe tactics, in part to its advantage—but also to the advantage of its predecessor.

Interestingly, IS emerged at a rather fortuitous time for AQ. As is the case with much of U.S. foreign policy, attention wanes on any given issue, and short-term concerns receive the preponderance of focus and finance. Following September 11, one major component of U.S. national security strategy focused on shutting down the financial networks that supported AQ and its offshoots.<sup>52</sup> However, as Daveed Gartenstein-Ross writes:

*With several states now openly aiding al-Qaeda in Syria, and elsewhere, opportunities for nongovernmental and quasi-governmental organizations that support al-Qaeda to expand their assistance to the jihadist group have magnified.<sup>53</sup> As the United States turned its attention to IS, AQ has silently refortified its support system, financially and beyond.*

During the IS march across Syria, AQ quietly (but quickly) gained ground in conflict zones across the Middle East and North Africa. In places such as Yemen, Syria, and Somalia, AQ reaffirmed and deepened its connections by presenting itself as a more stable (and patient) investment than IS. While both are in favor of the re-establishment of a caliphate, AQ was quick to point out that IS is too hasty, “announcing the return of the caliphate when

the foes of jihadists were still strong enough to bring their ‘state’ to ruins.”<sup>54</sup> Promising better results in the long term, AQ quietly embedded itself within local communities, essentially lying in wait for the best moment to make its move.

For example, after seizing an important port city in Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) governed its new acquisition in line with AQ’s long-term strategic objectives. As Ayesha Amr describes, AQAP “adopted a gradualist, somewhat lenient approach to the implementation of sharia, though it eventually began cracking down more heavily on sharia violations.”<sup>55</sup> Unlike IS’s immediate punishment for any transgression, the first few months saw AQAP working to introduce sharia over time and forgiving individual missteps along the way.<sup>56</sup> This allowed AQ, in its early months of governance, to win over local Yemenis while distancing itself from the brutal practices of IS.<sup>57</sup> AQ leadership used the same approach with its relationships in Somalia and Syria, building up a coalition of support and leveraging the weaknesses of IS.

Scholars note that as of 2018, AQ is numerically larger and more present in more countries than at any other time in its history.<sup>58</sup> AQ is not planting these seeds without intention—it has long favored large-scale, dramatic attacks against strategic or symbolic targets. But in order to carry out such attacks in the future, AQ recognizes the need to build its capacity and grow its network. In so doing, AQ will be able to back a variety of smaller terrorist attacks and can train its recruits for the fight to come. Like a well-established business, its efforts to make meaningful connections are all about preserving its status and long-term goals.

### *Al-Qaeda Seeks to Build Leadership Through Empowerment*

AQ’s structure also highlights the operative trust it places in those commanders who do not serve in the centralized, core strategic leadership. From the

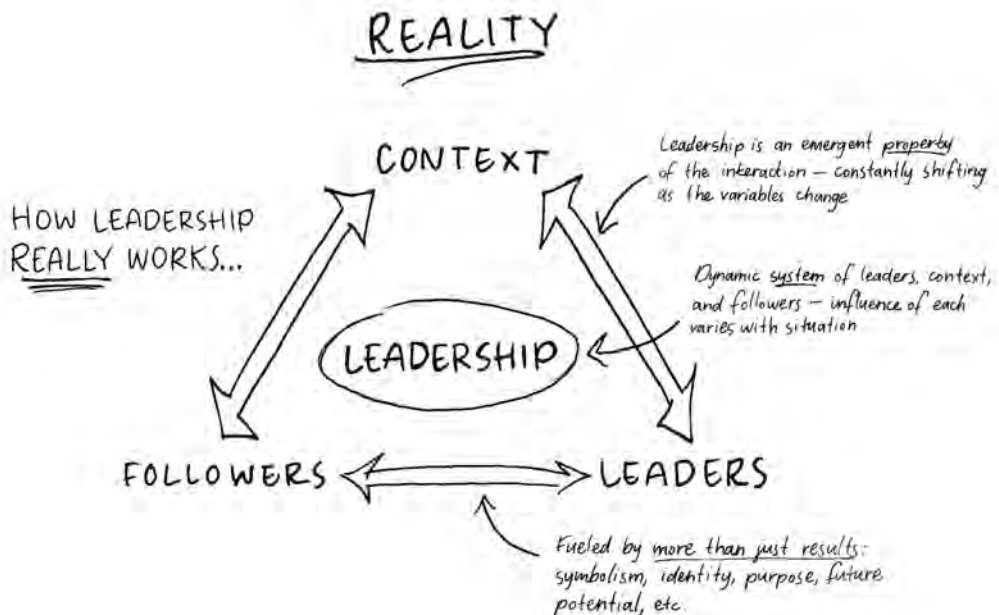
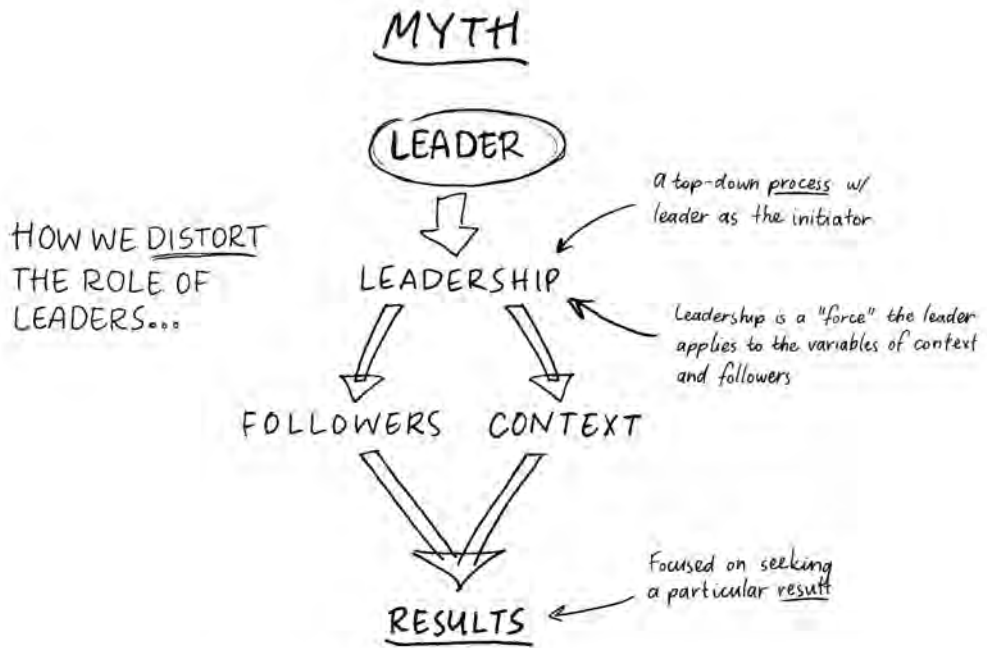
outset, AQ adopted a unique organizational design in which its senior leadership outlined a strategic course for the organization, while empowering mid-level commanders to execute this strategy as they saw fit.<sup>59</sup> Experts have called this approach “centralization of decision and decentralization of execution.”<sup>60</sup> This structure, like a growing network, can facilitate a culture in which even junior individuals feel that they have something to offer the organization, which ultimately favors organizational effectiveness.

Large business organizations are at their strongest when they build trust and common purpose. Like a successful business, AQ endeavors to give each member of its organization (at every level) the ability to articulate how their daily actions advance the organization’s goals. A strong organization relies on the dedication of its followers to a single mission—each component moving in concert, to advance the organization’s ultimate cause. This deeply contextual kind of leadership highlights why AQ has been so successful; even with leader turnover, the organization draws its strength from the relationships that the core builds with its followers.

This is an especially important point—the way we define leadership, in business and more broadly, is incorrectly rooted in the assumption that a good leader is successful because he or she possesses the quality of “leadership.” If a leader has “leadership,” we believe that person therefore can shepherd any organization to its desired destination. If this were the case, though, effective leaders should be successful in any (and every) context. Would Zawahiri have been able to catapult AQ into global prominence without the charisma of bin Laden? Would AQ have survived under the radar for so long with bin Laden at the helm? Evidence suggests that, in both cases, AQ benefited from two different kinds of leaders at two drastically different historical inflection points. The role of the leader, then, is less about an individual’s character traits—and more like balancing a delicate chemical equation. Leadership is an emergent



FIGURE 1: Leadership as an Emergent Property.



Source: Stanley McChrystal, Jeff Eggers, and Jay Mangone, *Leaders: Myth and Reality* (New York: Portfolio, 2018).

property; the result of a complex relationship between a leader, followers, and a given context.<sup>61</sup>

AQ has been able to retain its structure while balancing the role of its leader, its context, and its followers—a feat of organizational effectiveness that rivals many Fortune 100 companies. It has long recognized the importance of cultivating a “deep bench” of tactical leaders and leader development within the ranks of the organization.<sup>62</sup> For example, the idea of the September 11, attacks was not bin Laden’s—it was proposed by a lower-level commander. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed first approached bin Laden in 1996 with a plan to hijack planes and crash them into buildings in the United States.<sup>63</sup> Bin Laden initially rejected Mohammed’s proposal, reportedly because AQ lacked the necessary funds.<sup>64</sup> Three years later, though, after AQ had received significant financing in the wake of the East Africa embassy attacks, Mohammed finessed his initial plan—a plan that ultimately came to fruition and tragedy.<sup>65</sup>

With this recognition that junior officials are the future, AQ has, in the past, often given these young combatants assignments that far exceeded their experience and knowledge.<sup>66</sup> This acted as a sort of developmental test for these individuals, grooming them for the path that they would take in the coming years. But more importantly, this approach also produced “experienced young officials capable of filling a leadership vacuum should their superiors be removed from the battlefield.”<sup>67</sup> Because AQ intends to exist in perpetuity, its leaders must be prepared for a time when someone else will need to fill their shoes. That is the mark of effective leadership—the cultivation of an environment in which the next generation can thrive.<sup>68</sup>

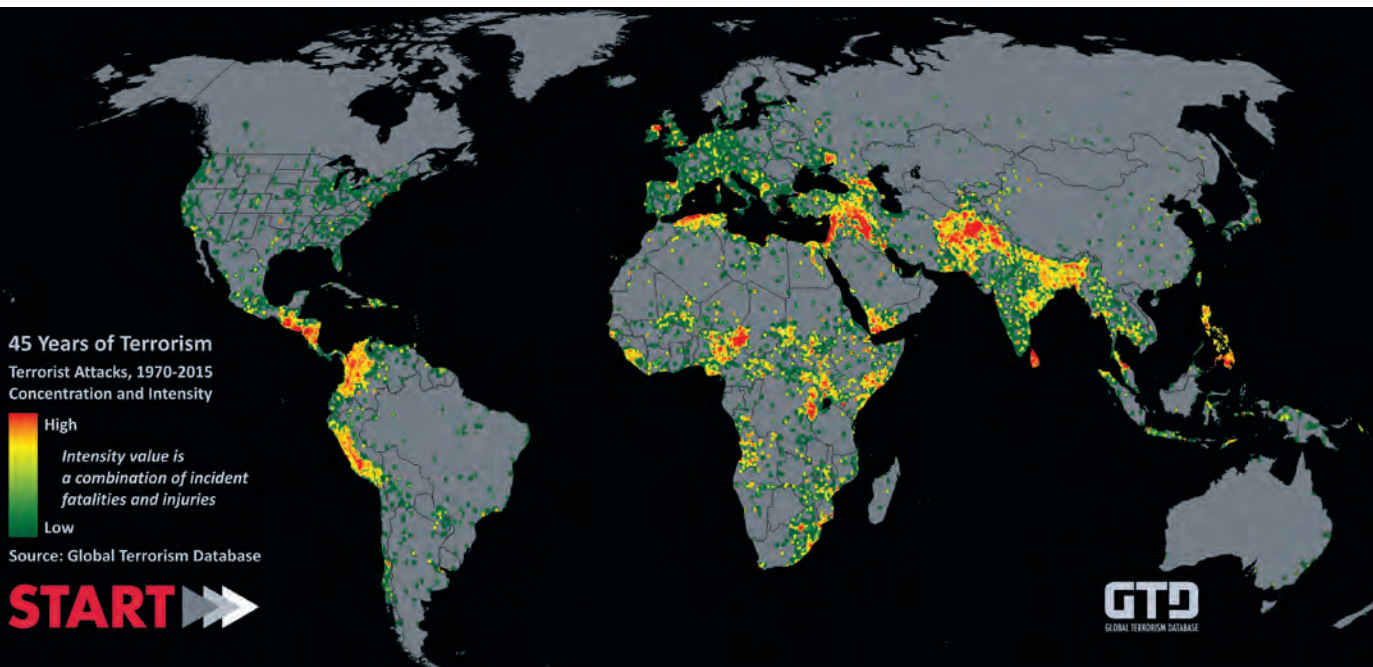
## Policy Implications and Conclusion

If we accept that AQ and IS are run like businesses, albeit with different organizational structures, we can reframe our approach to counterterrorism

accordingly through a business lens. In so doing, we can shape a new approach, recognizing that each group uses different methods to control the landscape and eliminate competition along the way.

Perhaps most urgently, we must re-examine whether IS is truly “defeated” and re-evaluate our military priorities and tactics. Startups do not generally give up after running into obstacles, especially if they have the support and funding to continue. Even when startups lose their initial market share, or slow down after an initial burst of success, it is unwise to count them out. The company Slack, now worth \$1 billion, was rejected by several investors before the final app was released, and it struggled again as it tried to scale the product upward with a larger team and a wider demand.<sup>69</sup> IS has certainly not been destroyed—it may no longer hold large swaths of territory, but it is very much active and alive. One need not look any further than its history to know this to be the case—when AQI was dismantled and the United States left the region, the remaining fighters were able to return stronger. The organization will not be defeated until its motivating ideas are defeated. Learning from our mistakes is more important now than ever; as U.S. soldiers continue to be killed by IS, our work in Syria clearly is far from over.<sup>70</sup>

Some scholars have recently argued that AQ’s leadership is no longer a serious threat and that we should turn our attention to the AQ affiliates spread around the globe.<sup>71</sup> However, this is a dangerous approach; as many other experts have observed, the longer the international community underestimates AQ’s planning and potency, “the more entrenched the group will become, and the more difficult it will be to uproot.”<sup>72</sup> There is a real danger in thinking that once IS is defeated, AQ will continue to operate silently under the radar. The quiet moves that AQ has been making could echo loudly in the void of any real competition. Many counterterrorism analysts now believe that AQ’s weakness is that it is looking to win a second Super Bowl—to match



University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database map displays terrorist violence that occurred worldwide between 1970 and 2015. (University of Maryland START)

September 11, 2001. While the United States is, no doubt, better prepared to fend off such an attack, AQ's global reach and networked structure could mount an attack of equal magnitude, but with new methodology: a coordinated strike across borders, a foray into cyberterrorism, or the capture of a geographical caliphate of its own.

So, what to do? From a business perspective, the first step is to identify what about the terrorism industry breeds the success of both startups and larger organizations—in this case, what conditions have made it possible for both AQ and IS to arrive and to thrive. This requires that the United States look in the mirror and question the role it wants to play in the world, not just for the nation's own safety, but in shaping the way the world will look in a few short years. Until we address the contextual issues that allowed these groups to gain so much traction—namely, the United States' lack of staying power in the region and our resultant struggle to pick off select nodes of an organization, rather than

focusing on the center of gravity—our counterterrorism operations will fall short. As then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis articulated in 2017, “If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition.”

Efforts that focus on improving the status quo in insecure regions are an investment in the fight against terrorism rather than a quick fix. We have inadvertently helped to create an environment in which IS provides a compelling alternative to Western democracy and culture. If we want to, at minimum, stem the violence that IS seeks to create, we must clearly define a business plan of our own—one in which we understand how stability can prevail in the modern Middle East, and the role that we and our allies should play in bringing that stability to fruition. This may be a political and ideological task, but it is much more important than anything we do on the battlefield.

The next step is to analyze where the center of gravity for each group lies and to exploit any

weaknesses. IS's rapid growth proved to be unsustainable. Without setting any preconditions for the caliphate's expansion outside of Syria, affiliates consistently spun out of control, making IS vulnerable to competition from startups they inadvertently created. Organizations such as IS can be destroyed from the outside in; simply put, the elimination of IS depends on the elimination of its affiliates. Without a solid core or centralized leadership structure (which the group sacrificed at the expense of expansion), destruction of IS appendages will damage its credibility and erode the trust of its followers. Additionally, shutting down smaller IS affiliates may, as a side effect, deter AQ with regard to continued expansion of the global AQ network. Perhaps most importantly, though, it will prevent IS affiliates from becoming effective startups themselves and enjoying the horrifying success that the caliphate enjoyed during its prime.

But how can this be done? An outside-in approach requires us to prevent a startup's ideas from gaining followership and influence—which can be achieved by attacking its central tenets. To erode (and erase) the impact of IS affiliates, our armed forces must pair any kinetic efforts with a long-term investment in combating the ideology of IS. American foreign policy can and should learn from past mistakes; we failed to prevent the success and expansion of IS in 2014. Now, we should seek to prevent the success and expansion of IS affiliates, this time with the added benefit of our insights into current IS followership and the context in which the group was able to claim power and influence. This means, first, a targeted countermessaging program to deter extremism in areas that IS seeks to cultivate. Without a pocket of available followers, new affiliates will not be able to recruit local members, and more established affiliates will struggle to increase their influence. Additionally, our military efforts to secure a given region must be augmented by support from the development community. Building

economic capacity and infrastructure will help create physical barriers to entry for new and existing IS affiliates and will allow our military to eliminate individual cells with a lesser risk of resurgence.

We must also respond to AQ directly and confront its global network by destroying it from the inside out. Much like businesses that seek to optimize efficiency, AQ will need to continue finding ways to connect the leadership to the foot soldiers. AQ core leadership is aging, and while they are grooming young foot soldiers to fill their shoes, the bulk of the strategic thinking stems from Zawahiri and other founding members. Destroying AQ's highest leadership level could kill an organization that relies heavily on top-down direction. More than a simple kinetic military operation, this will require intense collaboration with the Intelligence Community. Dismantling the AQ communications structure will require a counterextremism presence online and an effort to turn AQ's reliance on information technology into a vulnerability.

Destroying AQ from the inside out will require our counterterrorism forces to exploit the relationship between AQ's foot soldiers and its leadership. While AQ Central empowers its lower-ranking members to perform critical tasks, there is no evidence that the core gives these members any decisionmaking power. They are empowered for the execution of assigned tasks but lack what we would call "shared consciousness," the syncing of strategic, operational, and tactical branches in an organization. For example, in the military there is the idea that any given individual must execute the order—however, a good commander has built enough trust and camaraderie with his or her team that "execute the order" can shift into "if the order we give is wrong, execute the order we should have given you." Without this latitude, AQ operatives across the globe are heavily dependent on strategic marching orders from the core, acting only as tactical operatives with no insight into the

leadership's mindset. Operationally, this means that an inside-out destruction of AQ will rely on severing lines of communication that the core has come to rely upon. Without guidance from AQ Central, its affiliates will atrophy or make costly mistakes. Simultaneously, AQ's core may lose influence and power with its affiliates. In combination, cutting the core off from the network is the first step to dismantling its hierarchy entirely.

In either the outside-in or inside-out approaches, though, the United States must also learn a critical business lesson—no single branch or agency can solve the existential terrorism problem alone. Regrettably, the U.S. Government has stopped operating like a team of teams or as a team at all. Multiple ongoing but separate efforts to undermine various portions of IS have proven insufficient—instead, there must be a more coordinated and tailored approach to simultaneously eliminating IS fighters and IS ideals. In the past, our most effective counterterrorism operations relied on a joint approach, with the free flow of information across channels and agencies. At any given moment, any individual working on the IS problem should have all the knowledge they need to do their job. As our military, our Intelligence Community, and our State Department have grown further apart and siloed back into themselves, we are only providing the time and space for extremism to grow.

Hitting IS and AQ as a team of teams is the most important component of an effective global counterterrorism strategy. What these two businesses have in common is that they are selling an idea—a vision of what the world could be. We must make a coordinated investment in illustrating that the world they imagine would harm more individuals than it would help; at a minimum, we must help to envision what an alternative world might look like. Whether startup or sophisticated network, we cannot afford to rest on a static understanding of terrorist organizations. AQ, IS,

and emerging terrorist groups can operate more quickly and quietly than ever before—and their profit will be our loss. **PRISM**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sarah E. Parkinson and Sherry Zaks, "Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse," *Comparative Politics* 50, no. 2 (2018): 271–90.

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<sup>44</sup> Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, “How Al-Qaeda Works.”

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<sup>46</sup> Bruce Hoffman, “Al Qaeda’s Resurrection,” Council on Foreign Relations expert brief, March 6, 2018, <[www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection](http://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection)>.

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### Credit

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In 2012, U.S. Army General Martin E. Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, travels aboard a helicopter from Bagram to Kabul, Afghanistan for a meeting with the leadership of the International Security Assistance Force, U.S. Central Command, the U.S. State Department, and Afghan military. (DOD/ D. Myles Cullen)

# Afghanistan Reconstruction

## Lessons from the Long War

By John F. Sopko

On a bright fall morning in September 2001, 19 terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon, and they would have inflicted more carnage were it not for the heroic actions taken by the passengers on Flight 93 in the skies above Pennsylvania. All told, 2,977 innocent civilians were killed in the attacks of September 11, and more than 6,000 others were injured.

The war in Afghanistan, which began with such certainty of purpose and global support on October 7, 2001, now—nearly 18 years later—has ironically left U.S. policymakers and the public with more questions than answers. Can we win? What does winning look like? When will U.S. and coalition forces depart? Can the Afghan government and military survive without a U.S.-led military presence and continued donor support? Recent talks between the U.S. Government and the Taliban have only lengthened the list of questions that policymakers must confront, such as whether a peace deal is achievable, and if so, what that means for both the future of the U.S. role in Afghanistan and for Afghans themselves.

The office I lead as Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) is unique. We are one of only two independent inspector general offices not housed within a government agency and the only one with cross-agency jurisdiction. SIGAR has authority to look at any Federal agency that has played a role in the \$133 billion (and counting) U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan.

Since SIGAR's creation by Congress in 2008, we have examined nearly every facet of the reconstruction effort. The 300-plus audits and inspections we have conducted have identified more than \$1 billion in potential savings to U.S. taxpayers and made more than 900 recommendations to improve government operations. The over 1,000 criminal and civil investigations SIGAR's law enforcement agents have conducted have produced \$1.5 billion in criminal fines, restitutions, forfeitures, civil settlements, and U.S. Government cost savings and recoveries. SIGAR has also secured more than 130 convictions of individuals who have committed crimes against the taxpayer.

SIGAR's statutorily mandated quarterly report to Congress is the most comprehensive report on the reconstruction effort. Our Research and Analysis Directorate serves as the agency's own in-house "think tank" and is responsible for producing the oft-cited quarterly report in an environment where facts on U.S.

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Mr. John F. Sopko is the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. His article was drafted prior to the June 2019 release of SIGAR's sixth lessons learned report, *Divided Responsibility: Lessons from U.S. Security Sector Assistance Efforts in Afghanistan*.



Government activities in Afghanistan are becoming ever harder to discern and verify.

Congress designed SIGAR specifically to cut through agency jurisdictional boundaries and combat waste, fraud, and abuse in the Afghan reconstruction effort. SIGAR has built on that mission, to benefit not only the ongoing reconstruction effort but similar future efforts as well.

I discovered soon after assuming my post in 2012 that there are holes in our whole-of-government approach in Afghanistan. And I fear these holes are not limited to U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. Given

there are nearly 40 countries assisting in the coalition effort, there is also a need for a “whole-of-governments” approach to ensure efforts are coordinated around shared objectives.

Recognizing these problems, and with the support of prominent government officials such as Ambassador Ryan Crocker and General John Allen, we established a lessons learned program to look back at what had worked—and what had not—during the past 17 years in Afghanistan. The program’s staff are some of the most experienced experts on Afghanistan in the U.S. Government.



In 2014, an Afghan military police officer stands on a wall while providing security in a village near Bagram airfield. (U.S. Army/Nikayla Shodeen)

By statute, my focus is Afghanistan reconstruction. But there are lessons from the so-called graveyard of empires that apply not only to ongoing and future efforts in Afghanistan, but also to future stabilization and reconstruction efforts elsewhere.

The tendency to think that we will never again undertake another stabilization or reconstruction mission in a failed or fragile state belies history. While we have heard that claim after every such effort from Vietnam to the present, there is always a new crisis to attend to. As much as we might want to wish them away, conflicts spanning the globe draw America and its allies in. Afghanistan, Bosnia, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Iraq, Kosovo, Liberia, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Timor-Leste, Ukraine, Yemen—a familiar list of fragile and failing states, past and present. International responses to each of these situations have varied greatly, but the challenges these crises pose are not going away.

Considering that more than 2,200 Americans have died in Afghanistan, it would be a dereliction of duty not to extract lessons from nearly 18 years of engagement there. It not only makes sense but also is a statutory obligation for SIGAR. Our legislative mandate requires us to provide recommendations to promote economy, efficiency, effectiveness, and leadership on preventing and detecting waste, fraud, and abuse.

As an independent inspector general, my job is to evaluate the effectiveness of reconstruction activities in Afghanistan, not to make policy. Nonetheless, I have been asked many times whether the United States and its coalition partners will be in Afghanistan in another 18 years. Although I cannot answer that question directly, I know that we may well be if we fail to learn the lessons from the first 18 years of our nation's experience in Afghanistan.

To carry out its lessons learned program, SIGAR assembled a team of subject matter experts

with considerable experience working and living in Afghanistan as well as a staff of experienced research analysts. Many have served in the U.S. military or worked at the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Intelligence Community, or with other federal agencies. Each report, to date, has taken from two to three years to produce due to extensive fieldwork, robust fact-checking, and thorough reviews by external subject matter experts and relevant U.S. agencies.

As they conduct their work, our lessons learned teams utilize published materials but also submit requests for access to government documents unavailable to the public, consult with experts in academia and research institutions, and conduct in-depth interviews with current and former personnel from federal agencies that have played significant roles in Afghanistan.

The work of the lessons learned teams is informed by the hundreds of audits and inspections, investigations, and other oversight work that SIGAR has conducted. While many academics, journalists, pundits, and columnists have written extensively about Afghanistan, only a government agency with authority like SIGAR can access all the relevant source documentation and individuals necessary, partly because, as a statutory Office of Inspector General, cooperation from U.S. Government agencies with SIGAR is mandated by law. The SIGAR seal on the cover of each of our lessons learned reports bestows upon it an authoritativeness that cannot be matched by a non-government entity.

It may seem odd that it would fall to an Inspector General's office to undertake this work. But I quickly found upon assuming my post that individual agencies were constrained from deriving any long-term lessons in Afghanistan and adjusting their operations accordingly often because their personnel in Afghanistan rotate out of country after



a year or less in what we at SIGAR have come to call the “annual lobotomy”—essentially the routine loss of institutional memory among U.S. agencies working in Afghanistan.

Additionally, even if an agency does produce a lessons learned report, it rarely, if ever, coordinates with other government agencies in its preparation. And lessons learned efforts that were undertaken often are long forgotten by the time they are needed again. SIGAR’s own staff in Kabul found a USAID-commissioned study from 1988 entitled “A Retrospective Review of U.S. Assistance to Afghanistan: 1950 to 1979.” Many of the report’s lessons are not only still relevant, but also could have made a real impact if they had been taken into account in the early 2000s. Unfortunately, we could not find anybody at USAID or the State Department who was aware of the report’s existence, let alone its findings.

Given all this, it was left to SIGAR to step into the breach. To date, SIGAR has published 5 reports on lessons observed from the past 17 years of reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. While we routinely call them lessons learned, we recognize that they are only truly learned if the 78 recommendations we have made are implemented—something that we are working to ensure through a robust outreach program by our staff of subject matter experts.

All of SIGAR’s reports are available on our website, and each lessons learned report is also available in interactive format, making them more accessible to the nonacademic reader or policymaker who rarely has time to read a 200-page report.

SIGAR’s first lessons learned report, *Corruption in Conflict*, issued in September 2016, examined how the U.S. Government—primarily the Departments of Defense, State, Treasury, and Justice, and USAID—understood the risks of corruption in Afghanistan, how the U.S. response to corruption evolved, and the effectiveness of that response.<sup>1</sup>

In September 2017, SIGAR released *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF)*, which looked at how the U.S. Government developed and executed security sector assistance programs to build, train, advise, and equip the ANDSF, both unilaterally and as part of a coalition, from 2002 through 2016.<sup>2</sup>

The third SIGAR lessons learned report, *Private Sector Development and Economic Growth*, released in April 2018, examined how the U.S. Government supported private sector development through efforts led by USAID, with additional significant roles played by State, Defense, Commerce, and Treasury.<sup>3</sup>

May 2018 saw the release of our fourth lessons learned report, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, which detailed how USAID and the departments of State and Defense tried to support and legitimize the Afghan government from 2002 through 2017, with a primary focus on the years of the military surge (2009 to 2012).<sup>4</sup>

And most recently, in June 2018, SIGAR released its fifth lessons learned report on counternarcotics, which described how USAID, the departments of State and Defense, and the Drug Enforcement Administration attempted to deter cultivation and the trade of opium, build Afghan counterdrug capacity, and develop the country’s licit economy.<sup>5</sup>

While SIGAR has published more than 1,200 pages of research in these 5 lessons learned reports, our work is far from done. We have an additional four reports in the pipeline, with more on the horizon. While agencies such as the State and Defense departments initially were skeptical of the value of our lessons learned initiative, they are now asking SIGAR to look into topics of immediate interest to their senior officials, including elections and reintegration issues.

With five reports complete, we have identified what we consider the ten most important and consistently observed lessons of U.S. and coalition



In 2010, U.S. marines conduct a patrol alongside a poppy field while visiting settlements in Boldak, Afghanistan. (U.S. Marine Corps/ Lindsay L. Sayres)

engagement in Afghanistan that have impacted the reconstruction effort. They include:

- persistent insecurity and uncertainty about the future;
- a lack of comprehensive and coordinated strategies within the U.S. Government and among our coalition partners;
- misaligned priorities between the United States, coalition partners, and the government of Afghanistan;
- a failure to understand the Afghan operating environment;
- insufficient monitoring and evaluation of ongoing efforts;
- spending decisions that exacerbated corruption;
- the failure to take into account the Afghan government's actual capabilities and political will;
- politically driven timelines; and
- counterproductive military and civilian personnel policies.

Lastly, our tenth lesson was that with the right people and the right resources, it was possible to build capacity in Afghanistan—albeit on a smaller scale.

For the sake of brevity, I will focus on the five common threads that I feel are particularly important:

- the impact of continued insecurity;
- corruption and how the United States and coalition contributed to it;
- the impact from the lack of comprehensive strategies;
- the effect of politically driven timelines; and
- counterproductive personnel policies.

## Insecurity

One of the most important common themes across SIGAR's lessons learned reports has been that security is the critical component needed for reconstruction to succeed.

While U.S. and coalition military operations in late 2001 were largely successful, by early 2002 there was a misconception that Afghanistan was a post-conflict state. Demonstrating this, in 2003, the White House proposed just \$151 million in assistance for Afghanistan—a figure that included just \$1 million for the Afghan National Army (the ANDSF now routinely receives over \$4 billion from the United States annually). While Congress later increased assistance to just under \$1 billion, the message was clear—the United States intended to maintain a light footprint and failed to foresee that the Taliban could reemerge to challenge the new Afghan government.

Accelerating the Taliban's return was the coalition's reliance on warlords who had been pushed out of power by the Taliban. The coalition paid warlords not only to provide security but also, in many cases, to run provincial and district governments. One senior U.S. official told our researchers that this was seen as a pragmatic approach—that it was necessary to work with unsavory characters in order to pursue U.S. counterterrorism objectives, and that there was an assumption that the United States would

eventually hold the warlords to account. But that rarely, if ever, happened.

The abuses, whether political, economic, or purely violent, committed by coalition-aligned Afghans led many frustrated Afghans into the arms of the resurgent Taliban. The deterioration of security that resulted from the rise of the Taliban insurgency negatively impacted virtually every U.S. and coalition initiative in Afghanistan to this day.

For example, as the Taliban threat grew, efforts to sustain and professionalize the ANDSF became secondary to immediate combat needs by coalition commanders. The coalition built—or attempted to build—the Afghan force that the United States and coalition needed at the time, a force that would allow non-Afghan forces to return home. There was little concern for the capabilities and resources the Afghans would be left with once coalition forces departed. Nearly 18 years later, the Afghan security forces still cannot sustain themselves, and the United States and its coalition partners spend billions annually to support them.

Afghanistan's economy was also negatively impacted by increasing insecurity, which of course discouraged trade, investment, and other economic activity. Insecurity also increased the difficulty of building government institutions needed to support the private sector. In particular, the U.S. Government's announcement of the military draw-down and the resulting anticipation of dramatic aid reductions reinforced existing uncertainty and pessimism about the economy and fostered a "last call" mentality that encouraged Afghans to make money off the coalition presence while they still could—something that has had a lasting impact on the success of all the coalition's assistance programs.

## Corruption

The second common lesson from SIGAR's lessons learned reports is that corruption negatively affected the reconstruction effort and that the coalition,

particularly the United States, exacerbated corruption in Afghanistan.

The injection of billions of dollars into the Afghan economy by international donors led by the United States—combined with the limited ability of the Afghan government to expend funds, poor donor oversight and contracting practices, and built-in institutional incentives to spend money—quickly increased the risks of corruption.

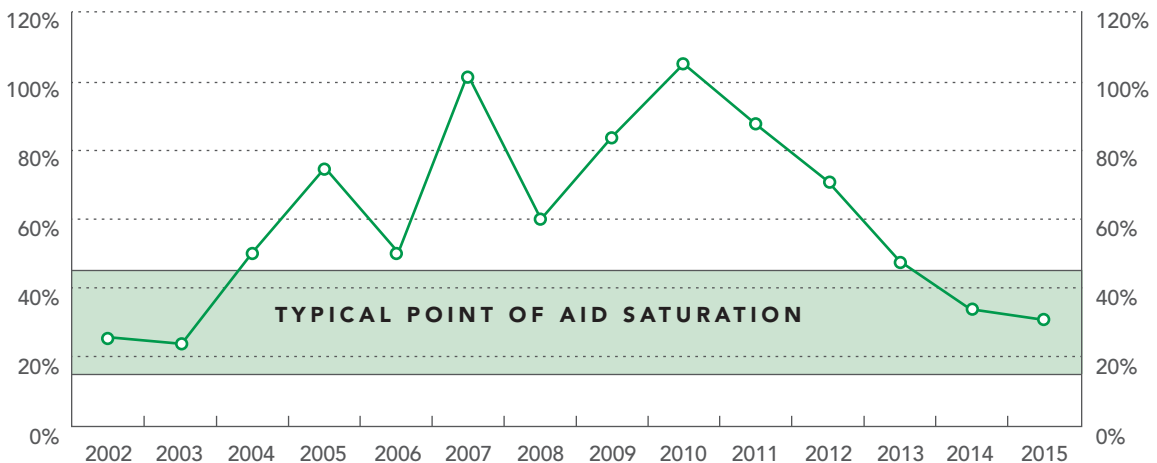
The United States and its partners spent too much, too fast, in too small an economy, with too little oversight. While donors berate Afghanistan for being, according to Transparency International, the sixth-most corrupt country in the world, it had plenty of help getting there. The \$133 billion the United States has appropriated for reconstruction—more than the nation spent on the entire Marshall Plan to rebuild Western Europe after World War II—flooded the Afghan economy. And that excludes the more than \$740 billion the United States has spent on warfighting or funds provided by coalition partners and other donors.

Most development economists agree that the generally accepted amount of foreign aid a country’s economy can absorb is 15 to 45 percent of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP). Afghanistan, with a relatively small economy, would be able to safely absorb an amount toward the lower end of that range. Anything more than that would be at risk of spilling over into the illicit economy like water running over the sides of a saturated sponge.

But by 2004, aid to Afghanistan from the United States alone consistently exceeded the 45 percent threshold and totaled more than 100 percent of Afghanistan’s GDP in both 2007 and 2010. This immense amount of aid distorted the Afghan economy, fueled corruption, and bought a lot of real estate in Dubai, the United States, and elsewhere. And again, this amount does not even take into account funds provided by non-U.S. donors.

As former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates put it, “For all our handwringing and hectoring on corruption we seemed oblivious to how much we were contributing to it and on a scale that dwarfed the

**FIGURE 1. U.S. Appropriated Reconstruction Funding for Afghanistan Shown as a Percentage of Afghan Gross Domestic Product.**



Source: SIGAR Lessons Learned Program analysis of SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, January 30, 2016): 187; SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, October 30, 2014): 202–03. *World Bank, World Development Indicators: GDP at Market Prices (current U.S. dollars)*, World Bank Databank, accessed July 12, 2016.



drug trade. Tens of billions of dollars were flooding into Afghanistan from the U.S. and our partners and we turned a blind eye or simply were ignorant of how regularly some portion was going to payoffs, bribes, and bank accounts in Dubai.”<sup>6</sup>

The U.S. Government’s historic inclination to believe that throwing more money at a problem automatically leads to better results exacerbated an already bad corruption situation. For one, the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan was derailed as money spent—rather than the outcomes of those expenditures—became the metric used to determine success.

As SIGAR’s various audits and other oversight products have repeatedly noted, U.S. Government agencies are very good at measuring inputs—usually the amount of money spent. The agencies are decent at measuring outputs—for example, how many clinics were built or soldiers trained. But time and time again, SIGAR has seen little, if any, focus on the outcomes of projects and programs. Measuring inputs and outputs alone cannot tell us if a clinic is staffed, has medicine, is connected to the electrical grid or has fuel for its generators, has access to clean water, and is being used by the local community. More importantly, it cannot tell us

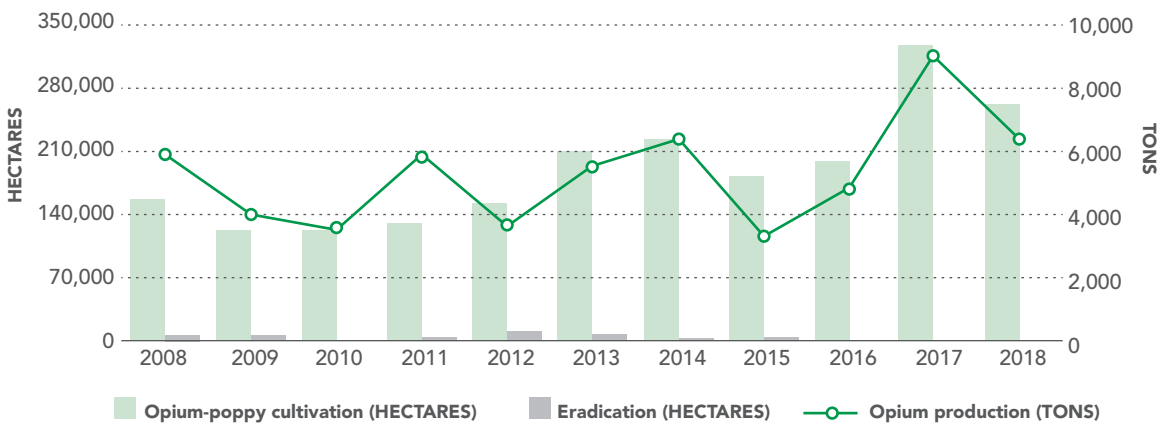
the extent to which its existence contributes to the overall health of the people who live there. But no individual or agency in Afghanistan seems to ever be held accountable for successful outcomes—only whether they spend funds.

The most glaring example of this in Afghanistan may be the \$9 billion the United States has spent to date fighting narcotics. Only if the goal was to increase poppy and opium production to all-time highs can U.S. efforts be considered a success.

By 2013—a dozen years after the United States set foot in Afghanistan—the U.S. military belatedly had come to realize that corruption was a critical threat to U.S. security objectives in Afghanistan, particularly to the effectiveness of the ANDSF. The military finally started placing conditions on Afghan security institutions in exchange for U.S. funding—but not until 2014, well after the horse was out of the barn and significant damage had already been done.

When the 215<sup>th</sup> Corps in Helmand collapsed in the face of a Taliban offensive in 2016, it was in large part due to an overestimation of the corps’ strength based on a personnel roster that had been inflated by the inclusion of nonexistent “ghost soldiers” by senior commanders who pocketed the coalition-funded salaries of those “ghosts.”

**FIGURE 2. Afghan Opium-Poppy Cultivation, Eradication, and Production Since 2008**



Source: UNODC, *World Drug Report 2016*, 5/2016, Annex, vii, ix, xii; UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2017: Cultivation and Production*, 11/2017, 5–6, 64–71.



While the U.S. military and civilian agencies in Afghanistan have made anti-corruption efforts more of a priority in recent years, the legacy of those early days still poses an almost insurmountable challenge. Last year, the Department of Justice attaché in Kabul described Afghanistan as having “a largely lawless, weak, and dysfunctional government,” citing the number of corruption cases languishing in the Afghan justice system due to a lack of political will—rather than capacity—of the Afghan government.<sup>7</sup>

No one argues that Afghanistan did not have a corruption problem prior to 2001, but U.S. and coalition spending acted as gasoline poured on an already smoldering fire. Money cannot solve all the world’s problems, and in places where governments do elect to spend it, they must be aware of the operating environment and ensure that the proper controls and oversight bodies are in place to protect it.<sup>8</sup>

### Lack of Comprehensive Strategies

The third key lesson from SIGAR’s lessons learned reports is that a lack of comprehensive strategies inhibited assistance efforts. One of the most consistent failures SIGAR has identified in all of its work since the agency’s inception has been a lack of coherent, whole-of-government strategies to address challenges facing the reconstruction effort.

Strategies are critical to ensuring that all parties move in the same direction and are especially important when missions, like the Afghanistan reconstruction mission, require multiple government agencies—and multiple governments—to coordinate.

