

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 52
Number 3 *Volume 52, Number 3 Autumn Issue*

Article 1

8-25-2022

Parameters Autumn 2022

USAWC Press

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), [National Security Law Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

USAWC Press, "Parameters Autumn 2022," *Parameters* 52, no. 3 (2022), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.3162.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

The US Army War College
QUARTERLY

PARAMETERS



Vol. 52 No. 3 Autumn 2022

Contemporary Strategy & Landpower

In Focus

*Why America's Army Can't Win
America's Wars*

John A. Nagl

*Sino-Russian Relations and the
War in Ukraine*

Zenel Garcia and Kevin D. Modlin

War and Its Effects

Thomas F. Lynch III

Erik W. Goepner

Future Force Development

John Fernandes, Nicolas Starck,
Richard Shmel, Charles Suslowicz,
Jan Kallberg, and Todd Arnold

Stefan Borg

C. Anthony Pfaff

Historical Studies

Arthur I. Cyr

SRAD Director's Corner

*Understanding North Korea and
the Key to Security in East Asia*

George Shatzer

**DECISIVE
POINT**

The USAWC Press Podcast Companion Series

<https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/decisive>



The US Army War College
QUARTERLY
PARAMETERS

Mission Statement

The US Army War College has published *The US Army War College Quarterly – Parameters*, a refereed journal for contributions concerning contemporary strategy and Landpower, since 1971. Parameters is a product line of the US Army War College Press, which publishes and disseminates research and analysis for Army leaders and other defense experts in multiple forms. The USAWC Press enhances the research and educational missions of the US Army War College by producing policy-relevant works of scholarship to inform national security decision making and to advance expert knowledge in such topics as grand strategy, military and defense strategy, strategic leadership, military ethics, and the military profession.

US Army Leadership	Editorial Board Members	
Secretary of the Army Honorable Christine E. Wormuth	Dr. Anne Louise Antonoff Marine Corps University	Dr. Montgomery McFate Naval War College
Chief of Staff of the Army General James C. McConville	Dr. Hal Brands Johns Hopkins University	Dr. Andrew Monaghan Royal United Services Institute
Commandant Major General David C. Hill	Dr. Douglas W. Bristol Jr. University of Southern Mississippi	Dr. Kathleen Moore US Army War College, CSL
Director, SSI and USAWC Press Dr. Carol V. Evans	Dr. Robert J. Bunker Director of Research and Analysis, C/O Futures, LLC	Dr. Matthew Pinsker Dickinson College
US Army War College Press	Mr. Jeffery L. Caton Kepler Strategies, LLC	Dr. George E. Reed Colonel (US Army, retired) University of Colorado, Colorado Springs
Editor in Chief Dr. Antulio J. Echevarria II	Dr. Samuel Charap RAND Corporation	Dr. Nadia Schadlow Hudson Institute
Digital Media Manager Mr. Richard K. Leach	Mr. Murray R. Clark Colonel (US Air Force, retired) At Large	Dr. Sibylle Scheipers University of St. Andrews
Managing Editor Ms. Lori K. Janning	Dr. Conrad C. Crane Lieutenant Colonel, (US Army, retired) US Army War College, SSI	Dr. Andrew C. Scobell US Institute of Peace
Developmental Editor Dr. Erin M. Forest	Professor Audrey Kurth Cronin American University	Dr. Kalev Sepp Naval Postgraduate School
Copy Editors Ms. Stephanie Crider Ms. Elizabeth Foster	Mr. Mark J. Eshelman Colonel (US Army, retired) US Army War College, DDE	Dr. Luis Simón Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Visual Information Specialist Mrs. Kristen G. Taylor	Dr. David M. Finkelstein Center for Naval Analyses	Mr. John W. Spencer Colonel (California Army National Guard) Modern Warfare Institute at the United States Military Academy
Composition Mrs. Jennifer E. Nevil	Dr. T. X. Hammes National Defense University	Dr. Samantha A. Taylor Air Command and Staff College
Contributing Editors	Dr. Stéfanie von Hlatky Queen's University, Centre for International and Defence Policy	Mr. Timothy L. Thomas Lieutenant Colonel (US Army, retired) MITRE Corporation
Dr. Jacqueline N. Deal Long Term Strategy Group, LLC	Dr. An Jacobs Nottingham Trent University	Mr. John F. Troxell Colonel (US Army, retired) At Large
Dr. Steven K. Metz US Army War College, DNSS	Dr. Genevieve Lester US Army War College, De Serio Chair	Mr. Bert B. Tussing Colonel (US Marine Corps, retired) US Army War College, CSL
Dr. C. Anthony Pfaff US Army War College, SSI	Dr. Sarah J. Lohmann University of Washington US Army War College, SSI	Dr. Marybeth P. Ulrich US Army War College, DNSS
Dr. Bettina Renz University of Nottingham	Dr. Matthew C. Mason US Army War College, SSI	Dr. Katarzyna Zysk Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies
Dr. Jacob N. Shapiro Princeton University		
Dr. Patricia M. Shields Texas State University		

Parameters is an official US Army periodical, published quarterly by the US Army War College. The Secretary of the Army has determined that publication of this periodical is necessary in the transaction of the public business as required by law of the Department. Use of funds for printing this publication has been approved by the Secretary of the Army in accordance with Army regulations.

Disclaimer: Articles and reviews published in *Parameters* are unofficial expressions of opinion. The views and opinions expressed in *Parameters* are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Department of the Army, the US Army War College, or any other agency of the US government.

Table of Contents

- 5 **From the Editor in Chief**
 Antulio J. Echevarria II

Features

In Focus

- 7 **Why America's Army Can't Win America's Wars**
 John A. Nagl
- 21 **Sino-Russian Relations and the War in Ukraine**
 Zenel Garcia and Kevin D. Modlin

War and Its Effects

- 37 **Deconstructing the Collapse of Afghanistan National Defense
and Security Forces**
 Thomas F. Lynch III
- 59 **Linking Trauma to the Prevalence of Civil War**
 Erik W. Goepner

Future Force Development

- 79 **Assessing the Army's Cyber Force Structure**
 John Fernandes, Nicolas Starck, Richard Shmel, Charles Suslowicz, Jan Kallberg,
 and Todd Arnold
- 97 **Meeting the US Military's Manpower Challenges**
 Stefan Borg
- 111 **Professionalizing Special Operations Forces**
 C. Anthony Pfaff

Historical Studies

- 127 **The Cuban Missile Crisis: Miscalculation, Nuclear Risks,
and the Human Dimension**
 Arthur I. Cyr

SRAD Director's Corner

- 145 **Understanding North Korea and the Key to Security in East Asia**
 George Shatzer

Book Reviews

Defense Studies

- 155 *A Violent Peace: Race, U.S. Militarism, and Cultures of Democratization in Cold War Asia and the Pacific of Military Modernity*

by Christina Hong

Reviewed by Eric Setzekorn

- 157 *Nuclear Reactions: How Nuclear-Armed States Behave*

by Mark S. Bell

Reviewed by Amy F. Woolf

Irregular Warfare

- 159 *Full-Spectrum Dominance: Irregular Warfare and the War on Terror*

by Maria Ryan

Reviewed by José de Arimatéia da Cruz

- 161 *Scripts of Terror: The Stories Terrorists Tell Themselves*

by Benedict Wilkinson

Reviewed by Whitney Grespin

- 163 *The Unknown Enemy: Counterinsurgency and the Illusion of Control*

by Christian Tripodi

Reviewed by Kalev Sepp

Military History

- 166 *Tower of Skulls: A History of the Asia-Pacific War, July 1937–May 1942*

by Richard B. Frank

Reviewed by Jonathan Klug

Regional Studies

- 168 *Kim Jong-Un's Strategy for Survival: A Method to Madness*

by David W. Shin

Reviewed by Patrick M. Cronin

- 170 *Blood, Metal, and Dust: How Victory Turned into Defeat in Afghanistan and Iraq*

by Ben Barry

Reviewed by John A. Nagl

- 173 Contributor's Guidelines

- 175 Cover Photo Credits

- 176 Call for Papers – Strategic Landpower Symposium

ANNOUNCEMENT

Contemporary Strategy and Landpower Essay Award

The annual Contemporary Strategy and Landpower Essay Award recognizes and rewards authors outside the US Army War College for the most significant contributions on contemporary strategy and landpower in a volume of the US Army War College Quarterly, *Parameters*. The journal's editorial board selects winners based upon an article's analytical depth and rigor.

The Contemporary Strategy and Landpower Essay Award is made possible by the generous support of the US Army War College Foundation.

WINNERS FOR VOLUME YEAR 2021

First Place

Dr. Jared M. McKinney and Dr. Peter Harris
 “Broken Nest: Deterring China from Invading Taiwan”
Parameters 51, no. 4 (Winter 2021–22): 23–36
<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol51/iss4/4/>

Second Place

Colonel Michael W. Wissemann
 “Great (Soft) Power Competition: US and Chinese Efforts
 in Global Health Engagement”
Parameters 51, no. 3 (Autumn 2021): 65–78
<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol51/iss3/11/>

Third Place (Tie)

Dr. Ann Mezzell and Dr. J. Wesley Hutto
 “JDN 2-19: Hitting the Target but Missing the Mark”
Parameters 51, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 85–96
<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol51/iss2/9/>

Dr. Tongfi Kim and Dr. Luis Simón
 “Greater Security Cooperation: US Allies in Europe and East Asia”
Parameters 51, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 61–72
<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol51/iss2/7/>

From the Editor in Chief

Welcome to the Autumn issue of *Parameters*. This issue consists of two *In Focus* commentaries, three forums, and the *SRAD Director's Corner*.

In our first *In Focus* essay, “Why America’s Army Can’t Win America’s Wars,” John Nagl presents a detailed historical analysis of the US military wins and losses since World War II. He provides a perspective on where past decisions and doctrines have led to defeat and where they may have succeeded if given more time or executed differently. In doing so, he outlines lessons learned and argues victory in American wars means the long-term commitment of US forces to troubled lands. In our second *In Focus* essay, “Sino-Russian Relations and the War in Ukraine,” Zenel Garcia and Kevin Modlin contend Sino-Russian relations are a narrow partnership centered on accelerating the emergence of a multipolar order to reduce American hegemony. They show how Beijing and Moscow converge on this point but diverge in how they define key actors and interests in this order. They also trace the foundations of this relationship and highlight how the war in Ukraine has created challenges and opportunities for China’s strategic interests.

The issue’s first forum, *War and Its Effects*, features two articles. In “Deconstructing the Collapse of Afghanistan National Security and Defense Forces,” Thomas Lynch analyzes the operational liabilities and qualitative limitations of the Afghanistan National Security and Defense Forces, referencing statements by US and Afghan political and military officials, data from official US government reports, and nongovernmental organization field analyses. In “Linking Trauma to the Prevalence of Civil War,” Erik Goepner shows that the more trauma endured by a population, the more civil war the country will experience.

Our second forum, *Future Force Development*, includes three articles showing how the military can anticipate personnel management challenges successfully. In “Assessing the Army’s Cyber Force Structure,” John Fernandes, Nicolas Starck, Richard Shmel, Charles Suslowicz, Jan Kallberg, and Todd Arnold assess the Army’s cyber forces and highlight areas military leadership must address to allow these forces to continue evolving. In “Meeting the US Military’s Manpower Challenges,” Stefan Borg discusses personnel issues and provides a scholarly overview of a critical yet understudied issue facing the US military. In “Professionalizing Special Operations Forces,” C. Anthony Pfaff argues that Special Operations Forces’ ethical crisis is due to

the lack of a professional identity and ethic and shows how addressing organizational issues can enable the group to establish and apply a code of ethics.

The third forum, *Historical Studies*, marks the 60th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. In “The Cuban Missile Crisis: Miscalculation, Nuclear Risks, and the Human Dimension,” Arthur Cyr revisits the 35-day confrontation between the United States and Russia to consider how leadership and related human qualities remain crucial to understanding the perspectives, incentives, and limitations of our opponents when facing crisis situations like nuclear war.

In the final section, the third installment of the *SRAD Director's Corner*, George Shatzer focuses on North Korea and the Kim family regime. He reviews *Becoming Kim Jong Un: A Former CIA Officer's Insights into North Korea's Enigmatic Young Dictator* by Jung H. Pak and *Rationality in the North Korean Regime: Understanding the Kims' Strategy of Provocation* by David W. Shin and shows how these books might help readers better understand North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-Un, and the implications of his actions for US foreign and military policy in the region. The books also provide insights for strategists attempting to plan for security in East Asia. ~AJE

Why America's Army Can't Win America's Wars

By John A. Nagl
©2022 John A. Nagl

ABSTRACT: Since achieving victory in World War II, the United States military has a less-than-enviable combat record in irregular warfare. This detailed historical analysis provides perspective on where past decisions and doctrines have led to defeat and where they may have succeeded if given more time or executed differently. In doing so, it provides lessons for future Army engagements and argues that until America becomes proficient in irregular warfare, our enemies will continue to fight us at the lower levels of the spectrum of conflict, where they have a good chance of exhausting our will to fight.

Keywords: victory, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, irregular warfare, landpower

As the American war in Vietnam began heating up in 1962, World War II hero General Douglas MacArthur returned to the United States Military Academy to receive the Thayer Award and encourage cadets to win the wars their generation would undoubtedly face. He exhorted them to do everything in their power to win America's wars, stating, "Yours is the profession of arms, the will to win, the sure knowledge that in war there is no substitute for victory, that if you lose, the Nation will be destroyed, that the very obsession of your public service must be Duty, Honor, Country."¹

MacArthur did not live to see his exhortation left unheeded. Since winning "the big one" more than 75 years ago, America's win-loss record would have landed any football coach in the hot seat—if it did not get the coach fired midseason. Desert Storm was a clear military win, and the Korean War ended in a tie with an armistice, which means it is technically ongoing.

However, Vietnam, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan were not wins in any meaningful sense of the word. In Vietnam and Afghanistan, America's exit was ignominious at best. America's withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 led to a rapid resurgence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, which took control of nearly a third of the country, necessitating the return of American forces to expel them from the ground yielded to them by Iraqi forces. American troops will likely have to remain in

1. General Douglas MacArthur, "Farewell Given to the Corps of Cadets" (speech, West Point, NY, May 12, 1962, National Center for Public Policy Research (website), <https://nationalcenter.org/ncppr/2001/11/04/general-douglas-macarthur-farewell-speech-to-west-point-1962/>).

Iraq for the foreseeable future to prevent radical Islamists from toppling the government as the Taliban did after America's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Following America's premature withdrawal, the Taliban returned to power in Kabul in August 2021, defeating not just a superpower but the world's only remaining superpower, the Soviet Union itself having crumbled as a result of its misadventures in the Hindu Kush.

The United States can make a credible claim to being the most powerful country in history, a colossus astride the globe comparable only to the Romans and the British at the heights of their respective powers. America currently spends more on defense than the next 10 countries (many of which are its allies) combined, with nearly 45 percent of global defense spending accruing to the red, white, and blue. Why, then, has the country so little to show for the blood and treasure it has invested in its wars since 1945? Why can't America win its wars?

In particular, why can't the Army win America's wars? Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) were all ground wars, with the Army playing a decisive role. Marines, by their reckoning and by Department of Defense doctrine, fight battles and not wars, while the Air Force and Navy—both clearly superior to any challengers on the planet—played a supporting role in each of the wars of the past 75 years, but not a decisive one. Due to the Air Force, Marine Corps, and Navy, American soldiers have enjoyed air supremacy since World War II, but even with this advantage, they still could not win. The result has led Andrew Bacevich, former Army officer and Boston University professor, to question whether the United States truly has the greatest military in the world.²

This article argues that for conventional warfare, the US Army is the best in the world but has consistently failed to plan for and adapt to the challenges of irregular warfare. The United States is the most capable state-on-state power in the world when it comes to high-intensity conflict and, indeed, the most powerful the world has ever seen. Yet, our excellence in this arena has driven our enemies to search for gaps in our armor. These enemies have found those vulnerabilities (lower on the spectrum of conflict) in the areas of terrorism, insurgency, and low-intensity conflict. Their success in these areas over the past 50 years has provided an unmissable lesson to our enemies, who will continue to fight us where

2. Andrew J. Bacevich, "Do We Truly Have the 'World's Greatest' Military?," *Responsible Statecraft* (website), December 27, 2021, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/12/27/do-we-truly-have-the-worlds-greatest-military/>.

we are weak rather than strong. We must learn from our mistakes and remedy them, so America is safe wherever our enemies choose to attack.

American hegemony began in the wake of World War II, with the ascension of the United States to a power differential unmatched in human history. America produced nearly half of the world's gross domestic product and was in sole possession of the most powerful weapon mankind had ever known—the nuclear bomb. The Soviet Union, much more badly hurt by World War II than America, created a buffer zone to protect its western flank, but the Cold War erupted into conflict on another continent. American forces in South Korea were unprepared for a North Korean invasion in June 1950. After stemming the North Korean advance and the operational success of the Inchon landing, a much-larger American force was unprepared for Chinese intervention when American forces approached the Yalu River later that year.³ America earned a tie in the first war of its period of hegemony and learned a global hegemon always has to be prepared for war—a lesson that continues to animate US forces patrolling the 38th parallel to this day. The Army can learn and has, but it is better at learning lessons related to conventional war rather than unconventional war.

The Vietnam War was even more challenging since it was both a conventional war against the North Vietnamese army supported by China and Russia and an irregular war against the Viet Cong. Like Korea, the war was conducted in the shadow of the Cold War, and the balance of power with Russia and China, supported by the specter of nuclear war, put an upper limit on America's ability to escalate. Nonetheless, the United States made gradual progress against both sets of enemies, leading North Vietnam to roll the dice with the Tet Offensive in 1968.

While the guerrilla uprising was defeated and its impact on the Viet Cong was costly at the tactical and operational levels, wars are won and lost at the strategic level. The American people lost faith in an Army and government that had told them of a light at the end of the Vietnam War tunnel. US President Lyndon Johnson chose not to run for reelection, contributing to Richard Nixon's ascent to the presidency and Creighton Abrams's ascent to command of the war in Vietnam. Abrams created a much more nuanced "One War" strategy (the strategy took advantage of the fact that the Viet Cong infrastructure had been exposed during the Tet Offensive) and prioritized training and equipping the South Vietnamese Army.⁴ The policy of withdrawing American ground troops but supporting the South Vietnamese army with American advisers and air support was called "Vietnamization." Heavily supported by American airpower, the

3. T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: The Classic Korean War History, Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2001).

4. John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

South Vietnamese forces turned back the 1972 Easter Offensive. Later, a congressional decision to withdraw further American support for South Vietnam in the wake of the Watergate scandal meant South Vietnamese forces had to face the 1975 North Vietnamese offensive on their own. They crumbled, and America withdrew in abject failure.

In the wake of the Vietnam War, the US Army turned away from counterinsurgency to focus on deterring and, if necessary, winning a conventional war with the Soviet Union in Europe. In a remarkable feat of leadership, vision, and determination, the Army created an all-volunteer force and reequipped itself with weapons systems that took advantage of the information revolution.⁵ The quality of that Army was a contributing factor in the defeat of the Soviet Union in the Cold War, much accelerated by the Soviet defeat fighting an insurgency in Afghanistan supported by the Central Intelligence Agency.

While the war in Europe for which the Army had prepared never emerged—in no small part because of the Army’s deterrent effect—the training and technology purchased at such great cost were put to the test in 1991 to overturn Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. The largest deployment of American troops since Vietnam demonstrated convincingly America’s ability to defeat conventional opponents on a battlefield devoid of civilians. It was the Army’s sole clear victory in the post-World War II period, even if the political result of the military accomplishment was less clear. Hussein withdrew his defeated forces from Kuwait but remained in power and a threat to regional stability.

The Army had made the right decision to focus on deterring conventional war in Europe in the wake of Vietnam; the threat was real, and the Army was unprepared for conventional war against a near-peer threat after two decades of conflict in Southeast Asia. However, following the American victory in the Cold War—a war that reached the threshold of 1,000 casualties per year only during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts—and the defeat of Saddam Hussein’s army, the Army struggled to find direction without a clearly identifiable enemy. As the Army focused on drawing down among proclamations of the “End of History” and the triumph of capitalism and democracy globally, troubling conflicts in Bosnia and Somalia presented new challenges to an Army that was finding its way in what President George H. W. Bush called “A New World Order.”

His son would face a greater challenge the Army and the nation were unprepared to handle. After the al-Qaeda attacks on Washington, DC, and New York on September 11, 2001, the Pentagon had no war plans ready

5. James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War* (Sterling, VA: Potomac Books, 1997).

for an invasion of Afghanistan when its Taliban rulers refused to hand over Osama bin Laden for justice. American Special Forces and CIA operatives supported Afghan Northern Alliance fighters who toppled the Taliban in an unconventional warfare campaign. The operation, plagued by shortages of ground-troop strength, contributed to bin Laden's escape into Pakistan.

America's attention quickly turned to the next war against Iraq, a country that had played no role in the September 11 attacks. Saddam Hussein would never have allowed al-Qaeda into Iraq, and before the American invasion in March 2003, there was no al-Qaeda presence in the country. Taking advantage of the security vacuum that followed the American invasion, al-Qaeda created a substantial presence there.

In addition to a notable shortage of radical Islamists inside Hussein's Iraq, there was also a significant shortage of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), though the apparent presence of these weapons was the proximate cause of America's invasion. More concerned about deterring Iran than American concerns about his weapons stores, Hussein refused to reveal he had essentially ceased all WMD production in the wake of Desert Storm. This decision would prove fatal to him—and to thousands of American troops and tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians who would perish in a war fought on incorrect intelligence.

In an attempt to win global support for the invasion, US Secretary of State Colin Powell argued before the United Nations that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, testimony he would later regret. Unsure of the intelligence he was briefing, he had required CIA Director George Tenet to appear in the camera frame with him as he testified. The United States invaded Iraq in March 2003 with too few troops to meet its obligation under international law to secure the country afterward and with no plan to govern the country after toppling the Hussein regime. A predictable and predicted civil war erupted between the minority Sunni, who had led the country for many years, and the newly empowered Shia majority.⁶

The civil war initially took the form of a Sunni insurgency against the American occupiers. It evolved to include both Sunni attacks on Shiite civilians and Shia-led reprisals. As the violence mounted, American commander General George Casey withdrew American forces from the cities where most of the killing was taking place. He prepared to draw down American forces at the direction of US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld until US President

6. W. Andrew Terrill and Conrad C. Crane, *Reconstructing Iraq: Insights, Challenges, and Missions for Military Forces in a Post-Conflict Scenario* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/807/>.

George W. Bush decided to surge American troops under a new commander who had written a new counterinsurgency strategy.

General David Petraeus oversaw a reduction of violence of two-thirds during his 18 months in command. Although Iraq is now a troubled and violent democracy, it is the first democracy in the history of the Arab world. Mistakes in Iraq have been bipartisan. US President Barack Obama's premature withdrawal of American troops in 2011 in fulfillment of a campaign promise provided space for a resurgent Islamic State in Iraq and Syria that again threatened Baghdad. A recommitment of American forces (who are likely to remain in Iraq indefinitely) prevented that disaster. Consequently, there is no way to spin American involvement in Iraq since 2003 as a victory. While the outcome has been far less horrific than it could have been, Tom Ricks's description of the American invasion as "one of the most profligate actions in the history of American foreign policy" is an understatement.⁷

Meanwhile, Iraq absorbed an inordinate share of resources, including the time and attention of American troops and decisionmakers. Afghanistan became the forgotten war, with the Taliban regaining strength as Iraq took all the oxygen and attention the Bush administration could spare. On his election in 2008, Obama studied the war in Afghanistan exhaustively before deciding upon his own surge of troops to fight an insurgency there. Unfortunately, in the same speech in which he committed those forces, Obama also provided the date they would start to withdraw—a move reinforcing the adage that while the Americans have the watches, the Taliban has the time to wait them out.⁸

The Taliban gained strength as US President Donald Trump repeatedly requested all American troops be withdrawn, ultimately resulting in a plan for a withdrawal beginning in May 2021. Newly elected US President Joe Biden, who was never fully supportive of the Afghan surge, chose to delay his predecessor's withdrawal decision but not overturn it. The American withdrawal began in earnest early in summer 2021. Afghan security forces who had grown dependent on American airpower and logistical support wavered and broke as the withdrawal accelerated. The horrifying picture of American helicopters evacuating the Kabul embassy provided the metaphor Biden had tried to avoid when he stated Kabul would not be another Saigon, as he predicted in July 2021, "There's going to be

7. Tom E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 3.

8. Matt Zeller, *Watches without Time: An American Soldier in Afghanistan* (Charlottesville, VA: Just World Books, 2021). The best book on the American war in Afghanistan is Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

no circumstance when you're going to see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy of the United States from Afghanistan.”

In the same July 8 press conference, Biden promised “I want to make clear what I made clear to [Afghan President Ashraf] Ghani: that we are not going to just walk away and not sustain their ability to maintain that force.”⁹ Yet, we did walk away and did not sustain the Afghan's ability to maintain the force we had so laboriously built.

This history demonstrates that since America accepted its role as global hegemon and the readiness requirements global leadership entails, America can win wars decisively and at relatively low cost (in lives if not in treasure)—as long as our opponents choose to fight us conventionally. Ricks has observed the Civil War is the Old Testament and World War II is the New Testament in the force-on-force contests that constitute the most hallowed parts of the American military canon.¹⁰

When enemy forces confront the United States at a lower point on the spectrum of conflict, as terrorists or insurgents, they can outlast America's patience as a nation. The Cold War demonstrated American democracy could prevail in a long war—but only if the threat was obvious and existential. When the stakes are lower and the threat less apparent, American politicians tend to tire of the conflict, and American strategists struggle to explain why continued sacrifices of blood and treasure—even at a relatively low level—are to America's benefit.

The reluctance of prospective enemies to fight the United States and her allies conventionally was apparent in the wake of the Cold War and Operation Desert Storm. Now, with two more irregular warfare failures in America's win-loss column, the choice for America's enemies is crystal clear. Nonetheless, in the wake of two abject irregular warfare failures, the Pentagon has again turned to preparation for conventional high-intensity conflict against a near-peer enemy, designating China as our “pacing threat.”

The Pentagon is correct in this decision; the costs of failure in a conventional war with China would be enormous and likely result in the end of the *Pax Americana* and the enormous benefits flowing from it to the entire globe (ironically, China perhaps most of all). The weapons systems and capabilities required to deter and, if necessary, defeat China in a conventional conflict will take decades to acquire and cannot be “surged” in a short period of time; the Pentagon is correct to prioritize this conflict. However, strategy is an iterative multiplayer

9. Michael Hirsh, “Is Biden Haunted by Vietnam? Should He Be?” *Foreign Policy* (website), July 9, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/09/is-biden-haunted-by-vietnam-should-he-be/>.

10. Discussion with the author circa 2010.

game; our actions influence those of our adversaries. Our very investment in these enormously costly conventional capabilities makes it less likely we will ever use them in conventional combat with China. Our thinking enemies will avoid our strengths and attack our weaknesses.

Therefore, after two decades of grinding irregular warfare, it is vital that the Army not make the same mistake it made in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, swearing America would “never again” engage in protracted irregular warfare. While American leaders should avoid engaging in wars of choice whenever possible, doing so only with eyes wide open as to the likely costs and consequences of war, they cannot forget our enemies get a vote.¹¹ America must learn the lessons purchased at so high a price in the past 20 years of war and build the capabilities needed to increase the Army’s effectiveness in this kind of war. In the wake of Afghanistan and with continued conflict in Iraq, when the Army swears “never again,” it must mean the United States will never again be as unprepared for irregular warfare as it was when the towers fell.

America’s ability to win, and to help its allies and partners win, in irregular warfare is as important in prospective large-scale combat operations as it is in the wars lower on the spectrum of conflict that have dominated the Pentagon’s attention for the past two decades. Future adversaries will pursue their aims through irregular warfare as an element of, or (if the US and her Allies present a sufficient conventional deterrent) as an alternative to, their conventional warfighting approach. Improving America’s understanding of and ability to succeed in irregular warfare is thus central to dealing with the pacing threat of China and with the urgent threat of Russia, not to mention North Korea with its massive special forces contingent.

Leaders can learn both military and political lessons from America’s bitter history of engagement in irregular war over the past 50 years. The military lessons focus on the unique challenges of counterinsurgency warfare and training and advising foreign forces. While these tasks are difficult because their success runs counter to the strategic and organizational culture of the Department of Defense and the Army, they are both knowable and solvable problems. The political challenges are more complicated since they involve sustaining public support for a protracted commitment of American troops to a counterinsurgency campaign, a task that may be impossible with a conscript army but doable with an all-professional force. The task is different with an all-volunteer force and is

11. Richard N. Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009).

perhaps even more challenging: sustaining the support of political elites for a multigenerational troop commitment.

Doctrine for defeating an insurgency is a task the US military has solved many times. While the Army struggled to come to terms with counterinsurgency in Vietnam, it produced a sound counterinsurgency doctrine by the end of the war.¹² However, in the wake of America's withdrawal from Vietnam, counterinsurgency doctrine, education, training, and force structure rapidly diminished as the Army refocused on the Soviet threat in Europe.¹³ That choice was understandable in 1975 but became less so after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the military's struggles with low-intensity conflict scenarios throughout the 1990s, beginning with Somalia and extending through the Balkans.

As a result, on September 12, 2001, the Army was not ready for the challenge it faced. Former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army General Jack Keane noted on the *Lehrer NewsHour* on April 18, 2006:

We put an Army on the battlefield that I had been a part of for 37 years. It didn't have any doctrine, nor was it educated and trained, to deal with an insurgency. . . . After the Vietnam War, we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war. In hindsight, that was a bad decision.¹⁴

Indeed it was, as US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates agreed in a speech to the Association of the United States Army on October 10, 2007:

In the years following the Vietnam War, the Army relegated unconventional war to the margins of training, doctrine, and budget priorities . . . [This] left the service unprepared to deal with the operations that followed: Somalia, Haiti, the Balkans, and more recently Afghanistan and Iraq—the consequences and costs of which we are still struggling with today.¹⁵

Although the Army was not ready for the wars it was tasked to fight in this century, it adapted and learned, producing counterinsurgency doctrine in 2006 and updating it in 2014. The 2006 doctrine focused on protecting the population as the *sine qua non* of success in counterinsurgency. It highlighted the

12. US Army, Field Manual 100–20, *Internal Defense and Development* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1974). For helpful analysis, see Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942–1976* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2006).

13. Andrew J. Birtle, "The Counterinsurgency Legacy," in *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942–1976*.

14. Jack Keane, "Lehrer NewsHour," PBS, April 18, 2006.

15. Robert Gates, "Remarks" (speech, Association of the United States Army Conference, Washington, DC, October 10, 2007).

importance of information operations and training host-nation security forces, a task further elevated in the 2014 doctrine as the key to America's exit strategy. Combat operations against identified insurgents and improved governance to meet the needs of the local population through economic development and the provision of essential services were all critical. By 2014, however, they were acknowledged to be subordinate to, and in support of, training and equipping local forces to take over responsibility for the country's security, likely assisted by American advisers and airpower.¹⁶

While doctrine increasingly acknowledged host-nation forces as the critical path to success in counterinsurgency, force structure to implement that doctrine lagged. The Army struggled to create the combat advisers required to train and fight with Iraqi and Afghan security forces and used *ad hoc* training to create *ad hoc* adviser units until the activation of the 1st Security Forces Assistance Brigade in August 2017—more than 15 years into the Afghan War and more than a decade after analysts began recommending the creation of dedicated force structure to accomplish this high-priority mission.¹⁷ In addition to the lack of understanding of counterinsurgency leading to a considerable number of mistakes early in the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, the failure to build a sufficient dedicated advisory force structure is among the most critical failures of the military in Iraq and Afghanistan and contributed significantly to American defeat in the latter war.¹⁸ These two strategic failures far override specific questions about tactical and operational decisions made throughout the two wars in determining final outcomes.

The military lessons, however, are subordinate to the political questions of whether to intervene in the first place and whether, when, and how to leave. Convincingly, Les Gelb and Richard Betts argued that when making the most important decisions about the Vietnam War, key decisionmakers had the information they needed and deliberated appropriately; there were simply no good options available to them.¹⁹ No one will make the same argument about the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. Although the decision to intervene in Afghanistan after the Taliban refused to hand over Osama bin Laden for justice was justifiable, the war in Iraq overshadowed the Afghan War from the day it

16. US Army, Field Manual 3-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), Chapter 7, especially page 7-9.

17. Matt Fontaine, "1st Security Force Assistance Brigade Change of Command" (media advisory, Fort Benning, GA, July 21, 2019), <https://www.benning.army.mil/mcoe/pao/newsreleases/2020/1st%20SFAB%20Change%20of%20Command%20Media%20Advisory.pdf>; John A. Nagl, *Institutionalizing Adaptation: It's Time for a Permanent Army Advisor Corps* (Center for a New American Security, June 2007), https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/Nagl_AdvisoryCorp_June07.pdf.

18. John A. Nagl, "In Era of Small Wars, U.S. Army Must Embrace Training Mission," *World Politics Review* (website), February 5, 2013, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12693/in-era-of-small-wars-u-s-army-must-embrace-training-mission>.

19. Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

began, stealing much of the attention and many of the resources that likely would have changed the outcome there.

As important as getting into wars is getting out of them. By 1972, America had arguably achieved a sustainable situation in Vietnam, with a small force of several thousand advisers supported by American airpower capable of turning back a conventional North Vietnamese invasion—North Vietnam's best option given the decimation of the Viet Cong during the Tet Offensive. Unfortunately, events in Washington doomed South Vietnam to a horrific fate. The Watergate scandal and the subsequent loss of faith in the Nixon administration led to a congressional cutoff of all funding for additional support to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, which collapsed after another North Vietnamese conventional assault in April 1975, ending what, at the time, was America's longest war.

History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes. Obama withdrew American forces from Iraq in 2011 to fulfill a campaign promise but against the advice of his secretary of defense, Robert Gates. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria swiftly rebounded and gained control of a significant portion of Iraqi territory, including Mosul, necessitating the recommitment of American advisers and airpower to regain the lost ground. As of this writing, a small force of Americans remains in Iraq; as long as the advisers endure and have the support of American airpower, the government is likely to stand. In a remarkable irony, an Iraq war fought unnecessarily and poorly early on may be perhaps the best example of successful American counterinsurgency since Vietnam.

Afghanistan could have enjoyed the same fate—a violent and imperfect one, but better than the starvation and absolute paucity of human rights that now mar the face of a country to which America devoted thousands of lives, billions of dollars, and two decades of effort. This abject defeat did not have to happen; as Rory Stewart notes:

The Taliban were not on the verge of victory; they won because the United States withdrew, crippled the Afghan air force on its way out, and left Afghan troops without air support or resupply lines. In other words, the decision to withdraw was driven not by military necessity, the interests of the Afghans, or even larger US foreign policy objectives but by US domestic politics.²⁰

As in Vietnam and Iraq, American counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan had resulted in the best end state realistically imaginable. It had a government

20. Rory Stewart, "The Last Days of Intervention: Afghanistan and the Delusions of Maximalism," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 6 (November/December 2021): 72.

that, while imperfect, was far preferable to its people than the alternative and an insurgency that could be managed by a growing host-nation security force supported by a relatively small and sustainable force of long-term American advisers. Nonetheless unpersuaded, the effort in the country was worth the costs it entailed, Trump negotiated, and Biden implemented, an agreement that gave the Taliban effective control of the country after a premature American withdrawal. Ironically, by then, America had successfully adopted the policy then-Vice President Biden had advocated in Afghanistan a decade earlier, with American advisers and airpower supporting Afghan security forces who bore the brunt of the fighting and the dying, but to no avail.

In the wake of World War I, America withdrew its forces from Europe and its weight from the international system and soon found itself embroiled in another European war even worse than the “War to End All Wars.” Since victory in World War II, American diplomacy, supported by its military power, has created the greatest system of alliances and the longest period of peace and prosperity in history. That success has depended upon the commitment of American landpower in Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Kuwait, the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and dozens of other countries around the globe. Sadly, the list does not include Vietnam or Afghanistan, places where the long-term commitment of American soldiers would have been in American interests and supported the promotion of the democratic and human rights values for which America stands.

American politicians and the US Army would benefit from a deeper understanding of the fact that victory in American wars requires the long-term commitment of American forces to troubled lands. If a country is important enough to fight over, it is important enough to stay there for generations. There is no substitute for American boots on the ground; while they are not the definition of victory, without them, there is only defeat, failure, and unimaginable suffering and loss.

John A. Nagl

Dr. John A. Nagl is an associate professor of warfighting studies in the Department of Military Strategy, Planning, and Operations at the US Army War College. He is the author of *Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice* (Penguin Books, 2014).

Select Bibliography

- Fehrenbach, T. R. *This Kind of War: The Classic Korean War History, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition*. Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2001.
- Gelb, Leslie H., and Richard K. Betts. *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016.
- Haass, Richard N. *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009.
- Kitfield, James. *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War*. Sterling, VA: Potomac Books, 1997.
- Malkasian, Carter. *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Nagl, John A. *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Ricks, Thomas E. *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*. New York: Penguin Press, 2006.

Sino-Russian Relations and the War in Ukraine

Zenel Garcia and Kevin D. Modlin
©2022 Zenel Garcia and Kevin D. Modlin

ABSTRACT: Claims that China has taken “Russia’s side” in the Ukrainian War oversimplify Sino-Russian relations. We contend Sino-Russian relations are a narrow partnership centered on accelerating the emergence of a multipolar order to reduce American hegemony and illustrate this point by tracing the discursive and empirical foundations of the relationship using primary and secondary materials. Furthermore, we highlight how the war has created challenges and opportunities for China’s other strategic interests, some at the expense of the United States or Russia.

Keywords: China, Russia, Ukraine war, strategic partnership, multipolarity

On February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation began an offensive on Ukrainian territory escalating a war that began eight years earlier with the annexation of Crimea. This event prompted a more resolute response by the United States and its partners, resulting in a two-pronged approach for compelling Russia to withdraw from Ukraine. One approach involved a series of economic sanctions, and the other involved steadfast support of the Ukrainian government and armed forces through financial aid and military equipment assistance.¹ However, despite rallying consensus on these key areas among its European and Asian partners, the United States has fared poorly in galvanizing support from the Global South.²

More concerning has been Washington’s inability to secure support from Beijing which has instead opted to amplify Moscow’s talking points rather than utilize its influence to change Russian President Vladimir Putin’s behavior. This problem has led US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to tell his Chinese counterpart, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, that China should “stand up and make its voice heard.”³ Blinken has also stated that “China in particular has a responsibility

1. “FACT SHEET: United States and G7 Partners Impose Severe Costs for Putin’s War against Ukraine,” White House (website), May 8, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/08/fact-sheet-united-states-and-g7-partners-impose-severe-costs-for-putins-war-against-ukraine/>; FACT SHEET: White House Calls on Congress to Provide Additional Support for Ukraine,” White House (website), April 28, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/04/28/fact-sheet-white-house-calls-on-congress-to-provide-additional-support-for-ukraine/>.

2. Heather Ashby and Joseph Sany, “On Ukraine, Africa Needs a Clearer U.S. Message,” United States Institute of Peace (website), May 17, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/ukraine-africa-needs-clearer-us-message>.

3. “Secretary Blinken with Jake Tapper of CNN – Interview,” US Department of State (website), March 6, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-on-cnn-state-of-the-union-with-jake-tapper/>.

to use its influence with Putin and to defend the international rules and principles that it professes to support,” adding he fears “China is moving in the opposite direction by refusing to condemn this aggression, while seeking to portray itself as a neutral arbiter.”⁴ For his part, US President Joe Biden communicated to his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, the “implications and consequences” should China aid Russia in its attacks on Ukrainian cities and civilians.⁵

These statements illustrate Washington’s growing frustration with Beijing as the conflict continues to unfold. In the context of the deterioration of US-Chinese relations in recent years, Beijing’s position is increasingly viewed as pro-Moscow and a sign of authoritarian unity against the “rules-based” international order. This view fundamentally oversimplifies Sino-Russian relations and fails to account for the impact the Ukrainian invasion might have on them.

In light of the current strategic context, we advance two arguments. The first is that the Sino-Russian relationship is best understood as a limited strategic partnership aimed at accelerating the emergence of a multipolar order to reduce American hegemony. It should not be viewed as a deep relationship involving coordination across the policy spectrum; instead each party perceives it will benefit from a multipolar order in which the other is a pole. The second is that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is simultaneously a challenge and an opportunity for China. Challenges include a potential blow to China’s credibility as a champion of sovereignty, territorial integrity, noninterference, and the possibility Russia’s poor performance will leave it unable to act as a pole in the emerging multipolar order. On the other hand, China has the opportunity to reorient pressure on itself by providing relief to developing countries impacted by the economic sanctions leveled by America and its allies. Furthermore, Russia’s isolation due to sanctions provides China with greater leverage in its bilateral relations.

This article breaks down into three parts to address these points. The first section focuses on the history of Sino-Russian relations and the emergence of their strategic partnership aimed at establishing a multipolar order. The second section focuses on how Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is simultaneously a challenge

4. “Secretary Anthony J. Blinken at a Press Availability,” US Department of State (website), March 17, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-16/>.

5. “Readout of President Joseph R. Biden Jr. Call with President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China,” White House (website), March 18, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/18/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-president-xi-jinping-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-2/>.

and an opportunity for China by utilizing empirical cases in the Global South. Lastly, the conclusion outlines the implications of our findings for US interests.

Sino-Russian Relations: Promoting a Multipolar Order

The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance in 1950 gave way to a Sino-Soviet split within a decade. This split exposed the personality and ideological tensions between Chinese and Soviet leaders and the historical tensions over unequal treaties involving border demarcation dating from the nineteenth century.⁶ These issues resulted in several border clashes that brought the former allies close to war.⁷ Consequently, it would take a change in leadership in both countries for rapprochement to begin in earnest in the early 1980s.⁸ Then-General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev's speech in Vladivostok on July 28, 1986, provided an opening for the two countries to normalize relations. In his speech, Gorbachev indicated his willingness to address key Chinese concerns, particularly the reduction of forces along the Sino-Soviet border and the establishment of concessions on disputed territory along the border.⁹ Ultimately, the resumption of negotiations on these two issues paved the way for closer ties between China and Russia in the post-Cold War era.

Their relationship, however, is not predicated on deeply shared politics or economics. Instead, it hinges on how the two countries independently and jointly want to operate in the international system, which contrasts with how neither side viewed the other as a legitimate actor after the Sino-Soviet split. Differences among leaders, images of idealized communism, leadership roles, perceptions of threat, territorial disputes, and proxy wars contributed to an unequal partnership and growing separation.¹⁰ This separation became more apparent when the administration of President Richard M. Nixon pressured the Soviet Union by improving relations with its "chief rival in the communist world, the People's Republic of China."¹¹ About two decades later, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the bipolar system shifted to a unipolar one. Within a few

6. See Danhui Li and Yafeng Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1959–1973: A New History* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020); Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, University Press, 2010); "A Comment on the Statement of the Communist Party of the U.S.A.," *People's Daily* (website), March 8, 1963, 12, www.marx2mao.com/Other/CCP2CPUSA63.pdf.

7. Yang Kuisong, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement," *Cold War History* 1, no. 1 (2000): 21–52.

8. Sergey Radchenko, *Unwanted Visionaries: The Soviet Failure in Asia at the End of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10–50.

9. See Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, *Speech by Mikhail Gorbachev in Vladivostok, July 28, 1986* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1986); and Joseph M. Ha, "Gorbachev's Bold Asian Initiatives: Vladivostok and Beyond," *Asian Perspective* 12, no. 1 (1988): 5–33.

10. Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 349.

11. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 292.

years, their relations improved considerably as the two countries reached landmark agreements on demilitarizing, demarcating, and delineating their respective borders. Consequently, despite sharing limited security interests, these gradual steps provided an avenue for a strategic partnership aimed at accelerating the emergence of a multipolar international order.

Susan Turner observes that in the early 1990s, China and Russia experienced an identity crisis as they began articulating their partnership. One area of converging interest was their mutual support for a multipolar order which became “a joint cause in many of their statements, declarations, and treaties.”¹² This goal was first encapsulated in the 1997 “Joint Russian–Chinese Declaration about a Multipolar World and the Formation of a New World Order.” This declaration was followed by the regional Shanghai Cooperation Organization agreement, where China and Russia were the senior partners involved in more in-depth multilateral military exercises than the various eras of the Treaty of Friendship.¹³

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization regional interactions do not extend to deep mutual expectations or obligations. Its charter from 2002 referenced the members’ historical ties and a desire for regional coordination and stability in an “environment of developing political multipolarity.”¹⁴ Their interaction through the organization increased coordination in the Central Asian region and competition more generally defined relations where individual states could play Russia and China against each other.

Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, many diplomatic statements from China and Russia have broadly stressed support for a multipolar order. For example, during a visit to China on March 30, 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov indicated Russia’s actions would clarify the international situation. Specifically, he claimed that with like-minded partners, the world would “move towards a multipolar, equitable, and democratic world order.”¹⁵ In his response, Wang Yi stated, “our striving for peace has no limits, our upholding of security has no limits, our opposition towards hegemony has no limits.”¹⁶ The readout of the meeting highlights the key roles China and Russia play in promoting greater

12. Susan Turner “Russia, China and a Multipolar World Order: The Danger in the Undefined,” *Asian Perspective* 33, no. 1 (2009): 159–84.

13. Alexander Marrow and Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber, “Russia, China Extend Friendship and Cooperation Treaty - Kremlin,” Reuters (website), June 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/russia-china-extend-friendship-cooperation-treaty-kremlin-2021-06-28/>.