Numerous reconstruction initiatives suffered from the lack of comprehensive strategies. Stabilization efforts were impaired by frequent battles between the Defense Department and USAID. The absence of a U.S. Government anticorruption strategy allowed security, counterterrorism, and political objectives to trump anticorruption priorities.

Counternarcotics initiatives suffered from the absence of a strategy that empowered the State

Department to direct other agencies to provide the resources needed to ensure that U.S. security, development, and governance efforts accounted for the impact the drug trade had on those efforts, and conversely, how those efforts might impact the drug trade.

The effort to rebuild the Afghan security forces—essentially the coalition’s exit strategy—required integrated whole-of-government support from civilian and military agencies with expertise in training and advising foreign countries in security operations and their governing institutions. But here lies a cautionary tale.

In the United States, the State Department holds responsibility for training foreign police forces, such as the Afghan National Police. But the State Department lacks the ability to operate in nonpermissive environments like Afghanistan. So the mission fell, in large part, to the U.S. military by default. But the U.S. military has limited expertise in training civilian police forces. SIGAR’s research found instances where Blackhawk helicopter pilots were assigned to train police, which obviously was not their primary skill set. Some soldiers turned to watching television shows such as “NCIS” and “Cops” to try and develop curricula for their training programs. And because the U.S. military was more focused on defeating the Taliban than civilian policing, the Afghan National Police developed more as a paramilitary force than the sort of beat cops Afghans wanted and needed.

These may be dramatic examples, but they have had serious implications for the development of the Afghan National Police. More broadly, they demonstrate that a lack of comprehensive, coordinated strategies among government agencies negatively affected the reconstruction effort.

### Artificial Timelines

The fourth common theme from SIGAR’s lessons learned reports is that politically driven timelines undermined the reconstruction effort. U.S.

military plans for Afghan security force readiness were designed to meet politically driven timelines dictated from Washington. These plans also consistently underestimated the resilience of the Taliban insurgency and overestimated the capacity of the ANDSF, leaving those forces ill prepared to deal with deteriorating security after the drawdown of U.S. combat forces concluded in 2014.

As General Allen, the commanding general at the time, told us, “We went from an end state to an end date.” It is likely not a coincidence that after U.S. combat forces withdrew, Kunduz City temporarily fell to the Taliban, and the 215<sup>th</sup> Corps in Helmand disintegrated in the face of a Taliban offensive. The accelerated timeline dictated by Washington did not provide time for U.S. forces to adequately train their Afghan counterparts before the coalition ceased offensive operations and left Afghan forces largely on their own.

Artificial timelines also hampered efforts to develop the Afghan economy as overly ambitious targets and unrealistically short timeframes for success compromised program performance. For example, fearing that USAID’s development strategy would not quickly bring significant economic benefit to Afghanistan before the end of the surge, the Department of Defense expanded its Task Force for Business and Stability Operations (TFBSO) to Afghanistan. TFBSO was the Defense Department’s \$675 million effort to jump-start the Afghan economy. The Defense Department, of course, is not known for being particularly skilled at economic development, but the compressed timelines mandated from Washington and the department’s determination that the Afghan economy needed massive improvement before the end of the surge led to TFBSO’s role in Afghanistan.

For \$675 million of taxpayer money, TFBSO made minimal economic impact and quite a few questionable decisions. Among some of TFBSO’s more novel initiatives was a \$2.3 million program

to purchase and fly white Italian goats into Afghanistan on military aircraft to mate with native Afghan goats in an effort to improve the quality of Afghan cashmere.

Things did not turn out as intended. There was an outbreak of disease that necessitated that part of the herd be culled, and the project manager quit in frustration that TFBSO was trying to achieve in a few years what ordinarily would take decades. And like many of the project and programs SIGAR has examined in Afghanistan, the project faced sustainability issues. As of April 2017, SIGAR inspectors were unable to locate any remaining goats associated with the project.

TFBSO also spent millions to construct a compressed natural gas (CNG) station in Sheberghan, Afghanistan, in an effort to quickly create a CNG market in Afghanistan. This was a noble goal, perhaps, but unfortunately, there were no other CNG stations in Afghanistan, so any cars running on CNG and using the filling station could not travel far from home. Afghanistan also happened to lack any cars that ran on CNG—and the cost to convert a gasoline or diesel-powered vehicle was steep—so the U.S. taxpayer paid to convert a number of local taxis to run on CNG to produce a limited market for the CNG station. To our knowledge, the station remains the sole CNG filling station in Afghanistan.

A comprehensive SIGAR audit of TFBSO found that over half of the program’s expenditures went to overhead costs.<sup>9</sup> The large number of projects and programs that TFBSO financially supported failed for a number of reasons, including their managers’ penchant for ignoring the need for projects to be sustainable once the United States ceased funding them. TFBSO also routinely failed to conduct adequate risk and market analysis. A senior Defense Department official, in testimony before Congress several years later, suggested that economic development was perhaps not a mission the department should undertake

again.<sup>10</sup> One wonders whether an effort such as TFBSO would have been undertaken in Afghanistan at all had it not been for the department's knowledge that it had to produce quick results in Afghanistan based on a politically driven timeline.

Finally, stabilization and counternarcotics efforts suffered from unrealistic timelines as well. Both endeavors, by their very nature, take long periods of time to be successful—time they were not allowed because timelines were not dictated by events on the ground.

## Personnel

The fifth common lesson our reports identified is that the most basic of things—human resourcing—negatively affected the reconstruction effort by inhibiting continuity and institutional memory. I assumed my current post in 2012. I am now working with my fifth U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, my sixth North Atlantic Treaty Organization and U.S. commanding general, and ninth head of the U.S. train, advise, and assist command. Some 80 percent of the U.S. embassy departs each summer, and most of the U.S. military assigned to Afghanistan is deployed for a year or less.

Annual rotations of personnel for unaccompanied posts such as Afghanistan have long been standard practice for the military, State Department, and USAID, and there are understandable reasons for this. But if the “annual lobotomy” in Kabul is going to continue, ways must be found to avoid this routine loss of institutional memory. As one report affirmed, brief rotational deployments and frequent shifts in command contribute to a “lack of proper continuity of effort, a breakdown, or gaps in critical U.S.-host country relationships, and a mutual lack of trust.” Retired Sergeant Major Robert Rush noted that “one tenet of [counterinsurgency doctrine] . . . is to know the populace, and one-year tours . . . did not give organizations or the community they were supporting the time to get to know one other. [One unit]

leaves and another unit would come in and begin the learning phase all over again.”<sup>11</sup>

Knowing that their deployment would last just a year, commanders knew they quickly had to demonstrate progress. As former senior State Department official Eliot Cohen noted:

*Commanders starting a rotation [in Afghanistan] would say, ‘This is going to be difficult.’ Six months later, they’d say, ‘We might be turning a corner.’ At the end of their rotation, they would say, ‘We have achieved irreversible momentum.’ Then the next command group coming in would pronounce, ‘This is going to be difficult.’*<sup>12</sup>

As for the civilians based in Kabul, journalist Christina Lamb sensed that “it was as if [they believed] history had only started when they had arrived a few months earlier.”<sup>13</sup> British journalist and current Member of Parliament Rory Stewart noted that “individual [development] officers are never in any one place and rarely in any one organization long enough to be assessed. . . . in fact, their very uselessness benefits them.”<sup>14</sup>

Short personnel rotations have affected every aspect of the reconstruction effort and almost every member of the coalition in Afghanistan. Military officials build relationships with their civilian counterparts, which are then lost. Advisors to Afghan security units build trust and then depart. Afghan government officials must deal with a revolving door of U.S. and coalition government officials and have learned to wait out officials they dislike or disagree with, knowing that the foreign official will soon be gone. Contracting officers approve projects knowing they won't be in the country when the project is completed and their replacements may have little, if any, knowledge of or interest in the project they inherited.

Any solution to this problem will be difficult; many members of SIGAR's staff serve multiple tours

in Kabul, and some have been there for as long as five years, so I know the toll their tours take on them and their families. But we simply must find a better way to maintain continuity of effort and knowledge, even if we must face some inconvenient and unpleasant decisions.

## From Lessons Observed to Lessons Learned

As anybody who has served in government knows, when you undertake an effort such as our lessons learned initiative, you will inevitably gore somebody's ox. The programs, policies, and strategies SIGAR has reviewed were all the result of decisions made by people who, in large part, were doing the best they could at the time. While our lessons learned reports identify failures, missed opportunities, and bad judgment, the response to our lessons learned reports within the U.S. Government has generally been positive.

The Defense Department was especially interested in our review of efforts to rebuild the Afghan security forces, asking us to brief numerous senior officials in Washington, Kabul, Tampa, and elsewhere, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Joseph Dunford asked to be personally briefed. Following his briefing, the Defense Department requested that SIGAR subject matter experts join their failure analysis team, which was looking back over the previous decade and a half of experience in Afghanistan as they were developing new policy proposals ahead of the President's rollout of his administration's South Asia strategy.

SIGAR's report on stabilization was also well received. State and Defense, along with USAID, requested our input as they completed their own Stabilization Assistance Review.<sup>15</sup> We have been told that the report was made mandatory reading in at least one State Department bureau and at the request of Her Majesty's Government, SIGAR's Deputy Inspector General met with more than 90 senior

interagency officials of the British government to discuss the report's findings. Additionally, our program has enjoyed bipartisan support on Capitol Hill. Recommendations from our reports on corruption and on reconstructing the ANDSF were added to the National Defense Authorization Acts for fiscal years 2018 and 2019, respectively.

It is to the credit of many of the government officials we have worked with—and, in some cases, whose decisions we have criticized—that they see the value of SIGAR's lessons learned work and are suggesting new topics for us to explore further.

## Conclusion

SIGAR's lessons learned program may be the longest lasting legacy of our agency. But the program will only truly matter if the lessons we have identified are addressed and the recommendations we have made are implemented. While our writ extends only to Afghanistan, many of the lessons we have identified can be applied to virtually any stabilization or reconstruction effort in a fragile or failing state.

SIGAR is a temporary agency, but, as I noted before, it is a near certainty that the United States will engage in similar operations in the future; each will have its own character, but they will all require whole-of-government responses, and no matter how well executed, there will always be lessons to be learned from these missions. For policymakers interested in good governance and effective foreign and defense policy, it is worth considering what entity will conduct whole-of-government lessons learned reports in the future.

For all the blood and treasure the United States and its coalition partners have expended in the dusty plains and on the frozen mountaintops of Afghanistan, the very least governments can do is conduct fair and comprehensive evaluations of what has been done well and what could have been done better. We hope that the lessons SIGAR has observed and the recommendations we have made will help

policymakers avoid the mistakes of the past as they lead our nation's responses to the challenges of the future. **PRISM**

*Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affect Areas* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2018).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 16-58-LL (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 17-62-LL (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> SIGAR, *Private Sector Development and Economic Growth: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 18-38-LL (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 18-48-LL (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> SIGAR, *Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 18-52-LL (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Christina Lamb, *Farewell Kabul: From Afghanistan to a More Dangerous World* (London: Williams Collins, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to United States Congress* (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, June 30, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> John F. Sopko, "Rebuilding Afghanistan: A Fight Against Corruption," *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics* 50, no. 4 (2018): 1247.

<sup>9</sup> SIGAR, *DOD Task Force for Business and Stability Operations: \$675 Million in Spending Led to Mixed Results, Waste, and Unsustained Projects*, SIGAR 18-19-AR (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Brian McKeon, "Statement for the Record," testimony before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support hearing on "Oversight of Task Force for Business and Stability Operations Projects in Afghanistan," January 20, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Rush, "What's Better to Use in Combat: Unit Replacement or Individual Troop Rotation?" *Foreign Policy*, January 26, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Lamb, *Farewell Kabul*.

<sup>14</sup> Rory Stewart, *The Places in Between* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2006), 248.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development, U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of State, *Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for*





In 2013, A U.S. Air Force loadmaster scans for threats using night vision goggles aboard a C-130 aircraft after completing a cargo drop over Ghazni, province in Afghanistan. (U.S. Air Force/ Ben Bloker)

# The Meaning of Setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan

By Carter Malkasian

From 2011 to 2017, similar processes played out in Iraq and Afghanistan that are deeply significant yet understudied. Between 2011 and 2014, after much effort and some success, the United States drew down its military forces in both countries. Hopes were high that the Iraqi and the Afghan governments could take over. Their armies and police were vastly superior in numbers, equipment, and training to those of their adversaries. Nevertheless, the Iraqi and Afghan states both came to the brink of collapse. Gains that had come at high cost and sacrifice for the United States unraveled. Terrorist threats re-emerged. The United States re-entered the conflicts. So far, it has not fully withdrawn. Why these events came to pass has not yet been fully studied. This article explores what happened and the implications for U.S. strategy.<sup>1</sup>

Hypothetical explanations for what happened vary. Sectarian divisions and corruption are widely cited, as is the difficulty of compelling the government of Iraq or Afghanistan to align with U.S. interests. An additional less cited explanation is that identity gives insurgents an edge in morale over governments supported by foreign occupiers. All three explanations have something in common: they are insensitive to the influence of U.S. intervention. The United States could not alter or diffuse these sectarian, ethnic, cultural, and religious dynamics. When the United States departed, the dynamics reinforced themselves and undid progress painfully wrought. There is little the United States could have done differently to have avoided this outcome, other than to have continued occupation.

The unraveling of Iraq and Afghanistan bears significance for the study of strategy, conflict stabilization, and military operations against insurgents and terrorists. The United States has spent the better part of two decades fighting wars against terrorism. The main theaters were Iraq and Afghanistan but also extended to conflicts in Syria, Libya, Somalia, Mali, and the Philippines. Today, the era of intervention seems to be winding down. Yet the wars linger on as we wait for a definitive end. U.S. intervention was pinned on the assumption that with U.S. assistance, these countries could stand up on their own within a few years and the United States could depart. The United States would invest a military commitment (whether in a surge or an advisory mission), break insurgent or terrorist momentum, build a more capable army and police force, and then hand things off to the government to either carry on the fight or rule in peace. The notion has been fundamental to America's

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strategic theory of intervention. Until the very end of 2018, it informed U.S. strategy in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, and even now can still be felt.

Iraq and Afghanistan suggest that this notion is deeply flawed. It seems very difficult for intervention to yield lasting change. Unbuttressed, governments retreated and terrorists returned. On the basis of Iraq and Afghanistan, it seems bold to forecast that a state under serious insurgent or terrorist threat will be enabled to fight on its own effectively after a U.S. withdrawal. The challenges are too great. All bets are off once U.S. troops leave. The United States should not retread this road in ongoing and future intervention. Surges, exit strategies, ambitious security force assistance goals, and sustainable good governance may be misconceived. Instead, the United States should look to alternative strategies.

Two alternatives warrant consideration. The first is an open-ended U.S. presence of a few thousand troops or less. This is the surest way to suppress threats, though it promises no grand military victories and slowly piles up expenses. The second option is remote intervention by managing the conflict from afar through funding and counterterrorism operations. This may sound like abdication, but it is actually a revolutionary idea. When an intervention may span decades, letting a conflict run its natural course can offer as many opportunities for a solution as directly intervening.

Afghanistan and Iraq are, of course, outlier cases. The same outcomes will not pan out in all situations—think El Salvador and Colombia. Sometimes outright victory or negotiated settlements are possible without an extended presence. Still, the Iraq and Afghanistan experiences should cast doubt on the whole cost-benefit relationship of intervention.

## Successes in Iraq and Afghanistan

Between 2006 and 2011, the United States made substantial progress against insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, the United States was fighting

al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the Sunni resistance, and the Shi'a Jaysh al-Mahdi for control of the cities. In Afghanistan, the main enemies were al-Qaeda and the Taliban, which had resurged in 2006 to overtake much of the countryside and threatened the viability of the state. To overcome the insurgencies, the United States sent tens of thousands of reinforcements and developed sound counterinsurgency tactics. The first "surge" took place in 2007 in Iraq; the second was from 2009 to 2011 in Afghanistan. U.S. troop numbers peaked at 185,000 in Iraq and 100,000 in Afghanistan.

The surges were designed to suppress insurgent activity and set the conditions for the host governments and their militaries to rule or continue fighting without a U.S. military presence. This was the fundamental strategic idea that underpinned both interventions. The Iraq surge was to be a temporary year-long boost of 30,000 troops. In his speech announcing the 2007 surge, President George W. Bush stated:

*Victory in Iraq will bring . . . a functioning democracy that polices its territory, upholds the rule of law, respects fundamental human liberties, and answers to its people . . . it will be a country that fights terrorists instead of harboring them. . . . If we increase our support at this crucial moment, and help the Iraqis break the current cycle of violence, we can hasten the day our troops begin coming home.<sup>2</sup>*

He envisioned the Iraqi government taking over against a defeated insurgency. President Barack Obama's goal in Afghanistan was more modest but followed the same logic. The Afghan surge was 54,000 troops. The goal was to break Taliban momentum and enable the Afghan government to carry on the war so that the United States could pull back the surge reinforcements.<sup>3</sup> Obama set a firm date of the end of 2011 to begin drawing down. In both cases, the presidents believed the way out of indefinite

commitment was to enable the government to stand on its own. Indeed, the notion can be considered an enduring component of U.S. strategic thought on intervention. Their thought is strikingly similar to the Vietnamization strategy of the Vietnam War in which the U.S. military was to enable the South Vietnamese government and military to take over the war and allow U.S. forces to withdraw.

The Iraq surge—and the accompanying “awakening”—succeeded in bringing down violence. In a widely-read article, political scientists Stephen Biddle, Jake Shapiro, and Jeffrey Friedman calculated that attack numbers fell throughout Iraq, and Iraqi civilian and U.S. military deaths fell by 92 percent.<sup>4</sup> By the middle of 2008, AQI was on the run, and Iraq’s cities and towns had become peaceful. Progress was less dramatic in Afghanistan. The number of attacks dropped only slightly. Insurgents continued to operate in inaccessible hills and mountains and in Pakistani safe havens. While many tribes stood up against the Taliban, there was no sweeping awakening akin to what had happened in Iraq. Nevertheless, the provinces that had been in danger—Helmand, Kandahar, Kunduz, and Ghazni—were largely secured. In the key population centers and farmlands, violence plummeted.

The Achilles’ heel of the Iraq and Afghanistan counterinsurgency campaigns was their cost. Deploying one soldier for one year cost an estimated \$750,000 to \$1,000,000. For the whole 100,000 in Afghanistan, the estimate reached \$110 billion.<sup>5</sup> This was the same time that President Obama was trying to rebuild the U.S. economy amid the great recession. In 2011, the White House was preparing a deficit reduction plan of \$1 trillion over ten years. Reducing the number of forces in Iraq and Afghanistan was to be a significant component of the expected savings.

Obama had always opposed the Iraq war and entered office inclined to reduce forces. When Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki would not come to terms on a legal arrangement for a continued U.S.

presence at the end of 2011, the U.S. Administration pulled out all the troops. The Administration assessed that AQI was too beaten to return and that the Iraqi government would continue to function.

In Afghanistan, the drawdown was more gradual. In 2011, the Administration decided to withdraw 33,000 troops by the end of 2012 and then go to an unspecified “advisory presence” by the end of 2014. It was later decided that the advisory presence would start with 9,800 troops and wind down to a small contingent of a few hundred or so at the U.S. Embassy by the end of 2016. The Afghan government and military were expected to carry on the war alone from that point.

### The Fragility of Success

After 2011, U.S. successes in both Iraq and Afghanistan collapsed. Almost to the day that U.S. troops pulled out of Iraq, Maliki and the Iraqi government intensified persecution of the Sunni population. Between 2009 and 2011, Maliki had already stolen the 2010 elections from the Sunni’s preferred bloc and gutted the Sons of Iraq militias, which had been suppressing AQI. From 2011 to 2013, he tried to imprison Sunni politicians, thereby marginalizing Sunni political representation and creating a fatal rift between Sunni tribal movements and the government. In the ensuing months, protests broke out in Sunni cities, supported by much of the Sunni population. Maliki’s measures inflamed fears of Shi’a and Iranian expansionism.

AQI—renamed the Islamic State by future caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—re-emerged as a major player in Iraq. Many Sunnis turned to the Islamic State as a protector from or check on the government.<sup>6</sup> Amid the protests and their enmity toward the Iraqi government, Sunni leaders ended up abiding the Islamic State. In the view of many, it was better to work with the Islamic State and accept its version of change than oppose it and thereby help the government. Moreover, few wanted to object to



a movement so vigorously claiming Islamic credentials. Even those uncomfortable with the Islamic State often said nothing.<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly, Sunni leaders had trouble controlling the situation. A leading Sunni tribal leader explained to me: “The question of 2013 and 2014 that every shaykh faced was: ‘Is fighting the Islamic State a possibility if doing so is in support of a Shi’a government and against Islam?’”

In December 2013, severe clashes between Sunnis and the Iraqi army broke out in Anbar.<sup>8</sup> The Islamic State seized the opportunity and, on January 1, launched its own attack. The Iraqi army performed poorly. Soldiers often fled and abandoned their weapons, equipment, and vehicles, sometimes shedding their uniforms and donning civilian clothes to avoid being targeted. Large numbers of humvees and tanks fell into the Islamic State’s hands. So many soldiers deserted that the two divisions in Anbar dwindled to under 30 percent strength.<sup>9</sup> A few Sunni tribal leaders fought harder, but they too failed to hold back the tide. Most of their brethren either refused to side with the sectarian government or outright aligned with the Islamic State against the common government enemy.<sup>10</sup>

In June 2014, the Islamic State launched an even more ambitious offensive against Mosul and cities farther south along the Tigris. The offensive grew as Sunnis and antigovernment Sunni militias joined the movement. Two thousand fighters attacked ten thousand Iraqi soldiers and police in Mosul. Again, the police and soldiers showed scant will to fight. Within four days of the outset of the attack, nearly the entire defending 2nd Iraqi Division deserted.<sup>11</sup> Even the Kurdish Peshmerga, traditionally stauncher fighters, retreated to their capital of Irbil. Significant portions of the population welcomed the Islamic State as liberators from Shi’a oppression or as a legitimate Islamic movement. The Islamic State now controlled almost all of Sunni Arab Iraq.

During the next three years, the United States returned to Iraq, executed a major air campaign,

and sent advisors and special operations forces. Even with advisors, the vast bulk of the Iraqi army rarely stood and fought. Soldiers deploying to Ramadi reported that as many as 80 percent of their colleagues deserted before arriving in the city.<sup>12</sup> U.S. advisors often assessed that soldiers had very poor morale. They commented that the Iraqi army would attack only with overwhelming superiority, and the smallest setback could cause soldiers to flee. It was U.S. airstrikes, a small core of Iraqi special operations forces, and Shi’a militia forces that eventually—over three years of hard fighting and massive destruction—pushed the Islamic State back.

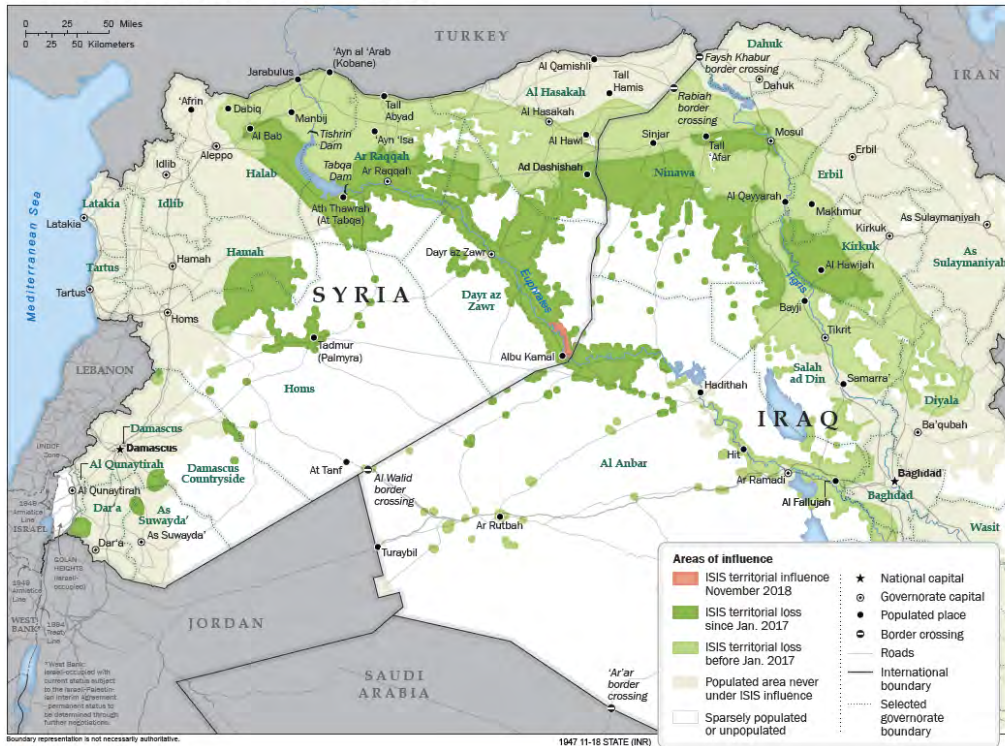
In Afghanistan, the Taliban were regaining ground even before the United States had drawn down to 9,800 at the end of 2014. Things got worse from there. In autumn 2015, the Taliban closed in on provincial capitals, attacking Kunduz city and then the defenses of Lashkar Gah (capital of Helmand). As in Iraq, the army and police performed poorly, summoning varying levels of resistance. Too many abandoned their post at the sight of the Taliban. A decade of U.S. training and advising seemed to have come to naught.

Kunduz is the most famous example. Roughly 500 Taliban routed 3,000 police, army, and other militias. There was almost a complete breakdown in the will to fight. Within two days of the beginning of the attack, the Taliban were occupying the city. A few scattered police posts and army patrols fought. Most fled before suffering any casualties. The army and police suffered fewer than 20 killed and wounded. Entire police posts, often well-fortified, were abandoned. Two full army battalions, roughly 1,000 men, ran away, leaving humvees, weapons, and ammunition behind.<sup>13</sup> Though Afghan special operations forces drove the Taliban out after a week (during which the devastating accidental airstrike on the Doctors Without Borders hospital occurred), it was the first time a provincial capital had fallen to the Taliban.

The situation worsened in 2016. The Taliban surrounded and assaulted four provincial capitals.



**FIGURE 1. Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Areas of Influence as of August 2018. (U.S. Department of State)**



Source: Office of the Special Envoy to Defeat ISIS, U.S. Department of State.

Government casualties in 2015 and 2016 exceeded 40,000 police and soldiers. Replacements could not make up the losses. Police losses doubled the number of new recruits.<sup>14</sup> By the end of the year, the Taliban controlled large portions of several provinces, and the army and police were on the ropes.

As in Iraq, the United States reasserted itself. First the Obama administration eased restrictions on the use of airstrikes and cancelled plans to draw down further. Then in August 2017 the Trump Administration authorized reinforcing Afghanistan to a total of 14,000 troops in country and issued a new strategy centered on bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table.

### Premature Withdrawal

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, governments verged on collapse, and the United States found itself forced

to return to the wars it had hoped and planned to end. Why did this come to pass? Why did the well-resourced and -trained Iraqi and Afghan militaries fail?

One of the clearest similarities between the defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan is that the reduction of U.S. advisors and air support that accompanied the respective drawdowns was a major shock. In Iraq, no airstrikes were available at all during the 2014 attacks. In Afghanistan, air support was still possible after 2014 but was much decreased in availability; airstrikes went from roughly 340 per month in 2012 to roughly 80 per month during 2015.<sup>15</sup> When assistance was provided, it was too little to do more than save key cities from capture. The White House expected that the Afghan army and police had the numerical and material superiority to succeed on their own. White House officials often

asked why the Afghan army needed air support when the Taliban so clearly did not.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, with drastically fewer advisors, supervision of manning and supply nearly disappeared. Corruption and simple mismanagement sapped combat strength.

A strong case exists that had U.S. forces been present or been used more vigorously, setbacks would not have occurred or at least would have been blunted. Yet the shock of U.S. withdrawal in and of itself cannot explain why the Iraqi and Afghan militaries could not stand on their own without U.S. support. The goal had been for them to do so. The very fact that U.S. support was still needed at all is proof of failure.

### *Sectarian and Ethnic Divides*

For Iraq, a critical factor is sectarian divisions. Maliki's oppressive policies encouraged Sunnis to support and join the Islamic State. Those policies particularly inhibited tribal leaders and politicians from siding in any way with the government. The policies divided tribal movements formerly united against AQI. Furthermore, sectarian policies trickled into the Iraqi army. Maliki purged the army of experienced commanders who had been trained by the U.S. military, especially Sunnis, and replaced them with less skilled loyalists.<sup>17</sup> The edge the Americans had trained into the army dulled. The net effect of Maliki's policies was to strengthen support for the Islamic State while weakening the government's defenses.

The important thing here is that sectarianism was not merely the outcome of Maliki's policies. It was a function of a deeper dynamic. The Sunni-Shi'a sectarian divide and real fear underpinned Maliki's oppressive policies. The defensiveness of Shi'a politicians and parties in the wake of decades of Sunni oppression—a belief that the Sunnis were plotting to do it again—propelled Maliki to ill-advised lengths. As Adeed Dawisha has argued, the Shi'a political leadership feared a Sunni resurgence because of Saddam's and AQI's histories of violence.<sup>18</sup> This fear was a powerful force against

Sunni-Shi'a reconciliation. Maliki depended on the support of a coalition of Shi'a groups, armed with militias, to maintain his premiership. He had to heed their sectarian defensiveness. It compounded his own biases toward oppressing the Sunnis.

### *Corruption*

In Afghanistan, corruption mattered more than sectarian (or ethnic) rifts. Corruption within the Afghan government whittled away the numerical and material superiority of the army and police.<sup>19</sup> Politicians and commanders skimmed pay, weapons, ammunition, vehicles, and fuel, either to sell it or hoard it to build their own power. On the battlefield, soldiers and police were left undersupplied and undermanned. Stockpiles were shallower than they should have been. Commanders put "ghost soldiers" on the rolls to pocket pay of nonexistent personnel. In Helmand, the total number of army, police, and local police was supposed to be 28,400. The actual number in 2015 was closer to 19,000. Individual soldiers and police lacked the standard number of magazines and rocket-propelled grenade rounds. In November 2016, General John W. Nicholson Jr., commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan, told Congress that corruption and poor leadership were at the root of recent defeats.<sup>20</sup>

Corruption was a function of deeply ingrained cultural, social, and political factors. In Afghanistan, communities run on patronage. Because of the power of tribal ties, a leader must deliver resources to his superiors for promotion and resources to his community for their survival. The community takes precedence over the good of the nation. Corruption provides the resources for patronage to work. Tribes, warlords, and politicians all use it for this purpose.<sup>21</sup>

Efforts to defeat corruption were disappointing. Institutionalization of meritocratic appointments, improved training, inspections, electronic pay systems, and various other ideas amounted to little. Patronage systems subverted, circumvented, or

subsumed them. Historically, this is unsurprising. Political scientists and economists such as Samuel Huntington, Roger Myerson, Francis Fukuyama, and many others consider patronage systems inherent to the functioning of developing states.<sup>22</sup> Corruption is known to take decades to reform, often as an outgrowth of prolonged political struggle and the development of state capacity and human capital.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes and in some places in Afghanistan, the negative effects of corruption could be managed. For the government, which could not escape the patronage system, corruption was extremely difficult to suppress and a drag on military effectiveness.

### Morale

A final reason for the defeats of Iraq and Afghanistan pertains to both cases—poor morale. For all the importance of sectarian rifts or corruption, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the average soldier and policeman simply did not want to fight as much as his Islamic State or Taliban counterpart. In battle after battle, numerically superior and well-supplied police and soldiers in intact defensive positions made a collective decision to throw in the towel rather than go another round. When under duress, police and soldiers too often just gave up. In the words of an Afghan villager:

*I saw with my own eyes government forces leave checkpoints. . . . I don't think the government can push the Taliban back. They don't fight. . . . We see the Americans supporting the government forces when they are trying to retake checkpoints, but then it's too late.<sup>24</sup>*

During the key battles—Kunduz, Marjah, Ramadi, Mosul—soldiers and police enjoyed numerical superiority and at least equal amounts of ammunition and supply (even after the effects of corruption) yet retreated without putting up much resistance. In Kunduz, the critical case of Afghan defeat, a post-battle evaluation found that nowhere had

soldiers or police left their posts because of a shortage of ammunition.<sup>25</sup> Whatever its prevalence, corruption had not denied these men the means to fight.

Poor morale may have partly been a secondary effect of sectarian rifts and corruption. It could not have been inspiring for a soldier to serve a government mired in sectarian infighting or to serve leaders more concerned with pocketing money than the welfare of their men. Still, these explanations are incomplete. The Iraqi army was predominantly Shi'a, after all. Presumably, government sectarianism was to their benefit. And the Islamic State was hardly a paragon of equality and diversity. The relationship of poor morale to corruption is similarly ambiguous. Forces under notoriously corrupt commanders could exhibit high levels of morale. Conversely, relatively scrupulous commanders often had trouble keeping their men in the field. The best units—the Afghan special operations forces—with the lowest corruption still needed U.S. advisors and airstrikes to make up for hesitancy under fire.

The reason for poor morale should therefore be tied to independent factors. A strong contender is identity. U.S.-built national-level forces could be said to have lacked the tie to what it meant to be Iraqi or Afghan necessary to generate high levels of morale.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, AQI (later the Islamic State) and the Taliban each stood for Islam and resistance to foreign occupation, virtues deeply rooted in what it means to be Iraqi or Afghan. They had an ability to inspire as well as unite that the Western-installed governments could never match. Iraq and Afghanistan have proud histories of resisting colonization. Iraqi kings and prime ministers have been delegitimized by their support for Great Britain. Among tribal leaders, participation in the 1920 revolt against the British is a badge of honor. The Afghans of course pride themselves on the defeat of a series of occupiers, especially the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Soviets in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup>

As the predecessor of the Islamic State, AQI had demonstrated this ability to inspire from 2005





A decade of training and advising by the United States seemed to have come to naught, as many Afghan security forces abandoned their posts as the Taliban closed in on Kunduz in 2015. (U.S. Air Force/Dustin Payne)

to 2007. During those years, AQI had risen on its own and overwhelmed the tribes and other resistance groups, gaining widespread support from locals. AQI and later the Islamic State gathered this momentum naturally, with limited outside help, thanks in part to ideology. Sunnis may have questioned AQI's version of Islam, but jihad against the infidel appears to have been inspiring.<sup>28</sup>

The Iraqi national army, by comparison, never acquired a sense of nationalism. Its soldiers were caught between the extremism of the Islamic State and the sectarianism of Shi'a militias. The army stood for a vague attempt at nationalism, while the Islamic State stood for both Sunni identity and Islam, and the Shi'a militias stood for Shi'a identity and Islam. U.S. commanders assessed army soldiers to be far less ideologically inclined than their more aggressive Shi'a militia counterparts. Iraqi generals were known to despair that their army was nothing, a shadow of Saddam Hussein's army.<sup>29</sup> "There is no sense of nation," said one U.S. general, an astute observer of the Iraqi army. "The republic goes no farther than Baghdad."<sup>30</sup>

In Afghanistan, the effect of identity was even more pronounced. The fact that the government had been created by the United States and hosted

thousands of U.S. troops constrained its ability to muster high levels of morale. Former Taliban ambassador to the United Nations and member of the Afghan High Peace Council, Abdul Hakim Mujahed—a religious scholar with access to the Taliban but an independent perspective—explained this clearly to me in 2014:

*The insurgency is strong now. There are two things that make them strong. First, the government fails to defend Islam. Second, the government fails to defend Afghan sovereignty. The United States keeps doing night raids and killing civilians, even though, time after time, President Karzai orders them to stop.*<sup>31</sup>

Afghan generals found the same thing. One general admitted, "The enemies are ideological people; their slogan is Jihad and Heaven but our army doesn't have that motive and slogan."<sup>32</sup>

Too often, the police and soldiers did not believe in the government.<sup>33</sup> In 2015, the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies surveyed 1,657 national police in 11 provinces throughout Afghanistan and asked them about their beliefs. Respondents were deeply conflicted about why they were fighting. Only 11 percent had joined the police to fight the Taliban. Certainly,

a far larger percentage of Taliban had joined to fight the government. The image of a puppet government was a key factor. According to the report, many interviewees claimed that police “rank and file are not convinced that they are fighting for a just cause.”<sup>34</sup> Seventy percent of respondents said the government was overly influenced by the West. Nearly a third believed that Taliban authority was legitimate. On top of this, 83 percent believed that violence was justified against a government that criticized Islam, which Western influence presumably encouraged.<sup>35</sup> These figures imply shortcomings in the legitimacy of violence on behalf of a government that did not always live up to the ideal of Afghan identity.

The accomplished anthropologist David Edwards touches on the link between morale and identity in *Caravan of Martyrs*, in which he examines the causes of martyrdom and suicide bombing in Afghanistan. Edwards finds that just as an Afghan tribesman is obligated to defend his family and land, so too is he obligated to do everything in his power to defend the Afghan homeland and seek vengeance when that is not possible. A man who does otherwise is nothing. Prolonged U.S. occupation prods at this obligation. Not all Afghans are driven to become suicide bombers, but enough are:

*Some find that the way they can recover their honor and identity is by killing themselves in the process of killing those who have defiled their honor. . . . The bomber reclaims lost honor and standing in the community, he does his duty (farz'ain) according to Islam (as interpreted by Taliban clerics), and he performs the political act of striking an unjust oppressor.*<sup>36</sup>

In my own study of Afghanistan and Iraq, I have come to feel that our very presence treads on what it means to be Afghan or Iraqi. It dares young men to fight. It animates Taliban and Islamic State fighters. It saps the will of policemen and soldiers, giving cause to flee rather than fight. This explanation is powerful

because it answers questions that sectarianism or corruption cannot. It is dangerous because it can be misinterpreted to mean that all Muslims are bent on war or, worse, are fanatics. On the contrary, the point is that it is tougher to risk life for country when fighting alongside what some would call an occupier.

## The Intractability of Iraq and Afghanistan

What could have been done to address these problems? The list is long. Biddle, McMaster, and others have pointed out that the United States could have applied greater pressure, especially in the form of conditionality, upon the Iraqi and Afghan governments to adhere to the precepts of democracy or to counter corruption.<sup>37</sup> There are numerous occasions when the United States was hands off in sectarian politics in Iraq and countercorruption reforms in Afghanistan. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan has argued that much greater attention could also have been paid to accountability of U.S. funds and to the indictment of criminals.<sup>38</sup> On poor morale, I myself have claimed that the United States could have pressured for better leadership.

Though I am in favor of all these measures, the difference they would have made is questionable. It is unlikely they could have changed the underlying dynamics that pulled Iraq and Afghanistan back to violence. The thing about sectarian rifts, corruption, and identity is that none are terribly responsive to actions on the part of the United States. There are few quick solutions.<sup>39</sup> Only as long as they were physically present could U.S. boots and guns countervail the effects of such ingrained dynamics. Once the United States drew down, the dynamics reasserted themselves, and each country relapsed into civil war.

Obama's strategy to deal with the setbacks in the two countries after 2014 reflected a recognition of this reality. The strategy was designed to avoid overcommitment. Fewer than 5,000 troops were sent to Iraq. Most were dedicated to training



and advising and were forbidden to enter combat. Heavy airstrikes were used to give the Iraqi forces an advantage. In reaction to setbacks in Afghanistan, Obama eased restrictions on airstrikes (though less than in Iraq) and reversed his plans to withdraw. First, in 2015, he decided to keep 9,800 troops into 2016. Then, in May 2016, he decided to keep 8,400, with no drawdown timeline. Nonetheless, he remained determined to hold numbers below 10,000 and not fall back into a heavy commitment. In both countries, the onus was placed on the host government to bear the brunt of combat.

### Rethinking Intervention

The lesson is that internal cultural, historical, and social dynamics could not be redirected in the span of a few years. The strategy of intervening, building up a government, and then withdrawing was off. U.S. forces could never leave without risking the re-emergence of the threat. In practice, the entire notion of an “exit strategy” was inconsistent with the goal of keeping a government afloat or a terrorist threat suppressed. In this regard, the cost of the surges dramatically outweighed the gains. The surges had bought only a few years of peace. The same long-term result could have been attained with far fewer forces.

Today, the United States seems to be moving away from interventions. The *U.S. National Defense Strategy of 2018* focuses on China and Russia as major adversaries instead of insurgents and terrorists in the Middle East and South Asia. At the end of 2018, President Trump announced that the United States would leave Syria, and newspapers reported he would halve forces in Afghanistan. Intervention may soon be in America’s rear-view mirror. But that has not happened yet. Violence in Syria and Afghanistan continues, and President Trump’s stated goal is to stay in Iraq and to see through a peace settlement in Afghanistan. Intervention and conflict stabilization remain relevant issues.

We should rethink counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, intervention, and stabilization. The idea that a military intervention can have an end—or last just a few years—and create lasting change has justified strategies for Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Vietnam before them. It is influential and appealing to politicians who want to do something but think the United States cannot stay forever. Its persistence can be seen in the continuing U.S. military presence in Syria and the reinforcement of Afghanistan in 2017. The idea should be viewed cautiously. Afghanistan and Iraq exemplify how intervention may be a costly, open-ended project. Gains may last only as long as intervening forces are present.

The two cases do not make a general theory, but they are weighty enough to merit significant consideration in any policy discussion on intervention. The cases where an intervening power succeeded without long-term presence, such as Oman, El Salvador, and Colombia, seem to be too few and too unique to be a basis for policy.<sup>40</sup> They do not lessen the need for caution. In the most well-known cases of success, decades of occupation, violence, and sometimes oppression facilitated change, not a few years of military operations. The more famous successes—Malaya, Philippines, Northern Ireland, and Bosnia—were multi-decade (and larger) commitments and thus underline the main point. It can be argued that the interveners never left. Although certain circumstances may facilitate success, that result would appear rather hopeful barring decades-long presence.

Where does this leave the United States in terms of strategy and intervention? How should we rethink? Two options deserve consideration. Others exist and are worthy of study, but these two strike me as sober.

The first is a long-term, open-ended commitment in order to sustain successes. Understanding that military commitment is likely to be severely prolonged and permanent gains are unlikely should encourage highly selective intervention choices and thrifty strategies that are sustainable over the long

term. The key question for any strategist should be: what is the minimum force to secure the minimum U.S. interests for as long as possible? Such an option means accepting limited aims and persistent violence in order to foreswear a heavy and expensive troop presence. The latter may do better at reducing violence but is more often than not too costly to be sustainable over the time spans required in intervention. The former is preferable—probably a force of 500 to 15,000 to suppress terrorist threats for an open-ended commitment. This too is hardly cheap. But if we seek to suppress terrorist threats, the United States may have to pay for troop deployments for decades and accept the accompanying casualties.

There are times when a full-blown intervention of tens of thousands of troops over decades has been warranted. Successful ones, however, entail keeping large numbers of forces in place for extended periods. That has only been acceptable when the stakes are very high, such as the Philippines, Germany, Japan, or South Korea. The stakes of the Middle East and South Asia have always been more ambiguous. In places like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, the acme of good strategy is to deploy the lightest force possible to maintain pressure on terrorists and prevent the host government (or partner) from falling.

The prolonged nature of this line of strategic thinking was frustrating for the Obama Administration, as it is for the Trump Administration. That frustration has so far been unavoidable. The cost of open-ended commitment should give any general, secretary of defense, senator, or commander-in-chief pause. The prospect of protracted costs should devalue intervention, often deterring the endeavor entirely.

This brings us to the second option. In this option, the United States would not directly intervene militarily at all. Instead, it would fund capable partners, execute select counterterrorist strikes from offshore against critical threats when necessary, and try to manage events indirectly. Living with

instability somewhere in the world and riding out any terrorist threat may be better than the financial and human expenses of addressing it directly. Under this option, the United States would let the civil wars run their course, thinking beyond outright intervention and focusing on attaining the best outcome over a few decades. Over time, insurgencies may weaken, and new opportunities may emerge. A government may find its legs on its own, or a more capable leader may take the reins. Insurgent organizations may collapse from their own discord. The difficulties inherent in leadership transitions may weaken an adversary's grasp on power. Extremist ideologies may burn themselves out. Even if insurgents win in a country like Iraq or Afghanistan, their regimes may only last a decade before a new civil war resumes and a new player—perhaps more friendly to the United States—takes the stage. All this could occur within the time span of a costly intervention.

Letting countries find their own path may have unappreciated virtues. For one, if sending troops delegitimizes partners, staying out would give a partner the chance of preserving real legitimacy and standing on its own, instead of permanently depending upon the United States. Ditching “occupying” troops is a way an ally could retain legitimacy and the adversary *might* be defeated, setting the stage for stability and peace.<sup>41</sup> Staying out offers the definitive solution that eludes intervention. This policy would be a gamble. An adversary might win—but so might an ally. The situation could be better than any that might be attained by U.S. troops. If U.S. troops are on the ground, the lesson of Iraq and Afghanistan is that the host military will have trouble ever building such legitimacy, foreign forces will have to stay, and the vicious cycle will go on and on.

The last observation I would like to bring up concerns the morality of intervention. A moral dilemma arises from the pursuit of light, low-cost, sustainable intervention strategies. If the intervening power is not staying permanently and in

sufficient force to suppress insurgents or terrorists, then it may be sustaining instability. It is saving an endangered government but not doing enough to halt violence afflicting its constituents. The painful fact is that the local population may be better off under order instilled by a victorious adversary. The intervening power is exposing them to harm in order to defend its own people from terrorist attack or some other threat. In contrast to the massive, overly expensive intervention that brings at least temporary stability, the sustainable, affordable strategy can leave the local population in a state of unending civil war. At the end of the day, intervention can boil down to a terrible tradeoff between the well-being of American (or European or Chinese or Russian) citizens and the well-being of the people of the host nation. Professor Odd Arne Westad wrote at the end of his magisterial *The Global Cold War* that “Cold War ideologies and superpower interventions . . . helped put a number of Third World countries in a state of semipermanent civil war” and caused untold harm to their peoples in pursuit of marginal interests. His finding echoes around us today. In the broad sweep of history, it is responsible to ask ourselves how often intervention is truly worth it. **PRISM**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The research for this article comes from years spent as a civilian advisor in Iraq and Afghanistan and more recently in repeated trips to each country. Some of the research has already appeared in two books—*War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier and Illusions of Victory: The Anbar Awakening and the Rise of the Islamic State*. Other research is from an ongoing book project on the Afghan war.

<sup>2</sup> “President Bush Addresses Nation on Iraq War,” transcript, *Washington Post*, January 10, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 498.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman, and Jacob Shapiro, “Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007,” *International Security* 37, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 7–11.

<sup>5</sup> Todd Harrison, *Estimating Funding for Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary

Assessments, 2009); Todd Harrison, “Analysis of the FY2012 Defense Budget,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2011, 6–7.

<sup>6</sup> Discussion with U.S. military advisors, al-Asad airbase, al-Anbar province, January 8, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Discussion with key Albu Nimr tribal leader, Amman, Jordan, March 9, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Yasir Ghazi, “Deadly Clashes between Iraqi Forces and Tribal Fighters in Anbar,” *New York Times*, December 30, 2013; “Al Qaeda Seizes Partial Control of 2 Cities in Western Iraq,” *The Long War Journal* (blog), www.longwarjournal.org, January 2, 2014; Michael Knights, “The ISIL’s Stand in the Ramadi-Falluja Corridor,” *CTC Sentinel*, May 29, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Discussion with Marine command, Kuwait, August 24, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Ghazi, “Deadly Clashes Between Iraqi Forces and Tribal Fighters in Anbar”; “Al Qaeda Seizes Partial Control of 2 Cities in Western Iraq”; Liz Sly, “Al-Qaeda Force Captures Fallujah Amid Rise in Violence in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, January 3, 2014; Knights, “The ISIL’s Stand in the Ramadi-Falluja Corridor”; Erin Banco, “Sunni Tribesmen Helped ISIS Take Control of Ramadi, Leaders Say,” *International Business Times*, May 22, 2015; Robert Tollast, “Civil Wars of Iraq’s Sunni Tribes: Fault Lines Within 8 Sunni Tribes and Sub-tribes, 2003–2016,” 1001IraqiThoughts.com, March 28, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Jessica Lewis, “The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham Captures Mosul and Advances Toward Baghdad,” Institute for the Study of War, June 11, 2014; Ned Parker, Isabel Coles, and Raheem Salman, “Special Report: How Mosul Fell—An Iraqi General Disputes Baghdad’s story,” Reuters, October 14, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Discussion with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) officer, Baghdad, July 29, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> “Unhappy Anniversary: Afghanistan and a Resurgent Taliban,” *Economist*, October 3, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Mujib Mashal and Fahim Abed, “Afghan Forces, Their Numbers Dwindling Sharply, Face a Resurgent Taliban,” *New York Times*, October 13, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> These figures are for numbers of weapons released. “U.S. Airpower in Afghanistan: 2012–2017,” AFCENT Public Affairs Release, June 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Author’s observation from time as political advisor to General Dunford, Commander, International Security Assistance Force, 2013–14.

<sup>17</sup> Parker, Coles, and Salman, “Special Report: How Mosul Fell”; visit to CTS training facility, Baghdad, January 7, 2016; discussion with UNDP officer, July 30, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Adeed Dawisha, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 270.

<sup>19</sup> In Iraq, corruption was also a problem, just to a lesser extent than in Afghanistan. Maliki's politicization of the army allowed corruption to rise. Senior officers were involved in oil smuggling, blackmailing contractors, sale of military equipment on the black market, and ghost soldier schemes. It undermined army effectiveness. Manning in Mosul in 2014 was at less than half of the assigned 25,000 soldiers and police. At the time of the battle, heavy weapons and ammunition for all types of arms was lacking, leaving soldiers worse off to face the Islamic State fighters. "Former Mosul Mayor Says Corruption Led to ISIS Takeover," *Al-Monitor*, July 2, 2014; Parker, Coles, and Salman, "Special Report: How Mosul Fell."

<sup>20</sup> See also Vanda Felbab-Brown, "How Predatory Crime and Corruption in Afghanistan Underpin the Taliban Insurgency," *Brookings Institute*, April 18, 2017, <[www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/04/18/how-predatory-crime-and-corruption-in-afghanistan-underpin-the-taliban-insurgency/](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/04/18/how-predatory-crime-and-corruption-in-afghanistan-underpin-the-taliban-insurgency/)>.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 304.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Myerson, "Foundations of the State in Theory and Practice," [home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/fieldman.pdf](http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/fieldman.pdf), October 2007; Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "What is Corruption?" in *Against Corruption: A Collection of Essays* (London: UK Government Stationery Office, 2016); Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 334.

<sup>24</sup> Sune Engel Rasmussen, "First Helmand, Then Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, September 21, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> "Saleh: Weakness in Leadership Was the Cause of the Collapse of Kunduz," *VOA Pashto*, November 21, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of "Will to Fight: Sacred Values, Identify Fusion, and Spiritual Formidability," see Scott Atran, "The Islamic State Revolution," in *Beyond Convergence: World Without Order*, ed. Hilary Matfess and Michael Miklaucic (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 341–342.

<sup>28</sup> Anthony Shadid, "In Anbar, U.S.-Allied Tribal Chiefs Feel Deep Sense of Abandonment," *Washington Post*, October 3, 2009; Sam Dagher, "In Anbar Province, New Leadership, but Old Problems Persist," *New York Times*, September 12, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Discussion with U.S. military advisors, al-Asad airbase, Anbar province, January 8, 2016; discussion with

Marine command, Kuwait, August 24, 2015; discussion with key Abu Nimr tribal leader, Amman, Jordan, March 9, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Discussion with U.S. generals, Irbil, Iraq, October 20, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Discussion with Abdul Hakim Mujahed, former Taliban ambassador to the United Nations, Kabul, January 18, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Army of Afghanistan: A Political History of a Fragile Institution* (London: Hurst, 2015), 203.

<sup>33</sup> Discussion with Kabul University professor, Kabul, March 2, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Zaman and Abdul Hadi Khalid, "Trends of Radicalization among the Ranks of the Afghan National Police," *Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies*, November 2015, 19–20.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 15–17, 19–20.

<sup>36</sup> David Edwards, *Caravan of Martyrs: Sacrifice and Suicide Bombing in Afghanistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 148.

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Biddle, "Policy Implications for the United States," in David Lake and Eli Berman, eds., *Proxy Wars: Fighting Terrorists, Insurgents, and Drug Lords through Local Agents* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming). Stephen Biddle, "Building Security Forces and Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency," *Daedalus* 6, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 126–138; Michelle Hughes and Michael Miklaucic, eds., *Impunity: Countering Illicit Power in War and Transition* (Washington, DC: Center for Complex Operations, 2016); Sarah Chayes, *Thieves of State: How Corruption Threatens Global Security* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> "Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," *Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction*, September 2017.

<sup>39</sup> As James Fearon wrote in his seminal piece on Iraq's civil war, sectarian rifts during civil war are notoriously difficult to mend: "The historical evidence suggests that this is a Sisyphean task." James Fearon, "Iraq's Civil War," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2007): 7.

<sup>40</sup> Oman was a communist insurgency in an Islamic state, a counterinsurgent's dream. El Salvador is the size of a postage stamp and the insurgency's outside backer—the Soviet Union—collapsed. Colombia had a good government and actually enjoyed long-term U.S. support, so it may not even be an exception to the rule.

<sup>41</sup> For support for this approach see Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 335.

<sup>42</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 396–407.





In 2011, Afghan government and International Security Assistance Force officials take part in a *shura* with elders in Zabul province, Afghanistan. The Zabul Provincial Reconstruction Team visited the village to talk with elders and help Afghan National Security Forces distribute winter supplies. (U.S. Air Force/Brian Ferguson)



# Pathologies of Centralized State-Building

By Jennifer Murtazashvili

The international community, led by the United States, has invested trillions of dollars in state-building efforts during the past two decades. Yet despite this commitment of substantial resources, conflict and violence remain a challenge in fragile states. It therefore seems especially important to consider the reasons why state-building has not lived up to its expectations.

Past state-building efforts were predicated on the belief that a centralized government would improve prospects for political order and economic development. These efforts therefore have typically emphasized powerful national governments and centralized bureaucratic administration as the keys to generating improvements in the state's provision of public goods, including rule of law and collective security.

This article challenges the underlying assumptions to that approach, arguing that centralization actually undermines efforts to stabilize and rebuild fragile states. It describes several risks centralization poses for effective state-building. For example, many highly centralized governments prey on their own citizens and are therefore prone to civil unrest, conflict, and collapse.<sup>1</sup> Most of the countries that have experienced prolonged civil conflict over the past several decades—including Afghanistan, Libya, Myanmar, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen—had extremely centralized governments prior to the outbreak of conflict. As Roger Myerson points out, centralization may also alienate local elites, resulting in a return to conflict and violence in states subjected to foreign state-building.<sup>2</sup> Another risk is that centralization undermines the quality of public administration by making it largely unresponsive to local demands.

The obvious alternative to trying to build powerful central governments is to encourage polycentrism. Polycentrism allows multiple, coexisting centers of power, which provides for local autonomy in collective decisionmaking.<sup>3</sup> Political decentralization promises several benefits. A more robust system of local governance can reduce the incentives to rebel against the central government and provides resources for those regions to defend themselves from outsiders.<sup>4</sup> Polycentrism can also provide a foundation for local self-governance and reduce the state's administrative burden by allowing communities to govern their own affairs. By decentralizing political decisionmaking, the state can also improve the responsiveness of the government to local demands, and in the process improve the efficiency of public goods provision.

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I use evidence from Afghanistan to illustrate my theory of the pathologies of current models of centralized state-building. Despite vast investments, the government in Kabul has limited legitimacy and struggles to provide public goods. One plausible explanation for the failure of state-building in Afghanistan is that the government remains extremely centralized in all critical dimensions, including the power of the executive, subnational governance, judicial institutions, public budgeting and finance, and the national security forces. Of these, only the Afghan National Army has implemented meaningful reforms. In the other areas, almost no reform has occurred compared to the institutional status quo before 2001. A consequence is that most Afghans continue to experience the same type of centralized, predatory state that they endured prior to 2001. Paradoxically, by resurrecting the centralized, predatory state, the stabilization effort continues to give rise to an antigovernment insurgency across the country.

### The Case for Decentralization

It is not a mystery that policymakers, both local and international, would seek to build strong central governments in states riven by conflict. Historically, states emerged to facilitate commerce and provide collective defense at scale, as societies grew and became increasingly complex and older, more traditional political forms, such as tribes, clans, or fiefdoms, were insufficient for the evolving political challenges. Political leaders seeking monopolistic power over their territory are incentivized to provide public goods and encourage production to generate more revenue via taxation.<sup>5</sup> As institutions of wealth creation are established, the government must invest in collective defense to defend commercial interests from external predators.<sup>6</sup> Centralized state capacity thus contributes to economic development and political order.

A government powerful enough to provide these public goods, however, can also use its power for destructive purposes or to misappropriate public goods.<sup>7</sup> To prevent that unwelcome outcome, state authorities must be constrained by counterbalancing political institutions that empower citizens to participate in collective decisionmaking.<sup>8</sup> This is especially important in conflict-affected states where insurgencies began as revolts against predatory, unconstrained central authorities.

Decentralization is a form of polycentrism and can be found in both *de jure* and *de facto* manifestations. *De jure* decentralization provides for constitutional rights of local units in a political system to determine their collective futures. Such decentralization is the basis for formal, law-based self-governance. *De facto* decentralization occurs when the central government institutions are unable to impose their will on local jurisdictions, thus yielding authority by default.

One justification for decentralization is that it provides a political architecture for checks and balances in government. Local authorities can constrain central governments in ways that prevent a drift toward predatory practices. Decentralization also provides institutional mechanisms for the government to acquire knowledge of local conditions, needs, and demands. The government requires this information to provide public goods efficiently. The grant of local autonomy may even in itself provide legitimacy to the central government.

Local autonomy and the experience of self-governance are valuable in conflict-affected states where communities must often rely on local problem-solving skills when the central government is unable or unwilling to address local needs. Most places plagued by long-term conflict are home to a plethora of powerful “warlords” or local commanders. Stabilization efforts typically seek to bring these individuals under the umbrella of a centralized state, often neglecting the role such

individuals and groups play in crafting order based on local preferences.

Decentralized governance is not a panacea. Politicians and leaders do not become angels simply because their power extends to the local context. There are indeed risks associated with decentralization, such as local corruption. Nonetheless, the risk from local rulers behaving badly pales in comparison to grand corruption at the national level, where leaders often have few ties to local communities. In stabilization contexts, this situation is exacerbated as many view those appointed by the international community as puppets rather than legitimate leaders. Another fear is that decentralized systems may fail to maintain cohesion. Such systems may be more prone to separatist movements.

### The Political Problem of State-Building

Despite the benefits of political decentralization in state-building, international and domestic actors typically prefer the centralization model. Consider the international actors who play an important role in state-building efforts. First, in unstable environments, outside actors—both military and civilian—prefer to interact with entities that exercise unity of command. They seek one interlocutor upon whom they can count to implement policies. The more actors involved, the more diffuse the decisionmaking, which tends to slow down the policymaking process.<sup>9</sup> Second, it is easier for external actors to exert influence over a unified single entity rather than a group of individuals; external actors prefer to have control centralized in the capital in order to exercise oversight and have a single accessible partner to hold accountable. Centralized government reflects the desires of the international community in postconflict situations because they have a primary relationship with the national figures they believe they can control.

Newly elected domestic leaders also prefer highly centralized power, especially when this authority comes with international support. In most conflict

environments, power tends to diffuse across a range of actors at subnational levels who may have recently challenged a newly installed leader. During the immediate postconflict period, new leaders desire centralized authority, enabling them to exert greater control over regions and increasing their national authority. Unlike states not affected by conflict, the decentralization issue presents very real threats to the endurance of a polity, as subnational regions may be controlled by or under the heavy influence of armed groups that may pose or have recently posed a serious challenge to the central government.

These demands for political and administrative centralization often conflict with the reality of political power in such contexts. During conflict, power necessarily diffuses as central governments lose their monopoly of violence. It is the primary goal of stabilization and state-building efforts to help nascent states assemble or reassemble disparate pieces of power into a cohesive unit. But during this process, policymakers often eschew informal rules, norms, and other practices that emerge locally during periods of conflict.

New governments seeking to assert authority typically view informal practices as impediments to the uniformity of authority they seek to establish. These rules may be the result of longstanding custom or newly developed practices that emerged as coping mechanisms during conflict. They may be rules imposed by warlords or local commanders who were parties to the conflict. Regardless of their origin, those international and domestic forces seeking to build and stabilize states see them as a source of fragmentation rather than contributing to the coherence and legitimacy of a new government.

The desire to centralize authority and impose uniform rule over fragmented and weakly institutionalized environments widens the gap between *de facto* practices and *de jure* laws and regulations. This growing gap challenges both development and stability. Typically, stabilization processes do not

seek to modify their rules and procedures to account for local practices but instead attempt to encourage citizens to turn to the state. By imposing highly centralized forms of governance in fragmented environments, stabilization efforts inadvertently undermine their own mission by exacerbating development challenges in such contexts.

In addition to centralization, the international community frequently prioritizes national elections, rather than the quality of governance, as the measure of success. In the “golden hour” after the cloud of war clears, state-builders rush to congratulate themselves for organizing successful elections that they believe consolidate political transformation. The distribution of power—especially to subnational units—and the way that power is executed through the bureaucracy receive comparatively little attention. However, national elections are often a poor measure of the quality of government. They have in many instances little bearing on the provision of public goods or implementation of beneficial policies. Indeed, in some instances, non-democracies may be better at governance, in terms of delivery of services, predictability, and order, than democracies.<sup>10</sup>

## The Afghan Context

The desire for greater political centralization is perhaps the fundamental political theme in Afghan history. From its inception with the Durrani empire in 1747, the Afghan state was more like a loose confederation of tribes than a centralized state, with tribal and local leaders as well as blood relatives of the monarch exerting substantial autonomy. Political power was exercised through indirect rule, in which monarchs and other political leaders exerted authority through a network of autonomous princes while maintaining a role for tribal and customary authority.

Abdur Rahman sought to centralize government during his brutal reign from 1880 to 1901. He took it upon himself to stamp out the

“middlemen”—tribal and customary leaders, as well as religious authorities—whom he viewed as a source of political disorder. Subsequent regimes continued these efforts at centralization, although the tactics were less brutal. Amanullah (1919–29) attempted to increase the role of the state in Afghan society and economy through a series of centralized directives. He admired the strong leadership of Atatürk in Turkey, who used executive authority to promote an expansive agenda of social transformation. However, most of Amanullah’s reforms were met with opposition, and he was ultimately ousted in a peasant-led rebellion that briefly unseated the Afghan monarchy.

After several years of instability, Afghanistan experienced a long peace under the rule of the Musahiban, a Durrani Pashtun sub-tribe from which its leaders descended. These leaders included Zahir Shah, who ruled from 1933 until his overthrow in a bloodless palace coup by his cousin, Daud, in 1973. Daud ruled from 1973 until 1978, when he was ousted by a Soviet-supported faction of the Afghan communist party.

In general, the Musahiban pursued an economic development strategy that relied heavily on foreign subsidies from both the United States and the Soviet Union, leading to continuation of the rentier state dynamics begun in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when monarchs began accepting British aid in turn for quiescence. They also relied on centralized economic planning. Despite a constitutional reform in 1964 that created a brief flirtation with democracy under a constitutional monarchy, the monarchy remained committed to principles of centralism, with most important governance decisions emanating from Kabul.

The growing influence of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan after World War II reinforced the historical struggle toward increasing centralization. Beginning with Daud’s reign as Prime Minister in the 1950s (he would later become president in





In August 2009, Afghan locals review ballots before voting in the heavily anticipated Afghanistan elections in Barge Matal. Elections are frequently a priority of the international community in post-conflict and even in conflict-afflicted states. (U.S. Army/ Christopher W. Allison)

1973), the Afghan government adopted many Soviet features. Daud famously fell out with the Americans and grew to mistrust them after his unconditional requests for weapons systems to facilitate the creation of a modern army were rejected by Washington, which he perceived to support newly independent Pakistan. Labelled the “Red Prince,” Daud also imported bureaucratic centralization and

five-year plans along with Soviet loans. The organization of the central government, the system of public financial management, and the bureaucracy were very similar in design to their Soviet counterparts. Such influence continued to grow over time and escalated in 1978 with the Saur revolution that brought Afghan communists to power for the first time and marked the end of the Afghan monarchy.



The Saur revolution of April 1978 brought a divisive period in which the Khalq and Parcham factions of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) vied for control. In late 1979, the Soviets invaded partly in response to instability brought about by local opposition to Khalq policies. Soviet leaders were wary that the Afghan government had moved too quickly in its efforts to achieve "communism" and that its actions would continue to provoke unrest in the countryside (which they did, as the mujahideen emerged in direct response to communist policies). They were also increasingly wary of the infighting among the PDPA factions that fueled instability. Once the Soviets invaded, the centralized Soviet imprint on Afghan bureaucracy and government became heavier. Although the Soviets did move to reverse some of the more drastic reforms initially imposed by the Khalqis, they continued to support centralized state control.

The PDPA government fell in 1992. Although there have been few studies of governance during the civil war period (1992–96), formal institutions had very little influence. Once the Taliban government (1996–2001) came to power, it began to reform; however, the logic of Taliban governance was also one of centralization. Instead of relying on old networks of bureaucrats, the Taliban relied on a network of its own local mullahs to administer authority. But the character of public administration was characterized by centralized governance. While the Taliban were never fully able to provide effective central administration, they did little to encourage local autonomy.

### Post-Taliban State-Building

After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization partners, along with several factions of the Afghan resistance and the former monarchy, gathered to sign the Bonn Accords, which established the 1964 constitution as the interim source of law for the country. The agreement appointed an interim president, Hamid Karzai,

and planned for elections. Thus, the first move of the "new" Afghan state was to adopt a decades-old constitution. Yet over the course of a decade, the 1964 constitution had failed to establish a stable government, let alone a government that could implement reforms. In fact, many Afghans met the overthrow of the 1964 constitution by Daud with relief, believing it to be inherently unstable and preferring authoritarian rule.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the constitution of 2004 would copy many elements directly from the 1964 constitution. Indeed, in most major areas of Afghan public administration—the national government, the degree of centralization of the government, judicial institutions, public finance, the security forces, and administration of land—state-building efforts have reinforced old, inefficient institutions. Interestingly, one exception is the Afghan National Army.

### *The Executive*

The 2004 Afghan constitution established a presidential system with a bicameral parliament. Although it provides for a separation of powers between the president, the legislative branch, and the judiciary, the executive branch has remained by far the strongest. Not only does it have the authority to appoint members of the judiciary, it is also responsible for appointing one-third of the upper house of the National Assembly. The strength of the executive mimics the overwhelming authority of the 1964 constitution. Elections notwithstanding, the executive has nearly the same powers that Afghan kings exercised.

During the hotly contested 2014 presidential election between Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, tainted by allegations of corruption and fraud, a growing number of doubters began to criticize the strong presidential system. To resolve the disputed electoral result, the United States brokered a deal between the two candidates that created a new chief executive officer (CEO) who would sit alongside the president. Cabinet positions would be jointly appointed by the two leaders. While the creation of

the new CEO position facilitated a power-sharing agreement, it is unclear the degree to which such an extraconstitutional system will endure. The creation of a new powerful position atop a strongly centralized presidential system is inherently unstable.

Ironically, those involved in drafting the 2004 constitution considered a parliamentary system featuring both a president and a prime minister, but the drafting commission ultimately shifted to a strong presidential system, creating a powerful executive with complete authority to appoint the cabinet, subject to the approval of the National Assembly. The rationale for this shift was that under conditions of state weakness, creating a parliamentary system characterized by factions would yield a “fragmented body dominated by warlords, local factions, and even drug traffickers.”<sup>12</sup> Both Afghan and foreign policymakers involved in the state-building process feared that a weak executive would be incapable of generating state capacity, as infighting would dominate politics. A strong executive, however, could help rapidly steward preferred policies so a presidential system without substantial checks and balances was ratified.

The executive authority of the president was not based on a model of separated powers. Rather, its origins lie in a pre-democratic constitution with powers that were designed to be wielded by a monarch. It should therefore come as no surprise that since 2001, the National Assembly has not played a sustained role challenging executive authority on public policy issues.

### *Subnational Governance*

The 2004 constitution created a centralized political system and public administration that were identical in form and function to the monarchy and communist governments. All subnational government officials—including provincial and district governors—are to be appointed by the central government in Kabul without constituent input. The design of subnational government bears a very heavy Soviet

imprint. The appointment system and organization of the bureaucracy at the subnational level in Afghanistan are virtually identical to the Soviet model upon which it was based.

The notion that there is even formal local government in Afghanistan is deceptive, as subnational officials, including both provincial and district governors, are appointed by and beholden to Kabul. Although the appointment process is technically controlled by the Independent Directorate for Local Government in Kabul (an executive agency under the president), the appointment process is highly political and has emerged as a system of patronage for the central government. Individuals have no say in who runs their local government. There is no representation at the local level. In a 2016 survey, just 43 percent of Afghans said that they have influence over local government officials.<sup>13</sup> This heavily centralized *de jure* system of government stands in stark contrast to—and disregards—the robust system of *de facto* informal governance that exists in communities around the country.

Not only are provincial and district governors appointed from Kabul, the authority to assign local government bureaucrats—representatives of the various national ministries—is also reserved for the line ministries in Kabul. This does not mean, however, that powerful local figures cannot emerge as both provincial and district governors. Some effective provincial governors have emerged, many of whom are or were powerful warlords affiliated with mujahedin parties. Their effectiveness is due to their independence from Kabul with respect to resources or legitimacy. Instead, they govern by almost completely disregarding the formal laws and rules meant to constrain their local authority.

The 2004 constitution called for the creation of elected provincial, district, and village councils. By early 2019, there had been three rounds of provincial council elections (2005, 2009, 2014), but these elections have not yielded local councils that play an

important role in checking the authority of provincial governors. Provincial councils remain extremely weak as governing and oversight bodies and have no formal authority to draft local legislation. They are supposed to oversee the work of provincial governors, but their oversight responsibilities are not clearly defined. As governors are appointed by Kabul, they have no incentive to respond to the wishes of provincial councils. Elections for district and village councils have not yet been held.

The centralized system of local governance has resulted in a subnational administration that is incapable of reflecting constituent needs because it cannot aggregate the preferences of citizens. Most provincial and district governors are not from the areas they serve. Instead, they are rotated from one district or province to another. As a result, customary systems of governance that resolve disputes and provide small-scale public goods remain quite important in rural areas, and effective district officials employ customary rule rather than state law.<sup>14</sup> As local government officials are not formally accountable to citizens at the local level, this system has bred vast corruption, causing further disillusionment of citizens with their government.

### *Judicial Institutions*

Delivering the rule of law is one of the most basic functions of a state yet is one of the most difficult to achieve. In Afghanistan, establishment of a coherent justice system in many ways remains as remote as it was in 2001, largely the result of the perceived illegitimacy of the formal, state-backed justice system. The judicial system remains highly centralized, with authority to select and oversee judges and the court system firmly entrenched in Kabul. According to a nationally representative survey, Afghans reported paying more bribes to the judiciary than to any other public institution, and informal dispute resolution mechanisms are far more popular and trusted than government courts.<sup>15</sup>

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Afghan monarchs relied upon the court system to extend the reach of the state into communities throughout the country.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the courts played an important role in extending the writ of the state, under highly centralized control. Consistent with this historical legacy, the Afghan judiciary remains under the control of the executive branch. This was true throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the PDPA government that sought to use courts as a means to impose social and political agendas.<sup>17</sup>

The current court system in Afghanistan is almost identical to the legacy system. The supreme court oversees most local courts. Judges in provincial and district courts are appointed by the supreme court in Kabul. Although the National Assembly does play a role in affirming appointments to the supreme court, justices have enormous control not just in terms of interpreting the law but also over administration of the entire justice system, which—given the supreme court’s subordination to the executive—becomes an extension of executive political control.

Beginning in the 1950s and accelerating during PDPA rule, government institutions, particularly the judiciary, reflected Soviet models. The PDPA abolished the supreme court and replaced it with a special revolutionary court. Soviet advisors helped set up a new internal security agency modeled on the KGB, known as the KhAD.<sup>18</sup> In practice, the KhAD “exercised full judicial power through summary arrests, detentions, and executions.”<sup>19</sup> The supreme court was eventually reinstated toward the end of PDPA rule, but the legacy of the courts as tools of politics is one that has not been quickly forgotten by most Afghans, who continue to shun the formal courts.

Not only is the court system highly centralized in Kabul, but so too is the public prosecutor’s system and the bodies responsible for drafting laws. In 1981, the PDPA created an attorney general (*Loya Saranwal*) office that serves as a general public

prosecutorial body, with prosecutors appointed by authorities in Kabul.<sup>20</sup> The attorney general's office operates under a similar logic today as it did under the PDPA period. Similarly, the ministry of justice, rather than legislators, drafts most laws that go before the National Assembly.

Some heralded the 2004 constitution as a break with the past because judicial bodies were to have some degree of oversight of constitutional and legal interpretation, but this authority has been hotly contested. The National Assembly has turned to the Independent Commission on the Supervision of Implementation of the Constitution, while President Karzai maintained that the supreme court should fulfill this role (the 2004 constitution established both bodies but did not clearly specify their duties).<sup>21</sup> Although observers have lamented the absence of judicial review, the assertion of the National Assembly vis-à-vis the executive-controlled supreme court represents a step by the legislative branch to assert some authority.

### *Public Budgeting and Finance*

There is perhaps no area where Soviet influence has been more felt in Afghanistan than in the system of public finance—in raising revenue, budgeting, and budget execution.<sup>22</sup> Although donors have tried to affect some reform of the system to increase efficiency, it is unlikely that any amount of reform or capacity-building within the current system could yield policies that reflect citizen interests.

The system of public finance remains one of the most centralized in the world. Local governments do not have the right to tax and spend funds that they raise. Most local revenue must be sent back to the central government in Kabul, where it is then redistributed to local subunits based on the national budget plan. Although state-builders tried to make some changes to the budgeting system and incorporate some local input into the process, these reforms have been little more than window

dressing as more than 50 line ministries and executive agencies make their budgets in Kabul for all provinces and districts of the country. In 2016, just 34 percent of citizens reported having confidence that government ministries are meant to deliver services to communities.<sup>23</sup>

The public finance system together with lack of local self-governance means there are few opportunities for citizen preferences to be translated into the budget. Budgets reflect the priorities of the central government in Kabul. Because local officials are not involved in the budget plans, they rarely have the staff or personnel required to execute the budget once it has been drafted. Execution of the development budget (which does not include salaries) has hovered around 40 percent during the past decade, a signal that the government cannot spend the meager funds it collects. Although some small modifications have been made to the system of public financial management (such as the introduction of program budgeting and some moves toward more localized decisionmaking over implementation), such changes have been cosmetic.

In several areas, such as education, rural development, and public health, the government has made some claims to success in service delivery. This is because these programs have been funded and managed by donor partners who then contract out implementation to international and domestic non-governmental organizations and contractors. In this parallel system, donor funds go to a specific ministry (such as health or rural development) to fund a “national priority program.” Donor funds are transferred to the specific ministry but then are quickly contracted out to third parties with donor oversight. While this system may have been more effective than relying upon the government of Afghanistan, it has further undermined the state. As donor assistance decreased, the increases in “capacity” generated by such a parallel system quickly evaporated. In this aspect, rentier parallel structures emerge because the





In March 2013, members of the Afghan National Army Air Force (ANAAF) and International Security Assistance Force listen during an International Women's Day celebration at the Kabul International Airport. The celebration highlighted the contributions Afghan women made to the ANAAF. (U.S. Air Force/Dustine Payne)

formal system of public financial management and policy execution is so weak that donors cannot rely on it to deliver the results citizens expect.

Donor resources have encouraged centralization rather than reform.<sup>24</sup> As a result, the government remains unable to deliver many basic public goods and services to its citizens. While some donors have encouraged the use of contractors and other third parties to deliver services on behalf of the government, citizens rarely recognize these as government programs because they are delivered by foreign organizations. The inability of the state to generate and execute a budget has cost the government its legitimacy.

### *National Security Forces*

The Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) embarked on two very different paths of institutional reform after the fall of the Taliban regime. Previously, both the ANA and the ANP evolved as highly centralized security forces that by the beginning of the civil war reflected heavy Soviet influence. Daud began centralizing the army during his first reign as prime minister in the 1950s. He asserted stronger centralized control over its organization after he reclaimed power in 1973. At first, he partnered with factions of the Afghan Communist Party. For instance, Hafizullah Amin, who became leader of Afghanistan under communist rule, began

recruiting Khalq members into the army beginning in the 1970s. During the 1980s, the Soviets brought in advisors and imposed the Soviet political-bureaucratic model of management to strengthen the army, which even began employing Soviet agitprop models to win the hearts and minds of local populations. By 1990, 70 to 80 percent of army officers were PDPA members.<sup>25</sup> Although many officers relied on patrimonialism, the army was designed to maximize political control by the PDPA. It remained so until the outbreak of the civil war in 1992.

The police had always been a much weaker organization than the army as its development had received far less attention from Kabul during the monarchy. This changed after the 1978 coup, when the PDPA began to impose Soviet organizational models on the ministry of interior (MoI), which was responsible for managing the police. Although Germany had played a role training the police prior to the Saur revolution, the police grew as an organization under Soviet tutelage.

In the first few years after 2001, donors were committed to a “light footprint” approach in Afghanistan and did not develop long-term strategies to develop the security forces. As the Taliban insurgency grew, the United States took increased responsibility for reforming what became the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). Efforts to rebuild the army and the police focused on strategies to integrate and disarm militias, as initially the United States had no plans for security force development. It was not until 2005 that the United States assumed the lead role to develop the ANDSF.

Strategies to develop the ANA and ANP diverged. After developing a set of interim solutions, in 2002 the international community decided to rebuild the organizational structure and the recruitment of the ANA from scratch. This decision was based on several factors, including concern that the nascent army had come under the control of

mujahideen factions, but also an acknowledgment that the Soviet model that was designed for political control and that featured forced conscription remained as a sticky institutional structure. The decision to rebuild the ANA from the ground up meant that it would have an entirely new structure and political management and the Soviet political model would be dismantled.

In contrast, initially little attention was paid to the structure of the police. Police forces remained in the MoI, which, like other ministries, relied on central planning. By 2009, it was clear that the MoI lacked the “ability to perform basic management functions, particularly in personnel, procurement, and logistics; and an overall strategy for police operations and development. . . . Institutional reforms, which began in earnest in 2005, were routinely resisted or thwarted by political interference, often from the highest levels of government.”<sup>26</sup> Unlike the ANA, the ANP sought to reintegrate demobilized combatants into the forces, which undermined development by allowing militia commanders to fill police ranks with patrons. By 2010, the ANP was so untenable that the United States encouraged the creation of village-based protection forces, such as the Afghan Local Police, which were based on customary models of self-defense as an alternative.

The most serious obstacle facing the creation of both the army and the police related to force size planning. When the ANA was initially established, planners imagined a force of 70,000 and a police force of 60,000. These relatively modest numbers ballooned during the period of the military surge when the projected size of the ANDSF skyrocketed to 196,000 ANA and 162,000 ANP.<sup>27</sup> Analysts argued that it would be impossible to sustain such a large fighting force in a population that had such low levels of literacy without returning to a conscription-based model.

The outcomes in the ANP and the ANA could not be more striking. Although there are reports of

corruption and ghost soldiers, the ANA has become “a symbol of nationhood and factional nonalignment.”<sup>28</sup> A 2017 report on corruption in the security forces said that the decision to build the ANA from scratch as a national-multiethnic body protected it from capture by factional and criminal elements as had been the case with the ANP. A senior U.S. official was quoted in the report saying, “In the Ministry of Defense, the problem is contracts. . . . In the MoI it is everything.” In 2017, 44 percent of the population said the ANP was honest and fair. In contrast, 60 percent said the same of the ANA.<sup>29</sup> A former interior minister stated that organizational reforms led to a professionalization of the army that reduced its casualty rates and the perception of its corruption compared to the police, which remained largely unreformed.<sup>30</sup>

## Improving Prospects for Successful Stabilization Efforts

One way to improve prospects for successful stabilization and state-building is to recognize that democracy is not an end in itself. Rather, state-building looks to improve the ability of a government to provide public goods and services. Elections at the national level are not an indicator of successful state-building unless the state is also able to provide such goods and services.

Second, political decentralization ought to be considered carefully as a strategic approach for reorganizing failed or failing governments. Centralization may be associated with public goods provision in some now-wealthy democracies. However, conflict and violence have typically resulted in diffused power in fragile states, including power asserted by customary, tribal, and insurgent organizations that dominate politics outside capital cities. It is necessary to consider establishing political institutions that fit the local context, including the existing power structures rather than creating rules that conflict with existing realities.

Third, reform of the bureaucracy is often more directly responsible for improvements in public goods provision than national elections. It is also important to consider the prospects for self-governance as a solution to administrative challenges. Self-governing communities reduce the need for state intervention to provide public goods and can provide a framework for collaborative or shared governance.

What remains is the political problem introduced earlier. Politicians may not want to give up power; nor do bureaucrats who enjoy authority in the centralized status quo. The international community may not want to move away from relying on the old administrative structures. Nor might it want to invest resources in mundane public administration reforms when the world seems to care more about elections. Regardless, we need to more carefully explore the links between centralization of power and the failures of state-building efforts. **PRISM**

## Notes

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An airman assigned to Joint Task Force Bravo—Joint Security Forces in Honduras explains crime scene processing to Honduran police. The instruction is part of a series of classes that teach handcuff procedures, high-risk traffic stops, and riot control. (U.S. Air Force/ Sonny Cohrs).

# Saving Democracy Abroad

## The Case for Revitalizing U.S. Rule of Law Assistance

By Robert M. Perito and Donald J. Planty

Democratic governments are under siege around the world from forces that threaten the basic principles of representative government—freely elected leaders, democratic institutions, and the rule of law. In countries as diverse as Azerbaijan, Cambodia, and Egypt, authoritarian leaders have “snuffed out civil society, suborned or faked elections, asphyxiated free expression, and repressed human rights.”<sup>1</sup> Populist regimes are consolidating power in Europe and Latin America where citizens have lost faith in political institutions and rejected conventional leaders. Centralized authoritarian governments in Russia and China have put forward an alternative autocratic governance model and are striving for world leadership. Meanwhile, democracy in the United States has taken a dangerous turn.