14. United Nations, Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Saint Petersburg, June 7, 2002), 245, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%202896/Part/volume-2896-I-50517.pdf>.

15. “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Opening Remarks during Talks with Foreign Minister of the People’s Republic of China Wang Yi,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russia Federation (website), March 30, 2022, https://mid.ru/fr/foreign_policy/news/1807067/?lang=en.

16. “China, Russia Slam ‘Illegal’ International Sanctions Targeting Putin Over Ukraine,” Radio Free Asia (website), March 30, 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/russia-ukraine-03302022094602.html>.

multipolarity in the international system.¹⁷ In other words, the Ukraine war has not undermined the commitment of both sides to advancing the emergence of a multipolar order. Indeed, the response by the United States and its partners to Russia's aggression has buttressed the Sino-Russian partnership on this issue.

While China and Russia agree on a multipolar international order, they disagree on who its primary members will be. In Chinese President Xi Jinping's conversation with French President Emmanuel Macron in February 2022, he indicated China believes European strength is conducive to developing a multipolar world.¹⁸ In other words, Chinese officials see the EU as an important pole in the international system, while Russia views it as a threat. Although both China and Russia want the EU to move away from the United States, the Kremlin sees the European block as a security threat, whereas China considers it a trading partner. Nevertheless, while the composition of the order is contested, the general outline espoused by China and Russia has existed for decades, even if the individual characters and characteristics differ.

Chinese and Russian official statements promoting a multipolar order appear regularly in their respective post-Cold War documents. This consistent reaffirmation indicates China and Russia organize around the ideas and recognize that the other does as well. For example, China has historically associated multipolarity with greater domestic and international autonomy in decision making.¹⁹ Martin A. Smith argues that Russia sees multipolarity as a concept that evolved from a polemic tool to a unifying policy concept that reinforces sovereignty. Therefore, emphasizing multipolarity functions is an indirect critique of the established pole, the United States.²⁰ For both countries, the approach is about asserting the shared idea that more autonomous decision making exists under multipolarity.

Over time multipolarity has transformed from a criticism to a desired order. As articulated by Russia and China, this order primarily operates in the domain of ideas and argues they contest the ideas developed during the "Unipolar Moment" with the United States as the sole great power.²¹ The current emphasis on a multipolar order does not preclude the possibility of Chinese leaders eventually seeking their own unipolar moment. However, official narratives and empirical

17. "Wang Yi Hold Talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 30, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220331_10658029.html.

18. "Xi Eyes New Driving Forces for China-France Cooperation," *Xinhua* (website), February 25, 2022, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/26/c_139767737.htm.

19. Brantly Womack, "Asymmetry Theory and China's Concept of Multipolarity," *Journal of Contemporary China* 13, no. 39 (2004): 351–66.

20. Martin A. Smith, "Russia and Multipolarity since the End of the Cold War," *East European Politics* 29, no. 1 (2013): 36–51.

21. Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs*, December 1, 1989, 23, <https://www-foreigndaffairs-com.usawc.idm.oclc.org/articles/1990-01-01/unipolar-moment>.

evidence indicate that in the coming decades, their efforts are geared toward accelerating the emergence of a multipolar order. In their view, a multipolar order would result in a dominant position for China in the East Asia region and a key global role in which Beijing has greater capacity to shape international rules and norms.²²

A Future with the Commitment Problem

In the future, can we expect China and Russia to continue reaffirming the idea of a multipolar world where they have a prominent place at the global leadership table? While Russia's political and economic abilities are compromised, how China develops economically will be just as important a factor in their relationship. As was the case in recent decades of Sino-Russian relations, there continue to be bilateral interactions but no ingrained commitments.

In other words, the implications of the war and economic slowdown may make China and Russia play a closer coordinating role in influencing the international system because they would recognize the limitations of acting independently. While policymakers in the United States have understandably been interested in the Belt and Road Initiative, fewer have focused on China shifting to a dual-circulation model. The Chinese Communist Party is advancing the goal of producing goods for domestic and global consumption. This additional influence of increased domestic consumption in China is responsible for the International Monetary Fund revising downward the expectations of China's economic growth.²³ Furthermore, while the outcome of the Ukrainian war is unknown, Russia will likely be in a worse position in the international system. Its future seems to include less global energy demand and other countries aligned against it, including the pending membership of Finland and Sweden in NATO.

These are examples where China may capitalize on Russian isolation for access to resources and as a global financial intermediary. For decades a long-delayed, but now-online natural gas pipeline between Russia and China appeared to be mutually beneficial. While neither side has much interest in exchanging in respective currency or in bartering for goods, it bears watching to see how much China commits to the project going forward and assists Russia with its financial

22. Alastair Iain Johnston, "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations," *International Security* 44, no. 2 (2019): 9–60.

23. "World Economic Outlook April 2022: War Sets Back the Global Recovery," International Monetary Fund (website), n.d., <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2022/04/19/world-economic-outlook-april-2022>.

strain. This commitment will be emblematic of how each side deals with existing bilateral differences in the face of new challenges.

For China and Russia to become much closer, the reasoning would be in tension with general arguments in balance-of-power theory. These arguments emphasize the role major powers play in global affairs because they more often perceive other powers as threats rather than allies.²⁴ This pair generally accepts a lot of assumptions about the economy of major and great powers. It seems likely that in a multipolar relationship, there would be more areas of agreement and disagreement between China and Russia than there have been in recent decades. Their opposition to the West will push them closer together within the constraints of their objectives and generally weaken ties. Simultaneously, they will also seem to be untrusting of each other to get involved in significant commitments.

The commitment problem influences a range of relations but is acute in the international system, where states sometimes break agreements and treaties. Therefore, the general assumptions for how Russia and China operate in the international order may be stable, but they will plausibly weaken in the face of efforts to expand commitments. This assumption may lead us to ask what the bilateral and systemic implications are when states seek to avoid the challenges inherent in the commitment problem.

Russia and China's shared outlook on the international order does not indicate unity of action. Both sides have expressed support for a multilateral order and criticism of the United States and its partners during the war. China, however, has routinely called for an end to the war without direct criticizing Russia and has avoided direct support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In short, the absence of deep commitments means the resulting words and deeds under a system of alliance like NATO are different than the conceptual arrangement between Russia and China. It will not be easy to parse the differences between commitment and noncommitment because all interactions will involve words and deeds that may resemble each other. To move toward significant commitment, Russia or China would incur significant security costs and risks for the other. Currently, they avoid the commitment problem and its side effects.

The Russo-Ukrainian War: Challenges and Opportunities for China

Russia's escalation of the conflict in Ukraine has generated challenges and opportunities for China. Understanding these dynamics is crucial because they reveal areas of convergence and divergence in Sino-Russian relations and prevent the simplistic perception that Beijing has effectively sided with Moscow.

24. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1979), 127.

These dynamics are particularly important given the joint statement released on February 4, 2022, at the start of the Beijing Winter Olympics, declaring the friendship between the two states has “no limits,” which implies this alignment has been solidified.²⁵ Russia’s actions, however, have created problems for China’s other policy priorities, though evidence suggests Beijing is also strategically exploiting the crisis for its benefit. In other words, it is less about China taking sides than it is about China navigating the geopolitical effects of the conflict in ways that secure its interests.

Challenges

The biggest direct challenge posed by Russian aggression in Ukraine is to the cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy: the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.²⁶ Although not always explicitly mentioned, these principles, embedded in key foreign policy statements by Chinese officials, have been used to generate international support. For example, Xi Jinping’s 2013 speeches announcing the Silk Road Economic Belt in Astana, Kazakhstan, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in Jakarta, Indonesia, highlighted the importance of sovereignty and noninterference.²⁷ His 2017 United Nations speech outlining his vision for a “Community of Shared Future for Mankind” also refers to these principles.²⁸ These principles serve as the basis for presenting China as a nonhegemonic international actor and also allow Beijing to critique implicitly the approach of the United States and its partners to foreign policy.²⁹ Furthermore, they serve as the basis for Chinese solidarity with the Global South.³⁰ Thus, it is in China’s interest to be seen as a supporter of these principles since they have been shown to provide policy benefits.

Russia’s aggression in Ukraine exposes the inherent tension between China’s strategic partnership with Russia, which it sees as necessary in a multipolar international order, and its image as a protector of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in the face of American hegemony. Consequently, Beijing’s messaging appears contradictory since it simultaneously voices support for the

25. “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” President of Russia, February 4, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

26. These refer to (1) mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, (2) mutual nonaggression, (3) noninterference in each other’s internal affairs, (4) equality and mutual benefit, and (5) peaceful coexistence.

27. See “Promote Friendship between Our People and Work Together to Build a Bright Future,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of Belgium (website), September 7, 2013, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cebel/eng/zxxx/t1078088.htm>; and “Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament,” ASEAN-China Centre (website), October 3, 2013, http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm.

28. “Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Iraq, January 18, 2017, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceiq/eng/zygx/t1432869.htm>.

29. Zenel Garcia, *China’s Western Frontier and Eurasia: The Politics of State and Region-Building* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 7.

30. Garcia, *China’s Western Frontier*, 190.

sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, while amplifying Moscow's talking points on NATO and refusing to refer to its actions as an invasion.³¹ While this may be interpreted as hypocrisy on Beijing's part, these statements reveal it is trying to walk a tightrope in the context of the geopolitical crisis Russia's invasion has set off. Because Beijing places a lot of weight on Moscow's role as a pole in the emerging multipolar order, it cannot situate itself squarely against Moscow in ways that would seriously damage its ability to play that role.

Furthermore, China shares a long border with Russia, and the latter continues to play an important security role in Central Asia, which has important implications for the stability of China's western frontiers.³² Russia's assistance in putting down anti-government protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022 highlights this point.³³ The fact that the Russian military has fared poorly in Ukraine only reinforces the need for China to walk that tightrope. Beijing cannot overtly support Russia without undercutting China's reputation as champion of sovereignty and risking secondary sanctions from the United States. Simultaneously, Beijing cannot pressure Moscow and undermine its strategic partnership.

Additionally, China relies on Russian strength to secure Central Asia, an area it has invested heavily in and considers vital to the stability of its interior.³⁴ Another concern for Beijing is that a weakened Russia, further isolated by China, may choose to play a destabilizing role along its frontiers—much like the USSR did at the height of the Sino-Soviet split.³⁵ Beijing is operating in a fundamentally different strategic environment than Washington.

Opportunities

A United Nations General Assembly vote on March 2, 2022, calling for the war's end and the withdrawal of Russian troops, indicated broad support in the Global South.³⁶ Even in Africa, where the number of abstentions was the highest, over half the countries voted in favor of ending the conflict.³⁷ Hence, Beijing's

31. See "State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (website), March 7, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220308_10649559.html; and "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (website), April 11, 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202204/t20220411_10666750.html.

32. Jakob Hedenskog, Erika Holmquist, and Johan Norberg, *Security in Central Asia: Russian Policy and Military Posture* (Stockholm: FOI Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2019), 1–96, <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--4756--SE>.

33. Nastassia Astrasheuskaya, "Russian Troops to Withdraw, Says Kazakhstan's President," *Financial Times* (website), January 11, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/d550169b-d50d-4188-86d7-91227810a43d>.

34. Garcia, *China's Western Frontier*.

35. Garcia, *China's Western Frontier*, 53.

36. See "A/RES/ED-11/1 Aggression against Ukraine: Resolution/Adopted by the General Assembly," United Nations (website), March 2, 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3965290?ln=en>; and "Aggression against Ukraine: Resolution/Adopted by the General Assembly Vote," United Nations (website), March 2, 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3959039>.

37. "A/RES/ED-11/1."

efforts to develop a compelling counternarrative to its perceived support for Russia proved difficult early on, given the challenge of reconciling the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, by late March, Beijing began to generate a coherent narrative on its position, which allowed it to exploit emerging opportunities. This narrative focuses on the United States' reaction to the invasion rather than the invasion itself and makes three key points aimed at developing countries in the Global South.

The first area focused on presenting China's position as "objective and fair, and on the right side of history."³⁸ In this context, Beijing's narrative contends that its position is balanced and more conducive to promoting a peaceful settlement of the disputes than the United States and its partners, which are operating in a "Cold War mentality."³⁹ As Foreign Minister Wang Yi indicated, "an enduring solution is to reject the Cold War mentality, refrain from bloc confrontation, and truly build a balanced, effective and sustainable security architecture for the region, so that long-term stability and security in the European continent can be achieved."⁴⁰ This framing allows Chinese officials to present the United States and its partners as the actual impediment to the resolution of the conflict, rather than its unwillingness to pressure Moscow.

The second component of the narrative builds on the first, critiquing Washington's efforts to build a broader coalition of support in the Global South against Russian aggression. Wang Yi has framed this move as a form of coercion and argues "all countries have the right to independently decide their external policies."⁴¹ He contends, "when dealing with complex issues and divergent views, one should not opt for the simplistic approach of "friend or foe" and "black or white," adding that "it is particularly important to resist Cold War mentality."⁴² This statement again reorients the focus away from Beijing's position by casting the United States as a source of instability. Furthermore, it connects directly to Beijing's long-standing narrative on sovereignty and noninterference.

The third and final component of the narrative focuses on the economic effects of the conflict and the sanctions imposed by the United States and its partners. In a meeting with African leaders in late March, Wang Yi stated the conflict in Ukraine was "spilling over to the world," adding that the "African continent

38. "Wang Yi: China's Position is Objective and Fair, and on the Right Side of History," Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland (website), March 18, 2022, http://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202203/t20220320_10653564.htm.

39. "Wang Yi: China's Position."

40. "Wang Yi: China's Position."

41. "Wang Yi: China and Other Developing Countries have Reasonable Concerns and Similar Positions on the Current Situation in Europe," Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland (website), March 20, 2022, http://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202203/t20220320_10653593.htm.

42. "Wang Yi: China and Other Developing Countries."

in particular should not be forgotten and should no longer be marginalized.”⁴³ While these meetings were scheduled before the invasion of Ukraine, Wang Yi capitalized on the economic uncertainty caused by the conflict among developing countries to promote the Belt and Road Initiative and other development programs in the African continent.⁴⁴ In the process, he cast China as a responsible actor taking an interest in the economic plight of these countries in the Global South. Furthermore, Wang Yi argued unilateral sanctions were fracturing global industrial and supply chains in the context of the ongoing pandemic.⁴⁵ This fracturing, he claimed, would negatively affect the livelihood of people around the world “who bear no responsibility for the conflict, but who are effectively paying for geopolitical conflicts and major-country competition.”⁴⁶

Beyond expanding its foothold in the Global South, Beijing will reap the benefits of Moscow’s self-inflicted wounds as it has in the past. For example, despite the instability the collapse of the Soviet Union caused China, it allowed Beijing to establish a foothold in Central Asia to secure its western frontier. Furthermore, Moscow’s interference in the domestic affairs of Central Asia has prompted these republics to pursue multivector policies, which facilitated Chinese engagement in the region and allowed it to gain access to hydrocarbon and mineral resources.⁴⁷ These actions eventually led to the construction of the Central Asia Pipeline, which accounts for about 20 percent of China’s gas consumption.⁴⁸

Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 provided another opportunity for China. The resulting Western sanctions left Moscow with few options except to turn to Beijing for investment. Consequently, Chinese investments in critical Russian economic sectors that had stalled due to the latter’s informal barriers were approved.⁴⁹ The outcome of the Power of Siberia Pipeline benefited from this delay,

43. “Wang Yi: The More Turbulent the International Situation is, the More Support and Assistance to Africa Should be Increased,” Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland (website), March 20, 2022, http://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202203/t20220320_10653589.htm.

44. See “Wang Yi Hold Video Talks with Tanzanian Minister for Foreign Affairs Liberata Mulamula,” Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland (website), March 20, 2022, http://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202203/t20220321_10653739.htm; and “Wang Yi Hold Talks with Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra,” Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland (website), March 20, 2022, http://ee.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202203/t20220321_10653737.htm.

45. “Wang Yi: China and Other Developing Countries Have Reasonable Concerns and Similar Positions on the Current Situation in Europe,” Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland (website), March 20, 2022, http://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202203/t20220320_10653593.htm.

46. “Wang Yi: China and Other Developing Countries.”

47. Garcia, *China’s Western Frontier*.

48. “Flow of Natural Gas from Central Asia,” China National Petroleum Corporation (website), 2016, www.cnpc.com.cn/en/FlowofnaturalgasfromCentralAsia/FlowofnaturalgasfromCentralAsia2.shtml.

49. Alexander Gabuev, “Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations after the Ukraine Crisis,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (website), 2016, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CEIP_CP278_Gabuev_revised_FINAL.pdf.

given the crisis allowed China to negotiate a lower price for gas purchases.⁵⁰ The sanctions also facilitated China's involvement in the Yamal liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects in northern Russia. As a Carnegie Endowment report suggests, "due to the impact of Western sanctions," China's share in the Yamal LNG project increased to 30 percent.⁵¹ This Chinese investment endeavor allowed Russian resources to commit to liquefied natural gas and the pipeline project. When China capitalizes on Russian isolation and economic challenges, it also faces financial risks from costly projects. Due to the war in Ukraine, Russia is likely to become more reliant on Chinese investments. In time, China may face diminishing returns and the choices it currently faces on Belt and Road Initiative partnerships.

Facing unprecedented sanctions, Moscow has narrower options than in 2014. Chinese investment may be able to offer some respite; however, many Chinese firms may be reticent and unable to fill the gap due to the fear of secondary sanctions. Beijing has been adept at working informal channels for capitalizing in strategic sectors, as it proved in Iran while it was under sanctions.⁵² For now, informal channels may not be necessary given Beijing can pursue three formal options to assist Moscow.

The first option is to continue providing Russia access to the nearly \$81 billion in reserves it has denominated in renminbi (RMB), allowing it to continue trading with China.⁵³ The second option could involve increasing access to the existing RMB swap line since most Sino-Russian trade occurs in dollars and euros. The third tool Beijing could use is giving Moscow access to China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS). In theory, access to this system would provide a closed trading loop based on renminbi. These three measures could allow for trade expansion into investment sectors China has long sought to increase (such as minerals, agriculture, and water) and provide Russia with some economic relief. All three options come with significant limitations given the imbalanced nature of the Sino-Russian bilateral trade, the nascent status of CIPS and RMB internationalization, and the risk of financial exposure

50. Anastasia Kapetas, "Can China Prop Up Russia's Failing Economy?" Strategist (website), Australian Strategic Policy Institute, March 23, 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/can-china-prop-up-russias-failing-economy/>.

51. Vita Spivak and Alexander Gabuev, "The Ice Age: Russia and China's Energy Cooperation in the Arctic," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (website), December 31, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/commentary/86100>.

52. Garcia, *China's Western Frontier*, 105–6.

53. Logan Wright, Reva Goujon, Jordan Schneider, and Lauren Dudley, "Beijing's Russia Reckoning," Rhodium Group (website), March 4, 2022, <https://rhg.com/research/beijings-russia-reckoning/>.

to Russia's deteriorating economy.⁵⁴ Despite the potential limitations, it is clear Beijing stands to benefit from Moscow's increased isolation.

Conclusion and Implications

The arguments laid out above have important implications for US interests and policy. Of crucial importance is the need to recognize that the Sino-Russian relationship is a partnership predicated on a narrow set of interests (specifically, accelerating the emergence of a multipolar order). China and Russia frame their efforts as anti-hegemonic and implicitly aimed at eroding US influence. These efforts are presented as a public good, promoting state sovereignty and therefore "greater democracy in international relations."⁵⁵ Furthermore, Beijing and Moscow see each other as key poles in a multipolar order. Thus, Beijing is reticent to push Moscow in ways that undermine its capacity to play the role. This fact is especially important given the security implications for China's western frontier. In essence, the areas of convergence involve an active effort by Beijing to avoid serious commitments to Moscow beyond the narrow scope of their mutual promotion of a multipolar order and not to push Moscow into a position that would undermine its capacity to be a pole in the international system.

Additionally, there are apparent tensions regarding which actors China and Russia perceive as legitimate poles in a multipolar order. Another point of contestation is that a multipolar order does not necessarily produce an equal distribution of power as expected, given the general lack of parity across the measures of power. An isolated Russia will be in an increasingly asymmetric relationship with China—a situation Beijing may see as beneficial, but Moscow would not.

It is also important to understand how Russia's war in Ukraine has impacted China and how it has adapted to the effects of the conflict. The initial challenges Beijing faced have given way to some opportunities. Beijing found its footing by late March as it began a comprehensive effort to shift the narrative to its benefit. While its messaging may fall on deaf ears in much of the Global North, it has found a receptive audience in the Global South. That the United States has struggled to rally support from the Global South based on a clear example of Russian aggression against Ukraine indicates its approach to these countries lacks strategic empathy. In other words, there is a lack of recognition that these countries are navigating complex strategic environments. For example, while Washington has been flexible in its approach to Europe's reliance on Russian

54. See Natasha Turak, "How Much Can—and Will—China Help Russia as Its Economy Crumbles?" *CNBC* (website), March 16, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/16/how-much-can-and-will-china-help-russia-as-its-economy-crumbles.html>; and Wright, Goujon, Schneider, and Dudley, "Beijing's Russia Reckoning."

55. "Wang Yi Hold Talks."

energy, it has not extended this flexibility to developing countries in the Global South. Conversely, Beijing has recognized and exploited this opening to shift the narrative in these spaces. Consequently, while these countries may oppose Russian aggression, China's narrative allows them greater flexibility in their response.

Overall, US officials need to track and understand the Sino-Russian relationship in its proper context and its scope and limitations. The partnership challenges America's position in the international system, especially in the Global South, where emerging economies seek political and economic flexibility. However, the context, scopes, and limitations of the Sino-Russian relations indicate the United States and its partners can shape this relationship and its systemic impacts. This indication is especially prescient in the context of Sino-American relations, which are expected to be the most important bilateral relationship in the twenty-first century. Assumptions that Beijing has cast its lot with Moscow are a fundamental misinterpretation of the relationship and lead to erroneous policy efforts, which can severely impact already-strained Sino-American relations. As evidence suggests, China has taken its own side rather than siding with Russia.

The implications of these findings for US policy are threefold. The first is that the Sino-Russian partnership is narrow and exhibits clear signs of a commitment problem. Thus, there is space for US officials to shape China's behavior vis-à-vis Russia, particularly in the context of Ukraine. While Chinese leaders view Russia as an important pole in the emerging multipolar order, a neighbor with which it shares a long border, and a country that continues to possess capabilities impacting Chinese security, Beijing's primary concern remains political and economic stability. Fear of secondary sanctions is illustrative of this concern. Furthermore, despite the deterioration of Sino-American relations, evidence shows the United States has played a key role in shaping Chinese domestic and foreign policy in the past decades.⁵⁶ While US officials are unlikely to reorient Chinese policy fundamentally to meet their preferences, the narrow scope of the Sino-Russia relation and the importance Chinese leaders place on stability indicates there is room for shaping it.

Second, while China gained footing in its narrative on the war, Russia's act of aggression raises legitimate questions about its commitment to the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and noninterference. This situation provides an important opportunity to shape China's approach to Ukraine, and more importantly, to gain the initiative in the Global South, given the key reason the United States attained its present position in the international system was its ability to bring its most likely competitors into the fold. Most of these actors

56. Tiffany Barron et al., "Engagement Revisited: Progress Made and Lessons Learned from the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue," National Committee on American Foreign Policy (website), September 2021, https://www.ncafp.org/2016/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/NCAFP_China_Engagement_final_Sept-2021.pdf.

now face relative decline, whereas several actors in the Global South are becoming increasingly pivotal to the international order. While the United States needs its current partners and allies to maintain its position, it will need to bring these emerging powers into the fold.

The third point stems from this need to win over emerging powers. China's success is predicated on deep economic engagement and the mobilization of discursive power in ways that appeal to the countries in the Global South. Therefore, American officials must understand the currencies in these spaces are investment and trade coupled with a flexible strategic policy. In other words, they need to recognize these countries are navigating complex strategic environments that make clear alignments undesirable. Relying on political binaries and focusing on security partnerships will likely yield limited returns.

Zenel Garcia

Dr. Zenel Garcia is an associate professor of security studies in the Department of National Security and Strategy at the US Army War College. His research focuses on the intersection of international relations theory, security, and geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia.

Kevin D. Modlin

Dr. Kevin D. Modlin is an instructor at Western Kentucky University, where his research interests focus on security studies and international political economy. He holds a PhD in international relations from Florida International University and a master's degree in economics from Western Kentucky University. He also served as a senior legislative aide for retired Congressman Ron Lewis.

Select Bibliography

- Barron, Tiffany et al. "Engagement Revisited: Progress Made and Lessons Learned from the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue." National Committee on American Foreign Policy (website). September 2021. https://www.ncafp.org/2016/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/NCAFP_China_Engagement_final_Sept-2021.pdf.
- Garcia, Zenel. *China's Western Frontier and Eurasia: The Politics of State and Region-Building*. New York: Routledge, 2021.
- Johnston, Alastair Iain. "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations." *International Security* 44, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 9-60.
- Radchenko, Sergey. *Unwanted Visionaries: The Soviet Failure in Asia at the End of the Cold War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Smith, Martin A. "Russia and Multipolarity since the End of the Cold War." *East European Politics* 29, no. 1 (2013): 36-51.
- Turner, Susan. "Russia, China and a Multipolar World Order: The Danger in the Undefined." *Asian Perspective* 33, no. 1 (2009): 159-84.
- Womack, Brantly. "Asymmetry Theory and China's Concept of Multipolarity." *Journal of Contemporary China* 13, no. 39 (2004): 351-66.
- Wright, Logan, Reva Goujon, Jordan Schneider, and Lauren Dudley. "Beijing's Russia Reckoning." Rhodium Group (website). March 4, 2022. <https://rhg.com/research/beijings-russia-reckoning/>.

Deconstructing the Collapse of Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces

Thomas F. Lynch III
©2022 Thomas F. Lynch III

ABSTRACT: The rapid collapse of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) in August 2021 was widely anticipated and due to its structural constraints and qualitative decline from 2018–21. This article provides a targeted analysis of ANDSF operational liabilities and qualitative limitations, referencing often overlooked statements by US and Afghan political and military officials, data from official US government reports, and prescient NGO field analyses. The painful ANDSF experience illuminates several principles that must be considered as US policymakers turn toward security force assistance for proxy and surrogate military forces in conflict with the partners of America’s emerging great-power geostrategic competitors—China and Russia.

Keywords: Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), Taliban, Doha Accord, collapse, security force assistance

In the year since the abrupt August 2021 collapse of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and the flight of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) of President Ashraf Ghani, a post-mortem myth has evolved. In the GIROA narrative, the rapid vaporization of the Afghan forces from the fight against the Afghan Taliban was a surprise to the Ghani government, the leadership of the US Embassy in Kabul, and American military leaders.¹ As evidence of this shock, its proponents cite the often-repeated 2021 public assurances by US political masters and military commanders that the Afghan defense and security forces would likely not prevail on their own but forecast that with limited American “over-the-horizon support,” it might continue to put up a credible fight for another 6 to 12 months.²

This mythology does not withstand scrutiny. The swift demise of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces was, in the words of the late US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, a “knowable known.” In fact, it was a “knowable known.”

1. See Jermaine Mohan, “Afghanistan’s Collapse Was Ashraf Ghani’s Fault,” *Chronicle* (website), October 18, 2021, <https://chronicle.durhamcollege.ca/2021/10/afghanistans-collapse-was-ashraf-ghanis-fault/>; and Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, “Afghanistan Collapse Was Not Inevitable,” *Slate* (website), February 2, 2022, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/02/joe-biden-afghanistan-collapse-not-inevitable.html>.

2. See Lara Seligman, “Top General on Afghanistan: ‘I Don’t Think the End Game Is Yet Written,’” *Politico* (website), July 21, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/21/mark-milley-top-general-afghanistan-taliban-500445>; and *Statement of General Mark A. Milley, USA, 20th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Department of Defense Afghanistan Hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/download/milley092821>.

In fact, it actually was a known-known for quite some time before August 2021.³ Since 2018, the ANDSF were never as big as reported nor as cohesive as implied in public statements. Although pessimistic, American military and intelligence leaders hedged their assessments of Afghan military viability after a final US withdrawal, speaking of an inevitable ANDSF demise in terms of months, not weeks. Yet by the end of 2018 ANDSF leaders and servicemembers understood that without a reversal of course in Washington, the American-Taliban peace negotiations would result in the end of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.⁴

From its inception, the Afghan military was a “monkey in the middle” of the geopolitical dynamics between the United States, the Pakistani military and intelligence services, and the fractious political leadership of Afghanistan. Combined, these factors seriously constrained the ANDSF, assuring it had quantifiable shortcomings and qualitative liabilities it could never resolve without continuing US and Coalition military in-country support. These quantitative shortfalls included insufficient aerial or artillery support for troops in contact, inadequate aerial resupply and replenishment for forces far afield, and insufficient maintenance to sustain the main weapons systems. Each of these shortfalls had been reported publicly for years. They merely accelerated after 2018.

More critically, the ANDSF had qualitative problems limiting its ability to conduct credible, autonomous counterinsurgency operations against a determined and resilient Taliban. Its cohesion was suspect owing to endemic mistrust of the Afghan central government and systemic corruption in its leadership ranks. Its morale was questionable, as it routinely suffered high-casualty attacks by Taliban forces. Other than in its small number of special operations forces, it lacked the ability to prevent proactively or respond to Taliban attacks without substantive American support. Moreover, from 2018 through 2021, ANDSF bore the brunt of Taliban aggression while US and Western militaries enjoyed first an informal agreement, and later, after the February 2020 US-Taliban Peace Agreement (Doha Accord), a formal arrangement with the Taliban to stop attacking foreign military forces only.

The February 2020 US-Taliban Doha Accord framed one final important dilemma for the ANDSF. The agreement stipulated all US and Western troops must

3. See Craig Whitlock, “The Afghanistan Papers – At War with the Truth,” *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>; Paul D. Shinkman, “Top U.S. General: Afghan Army Could Not Survive on Its Own,” *U.S. News & World Report*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2021-03-25/top-us-general-afghan-army-could-not-survive-on-its-own>; and Anatol Lieven, “Why Afghan Forces so Quickly Laid Down Their Arms,” *Politico* (website), August 16, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/08/16/afghanistan-history-taliban-collapse-504977>.

4. Douglas London, “CIA’s Former Counterterrorism Chief for the Region: Afghanistan, Not an Intelligence Failure – Something Much Worse,” *Just Security* (website), August 18, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/77801/cias-former-counterterrorism-chief-for-the-region-afghanistan-not-an-intelligence-failure-something-much-worse/>.

depart Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, or, and as the Taliban made clear repetitively, they would renew attacks against United States Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and other foreign forces as “fair game.” This deadline gave the US military and Coalition forces enormous incentives to move out of Afghanistan rapidly to reduce “risks to the force.” But this accelerated American military retrograde undercut the negotiating position of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) with the Taliban, and, in turn, gave ANDSF mid-level and junior officers and enlisted servicemembers additional incentives to cut local deals and prepare for an almost-certain Taliban return to power.

These debilitating quantitative and qualitative dynamics were hiding in plain sight—known and publicized in open-source media and public testimony. To establish the record of preconditions and important moments in the ANDSF’s rapid collapse properly, it is important to reexamine the chronology of what was known about ANDSF fragility from 2018 on, especially from 2020–21. A focused review will recount the most important “knowns” about this fragility in three key time periods: (1) January 2018 to February 2020, (2) March 2020 to April 2021, and, (3) May to August 2021.

This review highlights several principles American policymakers should consider in the future; one where Washington may find itself advising or directly supporting proxy and surrogate military forces undertaking kinetic activities against the proxies or forces of America’s great-power competitors. The ANDSF’s failure to launch and spectacular 2021 collapse reflect a larger historic problem for US security assistance efforts at training, advising, and equipping of allied militaries as an alternative to large, semipermanent US ground-force commitments.⁵ American policymakers must acknowledge this disappointing legacy and approach security-partner assistance in the new era of great-power competition with humility, forethought, and caution informed by the heavily foretold, rapid demise of the ANDSF.

Cost Consciousness and Delimited Afghan National Defense and Security Forces

The ANDSF’s growth parameters and composition were adjusted multiple times over its 20-year lifespan.⁶ After fluctuating during the 2000s, by the 2010s,

5. Stephen Biddle, “Building Security Forces & Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency,” *Daedalus* 146, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 126–38, https://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/126/1831111/daed_a_00464.pdf; Walter C. Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships and Counterinsurgency* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1–52, 289–313; and Stephen Biddle, “Afghanistan’s Legacy: Emerging Lessons of an Ongoing War,” *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 73–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.926210>.

6. For a short review of sizing machinations, see T. X. Hammes, “Raising and Mentoring Security Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq,” in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, ed., Richard D. Hooker Jr. and Joseph J. Collins (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 281–304.

US and Coalition partners decided ANDSF would be structured at 352,000 total personnel, 195,000 of whom were in the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan Air Force (AAF), with the remainder under the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) as national police and special security forces.⁷ It is unlikely ANDSF ever met these totals as reporting was notoriously suspect and the ability of US and Coalition advisers to monitor them atrophied consistently after 2014 as ANDSF took the counterinsurgency lead and Coalition mentors stepped back from side-by-side advising.⁸ Washington and its partners limited the AAF to a small number of aerial platforms with light, counterinsurgency-focused fixed-wing and ground-strike helicopters and a limited number of lift aircraft for reliable countrywide mobility for an ANA of almost 200,000 (see table 1). Likewise, the Afghan army would have limited indirect-fire weapons capability and be structured without long-range artillery or drone-strike assets.

The ANA was built to rely on US and Coalition support for its main battlefield competitive advantages against the Taliban insurgency: generation of airspace superiority, long-haul aerial logistics and mobility, and volume in air-to-ground interdiction strikes.

7. Department of Defense (DoD), *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, December 2017), 35–36, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/1225-Report-Dec-2017.pdf>.

8. “Transcripts: Department of Defense Press Briefing by Gen. Campbell via Satellite in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” DoD (website), October 2, 2014; and SIGAR, “Oversight Bubble Inquiry Letter,” SIGAR 14-4-SP, October 10, 2013.

Table 1. March 2020 Authorized and Available Aircraft for Afghanistan Air Force

(Entries with an asterisk are very light, small aircraft that would prove no match for the standard aircraft found in the Pakistani air force. These aircraft dominated the composition of the Afghanistan Air Force.)

Military Function	Aircraft Name	# Authorized	# Available
Air-to-Air Fixed Wing Fighters		0	0
Air-to-Ground Strike and Reconnaissance/ Strike Category Totals		105	89
Fixed Wing	A29 (Super Toucan)*	25	15
	AC-208*	10	10
Rotary Wing	MD-530*	48	45
	Mi-17	22	19
Aerial Transport/ Lift Category Totals		72	65
Fixed Wing	C-208*	23	23
	C-130	4	2
Rotary Wing	UH-60	45	40

These military hardware parameter limitations and force number vacillations emerged because of American and partner-state concerns about the costs and sustainment potential for an autonomous Afghan security force. A bigger AAF or a more capable ground force would cost more to recruit, train, retain, and operate with higher-end technologies.⁹ Thus, the United States preferred utilizing its own in-country military assets for these higher-end capabilities, thereby capping the costs to US taxpayers at about \$4 billion.¹⁰

Another critical regional security dynamic helped scope these ANDSF limitations: Pakistan's wary military and intelligence organizations. Pakistan never wanted strong, capable, autonomous ANDSF for several strategic reasons. First, Pakistan fundamentally distrusted the non-Pashtun ethnic groups in the north and west of Afghanistan, particularly the Tajiks and the Uzbeks. Pakistani security leaders viewed them as hostile to Pakistan and pointed to recent history for

9. Department of Defense (DoD), *Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, October 2013, 48, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/October_1230_Report_Master_Nov7.pdf).

10. See Kenneth Katzman, *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report RL30588 (Washington, DC: CRS, December 13, 2017), 27–28, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL30588/278>.

justification.¹¹ During the Afghan civil war of the 1990s, these Tajik and Uzbek groups not only battled against Pashtun groups favored by the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence Agency, but often took funding and physical support from Russia, Iran and, most critically, India. In 1994, Pakistan supported the Afghan Taliban in opposing these groups and was alarmed when post-2001 Afghan governments routinely featured Tajik and Uzbek strongmen as leaders of the ANDSF and the Afghan national intelligence services.¹²

Second, Pakistan feared Indian subterfuge and access to Pakistan's "back door" in the post-2001 Afghan government and especially in the ANDSF.¹³ India is Pakistan's biggest security concern and is described in Pakistan as an existential threat. Pakistan's chilly relations with the Tajik and Uzbek groups who habitually led the ANDSF (and Afghan intelligence service, the National Directorate of Security) made them paranoid that the ANDSF and National Directorate of Security would abet Indian diplomatic and intelligence assets at or near the Pakistani border.¹⁴ These fears underpinned Pakistan's constant complaining from 2004–15 that Afghanistan was riven with over a dozen Indian consulates, many close to Pakistan, and threatening to destabilize Pakistan through various means of cross-border influence. In reality, there never were more than five of these Indian outposts, including the Indian embassy in Kabul.¹⁵ Informed by these concerns, Pakistan's security establishment continued its indirect support for the Afghan Taliban, preferring a low-boil instability inside Afghanistan to a strong, non-Pashtun, ANDSF doing India's bidding and putting a "security squeeze" on Pakistan from the west.¹⁶

Concurrently, Pakistan quietly preferred the US military remain affiliated with the Afghan military while the Taliban was weak for three main reasons: because Rawalpindi officials distrusted the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as a stalking horse for India; because American presence there anchored a counterterrorism partnership that reaped a large financial-aid package for the Pakistani military; and because American military commanders served as a kind of

11. Raja Karthikeya Gundu and Teresita C. Schaffer, "India and Pakistan in Afghanistan: Hostile Sports," *South Asia Monitor* 117 (April 3, 2008), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-asia-monitor-india-and-pakistan-afghanistan-hostile-sports-april-03-2008>.

12. Rizwan Hussein, *Pakistan and the Emergence of Islamic Militancy in Afghanistan* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2005), 55–62; and Nasreen Akhtar, "Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Taliban," *International Journal on World Peace* 25, no. 4 (December 2008): 49–73, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20752859?seq=19#metadata_info_tab_contents.

13. Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk, *India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the Region*, RAND Occasional Paper 387 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), 1–3, 25–36, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP387.pdf; and Gundu and Schaffer, "India and Pakistan in Afghanistan."

14. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (Oxford, UK: Pan Books, 2000), 17–35.

15. Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 267–70.

16. Seth G. Jones, "Afghanistan's Future Emirate? The Taliban and the Struggle for Afghanistan," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 11 (West Point, New York: Countering Terrorism Center, November 2020), <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CTC-SENTINEL-112020.pdf>; and Hanauer and Chalk, *Strategies in Afghanistan*.

big-brother overseer and a node for the Pakistani military (PakMIL) and its Inter-Services Intelligence Agency to push back against ANDSF activities or associations (especially with India) that Islamabad found threatening. To be certain, American military presence in Afghanistan was bothersome for Pakistan in many other ways, but Rawalpindi balanced these with the benefits a US footprint there provided.¹⁷

Thus, the AAF would have a limited quantity and quality of air-to-ground strike aircraft. The AAF would have a limited number of airlifter planes with a capacity limited to battling insurgent forces rather than a cross-border rival state. The ANDSF had a limited number of ground artillery assets, and those were constrained in firing range—again, so they would not be able to range far into Pakistani territory in the event of major cross-border insurgency hostilities. The United States would provide all these capabilities and more.¹⁸

From birth, ANDSF was a “monkey in the middle” caught between US/Coalition concerns about affordability and sustainability and Pakistani worries about a strong force on its border with autonomous security aims and suspect relations with India.

Mixed Loyalty

ANDSF uniformed and civilian leadership was normally ethnic Tajiks or Uzbeks, and it struggled to recruit Pashtuns throughout the 2000s but attained proportionality in the 2010s.¹⁹ While desirable, Pashtun proportionality in the Afghan armed forces represented both a strength and a weakness. Pashtun representation was important optically and politically for a Pashtun-led government. Pashtun proportionality in the middle-to-lower ANDSF ranks enabled the government to present its forces as representative of the nation. Additionally, proportional ethnic representation ensured the Pashtun-led national government met the expectations of its political

17. See Moeed Yusuf, Huma Yusuf and Salman Zaidi, *Pakistan, the United States and the End Game in Afghanistan: Perceptions of Pakistan's Foreign Policy Elite* (Islamabad: Jinnah Institute - R0811-04, 2011), 14–15, 21–28, 28; John Schmidt, *The Unraveling: Pakistan in the Age of Jihad* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 198–202; and Jibrán Ahmad, “Afghan Taliban Stop Pakistan Army from Fencing International Border,” Reuters (website), December 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-taliban-stop-pakistan-army-fencing-international-border-2021-12-22/>.

18. See SIGAR, *High-Risk List* (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, December 2014), 1, www.sigar.mil/pdf/spotlight/High-Risk_List.pdf.

19. DoD, *Report on Progress*, 38; and Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Afghan National Security Forces: Afghan Corruption and the Development of an Effective Fighting Force,” Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Brookings (website), August 2, 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/afghan-national-security-forces-afghan-corruption-and-the-development-of-an-effective-fighting-force/>.

base. Given that the Afghan Taliban was mainly a Pashtun insurgency, equal ethnic representation was a political and military necessity.

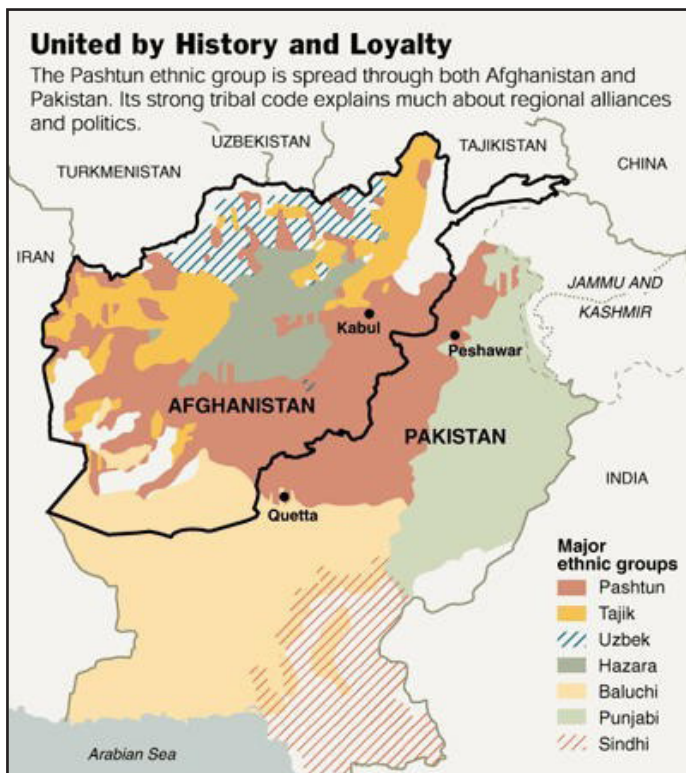


Figure 2. Major ethnic groups of Afghanistan
 (Map courtesy of <https://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/Reading/Maps/afghan.map.htm>)

Pashtun representation in the Afghan military also generated weakness. Unlike the northern Afghan ethnic groups, Pashtun tribes and subtribes span the soft, highly porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. There are approximately 14 million Pashtuns in Afghanistan, and they make up 42 percent of its population. As no other Afghan ethnicity comprises more than 27 percent of the population, Pashtuns hold the political power to assure national leadership. There are another 30 million ethnic Pashtuns in Pakistan. They are 16 percent of the Pakistani population but make up 66 percent of all regional Pashtuns. Therefore, Pashtun tribes and families in Afghanistan must always consider cross-border political and security issues. Since the Afghan Taliban is comprised of ethnic Pashtun subtribes and subgroups, Afghan Pashtuns hedged their bets in the post-2001 era. True across Afghanistan but especially in the Pashtun-dominated east and southeast, kinship and tribal connections often take precedence over

formal political loyalties.²⁰ Thus, it was common for Afghan Pashtun families to have one son in the Afghan military and another in the Taliban.²¹ One son made the family money with a regular government paycheck, and the other assured the family with a hedge against insurgent success.

By 2015, serious Afghan observers knew Pashtun families were negotiating with the Taliban in anticipation of ANDSF's ultimate failure. Early that year, the United States and NATO ended their leadership of the counterinsurgency combat mission in Afghanistan and shifted to training assistance, advising the ANDSF at-distance. Soon afterward, al-Qaeda training sites appeared in southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban had begun to push back the ANDSF in 2015. Alarmed, the Obama administration arrested its withdrawal plans and took steps to allow US and NATO forces to support the ANDSF.²² Then, the Trump administration review of Afghan policy authorized a mid-2017 mini-surge of US forces in yet another American effort to show strength against the resurgent Afghan Taliban. The Trump surge featured additional US military advisers in new Security Force Assistance Brigades for placement into ANDSF lower echelons and were considered critical to the campaign's success.²³ Arriving in early 2018, they conducted advising missions, facilitated operation planning with selected ANA Brigades and even some Kandaks (battalions) fighting the Taliban for the first time since 2014.