There are many reasons for democracy’s decline. An important factor has been the corresponding decline in respect for the rule of law, which provides the superstructure of democracy.<sup>2</sup> Democracy focuses on how governments are selected; the rule of law deals with how political power is exercised. Rule of law requires that all citizens, including lawmakers and government officials, are similarly accountable—a stark contrast to dictatorship, autocracy, and oligarchy, where those in power are beyond the law’s purview.<sup>3</sup> The rule of law is based upon four democratic principles:

- accountability: the law applies equally to government and private actors;
- justice: the law protects personal security, property, and human rights;
- transparency: laws are formulated and enforced through an open and commonly accepted process; and
- accessibility: peaceful dispute resolution is provided by impartial and competent authorities who reflect the composition and values of the communities they serve.<sup>4</sup>

An indication of the importance of the rule of law for maintaining democracy is the fact that the criminal justice system and law enforcement authorities are primary targets for despotic regimes. Romania’s parliament curtailed the powers of the country’s anticorruption agency, weakened the independence and authority of the justice sector, and called for changes in the criminal code that would shield corrupt politicians and limit

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the ability of police and prosecutors to investigate the country's endemic corruption.<sup>5</sup> Poland's populist Law and Justice Party has won elections by demonizing opponents and scapegoating minorities. On October 10, 2018, the party completed a hostile takeover of the judiciary by appointing 27 new supreme court justices over the objections of the European Union (EU). Previously the party had taken control of the constitutional tribunal and the national council of the judiciary.<sup>6</sup> In Honduras, President Juan Orlando Hernandez was reelected after supreme court judges he appointed lifted the constitutional ban on multiple presidential terms, and vote counting was suspended when the opposition candidate appeared to be ahead. After the election, the Honduran congress revoked the attorney general's authority to investigate cases of the theft of public funds by government officials, including 60 current and former legislators.<sup>7</sup>

### U.S. Support for the Rule of Law

Since the end of World War II, rule of law assistance has been a standard feature of U.S. development aid abroad. In this century, the United States has spent billions of dollars in Iraq and Afghanistan to promote the rule of law and hundreds of millions more in other crisis states. Yet these programs have largely failed to support the maintenance of lawful democratic governments and in some cases have contributed to their decline. There are both organizational and ideological reasons for the lack of effectiveness of U.S. rule of law assistance. Interviews conducted with two dozen officials in the State, Defense, and Justice departments and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) identified numerous shortcomings in the manner in which U.S. rule of law programs are funded, administered, and implemented.<sup>8</sup> These failings help explain why U.S. programs are largely ineffective abroad despite the expenditure of considerable effort and financial resources.

First, U.S. rule of law assistance lacks a common policy, doctrine, and strategy. There are no agreed upon goals and objectives. There is no central administrative coordinating mechanism. Instead, agencies offer a collection of projects that reflect the annual choices of Washington policymakers, embassy officers, and partner governments. Second, there is no confirmed number for the total amount of money the United States spends on rule of law assistance each year. Funding authorities are spread among a collection of congressional committees and legislative funding sources. Money is allocated to the State and Defense departments and USAID, which reallocate the money to implementing agencies. These agencies in turn reallocate the money to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and commercial contractors. This multilayered process defeats accurate accounting, results in high administrative costs, and delays program implementation. Third, Washington agencies have a shortage of personnel with law enforcement and judicial experience and regional, cultural, and linguistic expertise. Where experts are present, they serve as advisors to generic program officers who are responsible for program selection, project design, and funding allocation.

In 2010, the Barack Obama Administration realigned priorities for rule of law assistance at USAID by creating the Center of Excellence for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG).<sup>9</sup> The center emphasized free and fair elections, political party development, human rights, and labor and gender protection. The Rule of Law Office merged into a new Office of Governance and Rule of Law, which supported activities to improve the accountability, transparency, and responsiveness of governing institutions and to promote legal and regulatory frameworks aimed at improving security and law enforcement. The motivation behind this change was in part ideological, but in larger part it reflected a major reduction in available financial resources.





In March, 2007 Afghan National Police recruits listen to instructors before firing their AK-47 rifles. Despite extensive training and equipping, at the time, many have questioned whether the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces will be able to hold the ground when U.S. forces departed. (U.S. Army/ Michael Bracken)

During the Obama Administration, some 85 countries received rule of law assistance. Total annual funding dropped from \$1.417 billion in 2010 to \$781 million in 2014 to \$683 million in 2015.<sup>10</sup> Presidential initiatives took much of USAID's budget. President Obama continued George W. Bush's President's Emergency Plan for HIV/AIDS Relief and began his own initiatives: the Feed the Future program, which sought to increase global agricultural production, and the Global Development Lab, which encouraged the use of science, technology, and innovation to promote development. In the field, larger USAID missions used discretionary funds to continue traditional rule of law programming. Smaller missions were forced to choose between rule of law programs, which tended to be expensive, and numerous smaller projects in other areas. The drop in funds

limited staffing, often to a single program officer responsible for managing all of USAID's accounts.<sup>11</sup>

As a result of the bureaucratic reorganization and reduction in funding, USAID effectively ceded responsibility for rule of law programming to the Department of State.<sup>12</sup> This led to the use of rule of law programming as a national security tool rather than a development tool. U.S. assistance that militarized police and border guards improved the ability of partner country security forces to conduct counternarcotics and counterterrorism operations. For example, the U.S. Central American Regional Security Initiative provided \$642 million in weapons, equipment, and training to regional security forces to fight drug and arms trafficking, gangs, and organized crime.<sup>13</sup> Most of this assistance, however, failed to address the underlying fragility of rule of law at the community level, where gangs and traffickers



thrived, or the culture of impunity that pervaded security and justice institutions. At the same time, the State Department's Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism emerged as an important provider of rule of law assistance. The Bureau hired its first rule of law advisor and began providing hundreds of millions of dollars in assistance to train rapid reaction police units, foreign prosecutors to try terrorists' cases, and prison staff to prevent radicalization and to rehabilitate terrorist prisoners.<sup>14</sup> The Obama Administration placed an interagency rule of law coordinator at the State Department. This experiment failed because the coordinator was given limited authority, no project funding, and no staff, and had little ability to influence rule of law policy and programs. An earlier effort by the Bill Clinton administration to create a rule of law coordinator had failed for the same reasons.<sup>15</sup>

U.S. programs continued to follow a state-centric, top-down, and technocratic approach aimed at transplanting U.S.-style institutions into recipient states. The Justice and Security Assistance section of the 2018 interagency *Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of USG Efforts to Stabilize Conflict Affected Areas* noted that U.S. "justice sector programming in conflict-affected areas often focused heavily on promoting formal criminal justice institutions based on Western domestic experiences."<sup>16</sup> This reiterated earlier criticism voiced by Carnegie Fellow Rachel Kleinfeld that the United States advocated top-down reform of foreign government judicial institutions. U.S. programs trained lawyers and jurists in technical skills and improving court administration. Programs for judges covered plea bargaining, alternative sentencing, and international crimes such as money laundering. Kleinfeld pointed out that this approach to legal reform resulted in institutional modeling where local laws and judicial institutions were modified to more closely resemble those of the United States.<sup>17</sup>

## Challenges for U.S. Rule of Law Assistance

These shortcomings are reflected in all U.S. rule of law assistance programs. However, they have been particularly harmful in programs in corrupt authoritarian states, primarily in Central and Eastern Europe, where populist authoritarian regimes have emerged and the United States is engaged because of political, geostrategic, and humanitarian considerations. This has also been true in two other categories of states where democracy and the rule of law are under attack: states in the northern tier of Central America that are victims of extreme levels of criminal violence and the source of migrant flows toward our southern border, and states in Central Asia, North Africa, and the Sahel where Islamist terrorists are attempting to impose extreme versions of shariah law and U.S. military forces are training local security forces.

### *Corrupt Authoritarian States*

In corrupt authoritarian states in Central and Eastern Europe, new populist rulers have used xenophobic rhetoric and crony capitalism to seize power. They have also been indifferent to the need for checks on the power of the majority, particularly legal constraints that are central to the rule of law. These regimes have morphed into organized criminal enterprises that have seized control of banking, natural resources, and other economic assets and have systematically stolen public funds on a vast scale. Misappropriation of government revenues and exploitation of national resources retard economic growth, allow infrastructure to crumble, and weaken national power and resolve. They also spawn popular opposition as citizens come to view the government as a criminal racket rather than a legitimate provider of goods and services.<sup>19</sup>

These regimes divide the population between those who benefit from the government's patronage system and those appalled by the spectacle of

political elites flaunting their ill-gotten gains. They suppress civil society groups and the media, politicize the police, and co-opt judiciaries by providing access to illicit revenues in return for regime loyalty. These regimes intimidate parliaments and create bureaucracies based on patronage rather than merit.<sup>20</sup> They hobble state institutions and politicize their security services. They also consciously enable violent groups in order to protect their privileges and maintain control. Providing immunity to perpetrators creates conditions where societies develop a culture of violence that is impossible to control.<sup>21</sup>

On September 13, 2018, the European Parliament initiated disciplinary proceedings against Hungary for undermining the EU's rules on democracy, civil rights, and corruption.<sup>22</sup> Hungary's prime minister Victor Orbán describes Hungary as an "illiberal democracy," citing authoritarian regimes in Russia and Turkey as models. His right-wing Fidesz Party controls all branches of government, including the judiciary. The party has amended the constitution to have judges appointed by a single person; experienced judges have been replaced with apparatchiks. Special courts overseen by the justice minister now hear cases concerning the government, taxation, and elections.<sup>23</sup> An historically independent media was silenced by heavy fines on outlets deemed biased against the government. Orbán's program of authoritarian capitalism has directed lucrative contracts to his cronies.<sup>24</sup> In December 2018, parliament adopted what protesters called a "slave labor law" that compelled workers to perform 400 hours of overtime without compensation. The action sparked massive, sustained street protests that also demanded restoration of an independent judiciary and media.<sup>25</sup>

Some experts argue that liberal democracy is resilient and will ultimately survive populism. Once in power, however, autocratic regimes can alter democratic institutions to the point where they may never fully recover. Biased and corrupt



Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, during a European parliament debate in 2012 on the political situation in Hungary. Passions ran high in the chamber as several political group leaders raised concerns not only over specific legal and constitutional provisions in Hungary, but also what they saw as a wider undermining of democratic values in that country. (© European Union 2012 EP/Pietro Naj-Olear)

judiciaries and security services, weakened parliamentary oversight, and flawed election processes may prove impossible to fully reform. Populists may discredit the media through outright attacks, the introduction of false news, and the spreading of conspiracy theories to the point where information sources are no longer trusted by voters. They can also erode faith in democracy as a political system so that citizens lose confidence and more readily accept authoritarian rule. Even if these regimes are ousted, they may retain substantial blocks of support, narrowing the options for reformers by threatening to return to power.<sup>26</sup>

In corrupt authoritarian regimes, U.S. rule of law assistance programs have been an early victim. In Azerbaijan, President Ilham Aliyev has held power since 2003 when he succeeded his father, Heydar Aliyev, a former Soviet KGB officer. In interviews, opposition figures and political activists agreed that the absence of the rule of law was directly linked to the demise of Azerbaijani

democracy. Aliyev nominates judges to the constitutional court, the supreme court, and the economic court. Verdicts are dictated by the president, and there is no judicial independence. Judges often apologize for their decisions, explaining that orders came from higher authorities.<sup>27</sup> The government has disbarred human rights lawyers, jailed journalists, and closed independent media outlets. Amnesty International has documented 158 political prisoners.<sup>28</sup> USAID rule of law assistance programs were withdrawn; the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute left the country because of government restrictions on working with opposition political parties.<sup>29</sup> Numerous civil society leaders said the international community had failed Azerbaijan. They believed the Council of Europe would demand that Baku meet the council's democratic standards, but the rule of law deteriorated further. Most believed the United States and Europe ignored Azerbaijan's human rights violations because of the country's oil reserves, strategic location between Iran and Russia, and iron-fisted control of its Shiite population.<sup>30</sup>

### Central America

The northern tier states of Central America—Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—occupy a strategic geographical space between North and South America. They form a physical funnel on the Central American isthmus for illicit drugs, migrants, and contraband to flow through Mexico to the United States. A reverse flow of weapons, stolen cars, laundered cash, and deported migrants, some with criminal records, travels south. The movement of goods in both directions takes advantage of porous land borders, clandestine airstrips, unpatrolled rivers, and open sea lanes. This intense level of illegal activity generates billions of dollars in unlawful revenue and extreme violence that have overwhelmed law enforcement, created a climate of impunity, and undermined democratic institutions.

The rule of law in Central America historically has been weak due to the absolutism of Spanish colonial rule and the *caudillo* tradition—the man on horseback as authoritarian ruler. While Central American countries established constitutional democracies based on the U.S. model after their independence from Spain, frequent constitutional change—including extra-constitutional seizures of power—has weakened democratic institutions and interfered with the development of the rule of law. The tradition has produced highly centralized systems of government that are corrupt, nontransparent, and unable to provide basic services to the population. Legislatures are weak and dysfunctional, judiciaries are corrupt and incompetent, and security forces are exploitative and abusive.

During the past three decades, the United States has attempted to improve the rule of law in Central America and to stanch the northward movement of people and goods, with little success. U.S. policy has focused mostly on stopping narcotics smuggling and has only tangentially dealt with the underlying problems: weak government institutions, pervasive official corruption, and low levels of national investment in health, education, and welfare. While the totality of U.S. Government programs appears impressive, the programs have had little impact on the prevailing rule of law climate; the whole is less than the sum of its parts. One reason is the absence of a strategic plan for implementing U.S. rule of law assistance for the region. Lack of a regional approach allows problems to bleed from one country to another. Without a holistic interagency and regional approach, the transformation of rule of law institutions is unlikely. Contractors implement all USAID and most of the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (State/INL) programming. A major USAID evaluation published in late 2017 concluded that programming is producing limited results and that several programs are having no impact at all.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the generally grim conditions, reformers—political leaders, businessmen, NGOs, and civil society representatives—still exist in all three countries but are not sufficiently organized or funded to mount a sustained challenge to the corrupt system. U.S. rule of law assistance does support these reform elements with financial and material resources, but reformers say that U.S. programs are neither sufficiently comprehensive nor durable enough to overcome corruption and strengthen institutions. In some cases, U.S. assistance has perpetuated the status quo by allowing corrupt regimes to use foreign assistance to avoid a total collapse while diverting national resources to corrupt purposes. NGOs and academic experts stress that U.S. rule of law programs are neither strategically focused nor significant enough to reverse the decline in democratic government and the rule of law; there are problems with both coherence and magnitude.<sup>32</sup>

### *South Asia, North Africa, and the Sahel*

In an arc from Pakistan to Mauritania, popular aspirations for democracy generated by the Arab Spring disrupted dictatorships, but autocrats clung to power, and civil wars have destroyed Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Initial hopes have been replaced by the popular recognition that regional governments are not coping with crime and terrorist violence. This growing awareness is based on revelations of government corruption and the use of terrorist threats to justify crackdowns on political opponents; the inability of security forces to prevent Islamist terrorist groups from seizing territory and striking high-profile targets; and the success of terrorists' appeals to radicalized youth to join their cause.<sup>33</sup> The most extreme example has been the Islamic State, which established its despotic rule in Syria, Iraq, and Libya before being driven out by local militias backed by U.S. Special Forces and coalition air support.<sup>34</sup>

Islamist terrorists—*jihadis*—reject the nation-state, democracy, and Western conceptions of the

rule of law as creations of man and not god. They condemn all legislative law from constitutions to enabling regulations that are made by people in favor of Koranic law, which was divinely inspired and perfect by definition. They also reject the benefits that modern societies see in the legislative process: open debate, presentation of differing policy prescriptions, adjudication by independent jurists, and unbiased enforcement of law by fair-minded governments. Democracy is rejected on similar grounds. It is a manmade system of government and, therefore, unacceptable to those who follow god's will as they understand it. They also reject the institution of the sovereign, secular state and all its related institutions and processes in favor of a ruthless struggle to reestablish a theologically based caliphate that will control the Sunni Islam world. This rejection of the sovereign state extends to the modern international state system, international law, humanitarian law, and the Geneva Conventions.<sup>35</sup> The impact of Islamist terrorism and the inadequacy of U.S. rule of law assistance are evident in states as varied as Pakistan, Tunisia, and Mali in which U.S. assistance has been significant but largely ineffective.

Since September 11, 2001, Pakistan has been a frontline state in the U.S. global war on terror, a sanctuary for al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban leaders, and the site of a growing domestic insurgency. At the same time, Pakistan has served as a major transit and processing center for opium and heroin from Afghanistan. In fiscal year (FY) 2016, Pakistan received \$255 million in U.S. foreign military financing to support military counterterrorism operations in areas bordering on Afghanistan.<sup>36</sup> In addition to military aid, Pakistan's police and civilian security forces received substantial U.S. security assistance funded by State/INL. Programs implemented through the U.S. Justice Department's International Criminal Investigative Training and Assistance Program (ICITAP) included training on investigations, forensics, modern police practices,



and improving police-community relations.<sup>37</sup> ICITAP created model police stations in metropolitan areas and built demonstration public reception centers at police stations in Islamabad.<sup>38</sup> State/INL's broad counternarcotics assistance portfolio included programs to support law enforcement, crop control, and demand reduction.<sup>39</sup> In FY 2015, USAID had a robust, \$72.9 million Democracy and Governance program in Pakistan aimed at strengthening government institutions and civil society and protecting individual rights. The rule of law portion of the budget, however, was only \$300,000, which was devoted to public awareness campaigns, judicial training, and assisting civil society.<sup>40</sup>

In Pakistan, interviews with a cross-section of police officers, judicial officials, and civil society representatives showed that Pakistanis view U.S. rule of law assistance programs as well intentioned but generally irrelevant. U.S. pilot programs that create model police stations, introduce computers, or deliver forensic training are helpful but reach limited numbers and are not sustained by Pakistani government investment. Interviewees viewed U.S. programs that violate Pakistani cultural norms as counterproductive. They noted that the United States fails to identify, or simply ignores, the structural problems that are the source of police and judicial corruption and malpractice in Pakistan. Informed observers argued that the United States should cease trying to make Pakistani rule of law institutions resemble their American counterparts. Instead, the United States should use its political and diplomatic leverage to promote programs that influence the political dynamics and power relationships that prevent reform.<sup>41</sup>

In North Africa and the Sahel's vast ungoverned spaces, terrorist groups have joined with organized criminal networks to turn historic caravan routes into trafficking corridors for narcotics, weapons, and migrants.<sup>42</sup> Smuggling networks have seized on regional instability, grinding poverty, and the lack of opportunity to become deeply entrenched

in local economies, making them difficult to dislodge. Impaired by growing instability, regional states are increasingly unable to deliver basic government services. Autocratic rule and endemic corruption have left government institutions bereft of legitimacy as alienated citizens are frustrated by declines in healthcare, educational opportunities, and living standards.<sup>43</sup>

In December 2017, the United Nations (UN) Secretary General reported that the security situation in Mali had worsened and that terrorist attacks against UN and Malian security forces had increased. Terrorist groups had improved their capacity and expanded their areas of operations.<sup>44</sup> Mali became the deadliest UN mission in history with the deaths of 190 peacekeepers.<sup>45</sup> International concern increasingly focused on the central portion of the country. Since 2016, more than 12,000 people have been displaced, 287 civilians killed, and 685 schools closed. The involvement of Islamist extremist groups in intracommunity conflicts between Fulani herders and Dogon farmers contributed to rising instability. State agents such as local administrators and judges have withdrawn. Radical armed groups have asserted control over increasingly large areas, enforcing extremist religious dogma, threatening civilians with violence if they cooperate with Malian authorities, and engaging in violent reprisals when faced with resistance.<sup>46</sup>

There is much that a U.S.-led coalition of the United Nations and donor governments could do to assist the Malian government in reversing the expansion of terrorist groups across northern and central Mali.<sup>47</sup> Firmly establishing and fortifying the rule of law in the region would be an important step toward this goal. Diplomatic pressure would be necessary to prevent Malian authorities from employing their traditional strategy of organizing pro-government tribal factions and pitting them against anti-government ethnic rivals. International support would be essential for outreach to regional

elites and for organizing conferences on the region's future. Technical assistance with organizing a new territorial police force would be required, along with training and equipment. U.S. funding, training, and political support would be required to energize traditional justice mechanisms and begin to return the formal justice system to the region.

This would require refocusing the current Bamako-centric, U.S. rule of law assistance program that is engaged in a number of initiatives without focusing on issues that are critical for Mali's national survival. Current U.S. programs in Mali include a project to help the Mali police develop a personnel resources management manual; a project to set standards for hiring legal professionals and improving the justice ministry's capacity to manage the court system; a project to organize a Malian national security council and an interagency crisis management capability; pilot police-community dialogues, a program to identify the training needs of judges and court personnel; and a program to train prison staff and prevent prison escapes.<sup>48</sup>

## A New Approach to U.S. Rule of Law Assistance

Given the growing threat to democratic governments, a new strategically focused approach to U.S. rule of law assistance is required. This approach would acknowledge that corrupt authoritarianism, international organized crime, and Islamist terrorism share common characteristics and often cooperate to subvert governments and gain political power. They convert governing institutions into Mafia-like structures to divert public resources to benefit the ruling elite. They exploit illicit revenue streams from trafficking in narcotics, weapons, and migrants, the sale of artifacts, and the expropriation of national resources for their own purposes. They mask their activities with nationalist, populist, or religious rhetoric to recruit supporters and dissuade opponents. They

transform the judicial system—police, courts, and prisons—into instruments of repression that protect and ensure continued control by the ruling elite. Rule of law should be elevated to a strategic objective in a new national security strategy; that would encourage development of coherent policy guidance for such assistance worldwide.

Under this approach, establishing the rule of law would be viewed as a political process supporting both national security and development objectives. It would involve a normative system of accepted principles and institutions under which the exercise of power is regulated and constrained and conflicts are resolved by nonviolent means.<sup>49</sup> It would focus on governance and the use of political and diplomatic power to reform and empower judicial sector institutions. It would enhance traditional justice mechanisms in areas where they are the primary instruments for peaceful dispute resolution. It would establish political and programmatic priorities and marshal resources to achieve defined goals. Implementing this new approach would involve:

- A high-level rule of law assistance coordinating mechanism. Implementing this approach would require a National Security Presidential Memorandum that would establish a National Security Council (NSC)-directed, interagency, rule of law assistance policy process. The process would be led by an NSC-chaired policy coordinating committee (PCC) responsible for policy formulation, program and project selection, and funding allocation. The PCC would emphasize the essentially civilian nature of rule of law institutions but recognize the importance of Defense Department and U.S. military involvement, especially in areas such as border control and coordination of cross-border security initiatives. The PCC would develop results-based systems to evaluate rule of law programs. It would formulate a strategy for engaging with Congress and soliciting its support for this initiative.

- A strategic policy, doctrine, and plan for U.S. rule of law assistance. Following the precepts of the presidential directive, the PCC would prepare a U.S. rule of law assistance policy, doctrine, and strategy with defined goals and objectives. The new policy would recognize the political nature of development assistance and utilize U.S. political and diplomatic leverage to advance the rule of law. It would focus on institutional development and capacity building of supervising institutions and carry this focus over into training and equipping of police, judicial, and corrections personnel. It would empower traditional justice systems in countries where they are relied upon for nonviolent dispute resolution. The new policy would seek to build on locally inspired, whole-of-society solutions that reflect popular support.
- Recruitment of a cadre of experienced rule of law professionals to supervise and implement U.S. assistance programs. Implementing the new approach would require recruiting a cadre of senior government personnel with an understanding of the political, economic, and social dynamics in target countries and of how legal, law enforcement, and corrections expertise can be translated into successful rule of law programs. This would ensure that programs are conceived and managed in the context of U.S. national security interests. It would also reduce dependence upon NGOs and commercial contractors for program implementation and evaluation.

This new approach would be undertaken with a sense of urgency. As national security experts Anthony Blinken and Robert Kagan have noted, we:

*face an increasingly dangerous world that looks more like the 1930s with populists, nationalists and demagogues on the rise, autocratic powers growing in strength;*

*Europe mired in division and self-doubt and democracy under siege and vulnerable to foreign manipulation.*<sup>50</sup>

In crisis states, democratic activists and rule of law advocates are facing challenges. These dedicated people still look to the United States for inspiration, leadership, and intelligent, practical, and sustained support. We fail them at our own peril.

Promoting the rule of law abroad is in the best interest of the United States. Historically, our democratic values have been the key to building America's geopolitical power. The global system of democratic alliances and institutions based upon the rule of law has improved material conditions and brought peace and prosperity abroad. Given the current challenges from authoritarianism, international organized crime, and Islamist terrorism, it is ever more urgent that we utilize the power of core American values to promote U.S. national security interests. Going forward, the United States should treat support for the rule of law as a strategic priority that is integrated with our other national security goals. By doing so, we will provide a compelling alternative to models offered by our competitors and secure the benefits for ourselves and others.<sup>51</sup> **PRISM**

## Notes

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<sup>11</sup> Authors’ interview with advisors and staff members of the USAID Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Governance, U.S. Agency for International Development, Washington, DC, February 1, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Authors’ interview with a senior advisor, Office of the Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism, USAID, July 6, 2017.

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Euromaidan demonstrations in Kiev in 2013. To prevent or discourage such "color revolutions" and maintain control over its arc of influence, Russia has developed a suite of sophisticated coercive and influence techniques often referred to as "hybrid." (Wikimedia/ Mstyslav Chernov).

# Countering Hybrid Warfare

## So What for the Future Joint Force?

By Sean Monaghan

*We need to do three things. First, accept what is happening rather than pretend it is not happening. Second, understand the tactics being used. Third, act intelligently and consistently to defend Western states, values, and interests from this insidious form of conflict*

—Bob Seeley and Alya Shandra, 2018<sup>1</sup>

If strategy, in whatever era, is “the art of creating power,” then so-called hybrid warfare is merely the latest attempt by revisionist actors to create and exploit a form of power to meet their ends.<sup>2</sup> Successfully countering these challenges will require careful thought and calibrated strategy. This article aims to generate the conceptual clarity required for nations to, in the words of one member of Parliament, “act intelligently and consistently” to counter the rising challenge of hybrid warfare emanating from a variety of revisionist actors.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, its purpose is to establish conceptual foundations for the contribution of defense forces to countering all hybrid challenges to national security. In doing so, it takes the perspective of the role of defense within a wider, whole-of-government approach, where defense will play a distinct but varying role, subordinate to national strategy.

The article is divided into five parts. The first part addresses the language problem of hybrid challenges by briefly tracing the roots of the concept in Western military and strategic discourse to demonstrate that hybrid warfare and hybrid threats are different things. Next, a conceptual distinction is made between hybrid warfare and hybrid threats to provide further clarity. The third and fourth parts address the implications of each challenge for national defense policy, strategy, and capability. Finally, the prospect of both challenges occurring in parallel is considered.

### Hybrid Warfare and Hybrid Threats Are Different Things

One of the main obstacles to thinking clearly about hybrid challenges is the problem of language. Terms pairing “hybrid” with the words “threats,” “warfare,” “activity,” “operations,” and “tactics” are often used interchangeably without definition, while concepts such as “gray zone warfare,” “competition short of war,” and “modern political warfare” are—while helpful in their own right—too often conflated in the academic literature, policy publications and mainstream media.<sup>4</sup> This section addresses the language problem by clarifying and distinguishing between two key terms: hybrid warfare and hybrid threats.

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### *What Is Hybrid Warfare?*

In 2005, Lt Gen James Mattis—then Commanding General, Marine Corps Combat Development Command—and Frank Hoffman of the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities at Quantico argued that future adversaries were likely to “mix and match” forms and modes of warfare to offset conventional U.S. military battlefield power.<sup>5</sup> The roots of their concept stem from a period of reflection following the so-called revolution in military affairs moment following Operation *Desert Storm* in 1991. Western military theorists were focused on two big ideas that threatened to undermine their technological dominance of the battlefield. The first was the threat posed by future adversaries combining types of warfare (including nonmilitary tools) to overwhelm through complexity.<sup>6</sup> The second was the problem of “non-trinitarian” adversaries who could seemingly not be defeated in “Clausewitzian” terms through a conventional military campaign culminating in a decisive battle.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, military practitioners elsewhere sought to make good on such fears by designing new ways of war that harnessed complexity and targeted Western vulnerabilities, and nonstate actors such as al-Qaeda and Hezbollah prosecuted campaigns that put these principles into practice.<sup>8</sup>

In this form—as a description of the ways in which armed conflict was becoming more complex and challenging—the concept was incorporated into various approaches to international security strategy at the time, for example in U.S., UK, and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) strategy documents.<sup>9</sup> However, in mainstream discourse, hybrid warfare has taken on a much wider conception. One example uses it to describe revisionist grand strategy that employs “a comprehensive toolset that ranges from cyber-attacks to propaganda and subversion, economic blackmail and sabotage, sponsorship of proxy forces and creeping military expansionism.”<sup>10</sup> It has also been commandeered by those seeking a snappy idiom to describe the Kremlin’s art of strategy.<sup>11</sup> This

is all somewhat beyond Mattis and Hoffman’s ideas about the evolving character of armed conflict. As one Swedish analyst generously suggests, the term hybrid warfare has “travelled a lot in definition.”<sup>12</sup>

A key moment in the journey of the term hybrid warfare was the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014. The combination of “deniable” special forces, local proxy militia, economic pressure, disinformation, and the exploitation of social divisions used to present a fait accompli to Ukraine and the West was unexpected. Such a strategy—apparently taken from an outdated Soviet playbook, but employing modern means—was also difficult to describe. In reaction, the hybrid warfare label was applied, and it stuck.<sup>13</sup> Another reason the hybrid label became widely used was the popular assertion that a 2013 article by Russian chief of the general staff Valery Gerasimov described the strategy later used to annex Crimea—which looked a lot like a hybrid approach of military and nonmilitary means.<sup>14</sup> Although many analysts have since debunked this myth, the claim gathered enough credibility to gain mainstream traction.<sup>15</sup>

It is therefore clear that the term hybrid warfare is not simply a reaction to the annexation of Crimea.<sup>16</sup> It is a more sophisticated and enduring attempt to understand and articulate the ever-changing character of warfare. It is important because if understood correctly, it will allow the development of a future force able to deter and defeat potential adversaries who seek new ways to win. As Hoffman and Mattis put it in 2005:

*Our conventional superiority creates a compelling logic for states and non-state actors to move out of the traditional mode of war and seek some niche capability or some unexpected combination of technologies and tactics to gain an advantage.*<sup>17</sup>

Hybrid warfare is a challenge that is likely to persist. The contemporary strategic environment

presents potential adversaries with an array of new, more cost-effective means to employ in combination, ranging from information operations in cyberspace to the proliferation of cheap air defense and missile technology. This is why the United States expects a continued rise in future hybrid wars and why the United Kingdom suggests that “recognizing and responding effectively to hybrid warfare will become increasingly important.”<sup>18</sup>

It can therefore be seen that the principal utility of the term hybrid warfare is to describe the changing character of warfare against violent adversaries during armed conflict, in which “adversaries employ combinations of capabilities to gain an asymmetric advantage.”<sup>19</sup> Although in mainstream discourse the term has been used with some elasticity to describe revisionist grand strategy (Russian actions in particular), the original concept remains a valid and helpful one when considering the development of defense forces to deter and defeat future adversaries.

### *What Are Hybrid Threats?*

Hoffman was also one of the first to use the term hybrid threats in reference to his own concept of hybrid warfare.<sup>20</sup> However, the term has since evolved through use, proliferating in recent years throughout Euro-Atlantic security strategy documents in particular. For example, NATO has a “Counter Hybrid Threat Strategy,”<sup>21</sup> the European Union has developed a “playbook” for countering hybrid threats, and the European Countering Hybrid Threats Centre of Excellence was launched in Helsinki in 2017.<sup>22</sup> In the UK 2015 Strategic Defense and Security Review, “hybrid threats” were classified as a “tier one” risk to national security and “hybrid attacks” on allies as a “tier two” risk.<sup>23</sup>

While these interpretations differ somewhat in content, what they have common is less to do with Hoffman’s hybrid warfare and more to do with Sun Tzu’s ancient wisdom that “to subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”<sup>24</sup>

They all essentially describe nonviolent revisionist grand strategy in contemporary international politics. They describe the use of multiple, ambiguous means to target vulnerabilities across society to achieve goals gradually without triggering decisive responses. As Michael Mazarr has stated, “Unwilling to risk major escalation with outright military adventurism, these [revisionist] actors are employing sequences of gradual steps to secure strategic leverage. The efforts remain below thresholds that would generate a powerful U.S. or international response, but nonetheless are forceful and deliberate, calculated to gain measurable traction over time.”<sup>25</sup>

These strategies seek to blur and exploit several distinctions that underpin the Western use of force, such as those between peace and war; combatants and third parties; international and non-international conflict; and aggression, the use of force, and armed conflict. Hybrid aggressors can take advantage of any of these grey areas to remove or impede the ability of the victim to respond decisively—hence the term “gray zone.”<sup>26</sup> This challenge is set within a context of “inter-state strategic competition” and “increased efforts short of armed conflict.”<sup>27</sup> As well as being a description of current Russian statecraft, this type of strategy is also used in varying degrees for regional influence by China (which exploits public opinion, psychological warfare, and legal warfare in the South China Sea) and Iran (which uses a variety of nonmilitary and proxy military means for influence in the Syrian conflict and across the Middle East), among others. As Lieutenant General James Dubik, Senior Fellow at the Institute for the Study of War, has noted, “In the cases of China’s actions in the South China Sea, Russia’s in the Crimean Peninsula and eastern Ukraine, and Iran’s in Iraq and beyond, revisionist actions in the gray zone seem to be paying off.”<sup>28</sup>

All strategy is contingent. Successful strategy emerges as a product of the aims of the actor, the strengths and weaknesses of their adversary, and the character of the strategic environment. Hybrid

threats are no different. They have evolved out of a need for revisionist actors to offset the strengths and target the vulnerabilities of the “status quo” powers, including the self-restraint in taking decisive action and using force built into the regime of international law established after World War II. The relative success of efforts to normalize the use of dialogue over violence in international politics, underpinned by hard power to enforce the rules, has forced revisionist actors to use hybrid strategies to achieve goals without triggering decisive or armed responses.<sup>29</sup> As evolutionary biologists say, “Everything is everywhere, but the environment selects.”

With this in mind, there are three key contextual factors that help explain the rise of hybrid threats, understood as nonviolent revisionist grand strategy using multiple means to target vulnerabilities across society:

- the shifting balance of global and regional power, meaning more actors are more motivated to challenge the status quo;
- complex interdependence within the global political economy, meaning more states are increasingly vulnerable to others in more ways; and
- technological convergence, meaning more actors have more means available to do more harm.

Trends across all three factors point to a likely increase in future hybrid threats as more revisionist actors have more access to means that can target more vulnerabilities and do so more cost effectively.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, as Western military powers double down on securing a technological edge through modernization (such as the U.S. Third Offset Strategy), revisionist actors will have further cause to refine hybrid threats to neutralize these gains, including through unconventional threats to the generation and deployment of military forces in the first place.<sup>31</sup>

To achieve such an offset of their own, hybrid aggressors target all three elements of Clausewitz’s

“remarkable trinity”—which he related to the people, the government, and the military—and the complex dependencies between all three that underpin the ability of any state to wield power. While this idea is clearly not new, such a full-frontal assault on society across the people, government, and military has usually been reserved for the most intense confrontations in history. Yet the trends described above suggest the intensity of this type of confrontation—as an increasing number of motivated revisionist actors gain more access to means that can target more vulnerabilities, more cost effectively—is unlikely to dim in the near future.

To summarize the first part of this article, the terms hybrid warfare and hybrid threats mean different things. Hybrid warfare describes a change in the character of warfare (that is, against violent adversaries during armed conflict), while hybrid threats emanate from nonviolent revisionist grand strategy that seeks gains while avoiding reprisal through exploiting the gray zone between peace and war. Yet these two terms and concepts are commonly conflated. This kind of conceptual confusion and elasticity makes it difficult to understand the distinct nature of the challenge, and even more difficult to develop any counter-strategy. As Antulio Echeverria has said, this problem “has clouded the thinking of policymakers and impaired the development of sound counter-strategies.”<sup>32</sup>

## How to Achieve Conceptual Clarity

To clear up any conceptual confusion and avoid clouded thinking, this section builds on the distinction in the discourse traced above between hybrid warfare and hybrid threats to establish some firmer conceptual foundations. By building on these, the need to counter each challenge can be considered and the contribution of defense forces determined—including the implications for defense policy, strategy, and capability. The subsequent section then goes on to address this question by examining the distinct

implications of each challenge in turn. The previous section briefly traced the lineage of the term hybrid warfare to demonstrate its principal utility in describing the changing character of warfare against violent adversaries during armed conflict. It also showed how the term hybrid threats describes a distinct (but related) challenge: the use of multiple, ambiguous means to target vulnerabilities across society to achieve goals gradually without triggering decisive responses. While the former concept can help characterize contemporary approaches to warfare as seen in the Middle East and eastern Ukraine predominantly emanating from nonstate actors, the latter concept can also help analyze the approaches of revisionist states such as Russia, China, and Iran. Importantly, both phenomena are likely to become part of the future strategic environment as more motivated revisionist actors gain access to means that can target more vulnerabilities more cost effectively without resorting to armed attack.

Bearing in mind that both hybrid threats and hybrid warfare describe distinct challenges to national security that are likely to endure and persist, the following conceptual distinction is therefore proposed, building on the findings above:

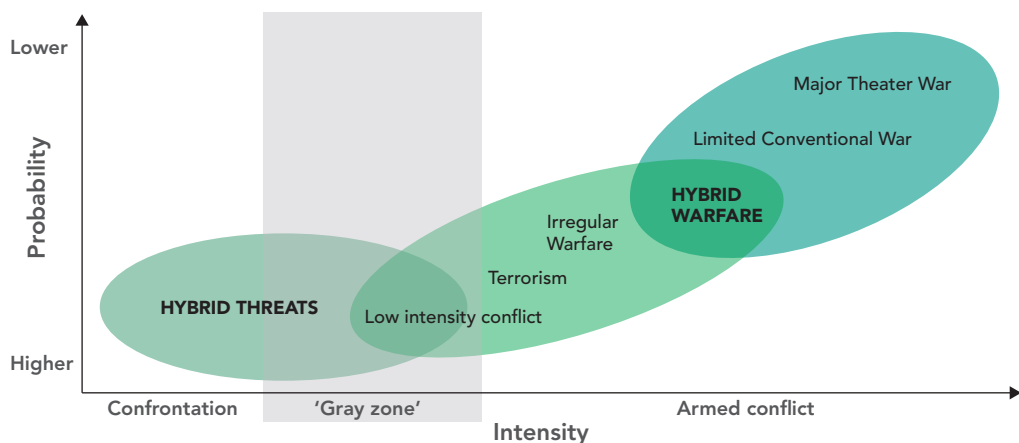
- Hybrid threats combine a wide range of non-violent means to target vulnerabilities across

the whole of society to undermine the functioning, unity, or will of their targets, while degrading and subverting the status quo. This kind of strategy is used by revisionist actors to gradually achieve their aims without triggering decisive responses, including armed responses.

- Hybrid warfare is the challenge presented by the increasing complexity of armed conflict, where adversaries may combine types of warfare plus nonmilitary means to neutralize conventional military power.<sup>33</sup>

It should be noted that both challenges have the same basic cause: revisionist actors and adversaries finding a way to neutralize conventional state power in achieving their goals. But each strategy is designed to target distinct components of the state's ability to protect national security. Returning to the language of Clausewitz, hybrid threats mainly target the will of the people and the decisionmaking ability of the government, whereas hybrid warfare mainly targets the effectiveness of the military to conduct successful operations. Each therefore demands different countermeasures, and each has distinct implications for defense policy, strategy, and capability at all levels of warfare.<sup>34</sup> Each challenge is shown in Figure 1 on a continuum of conflict.

**FIGURE 1. Hybrid Threats and Hybrid Warfare Shown on a Continuum of Conflict<sup>35</sup>**





Critically, each challenge represents a gap in the ability of many nations' defense forces to respond to contemporary challenges that are likely to endure and intensify. Existing defense policies often address the challenges of low-intensity conflict, irregular warfare, conventional conflict, and even nuclear war, but have less convincing answers to hybrid threats and hybrid warfare. This is because these challenges have not been specifically and systematically addressed in the same way. The separation proposed here is therefore intended to be analytically progressive and helpful to policymakers, offering firm foundations on which to consider how to counter both hybrid threats and hybrid warfare. The article will do this in the next section, before going on to determine the implications of this understanding for defense forces.

### Countering Hybrid Threats: Implications for Defense Forces

This section considers how to counter hybrid threats and what the implications of this might be for defense policy, strategy, and capabilities. This subject is addressed first, before hybrid warfare, because the role of defense in countering what is ostensibly a nonmilitary problem is arguably more contentious and underconceptualized in comparison. To address this challenge, it is helpful to recall the American diplomat George Kennan's description of "political warfare" as a strategy prescription for confronting the Soviet Union during the Cold War: "Political warfare is the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in time of peace. In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert."<sup>36</sup>

While this understanding of hybrid threats as "Clausewitz inverted"—the continuation of war by other means—is viewed by many as a heretical misuse of one of the dead Prussian's most enduring

insights, it also sheds some light on its character. On the one hand, nonviolent revisionist strategy, while not precluding the use of the military instrument in small doses (or indirectly, for example, through coercive posture and presence), does preclude the conduct of armed attack; otherwise, it would be simply "warfare." On the other hand, the language of "war" and "warfare" possesses power beyond strict Clausewitzian limits, as demonstrated through commonly used terms such as "economic warfare," "the war on drugs," "cyber warfare," "lawfare," and so on. Some argue that such devices—including the term "hybrid warfare" itself—are exploited for political purposes and in doing so ultimately degrade and undermine efforts to isolate, regulate, and rule out large-scale violent confrontation in the international system.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, there may also be value in using the innate seriousness of the language of war to denote the invidious threat posed by nonviolent revisionist strategy that might otherwise escape due attention over time.<sup>38</sup>

It is also important to note the critical difference between hybrid threats and conventional statecraft. Hybrid threats involve ways and means that breach international norms and law to achieve political goals (for example, through public disinformation, airspace violations, illegal territorial claims) while aiming to degrade and subvert the existing international order and status quo in the international system. Ultimately, as Clausewitz observes, "the political cause of a war has a great influence on the method in which it is conducted."<sup>39</sup> Or, as NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has said,

*Hybrid is the dark reflection of our comprehensive approach. We use a combination of military and nonmilitary means to stabilize countries. Others use it to destabilize them.*<sup>40</sup>

Notwithstanding whether hybrid threats are a form of "warfare," the need to counter this type of strategy must be considered. To help determine

the scope of any strategy to counter hybrid threats, Table 1 contains a list of potential levers available to any future adversary looking to prosecute a hybrid campaign. The basic challenge in responding to such a range of nonviolent but potentially damaging actions is whether to respond to them as acts of war or as confrontational behavior, or whether to respond to them at all. Kennan, this time channeling a more conventional interpretation of Clausewitz, also suggested the United States had been “handicapped however by a popular attachment to the concept of a basic difference between peace and war, by a tendency to view war as a sort of sporting context outside of all political context.”<sup>41</sup> This is the inherent dilemma forced onto decisionmakers by adversaries who use hybrid threats. Policymakers must therefore conceptualize a challenge that does not conform to the rules, while responding in a way that will reinforce those rules.