Taliban Violence Reduction against the United States, Not Afghan National Defense and Security Forces June 2018 to February 2020

The Trump surge and renewed connectivity between US/NATO military units and tactical ANDSF formations was short-lived. By summer 2018, the Trump administration announced it was pursuing direct peace negotiations with the Afghan Taliban, formally appointing Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as a Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation (SRAR) by the fall. SRAR Khalilzad acquired presidential authority to negotiate directly with Taliban representatives, mainly in Doha, Qatar, while keeping the Afghan government informed but not formally represented. From this point, the

20. Anatol Lieven, "An Afghan Tragedy: The Pashtuns, the Taliban and the State," *Survival* 63, no. 3 (June–July 2021): 7–31, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/survival/2021/survival-global-politics-and-strategy-june-july-2021>; and Lieven, "Why Afghan Forces."

21. General Abdul Fahim Wardak, then-Afghan Minister of Defense, comment to author (Kabul, Afghanistan, December 2009).

22. Thomas F. Lynch III, "After ISIS: Reappraising U.S. Policy in Afghanistan," *Washington Quarterly*, 38, no. 2 (July 2015): 119–44.

23. Ryan Browne and Barbara Starr, "US Military Says It Killed Dozens of Taliban Leaders in Afghanistan," *CNN* (website), May 30, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/30/politics/us-killed-taliban-leaders-afghanistan/index.html>.

Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan felt it was being sidelined and its future negotiated in absentia.

Sensing the prospect for a favorable outcome, or at least a respite from an exceptionally violent period of the insurgency, Afghan Taliban targeting of US/western military forces tailed off notably.²⁴ Fifteen American and allied forces were killed in Afghanistan in 2017, with eight of those deaths linked to attacks by the Afghan Taliban. In 2018, there were 14 US/allied troop deaths, and none were claimed by the Taliban. The pattern continued with almost all US 2019–20 military deaths coming from counterterrorism operations initiated by the US and Afghan forces against groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban in Afghanistan, or the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISIS-K).²⁵ Over the same period, ANDSF deaths from Taliban attacks and battles soared, moving beyond 8,000 per year in 2017–18 and up to an estimated 10,900 per year in 2019 and 2020.²⁶ Afghan President Ashraf Ghani reported in early 2019 that more than 45,000 members of the ANDSF had been killed since he became leader in 2014.²⁷

The ANDSF quandary came into full relief as formal US-Taliban peace talks commenced in January 2019.²⁸ The ANDSF bore the brunt of the Taliban fight on the ground without sufficient critical military capabilities to counter Taliban strength, and it now had the full knowledge that the Taliban appeared to have limited attacks against the American and Western military forces informally to encourage talks designed

24. Jonathan Beale, “Why Are UK and US Sending More Troops to Afghanistan?” *BBC News* (website), August 13, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44967531>.

25. Compiled from “Number of Fatalities among Western Coalition Soldiers Involved in the Execution of Operation Enduring Freedom from 2001 to 2021,” Statista (website), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262894/western-coalition-soldiers-killed-in-afghanistan/>; Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Afghanistan,” Department of State (website), n.d., <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/afghanistan/>; Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Afghanistan,” Department of State (website), n.d., <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/afghanistan/>; DoD, *Stability and Security in Afghanistan*, Reports to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, December 2017, December 2018, December 2019, December 2020, and December 2021); and Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *January 20, 2017 Quarterly Report to US Congress, January 20, 2018 Quarterly Report to US Congress, January 20, 2019 Quarterly Report to US Congress, January 20, 2020 Quarterly Report to US Congress, and January 20, 2021 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., <https://www.sigar.mil/quarterlyreports/>.

26. Sam Gollob and Michael E. O’Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-9/11 Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Foreign Policy at Brookings, 2020), 17, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FP_20200825_afghanistan_index.pdf.

27. “Afghanistan’s Ghani Says 45,000 Security Personnel Killed Since 2014,” *BBC News* (website), January 25, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47005558>.

28. Steve Coll and Adam Entous, “The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan,” *New Yorker* (website), December 10, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/the-secret-history-of-the-us-diplomatic-failure-in-afghanistan>.

to end Western military presence. This knowledge exacerbated ANDSF anxieties and reinforced local-level hedging behavior.

The Doha Accord and Extreme ANDSF Exposure March 2020 to April 2021

On February 29, 2020, SRAR Khalilzad and Afghan Taliban representative Abdul Ghani Baradar signed the US-Taliban Peace Accord in Doha, Qatar. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was not a signatory and had played no direct role in its negotiation over the prior 16 months. The agreement committed the United States and Coalition partners to “complete” military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 15 months—by May 1, 2021. In return, the Taliban promised three major outcomes. First, it committed to preventing al-Qaeda or similar international Salafi jihadist terror organizations from planning or conducting attacks against the United States or its allies from Afghan soil. It made a formal promise to refrain from attacks against US and Coalition forces during the implementation period and committed to a reduction in violence (RIV) for Afghanistan as a whole. The Taliban, however, did not formally promise to refrain from attacking GIRoA or ANDSF targets.²⁹ It also agreed to commence political talks with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan aimed at reconciliation and a new framework for Afghan governance—inter-Afghan negotiations (IAN).³⁰

Absent a total collapse of the peace agreement, the best outcome for the ANDSF would be one where inter-Afghan negotiations were successful, and there would be some combination of ANDSF and Taliban military assets. Ultimately, this outcome would require a process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR). Historically, the pathway to DDR between government and insurgent forces is vexing. While there are incentives for opposing military forces to reduce violence and save combatant lives, there are also competing incentives for them to maximize political negotiating leverage by conducting aggressive military operations aimed at altering “facts on the ground.” Often, a cease-fire agreement is built into a political negotiating period to dampen the incentives for military aggression.³¹ When a viable cease-fire is not feasible or enforceable, the

29. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

30. “Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,” February 29, 2020, 1, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>. (The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban.); and Michael R. Pompeo, “Secretary Pompeo Remarks to Media,” US Department of State (website), February 25, 2020, video, 18:35, site-894736.bcvp0rtal.com/detail/videos/secretary-of-state/video/6135770177001/secretary-pompeo-remarks-to-media.?autoStart=true.

31. Valerie Sticher and Siniša Vuković, “Bargaining in Intrastate Conflicts: The Shifting Role of Ceasefires,” *Journal of Peace Research* 1, no. 1 (May 2021): <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022343320982658>; Coll and Entous, “Secret History”; and SIGAR, *April 30, 2020 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., <https://www.sigar.mil/quarterlyreports/>.

force with the upper hand will normally fight to secure gains that will enhance its negotiating leverage. Since the terms of the Doha Accord allowed the Taliban to continue fighting against the ANDSF and GIRoA throughout the IAN period, they continued to press their martial advantage.

The worst scenario for ANDSF was one where the United States stuck to its withdrawal plans, IAN was not successful, and the Taliban took advantage of US/Coalition withdrawal of forces to attrit the ANDSF badly. Details of the reduction in violence (RIV) component in the US-Taliban Peace Accord were relegated to a classified annex but appeared to inhibit, but not credibly prohibit, the Taliban from pursuing this course of action.

After the February Doha Agreement signing ceremony, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo stated the level of Taliban attacks and violence were expected to remain low.³² But by late April 2020, General Austin “Scott” Miller, US Forces Afghanistan and Operation Resolute Support commander, reported that from March 1 to 31, “the Taliban refrained from attacks against Coalition Forces, [while] they increased attacks against ANDSF to levels above seasonal norms.”³³

Taliban military activities during spring and summer 2020 were unambiguously aggressive, but in a differentiated manner. An independent fall 2020 assessment reported Taliban-controlled areas experienced unexpected peace in the aftermath of Doha as the United States largely halted air attacks and the ANDSF moved to a defensive posture. But in GIRoA-controlled areas, the Taliban intensified violence against government entities and Afghan civilians even as it limited major attacks.³⁴

A key part of the Doha Accord not made public called on US forces to end offensive air strikes against the Taliban while allowing for strikes in defense of the ANDSF.³⁵ After a post-Doha Agreement lull, American military air strikes to protect ANDSF resumed in summer 2020. The Taliban formally protested all American strikes that supported ANDSF, calling them a violation of the Doha

32. Michael R. Pompeo, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo at a Press Availability after the Afghanistan Signing Ceremony: Remarks to the Press,” Department of State (website), February 29, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/at-a-press-availability-after-the-afghanistan-signing-ceremony/index.html>.

33. SIGAR, *April 30, 2020 Quarterly Report*, 62, 65.

34. Andrew Quilty, “Taliban Opportunism and ANSF Frustration: How the Afghan Conflict Has Changed Since the Doha Agreement,” Afghan Analysts Network (website), October 12, 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/taliban-opportunism-and-ansf-frustration-how-the-afghan-conflict-has-changed-since-the-doha-agreement/>.

35. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

Accord's annex on managing combat. Later in 2020, the Taliban used US air activity to justify their intensifying military campaign against Kabul.³⁶

The prisoner exchange component of the Doha Accord partially enabled surging Taliban military activity and acumen. Despite GIRoA skepticism, the final Doha Accord called for the confidence-building exchange of “up to” 5,000 Taliban prisoners held in Afghan jails in exchange for 1,000 Afghans held by the Taliban. The Taliban quickly insisted release of a full 5,000 was a precondition to commencing peace talks with the GIRoA.³⁷ Under American pressure, Afghan leaders released about 4,600 Taliban prisoners in spring 2020 and the final 400 in August 2020 after a period of inter-Afghan, and Afghan-American debate. An independent research report in late summer 2020 estimated almost 70 percent of the 108 released Taliban resumed active fighting roles, returning important battlefield expertise to intensifying Taliban military operations.³⁸

ANDSF morale took a direct hit from the way Taliban leaders spoke and acted after the Doha Accord. Tolo News reported that on March 25 in Balochistan Province, Pakistan, a senior Taliban negotiator, Mullah Fazel, told supporters the Taliban would ultimately be victorious in establishing an Islamic Emirate. Fazel reportedly said that while the “Taliban or the Islamic Emirate will never become part of the Kabul [Afghan] government,” the Taliban might accept Afghan government officials with senior positions.³⁹ US Agency for International Development (USAID)–funded monitoring of Taliban public communications found the Taliban's tone resoundingly triumphant during April and May 2020 following the announced withdrawal of US military forces, clearly indicating to Afghan forces the future government of Afghanistan would be subject to Taliban preferences and potential vengeance.⁴⁰ The one-sided pattern of Taliban aggression persisted into mid-October 2020 when USFOR-A Commander General Miller again stated that the high

36. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

37. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

38. Lynne O'Donnell, “Defying Peace Deal, Freed Taliban Return to Battlefield,” *Foreign Policy* (website), September 3, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/03/defying-peace-deal-freed-taliban-prisoners-return-battlefield-afghanistan/>; France 24, “Some Freed Taliban Prisoners Have Returned to Battle, Says Afghan Negotiator,” *France24.com* (website), September 23, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200923-afghanistan-freed-taliban-prisoners-return-battle-abdullah-abdullah-doha-peace-talks>.

39. Abubakar Siddique, “Are the Taliban Committed to Negotiating Peace in Afghanistan?” *Gandhara* (website), March 31, 2020, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/are-the-taliban-committed-to-negotiating-peace-in-afghanistan-/30520521.html>.

40. Quilty, “Taleban Opportunism and ANSF Frustration.”

level of Taliban violence around the country “is not consistent with the US-Taliban agreement and undermines the ongoing Afghan peace talks.”⁴¹

The disposition and orientation of ANDSF forces contributed to its vulnerability in the post-Doha Accord fight. In November 2019, the Afghan government estimated that the ANDSF had over 10,000 checkpoints nationwide, with an average of 10 to 20 personnel at each. After the Doha Accord, as Coalition forces stepped back from advising and assisting ANA forward elements, they helped the ANA with a checkpoint reduction and base development plan (CPRBD) for 2021 that reportedly reduced ANA checkpoints to just under 2,000 with another 600 patrol bases across Afghanistan.⁴² It still meant the ANDSF had approximately one-third of its total force, 95,000 personnel, manning checkpoints as of December 2020.⁴³

Afghan National Defense and Security Forces checkpoint-heavy positioning contributed to a largely static and defensive mission profile even as GIROA political leadership belatedly called for greater assertiveness against the resurgent Taliban in 2020. Most ANA Corps reportedly refused to execute missions without ANA Special Operations Command (ANASOC) augmentation. When ANASOC Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) arrived, they were just as likely to be misused to perform tasks intended for conventional forces such as route clearance, checkpoint security, and quick-reaction force.⁴⁴ From October to December 2020, the ASSF took on more responsibility for ground operations, and conducting more operations in a single quarter than they had since April–June 2019.⁴⁵ Small and overtaxed, the ASSF could not meet rapidly growing demand.⁴⁶

As the Biden-Harris administration assumed control and began a comprehensive review of Afghanistan policy in early 2021, the worst-case scenario for ANDSF unfolded. The Taliban stepped up attacks, maintained close ties with al-Qaeda, and actively planned for large-scale offensives—all while IAN between GIROA and the Taliban failed to make any progress.⁴⁷ The April 9, 2021, *Annual Threat Assessment of the*

41. USFOR-A Spokesman Colonel Sonny Leggett, “Taliban Need to Step Up,” October 12, 2020, https://twitter.com/USFOR_A/status/1315602850186244096.

42. SIGAR, *April 30, 2022 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., 71-2, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2022-04-30qr.pdf>.

43. SIGAR, *January 30, 2021 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., 1, 68, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-01-30qr.pdf>.

44. SIGAR, *April 30, 2021 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., 75, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-04-30qr.pdf>.

45. See SIGAR, *January 30, 2021 Quarterly Report*, 63; and ASSF - Afghan Special Security Forces, ANA Special Operations Command (ANASOC), <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/anasoc.htm>.

46. Also see SIGAR, *January 30, 2021 Quarterly Report*, 47.

47. Defense Department’s Office of Inspector General, May 18, 2021; and Courtney Kube and Dan De Luce, “Taliban Ramped Up Attacks against Afghans as Peace Talks Faltered, Pentagon Watchdog Says,” *NBC News* (website), March 2, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/taliban-ramped-attacks-against-afghans-peace-talks-faltered-pentagon-watchdog-n1267852>.

US Intelligence Community stated that prospects for an agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban “will remain low during the next year,” and “the Taliban is likely to make gains on the battlefield, and the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the Coalition withdraws support.” The assessment also concluded that the ANDSF “continues to face setbacks on the battlefield, and the Taliban is confident it can achieve military victory.”⁴⁸

Independent reporting indicates USFOR-A Commander Miller strongly argued during the Biden-Harris administration comprehensive review that the United States must keep forces in Afghanistan beyond the May 1, 2021, deadline for fear of what would happen to the Afghan military once the United States departed.⁴⁹ General Miller wrote what he had earlier stated in public: the level of Taliban military operational tempo could not be countered by the Afghan military alone.

Full US Military Withdrawal and ANDSF Collapse May to August 2021

On April 14, 2021, Biden announced the United States would end its military presence in Afghanistan by September 11, 2021.⁵⁰ American diplomats began pressing for expedited IAN, even as the US military and allied NATO forces pivoted to an accelerated withdrawal.⁵¹ In response, Afghan President Ghani tweeted an aspirational message about the ANDSF, stating “Afghanistan’s proud security and defense forces are fully capable of defending its people and country.”⁵² Ghani seemed to hold out hope and made changes to leadership of the Afghan MOD and MOI in March 2021 that bolstered Pashtun status and loyalty to him. At his request, the United States and its European allies avoided evacuating their personnel or Afghan associates for fear it would look like a rush to the exits and precipitate a collapse of GIRoA.⁵³

Yet, as the final US military withdrawal began in May 2021, Ghani was mired in a political crisis that bode poorly for an already bedraggled ANDSF.

48. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: ODNI, April 9, 2021), 25, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

49. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

50. “Briefing Room: Remarks by Joe Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan” White House (website), April 14, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>.

51. Associated Press, “Afghan Cease-fire Ends after Wave of Violence amid Calls for Fresh Peace Talks,” *NBC News* (website), May 16, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/afghan-cease-fire-ends-amid-calls-fresh-peace%7C-talks-n1267517>; and George Packer, “The Betrayal,” *Atlantic* (website), January 31, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/03/biden-afghanistan-exit-american-allies-abandoned/621307/>.

52. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

53. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

Ghani and his small inner circle, led by National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib, had not fully acted on the late 2020 US military recommendation to consolidate ANDSF forces into a smaller array of more defensible positions focused on strategic elements such as key roads, cities, and border crossings. In truth, the politics and demographics of Afghanistan made it impossible for Ghani to comply fully. Ghani reportedly told US Secretary of State Antony Blinken this sort of repositioning would make GIROA look weak.⁵⁴ Mohib reportedly stated, “We’re not giving up one inch of our country.”⁵⁵

The Taliban already had *de facto* control of much of Afghanistan by then, but Ghani and Mohib knew that to consolidate any further—away from ethnic Pashtun areas and into ones more populated by ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras—was political suicide. Under such a consolidation, he and any future national Pashtun political leader would play third fiddle to a Taliban-dominated Pashtun political base and to Tajik Co-president Abdullah Abdullah or another northern ethnic political persona. SRAR Khalilzad later told American journalists Steve Coll and Adam Entous that Ghani never had any interest in negotiating with the Taliban, for only the status quo kept him in power.⁵⁶ While far from exculpatory of SRAR Khalilzad’s pivotal role in empowering the Taliban military success during peace negotiations, Khalilzad properly understood Ghani’s political calculus.

Poorly positioned, insufficiently equipped, and politically isolated, ANDSF morale was at a tipping point. Then, on July 2, 2021, the abrupt US military departure from Bagram hit the ANDSF hard. Many in the ANDSF reported to local and national news they felt abandoned to die trying to defend Bagram and other such locations.⁵⁷

Regrettably, Biden went on record in early July 2021 stating that a Taliban military takeover or collapse of GIROA was not inevitable.⁵⁸ This statement misappreciated the realities of low ANDSF morale, bad tactical positioning, and a lack of confidence in GIROA. Perhaps the American intelligence community supported Biden’s ANDSF assessment, but such a conclusion would have been based upon its evaluation of the Taliban shortcomings, not on the structural or emotional liabilities of the ANDSF. By then, US military leaders lacked the onsite ability to evaluate

54. Jonathan Schroden “Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan’s Security Forces,” *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 8 (October 2021): 45–61, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CTC-SENTINEL-082021.pdf>.

55. Schroden “Lessons from Collapse.”

56. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

57. Packer, “Betrayal.”

58. “Briefing Room: Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan,” White House (website), July 8, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan/>.

ANDSF morale and cohesion dynamics reasonably, and US/Western abilities to make such assessments accurately had been suspect for a long time.⁵⁹

A lengthy *Washington Post* exposé later confirmed that by spring 2021, Afghan forces were negotiating with the Taliban, often with the help of local elders rather than fighting.⁶⁰ Dealmaking featured arrangements for ANDSF surrender, parole, and temporary local truces, all of which were well-established Afghan conflict resolution practices, alongside those of revenge killings and summary executions. Newly appointed Afghan Minister of Defense Bismillah Khan reported in mid-July what outside accounts like those from the Afghan Advisor Network (AAN) had foretold: the Taliban were offering ANDSF members money and a letter of passage to protect them from harassment after they surrendered. By August 2021, “money was changing hands at a rapid rate,” a senior British military officer said, with Afghan security forces getting “bought off by the Taliban.”⁶¹

Implications

The US-Taliban Peace Accord of February 29, 2020, put a 15-month “clock” on what the ANDSF could expect from US or allied support. It did not generate the perverse incentives underpinning the rapid collapse of the ANDSF, but it accelerated negative expectations that the Taliban would ultimately prevail. From February 2020 until its collapse, ANDSF leadership was told to anticipate an Afghan political settlement and subsequent security forces integration without ever witnessing a viable IAN process. An AAN postmortem summary critiqued this period of political negotiations scathingly, observing that SRAR Khalilzad’s faulty assumption that the Taliban were truly pursuing negotiated peace spawned fantasy scenarios of Taliban-GIRoA cooperation that never aligned with realities on the ground.⁶²

Concurrently, ANDSF leaders and troopers could only reason the US military would draw down to a point where it would stand alone against a resurgent Taliban. An October 2020 AAN report cogently observed that in eight short months since the Doha Agreement, US concessions to coax the Taliban to the negotiating table sharpened its military edge and heightened its confidence while simultaneously deflating and disempowering the ANDSF. The ANDSF bore the

59. Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 391; and Ben Connable, *Embracing the Fog of War: Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012).

60. Susannah George, “Afghanistan’s Military Collapse: Illicit Deals and Mass Desertions,” *Washington Post* (website), August 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/15/afghanistan-military-collapse-taliban/>.

61. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

62. Kate Clark, “The Taleban’s Rise to Power: As the US Prepared for Peace, the Taleban Prepared for War,” Afghanistan Analysts Network (website), August 21, 2021, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/the-talebans-rise-to-power-as-the-us-prepared-for-peace-the-taleban-prepared-for-war/>.

brunt of the Taliban's growing eagerness to fight all the while knowing it could not shoulder the accelerating fight alone."⁶³

On August 16, Biden addressed the nation and acknowledged the regrettable outcome of America's exit from Afghanistan, asserting that GIROA and ANDSF collapsed more quickly than anticipated. He also recited the mass of money and equipment the United States had provided ANDSF over the years and called the group it out for collapsing so quickly.⁶⁴

Biden clearly articulated American frustrations with the enormous but unsuccessful effort to build an autonomous Afghan military capability. However, his remarks did not acknowledge that the ANDSF never was designed to defend Afghanistan against a determined, resilient adversary alone or that Afghan culture and tradition set the conditions for a rapid patchwork of local peace deals once it was clear to "the monkey in the middle" that all US military forces would depart and a strong, durable Taliban with tacit Pakistani backing would remain.

As the United States moves forward into a new geostrategic era of great-power competition, it has backed away from counterinsurgency and associated security-sector building and reform that featured in Afghanistan for almost two decades. But American military advising and material support for partner security forces will not vanish in this new era, instead it will morph. The United States assuredly will find itself working with partner militaries, surrogates, and even proxy forces requiring structural and operational support.⁶⁵ Although security-sector reform for a counterinsurgency environment is not the same as advising and supporting a proxy force or surrogate military, a couple of insights from the American experience with ANDSF seem germane.⁶⁶

First, US policymakers should fully study and tailor mission support and package profiles to a realistic set of security goals and outcomes appropriate to both the conflict and the limitations on US military presence. Surrogates or proxy forces aligned against adversaries with sustained backing from an American rival state are not good candidates for structures or operations modeled after US institutions or tactics. Afghanistan, like Vietnam, demonstrates that American-centric approaches are unsustainable without a significant, long-term US military presence. American military advisers and supporting packages must be tailored to understand

63. Kate Clark, "Behind the Statistics: Drop in Civilian Casualties Masks Increased Taleban Violence," Afghanistan Analysts Network (website), October 27, 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/behind-the-statistics-drop-in-civilian-casualties-masks-increased-taleban-violence/>.

64. "Briefing: Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan," White House (website), August 16, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/>.

65. Frank Hoffman and Andrew Orner, "The Return of Great-Power Proxy Wars," War on the Rocks (website), September 2, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/the-return-of-great-power-proxy-wars/>.

66. Ladwig III, *Forgotten Front*, 289–313; Biddle, "Building Security Forces," 126–38; and Biddle, "Afghanistan's Legacy," 73–86.

the cultures and organizations before they deploy and be empowered to shape operational and technological support in a manner that best complements the forces they advise.⁶⁷

Second, security partner fighting force morale must be factored into policy options.⁶⁸ Too often, American military advising reduces its evaluation criteria to counting the quantity of material support and training time. Afghanistan reminds us that the morale of the fighting force is determined by much more than quantitative factors. The culture and incentives of the partner force must be considered. Qualitative metrics based upon local cultural and political needs must be developed and recurrently and fairly assessed. As the loss of fidelity in evaluating ANDSF morale from 2018–21 demonstrates, accurate evaluations are impossible at a distance. US policy must accept the inherent risk necessary to empower military advisers down to the tactical level with partner formations—surrogates or proxies—to generate reasonably reliable evaluations of fighting force morale.

Finally, the advising, training, and operational support for a partner military, proxy, or surrogate force is inherently a principal-agent arrangement.⁶⁹ Principals and agents operate in accordance with their respective political objectives. When these align, the relationship can be productive and enhance mutual security. When these diverge, the relationship can fray and pose a security risk.⁷⁰ Inevitably, even mutually advantageous security relationships tend to expire under the accumulating weight of political interest misalignment. In the case of Afghanistan, that expiration occurred when the United States decided to negotiate peace with the Taliban alone with an aim to terminate American military presence, leaving ANDSF without the structure, sufficient capabilities, or morale to sustain autonomous security operations against a strong and aggressive Taliban adversary. US policymakers must assume that future proxy or surrogate relationships will eventually fray or expire. Thus, the strategic interaction must be informed by a realistic termination criterion and a viable military transition plan.⁷¹

The rapid collapse of Afghan security forces was heavily foretold and largely anticipated. Cognitive dissonance alone explains why this certainty did not better impact American contingency plans for terminating its military presence in

67. Hammes, "Raising and Mentoring Security Forces," 330–31.

68. Schroden, "Lessons from Collapse."

69. Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, "Agency Theory: An Assessment and Review," *Academy of Management Review* 14, no. 1 (1989): 58–59.

70. Biddle, "Building Security Forces," 126–38.

71. Amos C. Fox, *In Pursuit of a General Theory of Proxy War*, Land Warfare Paper 123 (Washington, DC: Institute of Land Warfare/Association of the United States Army, February 2019), 14.

Afghanistan. Future American plans for security forces partnerships can and must do better.

Thomas F. Lynch III

Dr. Thomas F. Lynch III is a distinguished research fellow in the Institute of National Strategic Studies of the National Defense University. He focuses research, writing, teaching, and conferences on the topics of South Asia, the Indo-Pacific, the Gulf Arab States, counterterrorism, and great-power competition. A retired Army colonel with Afghanistan tours, including as military special assistant to the US ambassador in 2004, Lynch publishes frequently on Afghanistan including, “The Decades-Long, ‘Double-Double Game’: Pakistan, the United States and the Taliban” in *Military Review* (July–August 2018).

Select Bibliography

- Clark, Kate. "Behind the Statistics: Drop in Civilian Casualties Masks Increased Taliban Violence." Afghanistan Analysts Network (website). October 27, 2020. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/behind-the-statistics-drop-in-civilian-casualties-masks-increased-taliban-violence/>.
- Coll, Steve, and Adam Entous. "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan." *New Yorker* (website). December 10, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/the-secret-history-of-the-us-diplomatic-failure-in-afghanistan>.
- Connable, Ben. *Embracing the Fog of War: Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012.
- Department of Defense (DoD). *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*. 1225 Report to Congress. Washington, DC: DoD, December 2017. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/1225-Report-Dec-2017.pdf>.
- "Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan." February 29, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>.
- Ladwig, Walter C., III. *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships and Counterinsurgency*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Quilty, Andrew. "Taliban Opportunism and ANSF Frustration: How the Afghan Conflict Has Changed Since the Doha Agreement." Afghan Analysts Network (website). October 12, 2020. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/taliban-opportunism-and-ansf-frustration-how-the-afghan-conflict-has-changed-since-the-doha-agreement/>.
- Whitlock, Craig. "The Afghanistan Papers – At War with the Truth." *Washington Post*. December 9, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>.

In fact, it actually was a known-known for quite some time before August 2021.³ Since 2018, the ANDSF were never as big as reported nor as cohesive as implied in public statements. Although pessimistic, American military and intelligence leaders hedged their assessments of Afghan military viability after a final US withdrawal, speaking of an inevitable ANDSF demise in terms of months, not weeks. Yet by the end of 2018 ANDSF leaders and servicemembers understood that without a reversal of course in Washington, the American-Taliban peace negotiations would result in the end of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.⁴

From its inception, the Afghan military was a “monkey in the middle” of the geopolitical dynamics between the United States, the Pakistani military and intelligence services, and the fractious political leadership of Afghanistan. Combined, these factors seriously constrained the ANDSF, assuring it had quantifiable shortcomings and qualitative liabilities it could never resolve without continuing US and Coalition military in-country support. These quantitative shortfalls included insufficient aerial or artillery support for troops in contact, inadequate aerial resupply and replenishment for forces far afield, and insufficient maintenance to sustain the main weapons systems. Each of these shortfalls had been reported publicly for years. They merely accelerated after 2018.

More critically, the ANDSF had qualitative problems limiting its ability to conduct credible, autonomous counterinsurgency operations against a determined and resilient Taliban. Its cohesion was suspect owing to endemic mistrust of the Afghan central government and systemic corruption in its leadership ranks. Its morale was questionable, as it routinely suffered high-casualty attacks by Taliban forces. Other than in its small number of special operations forces, it lacked the ability to prevent proactively or respond to Taliban attacks without substantive American support. Moreover, from 2018 through 2021, ANDSF bore the brunt of Taliban aggression while US and Western militaries enjoyed first an informal agreement, and later, after the February 2020 US-Taliban Peace Agreement (Doha Accord), a formal arrangement with the Taliban to stop attacking foreign military forces only.

The February 2020 US-Taliban Doha Accord framed one final important dilemma for the ANDSF. The agreement stipulated all US and Western troops must

3. See Craig Whitlock, “The Afghanistan Papers – At War with the Truth,” *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>; Paul D. Shinkman, “Top U.S. General: Afghan Army Could Not Survive on Its Own,” *U.S. News & World Report*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2021-03-25/top-us-general-afghan-army-could-not-survive-on-its-own>; and Anatol Lieven, “Why Afghan Forces so Quickly Laid Down Their Arms,” *Politico* (website), August 16, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/08/16/afghanistan-history-taliban-collapse-504977>.

4. Douglas London, “CIA’s Former Counterterrorism Chief for the Region: Afghanistan, Not an Intelligence Failure – Something Much Worse,” *Just Security* (website), August 18, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/77801/cias-former-counterterrorism-chief-for-the-region-afghanistan-not-an-intelligence-failure-something-much-worse/>.

depart Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, or, and as the Taliban made clear repetitively, they would renew attacks against United States Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and other foreign forces as “fair game.” This deadline gave the US military and Coalition forces enormous incentives to move out of Afghanistan rapidly to reduce “risks to the force.” But this accelerated American military retrograde undercut the negotiating position of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) with the Taliban, and, in turn, gave ANDSF mid-level and junior officers and enlisted servicemembers additional incentives to cut local deals and prepare for an almost-certain Taliban return to power.

These debilitating quantitative and qualitative dynamics were hiding in plain sight—known and publicized in open-source media and public testimony. To establish the record of preconditions and important moments in the ANDSF’s rapid collapse properly, it is important to reexamine the chronology of what was known about ANDSF fragility from 2018 on, especially from 2020–21. A focused review will recount the most important “knowns” about this fragility in three key time periods: (1) January 2018 to February 2020, (2) March 2020 to April 2021, and, (3) May to August 2021.

This review highlights several principles American policymakers should consider in the future; one where Washington may find itself advising or directly supporting proxy and surrogate military forces undertaking kinetic activities against the proxies or forces of America’s great-power competitors. The ANDSF’s failure to launch and spectacular 2021 collapse reflect a larger historic problem for US security assistance efforts at training, advising, and equipping of allied militaries as an alternative to large, semipermanent US ground-force commitments.⁵ American policymakers must acknowledge this disappointing legacy and approach security-partner assistance in the new era of great-power competition with humility, forethought, and caution informed by the heavily foretold, rapid demise of the ANDSF.

Cost Consciousness and Delimited Afghan National Defense and Security Forces

The ANDSF’s growth parameters and composition were adjusted multiple times over its 20-year lifespan.⁶ After fluctuating during the 2000s, by the 2010s,

5. Stephen Biddle, “Building Security Forces & Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency,” *Daedalus* 146, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 126–38, https://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/126/1831111/daed_a_00464.pdf; Walter C. Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships and Counterinsurgency* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1–52, 289–313; and Stephen Biddle, “Afghanistan’s Legacy: Emerging Lessons of an Ongoing War,” *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 73–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.926210>.

6. For a short review of sizing machinations, see T. X. Hammes, “Raising and Mentoring Security Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq,” in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, ed., Richard D. Hooker Jr. and Joseph J. Collins (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 281–304.

US and Coalition partners decided ANDSF would be structured at 352,000 total personnel, 195,000 of whom were in the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan Air Force (AAF), with the remainder under the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) as national police and special security forces.⁷ It is unlikely ANDSF ever met these totals as reporting was notoriously suspect and the ability of US and Coalition advisers to monitor them atrophied consistently after 2014 as ANDSF took the counterinsurgency lead and Coalition mentors stepped back from side-by-side advising.⁸ Washington and its partners limited the AAF to a small number of aerial platforms with light, counterinsurgency-focused fixed-wing and ground-strike helicopters and a limited number of lift aircraft for reliable countrywide mobility for an ANA of almost 200,000 (see table 1). Likewise, the Afghan army would have limited indirect-fire weapons capability and be structured without long-range artillery or drone-strike assets.

The ANA was built to rely on US and Coalition support for its main battlefield competitive advantages against the Taliban insurgency: generation of airspace superiority, long-haul aerial logistics and mobility, and volume in air-to-ground interdiction strikes.

7. Department of Defense (DoD), *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, December 2017), 35–36, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/1225-Report-Dec-2017.pdf>.

8. “Transcripts: Department of Defense Press Briefing by Gen. Campbell via Satellite in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” DoD (website), October 2, 2014; and SIGAR, “Oversight Bubble Inquiry Letter,” SIGAR 14-4-SP, October 10, 2013.

Table 1. March 2020 Authorized and Available Aircraft for Afghanistan Air Force

(Entries with an asterisk are very light, small aircraft that would prove no match for the standard aircraft found in the Pakistani air force. These aircraft dominated the composition of the Afghanistan Air Force.)

Military Function	Aircraft Name	# Authorized	# Available
Air-to-Air Fixed Wing Fighters		0	0
Air-to-Ground Strike and Reconnaissance/ Strike Category Totals		105	89
Fixed Wing	A29 (Super Toucan)*	25	15
	AC-208*	10	10
Rotary Wing	MD-530*	48	45
	Mi-17	22	19
Aerial Transport/ Lift Category Totals		72	65
Fixed Wing	C-208*	23	23
	C-130	4	2
Rotary Wing	UH-60	45	40

These military hardware parameter limitations and force number vacillations emerged because of American and partner-state concerns about the costs and sustainment potential for an autonomous Afghan security force. A bigger AAF or a more capable ground force would cost more to recruit, train, retain, and operate with higher-end technologies.⁹ Thus, the United States preferred utilizing its own in-country military assets for these higher-end capabilities, thereby capping the costs to US taxpayers at about \$4 billion.¹⁰

Another critical regional security dynamic helped scope these ANDSF limitations: Pakistan's wary military and intelligence organizations. Pakistan never wanted strong, capable, autonomous ANDSF for several strategic reasons. First, Pakistan fundamentally distrusted the non-Pashtun ethnic groups in the north and west of Afghanistan, particularly the Tajiks and the Uzbeks. Pakistani security leaders viewed them as hostile to Pakistan and pointed to recent history for

9. Department of Defense (DoD), *Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, October 2013, 48, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/October_1230_Report_Master_Nov7.pdf).

10. See Kenneth Katzman, *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report RL30588 (Washington, DC: CRS, December 13, 2017), 27–28, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL30588/278>.

justification.¹¹ During the Afghan civil war of the 1990s, these Tajik and Uzbek groups not only battled against Pashtun groups favored by the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence Agency, but often took funding and physical support from Russia, Iran and, most critically, India. In 1994, Pakistan supported the Afghan Taliban in opposing these groups and was alarmed when post-2001 Afghan governments routinely featured Tajik and Uzbek strongmen as leaders of the ANDSF and the Afghan national intelligence services.¹²

Second, Pakistan feared Indian subterfuge and access to Pakistan's "back door" in the post-2001 Afghan government and especially in the ANDSF.¹³ India is Pakistan's biggest security concern and is described in Pakistan as an existential threat. Pakistan's chilly relations with the Tajik and Uzbek groups who habitually led the ANDSF (and Afghan intelligence service, the National Directorate of Security) made them paranoid that the ANDSF and National Directorate of Security would abet Indian diplomatic and intelligence assets at or near the Pakistani border.¹⁴ These fears underpinned Pakistan's constant complaining from 2004–15 that Afghanistan was riven with over a dozen Indian consulates, many close to Pakistan, and threatening to destabilize Pakistan through various means of cross-border influence. In reality, there never were more than five of these Indian outposts, including the Indian embassy in Kabul.¹⁵ Informed by these concerns, Pakistan's security establishment continued its indirect support for the Afghan Taliban, preferring a low-boil instability inside Afghanistan to a strong, non-Pashtun, ANDSF doing India's bidding and putting a "security squeeze" on Pakistan from the west.¹⁶

Concurrently, Pakistan quietly preferred the US military remain affiliated with the Afghan military while the Taliban was weak for three main reasons: because Rawalpindi officials distrusted the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as a stalking horse for India; because American presence there anchored a counterterrorism partnership that reaped a large financial-aid package for the Pakistani military; and because American military commanders served as a kind of

11. Raja Karthikeya Gundu and Teresita C. Schaffer, "India and Pakistan in Afghanistan: Hostile Sports," *South Asia Monitor* 117 (April 3, 2008), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-asia-monitor-india-and-pakistan-afghanistan-hostile-sports-april-03-2008>.

12. Rizwan Hussein, *Pakistan and the Emergence of Islamic Militancy in Afghanistan* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2005), 55–62; and Nasreen Akhtar, "Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Taliban," *International Journal on World Peace* 25, no. 4 (December 2008): 49–73, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20752859?seq=19#metadata_info_tab_contents.

13. Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk, *India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the Region*, RAND Occasional Paper 387 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), 1–3, 25–36, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP387.pdf; and Gundu and Schaffer, "India and Pakistan in Afghanistan."

14. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (Oxford, UK: Pan Books, 2000), 17–35.

15. Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 267–70.

16. Seth G. Jones, "Afghanistan's Future Emirate? The Taliban and the Struggle for Afghanistan," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 11 (West Point, New York: Countering Terrorism Center, November 2020), <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CTC-SENTINEL-112020.pdf>; and Hanauer and Chalk, *Strategies in Afghanistan*.

big-brother overseer and a node for the Pakistani military (PakMIL) and its Inter-Services Intelligence Agency to push back against ANDSF activities or associations (especially with India) that Islamabad found threatening. To be certain, American military presence in Afghanistan was bothersome for Pakistan in many other ways, but Rawalpindi balanced these with the benefits a US footprint there provided.¹⁷

Thus, the AAF would have a limited quantity and quality of air-to-ground strike aircraft. The AAF would have a limited number of airlifter planes with a capacity limited to battling insurgent forces rather than a cross-border rival state. The ANDSF had a limited number of ground artillery assets, and those were constrained in firing range—again, so they would not be able to range far into Pakistani territory in the event of major cross-border insurgency hostilities. The United States would provide all these capabilities and more.¹⁸

From birth, ANDSF was a “monkey in the middle” caught between US/Coalition concerns about affordability and sustainability and Pakistani worries about a strong force on its border with autonomous security aims and suspect relations with India.

Mixed Loyalty

ANDSF uniformed and civilian leadership was normally ethnic Tajiks or Uzbeks, and it struggled to recruit Pashtuns throughout the 2000s but attained proportionality in the 2010s.¹⁹ While desirable, Pashtun proportionality in the Afghan armed forces represented both a strength and a weakness. Pashtun representation was important optically and politically for a Pashtun-led government. Pashtun proportionality in the middle-to-lower ANDSF ranks enabled the government to present its forces as representative of the nation. Additionally, proportional ethnic representation ensured the Pashtun-led national government met the expectations of its political

17. See Moeed Yusuf, Huma Yusuf and Salman Zaidi, *Pakistan, the United States and the End Game in Afghanistan: Perceptions of Pakistan's Foreign Policy Elite* (Islamabad: Jinnah Institute - R0811-04, 2011), 14–15, 21–28, 28; John Schmidt, *The Unraveling: Pakistan in the Age of Jihad* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 198–202; and Jibrán Ahmad, “Afghan Taliban Stop Pakistan Army from Fencing International Border,” Reuters (website), December 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-taliban-stop-pakistan-army-fencing-international-border-2021-12-22/>.

18. See SIGAR, *High-Risk List* (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, December 2014), 1, www.sigar.mil/pdf/spotlight/High-Risk_List.pdf.

19. DoD, *Report on Progress*, 38; and Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Afghan National Security Forces: Afghan Corruption and the Development of an Effective Fighting Force,” Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Brookings (website), August 2, 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/afghan-national-security-forces-afghan-corruption-and-the-development-of-an-effective-fighting-force/>.

base. Given that the Afghan Taliban was mainly a Pashtun insurgency, equal ethnic representation was a political and military necessity.

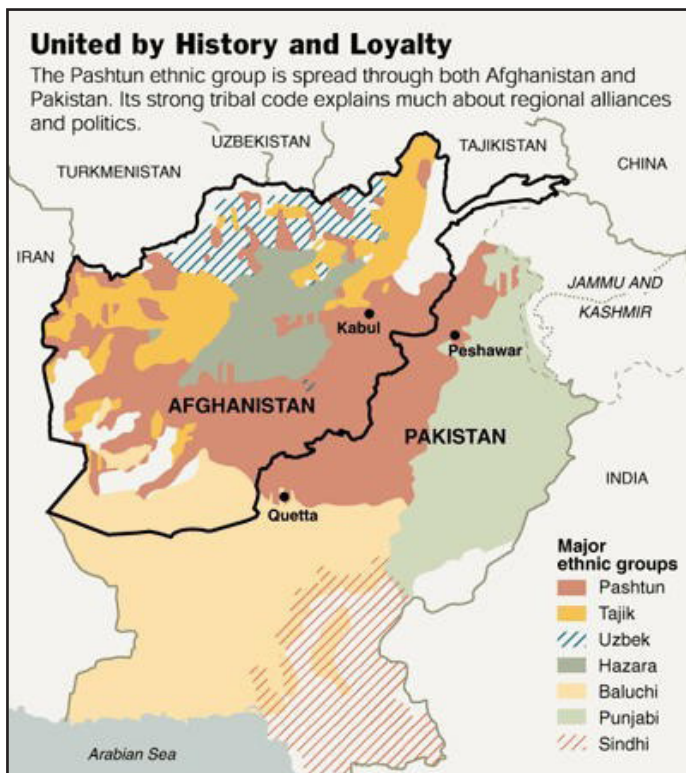


Figure 2. Major ethnic groups of Afghanistan
 (Map courtesy of <https://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/Reading/Maps/afghan.map.htm>)

Pashtun representation in the Afghan military also generated weakness. Unlike the northern Afghan ethnic groups, Pashtun tribes and subtribes span the soft, highly porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. There are approximately 14 million Pashtuns in Afghanistan, and they make up 42 percent of its population. As no other Afghan ethnicity comprises more than 27 percent of the population, Pashtuns hold the political power to assure national leadership. There are another 30 million ethnic Pashtuns in Pakistan. They are 16 percent of the Pakistani population but make up 66 percent of all regional Pashtuns. Therefore, Pashtun tribes and families in Afghanistan must always consider cross-border political and security issues. Since the Afghan Taliban is comprised of ethnic Pashtun subtribes and subgroups, Afghan Pashtuns hedged their bets in the post-2001 era. True across Afghanistan but especially in the Pashtun-dominated east and southeast, kinship and tribal connections often take precedence over

formal political loyalties.²⁰ Thus, it was common for Afghan Pashtun families to have one son in the Afghan military and another in the Taliban.²¹ One son made the family money with a regular government paycheck, and the other assured the family with a hedge against insurgent success.

By 2015, serious Afghan observers knew Pashtun families were negotiating with the Taliban in anticipation of ANDSF's ultimate failure. Early that year, the United States and NATO ended their leadership of the counterinsurgency combat mission in Afghanistan and shifted to training assistance, advising the ANDSF at-distance. Soon afterward, al-Qaeda training sites appeared in southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban had begun to push back the ANDSF in 2015. Alarmed, the Obama administration arrested its withdrawal plans and took steps to allow US and NATO forces to support the ANDSF.²² Then, the Trump administration review of Afghan policy authorized a mid-2017 mini-surge of US forces in yet another American effort to show strength against the resurgent Afghan Taliban. The Trump surge featured additional US military advisers in new Security Force Assistance Brigades for placement into ANDSF lower echelons and were considered critical to the campaign's success.²³ Arriving in early 2018, they conducted advising missions, facilitated operation planning with selected ANA Brigades and even some Kandaks (battalions) fighting the Taliban for the first time since 2014.

Taliban Violence Reduction against the United States, Not Afghan National Defense and Security Forces June 2018 to February 2020

The Trump surge and renewed connectivity between US/NATO military units and tactical ANDSF formations was short-lived. By summer 2018, the Trump administration announced it was pursuing direct peace negotiations with the Afghan Taliban, formally appointing Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as a Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation (SRAR) by the fall. SRAR Khalilzad acquired presidential authority to negotiate directly with Taliban representatives, mainly in Doha, Qatar, while keeping the Afghan government informed but not formally represented. From this point, the

20. Anatol Lieven, "An Afghan Tragedy: The Pashtuns, the Taliban and the State," *Survival* 63, no. 3 (June–July 2021): 7–31, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/survival/2021/survival-global-politics-and-strategy-june-july-2021>; and Lieven, "Why Afghan Forces."

21. General Abdul Fahim Wardak, then-Afghan Minister of Defense, comment to author (Kabul, Afghanistan, December 2009).

22. Thomas F. Lynch III, "After ISIS: Reappraising U.S. Policy in Afghanistan," *Washington Quarterly*, 38, no. 2 (July 2015): 119–44.

23. Ryan Browne and Barbara Starr, "US Military Says It Killed Dozens of Taliban Leaders in Afghanistan," *CNN* (website), May 30, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/30/politics/us-killed-taliban-leaders-afghanistan/index.html>.

Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan felt it was being sidelined and its future negotiated in absentia.

Sensing the prospect for a favorable outcome, or at least a respite from an exceptionally violent period of the insurgency, Afghan Taliban targeting of US/western military forces tailed off notably.²⁴ Fifteen American and allied forces were killed in Afghanistan in 2017, with eight of those deaths linked to attacks by the Afghan Taliban. In 2018, there were 14 US/allied troop deaths, and none were claimed by the Taliban. The pattern continued with almost all US 2019–20 military deaths coming from counterterrorism operations initiated by the US and Afghan forces against groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban in Afghanistan, or the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISIS-K).²⁵ Over the same period, ANDSF deaths from Taliban attacks and battles soared, moving beyond 8,000 per year in 2017–18 and up to an estimated 10,900 per year in 2019 and 2020.²⁶ Afghan President Ashraf Ghani reported in early 2019 that more than 45,000 members of the ANDSF had been killed since he became leader in 2014.²⁷

The ANDSF quandary came into full relief as formal US-Taliban peace talks commenced in January 2019.²⁸ The ANDSF bore the brunt of the Taliban fight on the ground without sufficient critical military capabilities to counter Taliban strength, and it now had the full knowledge that the Taliban appeared to have limited attacks against the American and Western military forces informally to encourage talks designed

24. Jonathan Beale, “Why Are UK and US Sending More Troops to Afghanistan?” *BBC News* (website), August 13, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44967531>.

25. Compiled from “Number of Fatalities among Western Coalition Soldiers Involved in the Execution of Operation Enduring Freedom from 2001 to 2021,” Statista (website), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262894/western-coalition-soldiers-killed-in-afghanistan/>; Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Afghanistan,” Department of State (website), n.d., <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/afghanistan/>; Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Afghanistan,” Department of State (website), n.d., <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/afghanistan/>; DoD, *Stability and Security in Afghanistan*, Reports to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, December 2017, December 2018, December 2019, December 2020, and December 2021); and Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *January 20, 2017 Quarterly Report to US Congress, January 20, 2018 Quarterly Report to US Congress, January 20, 2019 Quarterly Report to US Congress, January 20, 2020 Quarterly Report to US Congress, and January 20, 2021 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., <https://www.sigar.mil/quarterlyreports/>.

26. Sam Gollob and Michael E. O’Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-9/11 Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Foreign Policy at Brookings, 2020), 17, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FP_20200825_afghanistan_index.pdf.

27. “Afghanistan’s Ghani Says 45,000 Security Personnel Killed Since 2014,” *BBC News* (website), January 25, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47005558>.

28. Steve Coll and Adam Entous, “The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan,” *New Yorker* (website), December 10, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/the-secret-history-of-the-us-diplomatic-failure-in-afghanistan>.

to end Western military presence. This knowledge exacerbated ANDSF anxieties and reinforced local-level hedging behavior.

The Doha Accord and Extreme ANDSF Exposure March 2020 to April 2021

On February 29, 2020, SRAR Khalilzad and Afghan Taliban representative Abdul Ghani Baradar signed the US-Taliban Peace Accord in Doha, Qatar. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was not a signatory and had played no direct role in its negotiation over the prior 16 months. The agreement committed the United States and Coalition partners to “complete” military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 15 months—by May 1, 2021. In return, the Taliban promised three major outcomes. First, it committed to preventing al-Qaeda or similar international Salafi jihadist terror organizations from planning or conducting attacks against the United States or its allies from Afghan soil. It made a formal promise to refrain from attacks against US and Coalition forces during the implementation period and committed to a reduction in violence (RIV) for Afghanistan as a whole. The Taliban, however, did not formally promise to refrain from attacking GIRoA or ANDSF targets.²⁹ It also agreed to commence political talks with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan aimed at reconciliation and a new framework for Afghan governance—inter-Afghan negotiations (IAN).³⁰

Absent a total collapse of the peace agreement, the best outcome for the ANDSF would be one where inter-Afghan negotiations were successful, and there would be some combination of ANDSF and Taliban military assets. Ultimately, this outcome would require a process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR). Historically, the pathway to DDR between government and insurgent forces is vexing. While there are incentives for opposing military forces to reduce violence and save combatant lives, there are also competing incentives for them to maximize political negotiating leverage by conducting aggressive military operations aimed at altering “facts on the ground.” Often, a cease-fire agreement is built into a political negotiating period to dampen the incentives for military aggression.³¹ When a viable cease-fire is not feasible or enforceable, the

29. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

30. “Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,” February 29, 2020, 1, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>. (The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban.); and Michael R. Pompeo, “Secretary Pompeo Remarks to Media,” US Department of State (website), February 25, 2020, video, 18:35, site-894736.bcvp0rtal.com/detail/videos/secretary-of-state/video/6135770177001/secretary-pompeo-remarks-to-media.?autoStart=true.

31. Valerie Sticher and Siniša Vuković, “Bargaining in Intrastate Conflicts: The Shifting Role of Ceasefires,” *Journal of Peace Research* 1, no. 1 (May 2021): <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022343320982658>; Coll and Entous, “Secret History”; and SIGAR, *April 30, 2020 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., <https://www.sigar.mil/quarterlyreports/>.

force with the upper hand will normally fight to secure gains that will enhance its negotiating leverage. Since the terms of the Doha Accord allowed the Taliban to continue fighting against the ANDSF and GIRoA throughout the IAN period, they continued to press their martial advantage.

The worst scenario for ANDSF was one where the United States stuck to its withdrawal plans, IAN was not successful, and the Taliban took advantage of US/Coalition withdrawal of forces to attrit the ANDSF badly. Details of the reduction in violence (RIV) component in the US-Taliban Peace Accord were relegated to a classified annex but appeared to inhibit, but not credibly prohibit, the Taliban from pursuing this course of action.

After the February Doha Agreement signing ceremony, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo stated the level of Taliban attacks and violence were expected to remain low.³² But by late April 2020, General Austin “Scott” Miller, US Forces Afghanistan and Operation Resolute Support commander, reported that from March 1 to 31, “the Taliban refrained from attacks against Coalition Forces, [while] they increased attacks against ANDSF to levels above seasonal norms.”³³

Taliban military activities during spring and summer 2020 were unambiguously aggressive, but in a differentiated manner. An independent fall 2020 assessment reported Taliban-controlled areas experienced unexpected peace in the aftermath of Doha as the United States largely halted air attacks and the ANDSF moved to a defensive posture. But in GIRoA-controlled areas, the Taliban intensified violence against government entities and Afghan civilians even as it limited major attacks.³⁴

A key part of the Doha Accord not made public called on US forces to end offensive air strikes against the Taliban while allowing for strikes in defense of the ANDSF.³⁵ After a post-Doha Agreement lull, American military air strikes to protect ANDSF resumed in summer 2020. The Taliban formally protested all American strikes that supported ANDSF, calling them a violation of the Doha

32. Michael R. Pompeo, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo at a Press Availability after the Afghanistan Signing Ceremony: Remarks to the Press,” Department of State (website), February 29, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/at-a-press-availability-after-the-afghanistan-signing-ceremony/index.html>.

33. SIGAR, *April 30, 2020 Quarterly Report*, 62, 65.

34. Andrew Quilty, “Taliban Opportunism and ANSF Frustration: How the Afghan Conflict Has Changed Since the Doha Agreement,” Afghan Analysts Network (website), October 12, 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/taliban-opportunism-and-ansf-frustration-how-the-afghan-conflict-has-changed-since-the-doha-agreement/>.

35. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

Accord's annex on managing combat. Later in 2020, the Taliban used US air activity to justify their intensifying military campaign against Kabul.³⁶

The prisoner exchange component of the Doha Accord partially enabled surging Taliban military activity and acumen. Despite GIRoA skepticism, the final Doha Accord called for the confidence-building exchange of “up to” 5,000 Taliban prisoners held in Afghan jails in exchange for 1,000 Afghans held by the Taliban. The Taliban quickly insisted release of a full 5,000 was a precondition to commencing peace talks with the GIRoA.³⁷ Under American pressure, Afghan leaders released about 4,600 Taliban prisoners in spring 2020 and the final 400 in August 2020 after a period of inter-Afghan, and Afghan-American debate. An independent research report in late summer 2020 estimated almost 70 percent of the 108 released Taliban resumed active fighting roles, returning important battlefield expertise to intensifying Taliban military operations.³⁸

ANDSF morale took a direct hit from the way Taliban leaders spoke and acted after the Doha Accord. Tolo News reported that on March 25 in Balochistan Province, Pakistan, a senior Taliban negotiator, Mullah Fazel, told supporters the Taliban would ultimately be victorious in establishing an Islamic Emirate. Fazel reportedly said that while the “Taliban or the Islamic Emirate will never become part of the Kabul [Afghan] government,” the Taliban might accept Afghan government officials with senior positions.³⁹ US Agency for International Development (USAID)–funded monitoring of Taliban public communications found the Taliban's tone resoundingly triumphant during April and May 2020 following the announced withdrawal of US military forces, clearly indicating to Afghan forces the future government of Afghanistan would be subject to Taliban preferences and potential vengeance.⁴⁰ The one-sided pattern of Taliban aggression persisted into mid-October 2020 when USFOR-A Commander General Miller again stated that the high

36. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

37. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

38. Lynne O'Donnell, “Defying Peace Deal, Freed Taliban Return to Battlefield,” *Foreign Policy* (website), September 3, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/03/defying-peace-deal-freed-taliban-prisoners-return-battlefield-afghanistan/>; France 24, “Some Freed Taliban Prisoners Have Returned to Battle, Says Afghan Negotiator,” *France24.com* (website), September 23, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200923-afghanistan-freed-taliban-prisoners-return-battle-abdullah-abdullah-doha-peace-talks>.

39. Abubakar Siddique, “Are the Taliban Committed to Negotiating Peace in Afghanistan?” *Gandhara* (website), March 31, 2020, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/are-the-taliban-committed-to-negotiating-peace-in-afghanistan-/30520521.html>.

40. Quilty, “Taliban Opportunism and ANSF Frustration.”

level of Taliban violence around the country “is not consistent with the US-Taliban agreement and undermines the ongoing Afghan peace talks.”⁴¹

The disposition and orientation of ANDSF forces contributed to its vulnerability in the post-Doha Accord fight. In November 2019, the Afghan government estimated that the ANDSF had over 10,000 checkpoints nationwide, with an average of 10 to 20 personnel at each. After the Doha Accord, as Coalition forces stepped back from advising and assisting ANA forward elements, they helped the ANA with a checkpoint reduction and base development plan (CPRBD) for 2021 that reportedly reduced ANA checkpoints to just under 2,000 with another 600 patrol bases across Afghanistan.⁴² It still meant the ANDSF had approximately one-third of its total force, 95,000 personnel, manning checkpoints as of December 2020.⁴³

Afghan National Defense and Security Forces checkpoint-heavy positioning contributed to a largely static and defensive mission profile even as GIROA political leadership belatedly called for greater assertiveness against the resurgent Taliban in 2020. Most ANA Corps reportedly refused to execute missions without ANA Special Operations Command (ANASOC) augmentation. When ANASOC Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) arrived, they were just as likely to be misused to perform tasks intended for conventional forces such as route clearance, checkpoint security, and quick-reaction force.⁴⁴ From October to December 2020, the ASSF took on more responsibility for ground operations, and conducting more operations in a single quarter than they had since April–June 2019.⁴⁵ Small and overtaxed, the ASSF could not meet rapidly growing demand.⁴⁶

As the Biden-Harris administration assumed control and began a comprehensive review of Afghanistan policy in early 2021, the worst-case scenario for ANDSF unfolded. The Taliban stepped up attacks, maintained close ties with al-Qaeda, and actively planned for large-scale offensives—all while IAN between GIROA and the Taliban failed to make any progress.⁴⁷ The April 9, 2021, *Annual Threat Assessment of the*

41. USFOR-A Spokesman Colonel Sonny Leggett, “Taliban Need to Step Up,” October 12, 2020, https://twitter.com/USFOR_A/status/1315602850186244096.

42. SIGAR, *April 30, 2022 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., 71-2, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2022-04-30qr.pdf>.

43. SIGAR, *January 30, 2021 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., 1, 68, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-01-30qr.pdf>.

44. SIGAR, *April 30, 2021 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., 75, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-04-30qr.pdf>.

45. See SIGAR, *January 30, 2021 Quarterly Report*, 63; and ASSF - Afghan Special Security Forces, ANA Special Operations Command (ANASOC), <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/anasoc.htm>.

46. Also see SIGAR, *January 30, 2021 Quarterly Report*, 47.

47. Defense Department’s Office of Inspector General, May 18, 2021; and Courtney Kube and Dan De Luce, “Taliban Ramped Up Attacks against Afghans as Peace Talks Faltered, Pentagon Watchdog Says,” *NBC News* (website), March 2, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/taliban-ramped-attacks-against-afghans-peace-talks-faltered-pentagon-watchdog-n1267852>.

US Intelligence Community stated that prospects for an agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban “will remain low during the next year,” and “the Taliban is likely to make gains on the battlefield, and the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the Coalition withdraws support.” The assessment also concluded that the ANDSF “continues to face setbacks on the battlefield, and the Taliban is confident it can achieve military victory.”⁴⁸

Independent reporting indicates USFOR-A Commander Miller strongly argued during the Biden-Harris administration comprehensive review that the United States must keep forces in Afghanistan beyond the May 1, 2021, deadline for fear of what would happen to the Afghan military once the United States departed.⁴⁹ General Miller wrote what he had earlier stated in public: the level of Taliban military operational tempo could not be countered by the Afghan military alone.

Full US Military Withdrawal and ANDSF Collapse May to August 2021

On April 14, 2021, Biden announced the United States would end its military presence in Afghanistan by September 11, 2021.⁵⁰ American diplomats began pressing for expedited IAN, even as the US military and allied NATO forces pivoted to an accelerated withdrawal.⁵¹ In response, Afghan President Ghani tweeted an aspirational message about the ANDSF, stating “Afghanistan’s proud security and defense forces are fully capable of defending its people and country.”⁵² Ghani seemed to hold out hope and made changes to leadership of the Afghan MOD and MOI in March 2021 that bolstered Pashtun status and loyalty to him. At his request, the United States and its European allies avoided evacuating their personnel or Afghan associates for fear it would look like a rush to the exits and precipitate a collapse of GIRoA.⁵³

Yet, as the final US military withdrawal began in May 2021, Ghani was mired in a political crisis that bode poorly for an already bedraggled ANDSF.

48. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: ODNI, April 9, 2021), 25, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

49. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

50. “Briefing Room: Remarks by Joe Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan” White House (website), April 14, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>.

51. Associated Press, “Afghan Cease-fire Ends after Wave of Violence amid Calls for Fresh Peace Talks,” *NBC News* (website), May 16, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/afghan-cease-fire-ends-amid-calls-fresh-peace%7C-talks-n1267517>; and George Packer, “The Betrayal,” *Atlantic* (website), January 31, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/03/biden-afghanistan-exit-american-allies-abandoned/621307/>.

52. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

53. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

Ghani and his small inner circle, led by National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib, had not fully acted on the late 2020 US military recommendation to consolidate ANDSF forces into a smaller array of more defensible positions focused on strategic elements such as key roads, cities, and border crossings. In truth, the politics and demographics of Afghanistan made it impossible for Ghani to comply fully. Ghani reportedly told US Secretary of State Antony Blinken this sort of repositioning would make GIROA look weak.⁵⁴ Mohib reportedly stated, “We’re not giving up one inch of our country.”⁵⁵

The Taliban already had *de facto* control of much of Afghanistan by then, but Ghani and Mohib knew that to consolidate any further—away from ethnic Pashtun areas and into ones more populated by ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras—was political suicide. Under such a consolidation, he and any future national Pashtun political leader would play third fiddle to a Taliban-dominated Pashtun political base and to Tajik Co-president Abdullah Abdullah or another northern ethnic political persona. SRAR Khalilzad later told American journalists Steve Coll and Adam Entous that Ghani never had any interest in negotiating with the Taliban, for only the status quo kept him in power.⁵⁶ While far from exculpatory of SRAR Khalilzad’s pivotal role in empowering the Taliban military success during peace negotiations, Khalilzad properly understood Ghani’s political calculus.

Poorly positioned, insufficiently equipped, and politically isolated, ANDSF morale was at a tipping point. Then, on July 2, 2021, the abrupt US military departure from Bagram hit the ANDSF hard. Many in the ANDSF reported to local and national news they felt abandoned to die trying to defend Bagram and other such locations.⁵⁷

Regrettably, Biden went on record in early July 2021 stating that a Taliban military takeover or collapse of GIROA was not inevitable.⁵⁸ This statement misappreciated the realities of low ANDSF morale, bad tactical positioning, and a lack of confidence in GIROA. Perhaps the American intelligence community supported Biden’s ANDSF assessment, but such a conclusion would have been based upon its evaluation of the Taliban shortcomings, not on the structural or emotional liabilities of the ANDSF. By then, US military leaders lacked the onsite ability to evaluate

54. Jonathan Schroden “Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan’s Security Forces,” *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 8 (October 2021): 45–61, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CTC-SENTINEL-082021.pdf>.

55. Schroden “Lessons from Collapse.”

56. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

57. Packer, “Betrayal.”

58. “Briefing Room: Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan,” White House (website), July 8, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan/>.

ANDSF morale and cohesion dynamics reasonably, and US/Western abilities to make such assessments accurately had been suspect for a long time.⁵⁹

A lengthy *Washington Post* exposé later confirmed that by spring 2021, Afghan forces were negotiating with the Taliban, often with the help of local elders rather than fighting.⁶⁰ Dealmaking featured arrangements for ANDSF surrender, parole, and temporary local truces, all of which were well-established Afghan conflict resolution practices, alongside those of revenge killings and summary executions. Newly appointed Afghan Minister of Defense Bismillah Khan reported in mid-July what outside accounts like those from the Afghan Advisor Network (AAN) had foretold: the Taliban were offering ANDSF members money and a letter of passage to protect them from harassment after they surrendered. By August 2021, “money was changing hands at a rapid rate,” a senior British military officer said, with Afghan security forces getting “bought off by the Taliban.”⁶¹

Implications

The US-Taliban Peace Accord of February 29, 2020, put a 15-month “clock” on what the ANDSF could expect from US or allied support. It did not generate the perverse incentives underpinning the rapid collapse of the ANDSF, but it accelerated negative expectations that the Taliban would ultimately prevail. From February 2020 until its collapse, ANDSF leadership was told to anticipate an Afghan political settlement and subsequent security forces integration without ever witnessing a viable IAN process. An AAN postmortem summary critiqued this period of political negotiations scathingly, observing that SRAR Khalilzad’s faulty assumption that the Taliban were truly pursuing negotiated peace spawned fantasy scenarios of Taliban-GIRoA cooperation that never aligned with realities on the ground.⁶²

Concurrently, ANDSF leaders and troopers could only reason the US military would draw down to a point where it would stand alone against a resurgent Taliban. An October 2020 AAN report cogently observed that in eight short months since the Doha Agreement, US concessions to coax the Taliban to the negotiating table sharpened its military edge and heightened its confidence while simultaneously deflating and disempowering the ANDSF. The ANDSF bore the

59. Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 391; and Ben Connable, *Embracing the Fog of War: Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012).

60. Susannah George, “Afghanistan’s Military Collapse: Illicit Deals and Mass Desertions,” *Washington Post* (website), August 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/15/afghanistan-military-collapse-taliban/>.

61. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

62. Kate Clark, “The Taleban’s Rise to Power: As the US Prepared for Peace, the Taleban Prepared for War,” Afghanistan Analysts Network (website), August 21, 2021, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/the-talebans-rise-to-power-as-the-us-prepared-for-peace-the-taleban-prepared-for-war/>.

brunt of the Taliban's growing eagerness to fight all the while knowing it could not shoulder the accelerating fight alone."⁶³

On August 16, Biden addressed the nation and acknowledged the regrettable outcome of America's exit from Afghanistan, asserting that GIROA and ANDSF collapsed more quickly than anticipated. He also recited the mass of money and equipment the United States had provided ANDSF over the years and called the group it out for collapsing so quickly.⁶⁴

Biden clearly articulated American frustrations with the enormous but unsuccessful effort to build an autonomous Afghan military capability. However, his remarks did not acknowledge that the ANDSF never was designed to defend Afghanistan against a determined, resilient adversary alone or that Afghan culture and tradition set the conditions for a rapid patchwork of local peace deals once it was clear to "the monkey in the middle" that all US military forces would depart and a strong, durable Taliban with tacit Pakistani backing would remain.

As the United States moves forward into a new geostrategic era of great-power competition, it has backed away from counterinsurgency and associated security-sector building and reform that featured in Afghanistan for almost two decades. But American military advising and material support for partner security forces will not vanish in this new era, instead it will morph. The United States assuredly will find itself working with partner militaries, surrogates, and even proxy forces requiring structural and operational support.⁶⁵ Although security-sector reform for a counterinsurgency environment is not the same as advising and supporting a proxy force or surrogate military, a couple of insights from the American experience with ANDSF seem germane.⁶⁶

First, US policymakers should fully study and tailor mission support and package profiles to a realistic set of security goals and outcomes appropriate to both the conflict and the limitations on US military presence. Surrogates or proxy forces aligned against adversaries with sustained backing from an American rival state are not good candidates for structures or operations modeled after US institutions or tactics. Afghanistan, like Vietnam, demonstrates that American-centric approaches are unsustainable without a significant, long-term US military presence. American military advisers and supporting packages must be tailored to understand

63. Kate Clark, "Behind the Statistics: Drop in Civilian Casualties Masks Increased Taleban Violence," Afghanistan Analysts Network (website), October 27, 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/behind-the-statistics-drop-in-civilian-casualties-masks-increased-taleban-violence/>.

64. "Briefing: Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan," White House (website), August 16, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/>.

65. Frank Hoffman and Andrew Orner, "The Return of Great-Power Proxy Wars," War on the Rocks (website), September 2, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/the-return-of-great-power-proxy-wars/>.

66. Ladwig III, *Forgotten Front*, 289–313; Biddle, "Building Security Forces," 126–38; and Biddle, "Afghanistan's Legacy," 73–86.

the cultures and organizations before they deploy and be empowered to shape operational and technological support in a manner that best complements the forces they advise.⁶⁷

Second, security partner fighting force morale must be factored into policy options.⁶⁸ Too often, American military advising reduces its evaluation criteria to counting the quantity of material support and training time. Afghanistan reminds us that the morale of the fighting force is determined by much more than quantitative factors. The culture and incentives of the partner force must be considered. Qualitative metrics based upon local cultural and political needs must be developed and recurrently and fairly assessed. As the loss of fidelity in evaluating ANDSF morale from 2018–21 demonstrates, accurate evaluations are impossible at a distance. US policy must accept the inherent risk necessary to empower military advisers down to the tactical level with partner formations—surrogates or proxies—to generate reasonably reliable evaluations of fighting force morale.

Finally, the advising, training, and operational support for a partner military, proxy, or surrogate force is inherently a principal-agent arrangement.⁶⁹ Principals and agents operate in accordance with their respective political objectives. When these align, the relationship can be productive and enhance mutual security. When these diverge, the relationship can fray and pose a security risk.⁷⁰ Inevitably, even mutually advantageous security relationships tend to expire under the accumulating weight of political interest misalignment. In the case of Afghanistan, that expiration occurred when the United States decided to negotiate peace with the Taliban alone with an aim to terminate American military presence, leaving ANDSF without the structure, sufficient capabilities, or morale to sustain autonomous security operations against a strong and aggressive Taliban adversary. US policymakers must assume that future proxy or surrogate relationships will eventually fray or expire. Thus, the strategic interaction must be informed by a realistic termination criterion and a viable military transition plan.⁷¹

The rapid collapse of Afghan security forces was heavily foretold and largely anticipated. Cognitive dissonance alone explains why this certainty did not better impact American contingency plans for terminating its military presence in

67. Hammes, "Raising and Mentoring Security Forces," 330–31.

68. Schroden, "Lessons from Collapse."

69. Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, "Agency Theory: An Assessment and Review," *Academy of Management Review* 14, no. 1 (1989): 58–59.

70. Biddle, "Building Security Forces," 126–38.

71. Amos C. Fox, *In Pursuit of a General Theory of Proxy War*, Land Warfare Paper 123 (Washington, DC: Institute of Land Warfare/Association of the United States Army, February 2019), 14.

Afghanistan. Future American plans for security forces partnerships can and must do better.

Thomas F. Lynch III

Dr. Thomas F. Lynch III is a distinguished research fellow in the Institute of National Strategic Studies of the National Defense University. He focuses research, writing, teaching, and conferences on the topics of South Asia, the Indo-Pacific, the Gulf Arab States, counterterrorism, and great-power competition. A retired Army colonel with Afghanistan tours, including as military special assistant to the US ambassador in 2004, Lynch publishes frequently on Afghanistan including, “The Decades-Long, ‘Double-Double Game’: Pakistan, the United States and the Taliban” in *Military Review* (July–August 2018).

Select Bibliography

- Clark, Kate. "Behind the Statistics: Drop in Civilian Casualties Masks Increased Taliban Violence." Afghanistan Analysts Network (website). October 27, 2020. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/behind-the-statistics-drop-in-civilian-casualties-masks-increased-taliban-violence/>.
- Coll, Steve, and Adam Entous. "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan." *New Yorker* (website). December 10, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/the-secret-history-of-the-us-diplomatic-failure-in-afghanistan>.
- Connable, Ben. *Embracing the Fog of War: Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012.
- Department of Defense (DoD). *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*. 1225 Report to Congress. Washington, DC: DoD, December 2017. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/1225-Report-Dec-2017.pdf>.
- "Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan." February 29, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>.
- Ladwig, Walter C., III. *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships and Counterinsurgency*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Quilty, Andrew. "Taliban Opportunism and ANSF Frustration: How the Afghan Conflict Has Changed Since the Doha Agreement." Afghan Analysts Network (website). October 12, 2020. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/taliban-opportunism-and-ansf-frustration-how-the-afghan-conflict-has-changed-since-the-doha-agreement/>.
- Whitlock, Craig. "The Afghanistan Papers – At War with the Truth." *Washington Post*. December 9, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>.

In fact, it actually was a known-known for quite some time before August 2021.³ Since 2018, the ANDSF were never as big as reported nor as cohesive as implied in public statements. Although pessimistic, American military and intelligence leaders hedged their assessments of Afghan military viability after a final US withdrawal, speaking of an inevitable ANDSF demise in terms of months, not weeks. Yet by the end of 2018 ANDSF leaders and servicemembers understood that without a reversal of course in Washington, the American-Taliban peace negotiations would result in the end of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.⁴

From its inception, the Afghan military was a “monkey in the middle” of the geopolitical dynamics between the United States, the Pakistani military and intelligence services, and the fractious political leadership of Afghanistan. Combined, these factors seriously constrained the ANDSF, assuring it had quantifiable shortcomings and qualitative liabilities it could never resolve without continuing US and Coalition military in-country support. These quantitative shortfalls included insufficient aerial or artillery support for troops in contact, inadequate aerial resupply and replenishment for forces far afield, and insufficient maintenance to sustain the main weapons systems. Each of these shortfalls had been reported publicly for years. They merely accelerated after 2018.

More critically, the ANDSF had qualitative problems limiting its ability to conduct credible, autonomous counterinsurgency operations against a determined and resilient Taliban. Its cohesion was suspect owing to endemic mistrust of the Afghan central government and systemic corruption in its leadership ranks. Its morale was questionable, as it routinely suffered high-casualty attacks by Taliban forces. Other than in its small number of special operations forces, it lacked the ability to prevent proactively or respond to Taliban attacks without substantive American support. Moreover, from 2018 through 2021, ANDSF bore the brunt of Taliban aggression while US and Western militaries enjoyed first an informal agreement, and later, after the February 2020 US-Taliban Peace Agreement (Doha Accord), a formal arrangement with the Taliban to stop attacking foreign military forces only.

The February 2020 US-Taliban Doha Accord framed one final important dilemma for the ANDSF. The agreement stipulated all US and Western troops must

3. See Craig Whitlock, “The Afghanistan Papers – At War with the Truth,” *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>; Paul D. Shinkman, “Top U.S. General: Afghan Army Could Not Survive on Its Own,” *U.S. News & World Report*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2021-03-25/top-us-general-afghan-army-could-not-survive-on-its-own>; and Anatol Lieven, “Why Afghan Forces so Quickly Laid Down Their Arms,” *Politico* (website), August 16, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/08/16/afghanistan-history-taliban-collapse-504977>.

4. Douglas London, “CIA’s Former Counterterrorism Chief for the Region: Afghanistan, Not an Intelligence Failure – Something Much Worse,” *Just Security* (website), August 18, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/77801/cias-former-counterterrorism-chief-for-the-region-afghanistan-not-an-intelligence-failure-something-much-worse/>.

depart Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, or, and as the Taliban made clear repetitively, they would renew attacks against United States Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and other foreign forces as “fair game.” This deadline gave the US military and Coalition forces enormous incentives to move out of Afghanistan rapidly to reduce “risks to the force.” But this accelerated American military retrograde undercut the negotiating position of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) with the Taliban, and, in turn, gave ANDSF mid-level and junior officers and enlisted servicemembers additional incentives to cut local deals and prepare for an almost-certain Taliban return to power.

These debilitating quantitative and qualitative dynamics were hiding in plain sight—known and publicized in open-source media and public testimony. To establish the record of preconditions and important moments in the ANDSF’s rapid collapse properly, it is important to reexamine the chronology of what was known about ANDSF fragility from 2018 on, especially from 2020–21. A focused review will recount the most important “knowns” about this fragility in three key time periods: (1) January 2018 to February 2020, (2) March 2020 to April 2021, and, (3) May to August 2021.

This review highlights several principles American policymakers should consider in the future; one where Washington may find itself advising or directly supporting proxy and surrogate military forces undertaking kinetic activities against the proxies or forces of America’s great-power competitors. The ANDSF’s failure to launch and spectacular 2021 collapse reflect a larger historic problem for US security assistance efforts at training, advising, and equipping of allied militaries as an alternative to large, semipermanent US ground-force commitments.⁵ American policymakers must acknowledge this disappointing legacy and approach security-partner assistance in the new era of great-power competition with humility, forethought, and caution informed by the heavily foretold, rapid demise of the ANDSF.

Cost Consciousness and Delimited Afghan National Defense and Security Forces

The ANDSF’s growth parameters and composition were adjusted multiple times over its 20-year lifespan.⁶ After fluctuating during the 2000s, by the 2010s,

5. Stephen Biddle, “Building Security Forces & Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency,” *Daedalus* 146, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 126–38, https://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/126/1831111/daed_a_00464.pdf; Walter C. Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships and Counterinsurgency* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1–52, 289–313; and Stephen Biddle, “Afghanistan’s Legacy: Emerging Lessons of an Ongoing War,” *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 73–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.926210>.

6. For a short review of sizing machinations, see T. X. Hammes, “Raising and Mentoring Security Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq,” in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, ed., Richard D. Hooker Jr. and Joseph J. Collins (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 281–304.

US and Coalition partners decided ANDSF would be structured at 352,000 total personnel, 195,000 of whom were in the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan Air Force (AAF), with the remainder under the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) as national police and special security forces.⁷ It is unlikely ANDSF ever met these totals as reporting was notoriously suspect and the ability of US and Coalition advisers to monitor them atrophied consistently after 2014 as ANDSF took the counterinsurgency lead and Coalition mentors stepped back from side-by-side advising.⁸ Washington and its partners limited the AAF to a small number of aerial platforms with light, counterinsurgency-focused fixed-wing and ground-strike helicopters and a limited number of lift aircraft for reliable countrywide mobility for an ANA of almost 200,000 (see table 1). Likewise, the Afghan army would have limited indirect-fire weapons capability and be structured without long-range artillery or drone-strike assets.

The ANA was built to rely on US and Coalition support for its main battlefield competitive advantages against the Taliban insurgency: generation of airspace superiority, long-haul aerial logistics and mobility, and volume in air-to-ground interdiction strikes.

7. Department of Defense (DoD), *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, December 2017), 35–36, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/1225-Report-Dec-2017.pdf>.

8. “Transcripts: Department of Defense Press Briefing by Gen. Campbell via Satellite in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” DoD (website), October 2, 2014; and SIGAR, “Oversight Bubble Inquiry Letter,” SIGAR 14-4-SP, October 10, 2013.

Table 1. March 2020 Authorized and Available Aircraft for Afghanistan Air Force

(Entries with an asterisk are very light, small aircraft that would prove no match for the standard aircraft found in the Pakistani air force. These aircraft dominated the composition of the Afghanistan Air Force.)

Military Function	Aircraft Name	# Authorized	# Available
Air-to-Air Fixed Wing Fighters		0	0
Air-to-Ground Strike and Reconnaissance/ Strike Category Totals		105	89
Fixed Wing	A29 (Super Toucan)*	25	15
	AC-208*	10	10
Rotary Wing	MD-530*	48	45
	Mi-17	22	19
Aerial Transport/ Lift Category Totals		72	65
Fixed Wing	C-208*	23	23
	C-130	4	2
Rotary Wing	UH-60	45	40

These military hardware parameter limitations and force number vacillations emerged because of American and partner-state concerns about the costs and sustainment potential for an autonomous Afghan security force. A bigger AAF or a more capable ground force would cost more to recruit, train, retain, and operate with higher-end technologies.⁹ Thus, the United States preferred utilizing its own in-country military assets for these higher-end capabilities, thereby capping the costs to US taxpayers at about \$4 billion.¹⁰

Another critical regional security dynamic helped scope these ANDSF limitations: Pakistan's wary military and intelligence organizations. Pakistan never wanted strong, capable, autonomous ANDSF for several strategic reasons. First, Pakistan fundamentally distrusted the non-Pashtun ethnic groups in the north and west of Afghanistan, particularly the Tajiks and the Uzbeks. Pakistani security leaders viewed them as hostile to Pakistan and pointed to recent history for

9. Department of Defense (DoD), *Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, October 2013, 48, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/October_1230_Report_Master_Nov7.pdf).

10. See Kenneth Katzman, *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report RL30588 (Washington, DC: CRS, December 13, 2017), 27–28, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL30588/278>.

justification.¹¹ During the Afghan civil war of the 1990s, these Tajik and Uzbek groups not only battled against Pashtun groups favored by the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence Agency, but often took funding and physical support from Russia, Iran and, most critically, India. In 1994, Pakistan supported the Afghan Taliban in opposing these groups and was alarmed when post-2001 Afghan governments routinely featured Tajik and Uzbek strongmen as leaders of the ANDSF and the Afghan national intelligence services.¹²

Second, Pakistan feared Indian subterfuge and access to Pakistan's "back door" in the post-2001 Afghan government and especially in the ANDSF.¹³ India is Pakistan's biggest security concern and is described in Pakistan as an existential threat. Pakistan's chilly relations with the Tajik and Uzbek groups who habitually led the ANDSF (and Afghan intelligence service, the National Directorate of Security) made them paranoid that the ANDSF and National Directorate of Security would abet Indian diplomatic and intelligence assets at or near the Pakistani border.¹⁴ These fears underpinned Pakistan's constant complaining from 2004–15 that Afghanistan was riven with over a dozen Indian consulates, many close to Pakistan, and threatening to destabilize Pakistan through various means of cross-border influence. In reality, there never were more than five of these Indian outposts, including the Indian embassy in Kabul.¹⁵ Informed by these concerns, Pakistan's security establishment continued its indirect support for the Afghan Taliban, preferring a low-boil instability inside Afghanistan to a strong, non-Pashtun, ANDSF doing India's bidding and putting a "security squeeze" on Pakistan from the west.¹⁶

Concurrently, Pakistan quietly preferred the US military remain affiliated with the Afghan military while the Taliban was weak for three main reasons: because Rawalpindi officials distrusted the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as a stalking horse for India; because American presence there anchored a counterterrorism partnership that reaped a large financial-aid package for the Pakistani military; and because American military commanders served as a kind of

11. Raja Karthikeya Gundu and Teresita C. Schaffer, "India and Pakistan in Afghanistan: Hostile Sports," *South Asia Monitor* 117 (April 3, 2008), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-asia-monitor-india-and-pakistan-afghanistan-hostile-sports-april-03-2008>.

12. Rizwan Hussein, *Pakistan and the Emergence of Islamic Militancy in Afghanistan* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2005), 55–62; and Nasreen Akhtar, "Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Taliban," *International Journal on World Peace* 25, no. 4 (December 2008): 49–73, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20752859?seq=19#metadata_info_tab_contents.

13. Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk, *India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the Region*, RAND Occasional Paper 387 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), 1–3, 25–36, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP387.pdf; and Gundu and Schaffer, "India and Pakistan in Afghanistan."

14. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (Oxford, UK: Pan Books, 2000), 17–35.

15. Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 267–70.

16. Seth G. Jones, "Afghanistan's Future Emirate? The Taliban and the Struggle for Afghanistan," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 11 (West Point, New York: Countering Terrorism Center, November 2020), <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CTC-SENTINEL-112020.pdf>; and Hanauer and Chalk, *Strategies in Afghanistan*.

big-brother overseer and a node for the Pakistani military (PakMIL) and its Inter-Services Intelligence Agency to push back against ANDSF activities or associations (especially with India) that Islamabad found threatening. To be certain, American military presence in Afghanistan was bothersome for Pakistan in many other ways, but Rawalpindi balanced these with the benefits a US footprint there provided.¹⁷

Thus, the AAF would have a limited quantity and quality of air-to-ground strike aircraft. The AAF would have a limited number of airlifter planes with a capacity limited to battling insurgent forces rather than a cross-border rival state. The ANDSF had a limited number of ground artillery assets, and those were constrained in firing range—again, so they would not be able to range far into Pakistani territory in the event of major cross-border insurgency hostilities. The United States would provide all these capabilities and more.¹⁸

From birth, ANDSF was a “monkey in the middle” caught between US/Coalition concerns about affordability and sustainability and Pakistani worries about a strong force on its border with autonomous security aims and suspect relations with India.

Mixed Loyalty

ANDSF uniformed and civilian leadership was normally ethnic Tajiks or Uzbeks, and it struggled to recruit Pashtuns throughout the 2000s but attained proportionality in the 2010s.¹⁹ While desirable, Pashtun proportionality in the Afghan armed forces represented both a strength and a weakness. Pashtun representation was important optically and politically for a Pashtun-led government. Pashtun proportionality in the middle-to-lower ANDSF ranks enabled the government to present its forces as representative of the nation. Additionally, proportional ethnic representation ensured the Pashtun-led national government met the expectations of its political

17. See Moeed Yusuf, Huma Yusuf and Salman Zaidi, *Pakistan, the United States and the End Game in Afghanistan: Perceptions of Pakistan's Foreign Policy Elite* (Islamabad: Jinnah Institute - R0811-04, 2011), 14–15, 21–28, 28; John Schmidt, *The Unraveling: Pakistan in the Age of Jihad* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 198–202; and Jibrán Ahmad, “Afghan Taliban Stop Pakistan Army from Fencing International Border,” Reuters (website), December 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-taliban-stop-pakistan-army-fencing-international-border-2021-12-22/>.

18. See SIGAR, *High-Risk List* (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, December 2014), 1, www.sigar.mil/pdf/spotlight/High-Risk_List.pdf.

19. DoD, *Report on Progress*, 38; and Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Afghan National Security Forces: Afghan Corruption and the Development of an Effective Fighting Force,” Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Brookings (website), August 2, 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/afghan-national-security-forces-afghan-corruption-and-the-development-of-an-effective-fighting-force/>.

base. Given that the Afghan Taliban was mainly a Pashtun insurgency, equal ethnic representation was a political and military necessity.

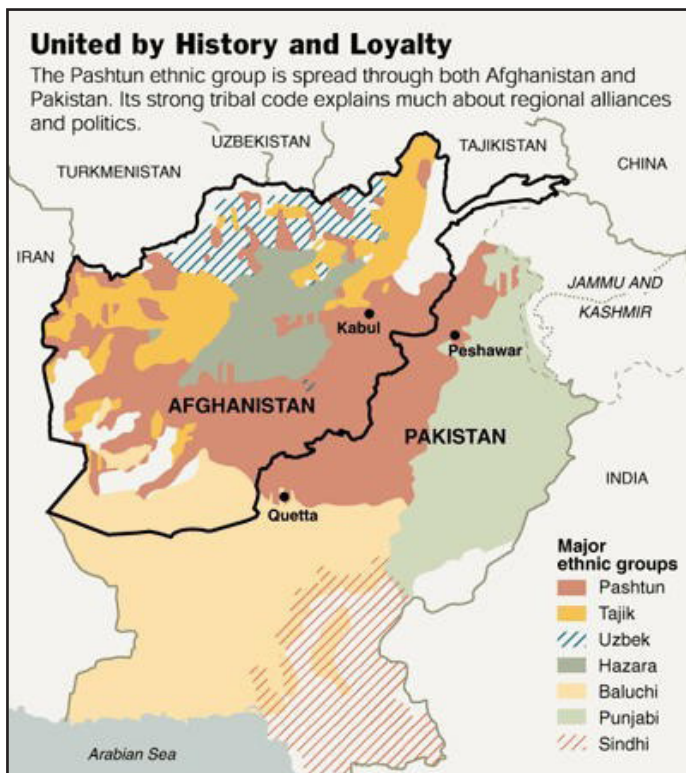


Figure 2. Major ethnic groups of Afghanistan
 (Map courtesy of <https://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/Reading/Maps/afghan.map.htm>)

Pashtun representation in the Afghan military also generated weakness. Unlike the northern Afghan ethnic groups, Pashtun tribes and subtribes span the soft, highly porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. There are approximately 14 million Pashtuns in Afghanistan, and they make up 42 percent of its population. As no other Afghan ethnicity comprises more than 27 percent of the population, Pashtuns hold the political power to assure national leadership. There are another 30 million ethnic Pashtuns in Pakistan. They are 16 percent of the Pakistani population but make up 66 percent of all regional Pashtuns. Therefore, Pashtun tribes and families in Afghanistan must always consider cross-border political and security issues. Since the Afghan Taliban is comprised of ethnic Pashtun subtribes and subgroups, Afghan Pashtuns hedged their bets in the post-2001 era. True across Afghanistan but especially in the Pashtun-dominated east and southeast, kinship and tribal connections often take precedence over

formal political loyalties.²⁰ Thus, it was common for Afghan Pashtun families to have one son in the Afghan military and another in the Taliban.²¹ One son made the family money with a regular government paycheck, and the other assured the family with a hedge against insurgent success.

By 2015, serious Afghan observers knew Pashtun families were negotiating with the Taliban in anticipation of ANDSF's ultimate failure. Early that year, the United States and NATO ended their leadership of the counterinsurgency combat mission in Afghanistan and shifted to training assistance, advising the ANDSF at-distance. Soon afterward, al-Qaeda training sites appeared in southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban had begun to push back the ANDSF in 2015. Alarmed, the Obama administration arrested its withdrawal plans and took steps to allow US and NATO forces to support the ANDSF.²² Then, the Trump administration review of Afghan policy authorized a mid-2017 mini-surge of US forces in yet another American effort to show strength against the resurgent Afghan Taliban. The Trump surge featured additional US military advisers in new Security Force Assistance Brigades for placement into ANDSF lower echelons and were considered critical to the campaign's success.²³ Arriving in early 2018, they conducted advising missions, facilitated operation planning with selected ANA Brigades and even some Kandaks (battalions) fighting the Taliban for the first time since 2014.

Taliban Violence Reduction against the United States, Not Afghan National Defense and Security Forces June 2018 to February 2020

The Trump surge and renewed connectivity between US/NATO military units and tactical ANDSF formations was short-lived. By summer 2018, the Trump administration announced it was pursuing direct peace negotiations with the Afghan Taliban, formally appointing Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as a Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation (SRAR) by the fall. SRAR Khalilzad acquired presidential authority to negotiate directly with Taliban representatives, mainly in Doha, Qatar, while keeping the Afghan government informed but not formally represented. From this point, the

20. Anatol Lieven, "An Afghan Tragedy: The Pashtuns, the Taliban and the State," *Survival* 63, no. 3 (June–July 2021): 7–31, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/survival/2021/survival-global-politics-and-strategy-june-july-2021>; and Lieven, "Why Afghan Forces."

21. General Abdul Fahim Wardak, then-Afghan Minister of Defense, comment to author (Kabul, Afghanistan, December 2009).

22. Thomas F. Lynch III, "After ISIS: Reappraising U.S. Policy in Afghanistan," *Washington Quarterly*, 38, no. 2 (July 2015): 119–44.

23. Ryan Browne and Barbara Starr, "US Military Says It Killed Dozens of Taliban Leaders in Afghanistan," *CNN* (website), May 30, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/30/politics/us-killed-taliban-leaders-afghanistan/index.html>.

Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan felt it was being sidelined and its future negotiated in absentia.

Sensing the prospect for a favorable outcome, or at least a respite from an exceptionally violent period of the insurgency, Afghan Taliban targeting of US/western military forces tailed off notably.²⁴ Fifteen American and allied forces were killed in Afghanistan in 2017, with eight of those deaths linked to attacks by the Afghan Taliban. In 2018, there were 14 US/allied troop deaths, and none were claimed by the Taliban. The pattern continued with almost all US 2019–20 military deaths coming from counterterrorism operations initiated by the US and Afghan forces against groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban in Afghanistan, or the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISIS-K).²⁵ Over the same period, ANDSF deaths from Taliban attacks and battles soared, moving beyond 8,000 per year in 2017–18 and up to an estimated 10,900 per year in 2019 and 2020.²⁶ Afghan President Ashraf Ghani reported in early 2019 that more than 45,000 members of the ANDSF had been killed since he became leader in 2014.²⁷

The ANDSF quandary came into full relief as formal US-Taliban peace talks commenced in January 2019.²⁸ The ANDSF bore the brunt of the Taliban fight on the ground without sufficient critical military capabilities to counter Taliban strength, and it now had the full knowledge that the Taliban appeared to have limited attacks against the American and Western military forces informally to encourage talks designed

24. Jonathan Beale, “Why Are UK and US Sending More Troops to Afghanistan?” *BBC News* (website), August 13, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44967531>.