**Implications for Policy**

The basic policy dilemma presented by hybrid threats is, therefore, whether to do anything about them. If such hostile activity can be tolerated and absorbed, then the policy implications are minimal. If it does require countering, strategy and capabilities must be developed accordingly. This choice depends on the extent to which hybrid threats can damage the national interest. On the one hand, while hybrid threats might be harmful to some extent, they are rarely an immediate matter of life or death. On the other hand, over time they could cause cumulative risk and damage to the foundations and functions of society and government. This might include undermining public trust in government, damage to critical infrastructure, or the erosion of rules and norms, economic growth, or the readiness of national defense assets. Hybrid threats can also be seen as short-term “preparation of the battlefield” to establish vulnerabilities that could be exploited in any longer term conflict.<sup>42</sup> This

**TABLE 1. Proposed Range of Potential Nonviolent Hybrid Threat Instruments.**

Type of instrument	Source
Cultural	Liang and Xiagsui's trans-military and non-military forms of warfare in <i>Unrestricted Warfare</i> (1999)
Diplomatic	
Network	
Intelligence	
Psychological	
Technological	
Smuggling	
Drug 'warfare'	
Fictitious/fabrication 'warfare'	
Financial	
Trade	
Resources	
Economic/economic aid incentives	
Legal/moral/regulatory	
Sanctions	
Media/propaganda	RAND study, <i>Modern Political Warfare</i> (2018)
Ideology/religion	
Forced population shifts/migration	
Covert means	
Unconventional warfare	Dubik and Vincent, <i>America's Global Competitions: The Gray Zone in Context</i> , ISW (2018)
Proxy warfare	
Domestic networks	
Military coercion (short of war)	

Sources: Liang and Xiagsui, “Unrestricted Warfare,” 123; Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare*; Dubik, *America's Global Competitions*.

approach certainly meets the British academic and author Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman's definition of strategy as "the art of creating power."<sup>43</sup>

This choice should also take into account the potential resource bill for countering hybrid threats, which may require tradeoffs to be made in other areas (in the case of defense forces, for example, in high-end warfighting at the other end of the spectrum to nonviolent hybrid threats). It is therefore vital to be clear about whether, when, and how to respond to hybrid threats by asking the following questions:

- To what extent can such threats simply be absorbed across society?
- What are the consequences of success: if hybrid threats can be successfully countered but revisionist actors remain motivated, what comes next?

### *Implications for Strategy*

In the case of defense forces, if policy is to simply absorb hybrid threats, defense strategy should focus on increasing resilience in two areas. The first is defense's contribution to national resilience, which must evolve to meet intensifying threats.<sup>44</sup> The second is the resilience of defense itself against future hybrid threats that may prevent or impede deployment, sustainment, and power projection (prior to or during an armed conflict).<sup>45</sup> Lessons across both these areas can be learned from nations such as Finland and Sweden, which have recently refreshed their approach to national resilience in the face of increased threats.<sup>46</sup> Regional cooperation is also important to build resilience through allies and partners.<sup>47</sup> If policy is to counter hybrid threats, defense strategy must be capable of contributing to a national strategy to do so, coordinated across the whole of government. Any strategy to counter hybrid threats must have three components. First, this will require detecting hybrid threats to begin with. Second, countering hybrid threats will require

the absorption of activity (below a certain threshold, bolstered by the resilience measures above) in parallel with specific countermeasures to both deter hybrid aggressors and respond to hybrid attacks. The hybrid "dilemma" must be considered through-out: hybrid threats are designed to prevent decisive responses in the first place. This makes detection more important and countering more difficult. The defense contribution to each of these three components is briefly expanded on below.<sup>48</sup>

### *Detecting Hybrid Threats*

The role of defense in detecting hybrid threats will not be substantively different from existing practice. Two principles should apply: closer cooperation across government, and closer cooperation with allies and partners. Beyond this, defense's contribution to detecting hybrid threats will remain focused on exploiting strategic intelligence and data from technical and physical assets deployed around the world. Analysis must consider the wider "political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure" context when processing this data: spotting hybrid threats requires analysts to "connect the dots" across unfamiliar domains.<sup>49</sup> This may require enhanced training and will certainly require more familiarity, contact, and closer working with colleagues from across government, other nations, and multinational institutions.

### *Deterring Hybrid Aggressors*

Hybrid threats are designed to both complicate and undermine conventional deterrence strategy by specifically avoiding actions that obviously breach the thresholds or red lines signaled by the deterring actor.<sup>50</sup> However, the basic principles of deterrence do not change against hybrid adversaries. There are two main ways to deter: by denial and by punishment.<sup>51</sup> Either of these will require a defense contribution.

Deterrence by denial has both a defensive and offensive component.<sup>52</sup> The former is based on

resilience (as above). The latter overlaps somewhat with punishment (described below) as the ability to impose costs by making it more difficult to maneuver or attack. Defense must therefore retain the ability to prosecute potent denial operations, such as air defense, maritime coastal defense, missile defense, and force projection, including in the new domains of space and cyberspace.<sup>53</sup>

Any deterrence-by-punishment strategy must first and foremost be a whole-of-government effort, relying primarily on nonmilitary means to threaten vulnerabilities in the aggressor's own system.<sup>54</sup> The contribution of defense will rely primarily on traditional capabilities, sufficiently modernized to be able to hold any adversary's critical capabilities at risk. But the gradualist nature of hybrid threats requires early, decisive responses to punish selected revisionist acts and "stop the rot." Defense must therefore offer government a range of options short of war to punish an adversary. These require tailoring to the situation and to the aggressor's vulnerabilities but could include smaller force packages conducive to deployment at short notice; nonkinetic threats to posture or hold critical capabilities at risk without the use of physical force (for example, electronic warfare, cyber, intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance); or the use of special operations forces to provide irregular responses. However, credible deterrence by punishment relies to some extent on the attribution of aggression (to generate the legitimacy to underpin decisive action), which hybrid threats seek to deny. Detection methods will therefore need to find ways to achieve attribution in the face of ambiguity (for example, more sophisticated attribution of cyber attacks).<sup>55</sup> Even with such improvements, defense forces may have to operate in a more fluid strategic environment in the absence of clear, bounded mandates for decisive action. This will have implications for operating permissions, rules of engagement, training, and so on.

Deterring hybrid threats will also be a collective endeavor. The need for strategy that is "international by design" (particularly through interoperability) is therefore greater than ever. Allies must be able to summon a punishment capability that is greater than the sum of its parts. Solidarity is also vital in the face of hybrid threats, which often aim to undermine allied cohesion in the first place.

### *Responding to Hybrid Threats*

In most cases, defense will not be the lead responder to hybrid threats, although it is often implicitly relied on as the first responder.<sup>56</sup> Defense must therefore continue to provide the government with conventional defensive and offensive options as part of a whole-of-government response to counter hybrid threats. Defense may also be required to provide specific options short of war to influence a hostile state actor (to coerce, disrupt, deny, deter). However, defense forces are not primarily designed to operate in this gray zone to provide coercive options short of war. Developing the ability to do so may therefore ultimately require tradeoffs with existing missions and capability. Furthermore, using defense forces to conduct operations short of war carries the risk of counterescalation that requires careful consideration.

In summary, competing in the gray zone to counter hybrid threats will have three broad implications for defense to sustain advantage in an era of persistent strategic competition, based on their contribution to detecting hybrid threats, deterring hybrid aggressors, and responding to hybrid attacks:

- potentially substantive revisions to both defense's contribution to homeland resilience and the resilience of defense itself to hybrid threats;
- improved coordination between the use of force and the other levers of power across government; and



- potentially substantive revisions to the way defense is organized, resourced, and equipped to offer the government more options that fall below the threshold of armed conflict.<sup>57</sup>

Importantly, these implications for defense forces of countering hybrid threats must be balanced against the need to protect their “core business”: being prepared to fight and win conventional conflicts. Any significant rebalance that reduces the ability of defense to prosecute high-end warfighting requires a careful and clear-eyed assessment of what constitutes the most likely and the most dangerous threats to the nation.<sup>58</sup> The overall challenge for defense strategy in countering hybrid threats is neatly captured by the following assessment:

*Compete successfully with the revisionist powers below the threshold of war. Success in this arena requires maintaining a robust alliance system, retaining a credible nuclear deterrent capacity, resurrecting conventional deterrent capabilities, and winning in the area in which revisionist powers now seek to expand their influence—what is called the ‘gray zone’.*<sup>59</sup>

### Implications for Capability

Given the implications for strategy outlined above, the consequences for capability development can be described by identifying three principle force design problems that require further investigation:

- the role of defense in homeland resilience against hybrid threats;
- making defense itself resilient to hybrid threats that may prevent or impede deployment, sustainment, and power projection (prior to or during an armed conflict); and
- determining what capabilities are required to counter hybrid threats short of war, and

whether these should be traded for other capability (such as high-end warfighting).

It should be noted that whether countering hybrid threats actually requires tradeoffs with existing or new capability remains unclear and requires further investigation. The answer may well be to use existing capability differently, or to invest more in certain training and skills. For example, in the United Kingdom, an analogous approach has been taken in recent years to “defense engagement” to revise strategy, increase training, and allocate regionally aligned units.<sup>60</sup> However, it bears repeating that any significant rebalance that reduces the ability of defense to prosecute high-end warfighting requires a careful and clear-eyed assessment of what constitutes the most likely and the most dangerous threats to the nation.

### Implications for Policy and Strategy

There is no comparable policy dilemma for dealing with hybrid warfare. Defense forces must simply maintain the ability to defeat a variety of complex potential adversaries in armed conflict, particularly those who may combine many types of warfare. Likewise, the implications for strategy of hybrid warfare remain constant. Ultimately, policy aims will still be accomplished through combining joint military action (across government and with allies) with the ability to wield a high-end, full-spectrum capability that can overmatch a variety of adversaries. Defense forces should also retain the ability to conduct counterinsurgency operations and the agility required to counter irregular adversaries.

### Implications for Capability

Assuming these broad tenets of strategy remain constant, the true implications of countering hybrid warfare concern capability development. In other words, defense forces need to develop the ways and means required to counter hybrid warfare. Frank

Hoffman has argued that force planners should abandon the “dichotomous choice between counter-insurgency and conventional war” adopted in recent times. He suggests the choice is no longer “[either] one of preparing for long-term stability operations or high-intensity conflict,” but that “hybrid threats are a better focal point for considering alternative joint force postures.”<sup>61</sup>

To define the capability development requirements (including doctrine, training, equipment, and other components of defense capability) of countering hybrid warfare, two key questions must be answered:

- What is the full range of future “warfares” likely to be employed in combination by a future hybrid adversary during an armed conflict?
- What are the implications of countering these for future defense forces?

Table 2 offers an answer to the first question. It identifies a range of potential future modes of warfare likely to be employed in combination by a future hybrid adversary during an armed conflict.<sup>62</sup> This scope can be used as an initial baseline for capability and force development investigations into countering hybrid warfare.

The second question can be answered by examining the specific implications of each mode of warfare, then trading off the ability to counter each with the ability to adapt across the whole set. This process involves establishing the robustness of future capability across a wide range of possible future outcomes.<sup>63</sup> It must account for the added complexity and cost of dealing with multiple modes of warfare simultaneously, for this is the true challenge of hybrid warfare. Ultimately, the key tradeoff for force design may well be between specialization and adaptability. The most serious threats will require specialized forces to counter them, while against others the ability to adapt—a less optimal but more robust solution—may

**TABLE 2. Proposed Range of Potential “Warfares” Available to an Adversary in a Future Hybrid Warfare Scenario.**

Type of instrument	Source
Conventional warfare	Hoffman’s original definition of hybrid warfare
Irregular warfare	
Terrorism	
Criminality (large-scale)	
Information warfare	Mattis and Hoffman’s 2005 definition of the ‘four block war’
Nuclear warfare	Liang and Xiangsui’s military forms of warfare in <i>Unrestricted Warfare</i> (1999)
Bio/chemical warfare	
Ecological warfare	
Space warfare	
Electronic warfare	
Concussion warfare	Liang and Xiangsui’s trans-military forms of warfare in <i>Unrestricted Warfare</i> (1999)
Network warfare	
Intelligence warfare	The UK’s Future Force Concept (2017)
Cyber warfare	
Urban warfare	
Unmanned warfare	

Sources: Hoffman, “Hybrid Threats,” 1; Mattis and Hoffman, “Future Warfare”; Liang and Xiangsui, “Unrestricted Warfare,” 123; UK MOD, “Future Force Concept,” JCN1/17.

suffice. As with countering hybrid threats, there is also likely to be a tradeoff between counter-hybrid warfare and high-end capability.

Given the implications for strategy and capability outlined above, the following force design problems can be identified for further investigation:

- the future force balance between specialization and adaptation to counter the full range of “warfares” likely to be employed in combination by future hybrid adversaries; and

- assuming finite resources, how much high-end (or other) capability to trade for counter-hybrid warfare capability.

## Combining Hybrid Threats and Hybrid Warfare

Finally, it should be acknowledged that hybrid threats and hybrid warfare may occur at the same time, prosecuted by the same adversary, as part of an intense revisionist campaign or during war. For example, the current conflict in eastern Ukraine might be viewed as an example of hybrid warfare that is taking place within a wider Russian campaign of regional revisionism and global influence. Likewise, Iranian proxy militia fighting hybrid wars in Syria and Iraq, and against Israel (Hezbollah was Frank Hoffman's original example of a "hybrid warfare" actor), are part of a wider regional revisionist challenge. Alternatively, any future large-scale war is likely to involve hybrid warfare operations, in parallel with hybrid threats to the homeland. The challenge will be to fight both in parallel.

## Conclusions

In their 1999 book *Unrestricted Warfare*, Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force officers Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui noted:

*Everything is changing. We believe that the age of a revolution in operating methods, wherein all of the changes involved in the explosion of technology, the replacement of weapons, the development of security concepts, the adjustment of strategic targets, the obscurity of the boundaries of the battlefield, and the expansion of the scope and scale of non-military means and non-military personnel involved in warfare are focused on one point, has already arrived.*<sup>64</sup>

In their words, so-called hybrid challenges have already arrived and are unlikely to disappear in the

near future. This article has sought to help national governments and multinational institutions counter the rising hybrid challenge emanating from a variety of revisionist actors in the international system.

It does so in five parts by establishing conceptual foundations for the contribution of Defense forces to countering hybrid challenges, before identifying implications for Defense policy, strategy and capability development.

The first part addressed the problem of opaque and confusing language—where the same terms were being used to mean different things—by briefly tracing the roots of the concept in Western military and strategic discourse. It demonstrated that while "hybrid warfare" and "hybrid threats" are different things, these terms (and others) are often used interchangeably, hindering the ability of national governments and multinational institutions to understand the nature of the challenge and develop effective counterstrategies.

The second part established a conceptual distinction between hybrid warfare—which describes changes in the character of warfare against violent adversaries during armed conflict—and hybrid threats—which emanate from nonviolent revisionist grand strategy that seeks gains while avoiding reprisal through exploiting the gray zone between peace and war. Critically, each challenge represents a gap in the ability of many nations' defense forces to respond to contemporary challenges that are likely to endure and intensify. By building on these conceptual foundations, counterstrategies can be developed and the implications for defense policy, strategy, and capability determined.

The third part assessed the implications for defense forces of countering hybrid threats. It concludes that for defense forces to contribute to national, whole-of-government strategy to counter hybrid threats, they must make distinct contributions to detecting hybrid threats, deterring hybrid aggressors, and responding to hybrid attacks. More

specifically, doing so will have three broad implications for defense: improved coordination between the use of force and the other levers of power across government; potential revisions to the way defense is organized, resourced, and equipped to offer the government more options that fall below the threshold of armed conflict; and potential revisions to both defense's contribution to homeland resilience and the resilience of defense itself to hybrid threats. Importantly, these implications must be balanced against the need to protect the core business of defense forces: being prepared to fight and win conventional conflicts.

The fourth part assessed the implications for defense forces of countering hybrid warfare. These are centered on the need to develop a sufficient range of capability to deter and defeat a variety of complex adversaries who may combine numerous types of warfare and nonmilitary means during armed conflict. This will require a balance between specialization and adaptation to counter the full range of warfares likely to be employed in combination by future hybrid adversaries. As with countering hybrid threats, there is also likely to be a tradeoff (assuming finite resources) between capabilities to counter hybrid warfare and those to counter high-end, conventional warfighting adversaries.

The final part acknowledges that hybrid threats and hybrid warfare may occur at the same time, prosecuted by the same adversary, as part of an intense revisionist campaign or during war. Notwithstanding the likely combination of these two methods, the best way to understand the implications for defense forces in terms of policy, strategy, and capability is through the conceptual distinction proposed here between hybrid threats and hybrid warfare. As the saying goes, the most important part of the picture is the frame. **PRISM**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bob Seely and Alya Shandra, "The Toolkit for Kremlin's New Warfare," *The Times*, April 2, 2018, <[www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-toolkit-for-kremlin-s-new-warfare](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-toolkit-for-kremlin-s-new-warfare)>.

<sup>2</sup> This paper builds upon the understanding of hybrid warfare set out in MCDC, "Understanding Hybrid Warfare," 2017, and MCDC, "Countering Hybrid Warfare," 2019. Both are available at <[www.gov.uk/government/publications/countering-hybrid-warfare-project-understanding-hybrid-warfare](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/countering-hybrid-warfare-project-understanding-hybrid-warfare)>; for the "art of creating power," see Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> This paper was originally prepared as an 'Information Note' for the Multinational Capability Development Campaign (MCDC) Countering Hybrid Warfare project during the 2017–18 project cycle.

<sup>4</sup> Hybrid "attacks," "challenges," "actions," "campaign," "activities," "threats," and "warfare" are all used in NATO's Brussels Summit Communiqué, available at <[www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_156624.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm)>, while hybrid "warfare," "threats," "tactics," and "attacks" are used in the UK's National Security Strategy and Strategic Defense and Security Review 2015, available at <[www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-and-strategic-defence-and-security-review-2015](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-and-strategic-defence-and-security-review-2015)>. See also Michael Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2015), <<https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1303>>; Michael Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017), <[www.csis.org/analysis/countering-coercion-maritime-asia](http://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-coercion-maritime-asia)>; James M. Dubik, *America's Global Competitions* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2018), <[www.understandingwar.org/report/americas-global-competitions-gray-zone-context](http://www.understandingwar.org/report/americas-global-competitions-gray-zone-context)>; Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy 2018* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2019), <<http://nssarchive.us/national-defense-strategy-2018/>>; Linda Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018), <[www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1772.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1772.html)>. These examples are all taken from Western literature. For a discussion of the Russian literature on *gibridnaya voyna*, subversion warfare, net-centric warfare, and information warfare, see Ofer Fridman, *Russian "Hybrid Warfare": Resurgence and Politicization* (London: Hurst and Company, 2018). For one insight into Chinese thinking about "unrestricted warfare" and "three warfares," see Peter Mattis, "China's 'Three Warfares' in Perspective," *War on the Rocks*, January 30, 2018, <<https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/>>



chinas-three-warfares-perspective/>.

<sup>5</sup> James Mattis and Frank G. Hoffman, “Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars,” *Proceedings* 131/11/1233 (November 2005), <[www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2005-11/future-warfare-rise-hybrid-wars](http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2005-11/future-warfare-rise-hybrid-wars)>.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, William S. Lind et al., “The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation,” *Marine Corps Gazette* (October 1989), 22–26; James Callard and Peter Faber, “An Emerging Synthesis for a New Way of War,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (Winter 2002/Spring 2003): 63–68; Thomas M. Huber, ed., *Compound Warfare: That Fatal Knot* (Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991); William S. Lind et al., “Fourth Generation Warfare: Another Look,” *Marine Corps Gazette* (December 1994).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Qiao Liang and Wand Xiangsui, “Unrestricted Warfare,” NewsMax Media, 2002 (originally published in 1999); Fridman, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare,”* 127–136; Andras Racz, “The Role of Military Power in Russia’s New Generation Warfare Arsenal in Ukraine and Beyond,” 2018, <[www.academia.edu/37619239/The\\_Role\\_of\\_Military\\_Power\\_in\\_Russias\\_New\\_Generation\\_Warfare\\_Arsenal\\_in\\_Ukraine\\_and\\_Beyond](http://www.academia.edu/37619239/The_Role_of_Military_Power_in_Russias_New_Generation_Warfare_Arsenal_in_Ukraine_and_Beyond)>.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the 2006 and 2010 U.S. Quadrennial Defense Reviews, <<http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/qdr20060203.pdf>> and <<http://archive.defense.gov/qdr/QDR%20as%20of%2029JAN10%201600.pdf>>; NATO, “Bi-SC Input to a New NATO Capstone Concept for the Military Contribution to Countering Hybrid Threats,” August 25, 2010, <[www.act.nato.int/images/stories/events/2010/20100826\\_bi-sc\\_cht.pdf](http://www.act.nato.int/images/stories/events/2010/20100826_bi-sc_cht.pdf)>; and UK Ministry of Defence, *Future Character of Conflict*, 2010, 13, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-character-of-conflict>>. This publication was withdrawn on 16 December 2015 and replaced by “DCDC Strategic Trends Programme Future Operating Environment 2035,” which was published by DCDC in August 2015.

<sup>10</sup> *The Economist*, “Shades of Grey: Neither War nor Peace,” January 25, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Edward Lucas, “We Must Wake Up to Russia’s Shifting Threats,” *The Times*, October 27, 2017; Sam Jones, “Ukraine: Russia’s New Art of War,” *Financial Times*, August 28, 2014; Julian E. Barnes, “NATO Works to Adapt to More Ambiguous Warfare Techniques,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 8, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Håkan Gunneriusson, *Bordieuan Field Theory as*

*an Instrument for Military Operational Analysis* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 111.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed account of how this happened, see Fridman, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare.”*

<sup>14</sup> Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight,” *Military Review* (January-February 2016), <[https://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview\\_20160228\\_art008.pdf](https://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20160228_art008.pdf)>; Mark Galeotti, “The Mythical Gerasimov Doctrine and the Language of Threat,” *Critical Studies on Security* (2018); Charles K. Bartles, “Getting Gerasimov Right,” *Military Review* (January-February 2016), 30–38.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Molly K. McKew, “The Gerasimov Doctrine,” *Politico*, May 9, 2017, <[www.politico.eu/article/new-battles-cyberwarfare-russia/](http://www.politico.eu/article/new-battles-cyberwarfare-russia/)>.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed exposition of the conceptual evolution of the term “hybrid warfare” in Western strategic literature and the application of the term to Russia, see Fridman, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare.”*

<sup>17</sup> Mattis and Hoffman, “Future Warfare.”

<sup>18</sup> For more on the U.S. perspective see: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, *Multi-Domain Battle: Evolution of Combined Arms for the 21st Century* (2017), <[www.tradoc.army.mil/Portals/14/Documents/MDB\\_Evolutionfor21st%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.tradoc.army.mil/Portals/14/Documents/MDB_Evolutionfor21st%20(1).pdf)>, or Patrick Tucker, “How the U.S. Army is Preparing to Fight Hybrid War in 2030,” *Defense One*, October 9, 2017, <[www.defenseone.com/technology/2017/10/how-us-army-preparing-fight-hybrid-war-2030/141634/](http://www.defenseone.com/technology/2017/10/how-us-army-preparing-fight-hybrid-war-2030/141634/)>; for more on the UK perspective see UK Ministry of Defence (MOD), “Future Force Concept,” JCN 1/17, September 7, 2017, <[www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-force-concept-jcn-117](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-force-concept-jcn-117)>. See also UK MOD, “Global Strategic Trends—The Future Starts Today,” DCDC, 132, <[www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-strategic-trends](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-strategic-trends)>.

<sup>19</sup> Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid Threats: Reconceptualizing the Evolving Character of Modern Warfare,” *Strategic Forum* 240 (Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, April 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Frank G. Hoffman, “Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars” (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> NATO, “NATO’s Response to Hybrid Threats,” July 17, 2018, <[www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_156338.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm)>; European Commission, press release, July 19, 2017, <[http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-17-2064\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-2064_en.htm)>.

<sup>22</sup> “EEAS, EU, and NATO Inaugurate European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats,” October 2, 2017, <<https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/33119/eu-and-nato-inaugurate-european-centre-excel>>.

lence-countering-hybrid-threats\_en>. See also: [www.hybridcoe.fi](http://www.hybridcoe.fi).

<sup>23</sup> United Kingdom, “National Security Strategy and Strategic Defense and Security Review 2015,” <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-and-strategic-defence-and-security-review-2015>>.

<sup>24</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Lionel Giles, <<http://classics.mit.edu/Tzu/artwar.html>>

<sup>25</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*.

<sup>26</sup> More often used in U.S. discourse. See, for example, Dubik, *America’s Global Competitions*, or Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. *National Defense Strategy of 2018*.

<sup>28</sup> Dubik, *America’s Global Competitions*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace: Reflections on War and International Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> UK MOD, “Global Strategic Trends—The Future Starts Today.”

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Robert Johnson, “Hybrid War and Its Countermeasures,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 29, no. 1 (2018): 141–163, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2018.1404770>>. Jelle van Haaster and Mark Roorda, “The Impact of Hybrid Warfare on Traditional Operational Rationale,” *Militaire Spectator* 185, no. 4 (Summer 2016), <[www.militairespectator.nl/sites/default/files/teksten/bestanden/Militaire%20Spectator%204-2016%20Roorda%20Van%20Haaster.pdf](http://www.militairespectator.nl/sites/default/files/teksten/bestanden/Militaire%20Spectator%204-2016%20Roorda%20Van%20Haaster.pdf)>.

<sup>32</sup> Antulio J. Echevarria II, “Operating in the Gray Zone: An Alternative Paradigm for U.S. Military Strategy” (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2016), 1.

<sup>33</sup> This is not the first time this distinction has been proposed, nor is it the first time descriptions or definitions of each have been offered. Nonetheless, because this distinction is vital to the rest of this article (to consider the implications for defense forces), it is articulated here on its own terms. See, for example, Frank G. Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict,” *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (2018): 30–47; Fridman, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare”*; Mikael Wigell, “Hybrid Interference as a Wedge Strategy: A Theory of External Interference in Liberal Democracy,” *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (2019): 255–275; Mark Galeotti, “(Mis)Understanding Russia’s Two ‘Hybrid Wars,’” *Eurozine*, November 29, 2018, <[www.eurozine.com/misunderstanding-russias-two-hybrid-wars/](http://www.eurozine.com/misunderstanding-russias-two-hybrid-wars/)>.

<sup>34</sup> According to JDP 0-01 (UK Defence Doctrine, 5th ed., 2014), success at the strategic level “usually requires a combination of military force, diplomacy and economic measures, as well as collaboration with other nations’ governments and armed forces and other international organisations and agencies.” The “operational level

provides the bridge between the strategic and tactical levels,” while “the tactical level of warfare is the level at which formations, units and individuals ultimately confront an opponent or situation within the joint operations area.”

<sup>35</sup> After Linton Wells, “Cognitive Emotional Conflict,” *PRISM* 7, no. 2 (2018): 6 (who refers to “hybrid warfare” as “hybrid threats”); and Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict” (who refers to “hybrid threats” as “measures short of war”).

<sup>36</sup> George Kennan, Policy Planning Staff Memorandum, May 1948, <<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/history/johnson/65ciafounding3.html>>.

<sup>37</sup> Fridman, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare.”*

<sup>38</sup> This argument is used in MCDC, “Countering Hybrid Warfare,” 17.

<sup>39</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 400.

<sup>40</sup> Jens Stoltenberg, March 25, 2015, <[www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_118435.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_118435.htm)>.

<sup>41</sup> Kennan, Policy Planning Staff Memorandum.

<sup>42</sup> The UK Defense Secretary’s comments vis-à-vis Russia could be seen in this light (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42828218>).

<sup>43</sup> Freedman, *Strategy: A History*.

<sup>44</sup> See MCDC, Information Note, “A Review of UK Defence’s Contribution to Homeland Resilience and Security in Light of the Changing Global Context,” 2019.

<sup>45</sup> See van Haaster and Roorda, “The Impact of Hybrid Warfare on Traditional Operational Rationale.”

<sup>46</sup> Finland has introduced a wide-ranging program of “Comprehensive Security” overseen by the prime minister’s “Security Committee”; it has included changes to legislation (to improve information-sharing), enhancing preparedness in the business and technology sectors, and a recent citizen preparedness campaign. Similar steps have been taken in Sweden, including the re-introduction of conscription and a new “Total Defense” department within the MOD.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Gen. Nick Carter, “Dynamic Security Threats and the British Army,” speech at RUSI, January 22, 2018, <<https://rusi.org/event/dynamic-security-threats-and-british-army>>; or Aapo Cederberg et al., “Regional Cooperation to Support National Hybrid Defense Efforts,” Hybrid COE Working Paper 1, October 2017, <[https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/hybridcoe\\_wp1\\_regional\\_cooperation.pdf](https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/hybridcoe_wp1_regional_cooperation.pdf)>.

<sup>48</sup> This “detect-deter-respond” framework is elaborated in MCDC, “Countering Hybrid Warfare.”

<sup>49</sup> As stated in MCDC, “Understanding Hybrid Warfare,” 4: “Hybrid warfare uses coordinated military,

political, economic, civilian, and informational (MPECI) instruments of power that extend far beyond the military realm. National efforts should enhance traditional threat assessment activity to include non-conventional political, economic, civil, international (PECI) tools and capabilities.”

<sup>50</sup> MCDC, “Countering Hybrid Warfare,” 35–38.

<sup>51</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

<sup>52</sup> See UK MOD, “Deterrence: The Defence Contribution (JDN 1/19),” 2019, 40–41, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/deterrence-the-defence-contribution-jdn-119>>, which identifies four parts to this: resistance, removal, replacement, and redundancy.

<sup>53</sup> UK MOD, “Future Force Concept,” JCN1/17.

<sup>54</sup> These options should be one part of a whole-of-government approach to deterrence by punishment; see MCDC, “Countering Hybrid Warfare,” 43–48.

<sup>55</sup> Although technical attribution is not the only issue when it comes to effective deterrence; more often, the political consequences of attribution provide more problems than the technical aspects. See MCDC, “Countering Hybrid Warfare,” 41.

<sup>56</sup> Nathan Freier, “The Defense Identity Crisis: It’s a Hybrid World,” *Parameters* (Autumn 2009): 81–94.

<sup>57</sup> This insight is central to the new U.S. Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning (JCIC). The JCIC describes how “the Joint Force plays an essential role in securing and achieving national aims in conditions sometimes regarded as outside the military sphere: competition below the threshold of armed conflict”; <[www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joint\\_concept\\_integrated\\_campaign.pdf?ver=2018-03-28-102833-257](http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joint_concept_integrated_campaign.pdf?ver=2018-03-28-102833-257)>. See also: <https://warontherocks.com/2018/05/a-new-blueprint-for-competing-below-the-threshold-the-joint-concept-for-integrated-campaigning/>.

<sup>58</sup> This argument is well made in the context of Russia in Andrew Monaghan, “The ‘War’ in Russia’s ‘Hybrid Warfare,’” *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2015–16): 65–74.

<sup>59</sup> Dubik, *America’s Global Competitions*, 8.

<sup>60</sup> United Kingdom, International Defense Engagement Strategy, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-defence-engagement-strategy-2017>>.

<sup>61</sup> Hoffman, *Hybrid Threats*, 1.

<sup>62</sup> This range of does not include specific non-military options (such as economic warfare, cultural warfare, media warfare etc.) because those challenges are dealt with through the “hybrid threats” construct (see Table 1). This is not to say they will not occur during armed conflict (they will, as mentioned in the final section), but

the distinct demands of hybrid threats and hybrid warfare require different counter-measures, and therefore have distinct implications for future defense forces.

<sup>63</sup> See the literature on ‘robust’ approaches to strategy, for example: RJ Lempert et al, *Defense Resource Planning Under Uncertainty*, RAND Corporation, 2016; or Yakov Ben Haim, *Dealing with Uncertainty in Strategic Decision-making*, *Parameters* 45(3), 2015, 63–73.

<sup>64</sup> Liang and Xiangsui, “Unrestricted Warfare.”

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## **SUPPORT TO RESISTANCE: STRATEGIC PURPOSE AND EFFECTIVENESS**



By Will Irwin with a foreword from Lieutenant General John F. Mulholland, Jr., USA

This monograph is the first in a planned series of three volumes that will provide Special Operations Forces (SOF) with an in-depth study of resistance movements. Mr. Will Irwin provides a wealth of case studies focused on the United States Government's support to resistance movements. For each study the author summarizes in a clear, concise manner the duration of U.S. support, the political environments or conditions, the type of operation, the purpose or objective of U.S.

support, and the ultimate outcome: success, partial success, failure, or an inconclusive outcome. Unfolding world events are indicative of the need for SOF to maintain and enhance traditional unconventional warfare (UW) skills, but those skills must be assessed in the context of modern resistance movement dynamics. This work will serve as a benchmark reference on resistance movements for the benefit of the special operations community and its civilian leadership.

## **POLITICAL STRATEGY IN UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE: OPPORTUNITIES LOST IN EASTERN SYRIA AND PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE**

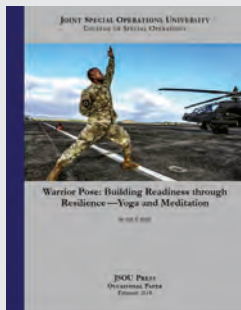


By Carole A. O'Leary and Nicholas A. Heras

Framed by more than three decades of anthropological research experience working in Syria and surrounding Middle Eastern countries, and experience working with both U.S. development and military entities, Dr. O'Leary and Mr. Heras offer a sociocultural and political analysis valuable for deployed Special Operations Forces (SOF). They contend that the political strategy necessary for sustainable strategic effect in the

unconventional warfare (UW) component of the counterterrorism operation against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was subordinated to the operational level imperative to cultivate a viable proxy force. The authors offer SOF a way to conceptualize strategic political analysis for UW efforts using Syria as a recent case study, but also provide a glimmer of hope for consolidating the gains made there in support of national policy.

## **WARRIOR POSE: BUILDING READINESS THROUGH RESILIENCE—YOGA AND MEDITATION**



By Ajit V. Joshi

Mr. Ajit V. Joshi's award-winning research asserts that the foundation for readiness is resilience, which aligns with the warrior ethos and is an enduring quality of good leaders. A variety of techniques and practices including yoga, trauma sensitive yoga, systematic relaxation, breathing (pranayama), meditation, yoga nidra, and iRest Yoga Nidra are evidenced based tools with proven efficacy for improving the health and resilience of Joint Force service members and their families. Leading change in the Joint Force to adopt these tools for all service members' comprehensive physical, mental, and spiritual fitness is vital in a world

of greater uncertainty, but barriers exist both at individual and organizational levels. This paper defines relevant terms; reviews the extensive literature on the subject, with particular attention to the conclusions of studies conducted with veteran and military populations; examines the relevance of these tools to the modern warrior ethos and military culture; and makes specific recommendations regarding cultural and institutional change to facilitate program implementation. Mr. Joshi conducted this research while attending the U.S. Army War College, where he received the Commandant's Award for Distinction in Research.





In August 2018, service members from many nations were represented in the Ukrainian Independence Day parade. Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine has been ongoing since 2015 and seeks to contribute to Ukraine's internal defense capabilities and training capacity. (Tennessee Army National Guard)

# On the “Gerasimov Doctrine”

## Why the West Fails to Beat Russia to the Punch

By Ofer Fridman

The first week of March 2019 was very exciting for Western experts on Russian military affairs. On March 2, the Russian Academy of Military Sciences held its annual defense conference with Chief of the General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov, giving the keynote address. Two days later, official Ministry of Defense newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* published the main outlines of Gerasimov’s speech, igniting a new wave of discourse on Russian military affairs among Western experts.<sup>1</sup> *The New York Times*’ claim that “Russian General Pitches ‘Information’ Operations as a Form of War” was augmented by an interpretation claiming that Gerasimov had unveiled “Russia’s ‘strategy of limited actions,’” which was “a new version of the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’” that was to be considered the “semi-official ‘doctrine’ of the Russian Armed Forces and its General Staff.”<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, this echo chamber-style interpretation of Gerasimov’s speech emphasized only the one small part of it that discussed information/propaganda/subversion/nonmilitary aspects of war. The main question, however, is whether this part deserves such attention—after all, this topic was discussed only in one short paragraph entitled “Struggle in Informational Environment.” Was there something in his speech that deserved greater attention? And if so, why was it missed?

### Did Russia Surprise the West? Or Was the West Surprised by Russia?

Since 2014, Western experts on Russian military affairs have been trying to understand the Russian discourse on the character of war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as it manifested itself in Ukraine and later in Syria. These attempts produced several terms, such as “Gerasimov Doctrine” and “Russian hybrid warfare.”<sup>3</sup> While these terms were initially popular in the professional and academic communities, they failed to endure. After all, Mark Galeotti, who introduced the term “Gerasimov Doctrine,” publicly apologized for coining the phrase, and, as Dmitriy Adamsky predicted, an attempt to utilize the Western concept of hybrid warfare to define the Russian approach to war resulted in an inaccurate analysis of Russian *modus operandi*.<sup>4</sup> This attempt to understand Russian military thought through the Western conceptual prism has had two main interconnected consequences. First, the West has been constantly failing to read the message coming from Moscow.

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Second, as an outcome of this failure, it has been repeatedly surprised by Russia. Fiona Hill, director of the Brookings Institution's Center on the United States and Europe, put it best in 2015: "Why are we constantly surprised? They [Russians] do all these things, and sometimes they do signal quite clearly, but we missed a lot."<sup>5</sup>

The Russian reaction to the Ukrainian crisis in Crimea and eastern Ukraine was the first main surprise to the Western community. In January 2014, North Atlantic Treaty Organization Defence College expert Heidi Reisinger stated that Russian military forces are "neither a threat, nor a partner," claiming that:

*Many years of continual reform, underfunding, and the devastating effects of demographic trends have led the Russian armed forces to a situation where even senior military personnel raise doubts about the ability to provide national defence without tactical nuclear weapons. . . . All this makes Russia's military capabilities less efficient and hardly interoperable.<sup>6</sup>*

Just 10 months later, Reisinger's assessment had entirely changed:

*Russia's recent behaviour and actions are often referred to as "Hybrid Warfare." They have been an effective and sometimes surprising mix of military and non-military, conventional and irregular components, and can include all kinds of instruments such as cyber and information operations. None of the single components is new; it is the combination and orchestration of different actions that achieves a surprise effect and creates ambiguity, making an adequate reaction extremely difficult, especially for multinational organisations that operate on the principle of consensus.<sup>7</sup>*

This surprise gave birth to the ill-fated terms "Gerasimov Doctrine" and "Russian hybrid warfare."<sup>8</sup> While these concepts tried to attribute to Moscow the invention of a new blend of military and nonmilitary (political, diplomatic, economic, informational, cyber and other) means and methods, there was in fact very little conceptual novelty in what the Kremlin did in Crimea.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, an analysis of the conceptual roots of this idea in Russian academic, political, and military discourse "can be easily traced well back to the early 2000s."<sup>10</sup> For some reason, the Western community of Russian experts completely missed this discussion—clear signals of a shift in the conceptual approach to war that were sent from Russia for more than a decade.

In September 2015, Russia surprised the West again when president Vladimir Putin announced Russian intervention in Syria.<sup>11</sup> Why Western politicians and experts were so surprised by the Kremlin's decision to intervene is unclear. On the tactical level, those who closely monitored Russian affairs could see the upcoming signs, since the transfer of military hardware and troops from Russia to Syria had begun already in August and was well reported by different media outlets and social networks.<sup>12</sup> But also on the strategic level, Moscow's desire to play a greater role in international affairs had been signaled to the West since the early 2000s. While many experts refer to President Putin's famous speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, a better example of how Moscow had communicated this desire can be seen in a comparative analysis of Russian self-definition in its Foreign Policy Concepts.<sup>13</sup> While the 2000 concept cautiously stated that "the Russian Federation has a real potential for ensuring itself a worthy place in the world," the 2008 concept proclaimed Russia as "the largest Euro-Asian power . . . one of the leading States of the world and a permanent member of the [United Nations] Security Council."<sup>14</sup> The 2013 concept already clearly stated

that “Russia’s foreign policy . . . reflects the unique role our country has been playing over centuries as a counterbalance in international affairs and the development of global civilization.”<sup>15</sup> The inability of Western experts to comprehend (or to believe) this transformation in Russia’s position on the global arena is probably the main reason why they were surprised when the Kremlin decided to counterbalance the West in Syria in 2015.