25. Compiled from “Number of Fatalities among Western Coalition Soldiers Involved in the Execution of Operation Enduring Freedom from 2001 to 2021,” Statista (website), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262894/western-coalition-soldiers-killed-in-afghanistan/>; Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Afghanistan,” Department of State (website), n.d., <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/afghanistan/>; Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Afghanistan,” Department of State (website), n.d., <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/afghanistan/>; DoD, *Stability and Security in Afghanistan*, Reports to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, December 2017, December 2018, December 2019, December 2020, and December 2021); and Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *January 20, 2017 Quarterly Report to US Congress, January 20, 2018 Quarterly Report to US Congress, January 20, 2019 Quarterly Report to US Congress, January 20, 2020 Quarterly Report to US Congress, and January 20, 2021 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., <https://www.sigar.mil/quarterlyreports/>.

26. Sam Gollob and Michael E. O’Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-9/11 Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Foreign Policy at Brookings, 2020), 17, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FP_20200825_afghanistan_index.pdf.

27. “Afghanistan’s Ghani Says 45,000 Security Personnel Killed Since 2014,” *BBC News* (website), January 25, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47005558>.

28. Steve Coll and Adam Entous, “The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan,” *New Yorker* (website), December 10, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/the-secret-history-of-the-us-diplomatic-failure-in-afghanistan>.

to end Western military presence. This knowledge exacerbated ANDSF anxieties and reinforced local-level hedging behavior.

The Doha Accord and Extreme ANDSF Exposure March 2020 to April 2021

On February 29, 2020, SRAR Khalilzad and Afghan Taliban representative Abdul Ghani Baradar signed the US-Taliban Peace Accord in Doha, Qatar. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was not a signatory and had played no direct role in its negotiation over the prior 16 months. The agreement committed the United States and Coalition partners to “complete” military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 15 months—by May 1, 2021. In return, the Taliban promised three major outcomes. First, it committed to preventing al-Qaeda or similar international Salafi jihadist terror organizations from planning or conducting attacks against the United States or its allies from Afghan soil. It made a formal promise to refrain from attacks against US and Coalition forces during the implementation period and committed to a reduction in violence (RIV) for Afghanistan as a whole. The Taliban, however, did not formally promise to refrain from attacking GIRoA or ANDSF targets.²⁹ It also agreed to commence political talks with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan aimed at reconciliation and a new framework for Afghan governance—inter-Afghan negotiations (IAN).³⁰

Absent a total collapse of the peace agreement, the best outcome for the ANDSF would be one where inter-Afghan negotiations were successful, and there would be some combination of ANDSF and Taliban military assets. Ultimately, this outcome would require a process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR). Historically, the pathway to DDR between government and insurgent forces is vexing. While there are incentives for opposing military forces to reduce violence and save combatant lives, there are also competing incentives for them to maximize political negotiating leverage by conducting aggressive military operations aimed at altering “facts on the ground.” Often, a cease-fire agreement is built into a political negotiating period to dampen the incentives for military aggression.³¹ When a viable cease-fire is not feasible or enforceable, the

29. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

30. “Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,” February 29, 2020, 1, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>. (The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban.); and Michael R. Pompeo, “Secretary Pompeo Remarks to Media,” US Department of State (website), February 25, 2020, video, 18:35, site-894736.bcvp0rtal.com/detail/videos/secretary-of-state/video/6135770177001/secretary-pompeo-remarks-to-media.?autoStart=true.

31. Valerie Sticher and Siniša Vuković, “Bargaining in Intrastate Conflicts: The Shifting Role of Ceasefires,” *Journal of Peace Research* 1, no. 1 (May 2021): <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022343320982658>; Coll and Entous, “Secret History”; and SIGAR, *April 30, 2020 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., <https://www.sigar.mil/quarterlyreports/>.

force with the upper hand will normally fight to secure gains that will enhance its negotiating leverage. Since the terms of the Doha Accord allowed the Taliban to continue fighting against the ANDSF and GIRoA throughout the IAN period, they continued to press their martial advantage.

The worst scenario for ANDSF was one where the United States stuck to its withdrawal plans, IAN was not successful, and the Taliban took advantage of US/Coalition withdrawal of forces to attrit the ANDSF badly. Details of the reduction in violence (RIV) component in the US-Taliban Peace Accord were relegated to a classified annex but appeared to inhibit, but not credibly prohibit, the Taliban from pursuing this course of action.

After the February Doha Agreement signing ceremony, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo stated the level of Taliban attacks and violence were expected to remain low.³² But by late April 2020, General Austin “Scott” Miller, US Forces Afghanistan and Operation Resolute Support commander, reported that from March 1 to 31, “the Taliban refrained from attacks against Coalition Forces, [while] they increased attacks against ANDSF to levels above seasonal norms.”³³

Taliban military activities during spring and summer 2020 were unambiguously aggressive, but in a differentiated manner. An independent fall 2020 assessment reported Taliban-controlled areas experienced unexpected peace in the aftermath of Doha as the United States largely halted air attacks and the ANDSF moved to a defensive posture. But in GIRoA-controlled areas, the Taliban intensified violence against government entities and Afghan civilians even as it limited major attacks.³⁴

A key part of the Doha Accord not made public called on US forces to end offensive air strikes against the Taliban while allowing for strikes in defense of the ANDSF.³⁵ After a post-Doha Agreement lull, American military air strikes to protect ANDSF resumed in summer 2020. The Taliban formally protested all American strikes that supported ANDSF, calling them a violation of the Doha

32. Michael R. Pompeo, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo at a Press Availability after the Afghanistan Signing Ceremony: Remarks to the Press,” Department of State (website), February 29, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/at-a-press-availability-after-the-afghanistan-signing-ceremony/index.html>.

33. SIGAR, *April 30, 2020 Quarterly Report*, 62, 65.

34. Andrew Quilty, “Taliban Opportunism and ANSF Frustration: How the Afghan Conflict Has Changed Since the Doha Agreement,” Afghan Analysts Network (website), October 12, 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/taliban-opportunism-and-ansf-frustration-how-the-afghan-conflict-has-changed-since-the-doha-agreement/>.

35. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

Accord's annex on managing combat. Later in 2020, the Taliban used US air activity to justify their intensifying military campaign against Kabul.³⁶

The prisoner exchange component of the Doha Accord partially enabled surging Taliban military activity and acumen. Despite GIRoA skepticism, the final Doha Accord called for the confidence-building exchange of “up to” 5,000 Taliban prisoners held in Afghan jails in exchange for 1,000 Afghans held by the Taliban. The Taliban quickly insisted release of a full 5,000 was a precondition to commencing peace talks with the GIRoA.³⁷ Under American pressure, Afghan leaders released about 4,600 Taliban prisoners in spring 2020 and the final 400 in August 2020 after a period of inter-Afghan, and Afghan-American debate. An independent research report in late summer 2020 estimated almost 70 percent of the 108 released Taliban resumed active fighting roles, returning important battlefield expertise to intensifying Taliban military operations.³⁸

ANDSF morale took a direct hit from the way Taliban leaders spoke and acted after the Doha Accord. Tolo News reported that on March 25 in Balochistan Province, Pakistan, a senior Taliban negotiator, Mullah Fazel, told supporters the Taliban would ultimately be victorious in establishing an Islamic Emirate. Fazel reportedly said that while the “Taliban or the Islamic Emirate will never become part of the Kabul [Afghan] government,” the Taliban might accept Afghan government officials with senior positions.³⁹ US Agency for International Development (USAID)–funded monitoring of Taliban public communications found the Taliban's tone resoundingly triumphant during April and May 2020 following the announced withdrawal of US military forces, clearly indicating to Afghan forces the future government of Afghanistan would be subject to Taliban preferences and potential vengeance.⁴⁰ The one-sided pattern of Taliban aggression persisted into mid-October 2020 when USFOR-A Commander General Miller again stated that the high

36. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

37. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

38. Lynne O'Donnell, “Defying Peace Deal, Freed Taliban Return to Battlefield,” *Foreign Policy* (website), September 3, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/03/defying-peace-deal-freed-taliban-prisoners-return-battlefield-afghanistan/>; France 24, “Some Freed Taliban Prisoners Have Returned to Battle, Says Afghan Negotiator,” *France24.com* (website), September 23, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200923-afghanistan-freed-taliban-prisoners-return-battle-abdullah-abdullah-doha-peace-talks>.

39. Abubakar Siddique, “Are the Taliban Committed to Negotiating Peace in Afghanistan?” *Gandhara* (website), March 31, 2020, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/are-the-taliban-committed-to-negotiating-peace-in-afghanistan-/30520521.html>.

40. Quilty, “Taliban Opportunism and ANSF Frustration.”

level of Taliban violence around the country “is not consistent with the US-Taliban agreement and undermines the ongoing Afghan peace talks.”⁴¹

The disposition and orientation of ANDSF forces contributed to its vulnerability in the post-Doha Accord fight. In November 2019, the Afghan government estimated that the ANDSF had over 10,000 checkpoints nationwide, with an average of 10 to 20 personnel at each. After the Doha Accord, as Coalition forces stepped back from advising and assisting ANA forward elements, they helped the ANA with a checkpoint reduction and base development plan (CPRBD) for 2021 that reportedly reduced ANA checkpoints to just under 2,000 with another 600 patrol bases across Afghanistan.⁴² It still meant the ANDSF had approximately one-third of its total force, 95,000 personnel, manning checkpoints as of December 2020.⁴³

Afghan National Defense and Security Forces checkpoint-heavy positioning contributed to a largely static and defensive mission profile even as GIROA political leadership belatedly called for greater assertiveness against the resurgent Taliban in 2020. Most ANA Corps reportedly refused to execute missions without ANA Special Operations Command (ANASOC) augmentation. When ANASOC Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) arrived, they were just as likely to be misused to perform tasks intended for conventional forces such as route clearance, checkpoint security, and quick-reaction force.⁴⁴ From October to December 2020, the ASSF took on more responsibility for ground operations, and conducting more operations in a single quarter than they had since April–June 2019.⁴⁵ Small and overtaxed, the ASSF could not meet rapidly growing demand.⁴⁶

As the Biden-Harris administration assumed control and began a comprehensive review of Afghanistan policy in early 2021, the worst-case scenario for ANDSF unfolded. The Taliban stepped up attacks, maintained close ties with al-Qaeda, and actively planned for large-scale offensives—all while IAN between GIROA and the Taliban failed to make any progress.⁴⁷ The April 9, 2021, *Annual Threat Assessment of the*

41. USFOR-A Spokesman Colonel Sonny Leggett, “Taliban Need to Step Up,” October 12, 2020, https://twitter.com/USFOR_A/status/1315602850186244096.

42. SIGAR, *April 30, 2022 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., 71-2, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2022-04-30qr.pdf>.

43. SIGAR, *January 30, 2021 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., 1, 68, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-01-30qr.pdf>.

44. SIGAR, *April 30, 2021 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., 75, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-04-30qr.pdf>.

45. See SIGAR, *January 30, 2021 Quarterly Report*, 63; and ASSF - Afghan Special Security Forces, ANA Special Operations Command (ANASOC), <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/anasoc.htm>.

46. Also see SIGAR, *January 30, 2021 Quarterly Report*, 47.

47. Defense Department’s Office of Inspector General, May 18, 2021; and Courtney Kube and Dan De Luce, “Taliban Ramped Up Attacks against Afghans as Peace Talks Faltered, Pentagon Watchdog Says,” *NBC News* (website), March 2, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/taliban-ramped-attacks-against-afghans-peace-talks-faltered-pentagon-watchdog-n1267852>.

US Intelligence Community stated that prospects for an agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban “will remain low during the next year,” and “the Taliban is likely to make gains on the battlefield, and the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the Coalition withdraws support.” The assessment also concluded that the ANDSF “continues to face setbacks on the battlefield, and the Taliban is confident it can achieve military victory.”⁴⁸

Independent reporting indicates USFOR-A Commander Miller strongly argued during the Biden-Harris administration comprehensive review that the United States must keep forces in Afghanistan beyond the May 1, 2021, deadline for fear of what would happen to the Afghan military once the United States departed.⁴⁹ General Miller wrote what he had earlier stated in public: the level of Taliban military operational tempo could not be countered by the Afghan military alone.

Full US Military Withdrawal and ANDSF Collapse May to August 2021

On April 14, 2021, Biden announced the United States would end its military presence in Afghanistan by September 11, 2021.⁵⁰ American diplomats began pressing for expedited IAN, even as the US military and allied NATO forces pivoted to an accelerated withdrawal.⁵¹ In response, Afghan President Ghani tweeted an aspirational message about the ANDSF, stating “Afghanistan’s proud security and defense forces are fully capable of defending its people and country.”⁵² Ghani seemed to hold out hope and made changes to leadership of the Afghan MOD and MOI in March 2021 that bolstered Pashtun status and loyalty to him. At his request, the United States and its European allies avoided evacuating their personnel or Afghan associates for fear it would look like a rush to the exits and precipitate a collapse of GIRoA.⁵³

Yet, as the final US military withdrawal began in May 2021, Ghani was mired in a political crisis that bode poorly for an already bedraggled ANDSF.

48. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: ODNI, April 9, 2021), 25, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

49. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

50. “Briefing Room: Remarks by Joe Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan” White House (website), April 14, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>.

51. Associated Press, “Afghan Cease-fire Ends after Wave of Violence amid Calls for Fresh Peace Talks,” *NBC News* (website), May 16, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/afghan-cease-fire-ends-amid-calls-fresh-peace%7C-talks-n1267517>; and George Packer, “The Betrayal,” *Atlantic* (website), January 31, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/03/biden-afghanistan-exit-american-allies-abandoned/621307/>.

52. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

53. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

Ghani and his small inner circle, led by National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib, had not fully acted on the late 2020 US military recommendation to consolidate ANDSF forces into a smaller array of more defensible positions focused on strategic elements such as key roads, cities, and border crossings. In truth, the politics and demographics of Afghanistan made it impossible for Ghani to comply fully. Ghani reportedly told US Secretary of State Antony Blinken this sort of repositioning would make GIROA look weak.⁵⁴ Mohib reportedly stated, “We’re not giving up one inch of our country.”⁵⁵

The Taliban already had *de facto* control of much of Afghanistan by then, but Ghani and Mohib knew that to consolidate any further—away from ethnic Pashtun areas and into ones more populated by ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras—was political suicide. Under such a consolidation, he and any future national Pashtun political leader would play third fiddle to a Taliban-dominated Pashtun political base and to Tajik Co-president Abdullah Abdullah or another northern ethnic political persona. SRAR Khalilzad later told American journalists Steve Coll and Adam Entous that Ghani never had any interest in negotiating with the Taliban, for only the status quo kept him in power.⁵⁶ While far from exculpatory of SRAR Khalilzad’s pivotal role in empowering the Taliban military success during peace negotiations, Khalilzad properly understood Ghani’s political calculus.

Poorly positioned, insufficiently equipped, and politically isolated, ANDSF morale was at a tipping point. Then, on July 2, 2021, the abrupt US military departure from Bagram hit the ANDSF hard. Many in the ANDSF reported to local and national news they felt abandoned to die trying to defend Bagram and other such locations.⁵⁷

Regrettably, Biden went on record in early July 2021 stating that a Taliban military takeover or collapse of GIROA was not inevitable.⁵⁸ This statement misappreciated the realities of low ANDSF morale, bad tactical positioning, and a lack of confidence in GIROA. Perhaps the American intelligence community supported Biden’s ANDSF assessment, but such a conclusion would have been based upon its evaluation of the Taliban shortcomings, not on the structural or emotional liabilities of the ANDSF. By then, US military leaders lacked the onsite ability to evaluate

54. Jonathan Schroden “Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan’s Security Forces,” *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 8 (October 2021): 45–61, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CTC-SENTINEL-082021.pdf>.

55. Schroden “Lessons from Collapse.”

56. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

57. Packer, “Betrayal.”

58. “Briefing Room: Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan,” White House (website), July 8, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan/>.

ANDSF morale and cohesion dynamics reasonably, and US/Western abilities to make such assessments accurately had been suspect for a long time.⁵⁹

A lengthy *Washington Post* exposé later confirmed that by spring 2021, Afghan forces were negotiating with the Taliban, often with the help of local elders rather than fighting.⁶⁰ Dealmaking featured arrangements for ANDSF surrender, parole, and temporary local truces, all of which were well-established Afghan conflict resolution practices, alongside those of revenge killings and summary executions. Newly appointed Afghan Minister of Defense Bismillah Khan reported in mid-July what outside accounts like those from the Afghan Advisor Network (AAN) had foretold: the Taliban were offering ANDSF members money and a letter of passage to protect them from harassment after they surrendered. By August 2021, “money was changing hands at a rapid rate,” a senior British military officer said, with Afghan security forces getting “bought off by the Taliban.”⁶¹

Implications

The US-Taliban Peace Accord of February 29, 2020, put a 15-month “clock” on what the ANDSF could expect from US or allied support. It did not generate the perverse incentives underpinning the rapid collapse of the ANDSF, but it accelerated negative expectations that the Taliban would ultimately prevail. From February 2020 until its collapse, ANDSF leadership was told to anticipate an Afghan political settlement and subsequent security forces integration without ever witnessing a viable IAN process. An AAN postmortem summary critiqued this period of political negotiations scathingly, observing that SRAR Khalilzad’s faulty assumption that the Taliban were truly pursuing negotiated peace spawned fantasy scenarios of Taliban-GIRoA cooperation that never aligned with realities on the ground.⁶²

Concurrently, ANDSF leaders and troopers could only reason the US military would draw down to a point where it would stand alone against a resurgent Taliban. An October 2020 AAN report cogently observed that in eight short months since the Doha Agreement, US concessions to coax the Taliban to the negotiating table sharpened its military edge and heightened its confidence while simultaneously deflating and disempowering the ANDSF. The ANDSF bore the

59. Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 391; and Ben Connable, *Embracing the Fog of War: Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012).

60. Susannah George, “Afghanistan’s Military Collapse: Illicit Deals and Mass Desertions,” *Washington Post* (website), August 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/15/afghanistan-military-collapse-taliban/>.

61. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

62. Kate Clark, “The Taleban’s Rise to Power: As the US Prepared for Peace, the Taleban Prepared for War,” Afghanistan Analysts Network (website), August 21, 2021, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/the-talebans-rise-to-power-as-the-us-prepared-for-peace-the-taleban-prepared-for-war/>.

brunt of the Taliban's growing eagerness to fight all the while knowing it could not shoulder the accelerating fight alone."⁶³

On August 16, Biden addressed the nation and acknowledged the regrettable outcome of America's exit from Afghanistan, asserting that GIROA and ANDSF collapsed more quickly than anticipated. He also recited the mass of money and equipment the United States had provided ANDSF over the years and called the group it out for collapsing so quickly.⁶⁴

Biden clearly articulated American frustrations with the enormous but unsuccessful effort to build an autonomous Afghan military capability. However, his remarks did not acknowledge that the ANDSF never was designed to defend Afghanistan against a determined, resilient adversary alone or that Afghan culture and tradition set the conditions for a rapid patchwork of local peace deals once it was clear to "the monkey in the middle" that all US military forces would depart and a strong, durable Taliban with tacit Pakistani backing would remain.

As the United States moves forward into a new geostrategic era of great-power competition, it has backed away from counterinsurgency and associated security-sector building and reform that featured in Afghanistan for almost two decades. But American military advising and material support for partner security forces will not vanish in this new era, instead it will morph. The United States assuredly will find itself working with partner militaries, surrogates, and even proxy forces requiring structural and operational support.⁶⁵ Although security-sector reform for a counterinsurgency environment is not the same as advising and supporting a proxy force or surrogate military, a couple of insights from the American experience with ANDSF seem germane.⁶⁶

First, US policymakers should fully study and tailor mission support and package profiles to a realistic set of security goals and outcomes appropriate to both the conflict and the limitations on US military presence. Surrogates or proxy forces aligned against adversaries with sustained backing from an American rival state are not good candidates for structures or operations modeled after US institutions or tactics. Afghanistan, like Vietnam, demonstrates that American-centric approaches are unsustainable without a significant, long-term US military presence. American military advisers and supporting packages must be tailored to understand

63. Kate Clark, "Behind the Statistics: Drop in Civilian Casualties Masks Increased Taleban Violence," Afghanistan Analysts Network (website), October 27, 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/behind-the-statistics-drop-in-civilian-casualties-masks-increased-taleban-violence/>.

64. "Briefing: Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan," White House (website), August 16, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/>.

65. Frank Hoffman and Andrew Orner, "The Return of Great-Power Proxy Wars," War on the Rocks (website), September 2, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/the-return-of-great-power-proxy-wars/>.

66. Ladwig III, *Forgotten Front*, 289–313; Biddle, "Building Security Forces," 126–38; and Biddle, "Afghanistan's Legacy," 73–86.

the cultures and organizations before they deploy and be empowered to shape operational and technological support in a manner that best complements the forces they advise.⁶⁷

Second, security partner fighting force morale must be factored into policy options.⁶⁸ Too often, American military advising reduces its evaluation criteria to counting the quantity of material support and training time. Afghanistan reminds us that the morale of the fighting force is determined by much more than quantitative factors. The culture and incentives of the partner force must be considered. Qualitative metrics based upon local cultural and political needs must be developed and recurrently and fairly assessed. As the loss of fidelity in evaluating ANDSF morale from 2018–21 demonstrates, accurate evaluations are impossible at a distance. US policy must accept the inherent risk necessary to empower military advisers down to the tactical level with partner formations—surrogates or proxies—to generate reasonably reliable evaluations of fighting force morale.

Finally, the advising, training, and operational support for a partner military, proxy, or surrogate force is inherently a principal-agent arrangement.⁶⁹ Principals and agents operate in accordance with their respective political objectives. When these align, the relationship can be productive and enhance mutual security. When these diverge, the relationship can fray and pose a security risk.⁷⁰ Inevitably, even mutually advantageous security relationships tend to expire under the accumulating weight of political interest misalignment. In the case of Afghanistan, that expiration occurred when the United States decided to negotiate peace with the Taliban alone with an aim to terminate American military presence, leaving ANDSF without the structure, sufficient capabilities, or morale to sustain autonomous security operations against a strong and aggressive Taliban adversary. US policymakers must assume that future proxy or surrogate relationships will eventually fray or expire. Thus, the strategic interaction must be informed by a realistic termination criterion and a viable military transition plan.⁷¹

The rapid collapse of Afghan security forces was heavily foretold and largely anticipated. Cognitive dissonance alone explains why this certainty did not better impact American contingency plans for terminating its military presence in

67. Hammes, "Raising and Mentoring Security Forces," 330–31.

68. Schroden, "Lessons from Collapse."

69. Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, "Agency Theory: An Assessment and Review," *Academy of Management Review* 14, no. 1 (1989): 58–59.

70. Biddle, "Building Security Forces," 126–38.

71. Amos C. Fox, *In Pursuit of a General Theory of Proxy War*, Land Warfare Paper 123 (Washington, DC: Institute of Land Warfare/Association of the United States Army, February 2019), 14.

Afghanistan. Future American plans for security forces partnerships can and must do better.

Thomas F. Lynch III

Dr. Thomas F. Lynch III is a distinguished research fellow in the Institute of National Strategic Studies of the National Defense University. He focuses research, writing, teaching, and conferences on the topics of South Asia, the Indo-Pacific, the Gulf Arab States, counterterrorism, and great-power competition. A retired Army colonel with Afghanistan tours, including as military special assistant to the US ambassador in 2004, Lynch publishes frequently on Afghanistan including, “The Decades-Long, ‘Double-Double Game’: Pakistan, the United States and the Taliban” in *Military Review* (July–August 2018).

Select Bibliography

- Clark, Kate. "Behind the Statistics: Drop in Civilian Casualties Masks Increased Taliban Violence." Afghanistan Analysts Network (website). October 27, 2020. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/behind-the-statistics-drop-in-civilian-casualties-masks-increased-taliban-violence/>.
- Coll, Steve, and Adam Entous. "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan." *New Yorker* (website). December 10, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/the-secret-history-of-the-us-diplomatic-failure-in-afghanistan>.
- Connable, Ben. *Embracing the Fog of War: Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012.
- Department of Defense (DoD). *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*. 1225 Report to Congress. Washington, DC: DoD, December 2017. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/1225-Report-Dec-2017.pdf>.
- "Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan." February 29, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>.
- Ladwig, Walter C., III. *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships and Counterinsurgency*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Quilty, Andrew. "Taliban Opportunism and ANSF Frustration: How the Afghan Conflict Has Changed Since the Doha Agreement." Afghan Analysts Network (website). October 12, 2020. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/taliban-opportunism-and-ansf-frustration-how-the-afghan-conflict-has-changed-since-the-doha-agreement/>.
- Whitlock, Craig. "The Afghanistan Papers – At War with the Truth." *Washington Post*. December 9, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>.

Linking Trauma to the Prevalence of Civil War

Erik W. Goepner
©2022 Erik W. Goepner

ABSTRACT: This article argues the more trauma endured by a population, the more civil war the country will experience in the future. Drawing on mental health, trauma, and neurobiological research, it builds a new theory of civil war that fills existing gaps in current civil-war literature, and then tests the theory via statistical analysis of a large sample size (large-n statistical analysis). The conclusions will help policymakers and US military leadership better understand civil wars and the limits of American power to end them.

Keywords: civil war, violence, insurgency, trauma, mental illness

Gaps in current civil-war research negatively impact the policymakers who decide whether the United States will intervene in another nation's civil war and the military servicemembers who plan for and fight in those wars. This article attempts to fill in these gaps by developing and testing a new trauma theory of civil war.

One primary theory argues civil wars occur when citizens become sufficiently motivated. Another argues civil wars occur when citizens have the opportunity to rebel. Neither explains how or why the threshold for taking human life varies across time and space. Additionally, quantitative researchers have failed to find support for most proxies of motivation, such as government type and ethnolinguistic or religious fractionalization. Furthermore, the opportunity theory appears to lack a causal mechanism. Instead, the opportunity to rebel is more likely an enabling condition rather than a theory.¹ Beyond widespread consensus that poverty, slow economic growth, and large populations are associated with an increased risk of civil war, substantial debate exists about the significance of other factors.²

This lack of understanding has resulted in the United States intervening in the civil wars of other nations yet remaining largely unaware of the underlying

1. Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 10–12.

2. James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75–90; Håvard Hegre and Nicholas Sambanis, "Sensitivity Analysis of Empirical Results on Civil War Onset," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 4 (2006); Nicholas Sambanis, "A Review of Recent Advances and Future Directions in the Quantitative Literature on Civil War," *Defence and Peace Economics* 13 no. 3 (2002): 229; Paul Collier, Anke Hoefler, and Dominic Rohner, "Beyond Greed and Grievance," *Oxford Economic Papers* 61, no. 1 (2009): 1–27; and Håvard Hegre, "Toward a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Political Change, and Civil War, 1816–1992," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 1 (2001).

causes of the wars. Why, for example, was the prevalence of civil war so high in Afghanistan yet so low in Bosnia before the United States intervened in those countries? Answers to this question and similar ones could have helped policymakers estimate the utility of military intervention and aided the military in planning and executing a sound strategy for the achievement of US objectives.

This article develops and tests a trauma theory of civil war. The potential causal linkage is straightforward. The more trauma (for instance, torture, rape, and disasters) endured by a country's citizens, the more problems the citizens will experience later, including mental illness, substance abuse, and diminished impulse control. People dealing with these issues use violence more frequently to resolve conflict and to achieve their goals than they would absent these conditions. As a result, civil war becomes more likely.

Two key terms warrant further definition. Scholars typically define "civil war" as armed conflict between a country's government and a rebel group (or groups) that takes place within the country's borders and results in a minimum number of fatalities over a specified period. Civil-war prevalence is thus the combined probability of a war starting and an ongoing war continuing in a given year.³

The American Psychiatric Association defines a "traumatic stressor" as "[a]ny event that may cause or threaten death, serious injury, or sexual violence to an individual, a close family member, or a close friend."⁴ Examples include being tortured or raped, experiencing war, being assaulted with a weapon, experiencing a natural disaster, and witnessing the death of a loved one. Intentional, man-made, violent events directly experienced by the person have, on average, a more negative effect than naturally occurring, indirectly experienced stressors.⁵

Three sections follow. The first builds the trauma theory by importing theory from the trauma, mental health, and neurobiological fields. The second reports the results of the statistical analysis of a large sample size. The final

3. Ibrahim Elbadawi and Nicholas Sambanis, "How Much War Will We See? Explaining the Prevalence of Civil War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 3 (2002): 311.

4. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2013).

5. Maria Pacella, Bryce Hruska, and Douglas Delahanty, "The Physical Health Consequences of PTSD and PTSD Symptoms: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 27, no. 1 (January 2013): 42.

section posits policy recommendations for military planners, warfighters, and national security policymakers.

Building a Trauma Theory of Civil War

Trauma may increase the prevalence of civil war in three ways. First, people often become more violent in response to severe and repeated, traumatic stressors, lowering the threshold at which citizens will use deadly force against their government. Second, trauma makes civil war more feasible by decreasing the capabilities of the government and its security force while lowering the opportunity costs of rebel recruitment. Third, trauma increases grievances among the population, which further motivates them to rebel against their governments.

Mechanism 1: Trauma, Violence, and Goal Achievement

An event during my deployment to Afghanistan illustrates how previously experienced trauma can lead people to use violence as a normal way to achieve their goals and resolve their problems. Colonel “Naseri” began berating Colonel “Habib” in the operations center in front of their subordinates and their American counterparts. Habib, the police chief for the province, had angered Naseri, the chief of the provincial security directorate, by arresting one of Naseri’s men in connection with the serial raping of an Afghan boy. Naseri used the moment to publicly mock Habib, who had spent most of his adult life in the midst of war and the trauma that came with it. The American forces loved Habib, who was one of the few brave men who consistently took the fight to the enemy, and the drug addiction we assessed he had was understandable in a land where self-medication was frequently the only medication available.

With their subordinates watching, Habib’s verbal responses proved no match for Naseri’s rhetorical skewering. As though a switch had flipped, Habib unholstered his handgun. There, in the Afghan equivalent of a war room, Habib aimed his loaded weapon at Naseri. Fortunately, a nearby American officer moved between the two men and the loaded firearm and persuaded Habib to reholster his weapon.

As trauma increases, violence becomes progressively normalized within society as a legitimate way to achieve goals and resolve problems. As the threshold for the use of lethal force lowers, civil war becomes more likely.

An increase in exposure to trauma includes one or more of the following situations. The traumatic stressors may become more severe. Intentionally caused events directly experienced by an individual, such as a physical assault with a weapon, typically lead to worse outcomes than do acts of nature or indirectly

experienced events. The severest traumatic stressors include torture, rape, and war. The amount of traumatic events experienced by a person may accumulate over time, and individuals may be exposed to multiple events. The traumatic events may continue or the time since the last exposure to a traumatic event might be recent. Figure 1 shows the potential causal linkage between trauma and civil war.

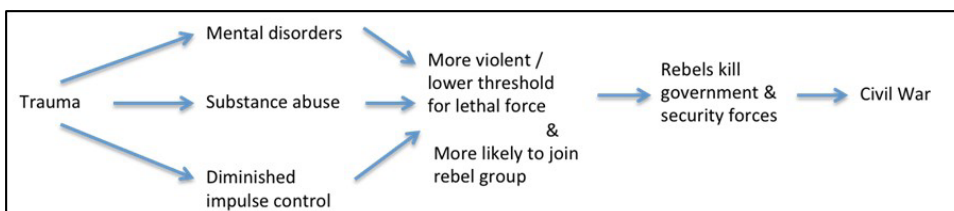


Figure 1. Potential pathway from trauma to civil war

Step One: More Mental Illness, Substance Abuse, and Impulse-Control Problems

Increased exposure to traumatic stressors causes an increased in mental illness and substance abuse and diminished impulse control.⁶ For example, 30 to 50 percent of populations caught in war zones with high rates of torture will likely develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁷ Other mental illnesses (such as major depressive disorder, anxiety disorders, and disruptive, impulse-control) and conduct disorders are also relevant to the study of trauma and civil war. Researchers have found more-severe traumatic stressors result in worse outcomes for the victim than less-severe traumatic events do. For instance, being the victim of torture or physical assault with a weapon is associated with more severe and long-lasting mental illness than experiencing trauma from a natural disaster or witnessing the death of a loved one.⁸

Trauma also leads to substance-abuse issues. Studies of participants in substance-abuse treatment programs found the co-occurrence of trauma and substance abuse to be as high as 90 percent.⁹ Additionally, on average,

6. Zachary Steel et al., "Association of Torture and Other Potentially Traumatic Events with Mental Health Outcomes among Populations Exposed to Mass Conflict and Displacement: A Systemic Review and Meta-analysis," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 302, no. 5 (2009): 537–49, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/184348>; Darrel Regier et al., "Comorbidity of Mental Disorders with Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 264, no. 19 (1990); and Tim Weaver et al., "Comorbidity of Substance Misuse and Mental Illness in the Community Mental Health and Substance Misuse Services," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 183, no. 4 (2003).

7. Steel et al., "Association of Torture."

8. Pacella, Hruska, and Delahanty, "Physical Health Consequences," 42.

9. Melissa Farley et al., "Trauma History and Relapse Probability among Patients Seeking Substance Abuse Treatment," *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* 27, no. 2 (2004): 162; Nancy Wu et al., "Childhood Trauma and Health Outcomes in Adults with Comorbid Substance Abuse and Mental Health Disorders," *Addictive Behaviors* 35, no. 1 (2010): 70; and Merith Cosden et al., "Trauma Symptoms for Men and Women in Substance Abuse Treatment: A Latent Transition Analysis," *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* 50 (2015): 18.

30 to 50 percent of individuals with a mental illness will be diagnosed with a substance-abuse disorder at some point.¹⁰

Experiencing trauma (particularly during childhood) decreases an individual's impulse control, and more frequent and severe trauma intensifies the effect.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, both PTSD and depression correlate with impulse-control disorders.¹² Additionally, diminished impulse control links to a "broad spectrum of personal and social problems," including violence and crime.¹³ In the United States, an example of diminished impulse control can include a road-rage incident, during which a driver displays uncontrolled anger in response to another motorist's actions.

In a high-trauma state like Afghanistan, examples are more plentiful. I witnessed other violent outbursts during my deployment to a small Afghan province. A mayor smacked a police officer in the face before the start of a *shūrā*. The act apparently resulted from stress experienced during preparation for the arrival of distinguished visitors. On another occasion, two field-grade officers assaulted each other at the police headquarters over a petty squabble. On another occasion, a firefight erupted at an illegal checkpoint. A district chief's bodyguards, who had established the checkpoint, opened fire on plainclothes police officers who were illegally providing security for a businessman's convoy and refused to pay the illegal toll.

Step Two: More Violence and a Lowered Threshold for Lethal Force

A consensus exists in psychiatric literature that severe mental illness increases the risk of violence.¹⁴ On average, people with severe mental illness, especially when combined with substance-abuse problems, act more violently, as do people

10. Regier et al., "Comorbidity of Mental Disorders," 2,514, 2,517; and Robert Drake et al., "A Review of Treatments for People with Severe Mental Illnesses and Co-Occurring Substance Use Disorders," *Psychiatric Rehabilitations Journal* 27, no. 4 (2004): 360–61.

11. John A. Fairbank, Frank W. Putnam, and William W. Harris, "The Prevalence and Impact of Child Traumatic Stress," in *Handbook of PTSD: Science and Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 2007), 240; Emil Coccaro, "Intermittent Explosive Disorder as a Disorder of Impulsive Aggression for DSM-5," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 169, no. 6 (2012): 584; and Bessel A. van der Kolk, "The Trauma Spectrum: The Interaction of Biological and Social Events in the Genesis of the Trauma Response," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 1, no. 3 (1988).

12. Michel Lejoyeux et al., "Impulse Control Disorders and Depression," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 190, no. 5 (2002): 310, 314; Moshe Kotler et al., "Anger, Impulsivity, Social Support, and Suicide Risk in Patients with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 189, no. 3 (2001); and Byron Good and Devon Hinton, "Introduction: Culture, Trauma, and PTSD," in *Culture and PTSD: Trauma in Global and Historical Perspective*, ed. Devon Hinton and Byron Good (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

13. Dianne Tice, Ellen Bratslavsky, and Roy F. Baumeister, "Emotional Distress Regulation Takes Precedence over Impulse Control," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 80, no. 1 (2001): 53; and Menahem Krakowski, "Violence and Serotonin: Influence of Impulse Control, Affect Regulation, and Social Functioning," *Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 15, no. 3 (2003): 294–95, 300.

14. Richard Van Dorn, Jan Volavka, and Norman Johnson, "Mental Disorder and Violence: Is There a Relationship beyond Substance Use?," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 47, no. 3 (2011): 487.

with diminished impulse control. The research, however, contains variation. For example, researchers debate the confounding factors that cause the increased risk of violence among people with mental illness. For instance, recent scholarship has focused on the potential effects of substance abuse, prior violence, and familial factors.¹⁵

As the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* observes, people with PTSD may engage in aggressive physical behavior with “little or no provocation.”¹⁶ Richard Van Dorn and colleagues observe the strongest associations with violence come from individuals with both severe mental illness and substance-use disorders.¹⁷ The manual also notes individuals who suffer from impulse control and similar disorders often exhibit behaviors that “violate the rights of others . . . and/or bring the individual into significant conflict with societal norms or authority figures.”¹⁸

Most studies treat the threshold when citizens will use lethal force to achieve their goals as a constant. This treatment is puzzling because norms vary in related areas (such as the prevalence of gun violence, murder rates, and the number of active-shooter events)—even across similar countries. For example, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime’s Intentional Homicide database indicates the United States has a homicide rate four to eight times greater than Australia, Canada, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom.¹⁹

In her work examining societal violence after civil conflict has ended, Chrissie Steenkamp refers to a “culture of violence” in which the norms and values that sustain the use of violence become established in a society. She attributes the culture of violence, in part, to the effects of trauma, when previous norms and values are replaced with ones perpetuating the use of violence in daily life.²⁰ Roos Haer and Tobias Böhmelt advance a similar argument about child soldiers. They find the effects of trauma plus the influence of learning by observation and imitation during the war normalized the use of violence as a problem-solving technique in the child soldiers’ postwar lives.²¹ Similarly, Elisabeth Schauer and Thomas Elbert observed after war ends, child soldiers continue to use physical

15. Matthew Roché et al., “Prevalence and Risk of Violent Ideation and Behavior in Serious Mental Illnesses: An Analysis of 63,572 Patient Records,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 36, no. 5-6 (2021); and Hanna Pickarda and Seena Fazelb, “Substance Abuse as a Risk Factor for Violence in Mental Illness: Some Implications for Forensic Psychiatric Practice and Clinical Ethics,” *Current Opinion in Psychiatry* 26, no. 4 (2013): 350.

16. American Psychiatric Association, *Manual of Mental Disorders*, 272–73, 275.

17. Van Dorn, Volavka, and Johnson, “Mental Disorder and Violence,” 487, 491.

18. American Psychiatric Association, *Manual of Mental Disorders*, 461.

19. UN Office on Drugs and Crime, “Intentional Homicides (per 100,000 People),” World Bank Open Data (website), n.d., <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5>.

20. Chrissie Steenkamp, “The Legacy of War: Conceptualizing a ‘Culture of Violence’ to Explain Violence after Peace Accords,” *Round Table* 94, no. 379 (2005): 254–55, 264.

21. Roos Haer and Tobias Böhmelt, “Child Soldiers as Time Bombs? Adolescents’ Participation in Rebel Groups and the Recurrence of Armed Conflict,” *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 2 (2016): 414.

violence frequently to resolve conflicts, even after the child soldiers return to their prewar environments.²²

Step Three: Rebels Kill Government Officials and Security Forces

More violent societies are likely to produce rebels willing to employ lethal force against their governments than less violent societies are. Steenkamp's "culture of violence" argument suggests societies can develop norms that allow and promote the use of violence to achieve goals or resolve problems. In such cultures, citizens who have joined or are affiliated with a rebel group will be more willing to use violence against their governments because violence has already become socially acceptable.²³

When cultural norms against violence erode and citizens increasingly use violence to achieve goals or resolve conflicts, rebels are more likely to employ lethal force in pursuit of their group's objectives. Depression and PTSD correlate with impulse-control disorders and substance abuse. Additionally, a relationship exists between severe childhood trauma, brain development, and impulse control.²⁴ All these elements increase the likelihood citizens who join a rebel group will be more willing to use lethal force against their governments.

Step Four: More Civil War

Finally, a conflict can only qualify as a civil war if rebels and government security forces do enough killing. For instance, the frequently used definitions from the Correlates of War project and Uppsala Conflict Data Program and Peace Research Institute Oslo require both sides to inflict a minimum number of deaths on each other. In the Correlates of War project definition, at least 1,000 battle-related combatant deaths must occur in a 12-month period, with the weaker side inflicting at least 5 percent of the fatalities, for the conflict to qualify

22. Elisabeth Schauer and Thomas Elbert, "The Psychological Impact of Child Soldiering," in *Trauma Rehabilitation After War and Conflict*, ed. Erin Martz (New York: Springer, 2010), 335.

23. Steenkamp, "Legacy of War," 254.

24. Lejoyeux et al., "Impulse Control Disorders," 310, 314; Kotler et al., "Anger," 162–67; Good and Hinton, "Introduction"; and Fairbank, Putnam, and Harris, "Child Traumatic Stress," 240.

as a civil war.²⁵ By definition, civil war cannot occur unless rebels kill 50 members of the government or security forces.

Mechanism 2: Trauma, Opportunity, and Civil War

Trauma may also serve as a remote cause for civil war by making war more feasible. In this instance, instead of directly causing civil war, trauma amplifies the direct cause—feasibility—such that an increase in trauma rates makes civil war more achievable. This explanation argues civil war becomes more likely as opportunity increases.²⁶ For example, when the effectiveness of a government's security force decreases, the opportunity for civil war increases. Similarly, as recruiting rebels becomes easier, the opportunity for civil war increases. In this context, higher rates of trauma help explain how rebel recruitment can become easier and why security force effectiveness might decrease, even if factors such as the number of troops and defense spending remain the same.

In countries with high rates of trauma, governments recruit bureaucrats and members of the security force from the pool of increasingly traumatized citizens. Increased exposure to traumatic stressors results in more substance abuse, a greater prevalence of mental illness, and negative changes to the brain.²⁷ These factors would make the government's security force less capable and therefore less effective. Although no studies of trauma's effects on the effectiveness of Afghan security forces, for instance, are available, RAND Corporation research on US servicemembers provides context and a potential proxy for trauma's impact on effectiveness. For example, RAND found one-third of US servicemembers diagnosed with PTSD were discharged for medical reasons between 2012 and 2015. More than a fifth of these servicemembers received an 80 percent or higher disability rating, and all received at least a 50 percent disability rating.²⁸

Mental illness can also play a role in recruiting rebels since it correlates strongly with unemployment. An estimated 60 to 90 percent of people with mental illness will be unemployed at some point.²⁹ Unemployment results in loss of income, which makes it easier to recruit rebels using financial incentives. In low-income

25. Meredith Reid Sarkees, "Codebook for the Intra-State Wars v.4.0: Definitions and Variables" (working paper, Correlates of War project, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2000), <https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/COW-war/intra-state-war-data-codebook>.

26. Collier, Hoeffler, and Rohner, "Beyond Greed and Grievance."

27. Deborah Weber and Cecil Reynolds, "Clinical Perspectives on Neurobiological Effects of Psychological Trauma," *Neuropsychology Review* 14, no. 2 (2004); and Anke Karl et al., "A Meta-Analysis of Structural Brain Abnormalities in PTSD," *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 30, no. 7 (2006).

28. Heather Krull et al., *Post-9/11 Trends in Medical Separation and Separation for Service Members with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021).

29. Deborah Schofield et al., "The Personal and National Costs of Mental Health Conditions: Impacts on Income, Taxes, Government Support Payments Due to Lost Labour Force Participation," *BMC Psychiatry* 11, no. 1 (2011): 72; and Ruth Crowther et al., "Helping People with Severe Mental Illness to Obtain Work: Systematic Review," *BMJ* 322, no. 7,280 (2001).

states, where the majority of civil wars occur, the effects of job loss are more pronounced because a larger portion of the population lives paycheck to paycheck, and unemployment benefits are not available.

In sum, trauma may serve as a remote cause for the feasibility (or opportunity) argument for civil war, since more trauma may decrease security force effectiveness and ease conditions for the recruitment of rebels. This in turn makes civil war more likely.

Mechanism 3: Trauma, Motivation, and Civil War

Trauma may also serve as a remote cause for civil war by increasing grievances among the population, which increases their motivation to rebel. This theory suggests people rebel against their governments when sufficiently motivated by grievances, greed, or a combination of both.³⁰ Trauma provides a rationale for the variation of grievances among countries when the traditional grievance measures of government type, ethnolinguistic fractionalization, and religious differences remain the same. Scholars have argued civil wars should be more likely in autocratic states because the citizens do not have a way to participate in their governance. Conversely, democracies should be less likely to experience civil wars because the citizens have ways (such as voting and petitioning elected representatives) to participate in democratic processes.