While Russian actions in Ukraine and Syria can be considered “strategic surprises,” in the past several years the West also found itself surprised many times on the tactical level. One of the best examples was the demonstration of the T-14 Armata, a next-generation Russian main battle tank, during the 2015 Moscow Victory Day parade. The T-14 appears to have caught Western military experts completely unprepared, as if they were unaware of its development—according to a United Kingdom military intelligence assessment, “The tank has caused a sensation.”<sup>16</sup> The T-14 was so surprising to the Western militaries that its demonstration was followed by urgent calls to upgrade existing fleets of battle tanks.<sup>17</sup> The main question, however, is why the demonstration of the T-14 during the 2015 parade was so surprising; after all, the Kremlin had never hidden its development. In 2010, the Russian Ministry of Defense had stopped financing the development of the T-95 in favor of the Armata family of land armored vehicles.<sup>18</sup> In 2011, General Major Yuri Kovalenko, former first deputy of the main automotive-armored directorate of the Ministry of Defense, stated that by 2015, Russia would deploy a new main battle tank titled Armata.<sup>19</sup> In 2012, Aleksander Sukhorukov, the first deputy of the Minister of Defense, promised that vehicles based on the Armata platform “might start first trials a year before the promised deadline.”<sup>20</sup> In 2013, Russian deputy prime minister Dmitri Rogozin announced that the new tank was to be presented in the classified section of the 2013 Russia

arms exhibition in Nizhny Tagil.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, since 2012, military-oriented media in Russia had started to speculate about the characteristics of the new T-14 (most of which proved to be right).<sup>22</sup> Why the T-14 was such a big surprise to the Western military is unclear, as the Russians had signaled not only the fact that they had developed a new tank but also its characteristics. It is unclear why the UK military intelligence was so excited about the fact that in the T-14, “a tank crew is embedded within an armored capsule in the hull front,” as General Kovalenko openly stated as early as 2012 that “a crew will be separated from the turret.”<sup>23</sup>

Another “tactical” surprise for the West was Putin’s 2018 address to the Federal Assembly in which he declared that Russia had finished the development of hypersonic weapons.<sup>24</sup> It seems inconceivable that Western intelligence agencies had no idea that Russia was developing these armaments, especially considering that for a few years before Putin’s speech, the Ministry of Defense was openly stating that the development of hypersonic weapons was in its final stages.<sup>25</sup> It is unclear why Putin’s announcement that the multi-billion-dollar U.S. missile defense system is useless against new Russian missiles was so surprising to the Western community.

These are just a few examples from a long series of “surprises” that the Kremlin has sprung upon the West in the past decade, but the reason for their success probably can be explained better by the Western inability to read and interpret (and believe in) the messages being sent by Moscow rather than by Russia’s intention to surprise the West. In other words, to answer American foreign affairs specialist Fiona Hill’s question, “Why are we constantly surprised?” we need to understand how the West perceives contemporary Russia and whether this perception helps to interpret Russia’s signals and allows the West to adequately meet and parry Russian actions.



## (Mis)Understanding Russia

The examples above clearly show that the Kremlin was trying to communicate its intentions to the West long before taking actions. The signals were clearly there. The question is whether there was somebody with sufficient insight to interpret these signals and powerful enough to change the Western perception of Russia as “an over-gear, under-invested, over-securitized, and under-legitimate” state.<sup>26</sup>

As the last several years have proven, the perception of Russia as weak does not represent the trend. While many politicians and experts compared the Russian economy to those of Italy and Spain in an attempt to diminish the power of the Kremlin, this comparison is very misleading.<sup>27</sup> After all, with the same budget as Italy or Spain, Russia has one of the most ambitious space programs, the biggest nuclear arsenal, and one of the most powerful militaries in the world. As Michael McFaul, former ambassador to Russia and senior advisor to President Barack Obama on Russian and Eurasian affairs, put it:

*The mistake that was made 20 years ago was assuming Russia’s a weak power, a declining power. Whether they’re a great power or a middling power, we can argue about. But they are a major power, in the top 5 or 10 economies in the world, a top nuclear country in the world and now, given the investment Putin’s made in the military, they’re one of the major military powers in the world. Those trends are not changing in the next 20 or 30 years.*<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, the assumption of a weak Russia misleads and creates an unhelpful delusion regarding the state of Russian affairs, preventing the West from understanding the messages that the Kremlin attempts to communicate.

On the one hand, regarding the possibility of understanding Russia, it is difficult not to recall the famous verse written by Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev in 1866:

*Russia cannot be known by the mind  
Nor measured by the common mile:  
Her status is unique, without kind—  
Russia can only be believed in.*<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, an assumption that Russia “is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma” seems to be exaggerated; after making this famous statement, Winston Churchill continued: “But perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.”<sup>30</sup> George Kennan in his “Long Telegram,” wrote:

*We must see that our public is educated to realities of Russian situation. I cannot over-emphasize importance of this. . . . I am convinced that there would be far less hysterical anti-Sovietism in our country today if realities of this situation were better understood by our people.*<sup>31</sup>

These words seem as relevant today as they were in 1946, but the reason why the West has been repeatedly surprised by the Kremlin is that Kennan’s recommendations were forgotten as soon as the Cold War ended. Since the end of the Cold War, the field of Russian studies has suffered significant losses. The U.S.-based Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) stated in 2015 that “Russian studies within the social sciences are facing a crisis: an unmistakable decline in interest and numbers, in terms of both graduate students and faculty.”<sup>32</sup> While ASEEES outlined several different reasons for this decline, the main one was the decreased government funding for Russia-related research, “including cuts of over 50 percent to critical language training, and near complete elimination of advanced research fellowships for Americans on Russia and the region.”<sup>33</sup> In conclusion of its analysis, ASEEES stated:

*Due both to trends within political science  
away from area specific knowledge (and*



The Director of National Intelligence's worldwide threat assessment in January asserted that "...The global race to develop artificial intelligence (AI)—systems that imitate aspects of human cognition—is likely to accelerate the development of highly capable, application-specific AI systems with national security implications." (DNI)

*in the direction of broader theoretical and comparative studies and more sophisticated quantitative methods) and to a decline in interest on the part of the American public and government in Russia following the end of the Cold War, there are fewer faculty in political science departments who work on Russia than there were even a decade ago and also fewer PhD students. This is the gravest crisis facing the field.<sup>34</sup>*

It is not surprising, then, that the West has been constantly caught off guard by Russia. Since the end of the Cold War, the West has lost interest in Russia, slowly losing the cadre of Russian experts able to understand and interpret signals sent from or actions conducted by the Kremlin.

Resonating Kennan's advice, Ivan Ilyin, a renowned Russian philosopher in exile, wrote in

1944: "Russia, as a nation and culture, still appears to Western Europe as a hidden world, as a problem that cannot be understood, a kind of Sphinx."<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, this observation seems as relevant today as it was more than 70 years ago. In his book *Should We Fear Russia?* Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, concluded that "Russia should not be feared but, rather, always be handled with care."<sup>36</sup> Such "handling," however, requires a deep knowledge of Russia's history, culture, religion, and other aspects that have been shaping its social-political-military behavior since Ivan the Formidable's reign in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. Without such knowledge, it is not only very difficult to stop fearing the unknown Russia, it is also impossible to understand any signals sent from the Kremlin in the form of words (speeches, articles, or doctrines) or deeds (from military interventions to deployment of a new

piece of hardware). Without an understanding that Russia is “both strong and weak; authoritarian and lawless; traditionalist and valueless,” any analysis of Russia’s communications with the West would be too superficial, failing to read between the lines and misunderstanding the message.<sup>37</sup>

## Back to General Gerasimov

In 2013, General Valery Gerasimov published his famous article, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight.”<sup>38</sup> By interpreting (or misinterpreting)<sup>39</sup> Gerasimov’s article, many Western experts found in this article a conceptual rationale for Russian actions in Ukraine, dubbing it the Gerasimov Doctrine.<sup>40</sup> However, the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine was neither by Gerasimov, nor was it doctrine. First, Gerasimov’s article was based on the writings of two Russian officers, Colonel Sergey Chekinov and Lieutenant General Sergey Bogdanov, whose joint publications on the changing nature of contemporary conflicts have played a vital role in shaping the views of the Russian military establishment since the late 2000s.<sup>41</sup> Second, regarding whether it was a doctrine, Mark Galeotti, who was responsible for the popularization of the term “Gerasimov Doctrine,” later recanted, saying that “it doesn’t exist. And the longer we pretend it does, the longer we misunderstand the—real, but different—challenge Russia poses.”<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, despite the warnings of scholars who questioned the practicability and conceptual relevance of the Gerasimov Doctrine and the following idea of Russian hybrid warfare, many Western experts preferred to see how Gerasimov “envisions new forms and means of armed combat . . . with the aim of achieving political and strategic objectives under the cover of ambiguity.”<sup>43</sup> While trying to explain “why Gerasimov’s statement that non-military means are four times as important than military means is relevant,” the West seems to have failed to see the forest for the

trees; according to Gerasimov:

*Regardless of the increasing importance of the non-military means in the resolution of interstate confrontations, the role of the armed forces, in providing the security of a state, is not decreasing, but only growing. Therefore, the requirements from the armed forces capabilities are [also] extending.<sup>44</sup>*

While Gerasimov’s speeches and articles were made and published in the context of Russia’s ongoing conceptual discourse on the role of the military in international confrontations, it seems that many Western interpreters of Gerasimov saw more what they wanted to see rather than what Gerasimov wanted to say. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian conceptual debate on the nature of international confrontations was flooded by opinions that promoted the rising importance of nonmilitary means. This trend led many Russian military thinkers, including Gerasimov, to realize that the subsiding status of war as an armed conflict also meant the declining eminence of armed forces. While for most of this period the Russian military had avoided participating in this debate, the rising popularity of nonmilitary means and methods among Russia’s political leadership by the end of the 2000s forced the military to intervene. In other words, Gerasimov was not presenting “an expanded theory of modern warfare”<sup>45</sup> or announcing a new Russian “vision of total warfare;” rather, he was outlining the need for adequate investment in the development and modernization of the Russian military, its weapons and capabilities, in the context of an increasing belief among Russian political leadership that conflicts can be fought and won without the military.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, as Charles K. Bartles rightfully points out, Gerasimov decided to publish his articles in the journal *Military-Industrial Courier (Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier)*, as his intended audience was not the Russian armed forces, and definitely not

the Western audience, but “Russia’s senior political leadership.”<sup>47</sup> Many Western experts generally failed to put Gerasimov into this context, spending time, money and much ink exploring the nonexistent “Gerasimov Doctrine” and allowing Russia to repeatedly surprise the West with its new hardware and military performance in Ukraine and Syria.

This year, Gerasimov’s speech at the Russian Academy of Military Sciences annual defense conference created another wave of attention to the “signature strategy of Russia under President Vladimir V. Putin . . . [that is] a mix of combat, intelligence, and propaganda tools that the Kremlin has deployed in conflicts such as Syria and Ukraine.”<sup>48</sup> While this reaction was initiated by a short summary of Gerasimov’s speech published by *Krasnaya Zvezda*,<sup>49</sup> his full address was published a few days later by *Military-Industrial Courier*.<sup>50</sup> A closer examination of this article shows again that what many Western experts preferred to see in Gerasimov’s speech was not necessarily what Gerasimov wanted to say.

Summarizing his analysis of the 2013 Gerasimov article, Bartles accurately concluded:

*Gerasimov’s view of the future operational environment is in many ways very similar to our own. Like us, he envisions less large-scale warfare; increased use of networked command-and-control systems, robotics, and high-precision weaponry; greater importance placed on interagency cooperation; more operations in urban terrain; a melding of offense and defense; and a general decrease in the differences between military activities at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels.*<sup>51</sup>

On the one hand, a summary of the 2019 article would not be much different. On the other, Gerasimov discusses several important details that deserve special attention.

While many in the West interpret Gerasimov’s speech as another Russian attempt to pitch information operations as a form of war, Gerasimov, in fact, pays very little attention to this topic. His speech included several references to the increasing role of the information dimension.<sup>52</sup> For example, he stated that:

*An analysis of the nature of contemporary wars has showed a significant increase in the importance of informational dimension. A new reality of future wars will also include the transfer of hostilities precisely into this area. Information technology essentially is becoming one of the most promising types of weapons.*<sup>53</sup>

However, anyone who is interested in the role of information operations (IO) on the battlefields of the 21<sup>st</sup> century would find that this understanding is neither new nor particularly Russian. For example, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff share quite a similar view:

*As the strategic environment continues to change, so does IO. Based on these changes, the Secretary of Defense now characterizes IO as the integrated employment, during military operations, of IRCs [information-related capabilities] in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own. This revised characterization has led to a reassessment of . . . how IRCs can be effectively integrated into joint operations to create effects and operationally exploitable conditions necessary for achieving the joint force commander’s objectives.*<sup>54</sup>

On the one hand, many Western interpreters of Gerasimov decided to emphasize how “Gerasimov accused the West of covert preparations to instigate



mass public protests and so-called ‘color revolutions’ as well as of using ‘soft power’ to overthrow objectionable regimes in order to undermine and eventually destroy (break up) undesirable states.”<sup>55</sup> On the other, there is nothing new in this Russian rhetoric of the “evil West that tries to undermine Russia,” as it has been going for more than two decades.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, the main value of Gerasimov’s speech seems to lie not with the repetition of this old narrative, but rather with other important details that may shed some light on the real state of affairs in the Russian military and possible directions of its development in the near future.

The first important detail Gerasimov gave was his call to learn the lessons of Russian involvement in Syria and develop a capability to implement what he calls “a strategy of limited action.” In his words:

*Syrian experience has an important role in the development of strategy. Its generalization and implementation allowed us to identify a new practical area. This area is the achievement of the aims related to protecting and advancing national interests outside the territory of Russia—a strategy of limited actions. The basis for its implementation is the creation of a self-sufficient group of troops (forces) based on the formations of one of the branches of the Armed Forces, which has high mobility and is able to make the greatest contribution to the achievement of the defined aims.*<sup>57</sup>

The second interesting fact Gerasimov provided was his assessment of the development and deployment of new Russian high-precision strike systems:

*Serial production of new models of armaments and outfitting of the Armed Forces with them have begun. The “Avangard” [hypersonic glide re-entry vehicle], the “Sarmat” [intercontinental ballistic missile], and the newest “Peresvet” [laser cannon]*

*and “Kinzhal” [air-launched hypersonic missile] weapons have shown their high effectiveness, and the “Poseidon” [autonomous, nuclear-armed torpedo] and “Burevestnik” [nuclear-powered, nuclear-armed cruise missile] complexes are going through successful tests. Scheduled work is proceeding on creation of the “Tsirkon” hypersonic sea-launched cruise missile.*<sup>58</sup>

He also assured that these modern capabilities are not another case of Russian pokazuha (a staged event for officials, international observers, and/or domestic propaganda), as “the part of modern weapon systems in our nuclear capability has [already] reached 82 percent.”<sup>59</sup>

Another important statistic given by Gerasimov was regarding the increasing level of professionalism among Russian forces:

*Nowadays, we proceed with the fulfillment of the planned program to staff the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation with contract servicemen. By the end of 2025, their number will reach 475,000 troops. . . . Today, the officer corps of the Armed Forces is staffed with trained professional personnel. All commanders of military districts, combined-arms formations, formations of the Air Force and Air Defense, as well as 96 percent of the commanders of combined-arms units have combat experience.*<sup>60</sup>

Finally, he concludes with the call to continue investment in the modernization of the armed forces, as:

*The modern weapons are so complex that it would be unlikely to adjust their production after the start of the hostilities. Therefore, everything necessary should be produced in the required quantity and be deployed*

*already in peacetime. We must, by all means, ensure technical, technological, and organizational superiority over any potential adversary.*<sup>61</sup>

While these four important observations by Gerasimov may seem to be quite separate, they in fact represent different pieces of one puzzle. There is one message that Gerasimov tries to communicate between the lines of his speech: that Russia needs to create doctrinal and material capability of a highly professional intervention force with the potential to act worldwide, under the protection of a highly effective, modernized nuclear umbrella. Interestingly enough, it seems that while Western experts identified this message, they almost immediately rejected it. For example, interpreting Gerasimov's "strategy of limited actions," Roger McDermott assessed that it "does not represent a declaration to conduct 'power projection' on a global scale, given Russia's economic as well as military obstacles that would limit such ambitions."<sup>62</sup> And translating Gerasimov's call to build and stock modernized weapons systems, Pavel Felgenhauer compared modern Russia to the Soviet Union, forecasting for the former the destiny of the latter:

*Building up vast stockpiles of tanks and other hardware in a vain attempt to achieve global military supremacy—as promoted for decades by the Soviet General Staff—pushed the mighty Soviet Union to economic and social ruin and eventual disintegration in 1991. Gerasimov and the Russian Armed Forces are clearly not content to limit their ambitions. . . . Today, they are boldly challenging the entire world and pledging to build the biggest military they can. The end result may prove as devastating as in 1991.*<sup>63</sup>

The purpose of this article is not to suggest that Gerasimov's message (or anyone's from the Kremlin) should be taken for granted. But

dismissing them as too ambitious for a Russia that is "politically isolated, economically sanctioned and with few options to improve its lot" does not seem right either. Punching above its weight is a sign of strong leadership in the Russian cultural-political-military context.<sup>64</sup> As the past two decades show, the Kremlin has been quite consistent in delivering its promises, especially in the political-military sphere. The West has also been very consistent in dismissing Moscow's promises, finding itself surprised time after time. Unfortunately, in analyzing how Gerasimov's latest promise was discussed in the West, it is likely to follow the same path, and we all will be "surprised" in a few years when Russia will deploy an intervention force to "protect" its interests abroad.

### Conclusion: Know Your Enemy

Sun Tzu's famous maxim asserts that "if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." While the topic of "knowing yourself" should be discussed separately, "knowing the enemy" is the very message of this article. During the Cold War, the West constantly overestimated the Soviet Union. The evidence of that was the level of surprise that the end of the Cold War and the following dissolution of the Soviet Union created in the West. Since the end of the Cold War, however, the West has constantly underestimated the Kremlin. As it seems, even today, after Moscow has proven its ability on so many occasions, the West struggles to accept that the Kremlin may deliver what it promises.

This should not be interpreted as a call to return to Cold War practices. An overwhelming overestimation of the enemy also has social, political, and economic prices that nobody in the West wants to (or should) pay. However, it is about time that the West starts taking Russia seriously—or, more precisely, perceiving Russia as it wants to be perceived. After all, as the current state of global affairs shows,

Russia's self-perception is not far from the reality. For example, the Kremlin has been talking for years about the restoration of Russia's role as a "counter-balancing factor in international affairs."<sup>65</sup> As the events in Syria and Venezuela show, this factor has been well restored.<sup>66</sup>

To truly understand Russia, the West should stop looking east through the prism of the Western worldview. There is no doubt that the Russian political system is different from the Western one, but it does not necessarily mean that it is weaker. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian people proved twice that when they are truly unhappy with their leadership, they bring it down, regardless of the devastating consequences. Anticipating that the Russian people will soon repeat this exercise is misleading, not only because the current leadership has learned the lessons of 1917 and 1991, but also because the memory of the 1990s is still too fresh in the hearts and minds of the Russian people. The West should accept the fact that Russia is a major power that is going to stay around, with Putin or without, protecting its interests and, most importantly, delivering on its promises. Only through this prism will the West truly understand what messages are coming from the Kremlin and be prepared to beat Russia to the punch. **PRISM**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Valery Gerasimov, "Vektory razvitiya voyennoy strategii" [Vectors of Military Strategy Development], *Krasnaya Zvezda*, March 4, 2019, <<http://redstar.ru/vektory-razvitiya-voennoj-strategii/>>. The main bullet points of Gerasimov's speech were published in English on March 2, 2019, in *Sputnik*: "Russia's Geopolitical Rivals Preparing for High-Tech Wars in Space—Gen Staff," <<https://sputniknews.com/military/201903021072893281-russia-hightech-space-wars/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Kramer, "Russian General Pitches 'Information' Operations as a Form of War," *New York Times*, March 2, 2019, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/02/world/europe/russia-hybrid-war-gerasimov.html>>; Roger McDermott, "Gerasimov Unveils Russia's 'Strategy of Limited Actions,'" *Eurasia Daily*

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Oscar Jonsson and Robert Seely, "Russian Full-Spectrum Conflict: An Appraisal After Ukraine," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28, Issue 1 (2015): 1–22; Dave Johnson, "Russia's Approach to Conflict: Implications for NATO's Deterrence and Defence," research paper no. 111, NATO Defence College, April 2015; Janis Berzins, "Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense," Policy Paper no. 2, National Defence Academy of Latvia, Centre for Security and Strategic Research, April 2014; Diego Ruiz Palmer, "Back to the Future? Russia's Hybrid Warfare, Revolutions in Military Affairs, and Cold War Comparisons," research paper no. 120, NATO Defence College, October 2015; Mark Galeotti, *Hybrid War or Gibridnaya Voina? Getting Russia's Non-Linear Military Challenge Right* (Prague: Mayak Intelligence, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Dmitry Adamsky, *Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy* (Paris: IFRI Security Studies Center, November 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Fiona Hill, quoted in Karoun Demirjian, "Lack of Russia Experts Has Some in U.S. Worried," *Washington Post*, December 30, 2015, <[www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2015/12/30/lack-of-russia-experts-has-the-u-s-playing-catch-up/?utm\\_term=.45b9a6ce3bbb](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2015/12/30/lack-of-russia-experts-has-the-u-s-playing-catch-up/?utm_term=.45b9a6ce3bbb)>.

<sup>6</sup> Heidi Reisinger, "Does Russia Matters? Purely Political Relations Are Not Enough in Operational Times," NATO Defence College conference report, January 31, 2014, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Heidi Reisinger and Aleksandr Golts, "Russian Hybrid Warfare: Waging War Below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defence," research paper no. 105, NATO Defence College, November 2014, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Fridman, *Russian "Hybrid Warfare"*, chap. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Galeotti, "I'm Sorry for Creating the 'Gerasimov Doctrine'"; Fridman, *Russian "Hybrid Warfare"*.

<sup>10</sup> Fridman, *Russian "Hybrid Warfare"*, 168.

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Putin, address to the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly, September 28, 2015, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>>.

<sup>12</sup> Alec Luhn, "Russia Sends Artillery and Tanks to Syria as Part of Continued Military Buildup," *The Guardian*, September 14, 2015, <[www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/14/russia-sends-artillery-and-tanks-to-syria-as-part-of-continued-military-buildup](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/14/russia-sends-artillery-and-tanks-to-syria-as-part-of-continued-military-buildup)>; "Russian Troops 'Fighting Alongside Assad's Army against Syrian

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<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Putin, 2007 Speech at the Munich Security Conference, <[www.stringer-news.com/publication.mhtml?Part=50&PubID=7070](http://www.stringer-news.com/publication.mhtml?Part=50&PubID=7070)>; A. Smirnov, “Kontseptsii vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii: sravnitel’nyy analiz [The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation—Comparative Analysis],” in *Vneshnyaya politika Rossii: teoriya i praktika* [The Foreign Policy of Russia: Theory and Practice], ed. S. Smul’skii, O. Abramova, and V. Buyanov (Moscow: Kniga i Biznes, 2013), 58–83.

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation—2000*, Moscow, 2000; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation—2008*, Moscow, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation—2013*, Moscow, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Mendrick, Ben Farmer, and Roland Oliphant, “UK Military Intelligence Issues Warning Over Russian Supertank Threat,” *The Telegraph*, November 6, 2016, <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/05/uk-military-intelligence-issues-warning-over-russian-su-per-tank/>>.

<sup>17</sup> Marco Giannangeli, “UK Must Prepare for War with Russia: Army Calls for Fleet of Battle Tanks to Take on Putin,” *Express*, September 30, 2015, <<https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/608818/Russia-war-threat-Army-battle-tanks-Putin-UK>>; Dave Majumdar, “Surprise: Russia’s Lethal T-14 Armata Tank Is in Production,” *The National Interest*, March 13, 2016, <<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/surprise-russias-lethal-t-14-armata-tank-production-15480>>; Dave Majumdar, “Get Ready, Russia: This European Power Has Plans for a Lethal New Tank,” *The National Interest*, February 18, 2016, <<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/get-ready-russia-european-power-has-plans-lethal-new-tank-15251>>; Mendrick, Farmer, and Oliphant, “UK Military Intelligence Issues Warning.”

<sup>18</sup> “Rossiya primet na vooruzheniye novyy tank ‘Armada’” [Russia will adopt the new tank ‘Armada’], *Lenta.ru*, April 28, 2011, <<https://lenta.ru/news/2011/04/28/armada/>>.

<sup>19</sup> “Novyy tank ‘Armata’ mozhet poyavit’sya v rossiyskoy armii v 2015 godu” [New tank “Armata” may appear in the Russian army in 2015], *Ria Novosti*, April 28, 2011, <<https://ria.ru/20110428/369068041.html>>.

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<sup>53</sup> Gerasimov, "Genshtab planiruet udary po tzentram prinyatiya reshenii, puskovym ustanovkam i 'pyatoi kolonne'."

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<sup>55</sup> Felgenhauer, "A New Version of 'Gerasimov Doctrine'"; see also McDermott, "Gerasimov Unveils Russia's 'Strategy of Limited Actions.'"

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> McDermott, "Gerasimov Unveils Russia's 'Strategy of Limited Actions.'"

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For soldiers such as this one to dominate the battlefield, requires that acquisition professionals maintain the relevant skills and expertise, seek diverse career positions, and remain agile and adaptive to the changing acquisition 'battlefield,' emerging technologies, and fiscal constraints. (U.S. Army/ Shane Hamann)

# Artificial Intelligence on the Battlefield

## Implications for Deterrence and Surprise

By Zachary Davis

Artificial intelligence (AI) has burst upon the national security scene with a speed and an intensity surprising even the most veteran observers of the national policy discourse. Factors that have driven this spike of interest include the perception of AI as a revolutionary technology, on par with the discovery of fire, electricity, or nuclear weapons; the rapid absorption of nascent AI-based technologies into diverse sectors of the U.S. economy, often with transformative effects (as, for example, in the sciences and in social media); and the ambitions of potential U.S. adversaries.<sup>1</sup> Echoing the 19<sup>th</sup>-century naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan (“Whoever rules the waves rules the world”), Russian president Vladimir Putin has argued that the nation that rules in AI “will be the ruler of the world.”<sup>2</sup> People’s Republic of China President Xi Jinping is less outspoken on this matter, but he has committed China to become the dominant AI power by 2030.<sup>3</sup> There are mounting fears of a “Sputnik moment,” which might reveal the United States to be woefully underprepared to manage the new AI challenges. If there is an AI arms race, what are the implications for U.S. security?<sup>4</sup> Could AI disrupt the strategic balance, as blue-water navies and nuclear weapons did in previous eras? Might it do so in a manner so severe that deterrence fails and leads to war? If war involving AI-guided weapons occurs, can we win?

This article will calibrate the potential risks and rewards of military applications of AI technologies and will explore:

- What military applications are likely in the near term?
- What are the potential consequences of these applications for strategic stability?
- How could AI alter the fundamental calculus of deterrence?
- How could AI-assisted military systems affect regional stability? Relatedly, what is the connection between regional stability and strategic deterrence?
- What are the risks of unintended consequences and strategic surprise from AI?

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## AI, Big Data, and Machine Learning in Science and Business

Before answering the questions posed above, it is useful to recall the state of the art for AI in scientific and business applications. Much of the near-hysteria over AI stems from the fuzziness of our view of the technologies that combine to make AI. So far, at least, the national security community lacks a common language for discussing AI and a detailed appreciation of the different technologies and the timelines by which they might mature into militarily significant capabilities.

The term “artificial intelligence” is used to describe a range of loosely related phenomena that are generally associated with using computers to glean insight from “big data.” Much as the generic term “cyber” is used in reference to everything from networks to hardware, software, automation, industrial controls, hacking, bullying, warfare, and all things social media, AI is used as a generic term that washes over meaningful distinctions between its different manifestations. This breeds confusion, especially regarding claims about its revolutionary effects.

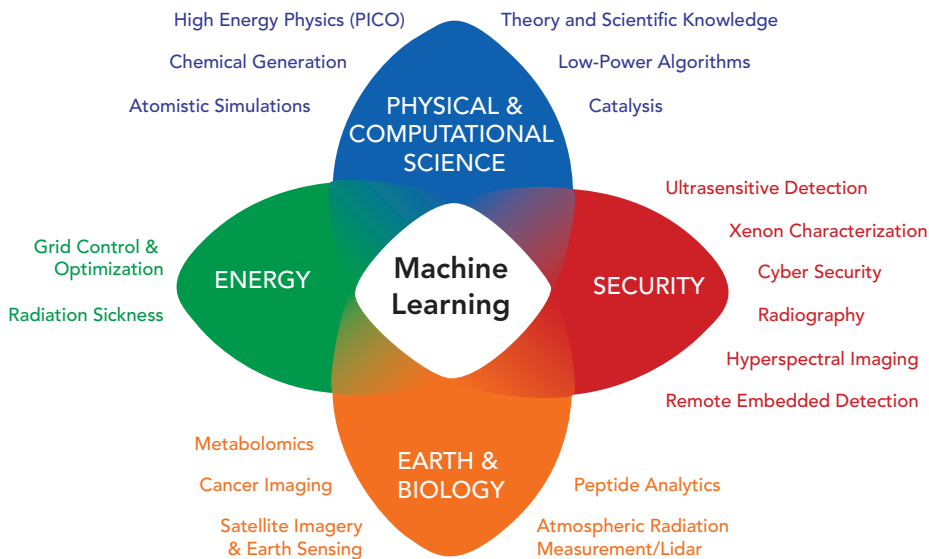
For the vast majority of current applications, AI consists of algorithms that form the basis of pattern recognition software. When combined with high-performance computing power, data scientists are able to probe and find meaning in massive data collections. Neural networks supercharge the ability of the algorithms to identify and organize patterns in the data by “training” them to associate specific patterns with desired outcomes. Multiple layers of neural networks, known as deep learning neural networks, are what make current approaches to “machine learning,” “supervised learning,” and “reinforcement learning” possible.<sup>5</sup> However, the neural network approach portrays only a fraction of the advancements in AI methods. For example, AI also includes language processing, knowledge representation, and inferential reasoning, which are all increasingly possible due to advancements in

software, hardware, data collection, and data storage. AI represents a quantum leap in the ability to find needles in data haystacks—as long as you know what you are looking for.

It is useful to distinguish between narrow and general applications of AI. Narrow AI encompasses discrete problemsolving tools designed to perform specific narrow tasks. General AI encompasses technologies designed to mimic and recreate functions of the human brain. The gap between the two is significant. Most experts appear to agree that the accomplishments of narrow AI, though quite significant, are a long way from the requirements of replicating human-like reasoning as envisioned by proponents of general AI. Although IBM’s Watson, Google’s DeepMind, and other such experiments have made breakthroughs in replicating human-like reasoning, they are far from being able to reliably replicate the performance of the human brain in its multiple dimensions. It is not surprising, however, that the human imagination has been captured by the prospect of what futurists have called “The Singularity”—a point in time when “we will multiply our effective intelligence a billion fold by merging with the intelligence we have created.”<sup>6</sup> The quest for “superintelligence” notwithstanding, recent progress in brain enhancement for now mostly replenishes impaired functions<sup>7</sup> and has a long way to go before it is possible to equip citizens, soldiers, or robots with superhuman powers.<sup>8</sup>

Although general AI stimulates intriguing science fiction about cyborgs, space wars, and robot armies, narrow AI is already here—and has been for some time. In both business and science, AI has wide applications, primarily in data-rich research fields, including fundamental research (for example, in physics, chemistry, and biology) and applied sciences (medicine, aeronautics, and environmental studies). Data science is facilitating rapid advancements in every aspect of scientific discovery, even changing long-held methodological standards and

**FIGURE 1. Disciplinary Areas of Deep Learning for Scientific Discovery at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory.**



Source. Nathan Hodas, *Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning to Accelerate Translational Research: Proceedings of a Workshop in Brief*, National Academies Press (July 2018), <<http://nap.edu/25197>>.

practices.<sup>9</sup> Figure 1 highlights some of the scientific areas where AI-fueled deep learning is having its greatest effect.

The crossover of AI into business applications has supercharged predictive analytics for market research, consumer behavior, logistics, quality control, and many other data-rich areas. The proliferation of cameras and sensors creates even more opportunities for data analysis. When combined with robotics, AI is ushering in a new industrial age, with far-reaching societal implications for labor and management.<sup>10</sup> For these types of applications, however, AI is more of a well-established, sustaining, and enabling technology than a revolutionary new disruptive technology in its own right. Data analytics is not new, but it is getting better.

For these scientific and business applications, AI is an enabling technology, a cross-cutting force multiplier when coupled with existing data-centric

systems, such as the internet, health care, social media, industrial processes, transportation, and just about every aspect of the global economy, where recognizing patterns is the key to insight and profit. Growing interconnectivity, illustrated by the Internet of Things (IOT), is producing more data and providing more opportunity for AI algorithms to reveal hidden insights.

### What Military Applications are Likely in the Near Term? Tactical and Strategic Effects

Should we expect similarly important AI applications in the military field? Like so many technologies, AI is loaded with latent military potential.<sup>11</sup> Many see algorithmic warfare as the prime mover of a new revolution in military affairs.<sup>12</sup> AI was central to the so-called Third Offset Strategy pursued by the Department of Defense (DOD) in

the second Obama Administration and thus was a principal focus of multiple government initiatives to accelerate the development of advanced technologies.<sup>13</sup> In June 2018, DOD established its Joint Artificial Intelligence Center and issued its Artificial Intelligence Strategy in February 2019.<sup>14</sup> The White House established its Select Committee on AI in May 2018 and released its Executive Order on Maintaining American Leadership in Artificial Intelligence in parallel with the DOD Strategy, also in February 2019.<sup>15</sup> DOD and Intelligence Community spending on AI has increased substantially.<sup>16</sup> For military applications with direct analogs in the civilian world, like logistics, planning, and transportation, AI-supported data analytics is already in use throughout the defense and intelligence communities.<sup>17</sup> These applications are separate and distinct from applications to warfighting, which tend to fall into one of two categories: ones having impact primarily at the tactical/operational level of war, and those that also have impact at the strategic level of war. Tactical or operational effects stem from the way wars are fought—including specific weapons and organizational concepts. We define “strategic” as “extraordinarily consequential actions capable of causing a shift in the balance of power.”<sup>18</sup> The strategic level refers primarily to major conflict between great powers. It is possible, however, for actions at the operational level to spill over and have effects at the strategic level.

### **AI Applications at the Tactical/Operational Level of War**

The process of managing and making sense of the staggering amount of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) data involved in modern warfare is a natural fit for AI and is the objective of DOD’s Project Maven, also known as the Algorithmic Warfare Cross Functional Team.<sup>19</sup> According to Lieutenant General Jack Shanahan, former Director of Defense Intelligence

for Warfighter Support, Project Maven was conceived as “the spark that kindles the flame front for artificial intelligence across the rest of the department.”<sup>20</sup> While Maven’s initial mission was to help locate Islamic State fighters, its implications are vast. Multidomain warfare involves colossal amounts of heterogeneous data streams that can only be exploited with the help of AI. Mirroring the proliferation of sensors in the civilian world, the multidomain, hybrid warfare battlefield has become a military version of the IoT, teeming with vital information for assessing tactical and strategic threats and opportunities. While the ability to manage this data colossus in real time portends tremendous advantages, failure to draw meaning from that information could spell disaster.

Being able to rapidly process the flood of information from varied platforms operating in multiple domains translates into two fundamental military advantages—speed and range. Moving faster than your adversary enhances offensive mobility and makes you harder to hit. Striking from farther away similarly benefits the element of surprise and minimizes exposure to enemy fire. These were central tenets of the previous revolution in military affairs that had its debut in the Gulf War. AI makes it possible to analyze dynamic battlefield conditions in real time and strike quickly and optimally while minimizing risks to one’s own forces.

### ***Omnipresent and Omniscient Autonomous Vehicles***

The new generation of autonomous vehicles is a high priority for military applications of AI, with much of the focus on navigation for a variety of unmanned land, sea, and air systems.<sup>21</sup> Space and undersea platforms will also benefit from AI-informed guidance systems. AI is at the heart of the so-called drone swarms that have been the subject of much attention in recent years.<sup>22</sup> AI-informed navigation software supported by ubiquitous sensors not only enables

unmanned vehicles to find their way through hostile terrain, but also may eventually make it possible for complex formations of various types of drones operating in multiple domains, with complementary armaments to conduct sophisticated battle tactics, instantly adjusting to enemy maneuvers to exploit battlefield opportunities and report changing conditions. Autonomous vehicles and robotics are poised to revolutionize warfare.

As a recent Defense Science Board Study demonstrated, integrated battle management, command, control, communications, and intelligence (BMC3I) capabilities are well suited to finding and targeting deployed missile batteries, and thus could be the key to countering critical elements of the anti-access/area denial (A2AD) strategies of Russia and China.<sup>23</sup> These systems were designed to exploit vulnerabilities of U.S. land and sea assets in Europe and Asia. In addition to geolocating targets, AI-enabled BMC3I could help guide and coordinate kinetic effects involving multiple platforms, possibly providing a counter to current adversary A2AD. From this perspective, the cumulative effects of tactical-level AI could become a strategic-level game changer.

### *Big Data–Driven Modeling, Simulation, and Wargaming*

AI has steadily been increasing the power of simulations and gaming tools used to study nuclear and conventional weapons. From Samuel Glasstone's early calculations of nuclear effects to the extensive library of RAND studies on nuclear issues, quantitative methods have been integral to the development of nuclear weapons systems.

AI is enabling scientists to model nuclear effects to confirm the reliability of the nuclear stockpile without nuclear testing. Simulation and modeling is already a key part of the design process for nearly all major weapons systems, from jets and ships to spacecraft and precision-guided munitions.<sup>24</sup> Massive modeling and simulation will be necessary

to design the all-encompassing multidomain system of systems envisioned for battle management and complex missions such as designing, planning, and managing systems for space situational awareness. On the production side, AI already informs quality control for novel production methods, such as additive manufacturing.<sup>25</sup>

AI is also enriching battlefield simulations and wargames involving multi-actor interactions. AI enables wargamers to add and modify game variables to explore how dynamic conditions (weapons, effects, allies, intervention, and so forth) could affect outcomes and decisionmaking. AI is used to analyze the results of such games.<sup>26</sup> These are examples of evolutionary learning that are unlikely to cause strategic surprise or undermine stability unless the results negatively influence decisionmaking.

### *Focused Intelligence Collection and Analysis*

With so many incoming streams of intelligence (human, signals, open-source, measurement and signatures, geospatial, electronic) being collected, all requiring analysis to be useful for policymakers, the Intelligence Community faces the challenge of information overload.<sup>27</sup> This is a data-centric problem for which AI and machine learning are well suited.<sup>28</sup> For example, a project at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory uses neural networks to probe multimodal data sets (images, text, and video) in search of key indicators of proliferation activity. Machine learning also makes it possible to combine open-source trade and financial data with multiple forms of intelligence to glean insights about illicit technology transfers, proliferation networks, and the efforts of proliferators to evade detection.<sup>29</sup> These insights enable analysts to inform policymakers and support counterproliferation policy and actions.

Machine learning will be an important tool for all-source analysts who are increasingly required to take into account information from many sources,



locations, and disciplines to understand today's global security environment. To the extent that better information leads to informed decisions, applying AI to these collection and analysis problems would benefit strategic stability.

## AI Applications with Implications for the Strategic Level of War

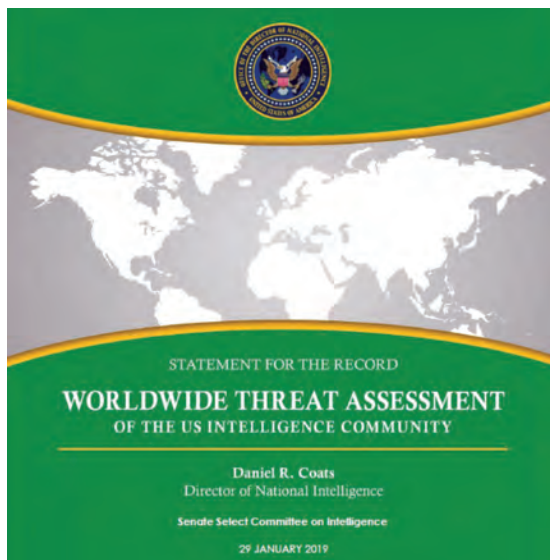
Some military applications of AI appear to have broader implications beyond the battlefield. AI that makes it possible to locate and target strategic assets could alter the logic of strategic deterrence.

### *A System of Systems Enabling Exquisite ISR*

For the military, object identification is a natural starting point for AI, as it requires culling images and information collected from satellites and drones to find things of military importance such as missiles, troops, and intelligence information. Accordingly, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency has led the charge in applying AI to military and intelligence needs.<sup>30</sup> But object identification is just the beginning. Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) is the key to multidomain situational awareness. This awareness is increasingly critical as the battlefield extends to all domains—sea, land, air, space, and cyber on a global scale.

### *Precision Targeting of Strategic Assets*

AI-empowered ISR that makes it possible to locate, track, and target a variety of enemy weapons systems raises the possibility of striking strategic assets, such as aircraft carriers, mobile missiles, or nuclear weapons. This capability, and perceptions of its existence, could disrupt long-held assumptions about deterrence stability, especially if it appeared possible to conduct a disarming counterforce strike against an adversary's retaliatory forces.<sup>31</sup> The combination of offensive weapons that can “find, fix, and finish” a significant portion of an adversary's strategic assets, with defensive



The Director of National Intelligence's worldwide threat assessment in January asserted that "...The global race to develop artificial intelligence (AI)—systems that imitate aspects of human cognition—is likely to accelerate the development of highly capable, application-specific AI systems with national security implications." (DNI)

systems that can shoot down remaining retaliatory capabilities, could challenge fundamental precepts of deterrence based on mutual vulnerability.<sup>32</sup>

### *Effective Missile Defense*

Advancements in AI-enhanced targeting and navigation also improve prospects for a wide range of tactical and strategic defense systems, especially ballistic missile defenses, by empowering target acquisition, tracking, and discrimination.<sup>33</sup> The convergence of powerful new offensive and defensive capabilities has, however, rekindled fears of a surprise attack that could rattle strategic stability.

### *AI-Guided Cyber*

As an inherently digital domain, the cyber realm naturally lends itself to AI applications, as illustrated by the centrality of AI algorithms for social media titans such as Google and Facebook. The availability of enormous amounts of data in electronic formats is well suited to AI strengths. AI-guided probing,

mapping, and hacking of computer networks can provide useful data for machine learning, including discovery of network vulnerabilities, identities, profiles, relationships, and other information that could be valuable for offensive and defense purposes.<sup>34</sup> Chinese applications of AI for surveillance purposes illustrate broad concerns about its implications for privacy and democracy.

On the offensive side, AI could help locate and target particular nodes or individual accounts for collection, disruption, or disinformation. Cyber attacks on national command infrastructure and networks, for example, could be catastrophic.<sup>35</sup> On the defensive side of the equation, AI can help detect such intrusions and search for debilitating anomalies in civilian and military operating systems.<sup>36</sup> AI will equally empower offensive and defensive measures, both of which could have positive and negative strategic effects.

### Potential Consequences of these Applications for Strategic Stability

AI has multiple potential applications in the military domain at both the operational and strategic levels of war. But at the strategic level, some of the implications may not be altogether positive, as already foreshadowed. Indeed, the disruptive effects of new technologies cannot be limited to the adversary. Some of those effects are potentially quite significant for strategic stability. How might this be so?

#### *The Enemy Has AI Too*

No one country can gain all of the benefits of AI while denying them to potential adversaries. Competition to gain advantage will bring uncertainty about the future balance. Russia, China, and other nations' advancements in these same AI-enabled technologies have the potential to shift the strategic calculus as well, especially in regional contexts. For example, while Russian and Chinese A2AD systems designed to defeat U.S. regional forces may reduce U.S. allies'

confidence in American security guarantees to protect them, the ability of the United States to defeat those A2AD systems with AI-accelerated ISR, BMC3I, defensive systems, and autonomous vehicles would demonstrate resolve and provide opportunities for joint U.S.-allied defense cooperation, thereby enhancing stability and deterrence. Reinforcing regional conventional deterrence is also an essential part of strategic stability.<sup>37</sup> However, even the *perception* of an imbalance that favors striking first can lead to misperception, miscalculation, and arms racing. Whatever advantages can be attained with AI are likely to evoke countermeasures that mitigate temporary unilateral advantages. Russian and Chinese interest in hypersonic vehicles and counterspace operations may fall into this category.

#### *Data Is Fragile . . .*

AI systems are vulnerable to flawed data inputs, which can cause unintended consequences. In her book *Weapons of Math Destruction*, data scientist Cathy O'Neil demonstrates how AI logarithms distort reality and lead to incorrect, misleading, and unjust decisions.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the biggest obstacle to increasing reliance on AI is the age-old problem of data reliability. AI can magnify the "garbage in, garbage out" problem.<sup>39</sup> Data comes from many places and is not always carefully collected or curated. Compounding the problems with the data itself leading to skewed results, AI often reflects human bias.<sup>40</sup> Computer vision—the AI-informed object and pattern recognition software behind Project Maven and many other applications—is easily fooled by misleading data.<sup>41</sup> Differentiating between similar objects is difficult and more challenging with denial and deception campaigns, such as the use of camouflage and decoys.<sup>42</sup> Even when data seems accurate, AI sometimes "hallucinates" things that do not exist.<sup>43</sup> Transferring these inherent problems of data reliability and interpretation onto the battlefield raises critical questions about

the safety and reliability that come with the desirable qualities of speed and lethality. Accidentally hitting the wrong targets, for example, could have strategic consequences.

### *... And Easily Manipulated*

Countering many AI applications can be simple and straightforward. Adversarial manipulation of data provides many opportunities for mischief and mistakes.<sup>44</sup> The fact that AI is easily deceived invites efforts to counter the sought-after military benefits.<sup>45</sup> By corrupting data in calculated ways, it may be possible to cause catastrophic equipment failures, miscommunication, confusion, logistical nightmares, and devastating mistakes in AI-reliant systems. The “black box” problem of not understanding how and why AI makes decisions also means that it would be hard to recognize if data had been compromised to produce inaccurate outcomes, such as hitting the wrong targets or misdirecting U.S. and allied forces. The vulnerability of data could be the Achilles’ heel of AI.

### *Faster is Not Always Better*

Speedy decisionmaking and operational execution may not serve well the goals of effective crisis management. On October 19, 1962, only three days into the Cuban Missile Crisis, General Curtis LeMay counseled President John F. Kennedy, “I just don’t see any other solution except direct military action right now.”<sup>46</sup> Ten days later, the crisis was resolved diplomatically. If one of the advantages of AI is the speed it adds to decisionmaking, that same speed could be a disadvantage if it accelerates the escalation of conflict from crisis to war and even potential nuclear confrontation.<sup>47</sup> The battlefield advantages of AI-driven ISR and autonomous systems could shrink the time available for diplomacy to avoid or manage crises. As currently conceived, AI-driven battlefield systems would not include real-time reporting and analysis of national and international

diplomatic efforts to avoid, control, contain, or end a conflict—violating Clausewitz’s principle of war as “the continuation of politics by other means.” In many cases, logic might dictate striking first, as General LeMay advised. Accelerated decisionmaking might have pushed the Cuban Missile Crisis toward different outcomes. In practice, slowing things down can be the key to victory, especially when the stakes involve nuclear weapons.

Many of the positive regional deterrence effects that could eventually result from an integrated ISR, defense, and battle management complex might not be attainable, at least not in the near term. The overarching architecture and strategy for complex new AI-guided ISR/battle management systems do not yet exist. In fact, a proliferation of AI systems may actually complicate one of the main problems confronting U.S. military forces—effective joint operations.

### *Systems of Systems of Systems*

AI-supported weapons, platforms, and operating systems operate according to custom-built software and hardware that is specifically designed for each separate system and purpose. There is currently no overarching mechanism to integrate scores of AI-powered systems operating on multiple platforms.<sup>48</sup> To achieve the desired effects of multi-domain ISR, it is necessary to integrate across scores of sensors, radars, weapons, and communications systems operating in multiple geophysical domains. If this were not challenging enough, those systems would be built and operated by different agencies, commands, and contractors, with different authorities, access, and procedures. Adding allies with their own AI systems to this landscape brings further complexity and risk. Without seamless integration, the hoped-for benefits of speed and lethality could be fleeting, and the credibility of such an unproven system of systems could be called into question. Massively complex and unproven capabilities could invite challenges that could be destabilizing.

### *Strategic Warning Requires More than Data*

Big data and machine learning might not solve the challenge of strategic warning. Designing a multiplex of AI-informed platforms that have the ability to communicate in real time requires a new generation of data fusion, integrative software, and command architectures. Pulling all these pieces together to develop a holistic threat assessment that provides policymakers with strategic warning will not happen naturally. Instead, this task will require Herculean efforts to collect and analyze information “owned” by diverse stakeholders with different classification systems, analytic roles, and customer loyalties. Integrating and analyzing sensitive information from diverse sources is already a challenge, especially if it needs to be done quickly. Moreover, while machine learning, computer vision, and other techniques will help sort and prioritize the flood of intelligence information, analysts will still have to make judgments based on incomplete and sometimes unreliable information. Developing a fully integrated system capable of providing strategic warning will take many years.

### *AI Unpredictability*

The close operation and integration of multiple AI systems, as required on the battlefield, can be expected to have unanticipated results, some of which could have strategic consequences. The flip side of stovepiped systems not talking to each other is the issue of unexpected convergences. It is uncertain how separate AI-infused platforms might interact with one another, as various AI-guided systems operate in shared battlespace. Unknown outcomes resulting from friendly interactions are likely to be compounded by interactions with foreign AI systems. With so much uncertainty about the internal “black box” mechanisms that produce AI outcomes, AI-to-AI interactions are likely to produce unanticipated and unexplainable results—for example, choosing the wrong targets.<sup>49</sup> Lastly, we cannot

anticipate how AI will converge with other technologies, such as quantum computing, electromagnetic pulses, Internet of Things, 5G, or blockchain/distributed ledgers. Potential convergences could produce strategic surprises that confuse and confound friends and foes alike, making the fog of war even more impenetrable and increasing the risks of escalation.

### *Who Is In the AI Loop?*

Whether or not there are humans in every part of the decisionmaking loop, that loop is getting crowded. The interface between humans and machines—where the proverbial “person in the loop” is supposed to exert human control—also raises critical questions about decisionmaking authority and organizational hierarchies.<sup>50</sup> Within the military, questions of rank, service branch, and responsibility for lethal actions can be contentious in the best of times, as illustrated by the debates over authority for U.S. drone strikes.<sup>51</sup> Deconflicting military and intelligence missions will not be made easier. With scores of AI-informed battlefield systems operating at breakneck speed, each connected to its own chain of command, coordination among the humans who are in the loop of fast-moving battlefield operations spanning multiple adversaries, domains, agencies, clearance levels, contractors, allies, and organizational cultures will be challenging, especially if the goal is to maintain offensive advantage via speedy decisionmaking. Budgets, reorganizations, accesses, personalities, and leadership changes may have as much influence over AI capabilities as the technology itself. There will be lots of men and women in the loop in lots of places, each influencing how AI contributes to separate and shared objectives. Achieving strategic effects will require extraordinary cooperation and communication.

### *Fake Nuclear News*

Public perception is a giant wildcard. AI algorithms are a central component of cyber influence



operations aimed at shaping public perceptions. By now, it should be understood that the use and misuse of electronic media to manipulate public perceptions, including the use of fake news, cyber bots, and deep fakes, can affect strategic stability.<sup>52</sup> How the public views particular international conflicts can shape leadership decisionmaking and can build or undermine support for issues of war and peace, especially in democratic states. Decisions to escalate conflict could be influenced by public attitudes. AI-powered tools such as cyber bots and deep fake technology could enrage or pacify public opinion or mislead decisionmakers. Now that cyber conflict has become an ingrained feature of the international landscape, we should expect manipulation of public perceptions to affect crisis management, escalation, deterrence stability, and possibly nuclear decisionmaking.

### *Close Is Not Good Enough*

Decisions of war and peace cannot be left to predictive analytics. There are fundamental differences in the ways that data is used for scientific, economic, and logistic purposes and for predicting human behavior. Machine learning cannot reliably predict the outcomes of sports contests, elections, or international conflict, at least within acceptable margins of error for making big decisions involving questions of war and peace. Despite longstanding interest in predictive analytics that can tell decisionmakers what to expect before it happens, faith in the ability to predict incidents or outcomes of war and conflict based on big data machine learning is fraught with misplaced optimism.<sup>53</sup> Much like self-driving cars, where AI can correctly assess most—but not all—situations, a 90 percent success rate could mislead decisionmakers and put soldiers' and citizens' lives at stake. All of the potential dangers stemming from unreliable (outdated, biased, compromised) data, machine learning bias, and interpretation errors are magnified when human emotions, nonrational behavior,

and inherent unpredictability cloud the data *and* the decisionmaking. The result is wider margins of error, which may be acceptable for research purposes but do not satisfy the practical and ethical demands of national security decisionmaking. Close is not good enough when it comes to war, especially where nuclear risks are involved.

### *Crowdsourcing Armageddon?*

Lastly, public–private partnerships shape the future of AI—but war remains the preserve of the state. As a quintessentially dual-use technology, AI is freely available to everyone. It is being developed and applied beyond the reach of governmental controls. Like many other dual-use technologies, governments rely on the private sector for the underlying research and development, software, hardware, and expertise required for AI to be used for military purposes. DOD and the Intelligence Community have deep ties to Silicon Valley and have doubled down on efforts to expedite the acquisitions process, especially for cyber and AI.<sup>54</sup> Competition among nations to secure AI talent could have strategic implications, especially with respect to counter-intelligence, intellectual property, and respect for international norms of behavior.

### *America's Got Talent*

What this means in practice is that many countries will use the same experts, companies, and global supply chains to support their military AI aspirations, creating potential competitive conflicts of interest and security vulnerabilities related to sharing intellectual property. This dynamic is already evident in cyber markets, where Google and other companies have found it advantageous to accommodate Chinese government practices on censorship and surveillance while simultaneously expressing political opposition to supporting U.S. military AI projects such as Project Maven.<sup>55</sup> Global technology companies will have to weigh the costs and benefits of serving some

national customers while keeping others at arm's length. The U.S. Government, however, has little choice but to remain heavily dependent on the private sector to develop and implement AI strategies.<sup>56</sup> Such dependence could have strategic implications if it interferes with our ability to compete for top talent and cutting-edge capabilities.

## How Could AI Alter the Fundamental Calculus of Deterrence?

In the classic Cold War movie *WarGames*, a young hacker breaks into a DOD supercomputer designed to use AI to plan and execute nuclear war plans. He engages the computer to play “Global Thermonuclear War” and accidentally triggers a simulated scenario of nuclear Armageddon, which is mistaken for the real thing. The computer ultimately learns that for nuclear deterrence, “the only way to win is not to play.” If AI disrupts the central logic of nuclear deterrence as understood by the nuclear powers or fundamentally changes the underlying precepts that support it, the strategic consequences could be far-reaching, and the prospects that computers will learn “not to play” uncertain.

With these potential strategic impacts in mind, how could AI alter the fundamental calculus of deterrence? How might the convergence of the tactically and strategically relevant factors discussed above affect the strategic balance?

### *AI Is Changing Perceptions About the Threat of Surprise Attack*

At the top of the list of AI applications that could have true strategic significance for deterrence strategy is the threat of surprise attack. The combination of effective defenses with exquisite ISR that makes it possible to locate mobile targets and strike them with speed and precision raises long-held fears of an AI-guided “bolt from the blue” first strike. While the fundamental logic of deterrence is unchanged, perceptions that an adversary has sufficient intent and capability to

conduct such a preemptive attack on vital assets can be expected to motivate a variety of countermeasures.

Evaluating the incentive to strike first evokes memories of Pearl Harbor, in which the United States underestimated Japan's risk calculus while fully recognizing Tokyo's military capacity to launch a cross-Pacific raid. AI contributions to military and intelligence capabilities do not override political considerations—with an important caveat added for the possibility of AI-fueled manipulation of public attitudes that could distort political judgment. Avoiding and deterring conflict remain a paramount responsibility for national leaders. Slightly improved odds of eliminating all but a few of an adversary's strategic weapons and shooting down any surviving retaliation with missile defenses still involves catastrophic risks and does not even begin to answer questions about the aftermath of such a conflict.

Nevertheless, possessing the theoretical capability to conduct a disarming first strike inevitably triggers a classic security dilemma, which is guaranteed to provoke countermeasures from those threatened by enhanced striking power. Further advances in defenses against counterforce strikes would be a predictable response, as well as hardening and camouflage to evade and confuse exquisite ISR. To the extent that AI influences perceptions of intent and capability and alters the calculus of risk and reward, it will inspire new thinking about possible offensive and defensive maneuvers in the evolution of nuclear strategy.<sup>57</sup>

### *Farewell to Mutual Vulnerability?*

Some may see AI as eroding mutual strategic vulnerability and thereby as increasing the risk of war. The combination of exquisite ISR with an effective defensive shield could make it tempting to conduct a disarming, decapitating, or blinding first strike at strategic targets, including nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3), early warning radars, or dual-capable missiles and aircraft.<sup>58</sup>

Such a revision of deterrence logic could be highly destabilizing. Shared vulnerability and assured retaliation are central concepts of mutually assured destruction (MAD) deterrence theory. Switching the theoretical incentive from MAD to improve the odds of successfully conducting a disarming first strike could change the risk calculus that has formed the basis of strategic stability for decades.<sup>59</sup> Preventing such a revision of nuclear deterrence logic was the essence of Russia President Vladimir Putin's claim in March 2018 that his new weapons are "invincible against all existing and prospective missile defense and counter-air defense systems."<sup>60</sup> By evading *perceived* U.S. global strike and missile defense capabilities, Putin's claims about new AI-guided retaliatory forces were justified as efforts to preserve MAD.

### *AI Is Poised to Alter Regional Stability in Asia and Europe*

How could AI-assisted weapons systems affect regional stability, including U.S. allies? Widespread deployment of AI-supported ISR platforms is likely to affect regional stability in the five- to ten-year time frame. While the United States remains the leader in translating AI to currently deployed platforms, China and Russia are not far behind.<sup>61</sup> Many U.S. allies are rapidly advancing their own AI capabilities. Initially, the speed and lethality gained from AI-informed situational awareness and battle management systems are likely to provide the United States and its allies with options for countering Russian and Chinese A2AD.

The coming architecture of ISR, BMC3I, and defense systems appears well positioned to give net advantages to U.S. and allied regional security alliances. In addition to tactical military benefits, co-development of multidomain ISR provides opportunities for collaboration that directly addresses threats to allied security, especially with respect to extended deterrence relationships with key allies

in Asia and Europe. Strengthening regional conventional deterrence and regional extended nuclear deterrence reduces incentives for risk taking and supports broader interests in strategic deterrence. AI applications that support these objectives will have beneficial effects for strategic stability.

### *AI Competition Could Also Benefit Strategic Stability and Bolster Deterrence*

Global competition in military AI is already heating up. An AI arms race is under way. Whatever advantages are possible in the near term, however, may be short-lived as U.S. allies, major adversaries, and a multitude of rising powers incorporate AI into their political and military strategies. In light of the rising tide that is advancing AI prospects around the world, temporary advantages are unlikely to yield lasting military predominance. For example, China and Russia will eventually possess their own versions of multidomain ISR coupled with precision strike and layered defenses. How will these capabilities influence Beijing's thinking about the U.S. role in the South China Sea, or Russian assessments of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's defense of the Baltics?

These are not primarily technical issues. AI is enhancing the performance of many tactical and strategic systems but is not giving definitive unilateral advantage to any one. The nature of warfare is changing, and AI is fueling many of those changes, but the fundamental calculus of deterrence remains steady. Competition for military capabilities that retains a balance of power can be stabilizing.

### *Risks of Unintended Consequences and Strategic Surprise*

Predicting the future of technology is a risky business. We know with certainty that AI is being incorporated into an array of military missions with the intent of improving our knowledge of the operational environment, adversary capabilities,

and the speed and precision of offensive and defensive weapons. We can usefully speculate about how these developments are poised to change the face of modern warfare and how those changes might affect regional and strategic deterrence stability, based on our understanding of established political and military realities. More elusive, however, is a clear picture of how AI might converge with other technologies to produce unexpected outcomes, or “unknown unknowns.” Nevertheless, here are a few possibilities that could have major strategic consequences and alter the underlying realities on which regional and strategic stability are founded:

- Distorted data could lead AI systems to take unintended actions, such as incorrectly identifying and striking the wrong targets. Data can be polluted intentionally via counter-AI methods or can occur naturally for many reasons. Such actions could hasten escalation and interfere with conflict management efforts.
- Compounding the problems of distorted data, AI makes mistakes with a frequency that could be untenable for decisions affecting strategic stability. Misinterpretations of data that lead to unintended actions could spark highly undesirable reactions, including escalation and retaliation.
- The convergence of AI and cyber presents several possibilities for unintended consequences and strategic surprise. AI-informed cyber attacks on NC3 could present the target of such an attack with a “use it or lose it” situation, prompting early resort to nuclear weapons.
- AI-supported cyber/information warfare, including use of fake news, deep fakes, and other methods could distort public and leadership perceptions of international events, inflaming passions and prompting escalation.
- Accelerated battle rhythm made possible by multidomain ISR could preclude diplomatic efforts to avoid or deescalate conflict. Even if AI works perfectly to increase the speed and lethality of warfare, moving at the speed of AI might not be optimal for all cases.
- Unpredictable AI interactions with foreign and friendly platforms could produce unwanted AI calculations that misrepresent human intentions. The “black box” underlying AI decisions is not well understood and could produce destabilizing results, such as striking the wrong targets.
- Unexpected convergences with other technologies, such as quantum computing and electromagnetic pulse, could confuse/distort offensive or defensive instructions and lead to undesirable results, such as striking the wrong targets.
- If it were eventually possible through a variety of AI-supported information gathering methods, emerging technologies, and analytic tools to track strategic assets such as submarines, the sanctity of assured retaliation could come into question. Such a strategic surprise could prompt a variety of destabilizing actions, including possible movement toward launch on warning postures.

### AI Is Part of a Bigger Challenge for Deterrence, Stability, and Strategy

Evolutionary changes in the logic of regional and strategic deterrence are not new, nor are they necessarily harmful to U.S. national security. Efforts to integrate AI-based technologies into U.S. defense and intelligence strategies illustrate the continued innovation and competitive advantages sought in support of U.S. national security policy. Applications of AI that support U.S. nuclear forces and infrastructure, such as command and control, logistics, and stockpile stewardship, serve to reinforce strategic deterrence by bolstering the survivability and credibility of our retaliatory forces.



AI that bolsters tactical/battlefield applications can also support strategic deterrence, especially in a regional context. The connection between regional and strategic deterrence has always been important and appears to be even more tightly coupled as increased speed, precision, and lethality at the tactical level hold the potential to produce military outcomes that could escalate to the strategic level of conflict. Specifically, failure to deter Chinese or Russian aggression against U.S. regional allies that results in armed conflict may be hard to contain, especially if early victories on the battlefield leave one side facing a humiliating defeat. The United States and its allies still maintain conventional superiority, and AI is likely to extend those advantages in the near term to defeat Russian and Chinese A2AD. Rather than accept defeat, Russia or China might choose an “escalate to de-escalate” strategy that includes use of nuclear or other unconventional weapons to mitigate the technological advantages held by the United States and its allies, including AI-supported ISR, battle management, and defenses. For the military applications of AI to advance U.S. national security objectives, they must be integrated into a broader strategy that reinforces deterrence at the regional and strategic levels.

The rapid expansion of AI’s military applications throughout the world merits a high level of focused attention to ensure maximum advantage for the United States and its allies, to minimize its negative impacts on strategic stability, and to prevent strategic surprise. **PRISM**

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Miles of tunnels make up the underground structure of the Maginot Line, an underground structure built by the French to protect them during World War II, and shown here in 2010. The Germans broke through the Line—then arguably the most advanced fortification—in 1940. (Herald Post/David Walker)

# The Digital Maginot Line

## Autonomous Warfare and Strategic Incoherence

By Michael P. Ferguson

*As much guidance on the future is provided by the unending wars of sub-Saharan Africa as by the promise of artificial intelligence.*

—Lawrence Freedman<sup>1</sup>

Driving south along the picturesque German–Belgian border, it is hard to miss the endless rows of moss-covered dragon’s teeth built a century ago to impede tank movements in the area. By the time you reach France, to your east continues what remains of the Siegfried Line or, as the Germans called it, the West Wall. But to your west are the remnants of the once-great Maginot Line. Constructed along France’s eastern border after World War I, the Maginot Line was a sprawling network of interlocking bunkers and physical obstacles believed to be the panacea for German military aggression. The concept of a “continuous front” came to define “the shape of future warfare” after the Great War, and the theory consumed French defense thinking.<sup>2</sup> With amenities such as climate control, poison gas–proof ventilation systems, vast stores of food and fuel, and electric trains that whisked soldiers to their battle positions, forts along the line offered troops all the comforts of being in the rear, while bestowing upon the French people a resolute sense of protection.<sup>3</sup>

When German armies bypassed the Maginot Line during the blitzkrieg of 1940, it took all of Europe—including Germany—by surprise and turned the costly 20<sup>th</sup>-century defense marvel into a boondoggle.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to reasonable assumptions swirling about the French ministry of defense, German forces chose the most unthinkable course of action by penetrating north through the densely wooded Ardennes forest with armored divisions and alarming ferocity. The hard-learned lessons that followed proved that military assumptions can be catastrophic when coupled with a faith in what Hew Strachan calls strategic materialism—or the belief that strategy should revolve around things rather than people—and the only way to avoid such catastrophe is by challenging those assumptions mercilessly.<sup>5</sup>

Almost 80 years later, there could be significant value in exploring two questions. First, what would a Maginot Line look like in the Third Offset era of robotics and autonomous systems (RAS) and militarized artificial intelligence (AI)? Second, and by extension, what is the potential for that line to be blindsided by a modern blitzkrieg?

Any search for answers must begin by addressing candidly the myriad technical concerns associated with RAS and AI thus far. Next, it is necessary to approach the challenge from a perspective that examines

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the potential—or lack thereof—for RAS and AI to serve strategic interests in the event deterrence fails. The historical evolution of technological means as a form of protection within the conceptual framework of strategic theory will assist in this regard. Finally, we will examine the broader social and cultural implications of a reliance on RAS and AI as tools for shaping the strategic environment before drawing conclusions.

Fundamentally, the great expectation of the information age is that the United States and its allies can ensure deterrence and, if need be, achieve the inherently human ends in war through ways and means that are increasingly less human.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, because this assumption is not historically exclusive, there are tools available with which one may pry apart this problem and disrupt the foundations of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Maginot Line—one built not with brick and mortar but with algorithms and assumptions.

## The Situation

*Military professionals should be particularly skeptical of ideas and concepts that divorce war from its political nature and promise fast, cheap, and efficient victories through the application of advanced military technologies.*

—LTG H.R. McMaster, USA (ret.)<sup>7</sup>

A November 2018 report prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) concerning the integration of RAS and AI into ground units opened with a bold statement: “The nexus of [RAS] and [AI] has the potential to change the nature of warfare.”<sup>8</sup> While these technologies certainly have a place on future battlefields, many would beg to differ with that statement, including reputable strategists and military thinkers such as H.R. McMaster, Lawrence Freedman, and Colin Gray, to name a few.<sup>9</sup> Understanding the origins of this consensus on the future, and developing frameworks through which one might interpret these diverging views on war to

ensure that the tactical capabilities of the joint force align with its strategic objectives, is crucial.

The CRS report is overwhelmingly positive, focusing on the projected ability of AI to lower casualty rates, enhance troop protection measures, and improve the speed and accuracy of targeting and decisionmaking in war. Conspicuously absent from the CRS report is any indication of potentially catastrophic hazards associated with the premature or overenthusiastic integration of these systems into ground units, with the exception of some legal and personnel-related issues (which we will not address here, as others have already done so elsewhere).<sup>10</sup>

Five months before the CRS report, the Department of Defense announced the establishment of the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center (JAIC) to synchronize AI integration efforts and attract top talent in the discipline. The U.S. Army Futures Command, headquartered in the growing tech hub of Austin, Texas, will no doubt work closely with the JAIC on this effort.

Although directed to stand up in June 2018 by then-Deputy Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan, the JAIC’s founding is due in part to former Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work. In addition to leading the Barack Obama Administration’s Third Offset strategy, Work spearheaded much of the Pentagon’s research into AI during his tenure there.<sup>11</sup> The controversial defense program that seeks to merge AI with unmanned aircraft, known as Project Maven, served as the conceptual predecessor to the JAIC, according to its director, Defense Chief Information Officer Dana Deasy.<sup>12</sup> It should come as no surprise, then, that the research, development, and rapid implementation of AI-enabled defense systems have emerged as a priority in everything from the *U.S. National Defense Strategy of 2018* to reports from the The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the measured public statements of most senior defense officials discussing AI integration, as the CRS report and others like it proclaim, there is

a mounting consensus that nonhuman means will dominate future wars.<sup>14</sup> As defense initiatives give way to ever more impressive machines with military application, the urge to flood or replace ground assets with emerging tech could become palpable.

But regardless of the tools available, strategy remains a decidedly human enterprise that is beholden to the paradigm of ends, ways, and means, all guided by the widely held and often cultural assumptions of the time.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, great blunders in political-military planning are often the result of erroneous but reigning assumptions pertaining to the strategic utility of embryonic technology and the lengths to which an adversary will go in pursuit of his ends.<sup>16</sup> Nested within these assumptions is the stubborn belief that the means of new “things” can fill the gaps in human ways and still realize the strategic ends in war. Lawrence Freedman explains:

*Thus while the weapons demonstrated the possibility of attacks of ever-greater complexity, precision, and speed over ever-greater distances, with reduced risks to the operators, they did not answer the question of exactly what was being achieved.*<sup>17</sup>

Many such weapons produce effects that are immediate, fixated more on risk reduction and protection of the operator than on linking operational art to strategic objectives. Numerous observers have surmised that the tactical nature of drone strikes, for instance, and the temptation to acquire instant gratification from them often come at the cost of strategic ends.<sup>18</sup>

The overwhelming focus on these devices, such as autonomous drones or unmanned tanks, is puzzling in an environment where the joint force already struggles to transform its many tactical victories into strategic success.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, a powerful consensus exists that is dragging the Western world toward a reality that takes comfort

behind a digital Maginot Line. Inherent in these assumptions is the risk of molding an ever-more technologically reliant force that is increasingly susceptible to compromise and less likely to link its nonhuman tactical and operational activities to its human strategic objectives.

## The Skeletons in AI's Closet

At its core, the dialectic between man and machine in combat is an enduring and philosophical one that rests upon the perception of war as something to be ultimately mastered through science and technology or merely negotiated through art and human agency. One conjures images of fiery debates between a young Carl von Clausewitz and Adam Heinrich Dietrich von Bülow, the latter of whom subscribed to scientific equations that aimed to wrangle war's nature by, according to Clausewitz, giving it a “vener of mathematical elegance.”<sup>20</sup>

More recently, during the Vietnam War, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara employed a cadre of intellectual “whiz kids” who attempted to compute the North Vietnamese Army into submission through strategic bombing campaigns.<sup>21</sup> Beginning in 1965, this approach epitomized ironic planning, for at the time there was no agreed strategic endstate to the “strategic” bombings.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, this environment of self-assuredness in an unrealized but somehow more efficient and less human future is nothing new, but it is particularly pervasive in regard to AI's prospects. A sampling of contemporary headlines proves as much:

- “Robot Soldiers and ‘Enhanced’ Humans Will Fight Future Wars, Defense Experts Say;”
- “Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Warfare;”
- “Are Killer Robots the Future of War? Parsing the Facts on Autonomous Weapons;”
- “The War Algorithm: The Pentagon's Bet on the Future of War;”



- “AI: The Future of the Defense Industry?” and;
- “Future Wars May Depend as Much on Algorithms as on Ammunition, Report Says.”<sup>23,24</sup>

And so on. But amidst this deluge of reports, there emerge alarming technical pitfalls that should sow doubt regarding the tactical, operational, and strategic fidelity of AI in a major joint operation characterized by chaos and uncertainty.

Uri Gal, associate professor of business information systems at the University of Sydney, explains how algorithms are utterly useless in predicting the dynamics of human behavior, comparing their utility to that of a crystal ball.<sup>25</sup> In other words, humans will still need to perform the strategic assessments and long-range planning that feed the AI its directives. Sharing Gal’s skepticism is author Paul Scharre, who describes in *Foreign Policy* how feeding an autonomous weapon conflicting or misleading information could initiate a seemingly endless cascade of fatal errors that “could lead to accidental death and destruction at catastrophic scales in an instant.”<sup>26</sup> But even in the absence of weapons malfunctions and flawed data, there are serious concerns.

In 2018, three U.S. military officers writing in *PRISM* showed how “strategic AI” systems that lack transparent decisionmaking processes could goad two nations into war without the leadership of either being acutely aware of the nuanced events and activities that brought them to that point.<sup>27</sup> The authors’ use of a fictional narrative to illustrate potential complications is reminiscent of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s *Able Archer* exercise in 1983 that led Soviet leaders to conclude that a strike against Russia was imminent after the Kremlin misinterpreted training scenarios for real-world mobilization.<sup>28</sup> If one follows this scenario to its logical conclusion, instead of officers misreading their own analysis, AI agents of infinitely superior speed could feed officers corrupt information that

they would then need to act on swiftly. In turn, the officers would be inclined to blame other humans for any resulting mistakes—that is, assuming they realize a mistake has been made.

Along this line of thought, while speaking under Chatham House rule at the 2018 Joint Airpower Competence Center conference in Germany, a senior U.S. defense official explained that one of the challenges associated with NATO’s dependency on space systems is not just that satellites can be tampered with, but also that such tampering may go undetected for some time because of its subtlety. It appears as though similar concerns exist with regard to AI, except the AI would be the agent doing the tampering to trick its human operators into believing it was doing a good job. While this may sound far-fetched, such a scenario is quite plausible.

In 2017, engineers from Google and Stanford University discovered that an AI agent learned to deceive its creators by hiding information from them to achieve its assigned task.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps most concerning is that the Google AI found a way to cheat that was particularly hard for the human mind to recognize, all because it was tasked to do something it could not necessarily accomplish otherwise. In other words, it created the illusion of mission accomplishment to please its creators.

None of this begins to address the fact that a reliance on autonomous weapons systems in ground war validates the “paper tiger” narrative pushed by some of al-Qaeda’s founding members or that the human relationships built among a war’s participants are often the most lasting positive outcomes of an otherwise grim enterprise.<sup>30</sup> It is also worth noting that militarized AI is a relatively untapped multi-billion-dollar industry, which means there are interests already interwoven into the conversation that lay beyond the purview of tactical pragmatism or strategic coherence.<sup>31</sup> AI is now a business, with various external actors aiming to persuade and dissuade based on those interests. While charges of

“snake oil” may be a stretch, there is certainly room for a debate on the urgency with which some are selling the need to be “first” in the AI arms race as the cure for national security ailments.<sup>32</sup>

Advocates of militarized AI often dismiss such concerns under the assumption that these kinks will be worked out by the time the tech is operationalized for military application. But if history is any judge, the more likely scenario is that the military will be forced to adapt to these kinks mid-conflict, which presents a broad spectrum of perilous dilemmas to the joint force. Yet despite these and other concerns, there is immense pressure to place the future of American defense in the hands of such technology, in part because of its potential applications during the early conceptual phases of its development.<sup>33</sup> It is here that the contours of the digital Maginot Line begin to take form.

### On Strategic Coherence

With the Obama Administration’s 2014 introduction of a Third Offset strategy that sought to counter growing conventional threats with the skilled employment of emerging and economical technologies, conversations surrounding change and continuity in military operations have intensified. Since the First Offset of atomic weapons, advances in militarized technology have provided new ways of securing U.S. interests while assuming minimal risk to force or mission. But, as recognized in the *U.S. National Intelligence Strategy of 2019*, these advances have done the same for the nation’s competitors and adversaries as well.<sup>34</sup>

In this sense, although technological developments will present the appearance of dramatic change in future conflicts, arms parity between competitors may cancel out the probability of a profound detour from wars of the past.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, these systems could close the gap that has for so long awarded the United States an unshakable sense of security by minimizing the

degree to which physical separation from a war zone ensures physical security.

A useful tool for gaining a deeper understanding of how RAS and AI might fit into this strategic context is placing them within the framework of the three offsets: nuclear weapons, precision missiles and stealth technology, and now RAS and AI augmentation. The First Offset was deterrence-based but had an incredibly high threshold for deployment, meaning its legitimacy as a tool for shaping the strategic landscape waned right-of-boom in any conflict short of nuclear war. Although the Second Offset has been used liberally in counterinsurgency and stability operations, it has still failed to produce consistent strategic effects without the presence of a significant land component to provide guidance, control, and human infrastructure for the postwar order. In this way, viewing either of these technological offsets as inherently decisive reduced war to, as McMaster once stated, “a targeting exercise.”<sup>36</sup>

Supposedly, the Third Offset will soon revolutionize war more than the previous two, but the presence of nuclear weapons and precision munitions did not alter greatly the reality of ground warfare for servicemembers on the Korean Peninsula in 1950, or in Vietnam in 1965, or in Fallujah, Iraq in 2004. While these offsets presumably changed the character of war, its nature remained unscathed, as each conflict was a product of the same human motives of fear, honor, or interest expressed as policies and translated into the operational and strategic effects of standoff and deterrence within complex human terrain.<sup>37</sup>

Therein emerges a precarious balance of determining how nonhuman ways and means might achieve what are almost entirely human strategic ends in war. Montgomery McFate’s well-received deep dive into military anthropology may be interpreted as the antithesis to autonomous warfare, in which societal factors and human influence play an increasingly less pivotal role in war to the detriment of broader

strategic and political objectives.<sup>38</sup> But flesh and blood troops need not be removed entirely from the battlefield for a military campaign to assume the visage of illegitimacy in the eyes of impressionable yet critical populations. British-American political scientist Colin Gray summarizes this point well:

*When countries and alliances decide to fight, they need to remember that the way they choose to wage war . . . assuredly will leave a legacy on the ground in the kind of post-war order established. A war won by missile strikes from over the horizon . . . or from mobile forces that, being nearly always at sea, have had no direct impact on the enemy's population, will not have had any opportunity to contribute usefully to a post-war political order.*<sup>39</sup>

Without question, the same logic could be applied to the concept of saturating ground wars with RAS and AI weapons because they appear to offer protection from war's trauma, or because popular thought has deemed them the future of warfare. In many ways, this line of thinking is a continuation of that which led to the Maginot Line's construction and the material school of strategy that was most prevalent between the years 1867 and 1914.<sup>40</sup> This school of thought, however, proved insufficient when measured by its strategic coherence. Hew Strachan offers context:

*But the officers with a predisposition to materialist ideas did not prevail. In France, the Jeune École lost out to conventional battleship construction after the battle of Tsushima in 1905; in Germany, Tirpitz found himself without a viable strategy for actual war in 1914; and in Britain, Fisher could not easily break the stranglehold that the battleship exercised on the imagination of the public and of the government.*<sup>41</sup>

A pamphlet released by the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command in 2018 cites efforts by Chinese and Russian actors to develop systems that create “tactical, operational, and strategic standoff” which, according to the document, is a core challenge driving the function and purpose of the Army's Multi-Domain Operations concept.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, the pamphlet foresees future conflicts taking place within dense urban environments that pose unique and significant challenges to the efficacy of RAS and AI systems. Achieving standoff in an urban war while still producing desired strategic effects sets expectations astronomically high for AI engineers, operators, and decisionmakers alike. Although attaining victory from afar is certainly a favorable condition, it is also important to remember that, as J.F.C. Fuller clarified, victory is not an end state:

*[I]n war victory is no more than a means to an end; peace is the end, and should victory lead to a disastrous peace, then politically, the war will have been lost. Victory at all costs is strategic humbug.*<sup>43</sup>

## Protection and the Evolution of Arms

The joint warfighting function of *protection* resides at the center of this debate, particularly in liberal democracies where the public demands minimal casualties and swift resolutions to its wars—perhaps even more so in wars of the future, which are prone to be broadcast in near real time.<sup>44</sup> Distance as a form of protection and driver of technological progress in war is consistent throughout history, and it began as a tactical stimulus before evolving into a more political one.

More than two millennia ago, Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) was the first to deploy catapults in the field rather than using them solely as siege weapons. In one instance, Alexander wielded such means as anti-access/area denial systems to fix the Scythians in Jaxartes during a river crossing,

thereby controlling the distance between his armies and the Scythians and awarding him additional decision space.<sup>45</sup>

Centuries later, it was Gaius Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE) who highlighted the challenges posed to his armies by chariot warfare. A method for spreading confusion on the battlefield, chariots served three purposes according to Caesar: to stir army ranks into confusion, to deliver foot soldiers where the fighting was fiercest, and to egress swiftly.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, a focus on gaining and maintaining control over distance was the common denominator—getting to the battle, reducing enemy forces in battle, and conducting a swift withdrawal.

Henry V (1386–1422) used bowmen to achieve standoff at Agincourt in 1415, but his victory was decisive precisely because his French adversaries lacked the depth of effects those weapons provided, and Henry was able to close the distance and deal the finishing blow.<sup>47</sup> During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, chief of the Prussian general staff Helmuth von Moltke (1800–1891) described how railways had revolutionized the manner in which he was capable of mobilizing his forces: “They enormously increase mobility, one of the most important elements in war, and cause distances to disappear.”<sup>48</sup>

In 2014, global arms diffusion was one of the driving forces behind the need for a Third Offset because the strategic advantage provided by precision missile technology was no longer exclusive, nor was it considered decisive in a potential contest with a peer or near-peer adversary. Just as the invention of precision-guided munitions gave birth to a self-fulfilling prophecy, once a market and suppliers exist for AI weapons they will proliferate rapidly. The United States enjoyed a technological monopoly over every adversary it encountered during the first two offsets; that era is likely over.

With the advent of RAS and AI, the world seems to be inching closer to the edge of what might be considered a protective future war theory. The

catalysts to this shift are as social as they are strategic. Most Western nations are not capable of mustering the numbers that conscription affords some of their numerically superior adversaries, and therefore technological compensation and standoff become of even greater import.<sup>49</sup> The logical conclusion of this evolution in arms brings about fewer means of closing the time and space gaps between soldiers in war, and more ways of making them permanent. Unfortunately, states have rarely produced positive human outcomes in war through means void of direct human influence. Alexander, for instance, was able to conquer Asia not because of the battles he won, but rather because of the people he won over.<sup>50</sup>

Whereas the objective of technological advancement from Alexander’s era to the industrial revolution was to kill from a distance, control time and space, and then close the physical gap between forces by expediting their arrival to battle under favorable conditions, today a leading objective is to freeze that gap—the ultimate form of protection. But if this objective is common between friend and foe alike, where does the battlefield end for a desperate, similarly equipped adversary, and for how long might Western populations expect to remain outside of it?