People in high-trauma states should be more aggrieved and, therefore, more motivated to rebel than their low-trauma counterparts. By definition, victims of man-made trauma have legitimate grievances that often persist long after traumatic events have ended. Casualties of torture, war, and rape can point to a specific person or group as the source of their pain. In these cases, grievances increase in a general sense, and these human-caused stressors contribute to an “us versus them” mindset. In response, trauma victims and their loved ones are likely to become more motivated to rebel, and they have a ready-made “them” against whom to execute their violence.

Large-scale trauma and hatred go hand in hand. After experiencing a traumatic stressor, people frequently manifest intense anger.³¹ In research conducted in Afghanistan, Barbara Cardozo and her colleagues noted high levels of hatred across survey respondents—84 percent reported feeling “a lot” of or “extreme” hatred, and 62 percent reported they had endured four or more traumatic events

30. Collier, Hoeffler, and Rohner, “Beyond Greed and Grievance.”

31. Linda Young and Elizabeth Gibb, “Trauma and Grievance,” in *Understanding Trauma: A Psychoanalytical Approach*, ed. Caroline Garland (London: Duckworth, 1998), 81.

within the past 10 years, which is approximately nine times the trauma rate found in other countries.³²

Many trauma victims look for an opportunity to redress their grievances.³³ Linda Young and Elizabeth Gibb present a continuum along which grievances can be assuaged. On one end of the spectrum, an apology suffices. At the other end, justice requires violent revenge.³⁴ A study of rape and nonsexual assault victims revealed a “relatively high” preference for revenge. For some of these victims, even “an eye for an eye” was insufficient; these victims desired acts of “extreme and unending” violence against those who harmed them.³⁵

Summary

Trauma helps improve our understanding of civil war in three ways. First, it provides an explanation for why and how violence becomes normalized within a society as a legitimate way to achieve goals and resolve problems. Second, trauma may serve as a remote cause for the opportunity theory of civil war by decreasing the effectiveness of the government’s security forces and making the recruitment of rebels easier. Finally, trauma may serve as a remote cause of the motivation theory for civil war by increasing the sense of grievance and the desire for revenge among the population.

Testing the Trauma Theory of Civil War

This section reports the results of a large-n statistical analysis that included the creation of a trauma index and trauma variables for testing and the results from three statistical tests. For more information on the data and statistical analysis, please contact the author at egoepner@masonlive.gmu.edu.

Trauma Index

The trauma index includes all countries in the international system in any given year and the countries’ scores in four areas. The first three areas include the most pernicious forms of traumatic stressors: torture, rape, and war. The fourth

32. Barbara Cardozo, “Mental Health, Social Functioning, and Disability in Postwar Afghanistan,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 292, no. 5 (2004): 575, 583; and Kate Scott et al., “Associations between Lifetime Traumatic Events and Subsequent Chronic Physical Conditions: A Cross-National, Cross-Sectional Study,” *PLOS ONE* 8, no. 11 (2013).

33. Young and Gibb, “Trauma and Grievance”; Uli Orth, “Punishment Goals of Crime Victims,” *Law and Human Behavior* 27, no. 2 (2003); Garth Davies, Edith Wu, and Richard Frank, “A Witch’s Brew of Grievances: The Potential Effects of COVID-19 on Radicalization to Violent Extremism,” Taylor and Francis Online, May 10, 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1923188?scroll=top&needAccess=true>; and David Mendeloff, “Trauma and Vengeance: Assessing the Psychological and Emotional Effects of Post-Conflict Justice,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 31 (2009).

34. Young and Gibb, “Trauma and Grievance.”

35. Orth, “Punishment Goals,” 179, 183.

captures more general forms of trauma, such as natural disasters. The trauma index provides a country-by-country snapshot from 1990 to 2014. Each country receives an annual score from zero to 100, with each of the four areas representing 25 percent of the score. (Earl Babbie and others recommend equal weighting unless compelling circumstances suggest doing otherwise. No methodological or theoretical concerns existed with the trauma variables, so I used equal weighting.)³⁶ Higher scores indicate higher rates of trauma.

The four areas of the index comprise nine variables, eight of which come from established data sets.

- The author created the ninth variable, which measures the prevalence of rape, using data from the Department of State and Amnesty International. The methodology and scoring criteria for the rape variable followed Dara Kay Cohen and Ragnhild Nordås's work on rape and sexual violence during war.³⁷
- The torture component comprises an average of the Political Terror Scale and Cingranelli-Richards Human Rights dataset torture measures.³⁸ These data measure the amount of torture and political violence occurring within each country.
- The measure for war trauma comprises three variables: years of peace, battle deaths per capita, and area of the country affected by fighting. The data came from the Correlates of War project, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, the Peace Research Institute Oslo, and the Center for Systemic Peace.
- The general trauma category consists of disasters, mortality rates for persons under the age of 40, and internally displaced persons or refugees. These data came from the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, the UN Population Division, the Center for Systemic Peace, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

36. Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 14th ed. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2015), 164; Frederik Booyen, "An Overview and Evaluation of Composite Indices of Development," *Social Indicators Research* 59, no. 2 (August 2002): 127–28; and Michela Nardo et al., *Handbook on Constructing Composite Indicators: Methodology and User Guide* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008), 31.

37. Dara Kay Cohen, "Explaining Rape during Civil War: Cross-National Evidence (1980–2009)," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 3 (2013); and Dara Kay Cohen and Ragnhild Nordås, "Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Introducing the SVAC Dataset, 1989–2009," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 3 (2014).

38. "Data," Political Terror Scale (website), n.d., <https://www.politicalterrorsscale.org/Data/>; and "The CIRI Human Rights Dataset, Version 2014.04.14," Harvard Dataverse (website), n.d., <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/UKCPXT>.

Table 1 shows the 10 countries with the highest and lowest trauma averages for the 25-year period.

Table 1. Countries with highest and lowest trauma averages for 25-year period

Highest Trauma		Lowest Trauma	
Country	Score	Country	Score
Sudan	76	Luxembourg	0
Afghanistan	75	Finland	2
Somalia	74	Iceland	2
Democratic Republic of the Congo	69	Norway	3
India	68	Brunei	4
Colombia	67	Malta	4
Iraq	64	Denmark	5
Myanmar	63	Netherlands	5
Uganda	63	Grenada	6
Sri Lanka	62	Samoa	6

As Table 2 shows, countries that descended into civil war had experienced substantially higher trauma levels before the wars began. For instance, trauma scores more than doubled from an average of 27 for all countries not at war to 57 for those that would experience civil war within three years' time.

Table 2. Trauma index means

		Trauma Scores			
No Civil War	Three Years Prior	Two Years Prior	One Year Prior	Civil War Ongoing	
27.34	57.00	54.22	57.49	68.90	

Tests and Results

As trauma increased, so did the likelihood of civil war. Trauma consistently showed a positive and statistically significant relationship with the prevalence of civil war across all three statistical tests.

This study analyzed every country in the international system with a population of at least 100,000 for the 25-year period (1990–2014). Previous studies have found only three variables consistently significant: population size,

income per capita, and economic growth rates. More specifically, more populous countries have more civil war, as do poorer countries and countries with shrinking economies. As such, all tests controlled for these variables.

Because everyone accepts civil war results in more trauma, steps should be taken to ensure the tests measure trauma's effect on civil war rather than inadvertently capturing civil war's effect on trauma. Without taking appropriate steps to deconflict the confounding effect of war-related trauma, the argument can become circular. Trauma may increase the prevalence of civil war, but civil war also increases the prevalence of trauma. In circumstances like these, quantitative researchers recommend the use of instrumental variable estimation to address the possibility trauma and civil war simultaneously cause each other. (Instrumental variable estimation produces a consistent estimator when, for instance, concerns x causes y and y causes x exist simultaneously).³⁹ In the civil-war literature, however, researchers rarely use instrumental variables. Instead, researchers use logistic regression and lag the independent variables. As a result, their statistical models would compare, for example, income levels in 1999 with civil wars in 2000. By lagging variables like income levels, researchers hope to eliminate the second half of the circular argument, which says civil war lowers income levels. This study used both instrumental variables and logistic regression with lagged variables.

The statistical analyses used three variations of the dependent variable for civil war: the Armed Conflict Dataset with a minimum of 1,000 battle-related deaths, the Armed Conflict Dataset with a minimum of 25 battle-related deaths, and the Correlates of War data set with 1,000 or more battle-related deaths. Data for the control variables—population size, income, and economic growth rates—came from the World Bank.⁴⁰

Finally, to parse whether the trauma index may be a proxy for previous war, the study ran models to determine whether trauma remained a significant factor after controlling for previous war (trauma remained significant).

First Test: Logistic Regression with Random Effects

In the first test, trauma had a significant effect on the prevalence of civil war. The model indicated for each one-point increase in the trauma index score, the likelihood of future civil war increased by 9 percent. In addition, population was significant; as population size grew, so did the likelihood of civil war. Economic

39. Peter Kennedy, *A Guide to Econometrics*, 6th ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 139–41.

40. "Population, Total," World Bank Open Data (website), n.d., <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL>; and "GDP per Capita (Current US\$)," World Bank Open Data (website), n.d., <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD> (page discontinued).

growth was also significant; as the economy shrank, the risk of civil war increased. Income, however, was not a significant factor.

Second Test: Logistic Regression with Fixed Effects

In the second test, trauma again had a significant effect on the prevalence of civil war. The model indicated for each one-point increase in the trauma index score, the likelihood of future civil war increased by 7 percent. Population was again significant. As population size grew, so did the likelihood of civil war. Income was also significant. As personal income shrank, the risk of civil war increased. Nevertheless, economic growth was not a significant factor.

Third Test: Two-Stage Least Squares

In the third test, trauma had a significant effect on the prevalence of civil war. The models indicated for each one-point increase in the trauma index score, the likelihood of future civil war increased by 7 percent. Population was again significant. As population size grew, so did the likelihood of civil war. Economic variables returned inconsistent results. Economic growth was significant in one of the two model specifications, and income was not significant in either.

Marginal Effects of Trauma on the Probability of Civil War

When trauma and the three control variables were held at their averages, civil war had a near-zero, 0.30 percent probability of occurring in any given country in any given year. A 10-point increase in trauma from its median value of 26 (to 36) only increased the probability of civil war to 0.95 percent in any given country in any given year. Once a country reached a trauma score of 57, however, the likelihood of civil war rose to one in 10. If a trauma score rose to 65, the country had a 20 percent chance of experiencing civil war the following year.

Summary

Trauma appears to have a significant and positive relationship with the prevalence of civil war. The use of instrumental variables to test the trauma theory suggests the relationship may be causal—higher trauma levels among a population cause more civil war, regardless of whether the countries experienced war previously. The relationship appears to be robust because it remained strong

across all four areas of the trauma index, multiple statistical tests, and alternate specifications of the dependent variable.

Recommendations

Do Not Intervene Militarily in the Civil Wars of Trauma States

Countries with high rates of trauma will experience more future civil war. This correlation appears to be driven partly by the normalization of violence that follows severe and repetitive trauma exposure, which presents intervening actors like the US military with a dilemma. Intervention in a trauma state such as Afghanistan has a low chance of achieving an enduring peace, leaving the intervening party stuck in an enduring conflict. Each new surge of military forces and financial aid may become tomorrow's sunk costs, and no president wants to admit failure occurred on his or her watch. Moreover, military intervention may inadvertently make the situation worse. For example, Afghanistan's trauma score rose during the five-year period after US forces arrived when compared to the country's trauma score from the five-year period prior to intervention, and the level of trauma remained elevated as of 2014 (the last year of the trauma index). An increase in the number of combatants increases trauma rates for the population, intensifying trauma's negative effects and further normalizing the use of violence. The likelihood of continued civil war increases in response to military intervention.

Plan for the Negative Effects of Trauma before Intervening

Currently, US policymakers, intelligence professionals, and military planners do not consider a nation's trauma before intervening in the nation's civil war. Ignoring this important factor suggests US policies have been suboptimal.

Since the beginning of the "global war on terrorism," the US military has adapted significantly in multiple areas. Intelligence estimates that once focused on the physical terrain now analyze the "human terrain"—the psychological, cultural, and behavioral attributes of the populations American forces seek to protect.⁴¹ Military members have learned the languages, customs, and histories of the

41. *Nomination of General David H. Petraeus, USA, for Reappointment to the Grade of General, and to Be Commander, International Security Assistance Force, and Commander, United States Forces Afghanistan, Before the Senate Committee on Armed Services*, 111th Cong. (2010) (statement of David H. Petraeus, commander, United States Central Command); and Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), *Counterinsurgency*, Joint Publication 3-24 (Washington, DC: JCS, 2018), https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_24.pdf.

countries in which the members fight. But the degree to which Afghans and Iraqis have already been traumatized has gone unexamined.

As the Department of Defense now recognizes the significant effects PTSD and other mental health problems can have on American troops, military planners and policymakers should account for a foreign nation's mental health status before intervening in an ongoing civil war. Had planners and policymakers analyzed the Afghan population before embarking on a decade-and-a-half of nation building, the analysis would have cast significant doubt on the prospects for peace. If planners and policymakers continue to ignore the impact of trauma on a population's mental health status, they will fail to account for important factors that affect the war outcome they seek to control.

Treat Trauma as a National Security Concern

Although it has traditionally been viewed as a humanitarian crisis, the traumatization of a population is also a legitimate security concern. Naturally, human suffering should elicit empathy among concerned citizens and a humanitarian response from the agencies available to provide help. Additionally, trauma should cause international organizations and sovereign states to estimate the future security impacts of war. If more trauma in a population's past results in more future civil war, then security-focused entities like the Department of Defense and the CIA should be using the data to predict and plan accordingly.

Deploy Evidence-Based Mental Health Capabilities to Trauma States

Optimally, support would be deployed before a trauma state descended into civil war. Failing that, the military or a government partner should apply mental health capabilities to mitigate trauma's negative effects, especially as related to host-nation government officials and security force members who will be essential in achieving an enduring peace.

To the ears of warfighters, including such soft capabilities may sound incompatible with the nature of war. But these capabilities align with US Joint doctrine, which states countering an insurgency requires "the blend of comprehensive . . . efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes."⁴² In simpler language, such effort means killing and capturing rebels while also supporting the population through "political, psychological, and economic methods." Although current counterinsurgency doctrine does not mention the mental health of the host nation, trauma and its negative effects fit nicely with

42. JCS, *Counterinsurgency*, xiii.

the military's emphasis on addressing "root causes" and supporting the population through psychological methods.⁴³

Use the Trauma Index in Predictive Models to Anticipate Civil-War Locations

Organizations like the CIA, the Department of Defense, and the Department of State have used predictive modeling to anticipate state failure and national crises.⁴⁴ The addition of the trauma index and its variables should improve such models' predictive power. Initial comparisons with models that include widely used variables (income, economic growth, and population size) indicate the addition of the trauma index improves the models. This is suggested by the results of different measures often used in model selection, such as Akaike information criterion, Bayesian information criterion, and receiver-operating characteristic analysis.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The data suggest a statistically significant relationship exists between the level of trauma previously experienced by a national population and the prevalence of civil war in the country's future (which holds regardless of past war). The theory underlying this observation proposes a causal linkage between trauma and civil war. As citizens are exposed to more frequent and severe traumatic stressors, they succumb to higher rates of mental illness, substance abuse, and diminished impulse control. On average, traumatized individuals use violence more frequently in their daily lives, and violence becomes increasingly normalized as a way to resolve problems and achieve goals. As a result, the threshold at which potential rebels use deadly force against their government decreases and the likelihood of civil war rises.

Trauma may also increase the prevalence of civil war indirectly by amplifying factors associated with the opportunity and motivation theories. First, governments and security forces should become less effective as they recruit from increasingly traumatized populations. Second, rebel recruitment should be easier because more trauma results in more unemployment, which lowers opportunity costs. Third, traumatized individuals have genuine grievances that can motivate

43. JCS, *Counterinsurgency*, III-4, IV-2.

44. Daniel Etsy et al., "State Failure Task Force Report: Phase II Findings," *Environmental Change & Security Project Report 5* (Summer 1999): 49–72; and Sean O'Brien, "Crisis Early Warning and Decision Support: Contemporary Approaches and Thoughts on Future Research," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2010).

45. Kennedy, *Guide to Econometrics*, 95; and Kelly H. Zou, James O'Malley, and Laura Mauri, "Receiver-Operating Characteristic Analysis for Evaluating Diagnostic Tests and Predictive Models," *Circulation* 115, no. 5 (February 6, 2007): 654–57.

them to use violence, and they often have a specific person or group they hold responsible for their pain.

The relationship between trauma and civil war has profound implications for policymakers, planners, and warfighters. Once started, the vicious cycle of trauma and violence is hard to stop. This feedback mechanism decreases the likelihood intervening actors like the United States will be able to end a civil war.

Erik W. Goepner

Dr. Erik W. Goepner has a PhD in public policy from George Mason University. A retired US Air Force colonel, he currently works as a civil servant in the federal government.

Select Bibliography

- American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2013.
- Collier, Paul, Anke Hoeffler, and Dominic Rohner. "Beyond Greed and Grievance" Feasibility and Civil War." *Oxford Economic Papers* 61, no. 1 (2009): 1–27.
- Elbadawi, Ibrahim, and Nicholas Sambanis. "How Much War Will We See? Explaining the Prevalence of Civil War." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 3 (2002), 307–34.
- Fearon, James D., and David D. Laitin. "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War." *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75–90.
- Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Counterinsurgency*, Joint Publication 3-24. Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018.
- Karl, Anke, et al. "A Meta-Analysis of Structural Brain Abnormalities in PTSD." *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 30, no. 7 (2006): 1004–31.
- Steel, Zachary, et al. "Association of Torture and Other Potentially Traumatic Events with Mental Health Outcomes among Populations Exposed to Mass Conflict and Displacement." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 302 no. 5 (2009): 537–49, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/184348>.
- Van Dorn, Richard, Jan Volavka, and Norman Johnson. "Mental Disorder and Violence: Is There a Relationship beyond Substance Use?" *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 47, no. 3 (2011): 487–503.

Assessing the Army's Cyber Force Structure

John Fernandes, Nicolas Starck, Richard Shmel, Charles Suslowicz, Jan Kallberg, and Todd Arnold

ABSTRACT: The skill and capacity of Army cyber forces have grown in the decade since their creation. This article focuses on needed structural changes to the Army's portion of the Cyber Mission Forces that will enable their continued growth and maturity since the Army's past organizational and structural decisions impose challenges impacting current and future efficiency and effectiveness. This assessment of the current situation highlights the areas military leadership must address to allow the Army's cyber forces to continue evolving to meet the needs of multi-domain operations.

Keywords: workforce development, task organization, cyberspace operations, unity of effort, unity of command

Training and equipping a new military force capable of conducting operations in a new domain is an iterative process. The last time the United States embarked on such an effort was the birth of aviation units and the emergence of the air domain at the dawn of the twentieth century. Tactics, force structures, and strategies for utilizing the new capabilities evolved after the establishment of military aviation but were defined and limited by the lack of crisis at the time. World War II forced the rapid maturation of the Air Corps and resulted in the creation of the US Army Air Corps, a cohesive fighting force designed for the challenges of the air domain.¹ Like the Army Air Corps, the Army's cyber forces are reaching maturity with tangible capabilities and operational experience against adversaries and will benefit from assessing the impacts of prior organizational and personnel decisions in preparation for multi-domain operations.

A significant and sophisticated intrusion into military networks provided the impetus for standing up US Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM) and for cyberspace to join air, sea, land, and space as a warfighting domain. The Army and the Department of Defense (DoD) have made significant strides to establish

1. Tami Davis Biddle, *Air Power and Warfare: A Century of Theory and History* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2019), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/378/>.

competence within the domain.² From a force structure perspective, major highlights include:

- establishing US Army Cyber Command (ARCYBER) in 2010;
- forming an offensive cyber force by creating the 780th Military Intelligence Brigade (Cyber) in 2011;
- creating the Cyber Protection Brigade (CPB) in 2014 to house the defensive force;
- establishing the 915th Cyberspace Warfare Battalion (CWB) in 2019 for tactical cyberspace electromagnetic activities requirements, and all Cyber Mission Force (CMF) teams; and
- achieving full operational capability in 2018.

On the personnel front, the Army established the Cyber branch in 2014 and integrated electronic warfare in 2018. Recently, the Army formalized the cyberspace capabilities development officer/warrant officer military occupational specialties (MOSs) to provide the organic ability to design and create specific cyberspace capabilities.

From doctrine to training to organization, the branch and the cyber units have had to identify needs, experiment, and develop solutions to meet the evolving demands of cyberspace operations. In this article, we examine the challenges associated with two initial force structure decisions and provide considerations for overcoming them.

First, when the Army created its cyber units, offensive and defensive cyber operations were isolated within two distinct and separate brigades. The historical divide continues with unintended consequences. Despite creating a new branch and military occupational specialties, the organizational decision to separate offensive cyber operations (OCO) and defensive cyber operations (DCO) negatively impacted personnel and resourcing.

Second, these units have complex chains of command with separate administrative control (ADCON) and operational control (OPCON) relationships. Currently, the operational command of a cyber team is not aligned with the team's administration and leadership, including personnel ratings, property accountability, Unified Code of Military Justice authority, and

2. William J. Lynn III, "Defending a New Domain: The Pentagon's Cyberstrategy," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2010, 97-108, <https://www-foreignaffairs-com.usawc.idm.oclc.org/articles/united-states/2010-09-01/defending-new-domain>.

command itself (for example, a company commander tracks a cyber team's training and medical readiness while the team lead is responsible for daily operations). These complexities cause confusion and consternation and hamper unity of effort.

While these organizational decisions were deliberate and motivated by operational demands, they hindered unity of effort within the Army's cyber forces, imposing organizational and operational costs. Introspection is occurring across the joint cyber community. With all CMF teams recently achieving full operational capacity, US Cyber Command is evaluating its current size and requesting additional teams to be fielded by the Army and Air Force.³ To bring a more unified approach to cyberspace, the Air Force realigned its internal components' structure and composition by redesignating and reassigning several units under the 67th Cyberspace Wing.⁴ Now is an ideal time to re-examine the Army's internal structures to support cyberspace operations better. The Army would be remiss to ignore the implications of past decisions made of necessity without reassessing their effectiveness. We argue the Army must push for greater unity within the Cyber branch so the organization continues to progress as an effective fighting force in cyberspace.

Background

The majority of the decade since US Cyber Command and US Army Cyber Command's establishment was dedicated to building and training the force. While the inchoate force stood up teams, designed—and redesigned—training pipelines for various specialties, and struggled to recruit and retain talent, the forces were in constant contact.⁵ The Army's original concept was to provide 41 teams, and shortly after that the mandate expanded to include 21 reserve component defensive Cyber Protection Teams (CPTs) (11 Army National Guard and 10 Army Reserve).⁶ To meet this immense manning requirement, planners drew soldiers primarily from the Military Intelligence (MI) and Signal Corps (SC) branches, the two branches already engaged in offensive and defensive cyber operations. The rapid

3. *Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Request for U.S. Cyber Command and Operations in Cyberspace: Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Intelligence and Emerging Threats and Capabilities, US House of Representatives*, 116th Cong. (2020), <https://www.congress.gov/116/chrg/CHRG-116hhrg40605/CHRG-116hhrg40605.pdf>; and Mark Pomerleau, "Cyber Command's Force Is Growing, in Part, to Support Space," FEDSCOOP (website), April 8, 2022, <https://www.fedscoop.com/cyber-commands-force-is-growing-in-part-to-support-space/>.

4. Mark Pomerleau, "Air Force Revamps Its Teams for U.S. Cyber Command," C4ISRNET (website), September 18, 2020, <https://www.c4isrnet.com/cyber/2020/09/18/air-force-revamps-its-teams-for-us-cyber-command/>.

5. Jim Garamone, "Rogers Outlines Cyber Challenges Facing DoD, U.S.," Department of Defense (website), September 9, 2015, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/616569/rogers-outlines-cyber-challenges-facing-dod-us/>.

6. Edward Cardon, "2014 Green Book: Army Cyber Command and Second Army," US Army (website), September 30, 2014, <https://www.army.mil/article/134857/>; and *US Army Cyber Posture: Hearing before the Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Cybersecurity*, 115th Cong. (2017) (statement of Lieutenant General Paul M. Nakasone, Commanding General, US Cyber Command), https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Nakasone_05-23-17.pdf.

assembly of personnel into “cyber” units (the branch was not yet approved) brought the unique attitudes, traditions, and perspectives of the previous branches to the units. Given the immediate operational necessity created by adversary activity, personnel assignments and missions aligned with the previous branch’s mission. Signal Corps soldiers were assigned to the cyber protection brigade, and intelligence soldiers were assigned to the 780th Military Intelligence Brigade. As a result, the early incarnations of the branch’s units did not share a common attitude, mission, or understanding of each other’s capabilities.

Similarly, the Army’s basic manning requirement to field 41 teams placed immense stress on the entire chain of command of its nascent cyber units.⁷ The Army Cyber School, responsible for individual MOS training, was not established until 2015, so training fell upon the cyber brigades.⁸ The preponderance of training still falls on the brigades due to specific training requirements for each cyber work role—a jointly defined job standard similar to a MOS (we discuss work-roles in more detail later in the article).

Training and equipping incoming personnel and organizing them into teams was the brigades’ all-consuming mission. When a team achieved initial operational capability, it was turned over to its operational command. Once a team achieved full operational capacity, the ADCON chain of command maintained the team’s full operational capacity manning and began building the next team. This task separation enabled the Army chain of command to focus on building teams while separate operational commands focused on employing the teams. However, this process crystallized the administrative control and operational control split into a permanent fixture. The decision to build units aggressively and prioritize arbitrary checkpoints enabled the Army to achieve required operational readiness conditions rapidly, but at the expense of developing the most effective and efficient units.

Ultimately, these organizational challenges—the offensive cyber operations and defensive cyber operations split and divided chains of command—and the resulting personnel challenges are a by-product of the herculean effort necessary to overcome the traditional glacial pace of the Department of Defense and Army bureaucracy. However, the cyber force has matured and gained operational

7. Cardon, “Army Cyber Command.”

8. George I. Seffers, “U.S. Army Builds Cyber Branch One Step at a Time,” *Signal Magazine*, Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association, April 1, 2015, <https://www.afcea.org/signal-media/education/us-army-builds-cyber-branch-one-step-time>.

experience, and the situation has changed. The Army must reassess prior decisions and adjust to meet the force's and nation's long-term needs.

Offense and Defense Split

Siloing the force's offensive and defensive elements created barriers within the force that are continually being reinforced, including operational and cultural challenges and impacting the soldiers and civilians who comprise the Army's cyberspace forces.

Under the current structure, the Cyber branch has effectively created specialization in offense or defense roles, with soldiers' designations determined by their initial assignment. Once inside the offensive or defensive silo, personnel cannot easily move between workspaces, discuss missions, or build a cohesive culture. Personnel in both offensive and defensive units complete a job qualification record (JQR) to demonstrate proficiency for a specific work role. This time-consuming process entails specialized training, requires operational experience, and introduces a significant organizational cost to transfer between offense and defense. These artificial barriers foster the incorrect belief that experience in one form of cyber operation does not translate to the other and bifurcates the branch.

The centralized selection lists exemplify the reinforcement of this bifurcation. Individuals selected to lead offensive cyber units primarily have an offensive background (and military intelligence origin). Defensive units are generally led by officers with defensive (and Signal Corps) experience. Although introducing the Assignment Interactive Module (AIM) Marketplace provided increased autonomy to soldiers, it created another avenue through which a soldier can be designated as a specific type of cyber soldier. Leaders now have an opportunity to screen future subordinate leaders for previous experience within a particular operational facet. While valuable on the surface, this possibility reinforces the chance of a first assignment determining a soldier's career path.

Since military operations and the cyberspace domain are complex, specialization can be beneficial and desirable. However, structural separation between offense and defensive cyberspace units and operations combined with the inadvertent individual specialization in defensive or offensive cyber operations creates potential problems.

Challenges

While the barriers have changed over time, the potential for real or perceived preferential status exists while two distinct silos exist. Initially, the DCO forces were built from scratch, while OCO forces could leverage existing, albeit limited, expertise. The additional accesses, authorities, infrastructure, and training required for successful offensive cyber operations fostered a feeling of superiority or preferential status for the units rather than a recognition of the requirements for successful offensive cyber operations. This perception is exacerbated by the additional support attached to offensive cyber units (for example, military intelligence support and developer capacity). This skewed perspective—of importance, impact, and necessity—can damage morale and result in dangerous implications for planning and resourcing.

These perceptions regarding superiority and preferential treatment can have resounding impacts on unit morale, retention, and culture. Consequently, members of the negatively perceived group (defensive cyber operations) may attempt to become a member of the positively perceived group (offensive cyber operations) if possible.⁹ Since mobility between offense and defense has been relatively constrained, the members of the negatively perceived group may change their valuation method.¹⁰ For example, defensive cyber operations could redefine their internal value as the total number of missions executed rather than resources allocated. However, these changes in valuation can increase differences in culture between defensive and offensive cyber operations. Alternatively, the negatively perceived group may “activate competitive strategies to achieve a positive social identity” with the unintended negative outcomes of subgroup conflict.¹¹ Specialization heightens this perception of conflict and may cause job dissatisfaction, frustration, and morale problems.¹² At the organizational level, there may be a rise in the promotion of self-interest of the subgroups (defensive and offensive), along with additional organizational cost to manage where the subgroups intersect, such as requirements for schoolhouse training, operational support from ARCYBER or CYBERCOM, or the Army’s requirement process.¹³

The perspective mentioned above results in the Army’s defensive cyber forces being unnecessarily deprioritized. Specialized skillsets like capability development (creating hardware or software solutions) and reverse engineering (deconstructing

9. Samuel Fernández-Salinero and Gabriela Topa, “Intergroup Discrimination as a Predictor of Conflict within the Same Organization: The Role of Organizational Identity,” *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education* 10, no. 1 (May 2019), <https://www.mdpi.com/2254-9625/10/1/1>.

10. Fernández-Salinero and Topa, “Intergroup Discrimination.”

11. Fernández-Salinero and Topa, “Intergroup Discrimination.”

12. Bernard Oladosu Omisore and Ashimi Rashidat Abiodun, “Organizational Conflicts: Causes, Effects and Remedies,” *International Journal of Academic Research in Economics and Management Services* 3, no. 6 (Nov 2014), <https://www.mdpi.com/2254-9625/10/1/1>.

13. Omisore and Abiodun, “Organizational Conflicts.”

an unknown piece of hardware or software to determine how it functions) were seen as offensive functions and placed in OCO units, even though they are also critical for effective incident response. Like personnel prioritization impacts resource allocation, decisions will also be shaped by an environment where the offense is viewed as superior, more critical, or more challenging. The unintended personnel and resource implications of the perceptions of offensive and defensive cyberspace operations work in opposition to the relative restrictions placed on the conduct of different operations based on legal authorities. Given the potential global implications, the authority to conduct offensive cyber operations is held by US Cyber Command, given the appropriate determinations by the National Command Authority (the president, secretary of defense, or designee).¹⁴ By contrast, a standing authority requires defensive cyber operations be conducted on the Department of Defense information networks, with authority delegated to the service-component organizations like Army Cyber Command.¹⁵ This requirement suggests defensive cyber operation should have fewer internal barriers and more freedom of action. However, even when network owners fully cooperate with a defensive mission, it can take days or weeks to work through organizational hurdles, gather resources, and take necessary network actions. Deliberate effort and attention by commanders are needed to address the inequalities in perception and resourcing to resolve those issues and their resulting operational harms.

At the individual level, this disparity in treatment feeds myopia across the branch regarding the capabilities and requirements of different cyberspace missions. Bright young soldiers are lured to specific units with the promise of more glamorous offensive work, preventing their exposure to the challenging, multitudinous, and critical defensive cyber work required across the Army. Failure to expose officers and noncommissioned officers to the full spectrum of cyberspace operations feeds a dangerous misconception that advanced understanding is not portable to different aspects of the cyberspace domain and that the highest levels of proficiency do not require both perspectives.

Siloing reduces our effectiveness in planning and executing operations by limiting cross-pollination between the offensive and defensive forces. A critical tenet of Army planning is that the “enemy has a vote.” This belief is codified in our doctrine, with the enemy being a mission variable and enemy analysis being a portion of intelligence preparation of the battlefield and part of paragraph

14. Robert Chesney, “The Domestic Legal Framework for US Military Cyber Operations,” Hoover Working Group on National Security, Technology, and Law, Aegis Series Paper No. 2003 (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, July 2020), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/Delivery.cfm/SSRN_ID3668463_code119080.pdf?abstractid=3668463&mirid=1.

15. Center for Strategic Leadership, *Strategic Cyberspace Operations Guide* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, August 2021), https://csl.armywarcollege.edu/USACSL/Publications/Strategic_Cyberspace_Operations_Guide.pdf.

one of the operations order.¹⁶ Soldiers with significant experience in either offensive or defensive cyber operations can provide unique and critical insights into the other forms of operation.¹⁷ When we look to the field Army, the billets for cyber officers (17A and 17B) are primarily planner roles down to the brigade level, where cyber officers will be responsible for planning and integrating offensive, defensive, and electronic warfare capabilities. An officer whose career has only exposed them to one facet may not be able to utilize the other two aspects as effectively.

The partitioning of cyber forces exacerbates problems posed by the small size of the branch. With a single brigade for both offense and defense, leaders who stay within those silos can have outsized impacts. Battalion commanders return as brigade commanders, and their leadership styles, command climates, and assessments of subordinate leaders endure beyond the typical two-year command and further reinforce the force's cultural divide. It becomes less likely commanders will bring a fresh perspective, and units become more susceptible to dangerous forms of groupthink. Subordinates who interact negatively with a leader can anticipate meeting with the leader repeatedly, creating an environment suited to the establishment of fiefdoms and other forms of counterproductive leadership.

Considerations for Mitigation

Without deliberate effort, the challenges stemming from the bifurcation of offensive and defensive cyber capabilities will remain unsolved. While the Military Intelligence and Signal Corps branch lineages are less immediate, the resulting latent cultural and functional divisions remain. From senior leaders down to individuals serving on offensive and defensive teams, we must acknowledge all these challenges and actively work to minimize their effects. Bridging the divide may include deliberately seeking the opposite perspective when planning operations, seeking collaboration opportunities across silos, and conducting leader professional development programs to expose personnel to the other areas. At times, it may mean putting unit pride aside to acknowledge the contributions of the entire force. Professional military education should provide the impetus for this balanced exposure that is expanded through self-development and the

16. Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), *The Operations Process*, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 5-0 (Washington, DC: HQDA, July 2019), https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN18126-ADP_5-0-000-WEB-3.pdf.

17. Chuck Suslowicz, Jan Kallberg, and Todd Arnold, "Government Cyber Breach Shows Need for Convergence," C4ISRNET (website), December 28, 2020, <https://www.c4isrnet.com/opinion/2020/12/28/government-cyber-breach-shows-need-for-convergence/>.

operational domain. Below are three ways to address the challenges through the Army's systems.

Enforce Breadth of Assignments for Officers

Some branches deliberately assign officers across segments of the branch to increase the understanding of the broader branch. For instance, the Infantry branch emphasizes officers serving in heavy and light units, while other branches such as Logistics, Military Intelligence, and the Signal Corps balance serving in division and brigade combat teams with the branch-specific strategic units. The Cyber branch must do the same to prevent fracturing the force and developing senior leaders with little understanding of or experience with entire portions of the domain. As a whole, the branch must value and promote breadth of experience. For officers, this training could be accomplished after the career course, an ideal period to refresh knowledge of the other aspects of the branch. The Cyber schoolhouse could provide additional specialized training if required. Similar models are used with branch-detailed personnel and the Cyber branch's training for company-grade officers who voluntarily transfer into the branch.

Determine Appropriate Specialization within the Cyber Force

While there is a need for understanding across offensive and defensive cyber operations, the existence of work roles and the recent creation of capability developers indicate specialization is required to establish and grow proficiency. This need is especially true for enlisted personnel and warrant officers, who are typically more specialized than commissioned officers. Specialization by mission, however, may be less appropriate than specialization based on function or technology. For instance, an expert at attacking Windows systems is probably well suited to defending Windows systems as opposed to analyzing network traffic in a Linux environment. Alternatively, soldiers who worked on electronic warfare systems for four years may be challenged to train their subordinates on host-based forensics as an NCOIC in a defensive unit.

Within the Signal Corps branch, warrant officers specialize as network and system engineers (255N and 255A) and within the Cyber branch the new cyberspace capabilities development MOSs (170D, 17D) are specialized by technology, not as offense or defense. Determining the proper set and scope of specializations requires analysis of individual tasks, knowledge, skills, and behaviors across offense and defense jobs and the increasing billets outside those units. Integrating job qualification records with existing Army programs, such as Critical Task Site Selection Board, for entry-level and advanced institutional

training, individual tasks refinement, and additional skill identifiers or special qualifications identifier may help the Cyber branch identify and sustain the right specializations in the correct billets.

Consider Specialized and Integrated Units

The lineage of divided offensive and defensive units is not the only solution. The 915th Cyberspace Warfare Battalion and the Multi-Domain Task Force are steps toward more integrated cyber units. Across the Army, units dedicated to specific functions (such as combat support sustainment battalions) and units (such as brigade combat teams) integrate multiple functions to provide greater operational flexibility and internal support. The degree of mission specialization and the echelon at which to integrate functions is a multifaceted problem involving tradeoffs and should be based on careful analysis. As the cyberspace domain continues to mature, leadership should consider specialized and integrated units to meet the needs of the Army and Joint force.

Divided Chains of Command

Another structural challenge facing the Army's cyber forces is the complex chains of command constructed across the branch. At every level, cyber personnel face disconnected and competing leadership chains with conflicting priorities. Most cyber forces are assigned to Army Cyber Command, the force provider for joint and service requirements. Active-duty CMF teams are assigned to one of the two brigades for administrative control but fall under the operational control of the Cyber National Mission Force, a combatant command, or a combat support agency.

Further complicating matters, each brigade is assigned to the two-star operational headquarters of their mission's progenitor branch. The Cyber Protection Brigade is subordinate to the Network Enterprise Technology Command (a major subordinate command under the administrative control of Army Cyber Command) and the 780th Military Intelligence Brigade to the Intelligence and Security Command (a direct reporting unit to the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence).¹⁸ Within this construct, the command relationships and responsibilities are often muddled, while support relationships are rarely used or defined. The persistent separation of administrative and

18. HQDA, *Army Commands, Army Service Component Commands, and Direct Reporting Units*, Army Regulation (AR) 10-87 (Washington, DC: HQDA, December 11, 2017), https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN2541_AR10-87_WEB_Final.pdf.

operational control deleteriously affects the Army's ability to conduct effective cyberspace operations.

This divided chain of command diverges from the principles of unity of effort and unity of command and degrades the units' effectiveness and efficiencies. Operational and administrative control is split for the detachments/teams provided to the joint forces and the service-retained units. According to Army doctrine, "the chain of command assists commanders at all levels to achieve their primary function of accomplishing the unit's assigned mission while caring for personnel and property in their charge."¹⁹ However, the Army cyber force's command structure adds complexities to the key command elements and exacerbates the chain of command's challenges to serve its function.

Challenges

While units have administrative and operational requirements, they do not have enough training days to accomplish the requirements placed upon them—a challenge not unique to cyber forces.²⁰ Commanders, with the help of their staffs, make decisions and assume risks to balance competing requirements. For the nonservice retained teams, neither the commander nor the staff has administrative and operational control, nor are there structural mechanisms to prioritize and synchronize requirements. This oversight is reflected in resourcing and personnel. OPCON headquarters plan and direct operations the ADCON headquarters must fund. ADCON headquarters must also complete borrowed military manpower tasks that may directly conflict with operational requirements. Formally, no two headquarters simultaneously exercise the same command relationship on the unit. However, both headquarters effectively exert tactical control—like control, violating the principle of unity of command. Company commanders, detachment commanders/team leads, and battalion/brigade leaders can find ways to overcome these challenges and make missions happen. Based on individual personalities, their successes are achieved by overcoming structural impediments rather than being enabled by structure and processes.

Balancing operational and administrative requirements and having multiple headquarters imposing requirements is not unique to the Army's cyber forces. The scale of requirements, the echelons involved, persistence, and the evolving nature of cyberspace and the cyber force make it increasingly onerous. This imbalance manifests in two ways. First, the requirements of the administrative

19. HQDA, *Army Command Policy*, AR 600-20 (Washington, DC: HQDA, July 2020), https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN30074-AR_600-20-000-WEB-1.pdf.

20. Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and US Army War College Press, 2015), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/466>.

headquarters exceed personnel support. While some units, like those supporting the National Security Agency, need only provide an administrative structure for detached personnel, Army cyber units must provide a mix of administrative and operational support. Cyber units must conduct individual and collective training for which the OPCON headquarters may have limited understanding, responsibility, or capacity. Additionally, the Cyber branch is small and continually evolving. As a result, the demands by operational forces for the continual development of capabilities, doctrine, organization, and training often fall to administrative headquarters. These practical demands exceed the scope and capacity intended for administrative headquarters and exacerbate the challenges of balancing requirements.

Second, cyber elements often lack intermediate supporting organizations like a division or corps staff. Enduring operational control of cyber detachments, typically led by a major or lieutenant colonel, is given to headquarters at echelons above corps, like a combatant command, while administrative control is retained by a brigade. In contrast to units like the 82nd Airborne Division, which might be operationally aligned to a combatant command, these cyber detachments lack the usual echelons of staff between a combatant commander and a detachment. In more typical force structures, these absent echelons would balance requirements across time and units. Instead, this responsibility falls to the team leads of cyber detachments with an authorized strength of around 39 personnel, though rarely fully manned, and with minimal redundancy in work roles. As a result, the persistently aligned detachments have little flexibility in how they allocate requirements to their personnel without deployment cycles or reset phases to provide time-based prioritization. Thus, the responsibility for balancing operational and administrative requirements has devolved to detachments lacking the capacity to do so, ensuring the problem persists.

This divided chain of command challenges normal Army processes. An administrative chain of command with no formal role in operations executes ratings, evaluations, awards, and other administrative processes. Contrary to the normal application of Army regulations, a line company commander is not the highest ranking regularly assigned officer. A company may have as many as five field-grade officers rated by the battalion or brigade commander and operationally controlled by a completely separate organization.

Soldier issues take on added complexity as the commander is less synchronized with operational requirements and must coordinate with multiple layers of leaders. The nuanced interplay of responsibility and authority between team leadership and company commander complicates the delegation and oversight of command responsibilities and can result in lieutenants and junior noncommissioned officers missing key developmental experiences. Supporting and enabling

functions, already ill-defined for cyberspace, are further complicated by decisions regarding whether something is an ADCON or OPCON function and the differing channels for each. Further complicating the situation, most teams are externally controlled and actively on the mission, so there is no “garrison” time between deployments to complete ADCON requirements, leaving soldiers pulled between completing administrative tasks and executing the mission.

Most concerning are the operational challenges these command relationships impose. First, they can hinder organizational energy. Competing requirements and nonstandard processes require more communication and reporting and reduce the availability of personnel for operational requirements. Second, these relationships can reduce operational integration. Intent varies with commanders, making disciplined initiative across elements challenging. With convoluted chains of command, coordination may be slower or not happen because the correct information did not get to the right person. Since these command relationships lack support relationships or even full staffs, the command and operations (S3/G3/J3) channels provide the primary means of communication and often become overwhelmed. Similarly, it becomes less likely that the person making decisions and handling prioritization has all the information. This problem extends beyond the mission cycle into how we build and maintain combat power in the cyberspace domain.

Considerations for Mitigation

Cyberspace as a domain is constantly evolving, but many of these challenges are not. Artillery and logistics elements struggle with aligning by function or as integrated teams. Special forces frequently operate as independent small teams integrated with other organizations and headquarters with the goal to enable unity of effort, ultimately a matter of mission command. Commanders across the Army with complex command structures struggle to solve problems at the lowest echelon. The principles below can guide how we reassess our current force structures based on operational experiences to enable mission command in a modern cyber force.

Embrace the Principles of Unit Integrity

According to the Army’s foundation doctrine for command and control, “[w]henever possible, commanders should task-organize based on standing headquarters and habitually associated groups.”²¹ For instance, if an operation requires two teams, those teams should be from the same company. This principle

21. HQDA, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, ADP 6-0 (Washington, DC: HQDA, July 2019).

also applies to administrative tasks, which can reduce reporting requirements and ensure that nontasked units remain organically capable of accomplishing assigned missions; simplifying command and control; and reducing duplication, gaps in effort, and coordination requirements. We can use the command relationships of organic, assigned, and attached to preserve unit integrity but must carefully assess the long-term situation and costs to ensure the most effective structure is codified and unnecessary organizational chaos is not imposed.

Integrate Supporting and Enabling Functions

From property acquisitions to intelligence support, a variety of functions support cyberspace operations. These functions, however, cannot reside at every echelon. Instead, a clear process to coordinate and integrate support up and down echelons must be established. In conjunction with the previously recommended push toward unit integrity, clearly defined support relationships will ensure coordination for the gaps and overlaps in requirements.

Systemically Deconflict Requirements

Deployments provide clear transitions that shape unit priorities, distinguishing between training cycles, conducting operations, and synchronizing readiness cycles. While physical deployments might not be the right answer, time-based deconfliction measures (such as “mission windows,” “long range training calendars,” and “red, amber, green cycles”) could be useful. The mechanism(s) should include the purpose, be acceptable to ADCON and OPCON, meet readiness and operational priorities, and clarify the responsibilities of the different headquarters, including operational support and reporting.

Provide Commander Latitudes in Execution

Unity integrity, clarity on roles and responsibilities, and channels for elevating support enable unit leaders to operate effectively. Units must also have the latitude to employ their resources optimally. Combining resources with latitude in execution, enables decentralized execution and the exercise of disciplined initiative. The emphasis on purpose in mission orders supports this principle. Providing units more time to complete requirements allows commanders to sequence priorities effectively and determine the force levels required to accomplish a mission, enabling more efficient use of personnel.

The Path Forward

The Cyber branch has grown in scope since its initiation and has not adjusted to meet the expanded needs of the Army, which now include electronic warfare, billets in the multi-domain task forces, billets in corps units and below, and the 915th Cyberspace Warfare Battalion. Military leadership should approach the recommendations made with a view toward the long-term growth of the Cyber branch to prevent repeating past mistakes. The Cyber branch must develop individuals with electronic-warfare knowledge, skills, and behaviors, and existing personnel should serve in units and on missions outside the 780th Military Intelligence Brigade and the Cyber Protection Brigade. Additionally, the Cyber branch must continue to recruit and integrate officers from other branches through the voluntary transfer incentive program. Acknowledging the manifest challenges in the existing cyber organizations can assist the successful development of the newly established portions of the branch.

With a broader scope, the potential to mismanage specialization increases. It becomes less plausible that officers can achieve competency in offensive, defensive, and electronic warfare mission sets, especially if they become cyber officers four or more years into their careers. For warrant officers and enlisted soldiers, growth represents additional specialization. A single billet, or even a limited number of billets, cannot bring mastery of all branch functions. Similarly, members of the branch cannot achieve advanced competency without specialized training and assignment. The branch must carefully consider its doctrine, organization, and training to ensure sufficient specialization and mastery while maintaining adequate integration across these specializations to deliver maximal effects.

The growth in the Cyber branch's scope will also have implications for the complex chains of command, introducing additional headquarters and longer coordination chains. The cyber billets have a relatively low density in the field Army and provide a limited set of organic capabilities for commanders at those echelons. Instead, capabilities will often be integrated or assigned from higher headquarters. Authorities, network ownership and visibility, and MOS density dictate that this integration must occur with the already complex chains of commands within Army Cyber Command, the 780th Military Intelligence Brigade, and the Cyber Protection Brigade. If unresolved, these complexities will affect combat power. Cyber personnel in noncyber units will duplicate capabilities available to other echelons or be unable to integrate and mass sufficient capabilities effectly. A revised modern cyber force structure that

applies the principles outlined in this article will better equip the Army to meet the needs of multi-domain operations and beyond.

John Fernandes

Major John Fernandes, US Army, is a cyber officer and research scientist at the Army Cyber Institute. He holds a Master of Science degree in computer science from the University of Massachusetts.

Nicolas Starck

Major Nicolas Starck, US Army, is a cyber officer and research scientist at the Army Cyber Institute. He holds a Master of Science degree in electrical and computer engineering from Carnegie Mellon University.

Richard Shmel

Captain Richard Shmel, US Army, is a cyber officer and research scientist at the Army Cyber Institute. He holds a Master of Science degree in electrical engineering from the Naval Postgraduate School.

Charles Suslowicz

Major Charles Suslowicz, US Army, is a cyber officer and research scientist at the Army Cyber Institute. He holds a Master of Science in Computer Engineering from Virginia Tech.

Jan Kallberg

Dr. Jan Kallberg, US Army, is an assistant professor and research scientist in the Insider Threat Research Program, Department of Mathematical Sciences, at the United States Military Academy.

Todd W. Arnold

Lieutenant Colonel Todd W. Arnold, PhD, US Army, is a cyber officer and academy professor at the Army Cyber Institute and an assistant professor, Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, at the United States Military Academy.

Select Bibliography

- Center for Strategic Leadership. *Strategic Cyberspace Operations Guide*. Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, August 2021. https://csl.armywarcollege.edu/USACSL/Publications/Strategic_Cyberspace_Operations_Guide.pdf.
- Chesney, Robert. "The Domestic Legal Framework for US Military Cyber Operations." Hoover Working Group on National Security, Technology, and Law. Aegis Series Paper No. 2003. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, July 2020. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/Delivery.cfm/SSRN_ID3668463_code119080.pdf?abstractid=3668463&mirid=1.
- Fernández-Salineró, Samuel, and Gabriela Topa. "Intergroup Discrimination as a Predictor of Conflict within the Same Organization: The Role of Organizational Identity." *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education* 10, no. 1 (May 2019): 1–9. <https://www.mdpi.com/2254-9625/10/1/1/pdf?version=1585805094>.
- Lynn, William J., III. "Defending a New Domain: The Pentagon's Cyberstrategy," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2010, <https://www-foreignaffairs-com.usawc.idm.oclc.org/articles/united-states/2010-09-01/defending-new-domain>.
- Pomerleau, Mark. "Cyber Command's Force Is Growing, in Part, to Support Space." FEDSCOOP (website). April 8, 2022. <https://www.fedscoop.com/cyber-commands-force-is-growing-in-part-to-support-space/>.
- Wong, Leonard, and Stephen J. Gerras. *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and US Army War College Press, 2015. <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/466>.

Meeting the US Military's Manpower Challenges

Stefan Borg
©2022 Stefan Borg

ABSTRACT: Concerns raised over the impact of changing demographics, domestic polarization, and the return of near-peer competition on US military manpower challenges are overstated. Drawing on open-source materials and interviews, this article discusses factors often neglected in conversations on this topic and provides leadership and policymakers with a scholarly overview of an important yet understudied issue facing the US armed forces.

Keywords: manpower, demographic change, domestic polarization, near-peer competition, US armed forces

The question of whether the manpower needs of the Armed Forces might be solved with volunteers has been debated since the draft was abolished and the all-volunteer force (AVF) introduced as US operations in Vietnam began winding down in the early 1970s. The Gates Commission, which examined the implications of moving to an all-volunteer force, raised concerns about ending the draft. Would a career military become increasingly isolated from the rest of US society? Would this isolation lead to a military unrepresentative of the US population in terms of class and race? Consequentially, would the broader public become less interested in US foreign and security affairs?¹ Moreover, Samuel Huntington famously argued that civilian control would be harder to assert if a military organization is not representative of its population.² Over the years, experts and pundits have addressed these concerns by arguing that reinstating the draft is the best way to meet future manpower needs.³ Doing so is unpopular and unlikely to happen.

Nevertheless, manpower remains a central issue for the US military. In 2018, the Army failed to meet its recruitment target for the first time since 2005, when the Iraq War was at its peak, and there was widespread talk of an emerging “manpower crisis” in the Army and the military at large. Unlike strategy and weapon systems

The author gratefully acknowledges very helpful discussion on the themes of this article with Mark Cancian (CSIS), Anthony Cordesman (CSIS), Eric Gomez (CATO), and Kate Kuzminski (CNAS) and also thanks Professor Kjell Engelbrekt and Associate Professor Antoine Bousquet, as well as two anonymous reviewers, for helpful feedback. The views expressed in this article, however, are the sole responsibility of the author.

1. President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force, *The Report of the President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 1970), <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/The-Report-Of-The-Presidents-Commission-On-An-All-Volunteer-Armed-Force.pdf>.

2. Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1957).

3. See Thomas E. Ricks, “Let's Draft Our Kids,” *New York Times*, July 9, 2012; and David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “Why We Still Need the Draft,” *War on the Rocks* (website), February 23, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/02/why-we-still-need-the-draft/>.

questions, manpower issues remain understudied in the scholarly community. This article examines the current manpower challenges in the US military within the context of changing demographics, increased domestic polarization, and a change in strategic focus to near-peer competition. It argues that the long-term manpower supply is not the crisis others have made it out to be despite the issues first raised in 2018 and the additional problems arising from an increasingly polarized public. The projected 2050 recruitment pool is sufficient to meet the Army's needs, and the Army should focus on modernization and investment in high-end technologies to meet the challenges posed by near-peer competition with China and Russia.

This article examines the main factors influencing recruitment and retention numbers, the changing demographic facing the US military, the significance of domestic polarization, and the manpower challenges caused by the strategic shift to near-peer competition. The final section summarizes the main findings.

Recruitment and Retention

Recruitment and retention are core concerns for staffing organizations, including militaries. Much of the discussion of manpower challenges facing the US military focuses on recruitment rather than retention. In the last few years, retention goals have mostly been met or exceeded, and retaining personnel is, therefore, usually considered less of an issue than recruitment—except for female retention, which is considerably lower than male retention.⁴

Applicant numbers increased dramatically following 9/11, and the 2008 economic recession further bolstered these numbers. Then, combat operations were gradually cut back in Iraq and then Afghanistan, reducing the number of recruits needed.⁵ In 2018, however, the Army failed to meet its recruitment target for the first time since 2005, when the Iraq War was at its peak, and there was widespread talk of an emerging “manpower crisis” in the Army.⁶ This failure, which likely resulted from the booming US economy at the time, provoked debate within the Army about future recruitment efforts. While all service branches reached their 2020 and 2021 targets, many believe this achievement was due to the weak

4. Ben Werner, “GAO: Women 28 Percent More Likely to Leave Military Service than Men,” *USNI News* (website), May 20, 2020, <https://news.usni.org/2020/05/20/gao-women-28-percent-more-likely-to-leave-military-service-than-men>.

5. Meghann Myers, “The Army Needs to Attract Gen Z’s Best and Brightest, So It’s Working on Its Sales Pitch,” *Army Times* (website), November 14, 2018, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2018/11/14/the-army-needs-to-attract-gen-zs-best-and-brightest-so-its-working-on-its-sales-pitch/>.

6. James Long, “It’s Not the Economy: Why the Army Missed Its Recruitment Goals and What to Do about It,” Modern War Institute at West Point (website), February 14, 2019, <https://mwi.usma.edu/not-economy-army-missed-recruitment-goals/>; and Dennis Laich, “Commentary: Recruiting’s Slippery Slope,” *Army Times* (website), July 27, 2018, <https://www.armytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2018/07/28/recruittings-slippery-slope/>.

COVID-19 afflicted economy.⁷ In the competitive 2022 job market, all service branches experienced difficulties meeting recruitment targets, raising alarms about the challenges of maintaining a large enough force.⁸

From the quality of applicants to the state of the economy, many factors impact recruitment numbers. First, scholars have observed a strong correlation between unemployment and higher recruitment and retention. In a strong economy, there are naturally more options for people considering leaving the armed forces.⁹ Hence, some analysts believe the uncertain post-COVID-19 economy may provide fertile ground for military recruiters.¹⁰ Second, the total pool the military recruits from is small. Moreover, awareness of what a military career entails among youth is limited; 50 percent of youth claim to “know little” about serving in the US military.¹¹ Studies have shown that approximately 136,000 individuals of the 33-million Americans between 17 and 24 meet the minimum enlistment standards *and* express a willingness to serve. According to 2017 Pentagon data, over 70 percent of Americans between 17 and 24 are ineligible to serve in the military—meaning 24 million individuals from the 33-million pool do not meet minimum enlistment requirements.¹² A 2018 Heritage Foundation report described these numbers as an “alarming situation which threatens the country’s fundamental national security.”¹³ The main reasons for ineligibility were lack of education, previous criminal records, and obesity.

Many eligible recruits are from military families, which opponents of the all-volunteer force feared would happen. They believe this tendency led to the

7. Guest Editorial, “US Military Needs Recruits,” *Day* (website), July 15, 2021, <https://www.theday.com/article/20210715/OP01/210719637>; and Ellie Kaufmann, “US Military Struggled to Attract National Guard and Reserve Troops but Met Targets for Full-time Recruits in 2021 Fiscal Year,” *CNN* (website), January 19, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/14/politics/military-recruitment-numbers-2021/index.html>.

8. Courtney Kube and Molly Boignon, “Every Branch of the Military Is Struggling to Make Its 2022 Recruiting Goals, Officials Say,” *NBC News* (website), June 27, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/every-branch-us-military-struggling-meet-2022-recruiting-goals-officials-rcna35078>; and Thomas Spoehr, “Military Recruiting Faces Its Biggest Challenges in Years,” May 13, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/military-recruiting-faces-its-biggest-challenge-year>.

9. John T. Warner, “The Effect of the Civilian Economy on Recruiting and Retention,” in *Report of the Eleventh Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation: Supporting Research Papers* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2012), [https://militarypay.defense.gov/Portals/3/Documents/Reports/11th_QRMC_Supporting_Research_Papers_\(932pp\)_Linked.pdf](https://militarypay.defense.gov/Portals/3/Documents/Reports/11th_QRMC_Supporting_Research_Papers_(932pp)_Linked.pdf).

10. Meghann Myers, “In Uncertain Economic Times, Some of the Services Are Upping Their Recruiting Goals,” *Military Times* (website), February 2, 2021, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2021/02/02/in-uncertain-economic-times-some-of-the-services-are-upping-their-recruiting-goals/>.

11. US Army Public Affairs, “Recruiting Facts and Figures,” US Army Recruiting Command (website), n.d., https://recruiting.army.mil/pao/facts_figures/.

12. Meghann Myers, “Top Recruiter: Just 136,000 Out of 33 Million Young Americans Would Join the Army,” *Army Times* (website), October 12, 2017, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2017/10/12/top-recruiter-just-136000-out-of-33-million-young-americans-would-join-the-army/>.

13. Thomas Spoehr and Bridget Handy, “The Looming National Security Crisis: Young Americans Unable to Serve in the Military,” Heritage Foundation (website), February 13, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/the-looming-national-security-crisis-young-americans-unable-serve-the-military>.

unintended creation of an American “warrior caste.”¹⁴ So-called “professional inheritance” is not exclusive to the military. Many occupations display similar tendencies, such as US police forces. However, 2015 Department of Defense data indicated that over 25 percent of new recruits have a parent who previously served in the military.¹⁵ In itself, professional inheritance is not a problem, but it could become one if the appearance of a “family business” impedes efforts to reach new demographics.

When assessing the current state of recruitment, military leadership should consider trends likely to impact the recruiting pool in the medium- to long-term future. First, there does not seem to be much cause for alarm regarding high-school completion rates, and there are few reasons to believe the situation will deteriorate further. The National Center for Education Statistics reports the graduation rate for public high-school students in 2018 was 85 percent—the highest rate since it was first measured in 2010–11.¹⁶ Although the federal government has a limited role in the education system, the Biden-Harris administration invests heavily in school districts with a higher proportion of low-income students, which should encourage the positive trend in high-school graduation rates.¹⁷

Second, the number of Americans with criminal records is high—as many as one in three US adults is estimated to have a criminal record.¹⁸ The service branches often grant waivers for minor offenses, and over time, the percentage of waivers has closely reflected recruitment needs.

Third, unlike education and criminal records, obesity is not improving, particularly in the southern United States, which provides a disproportionately large number of recruits.¹⁹ There are strategies, however, to help potential recruits deal with obesity. Local recruitment offices often run informal fitness camps to

14. Amy Schafer, “Generations of War: The Rise of the Warrior Caste and the All-Volunteer Force,” Center for a New American Security (website), May 8, 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/generations-of-war>.

15. Kristy N. Kamarck, *Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity in the Armed Services: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report R44321 (Washington, DC: CRS, June 5, 2019), 58.

16. “Public High School Graduation Rates,” National Center for Education Statistics (website), May 2021, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/coi/high-school-graduation-rates>.

17. Nicholas Tampio, “How Biden’s Request for More Education Funding Would Shift More Power to the Federal Government,” *Conversation* (website), April 26, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/how-bidens-request-for-more-education-funding-would-shift-more-power-to-the-federal-government-159489>.

18. Rebecca Vallas, Sharon Dietrich, and Beth Avery, “A Criminal Record Shouldn’t Be a Life Sentence to Poverty,” Center for American Progress (website), May 28, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/criminal-record-shouldnt-life-sentence-poverty-2/>.

19. Craig M. Hales, Margaret D. Carroll, Cheryl D. Fryar, and Cynthia L. Ogden, “Prevalence of Obesity and Severe Obesity among Adults: United States, 2017–2018,” National Center for Health Statistics Data Brief No. 1, National Center for Health Statistics (website), February 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db360.htm>.

get potential recruits in good enough physical shape to enlist.²⁰ Current recruiting and retention have challenges and problem areas, but there are many ways to work around these issues.

Shifting Demographics and Manpower Challenges

Although the military has found ways to address current challenges, the United States is experiencing rapid demographic shifts that will raise new issues. The US Census Bureau projects that the United States will become “minority white” around 2045, meaning the white population will constitute less than 50 percent of the total population.²¹ As a result, future military ranks will be more racially and ethnically diverse. In response to these projections, the Department of Defense implemented various diversity initiatives that have been debated for decades. Addressing diversity and inclusivity within the armed forces is “a strategic imperative,” with implications for the future ability to carry out grand strategy.²² A growing emphasis on diversity in all US sectors has also impacted the armed forces.

The military has made significant progress in diversifying its workforce overall, and the composition of all active-duty personnel closely reflects the ethnic/racial composition of the US population.²³ The senior officer corps, however, is still significantly less diverse than the US population. Moreover, the majority of recruits come from middle-class backgrounds, and are not disproportionately recruited among poor Americans, as observers critical of US foreign policy sometimes claim.²⁴ Women remain underrepresented at all levels (around 16 percent), and ethnic and racial minorities are underrepresented at higher ranks.²⁵ As of May 2018, Black Americans made up 16.8 percent of active-duty personnel, with a total share of 13.7 percent of the US resident

20. Yuki Noguchi, “Fighting Weight: How Military Recruiters Take on Obesity, Case by Case,” National Public Radio (website), May 17, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/05/17/994241471/fighting-weight-how-military-recruiters-take-on-obesity-case-by-case?t=1652777676533>.

21. William H. Frey, “The US Will Become ‘Minority White’ in 2045, Census Projects: Youthful Minorities Are the Engines of Future Growth,” Brookings Institution, *Avenue* (blog), March 14, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects/>. At the same time, what might happen is more Hispanics will start self-identifying as whites. See Ezra Klein, *Why We’re Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020), 106.

22. Department of Defense (DoD), *Department of Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion Report: Recommendations to Improve Racial and Ethnic Diversity and Inclusion in the U.S. Military* (Washington, DC: DoD, December 18, 2020) 43, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Dec/18/2002554852/-1/-1/0/DOD-DIVERSITY-AND-INCLUSION-FINAL-BOARD-REPORT.PDF>.

23. Helene Cooper, “African-Americans Are Highly Visible in the Military, but Almost Invisible at the Top,” *New York Times* (website), May 20 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/25/us/politics/military-minorities-leadership.html>.

24. Andrea Asoni, Andrea Gilli, Mauro Gilli, and Tino Sanandaji, “A Mercenary Army of the Poor? Technological Change and the Demographic Composition of the Post-9/11 U.S. Military,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 45, no. 4 (January 30, 2020): 568–614, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1692660>.

25. Lori Robinson and Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Women Warriors: The Ongoing Story of Integrating and Diversifying the American Armed Forces,” Brookings (website), May 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/women-warriors-the-ongoing-story-of-integrating-and-diversifying-the-armed-forces>.

population ages 18 to 64.²⁶ In the officer corps only, Black representation decreases to 8.1 percent. Within the top echelons of the armed forces (generals/flag officers), Black representation amounts to 8 percent. When examining the top 41 most senior commanders (four-star ranking) in 2021, two are Black, and one is a woman.²⁷ Under Joe Biden's presidency, the Department of Defense has prioritized diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives to ensure the military remains an attractive career choice for minorities.²⁸ When it comes to female retention, momentum is building in Congress to change how the military deals with sexual violence within the services. These potential changes may facilitate the retention and recruitment of women. Whether such efforts will yield tangible results remains to be seen.

Domestic Polarization and Manpower Challenges

A tendency toward polarization may be understood as foundational to the US political system, which combines a majoritarian electoral system with strong support for minority interests. To fully comprehend the challenges of a rapidly diversifying population, one needs to examine how the military has been impacted by increased domestic polarization in recent decades. Many Democratic voters moved to the left. In what a *Vox* journalist called “a Great Awakening,” White Democrats have changed their political preferences to the left over the last few years, especially in terms of social justice issues such as race.²⁹ Political scientist Lilliana Mason has shown how a variety of social, economic, religious, and racial cleavages have aligned themselves into a simple binary—Republican or Democrat. She argues Donald Trump's election may be understood as “the culmination of a long process by which the American electorate has become deeply divided along partisan lines.”³⁰ By the end of Trump's presidency, analysts at the Pew Research Center concluded “Americans have rarely been as polarized as they are today.”³¹

The controversies surrounding the military's diversity initiatives must be understood within the context of an increasingly polarized society. The most

26. Numbers are taken from Kamarck, *Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity*.

27. Robert Burns and Lolita C. Baldor, “Top US General Urges Greater Racial Diversity in Military,” Associated Press (website), May 5, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-government-and-politics-1deffc0efb652716aa44dab756b614d1>.

28. Terri Moon Cronk, “Austin Speaks Out on Importance of Diversity in White House Roundtable,” DoD (website), February 10, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2930883/austin-speaks-out-on-importance-of-diversity-in-white-house-roundtable/>.

29. Matthew Yglesias, “The Great Awakening,” *Vox* (website), April 1, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/3/22/18259865/great-awakening-white-liberals-race-polling-trump-2020>.

30. Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 3.

31. Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, “America Is Exceptional in the Nature of Its Political Divide,” Pew Research Center (website), November 13, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide/>.

controversial parts of diversity initiatives are wholly or partly based on critical race theory (CRT).³² A slide with information on “white privilege,” a key concept within critical race theory, was included in a 2015 diversity training session at Fort Gordon, Georgia, drawing criticism. An Army spokesperson immediately backtracked and said that the slide’s content was not authorized.³³ The Trump administration banned federal diversity training based on CRT precepts in September 2020, and the service branches then canceled contracts with contractors who provided diversity training based on critical race theory.

Critical race theory, however, continued to gain traction in an increasingly polarized domestic setting. On his first day in office, Biden rescinded the ban, and Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III issued a memo instructing the armed forces to resume CRT-based diversity training.³⁴ Scattered reports of pushback started to appear shortly after the memo’s release. For instance, a high-profile incident erupted around the incorporation of critical race theory in workshops on equity, diversity, and inclusion conducted at the United States Military Academy. In April 2021, Congressman Mike Waltz (Florida Sixth Congressional District) sent a letter to Lieutenant General Darryl A. Williams, superintendent of the United States Military Academy, characterizing this training as “inflammatory” and “detrimental to the mission and morale of the U.S. Army.”³⁵ Some commentators and members of Congress have gone so far as to speak of a “woke military.”³⁶

The high degree of contestation surrounding military diversity initiatives presents challenges for recruitment efforts. The military needs to remain an attractive career choice for minorities since the US population is rapidly diversifying. Therefore, recruiters are actively attempting to attract minorities. Although recent data on political preference within the military is lacking, available research suggests conservatives are overrepresented within the military, particularly among officers.³⁷ Given the polarized public, one may suspect some

32. See John McWhorter, “John McWhorter on How Critical Race Theory Poorly Serves Its Intended Beneficiaries,” *Economist* (website), May 24, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2021/05/24/john-mcwhorter-on-how-critical-race-theory-poorly-serves-its-intended-beneficiaries>; and Jason Stanley “Jason Stanley on Critical Race Theory and Why It Matters,” *Economist* (website), May 24, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2021/05/24/jason-stanley-on-critical-race-theory-and-why-it-matters>.

33. Tom Vanden Brook, “Army Says Diversity Training Sent Wrong Signal,” *USA Today* (website), April 3, 2015, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/04/03/army-diversity-training/25250733/>.

34. Stephen Losey, “The Military Is Resuming the Diversity Training That Trump Banned,” *Military* (website), March 8, 2021, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/03/08/military-resuming-diversity-training-trump-banned.html>.

35. “Press Release: Waltz Requests Critical Race Theory Materials & Presentations from West Point,” Mike Waltz (website), April 8, 2021, <https://waltz.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=486>.

36. Konstantin Toropin, “Top Leaders Again Reject Claims That Military Is Becoming Too ‘Woke,’” *Military* (website), July 1, 2021, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/07/01/top-leaders-again-reject-claims-military-becoming-too-woke.html>.

37. Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); and Leo Shane III, “Troops See Rising Political Tension in the Ranks, Poll Shows,” *Military Times* (website), October 17, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2018/10/17/troops-see-rising-political-tension-in-the-ranks-poll-shows/>.

officers are put off by too strident a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, as seen in recent controversies surrounding diversity training based on critical race theory, which some observers believe could be harmful to military effectiveness.³⁸ Others are concerned diversity initiatives, to the extent that they involve informal quotas or “soft” affirmative-action programs, would undermine the military’s strict meritocratic system.³⁹ The military will need to balance the appeal to ethnic and racial minorities while not alienating rural Southern and more conservative Americans who have traditionally been its largest recruiting pool.

Near-Peer Competition

The shift from focusing on anti-terrorist operations and counterinsurgency (COIN) to near-peer competition with China and Russia raises new manpower challenges. As the *2018 National Defense Strategy* observed: “[i]nter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”⁴⁰ This concern remains in the *2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* and the *2022 National Defense Strategy*. China and Russia, however, are struggling with low birth rates that will affect their projected pool of recruits in 2050. In 2050, the United States will have an estimated total recruitment pool (ages 15 to 24) of 44 million people, compared to 138 million in China and 14.6 million in Russia.⁴¹ Given the total size of the US military has remained stable since the end of the Cold War, these numbers, while important to monitor carefully, should not cause concern.⁴²

Further, the strategic focus on near-peer competition with China calls for investment in expensive technologies rather than expanding conventional armies.⁴³ With Russia, though, strategists see the need for retaining large conventional armies. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, some observers argued for an increased permanent presence of US troops in Eastern Europe.⁴⁴ As Mark Cancian pointed out, the scenarios considered most likely in great-power conflict do not require large conventional ground forces. The Pacific

38. Kamarck, *Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity*, 59–60; and Conner Bolanos and Thomas Spoehr, “Military Readiness Takes Back Seat to Wokeness at the Pentagon,” *Daily Signal* (website), June 21, 2022, <https://www.dailysignal.com/2022/06/21/military-readiness-takes-back-seat-to-wokeness-at-the-pentagon>.

39. Kamarck, *Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity*, 59–60.

40. James N. Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2018), 1, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

41. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2019: Demographic Profiles*, vol. 2 (New York: United Nations, 2019), https://population.un.org/wpp/publications/Files/WPP2019_Volume-II-Demographic-Profiles.pdf.

42. Mark F. Cancian, discussion with author, September 2021.

43. Mark F. Cancian, “U.S. Military Forces in FY 2020: Army,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (website), October 15, 2019, 4, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-military-forces-fy-2020-army>.

44. Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Strengthening the US and NATO Defense Postures in Europe after Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” Brookings (website), June 21, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/strengthening-the-us-and-nato-defense-postures-in-europe-after-russias-invasion-of-ukraine>.

theater consists mostly of oceans, and the geographical features involved in an attack on the Baltic countries would make it difficult to deploy large numbers of US ground forces.⁴⁵ In addition, many US strategists believe Europeans should assume more responsibility for their defense, freeing up American resources for Asia.

To pay for expensive technologies, many strategists favor a reduction in force size.⁴⁶ In light of the strategic focus on China, the different service branches are adopting their own approaches. Since the Navy and Air Force are likely to play the most important roles in a conflict with China, the Army is likely to shrink. The Army, however, would play a critical role in a conflict with Russia. At the same time, it is trying to develop capabilities that will also be useful in the Pacific theater, such as long-range anti-ship missiles.⁴⁷ Even when large numbers of ground combat troops are not needed, the Army has historically provided large numbers of troops to support other services.

The Air Force will likely cut its force to finance modernization efforts. The Marine Corps is currently restructuring its forces (Force Design 2030) for the Pacific theater.⁴⁸ It plans to shrink to pre-Iraq and pre-Afghanistan levels to pay for long-range precision weapons and unmanned aerial vehicles.⁴⁹ The Navy, for some time, has been perceived as an outlier because it plans to grow its force structure and increase its fleet considerably, though its earlier goal of reaching a 355-ship fleet collapsed due to staggering costs.⁵⁰ Although Russia's invasion of Ukraine may delay the long overdue pivot to Asia, the future focus on China will require modernization and investment in high-end technologies rather than large numbers of troops.

Analysts agree the biggest challenge for the armed forces in an age of near-peer competition is the *quality* rather than the quantity of servicemembers.⁵¹ Recruiting and retaining personnel with high-end technical and cyber skills, (since the cyber domain is projected to increase rapidly) must be a priority. The *2018 National Defense Strategy* highlights the necessity to modernize professional

45. Mark F. Cancian, "U.S. Military Forces in FY 2020: The Struggle to Align Forces with Strategy," Center for Strategic and International Studies (website), November 8, 2019, 17, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-military-forces-fy-2020-struggle-align-forces-strategy-1>.

46. Mark F. Cancian, "U.S. Military Forces in FY 2021: The Last Year of Growth?," Center for Strategic and International Studies (website), March 18, 2021, vii, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-military-forces-fy-2021-last-year-growth>.

47. Cancian, "Last Year of Growth?."

48. David Barno and Nora Bensahel, "A Striking New Vision for the Marines, and a Wakeup Call for the Other Services," War on the Rocks (website), October 1, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/a-striking-new-vision-for-the-marines-and-a-wakeup-call-for-the-other-services/>.

49. Cancian, "Last Year of Growth?," 62.

50. Cancian, "Last Year of Growth?," 38.

51. Michael E. O'Hanlon and James N. Miller, "Focusing on Quality over Quantity in the US Military Budget," Brookings 2020 Big Policy (website), December 2, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/bigideas/focusing-on-quality-over-quantity-in-the-us-military-budget/>.

military education (PME), implement improved talent management, and better utilize civilian workforce expertise.⁵² In May 2020 the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued a vision and guidance for professional military education and talent management, noting “[t]he return of great power competition raises the stakes for readiness and for innovation.”⁵³ The document acknowledges the US military must prepare for facing adversaries, which may outnumber US forces and possess technologies equal to the United States, and provides a vision for a continuous PME and talent management system that produces leaders who “achieve intellectual overmatch against adversaries.”⁵⁴

Prioritizing talent management is essential from a manpower perspective since it makes the military a more attractive employer and helps recruitment and retention. For some years, a better talent management system has been discussed.⁵⁵ Essentially, the armed forces face the problem of moving from an industrial-era model for labor force management, where individuals are interchangeable, to a talent management model, where management must consider the particular skills and knowledge of each individual.⁵⁶ The Army has been using an online marketplace—the Army Talent Alignment Process (ATAP)—for several years. Officers may easily see available assignments for which they are qualified, rank-order their preferences, and upload their CVs. The system gives users recruiting and designing PME programs a better overview of needed skills.⁵⁷ While more work is needed to improve talent management, its higher prioritization may enhance personnel retention.

Conclusion

In 2018, analysts sounded the alarm when Army recruitment numbers were not met for the first time in over a decade. On closer inspection, it turned out 71 percent of American youth did not meet minimum enlistment standards due to obesity, previous criminal records, and lack of education. Recruitment and retention numbers for all services recovered in the following years, and the services met their fiscal year 2021 goals. In 2022, however, all service branches are

52. Mattis, *Summary of 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 1.

53. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), *Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War: The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management* (Washington, DC: JCS, May 1, 2020), 2, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/jcs_pme_tm_vision.pdf?ver=2020-05-15-102429-817.

54. JCS, *Developing Today's Joint Officers*.

55. See Brennan Randel, “The Army Has a Revolutionary New Talent Management System. Now We Have to Make It Work,” Modern War Institute at West Point (website), December 23, 2019, <https://mwi.usma.edu/army-revolutionary-new-talent-management-system-now-make-work/>.

56. Kate Kuzminski (Center for a New American Security), discussion with author, September 2021.

57. Duane A. Gamble, “Talent Management: Enabling Total Army Readiness,” US Army (website), February 16, 2021, https://www.army.mil/article/242952/talent_management_enabling_total_army_readiness.

struggling to meet recruitment targets, most likely due to the highly competitive civilian US job market.

While acknowledging that manpower supply is a serious concern, this article has argued that the notion of a “manpower crisis” needs to be nuanced. Although the relatively small recruitment pool of qualified youth remains a serious challenge for the armed forces, the underlying issues of obesity, previous criminal records, and lack of education may, to various degrees, be worked around. Nor do all of these issues trend in the wrong direction, particularly when it comes to the educational attainment of young Americans.

The Department of Defense has historically found ways to overcome manpower shortfalls.⁵⁸ First, the Armed forces have used more contractors at home and abroad. Contractors are less expensive and easier to recruit and terminate. The US military has adopted a practice employed by private companies for a long time—outsourcing certain activities that do not need a highly skilled workforce. Outsourcing is problematic since the practice makes the military dependent on a private sector driven by different incentives than the public sector. Second, reservists have been used more efficiently—and could be used even more efficiently if appropriately managed.

Third, the number of Department of Defense civilians has increased. Over time, the military has shifted active-duty personnel functions to other workforces to overcome recruitment and retention problems because active-duty servicemembers are expensive. Although much of the discussion focuses on recruitment, some analysts think retention is a more significant concern since it is easier for the military to mask the numbers. Some believe the most talented people tend to leave and continue their careers elsewhere.⁵⁹

Finally, in light of the Biden-Harris administration’s prevailing focus on China, there is pressure to prioritize technological modernization over a force structure increase. Russia’s war in Ukraine may delay but will not fundamentally change the long overdue pivot to Asia. The Marine Corps has led the way in this respect and adopted a future vision based on a conflict scenario in the South China Sea. Additionally, US leadership needs to focus on implementing better talent management systems within the military that bolster the quality rather than quantity of servicemembers. Although these actions are necessary for improvement, in comparison to Russia and China, the future US recruitment pool in the long-term looks good. While complacency about manpower challenges is never

58. Cancian, discussion with the author.

59. Anthony Cordesman, discussion with author, September 2021.

a virtue, there should be no significant problems recruiting a sufficiently large force in the medium- to long-term.

Stefan Borg

Stefan Borg is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science and Law at the Swedish Defence University.

Select Bibliography

- Asoni, Andrea, Andrea Gilli, Mauro Gilli, and Tino Sanandaji. "A Mercenary Army of the Poor? Technological Change and the Demographic Composition of the Post-9/11 U.S. Military." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 45, no. 4 (January 30, 2020): 568–614. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1692660>.
- Feaver, Peter D., and Richard H. Kohn, eds. *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.
- Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War: The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management*. Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, May 1, 2020. https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/jcs_pme_tm_vision.pdf?ver=2020-05-15-102429-817.
- Kamarck, Kristy N. *Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity in the Armed Services: Background and Issues for Congress*. Congressional Research Service Report R44321. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 5, 2019.
- Klein, Ezra. *Why We're Polarized*. New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020.
- Long, James. "It's Not the Economy: Why the Army Missed Its Recruitment Goals and What to Do about It." Modern War Institute at West Point (website). February 14, 2019. <https://mwi.usma.edu/not-economy-army-missed-recruitment-goals/>.
- Mason, Lilliana. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.
- Spoehr, Thomas, and Bridget Handy. "The Looming National Security Crisis: Young Americans Unable to Serve in the Military." Heritage Foundation (website). February 13, 2018. <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/the-looming-national-security-crisis-young-americans-unable-serve-the-military>.

Professionalizing Special Operations Forces

C. Anthony Pfaff
©2022 C. Anthony Pfaff

ABSTRACT: The special operations community could best address the perceived ethical crisis it faces by professionalizing as an institution. While earlier assessments have attributed special operations forces' ethical issues to a focus on mission accomplishment that led to a broken force generation process and a high operations tempo, such diagnoses obscure a more comprehensive solution. Using sociologist Andrew Abbott's work on professions as a framework, this article explores the benefits of building the kinds of institutions that can claim a jurisdiction, develop and certify expert knowledge, and establish and apply a code of ethics that addresses special operations unique concerns so that it builds trust and better serves the American people.

Keywords: special operations, military ethics, professional studies, professional expertise, professional jurisdictions, civil-military relations

Special operations forces (SOF) appear to be experiencing an ethical crisis. According to a report last year in *Rolling Stone*, special operators routinely abused and even smuggled drugs while conducting operations. More concerning are the times special operators were involved in, and occasionally got away with, murder.¹ Another report described special operators engaging in extremist, radicalized, and racist discussions, sometimes advocating violence against elected US officials in secret Facebook groups.² Additionally, multiple high-profile war-crime cases have recently occurred, including those of Eddie Gallagher (who was accused of one count of murder and two counts of attempted murder but convicted for posing for a photo with the corpse of a detainee) and US Army Special Forces Major Matthew Golestyn, who was accused of murdering an Afghan man his unit had detained.³

This ethical crisis is not limited to US special operations forces. According to the 2020 Brereton Report by the Australian Department of Defence, Australian special forces have also been involved in killing civilians and other abuses in

1. Seth Harp, "The Fort Bragg Murders," *Rolling Stone* (website), April 18, 2021, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/fort-bragg-murders-1153405/>.

2. Carol E. Lee, "In Secret Facebook Groups, America's Best Warriors Share Racist Jabs, Lies about 2020, Even QAnon Theories," *NBC News* (website), April 16, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/secret-facebook-groups-america-s-best-warriors-share-racist-jabs-n1263985>.

3. Stephen Losey, "Eddie Gallagher vs. the World: After War Crimes Trial, Notorious SEAL Is Out to Settle Scores," *Military.com* (website), June 26, 2021, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/06/26/eddie-gallagher-vs-world-after-war-crimes-trial-notorious-seal-out-settle-scores.html>; and Dave Phillips, "Army Denies Request by Soldier Pardoned by Trump, Setting Up Showdown," *New York Times* (website), January 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/09/us/mathew-golestyn-army-war-crime.html>.

Afghanistan.⁴ The report cites credible evidence Australian special operators wrongfully killed 39 Afghan civilians—news that has generated much of the same kind of soul-searching currently happening in the United States.⁵

Crises like these are as attributable to the institution as they are to the individual. Indeed, United States Special Operations Command issued the *Comprehensive Review* in January 2020 to address this point. The report attributed these ethical failures, in part, to a focus on force employment and mission accomplishment, leading to a broken force generation (FORGEN) process and a high operations tempo (OPTEMPO) that impeded the recruitment, assessment, and deployment of fully trained operators and leaders.⁶

This diagnosis obscures the solution. Fixing these problems may result in a highly skilled force, but that is not the same as a highly professional one. Whereas a highly skilled force is proficient at performing tasks, a professional force understands how these tasks collectively serve a greater social good. The point here is not to assess whether the SOF community has a crisis but to emphasize the opportunity the current situation provides to professionalize more fully by addressing institutional shortcomings that diminish the ability to construct an effective professional identity.

Special operators may be professionals of a sort. However, until special operations designates a jurisdiction over which it has the autonomy to exercise judgment, the organization is better characterized as a bureaucracy that manages a highly skilled force. Sociologist Andrew Abbott describes professional expertise as necessary to diagnose, treat, and make inferences about the problems professionals are called upon to solve.⁷ Employing Abbott's framework, I suggest a better way to address these issues and enable the SOF community to examine its ethical and operational challenges.

Diagnoses

Whether reported cases of ethical failure in special operations forces rise to the level of crisis is difficult to say given the anecdotal nature of the evidence. In 2018 and 2019, however, the severity of these failures motivated Congress

4. Ben Doherty, "How the 'Good War' Went Bad: Elite Soldiers from Australia, UK, and US Face a Reckoning," *Guardian* (website), June 1, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/jun/02/how-the-good-war-went-bad-elite-soldiers-from-australia-uk-and-us-face-a-reckoning>.

5. Christopher Knaus, "Key Findings of the Brereton Report into Allegations of Australian War Crimes in Afghanistan," *Guardian* (website), November 18, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/nov/19/key-findings-of-the-brereton-report-into-allegations-of-australian-war-crimes-in-afghanistan>.

6. United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), *Comprehensive Review* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: USSOCOM, January 23, 2020), 5–7.

7. Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 52.

to direct a review of special operations accountability, misconduct, ethics, and professionalism.⁸ In response, United States Special Operations Command issued a report in January 2020 that found no “systemic” ethical failures. The report acknowledged a high operational tempo and certain aspects of special operations culture had set conditions for ethical failures. Specifically, the high operational tempo disrupted the normal FORGEN process and caused a “cascading effect” impacting leader development and unit integrity.⁹

Additionally, the review found some services overemphasized physical training at the expense of professional development. Thus, special operators were highly skilled when they joined special operations organizations, but they lacked a fully developed professional identity and ethos. The report also found the lack of exposure to originating service cultures, and the specialized attention and amenities operators received further risked creating a sense of entitlement. Moreover, the level of quality control over assessment, selection, and training varied among services and special operations components, causing acculturation to be inconsistent.¹⁰

The report’s findings were met with a mixed response. Writing in the *Washington Post*, David Ignatius described the report as an “important step,” though the report may have been “careful . . . perhaps to a fault” in its language.¹¹ Less receptive, *Rolling Stone* described the report as “mostly a whitewash, full of vague language about improving leadership and accountability.”¹² Both responses likely hold truth. The report helpfully describes how ethical failures are attributable to the institution as much as the individual. By understating the role the institution (as a system) plays in setting the conditions for these failures, the report obscures the institutional remedies available to address the conditions for ethical failure.

As an institution, special operations has been hampered in its ability to control the recruitment, assessment, and professional development of its personnel because of its dependency on external organizations to manage those processes. Although the establishment of US Special Operations Command as a unified command solved many operational concerns at the time, the most important elements of what it means to be in a profession were left to the other services,

8. Meghann Myers, “The Pentagon Is Reviewing the Special Operations Community after a Series of High-Profile Scandals,” *ArmyTimes* (website), December 5, 2018, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2018/12/05/the-pentagon-is-reviewing-the-special-operations-community-after-a-series-of-high-profile-scandals/>.

9. USSOCOM, *Comprehensive Review*, 25–32.

10. USSOCOM, *Comprehensive Review*, 42.

11. David Ignatius, “Special Operations Forces Are Stretched to the Danger Point,” *Washington Post* (website), January 28, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/special-operations-forces-are-stretched-to-the-danger-point/2020/01/28/c6c3898a-421a-11ea-aa6a-083d01b3ed18_story.html.

12. Harp, “Fort Bragg Murders.”

which are effectively other professions.¹³ At this point, no single institution oversees the professional development and certification of special operators over one jurisdiction.

Compounding these institutional difficulties, the complexity of the operating environment also contributes to the current crisis. Writing on the *Small Wars Journal* website, one special operations officer argued the community's ethical issues primarily arise from special operations soldiers being "selected for a willingness and aptitude to conduct traditionally immoral acts, trained to be proficient at the conduct of those acts, but then expected to refrain from those acts outside of approved operational circumstances." In response, the author recommends a "bifurcated ethics system" that differentiates operational and nonoperational environments.¹⁴ Echoing this sentiment, another special operator serving a federal prison sentence told *Rolling Stone* special operators act in the "grey zone" where morality and ethics are "in the eye of the beholder," "everything goes" as long as the mission is accomplished, and any indiscretions remain outside the public eye.¹⁵

Although anecdotal, both views reflect a misunderstanding of the roles professionals play in society. Where professions serve a social good (such as health, justice, or security), professionals have a *prima facie* ethical obligation to provide that service. For example, emergency rooms are required to ensure patients are stabilized and treated, regardless of their ability to pay.¹⁶ Thus, professionals are not asked to do unethical things; rather, professionals are asked to do things that would be unethical for nonprofessionals to do. Professional knowledge is highly specialized, and those without it will be unable to provide the profession's service and, in some cases, could harm the client.¹⁷

Notably, Abbott rejects the idea professions must somehow serve society. Yet, Abbott acknowledges some professions, like the military, could qualify as a "special calling" because of the nature of the work and a sense of corporateness in members' individual roles. Writing in 1988, Abbott observed such professionalism was generally in decline in the United States.¹⁸ This point is important because an occupation can count as a profession without needing to reconcile its professional ethics with personal ones. But where the provision of a

13. Bryan D. Brown, *United States Special Operations Command History: 1987–2007* (Tampa, FL: USSOCOM History and Research Office, 2007), 12.

14. Dan Pace, "A House Divided: A Look at SOF Values," *Small Wars Journal* (website), February 25, 2021, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrn/art/house-divided-look-sof-values>.

15. Harp, "Fort Bragg Murders."

16. "Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act (EMTALA) Fact Sheet," American College of Emergency Physicians (website), accessed on May 10, 2022, <https://www.acep.org/life-as-a-physician/ethics--legal/emtala/emtala-fact-sheet/>.

17. Eliot Freidson, *Professionalism, The Third Logic: On the Practice of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 17.

18. Andrew Abbott, "The Army and the Theory of Professions," in *The Future of the Army Profession*, ed. Don M. Snider and Gayle L. Watkins (Boston: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 2002), 528–30.

good or service risks harm—whether to the client or others—professions must ensure they have effective institutions able to educate, train, certify, and, perhaps most importantly, govern professionals to ensure their acts serve the greater good and can stand up to ethical scrutiny.

This obligation points to another challenge for special operations forces. Although a subjective approach to ethics like the ones expressed above is wrong in any environment, the norms for operations below the threshold of war are not well established, well understood, or even normative. In this environment, weaker adversaries “punch above their weight” by employing technology, proxies, and other means to bypass stronger actors’ military forces and inflict substantial harm, often while avoiding accountability. Where actors evade accountability, their targets have little choice but to engage in reprisals to discourage and deter future aggressions. Reprisals, of course, set conditions for escalation, which risks a wider conflict for otherwise limited ends.¹⁹ These conditions, however, do not mean unethical acts are permitted or ethics does not apply. Rather, the under-governed environment in which special operators work requires professionals who can conduct themselves ethically within a profession that can tell them how.