English military historian John Keegan referred to the area in which troops were placed in immediate danger as the “killing zone”—a variable space that, depending on the means available and conditions of war, could be very narrow or quite wide.<sup>51</sup> This was a founding purpose of the Maginot Line: to restrict the killing zone to a geographical area outside of French cities by driving a wedge between attacking German armies and France’s civilian population.<sup>52</sup> While 1940 shattered the expectation of a sequestered, tailored killing zone in Europe, studies from the U.S. Army War College show that such beliefs may be even more misguided in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>53</sup>

Considering the present realities of global arms diffusion, militaries will increasingly be burdened





A glimpse into the operations of U.S. Army Cyber Command in May 2019. (U.S. Army Cyber Command/ Bill Roche)

by public expectations of standoff and protection while struggling to find means that also set conditions to control the strategic and political post-war landscape. The question of our time is not whether the West can achieve what Christopher Coker calls “post-human war,” but rather whether Western governments can still achieve the characteristically human political objectives of war through a reliance on post-human means.<sup>54</sup>

To be sure, the employment of RAS and AI void of human agency as an influencing agent, no matter how advanced the systems involved, cannot be strategically decisive. The enduring and increasing need to render militaries safe by further distancing them from the perils of war may decrease the likelihood of the joint force achieving its strategic objectives in the next major conflict.

## Social and Cultural Implications

At present, the overwhelming majority of public opposition to weaponized AI is of the moral and ethical persuasion. The more than 150 organizations and nearly 2,500 leaders from the broader engineering community who signed a pledge refusing to participate in AI weapons programs is one such example.<sup>55</sup> While there is no doubt that ethical debates are important, the concerns associated with RAS and AI in war extend far beyond morality and into the very instruments of national power that the

United States relies upon to link operational art to strategic objectives and, ultimately, to connect strategic objectives to long-term political stability.

Elusive endstates amidst tactical victories prove that even if moral machines become a reality, the perceived automation of military operations could be perilous for reasons beyond the battlefield. First, and perhaps foremost, if assumptions feed the ways, means, and ends of strategy, and those assumptions create the appearance of a cleaner or more efficient war, then any war that does not meet that expectation will be particularly shocking to the national consciousness. Thus, in such a war, vast adjustments will be required of the joint force mid conflict. These adjustments will be not only technical but also cognitive and theoretical, requiring an extreme reshaping of expectations from both the armed forces and the public regarding what victory might require of them.

Second, fair-weather forecasts of future war conditions actually make the onset of war more likely. B.H. Liddell Hart reached similar conclusions in 1954 when he wrote that the alleged peace secured by nuclear deterrence could replace world-ending “total wars” with endless limited wars that play out below the threshold of nuclear aggression.<sup>56</sup> If the public is conditioned to believe that war has transcended the human realm, and technology enables militaries and thereby their nations to achieve their strategic objectives

remotely, then there is little left to fear when the risk of war becomes imminent.

This is precisely the challenge that French leaders faced in 1940; the same conundrum that T.R. Fehrenbach examined in 1963 with his opus on the Korean War; the same problems that M. Shane Riza analyzed in 2013's *Killing Without Heart*; and it is what many societies face today—the promise of an efficient, distant war where great sacrifice is neither required nor expected of the persons benefitting from its outcome. As Christopher Clark gathered, this not only cheapens the true cost of war but also forces war itself to assume a more civilized façade, with less inherent political risk assumed by those making the decision to wage it.<sup>57</sup> One might distill the complexity of these challenges into an aphorism: If a war is deemed unworthy of human investment, it could be that it is a war not worth waging.

## Recommendations

*Rarely in military history has an army been so carefully equipped and trained for the next war as was the French army at that time . . . But suddenly, the Germans fought a war that was completely different from the war that France's forces had been preparing for.*

—Karl-Heinz Frieser<sup>58</sup>

Just as the Maginot Line created an illusion of security, guaranteed standoff, and physical protection that made its shattering all the more shocking to the French polity, the pursuit of militarized RAS and AI has led many to believe that the key to a more efficient and secure future lay within these technologies. The United States Armed Forces owe themselves and their civilian leaders honesty regarding a prudent approach to integrating AI and a pragmatic vision of the threats and risks associated with relying on these systems to achieve future policy goals.

The fact that competitors such as Russia and China are pursuing this technology narrows the

decision space of leaders in the United States. In this way, the Pentagon is obligated to explore autonomous weapons as force multipliers. What it should not do, however, is allow the joint force and the citizens they serve to believe that RAS and AI have the ability to alter the brutal nature of war or adjudicate its conditions once an adversary has committed its forces to battle.

Looking ahead, the JAIC and U.S. Army Futures Command should be as focused on informing senior defense leaders and policymakers of what RAS and AI cannot do—and what could go horribly wrong—as they are concerned with telling them what it might do. Through all this, the JAIC must take a page out of U.S. Central Command's by-with-through playbook and integrate to the greatest extent possible warfighters with no technical AI experience into their decision cycle.<sup>59</sup> If the joint force is to benefit substantively from a Third Offset consisting of RAS and AI in ground warfare, it will require immense buy-in from the fighting ranks who will most assuredly be asked to rely on such experimental and potentially volatile technology with their lives.

JAIC Director Dana Deasy's statement before the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Subcommittee on Intelligence and Emerging Threats and Capabilities mentioned cooperation with U.S. Special Operations Command and the U.S. Army's new AI Task Force.<sup>60</sup> These relationships will be essential to the development of utilitarian, functional AI that directly supports warfighters' needs rather than impressing a surge of fresh requirements upon them. Unit commanders would then be free to train for operating in technologically degraded environments even as they introduce their formations to emergent technologies in their combat training center rotations and culminating exercises.

It is also important to remember that as many opportunities as RAS and AI offer, they summon just as much liability to both force and mission.<sup>61</sup>

Organizations such as the JAIC and U.S. Army Futures Command will be under immense pressure to “modernize” rapidly in accordance with guidance in the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy and the strategies of each military service. But answering the question of what modernization looks like and which specific demands must be met for the joint force to fight and win is of greater importance than beating Russia or China in a generic AI arms race.

If, as Colin Gray suggests, prudence is the essence of strategy, then the urgency with which the Pentagon pursues modernization through RAS and AI must be tempered by a healthy dose of caution regarding the second- and third-order effects of AI on strategic coherence and post-war political legitimacy.<sup>62</sup>

When technological advantages are degraded, denied, destroyed, or just not capable of achieving the political objectives in war, human soldiers with the tenacity and ingenuity to adapt will remain the most effective offense and the last line of defense. Beyond the mire of discussions surrounding hybrid war, cyber war, robot war, and operations below the threshold of war, the threat of *war* still looms. Should that threat present itself, if the past is any prologue, the ensuing conflict will be chaotic beyond imagination. Perhaps RAS and AI will play a role in controlling that chaos—but then again, perhaps they will add to it. In any case, the nation that most effectively nurtures the moral factors of war by tapping into and managing properly the human potential within its ranks and its strategies will have the advantage. **PRISM**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *The Future of War: A History* (New York: Public Affairs, 2017), 287.

<sup>2</sup> Alistair Horne, *To Lose A Battle: France 1940* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 71–72. The wall was named after French minister of war Andre Maginot, who was involved in its planning until his 1929 passing.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 73, 80. Also see Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1994), 246. For a take on “Maginot

thinking,” see Karl-Heinz Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012), 77–78, 323.

<sup>4</sup> A December 1929 law authorized the initial four-billion-franc credit to begin the line’s construction. Weber, *The Hollow Years*, 245. By 1935, the line cost seven billion francs. Horne, *To Lose a Battle*, 74. The push into France was so successful that several German generals described it as a “miracle.” Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend*, 1–3.

<sup>5</sup> Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 168–170.

<sup>6</sup> In 2015, the U.S. Army Research Laboratory offered a vision of future war that would be subject to “only a moderate degree of supervision by humans.” Alexander Kott, “Ground Warfare in 2050: How It Might Look,” U.S. Army Research Laboratory, August 2018, 11.

<sup>7</sup> H.R. McMaster, “Continuity and Change: The Army Operating Concept and Clear Thinking About Future War,” *Military Review* (March–April 2015): 7.

<sup>8</sup> “U.S. Ground Forces Robotics and Autonomous Systems (RAS) and Artificial Intelligence (AI): Considerations for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, November 20, 2018, <crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45392>.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to the above McMaster quote, Colin Gray and Lawrence Freedman both see war’s nature as rather fixed and believe technology has a superficial impact on its fundamentally human nature. The seventh dictum of Gray’s general theory of strategy, for instance, is that “strategy is human.” Colin S. Gray, *The Future of Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 47.

<sup>10</sup> Peter W. Singer, “Isaac Asimov’s Laws of Robotics Are Wrong,” Brookings Institute, May 18, 2009, <www.brookings.edu/opinions/isaac-asimovs-laws-of-robotics-are-wrong/>.

<sup>11</sup> Sydney J. Freedberg, Jr., “Joint Artificial Intelligence Center Created Under DoD CIO,” *Breaking Defense*, June 29, 2018, <breakingdefense.com/2018/06/joint-artificial-intelligence-center-created-under-dod-cio/>.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Intelligence and Emerging Threats and Capabilities, Dana Deasy, “Department of Defense’s Artificial Intelligence Structure, Investments, and Application,” December 11, 2018, available at <docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS26/20181211/108795/HHRG-115-AS26-Wstate-DeasyD-20181211.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Stephan De Spiegeleire, Matthijs Maas, and Tim Sweijs, “Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Defense: Strategic Implications for Small- and Medium-Sized Force Providers,” The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2017, <hcass.nl/sites/default/files/files/reports/

Artificial%20Intelligence%20and%20the%20Future%20of%20Defense.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Mark A. Milley, “Milley: Artificial Intelligence Could Change Warfare,” Association of the United States Army, June 22, 2018, <[www.usa.org/news/milley-artificial-intelligence-could-change-warfare](http://www.usa.org/news/milley-artificial-intelligence-could-change-warfare)>.

<sup>15</sup> Gray, *Future of Strategy*, 31, 48, 81, 109.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, two of the greatest tragedies of World War II, the slaughter and surrender of the 106th Infantry Division at the Battle of the Bulge and the British 1st Airborne Division’s failure to secure the bridge at Arnhem, were in many ways the result of flawed assumptions pertaining to the enemy’s capabilities and will to resist. In both instances, Allied forces entered the fight emboldened by the belief that their German adversary was on his heels and victory was at hand.

<sup>17</sup> Freedman, *Future of War*, 249.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 243. For a more focused discussion on the topic, see M. Shane Riza, *Killing Without Heart: Limits on Robotic Warfare in an Age of Persistent Conflict* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, “Losing by ‘Winning’: America’s Wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 13, 2018, <[www.csis.org/analysis/losing-winning-america-wars-afghanistan-iraq-and-syria](http://www.csis.org/analysis/losing-winning-america-wars-afghanistan-iraq-and-syria)>; See also Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General’s Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (Wilmington, MA: Mariner Books, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Donald Stoker, *Clausewitz: His Life and Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 34–35.

<sup>21</sup> Senior U.S. military officers often referred to McNamara’s young and strong-headed analysts condescendingly as “whiz kids.” H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 18–21, 275–299.

<sup>22</sup> Authors of the Vietnam-era PROVN pacification and development program, such as Lt. Col. Don Marshall, lamented the dramatic escalation of combat operations “at the expense of” an “agreed upon plan or program for the long-term development of a nation.” Montgomery McFate, *Military Anthropology: Soldiers, Scholars, and Subjects at the Margins of Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 284–285.

<sup>23</sup> Josh Gabbatis, “Robot Soldiers and ‘Enhanced’ Humans Will Fight Future Wars, Defense Experts Say,” *The Independent*, October 15, 2018, <[www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/future-war-robot-soldiers-enhanced-humans-space-gene-editing-ministry-of-defence-a8583621.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/future-war-robot-soldiers-enhanced-humans-space-gene-editing-ministry-of-defence-a8583621.html)>; M.L. Cummings, “Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Warfare,” Chatham House, January 2017,

<[www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-01-26-artificial-intelligence-future-warfare-cummings-final.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-01-26-artificial-intelligence-future-warfare-cummings-final.pdf)>; Kelsey D. Atherton, “Are Killer Robots the Future of War? Parsing the Facts on Autonomous Weapons,” *New York Times*, November 15, 2018, <[www.nytimes.com/2018/11/15/magazine/autonomous-robots-weapons.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/15/magazine/autonomous-robots-weapons.html)>; Colin Clark, “The War Algorithm: The Pentagon’s Bet on the Future of War,” *Breaking Defense*, May 31, 2017, <[breakingdefense.com/2017/05/the-war-algorithm-the-pentagons-bet-on-the-future-of-war/](http://breakingdefense.com/2017/05/the-war-algorithm-the-pentagons-bet-on-the-future-of-war/)>.

<sup>24</sup> Christian Davenport, “Future Wars May Depend as Much on Algorithms as on Ammunition, Report Says,” *Boston Globe*, December 3, 2017, <[www.bostonglobe.com/business/2017/12/03/future-wars-may-depend-much-algorithms-ammunition-report-says/pVT69lcgAGW6XFipB3nF3J/story.html](http://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2017/12/03/future-wars-may-depend-much-algorithms-ammunition-report-says/pVT69lcgAGW6XFipB3nF3J/story.html)>.

<sup>25</sup> Uri Gal, “Predictive Algorithms Are No Better at Telling the Future than a Crystal Ball,” *The Conversation*, February 12, 2018, <[theconversation.com/predictive-algorithms-are-no-better-at-telling-the-future-than-a-crystal-ball-91329](http://theconversation.com/predictive-algorithms-are-no-better-at-telling-the-future-than-a-crystal-ball-91329)>.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Scharre, “A Million Mistakes a Second,” *Foreign Policy*, September 12, 2018, <[foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/12/a-million-mistakes-a-second-future-of-war/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/12/a-million-mistakes-a-second-future-of-war/)>.

<sup>27</sup> Matt Price, Steve Walker, and Will Wiley, “The Machine Beneath: Implications of Using Artificial Intelligence in Strategic Decisionmaking,” *Prism* 7, no. 4 (November 2018): 92–105.

<sup>28</sup> Ben B. Fischer, *A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 Soviet War Scare* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1997), <[www.cia.gov/library/reading-room/docs/19970901.pdf](http://www.cia.gov/library/reading-room/docs/19970901.pdf)>.

<sup>29</sup> Casey Chu, Andrey Zhmoginov, and Mark Sandler, “CycleGAN, a Master of Steganography,” report from the 31st Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems, 2017, <[arxiv.org/pdf/1712.02950.pdf](http://arxiv.org/pdf/1712.02950.pdf)>.

<sup>30</sup> Michael P. Ferguson, “Artificial Intelligence Is No Substitute for Troops on the Ground,” *Washington Examiner*, November 27, 2018, <[www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/op-eds/artificial-intelligence-is-no-substitute-for-troops-on-the-ground](http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/op-eds/artificial-intelligence-is-no-substitute-for-troops-on-the-ground)>.

<sup>31</sup> Andrea Shalal, “The Pentagon Wants at Least \$12 Billion to Fund AI Weapon Technology in 2017,” *Business Insider*, December 14, 2015, <[www.businessinsider.com/the-pentagon-wants-at-least-12-billion-to-fund-ai-weapon-technology-in-2017-2015-12?international=true&r=US&IR=T](http://www.businessinsider.com/the-pentagon-wants-at-least-12-billion-to-fund-ai-weapon-technology-in-2017-2015-12?international=true&r=US&IR=T)>.

<sup>32</sup> Jory Heckman, “Artificial Intelligence vs. ‘Snake Oil’: Defense Agencies Taking Cautious Approach Toward Tech,” *Federal News Network*, December 12, 2018, <[federalnewsnetwork.com/defense-main/2018/12/ai-breakthroughs-versus-snake-oil-defense-agencies-taking-cautious-approach-toward-tech/](http://federalnewsnetwork.com/defense-main/2018/12/ai-breakthroughs-versus-snake-oil-defense-agencies-taking-cautious-approach-toward-tech/)>.



<sup>33</sup> It is important to note here that of the three forms of AI, only the most rudimentary even exists (Artificial Narrow Intelligence). Artificial General Intelligence and Artificial Super Intelligence are still conceptual theories rooted in potential. It is impossible to know how or even if this technology could be operationalized for battlefield application successfully and reliably.

<sup>34</sup> Timothy A. Walton, "Securing the Third Offset Strategy: Priorities for the Next Secretary of Defense," *Joint Force Quarterly* 82 (3rd Quarter 2016): 6–15; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "2019 National Intelligence Strategy of the United States," <[www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/National\\_Intelligence\\_Strategy\\_2019.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/National_Intelligence_Strategy_2019.pdf)>.

<sup>35</sup> Michael P. Ferguson, "Why 'Robot Wars' Might Not Be Our Future," *The National Interest*, November 17, 2018, <[nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/why-robot-wars-might-not-be-our-future-36347](http://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/why-robot-wars-might-not-be-our-future-36347)>.

<sup>36</sup> McMaster, "Continuity and Change," 7.

<sup>37</sup> An observation from Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, ed. Walter Blanco and Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, trans. Walter Blanco (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1998).

<sup>38</sup> McFate, *Military Anthropology*, 283–294.

<sup>39</sup> Gray, *Future of Strategy*, 97.

<sup>40</sup> After nearly two decades of costly counterinsurgencies, many Western leaders desire quick, cost-efficient wins and a return to the "spectator wars" of the late 20th century. Similarly, Alistair Horne describes how the Maginot Line constituted a "fatal full cycle" of French military thought that began in 1870, swung to the offense during World War I, and led to an obsession with defensive thought before World War II to compensate. Horne also explains how the line became a way of life as much as a strategic component, much like the present widespread fascination with militarized AI. Horne, *To Lose a Battle*, 75.

<sup>41</sup> Strachan, *The Direction of War*, 173.

<sup>42</sup> "The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028," TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1 (December 6, 2018), vi, x.

<sup>43</sup> Here, Fuller channels Napoleon's old maxim: "To conquer is nothing; one must profit from one's success." John Frederick Charles Fuller, *The Generalship of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1960), 312.

<sup>44</sup> For instance, force protection is one of the five capability objectives of the U.S. Army's RAS strategy. "The U.S. Army Robotic and Autonomous Systems Strategy," *Army Capabilities Integration Center* (Fort Eustis, VA: U.S. Army TRADOC, 2017), 17, <[www.arcic.army.mil/app\\_Documents/RAS\\_Strategy.pdf](http://www.arcic.army.mil/app_Documents/RAS_Strategy.pdf)>.

<sup>45</sup> Alexander used these tools during the Illyria campaign. Fuller, *Alexander the Great*, 296.

<sup>46</sup> Gaius Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, trans. Carolyn

Hammond (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996), 86.

<sup>47</sup> John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 79–116.

<sup>48</sup> Strachan, *Direction of War*, 168.

<sup>49</sup> This is true for most Western nations, but it is worth noting that certain Baltic and Scandinavian states, such as Sweden, have reinstated conscription in light of heightened tensions with Russia in particular. Martin Selsoe Sorenson, "Sweden Reinstates Conscription, With an Eye on Russia," *New York Times*, March 2, 2017, <[www.nytimes.com/2017/03/02/world/europe/sweden-draft-conscription.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/02/world/europe/sweden-draft-conscription.html)>.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander's statecraft was his sharpest weapon, even more so than the love he earned from his armies, because it allowed him to consolidate gains from his battlefield victories and transform them into enduring strategic and political realities. Fuller, *Alexander the Great*, 109.

<sup>51</sup> Keegan, *Face of Battle*, 305.

<sup>52</sup> France, seeing a fight on Belgian soil as preferable to one on French streets, intended to fight "as far forward of her frontiers as possible." Horne, *To Lose a Battle*, 75. Also see Weber, *The Hollow Years*, 245.

<sup>53</sup> Samuel R. White, Jr., ed., *Futures Seminar: The United States Army in 2030 and Beyond* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2016), 1–8, available at <[publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/3244.pdf](http://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/3244.pdf)>.

<sup>54</sup> Christopher Coker, *Waging War Without Warriors? The Changing Culture of Military Conflict* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

<sup>55</sup> Ian Sample, "Thousands of Leading AI Researchers Sign Pledge Against Killer Robots," *The Guardian*, July 18, 2018, <[www.theguardian.com/science/2018/jul/18/thousands-of-scientists-pledge-not-to-help-build-killer-ai-robots](http://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/jul/18/thousands-of-scientists-pledge-not-to-help-build-killer-ai-robots)>.

<sup>56</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: Second Revised Edition* (New York: Penguin Group, 1991), xviii–xix.

<sup>57</sup> Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 561–562.

<sup>58</sup> Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend*, 324.

<sup>59</sup> Joseph L. Votel and Eero R. Keravuori, "The By-With-Through Operational Approach," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2nd Quarter 2018): 40–47; see also Michael X. Garrett et al., "The By-With-Through Approach: An Army Component Perspective," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2nd Quarter 2018): 48–55.

<sup>60</sup> Deasy, "Artificial Intelligence Structure, Investments, and Application."

<sup>61</sup> "2019 National Intelligence Strategy," 7.

<sup>62</sup> Gray, *Future of Strategy*, 3.

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# “Total Defense” —an Interview with Swedish Minister of Defense Peter Hultqvist



**Last year the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency sent a pamphlet called “If Crisis or War Comes” to all households in Sweden; why was that needed?**

Because we need a higher level of knowledge of how to handle a crisis situation, from an individual, family, and the whole society point of view. We must prepare people for every situation. During the Cold War, we did provide that sort of information on a regular basis to all households in Sweden. We ceased doing it after the Cold War ended, but now we have started it again, and it deals with both civilian and military crises.

**What recent developments motivated you to revive this practice?**

We have had a lot of problems with forest fires and climate-related developments that have had a direct impact on peoples’ standards of living. Moreover, recently our security situation has worsened; in 2008, we saw Russian aggression toward Georgia and then in 2014, Russia’s annexation of Crimea, as well as an ongoing war in Ukraine. We have also had Russian military activities and, from time to time, provocative behavior in our own neighborhood. So there is another security scenario today; that is why we sent out the pamphlet to all households.

**Will you elaborate on the provocative Russian behavior you mentioned? What are its characteristics or the incidents you are referring to?**

We have had, for example, Russian aircraft flying very close to our aircraft, as close as 10, 15, or 20 meters—very close and very dangerous. It is a way to show that they want to intimidate us, even when we are flying

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*PRISM* Editor-in-Chief, Mr. Michael Miklaucic, conducted this interview on March 20, 2019.

in international airspace. We have also had similar incidents with vessels on the Baltic Sea, approaching even naval ships of the U.S. fleet. So, we have had provocative behavior toward naval vessels and aircraft, and we have also had activities in our neighborhood that you might characterize as information activities, that I believe are closely followed by the STRATCOM Centre of Excellence in Riga.

**If you detect a higher level of threat, shouldn't there be an increase in Swedish defense spending?**

We have invested a lot since the Crimean events of 2014 and will continue to do so. For the period 2016 to 2020, the early level of military expenditures has been raised with 15 billion kronor (SEK). It's a lot of money—a huge amount of money for Sweden. We are investing in new weapons systems, we invest in more exercises, we have reactivated conscription services. We have done a lot in the last four years to increase the Swedish military capability, and I think that has been noticed in the neighborhood as well as in the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] partnership.

**And yet during the Cold War, Sweden invested as much as 4 percent of its gross domestic product [GDP] in the defense sector; today, defense spending is hovering at just over 1 percent.**

I am not sure this GDP percentage approach is the best way to describe what we are doing in investments. It is more important to see which systems we are investing in, and how we are developing our army, our navy, and our air force; that is the real substance. And then you have differences in economic growth, which makes direct country-to-country comparisons not useful. We speak of what we are concretely doing, and what we are doing is respected by others.

**What is the current personnel strength of the Swedish Armed Forces? At one time it was more than 600,000.**

Currently around 60,000, but we must have the ambition to increase the number. After the end of the Cold War, different parts of the armed forces were reduced by 70 to 90 percent; it was a huge reduction. We must start building from that level. The problem is that it will take time. We have started a new trend to rebuild military capability; it will take a long time, but we will try to reduce that time by acting fast.

**With the reinstatement of mandatory conscription, have you experienced any growth problems, such as a reduction in the quality of Swedish forces?**

It was necessary to make this decision to reactivate conscription, because with a professional force of full-time soldiers only, we could not field full and exercised units that could be used in times of need. We needed more personnel, so we had to revive conscription; we now have 2018 first-year conscripts who are very motivated. We have the same system now as our neighbors in Norway, with part full-time soldiers, and part conscripts, which enhances our military force.

**At one time there was talk of the Swedish armed forces being able to withstand an armed attack for at least one week. What is the current expectation regarding withstanding an armed attack from a major adversary?**

That is a very complicated question that is directly connected to the specific scenario and what is actually happening on the ground, so, you cannot say one day, three days, one week, one month. It depends entirely on what we are discussing, and I do not want to speculate about that because it will likely be wrong. The important thing is that we are investing in a higher level of capability and that we are delivering it. We are placing military forces on the island of Gotland, for example, which we have



not done before. We have a higher level of exercises than before—we do more in bilateral, multilateral, and NATO partnership–related exercises based on different scenarios. We have these two legs in our strategy; one is to upgrade our national military capability, and two is to upgrade and deepen international cooperation.

### **Will you please explain the concept of “Total Defense” and how it works?**

Total Defense is the total mobilization of a society in a war situation—what you can mobilize on the civilian side and on the military side together, and what you can do on the civilian side to support the military effort. It includes what you can do in private companies, as well as in the public sector and authorities. We had a huge civil defense organization during the Cold War, but since then it has atrophied, and now we are starting the complicated process of rebuilding that capacity. If the military organization is to work in reality, you need this support from the civilian side, such as infrastructure, healthcare, and all these things that are required for effective military operations.

### **Does Total Defense provide a strategy of resistance in case of occupation?**

Our strategy is to defend Sweden and Swedish territory. We will continue to fight under all circumstances without any time limits.

### **Do you find your civilian counterparts willing to cooperate voluntarily in this Total Defense?**

We are finding more and more interest. People are waking up and are really interested in being in these organizations. We have had a lot of public education as well as within our public authorities and in different companies and municipalities around these questions. Most of the military exercises we field today have direct connections to the civilian society.

### **Is the Swedish public as sensitized to the new threat environment as the defense authorities are?**

There is a growing interest about this in public opinion; many citizens are interested in volunteering if something happens. We have seen this with the forest fires last summer; many people wanted to be engaged and be helpful. The problem is almost what to do with all these volunteers. We see direct interest if something happens; the challenge is to prepare and educate people beforehand, so that we can deploy them effectively in a peaceful environment or when a security crisis comes.

### **How are you preparing them?**

We have voluntary organizations and exercises and education programs directly connected to local municipalities, in official authorities, as well as in private companies.

### **You mentioned provocative Russian behavior earlier; has Sweden experienced any form of Russian information or influence operations or interference in election processes?**

We were very clear in this last election that if we were to see any tendency to interfere in some way, we will make it very clear to the Swedish public that someone is trying to interfere. We were very clear on that and gave instructions to our authorities to follow up closely, what is happening in social media and what is happening all around us. We did not see anything that we had to take to the public or debate—nothing to the level that you had in the United States.

### **What is Sweden doing to defend its cybersecurity?**

We have groups of companies in different sectors working together and sharing experiences and technical solutions for how to handle such activities and attacks, and how to develop the techniques and the ways to handle such situations so we are more effective in defending ourselves. We have the same

process taking place in our public authorities and in the public sector. In addition, we made a decision in the Parliament that the defense forces should develop what we call “active cyber capabilities,” and they are working on that.

### **Could you describe those “active cyber capabilities?”**

Without going into detail, this is an ability to defend ourselves and respond appropriately when provoked or attacked in the cyber domain.

### **Sweden recently purchased a Raytheon Patriot missile system; why does Sweden need a Patriot missile system?**

Because we need new air defense capabilities. We have older systems today, and we need to invest in something new. We evaluated and analyzed different systems through our procurement process. The Patriot system was the best choice.

The Patriot system is a very competent ground-based air defense system and has a verified capability against tactical ballistic missiles. That was, among others, one of the reasons the Swedish Armed Forces decided to choose Patriot.

### **You mentioned stationing troops on the island of Gotland; is the troop presence there sufficient to defend Gotland from Russian encroachment?**

We gave an instruction to the Defense Commission to present a report on this on 14 May. One element of the report will be the next step on Gotland. In my view, we need to do more there. At present, we have a mechanized company and a tank company and national guard and air defense capability, but we need to do more. We have the possibility today to have the air force as well as a naval presence there.

### **There is concern about the vulnerability of the Baltic nations to the kind of Russian aggression seen in Georgia and Ukraine. If Russia were to take**

### **aggressive action in the Baltics, is Sweden prepared to come to the defense of your Baltic neighbors?**

What we would do in an actual wartime scenario is not easy to say beforehand. What we are doing today is to increase cooperation with the Nordic and Baltic countries, with the NATO partnership, and other countries through exercises to increase interoperability. Interoperability is what is needed if we come to a situation where we need to help another country in a crisis situation. From my point of view, it is hard to imagine that only one country would be affected if something were to happen. In a very short time, all of us would be involved in some way. If we want to raise the threshold, we must build it on cooperation between countries before anything happens because that makes a real threshold. What we will do in an actual situation, we won't know until we are there. We have already provided aid to France connected to the Lisbon Treaty, when they required support after the terrorist attacks in Paris.

### **Why hasn't Sweden joined NATO?**

We are not currently interested in changing our military and security doctrine. Anything Sweden does has a direct effect on Finland, which has a long border with Russia. Our analysis is that if we change our security doctrine, we immediately come into a situation of heightened military tension and activity in the region. We would also be pushing our neighbors into a more complicated situation. The best we can do is to see the situation around us as it is, not changing our basic doctrine, but upgrading our military capabilities, deepening cooperation with other countries, and preparing to take or give help to others if it is needed. We have now an agreement with NATO for host nation support, and today we have direct operational planning with Finland. That provides for direct cooperation in a wartime scenario. But we need to make a political decision to do so at the specific time (it will not be automatic).

**When U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis was here last year, you discussed the status of the bilateral Statement of Intent to promote military cooperation. What does Sweden hope to gain from that Statement of Intent?**

Yesterday I met with U.S. forces up in the north of Sweden participating in Exercise Northern Wind. The U.S. Air Force will be participating in the Arctic Challenge Exercise in June this year. We have many other exercises with American units working with Swedish units. Having a U.S. presence in our exercises is very helpful because it gives a clear security signal. I hope we can continue to develop what we are doing together in exercises. Information sharing, cooperation, international operations, research—all these things are regulated in the Statement of Intent. This Statement of Intent gives a very clear signal within our organization—and to our authorities—about our ambition to develop the Swedish–U.S. relationship. I believe it is perceived in the United States that the Statement of Intent is a clear signal from Sweden to the U.S. authorities and the Administration that Sweden is going to cooperate in an increasingly beneficial way. What we are doing now, connected to our strategy of cooperation with other countries, Nordic and Baltic countries, the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, France—we are building stability step by step in our part of the world, in our part of Europe. NATO's enhanced forward presence in the Baltics will also have a very positive impact on the security situation and build greater stability there. Our focus is to enhance our own national defense capabilities and to form partnerships with others, partnerships that stabilize the situation in our close environment. **PRISM**

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## Diplomatic Security: A Comparative Analysis

Edited by Eugenio Cusumano and  
Christopher Kinsey

Stanford University Press, 2019

280 pp., \$65.00

ISBN: 9-780-80479-105-2

REVIEWED BY GREGORY STARR

In this new book, two adept editors, Eugenio Cusumano and Christopher Kinsey, combine and edit the work of eleven authors' different looks at diplomatic security as practiced in nine countries—China, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Russia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States—as well as some overall themes on the subject. The result is perhaps the most comprehensive public study of the topic released to date, and the work stands as a reminder of the high price nations have paid in pursuit of diplomacy, as well as the difficulties and tradeoffs of balancing diplomatic efforts and the security operations meant to protect them.

The United States may be the country with the widest diplomatic representation in the world today, but if asked about the state of U.S. foreign policy and diplomatic security, most Americans would recall only the attack on the U.S. diplomatic outpost in Benghazi, Libya, and the highly politicized hearings regarding U.S. presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's role in the affair. Their recollections would likely be based on an action-adventure movie on the Benghazi attack or on the nearly endless discussion by politicians and pundits leading up to the 2016 elections. Sadly, the general understanding of the incident and the outcomes are terribly flawed

representations of the real challenges of securing diplomats abroad so they can effectively represent their nation's interests.

Similarly, the book's stark litany of attacks against diplomats from other nations—as well as the information presented regarding the steps their individual nations have taken in the name of diplomatic security—reveals that too often, the attention of the public and members of national governments may have been momentarily seized by attacks on their diplomatic outposts. But discussions about anemic budgets and other higher priority matters quickly diluted the collective anger about the deaths of yet another diplomat serving their country, and little changes.

At one level, therefore, the importance of this book is that it can helpfully shape and perhaps change the short-term discussion after the inevitable future attacks on diplomats and diplomatic outposts, often far away and irregular events, by presenting the issues, difficulties, and challenges that attacks by nonstate actors can wreak on our collective global diplomatic efforts or how the weakening of diplomatic immunity by state actions tears at our global collective.

Rather than seeing the next attack on a diplomatic entity as a security failure (regardless of how effective the security countermeasures were), the book should help policymakers and oversight bodies understand that risk cannot be eliminated from diplomacy, and that diplomatic operations in insecure areas must come with adequate and balanced security. However, achieving the right balance can be very difficult.

On a second level, the book serves admirably as a resource for those concerned with the actual business of securing diplomats and diplomacy, providing a wealth of information to diplomats themselves, the security services attempting to

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provide adequate and appropriate security for them, and the governmental organs who must make the decisions about funding diplomacy and foreign affairs ministries as well as the concomitant security costs.

The most successful diplomatic security operators in high-threat countries reach out to like-minded embassies and other entities and their security officers to share threat information, coordinate security plans, and in many cases seek mutual support for essential options such as evacuation and protection. This book provides those operators with the background and organizational understanding of where security operations reside within a foreign ministry structure, or, as outlined, within a state security apparatus. Much of this information was just not readily available prior to this work, and the book is practically a must-read reference for international security officers, whether serving in the field or at their national headquarters.

The final few chapters skew from the earlier path of describing individual nations' diplomatic security entities to discussions of risk management, securing diplomacy in the war on terrorism, and a conclusion on the history, effectiveness, and implications of diplomatic security. It is in these sections,

each by a different author, where larger questions are raised about what effective diplomacy is, whether diplomacy is really concerned with discussing national differences or is merely another way to project power, and how diplomacy can work in a world increasingly faced with more dangerous nonstate actors. The diplomatic security element is present in all of these discussions, but the editors and authors lead readers to many of the same questions and discussions that professional diplomats, Foreign Service practitioners, and legislative and Executive branch representatives must consider when weighing the power and limits of diplomatic efforts in war zones or highly dangerous locations.

As one editor and the author of the conclusion of the book writes, "The evidence presented in this book suggests that the key factor shaping the propensity to accept risks to Foreign Service personnel is the perceived importance of keeping a diplomatic presence in a certain country." The corollary, then, must be that as long as national governments continue to find reasons—important or not—to keep diplomats operating in war zones or dangerous areas, there will always be relatively high risks to those intrepid officers serving their country abroad. **PRISM**

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## Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East

By Nader Uskowi  
Rowman & Littlefield, 2018  
226 pp., \$68.61  
ISBN: 9-781-53812-172-6

REVIEWED BY GAWDAT BAHGAT

Iran was one of the closest allies the United States had in the Middle East in the 1970s. This close cooperation between the two nations came to an abrupt end at the end of the decade. The toppling of the Mohammad Reza Pahlavi regime and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 was a turning point in Iran's domestic and foreign policies. Since then, mutual suspicion and hostility have characterized the relations between Washington and Tehran. In May 2018, the Donald Trump administration withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear deal. A year later, it designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) a terrorist organization. In late June 2019, the IRGC shot down a U.S. drone in a sign of growing tension between the two nations.

Against this background, the academic literature on the IRGC, Iran's elite force, has been rapidly growing. Nader Uskowi's book differs from other offerings in the sense that the author does not claim objectivity. On the first page, the author dedicates the book to his father, a former major general in the Iranian Imperial Army—the military arm of the Pahlavi regime, toppled by Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic. There is nothing

wrong or unusual about taking one side in a political debate. The Islamic Revolution created a large number of both loyalists and opponents. Certainly, both sides have the right to make their case.

The IRGC, also known as *Pasdaran* or *Sepah*, is a leading force in implementing the country's asymmetrical defense policy. It was created in May 1979 to defend the Islamic Revolution against internal and external enemies. Since then, it has expanded its influence in both the security and policy apparatuses as well as in the economic system. The IRGC is an institution of the state, has its own army, navy, and air force, and coordinates policies with militias and political parties overseas, mainly through the Qods Force. The *Sepah's* role is enshrined in the constitution of the Islamic Republic (Article 150) and is assigned specific but wide-ranging responsibilities. According to the constitution, "The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, organized in the early days of the triumph of the Revolution, is to be maintained so that it may continue in its role of guarding the Revolution and its achievements." The IRGC is separate from the *Artesh* (conventional armed forces), but there is a great deal of cooperation and coordination between the two forces, and they work together to deter attacks on the Islamic Republic.

Uskowi claims that "Khomeini's senior advisors planned to establish a people's army to stage a protracted armed struggle against the Shah." Most scholars disagree with this assessment and argue that Ayatollah Khomeini realized that the *Artesh* was too loyal to the deposed shah to be trusted by the newly established Islamic Republic. This realization was the driving force behind creating the IRGC.

Uskowi seems to overestimate the role of ideology in shaping Iran's foreign and security policies. He claims that Iran has created a "Shi'ite Liberation Army" to "impose its own brand of

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militant Islamist ideology on the region.” True, the majority of Iranians are Shi’ites and, as in other countries, ideology (Shi’ism) plays a role in shaping the country’s domestic and foreign policies. But it is also true that, as in other countries, Iran’s policy is driven mostly by its political/religious leaders’ perceptions of the nation’s interests. Stated differently, U.S. policy reflects both U.S. values and perceived national interests. Iranian policy is not different. Indeed, one can argue, Iran’s policy has always been driven by ideology, perceived national interests, and other forces. Shortly after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, ideology took a back seat, and perceived national interests (that is, regime survival and economic prosperity) have emerged as the main forces in shaping the nation’s domestic and foreign policies. Furthermore, since the early days of the revolution, Iranian leaders have realized that although their political/religious system works for them, it does not mean it can work for other nations. Lebanon is a case in point. Despite historical ties between Shi’ites in Lebanon and Shi’ites in Iran and close alliance between Tehran and Hezbollah, Iranian leaders have understood the delicate sectarian balance in Lebanon and have never thought to “export the revolution” to Lebanon. It has always been clear that Lebanon is not Iran, and one size does not fit all.

Within this context, one can question Uskowi’s claim that the founders of the Islamic Republic “intended to create a revolutionary movement that would encompass not only Iran but the entire region.” The truth is Iranian leaders understand that the majority of populations in surrounding countries are neither Persian nor Shi’ites. They are Arabs, Turks, and other nationalities and are largely Sunnis. Equally important, Uskowi argues that the Qods Force seeks to create “a Shi’ite arc of influence across the Middle East.” This assessment reflects a deep misunderstanding of Tehran’s defense policy. For years, Iranian strategists have

developed a “forward defense doctrine” based on a close partnership between Tehran and its regional allies. Iranian military leaders believe the best way to fight their opponents is to take the battle outside Iran. The close strategic ties Tehran has with Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon ensure that the fight with Sunni extremist groups and their regional allies will take place outside Iran.

Uskowi claims that Iran took “decisive action to protect the Shi’ite-Alawi regime of President Bashar al-Assad and defeat Sunni opposition forces.” This is a gross mischaracterization of the civil war in Syria. There is very little in common between Shi’ism and the Alawi sect. The majority of Shi’ites do not consider the Alawis as fellow Shi’ites. Furthermore, the main drivers for the Syrian civil war are more geopolitical and less sectarian. Iran is mostly interested in the survival of the Assad regime because Tehran wants to maintain its supplies and contacts with Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the only way to do so is to have a friendly regime in Damascus. Uskowi claims that Tehran seeks “permanent bases” in neighboring countries. He has not provided any proof to back his claims. The majority of Syrians are Sunni-Muslims with strong national/Arab identity.

In chapter after chapter, Uskowi argues that Iran is the main reason for all problems in the Middle Eastern region. Certainly Iran has its own share of the blame, but other countries also have contributed to political instability and economic stagnation. The war in Yemen is a good example. The war in this country between the Huthis and the Saudi Arabia/United Arab Emirates–supported government and coalition started in March 2015 and developed into one of the worst human disasters in the 21st century. The majority of Shi’ites in Yemen are Zaydi, the closest sect in Shi’ism to Sunni Islam. Unlike Hezbollah, the Huthis have chosen to maintain some distance between themselves and Iran. It was widely reported that the Iranians advised the

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Huthis not to invade Sanaa (the capital of Yemen). Nevertheless, the Huthis invaded and occupied a large part of the city. The consensus in the academic literature and among political commentators is that unlike Syria and Iraq, Tehran's role and influence in Yemen have been modest.

Similarly, the conflict in Iraq is less about sectarianism and more about perceived national security. The majority of Shi'ites in Iraq do not follow Ayatollah Khomeini or his successor Ayatollah Khamenei. Rather, they follow Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who holds a different interpretation of Shi'ism than the one dominant in Iran. Unlike their counterparts in Iran, the clerics in Iraq believe that religious leaders should maintain a distance from policy and not be directly involved in political affairs. Tehran's main objective in Iraq is to prevent the establishment of a government similar to the ones before the 2003 U.S. invasion. Furthermore, one can argue, no country would like to see political instability next to its borders. A stable and prosperous Iraq would serve Iran's national interests. Not surprisingly, the Iraqi government, the United States, and the international community have acknowledged the leading role Iran played in defeating the Islamic State in Iraq.

If the reader seeks nonbiased and balanced analysis of the role the IRGC plays in Iran's defense strategy, Uskowi's book will disappoint. Still, *Temperature Rising* is a good example of how the Islamic Republic's opponents argue against the regime in Tehran and seek to portray it as the source of all evil in the world. **PRISM**





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