Treatment

To remedy the situation, the *Comprehensive Review* recommends US Special Operations Command improve its validating requirements to ensure the FORGEN process can generate fully manned and trained organizations. The review also recommends better development of leaders who can provide increased accountability and oversight.²⁰ These recommendations are good, but they miss the gap the review identifies in special operations recruitment, assessment, and professional development. As the review notes, individuals enter special operations before they have been fully acculturated into their service profession, and, after joining, their development focuses on skills rather than the profession.²¹ Consequently, a gap between professional identity and practice emerges that is unlikely to be remedied by more professional or ethics training or education. Rather, this gap suggests special operations as an enterprise must fully professionalize before it can expect its members to act as professionals.

Before examining what fully professionalizing special operations means, it is worth clarifying how a professional perspective can improve ethical reasoning and create conditions for more ethical behavior. Take for instance the approach articulated in *A Special Operations Force Ethics Field Guide: 13 Ethical Battle Drills*

19. C. Anthony Pfaff, “Military Ethics below the Threshold of War,” *Parameters* 50, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 69–70, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol50/iss2/10/>.

20. USSOCOM, *Comprehensive Review*, 69.

21. USSOCOM, *Comprehensive Review*, 41–43.

for *SOF Leaders*. Produced by the US Special Operations Command chaplain's office, the field guide is based on a business ethics text developed by two Brigham Young University business professors.²² The guide characterizes moral dilemmas as a finite set of choices between "right versus right," where actors understand their options as two "highly prized values," such as keeping a promise to honor confidentiality versus loyalty to a friend.²³

The problem with this "right versus right" framing is it oversimplifies the complexities of practical moral reasoning and downplays the importance of professional judgment and experience. For example, one "battle drill" poses a dilemma in which one special operator observes another stealing thermal scopes. The dilemma arises because the thief saved the life of the special operator, and turning the thief in would ruin his career, if not land him in prison. The situation appears to pit loyalty to a friend to whom one has a special obligation against the organization, which would suffer from the loss of thermal scopes.

Framing the situation in this way creates a false dilemma from a professional, ethical perspective. Loyalty alone is insufficient to generate ethical obligation; to whom or what one is loyal matters in the context of ethics. As legal scholar George Fletcher stated, "Blind adherence to any object of loyalty—whether friend, lover, or nation—converts loyalty into idolatry."²⁴ More to the point, constructing the dilemma in this way obscures the professional obligation special operators have as stewards of their profession to conserve and employ appropriately the resources the American people have provided. Upon more careful analysis, seeing the two rights here is difficult. The special operator should have turned in his friend, and his friend, if he had any professionalism left, should understand why the special operator had to do it.

Another more tragic dilemma illustrated in the battle drills is an operator's choice whether to shoot an armed nine-year-old child who is about to shoot other soldiers maneuvering in a firefight.²⁵ This case could easily be framed as a choice between two wrongs, which would better reflect its tragic nature. Under the laws of armed conflict, shooting the child may be permissible because the laws allow one to attack persons participating in

22. Dan Rascon, "BYU Professors Create Ethics Field Guide to Help US Special Forces," KSL TV (website), February 23, 2021, <https://ksltv.com/456124/byu-professors-create-ethics-field-guide-to-help-us-special-forces/>.

23. George T. Youstra, *A Special Operations Force Ethics Field Guide: 13 Ethical Battle Drills for SOF Leaders* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: USSOCOM, 2021), 7.

24. George P. Fletcher, *Loyalty: An Essay on the Morality of Relationships* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6.

25. Youstra, *Ethics Field Guide*, 30.

hostilities. Seeing shooting the child as right, however, is difficult.²⁶ A more professional frame would account for professionals incurring an additional burden of risk, requiring them to consider alternative responses such as finding ways to disrupt the child's aim or warn the soldiers the child is about to engage.²⁷

In tragic dilemmas, regardless of the choice made, moral residue and reasons for regret and remorse will always exist; that is what makes the situation tragic.²⁸ Seeing either choice as "right," in any sense of the word, downplays the complex emotional response a special operator might have. If these emotional responses are left unaddressed, they can contribute to psychological stresses that potentially create the conditions for future unethical behavior. A code of professional ethics can help individuals mediate these stresses by providing a framework for evaluating practical choices, even in the heat of the moment. Moreover, institutions are obligated to provide the tools for better ethical outcomes, resulting in better alternatives and preparing professionals practically, ethically, and psychologically to reduce the chance for and degree of stress.

US Special Operations Command has engaged in efforts, such as those associated with the Preservation of the Force and Family initiative, that address physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and spiritual conditions that can enable ethical violations.²⁹ Such initiatives are an important part of any comprehensive solution, but they do not address the fundamental professional and ethical concerns necessary for effective reform.

The field guide is not a governing document for special operations; therefore, one must be careful about drawing too broad a conclusion about special operations ethics. Also, in fairness to the guide, the battle-drill examples are real-world cases, and the special operators may have perceived their situations as "right versus right" dilemmas. Well-trained and well-educated professionals should not see such situations in this way. While ethical dilemmas may be difficult and tragic, a well-conceived professional ethic resolves the tension by reconciling personal values to professional ones.

Inference

Based on the above analysis, special operations forces may not be having an ethical crisis so much as a professional one. Exacerbating the problem is special

26. John Cherry and Michael Rizzotti, "Understanding Self-Defense and the Law of Armed Conflict," Lieber Institute (website), March 9, 2021, <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/understanding-self-defense-law-armed-conflict/>.

27. Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 4th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 155.

28. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 71–75.

29. "About USSOCOM Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF)," USSOCOM (website), April 20, 2021, <https://www.socom.mil/POTFF/Pages/About-POTFF.aspx>.

operations is not really a profession. A profession entails specialized knowledge in service to society, allowing professionals to exercise autonomy over a specific jurisdiction.³⁰ The medical profession, for instance, involves specialized knowledge about human health applied to sustain or improve the health of patients. Because these professionals have autonomy over a specific jurisdiction, they can act in ways nonprofessionals cannot.³¹ For example, only medical professionals are certified and permitted to conduct surgery or prescribe drugs.

Moreover, membership in a profession is contingent upon completing a certification process created and assessed by other members of the profession. Doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals are certified by attending medical school. As they progress within their chosen specialties, the professionals undergo additional education and training. Professions also have a code of ethics to ensure their members continue to serve a greater good.³² Again, the medical example is instructive because the codes obligate members to practice competency, compassion, and the provision of care, among other qualities necessary for the medical profession to fulfill its role.³³

Professional codes require an understanding of professional purpose and the knowledge required to fulfill this purpose. Samuel Huntington famously argued the essential function of the military is successful armed combat, and he characterized military expertise as the “management of violence.”³⁴ Managing violence requires more than tactical skill; it also involves organizing, training, and equipping the force and planning and directing its operations and activities in and outside combat.³⁵ Within the military, services carve out jurisdictions and build expert knowledge around them. For instance, the Army claims Landpower as its jurisdiction and “the ethical design, generation, support, and application of landpower, primarily in unified land operations, and all supporting capabilities essential to accomplish the mission in defense of the American people” as its expert knowledge.³⁶ Other services have similar statements specifying their jurisdictions, roughly corresponding to the five domains of warfighting: land, air, maritime, space, and information (including cyberspace).³⁷ Regardless of the jurisdiction

30. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1957), 8–10.

31. Abbott, *System of Professions*, 60.

32. Huntington, *Soldier and the State*, 9–10.

33. “Code of Medical Ethics Overview,” American Medical Association (website), accessed on July 8, 2021, <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/ethics/code-medical-ethics-overview>.

34. Huntington, *Soldier and the State*, 11.

35. Huntington, *Soldier and the State*, 11.

36. Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), *The Army Profession*, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 1 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2015), 5-1.

37. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), *Joint Operations*, Joint Publication 3-0 (Washington, DC: JCS, October 22, 2018), IV-1.

a service claims, the burden is on the service to determine the knowledge the members need to claim the jurisdiction.

Military expert knowledge comprises four fields: military-technical, moral-ethical, political-cultural, and human development.

- Technical expertise ensures the profession is effective.
- Ethical expertise determines the norms governing the service the profession provides and ensures the trust of the client.
- Political expertise includes cultural knowledge and covers how the profession interacts with external actors—which, in the case of the military, includes the US government, the American people, allies and partners, and civilian populations where the military operates.
- Human development involves inspiring people to serve and then providing them with the professional development necessary to become effective certified leaders.³⁸

These different elements of professional expertise are necessary so professionals can fulfill client needs, maintain client trust, develop the talent necessary for sustaining and growing the profession, and manage relations with external actors who have a stake in the profession's activities.

The trust of the client is critical to the health of a profession. Professionals must put the needs of their clients first.³⁹ Without this trust, clients will look elsewhere for service, undermining the profession's jurisdiction, or impose external regulation and oversight, thus eroding the profession's autonomy. Unlike the professions of law and medicine (the clients of which are members of society, the military's client is the state to whom it must provide expert advice on the application of force in defense of the society the state represents.⁴⁰

No occupation is ever fully professionalized because humans are frequently neither fully competent nor fully ethical. This limitation is also built into the design of professional practice. Professions usually require extensive bureaucracies to sustain their practices and manage scarce resources, so they are used to maximum effect. Bureaucratic demands, however, are often at odds with professional ones. Where professionals create expert knowledge and apply it to new situations,

38. Richard A. Lacquement Jr., "Mapping Army Professional Expertise and Clarifying Jurisdictions of Practice," in *The Future of the Army Profession*, ed. Don M. Snider and Gayle L. Watkins (Boston: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 2002), 217.

39. Anne C. Ozar, "The Plausibility of Client Trust of Professionals," *Business and Professional Ethics Journal* 33, no. 1 (2014): 90.

40. Huntington, *Soldier and the State*, 11–18.

bureaucrats emphasize efficiency and maintaining the status quo.⁴¹ The resulting tension is evident in the medical field where, for example, a doctor may wish to prescribe an expensive treatment, but the hospital administrator will not approve it because the treatment will result in fewer resources for other patients.

Favoring the professional ideal over the bureaucratic may encourage an innovative service, but one that is likely incapable of delivering on a large scale. If the bureaucratic is favored over the professional, service provision can get overwhelmed by process and regulation.⁴² For this reason, a profession's status as a profession should never be taken for granted. Resolving the tension in either direction undermines the service provided, which, in turn, undermines the trust of the client. Such an effect occurred in the post-Vietnam War Army, wherein stifled innovation and diminished training and discipline were not overcome until the Army renewed its emphasis on defeating the Soviets and developed education, training, and capabilities to match.⁴³ The Army's professional status was questioned again in the 1990s, when the emphasis on large-scale combat operations displaced other security concerns related to failed states in the Balkans and elsewhere.⁴⁴

The point here is not that clients set a profession's jurisdiction. When confronted with a problem that falls outside the profession's capabilities but within its jurisdiction, professionals are obligated to generate new capabilities—especially if no other profession would be a better fit for the problem. For instance, when the coronavirus pandemic broke out in early 2020, it was the role and obligation of medical professionals to develop a vaccine. The pandemic also required the medical profession to expand capacity—a feat it was not always able to accomplish. Because capacity was limited, the profession recommended restriction on movement and social contact to lower demand. Some of these restrictions drew objections from the public and brought into question—rational or not—how much the public trusted the medical profession. Therefore, in pursuit of the social good, the execution of professional responsibilities can require constant negotiation between the needs of the client and the particular social good the profession was created to provide.

This tension between the profession and the bureaucracy is enduring. Professional services are a finite resource rarely sufficient to meet demand. Bureaucratic hierarchy, process, and other requirements often displace notions of

41. Don M. Snider, "The US Army as a Profession," in *The Future of the Army Profession*, ed. Don M. Snider and Gayle L. Watkins (Boston: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 2002), 15.

42. Snider, "Army as a Profession," 15–16.

43. Leonard Wong and Douglas V. Johnson II, "Serving the American People: A Historical View of the Army Profession," in *The Future of the Army Profession*, ed. Don M. Snider and Gayle L. Watkins (Boston: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 2002), 102; and Suzanne C. Nielsen, *An Army Transformed: The US Army's Post-Vietnam Recovery and the Dynamics of Change in Military Organizations* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, 2010), 36–39, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/343/>.

44. Snider, "Army as a Profession," 14–20; and Wong and Johnson, "Serving the American People," 103–4.

personal and social responsibility, especially when they conflict with bureaucratic efficiency. The choice for the professional is not “either/or”; the choice is “both/and.” Bureaucratic requirements are necessary for the large-scale provision of a professional service and critical for accountability and transparency. Professionals must “do the heavy lifting” to balance bureaucratic requirements in ways that maintain a level of efficiency that preserves clients’ trust and bolsters the jurisdiction and autonomy necessary to ensure professional effectiveness.

Thinking a particular professional practice consisted of one group of expert professionals and another group of skilled bureaucrats would be wrong. A healthy profession’s members must play both roles. They can, however, rely on nonprofessionals or professionals from other fields to improve operations. While human resource professionals working in a law firm are not members of the legal profession, this status does not make their contributions any less important. Professionals must know how to use nonprofessional contributions to apply expert knowledge successfully.

Bureaucracies are not the only things able to undermine a profession. Often, specific policies that seem effective can set conditions for ethical failure in practice. As Peter Olsthoorn observes, the military encourages social cohesion and physical courage by instilling a sense of shame should soldiers fail their comrades in combat.⁴⁵ High social cohesion, however, can crowd out the conditions necessary for moral courage—understood here as overcoming the fear of humiliation, shame, or loss of status when confronting wrongdoing.⁴⁶ When overcoming these fears and confronting wrongdoing negatively affects membership, members of highly cohesive groups often perceive the cost of confrontation to be too high.

Thus, the *Rolling Stone* article describing the special operations ethos as focusing almost exclusively on mission accomplishment and avoiding embarrassment is not surprising. However, a better-developed professional identity can address the negative conditions high social cohesion can create and preserve the positive conditions necessary for an effective fighting force. Professional obligations require the individual’s reputational cost to be subordinated to the reputational cost of the profession.

Professionalizing Special Operations Forces

Absent a professional framework, things can go wrong because they are also going right. The professional framework demands the professional maintain the

45. Peter Olsthoorn, *Military Ethics and Virtues: An Interdisciplinary Approach for the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 54–55.

46. Olsthoorn, *Military Ethics*, 49–50.

client's trust and get the job done in ways that reflect the client's values. As the foregoing analysis suggests, creating and integrating a professional framework requires establishing a jurisdiction, creating expert knowledge, certifying members in the knowledge, and developing a code of ethics governing the application of expert knowledge.

Establish a Jurisdiction

For Abbott, professions establish themselves by competing over jurisdictions.⁴⁷ Without its own jurisdiction, the special operations community is not fully professionalized. James Burk describes a professional jurisdiction as the domain within which expert knowledge is applied. This domain is physical, such as a hospital, courtroom, or battlefield. The domain, however, is equally conceptual—for example, health, justice, or defense.⁴⁸ Both physical and conceptual domains can be further divided, creating additional professional spaces. Given the four physical domains of warfighting have been claimed by other services, special operations will have to look below the threshold of war to find its place.⁴⁹

Competition below the threshold of war is a natural fit for special operations. In the 1960s, US President John F. Kennedy reoriented US Army Special Forces to focus on unconventional warfare and counterinsurgency to combat the spread of communism while avoiding escalation with the Soviet Union.⁵⁰ More recently, General Richard Clarke, commander of US Special Operations Command, stated the future of special operations entails working with critical allies and partners to ensure access, placement, and influence. The future of special operations also involves ensuring the success of relevant information operations intended to deny adversaries the ability to spread disinformation.⁵¹ These activities are critical to how the Department of Defense supports international competition.

To claim a jurisdiction is not to say other services do not play a role. Rather, in doing so a profession takes responsibility for success within that jurisdiction, allowing other contributions to have maximal positive impact. Currently, no single service or other entity owns the competitive space below the threshold

47. Abbott, "Theory of Professions," 534.

48. James Burk, "Expertise, Jurisdiction, and Legitimacy of the Military Profession," in *The Future of the Army Profession*, ed. Don M. Snider and Gail L. Watkins (Boston: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 2002), 49–50.

49. JCS, *Joint Operations*, IV-1.

50. Allan R. Millet, Peter Maslowski, and William B. Feis, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States from 1607 to 2012* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 624–25.

51. Howard Altman, "The Future of SOF: Exclusive Interview with SOCOM Commander Richard Clarke," *Military Times* (website), May 20, 2021, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2021/05/20/the-future-of-sof-exclusive-interview-with-socom-commander-richard-clarke/>.

of war. Moreover, the other services have jurisdictions above the threshold that take priority.

Create Expert Knowledge and a Process to Certify Professionals

Professional knowledge goes beyond the development of skills. Abbott states professional knowledge is abstract in that it legitimizes professional work; establishes the research necessary to diagnose, treat, and make inferences about the problems professionals solve; and constructs the standards of instruction from which the profession certifies its members. Additionally, professional knowledge supports innovation because it reveals underlying regularities that relying on skill does not.⁵²

A significant challenge for professionalizing special operations is the diversity of skills involved, including direct-action operations, foreign internal defense, security force assistance, information operations, and civil affairs.⁵³ Given this range, seeing how these skills could be unified under one professional education umbrella might be difficult. A professional jurisdiction will inform how the profession educates and trains each member to apply each required skill.

Creating expert knowledge and its certification process means significant investment in professional military education that focuses on the demands of special operations. Special operations could still rely on the service components for recruitment, accession, and training but would need to have greater involvement in, if not oversight of, its programs (as the *Comprehensive Review* recommends). Additionally, special operations must create a career-long standard of education that produces professionals capable of stewarding the profession at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels.

Develop a Code of Ethics

With a jurisdiction and expert knowledge established, special operations will be in a position to establish and administer a professional ethic that accounts for what the special operator, as a highly skilled individual, does; who the special operator, as a moral agent, is; and what special operations, as an institution, should achieve. Properly constructed, a robust professional ethic describes the duties, outcomes, and character traits associated with good special operators. Moreover, a professional ethic is not passive. Avoiding

52. Abbott, *System of Professions*, 56–57.

53. “Core Activities,” USSOCOM (website), accessed on July 12, 2021, <https://www.socom.mil/about/core-activities>.

ethical wrongdoing is not good enough; a professional must proactively seek to do good.⁵⁴

Developing such an ethic will be complex given the relative paucity of norms below the threshold of war. Further complicating matters, no professional ethic involves the effective provision of a service. Society gives professionals the authority to engage in activities society does not grant nonprofessionals because these activities could lead to harm. Especially in the military context, professionals must further gain and sustain moral authority. In addition to the functional imperative of the profession, professionals must integrate social norms and relevant legislation, including international law and treaties, into practice and their personal values.⁵⁵

Conclusion

Implementing any of these recommendations, much less all of them, would raise several concerns. The most obvious is designating a special operations jurisdiction would place the organization on the same level as the other services. This effect was almost achieved when then-Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller directed the assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict to report directly to him, as other service secretaries do.⁵⁶ Current Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, however, partially reversed this decision when he moved the position back under the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, where the position focuses on the broad policies associated with its functional imperative. Nevertheless, Austin retained a direct line over administrative matters involving organization, training, and equipment.⁵⁷ The reversal effectively provided additional oversight by the Department of Defense without the additional autonomy US Special Operations Command would have gained as a service equivalent.

Other concerns follow from the “chicken-and-egg” situation in which special operations finds itself. To professionalize fully, special operations must set itself apart from the other service professions. From a bureaucratic perspective, this distinction would place special operations in competition rather than collaboration with the other services. This competition could affect access

54. C. Anthony Pfaff and Keith R. Beurskens, “Introduction,” in *Maintaining the High Ground: The Profession and the Ethic in Large-Scale Combat Operations*, ed. C. Anthony Pfaff and Keith R. Beurskens (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army University Press, 2021), 2.

55. Anthony Hartle, *Moral Issues in Military Decision Making*, 2nd ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 74–75.

56. Corey Dickstein, “Acting Defense Secretary Orders Top Special Operations Civilian to Report Directly to Him,” *Stars and Stripes* (website), November 18, 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/acting-defense-secretary-orders-top-special-ops-civilian-to-report-directly-to-him-1.652557>.

57. Lara Seligman, “Austin Rolls Back Trump-Era Policy on Special Ops,” *Politico* (website), May 5, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/05/05/lloyd-austin-defense-special-ops-policy-485432>.

to important resources service components currently provide, making full separation from the services difficult. The growing importance and complexity of competition below the threshold of war and the distraction created by the competition from the equally important task of warfighting suggest special operations' evolution into a full profession is in the organization's interests.

Multiple options exist to move special operations from its current state to one with the resources necessary to recruit, train, assess, and employ effective individuals and teams that can avoid the current ethical failures of the organization. Something like professionalization in the sense described here must happen. Additionally, nothing is wrong with developing an ethics curriculum to sensitize individuals to what is ethically relevant.

Without a professional framework, these measures will do little to set conditions for better ethical behavior. Fixing force generation and operational tempo will ensure a highly skilled force that may be blind to how functional imperatives (like high social cohesion) can encourage unethical behavior. While teaching individual ethics may better enable special operators to talk about ethics, it cannot make them care about ethics. Divorced from the calling a professional identity provides, individuals will have little reason to take the hard right and avoid the easy wrong—and little reason to hold themselves accountable for attaining the professional ideal.

C. Anthony Pfaff

Dr. C. Anthony Pfaff is the research professor for strategy, the military profession, and ethics at the US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute and a senior nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council. He is the author of numerous articles on ethics and professions, including, most recently, "Making the Case for a Joint Special Operations Profession" in *Joint Forces Quarterly*, which he coauthored.

Select Bibliography

Abbott, Andrew. "The Army and the Theory of Professions," in *The Future of the Army Profession*. ed. Don M. Snider and Gayle L. Watkins. Boston: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 2002.

Abbott, Andrew. *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Burk, James. "Expertise, Jurisdiction, and Legitimacy of the Military Profession," in *The Future of the Army Profession*. ed. Don M. Snider and Gayle L. Watkins. Boston: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 2002.

Freidson, Eliot. *Professionalism: The Third Logic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Hartle, Anthony. *Moral Issues in Military Decision Making*. 2nd ed. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004.

Huntington, Samuel P. *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1957.

Lacquement, Richard. "Mapping Army Professional Expertise and Clarifying Jurisdictions of Practice," in *The Future of the Army Profession*. ed. Don M. Snider and Gayle L. Watkins. Boston: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 2002.

Pfaff, C. Anthony, and Keith R. Beurskens. "Introduction," in *Maintaining the High Ground: The Profession and the Ethic in Large-Scale Combat Operations*. ed. C. Anthony Pfaff and Keith R. Beurskens. Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army University Press, 2021.

The Cuban Missile Crisis: Miscalculation, Nuclear Risks, and the Human Dimension

Arthur I. Cyr
©2022 Arthur I. Cyr

ABSTRACT: Nuclear weapons have vastly raised the stakes and potential costs of crisis, making leadership and related human qualities of judgment and temperament crucial. This article analyzes in depth one exceptionally dangerous US-Soviet confrontation, which barely averted war. Military and policy professionals will see how understanding the perspectives, incentives, and limitations of opponents is important in every conflict—and vital when facing crisis situations like nuclear war.

Keywords: Cuba, deterrence, leadership, missile crisis, nuclear weapons

The Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 between the Soviet Union, the United States, and Cuba remains the closest the world has come to nuclear war. The enormously high stakes involved and the fact the two superpowers barely averted nuclear war provided powerful incentives to avoid another such confrontation. However, there has been the potential for nuclear war since then. During the 1973 Arab-Israeli Yom Kippur War, US President Richard Nixon ordered a worldwide strategic alert of American military forces, and Israel may have readied nuclear weapons. In 1983, Moscow misinterpreted the annual Able Archer military exercise conducted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as preparation for an attack. Professor John Lewis Gaddis of Yale University described this event as “probably the most dangerous moment since the Cuban Missile Crisis.”¹

The Cuban Missile Crisis remains distinct for the closeness of nuclear weapons to the United States; the proximity of American and Soviet warships (particularly nuclear-armed submarines) to one another; and the public unfolding of the crisis following US President John F. Kennedy’s speech of October 22, 1962, which began the public turmoil, though vital crisis resolution occurred privately. Nearly 60 years later, the Cuban Missile Crisis reminds the international community of how nuclear weapons raise the stakes and potential costs of any crisis. It is a regular topic for quantitative and

1. McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), 518–25 (Israel nuclear weapons), 585; and John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War – A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 227–28. Excellent background information on the Yom Kippur War is provided by the Cold War Archives at George Washington University, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB98/index.htm>.

theoretical policy analysis, in particular game theory. While these approaches can aid crisis analysis, they can also distort reality and encourage false confidence.² Unlike theory, the reality of a crisis is that events can quickly become unpredictable, and strong leadership becomes crucial to a successful resolution.

Start of the Nuclear Era

The detonation of atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 brought Japan's swift and unconditional surrender. Horror at the destruction they caused tempered the world's relief at the war's end and acted as a deterrent against their future use. In the following years, the expansion of nuclear arsenals, the development of the hydrogen bomb, and the creation of modern delivery devices, especially the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), reinforced this deterrence.

Following World War II, several major attempts were made to curtail the use and stockpiling of atomic weapons. Named for financier and public servant Bernard Baruch, the United States presented the Baruch Plan to the United Nations in June 1946. Based on *The Report on the International Control of Atomic Energy*, the plan proposed an internationally supervised phased reduction of the US stockpile of atomic weapons. The Soviet Union vetoed this initiative. Other arms control efforts included the 1959 demilitarization of Antarctica, achieved by US President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty reached by Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in 1963.³ For most of the early nuclear era, the atomic arms race and threat of mutual destruction seemed reliable deterrents. Then Cuba became a central nation in the race to expand one superpower's sphere of influence.

Concern about Cuba as a security threat to the United States began early in 1959—shortly after the victory of revolutionary forces led by Fidel Castro. Support for Castro as a successor to corrupt dictator Fulgencio Batista ended with mass executions and a new dictatorship. Castro's steady drift into the Soviet orbit raised alarm in the United States and elsewhere, and Cuba became a central

2. Ananyo Bhattacharya, *The Man from the Future: The Visionary Life of John von Neumann* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2022); and Edward C. Rosenthal, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Game Theory* (New York: Alpha-Penguin Group, 2011), a serious, clear, and practical guide to this complex subject.

3. Bundy, *Danger and Survival*.

topic during the 1960 presidential campaign between Vice President Nixon and Senator Kennedy.⁴

Senior Soviet representatives consistently denied any intent of placing long-range nuclear-armed missiles in Cuba. These statements were revealed as lies early in the crisis, providing the Kennedy administration with a significant advantage in world, public, and diplomatic opinion.⁵

Conferences among surviving participants of the Cuban Missile Crisis, beginning with the initial meeting at Hawk's Cay, Florida, in March 1987, provided valuable information on what was happening in the command centers of the two superpowers, plus Cuba, and within their militaries.⁶ Particularly important, but not evident during the crisis, is that the Soviet Union already had shorter-range tactical nuclear-capable missiles and warheads in Cuba.

On the Soviet side, General Anatoli I. Gribkov was responsible for the planning and execution of Operation Anadyr, the top-secret shipment of missile forces to Cuba. Gribkov testified premier and chairman of the Council of Ministers Nikita Khrushchev gave General Issa Pliyev, commander of Soviet forces on Cuba, "authority to use his battlefield weapons and atomic charges if, in the heat of combat, he could not contact Moscow."⁷ Gribkov was present for Khrushchev's conversation with Pliyev. Marshal Marvei Zakharov, chief of the general staff of the Soviet Armed Forces, signed an order to Pliyev to that effect but Marshal Rodion Malinovsky, minister of defense, chose not to sign the document approving this order, telling Gribkov, "We don't need any extra pieces of paper."⁸

As the crisis approached, an increasingly anxious Khrushchev contacted the Soviet military in Cuba, emphasizing restraint. One particularly forceful message occurred on October 22, about 30 minutes before Kennedy announced to the American people and the world the discovery of Soviet long-range missiles in Cuba and initial US responses.⁹ For Soviet personnel in Cuba, Khrushchev's message

4. Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1961); W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Real Making of the President: Kennedy, Nixon, and the 1960 Election* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

5. Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), 64.

6. James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990).

7. Anatoli I. Gribkov and William Y. Smith, *Operation Anadyr: U.S. and Soviet Generals Recount the Cuban Missile Crisis*, ed. Alfred Friendly Jr. (Chicago: Edition q, Verlags GMBH, 1994), 4.

8. Gribkov and Smith, *Operation Anadyr*, 6.

9. Gribkov and Smith, *Operation Anadyr*, 62.

reiterated the status quo. Pliyev did not share the private verbal authorization he had received.¹⁰

A related important interpersonal revelation concerns the exceptional heroism of Vasili Arkhipov, a Soviet staff officer of a submarine flotilla off Cuba. During the height of the crisis, he proved instrumental in preventing a Soviet submarine commander from launching a nuclear torpedo.¹¹

Prelude

As the spring and summer of 1962 unfolded, Kennedy came under increasing domestic political criticism. The failed invasion of Cuba by a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-backed anti-Castro force at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 represented a massive political failure and military defeat for the United States. Kennedy was widely criticized for refusing to provide air support to protect the force, including leaks to the press from US military officers incensed by the president's decision and the consequent failure. The White House had vetoed direct combat intervention by US forces.¹² Observers have argued Khrushchev's willingness to take the risk of placing missiles in Cuba was spurred by the Bay of Pigs and the Vienna Summit shortly after that, where the Soviet leader sized up the young and inexperienced American president as a weakling.¹³

Both general and specific considerations were involved in the criticism and concern. The Cold War had been intense but predicated on the idea that both sides were "rational actors," and the actions of the two sides likely would be limited. Ideology and competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, focused on Europe and made global by the Korean War, had possessed relative geographic stability. Each side had been reluctant to engage in large-scale strategic moves. The boundaries of conflict seemed known and relatively limited. Shifts were minor (such as the neutralization of Austria in 1955 and the movement of Yugoslavia toward an independent and neutral stance vis-à-vis Moscow). The 1949 communist victory in taking control of China created a great political

10. Gribkov and Smith, *Operation Anadyr*, 6.

11. Serhii Plokyh, *Nuclear Folly: A History of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2021), 259.

12. Jim Rasenberger, *The Brilliant Disaster: JFK, Castro, and America's Doomed Invasion of Cuba's Bay of Pigs* (New York: Scribner, 2011).

13. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 23–25. Abel also speculates the Bay of Pigs experience encouraged Kennedy to doubt reports of missiles in Cuba, in other words "once burned, twice shy," 28.

and strategic shift, reverberating in the United States in intense, emotional anti-communism, but that development was distinctive.¹⁴

Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union threatened the stability of the Cold War in several important ways. First, there was the possibility of Castro's regime sponsoring communist insurgencies elsewhere in Latin America. Second, as the Soviet military buildup in Cuba proceeded, the danger that the island could become a direct strategic military threat to the United States grew. Senior Kennedy administration officials, however, were convinced Moscow would never introduce nuclear weapons on the island.¹⁵

This second graver possibility grew as a topic of concern in the American press and public debate as the Soviet military involvement in Cuba increased in July and August 1962. In July, Havana and Moscow reached their fateful secret accord to emplace strategic nuclear missiles on Cuban soil. Meanwhile, poet Robert Frost returned from a trip to the Soviet Union, quoting Khrushchev and other leaders saying the United States was "too liberal to fight." The Republican senatorial and congressional campaign committees declared Cuba would be "the dominant issue of the 1962 campaign," and opinion polls indicated increasing American frustration.¹⁶

New York Republican Senator Kenneth Keating derided the Kennedy administration, repeatedly declaring that Soviet troops and missiles were in Cuba before any confirmed evidence existed. Kennedy aide Theodore C. Sorensen brushed off suggestions that the White House was insensitive to the possibility of the missile move. In this regard, the loyal aide was not alone—and the point is fundamental to this analysis.¹⁷

As the political atmosphere intensified, Kennedy engaged with the public more directly. Various administration officials had made statements about the distinction between "offensive" and "defensive" missiles, resulting in inconsistency and confusion. In a September 4, 1962, statement and a September 13 press conference, Kennedy defined long-range, ground-to-ground missiles as offensive and unacceptable. U-2 reconnaissance photographs of August 29 indicated the Soviets were installing surface-to-air antiaircraft missile (SAM) sites in Cuba. At this point, Kennedy wisely avoided issuing an

14. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982, 2005). See the author's publications about Ambassador George F. Kennan, architect of containment.

15. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 19; and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), 798–99.

16. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 24; Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 821, argues Frost misinterpreted and misquoted Khrushchev.

17. Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, Bantam Books, 1966), 754–58. Sorensen does credit CIA Director John McCone's accurate foresight regarding Soviet intentions.

ultimatum. While indicating the United States would tolerate the presence of the surface-to-air antiaircraft missile sites, the president stated that if evidence emerged of “significant offensive capability either in Cuban hands or under Soviet direction,” then “the gravest issues would arise.”¹⁸

Concerns

The United States received reports from Cuban refugees and sources on the island that “missiles” were being introduced. However, when reports could be verified, they turned out to be surface-to-air antiaircraft missiles or politically motivated fiction. Although reports increased over summer 1962, no evidence emerged to suggest a shift from the status quo of sometimes heated rhetoric but caution regarding troops and weapons movements. In August, Kennedy convened a series of White House meetings to review the situation, emphasizing the particulars of Soviet involvement. The United States photographed every Soviet ship en route to Cuba and patrolled the island twice monthly with camera-equipped U-2s. Remarkably, the Kennedy administration remained more concerned about Berlin and Germany. Sorensen quotes Kennedy, “If we solve the Berlin problem without war, Cuba will look pretty small. And if there is a war, Cuba won’t matter much either.”¹⁹

On September 19, the Board of National Estimates met in Washington. CIA Director John McCone was convinced unfolding events could culminate in Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. However, Board Chairman General Marshall S. Carter and others felt McCone’s inexperience in intelligence was misleading him. Following the Bay of Pigs invasion, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., another Kennedy aide, contended that Moscow might take steps to protect Castro. He noted “No one in the intelligence community (with one exception; for the thought flickered through the mind of John McCone) supposed that the Soviet Union would conceivably go beyond defensive weapons.”²⁰

On September 21, Washington received the first reliable report that more than just surface-to-air missiles were being unloaded on the Havana docks. An agent had seen long missile trailers moving down a highway. One night, Castro’s pilot publicly stated that Cuba no longer feared the Yankees and their nuclear weapons. He declared, “We will fight to the death, and perhaps we can win because we have everything, including atomic weapons.” On October 3, reports indicated strange activity “probably connected with missiles” in the

18. “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961–September 1962,” Office of the Historian (website), n.d., <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v10/d411>.

19. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 754.

20. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 798.

Pinar del Rio region. These reports, transmitted through the CIA, failed to heighten Washington's concern, at least at the top.²¹

U-2 flights over Cuba on September 5, 7, 26, and 29 and October 5 and 7 failed to reveal evidence of unusual hostile military buildup, beyond MIG fighter aircraft, or Komar torpedo boats armed with short-range missiles. Surprisingly, only the September 5 flight covered the western portion of Cuba, where the offensive Soviet missiles were eventually discovered. This restraint followed a September 10 meeting of the administration's Committee on Overhead Reconnaissance, which made the self-limiting decision to dip in and out of Cuban airspace rather than conduct extensive and continuous flyovers. A principal reason was that a Taiwan-based U-2 was destroyed over mainland China the day before. US Secretary of State Dean Rusk urged shorter, more frequent flights as the new approach to avoid a similar incident. Along with the desire to protect pilots' lives, there was anxiety any incident could provoke an international outcry and lead to curtailing flights indefinitely. The Committee on Overhead Reconnaissance never considered dropping flights entirely.²²

Contrary to Schlesinger's assertion, McCone consistently advocated that the Soviets and Cubans would install strategic missiles on the island. His sustained defense of this position proved crucial in pushing the Kennedy administration to discover the missile threat. When McCone returned to Washington following his honeymoon, he was appalled to find the U-2s had avoided western Cuba, where the surface-to-air missiles were concentrated for nearly a month. On October 4, McGeorge Bundy, the president's special assistant for national security affairs, and his colleagues agreed that all of Cuba would be covered. Pentagon sources reported a new SAM site, laid out in a distinctive trapezoidal pattern, had been spotted near the village of San Cristóbal, and the decision was made to examine the area closely.²³

The debate over alternative approaches to gathering this intelligence, plus reports of approaching bad weather, delayed the next flight until October 14. Developing and evaluating the resulting film took until late afternoon of the

21. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 13.

22. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 14, 25–26. Sorenson, *Thousand Days*, 672, differs somewhat from other authors on September flight dates.

23. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 15–16.

following day. Analysts declared evidence of long-range missiles not “conclusive” but “compelling.” Bundy agreed.²⁴

Reaction

Bundy presented the evidence to Kennedy, but not until the following morning. Meanwhile, the always-efficient aide systematically double-checked and reviewed the evidence and prepared answers to the questions he anticipated from Kennedy.²⁵ There were no long-range missiles in these photographs, but there was telling evidence. Experienced photo analysts pointed to missile erectors, launchers, and trailers, all placed within a signature trapezoidal area. A SAM site guarded each corner of the trapezoid. This additional detail was congruent with the profile of intermediate- and medium-range missile deployments inside the Soviet Union.²⁶

When compared with earlier photographs, the pace of constructing temporary launching sites was remarkably rapid, with clear evidence of permanent missile sites. The Soviets were constructing 24 launching pads for medium-range missiles that could be used more than once and 16 for intermediate-range missiles. A total of 42 medium-range missiles were known to be brought into Cuba.²⁷

Kennedy and his advisers were stunned by a Soviet move contrary to their assumptions and Moscow’s reassurances. In one of the most insightful analyses of the missile crisis, Roberta Wohlstetter describes the American reaction.²⁸ The move was not a function of naiveté, for this administration emphasized worldliness and hard-nosed realism; it was out of character based on history. Kennedy was concerned about other disastrous experiences (such as the Bay of Pigs invasion), while the White House escalated efforts to overthrow Castro covertly.²⁹

Perhaps because official advisers had been mistaken, Kennedy relied from the start of the crisis on an *ad hoc* handpicked team, later titled the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm). This informal approach

24. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 31–32, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara was more skeptical, 38.

25. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 801–2.

26. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 28–29, 43, 46–47.

27. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 796.

28. Roberta Wohlstetter, “Cuba and Pearl Harbor: Hindsight and Foresight,” *Foreign Affairs* (July 1965): 691–707.

29. See Mark J. White, ed., *The Kennedys and Cuba: The Declassified Documentary History* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), 78–80 and passim.

is notable and consistent with the practices of other presidents throughout American history.³⁰

Crisis

The ExComm had to address two questions: What were the actual military and political significance of the missiles, and what should be done about them? Opinions ranged widely. Initially, McNamara argued they had no military value. Paul Nitze, assistant secretary of defense, and others strongly disagreed and argued for a “surgical” air strike to destroy the sites. Prompting by Kennedy revealed such a strike would not be “surgical.” Collateral damage would be inevitable, killing Soviet personnel and Cubans. As reality sank in, a consensus emerged for a naval blockade or “quarantine” of Cuba. The latter term was preferable to declaring a blockade, which under international law constitutes an act of war.³¹

Within a broader context, ExComm members employed legal and moral arguments in their initial discussion. Professor Stanley Hoffmann of Harvard University and others have observed that the US blockade was questionable on legal grounds.³² The White House developed a legal brief defending the move. While Kennedy gave less weight to the United Nations than his three predecessors, he wanted the evidence of Soviet actions presented to that body and the Organization of American States.³³ His concerns included preventing arguments that the United States was the aggressor.³⁴ Moral considerations also played a role. Most notably, Attorney General Robert Kennedy objected to former Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s suggestion of a surprise air attack on the missile sites, comparing it to Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor. An irritated Acheson made clear his disdain for the attorney general’s reasoning. Elie Abel, in one of the first and most insightful published analyses of the crisis, emphasized Kennedy’s concern for restraint and skepticism about keeping military action limited.³⁵

On October 18, Kennedy met with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. With self-control evident throughout the crisis, the president read aloud his September statement on the definition of offensive missiles. Gromyko, who must

30. Theodore C. Sorensen, *Decision-Making in the White House: The Olive Branch of the Arrows* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

31. “The Practical Guide to Humanitarian Law,” Médecins Sans Frontières (website), n.d., <https://guide-humanitarian-law.org/content/article/3/blockade/>, Doctors Without Borders provides background on the subject in the context of providing humanitarian relief; and Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 59, Leonard C. Meeker, deputy legal adviser to the State Department, suggested the term “quarantine.”

32. Stanley Hoffmann, *Gulliver’s Troubles or the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), also describes managing the crisis as Kennedy’s “finest hour,” 297.

33. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 73; and Sorensen, *Decision-Making*, 796–97.

34. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 807–12, indicates the importance of the UN dimension and Ambassador Adlai Stevenson’s role.

35. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 50, 66–67, 78.

have known about the missiles and therefore was lying, repeated past Soviet assurances. Kennedy said nothing in response and, through silence, maintained American initiative. Bundy later argued this was the critical moment that sealed the American case for Soviet duplicity and dishonesty: “It made all the difference—I felt then and have felt since—that the Russians were caught pretending, in a clumsy way, that they had not done what it was clear to the whole world they had in fact done.”³⁶

On October 22, after the text of Kennedy’s address to the nation on the Soviet missiles in Cuba had been reviewed and rechecked, the president delivered the televised speech. He summarized the situation in Cuba and listed the initial moves taken by Washington, stressing these were only the first steps:

- acceleration of surveillance of Cuba;
- a “quarantine,” the euphemism for naval blockade, would be imposed around Cuba;
- a clear declaration that any missile launched from Cuba would be regarded as a Soviet attack on the United States and would bring a full American response against the Soviet Union;
- a call immediately to convene the Organization of American States to consider the threat;
- a call to convene an emergency session of the United Nations Security Council; and
- a personal appeal to Khrushchev to “abandon this course.”³⁷

A week of extraordinary tension followed. On October 24, the Soviet Union had diverted 12 of 25 ships on course for Cuba, presumably because they carried military cargo. The following day, influential columnist Walter Lippmann proposed trading Soviet missiles in Cuba for American missiles in Turkey that vexed Khrushchev. Soviet officials assumed Lippmann was publicly presenting a White House suggestion. In fact, ExComm members put exceptional weight on private meetings between Alexander S. Fomin, a Soviet embassy official, and

36. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, footnote, 64.

37. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 104–6; and Schlesinger, *Decision-Making*, 812–13.

John Scali, an American journalist, with the former assumed to have a direct line to Soviet leaders.³⁸

The evening of Thursday, October 25, witnessed the start of a dangerous duel off the coast of Cuba between a Soviet submarine and United States surface ships and aircraft, which came close to starting a nuclear war. Soviet submarine B-59, spotted and identified by US aircraft, became the target of devices dropped by antisubmarine surface ships as signals to surface. Explosive charges banged on the sides of the hull and generated severe pulses that made breathing difficult.³⁹

On Saturday, October 27, the duel escalated further. Three US destroyers, the *Beale*, *Cony*, and *Murray*, unsuccessfully tried to establish contact and then began dropping practice depth charges followed by hand grenades. The atmosphere in the Soviet submarine was becoming extremely hot, with carbon dioxide rising to dangerous levels as equipment began to break down. Men began to pass out and collapse. B-59 Commander Valentin Savitsky tried to shake off the relentless pursuers for four hours without success. The presence of the potentially lethal Americans on the surface reinforced the claustrophobia and anxiety experienced by the crew of the Soviet submarine.⁴⁰

Finally, exhausted and enraged, Savitsky ordered the officer responsible for the vessel's atomic torpedo to arm and prepare the weapon for launch. The US Navy also had nuclear torpedoes but gave them less priority. Nuclear weapons occupy a distinct dimension—separate weapons in kind and degree. The Soviets were more inclined to regard armed conflict as one continuum, at least through the introduction of smaller nuclear weapons. This belief reflects the Soviet total war doctrine, which involves a perspective different from the United States.⁴¹

On the precipice of nuclear war, Arkhipov made an unconventional move and intervened. He was the chief of staff for the submarine flotilla, with a rank equal to Savitsky but without direct-line authority over this specific vessel. His presence on this submarine proved extraordinarily fortunate.⁴²

The B-59 surfaced to recharge low batteries and secure desperately needed fresh air. The US destroyer *Cory* was close by and aircraft hit the Russian officers

38. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 155–58; and Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (New York: Vintage, 2009), Dobbs argues Fomin (a.k.a Feklisov) had no significant influence; and Plokhy, *Nuclear Folly*, 200, 271, disagrees and indicates influence.

39. Plokhy, *Nuclear Folly*, 267.

40. Plokhy, *Nuclear Folly*, 267–68.

41. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 355–79. Throughout the book, he compares Soviet and US approaches to strategy, with the former emphasizing maximum force, the latter much more inclined to intellectualize. US President Ronald Reagan's update of containment and Soviet reactions is particularly instructive.

42. Sergo Mikoyan, *The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis: Castro, Mikoyan, Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Missiles of November*, ed. Svetlana Savranskaya (Washington, DC/Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Press/Stanford University Press, 2012), 137. This book further confirms Arkhipov's presence on B-59.

with blinding searchlights and flares, as they walked up to the submarine's deck, to confirm identification and photograph the submarine. The flares made loud booming noises as they exploded. American planes flew low over the submarine and fired tracer bullets into the water. Savitsky, driven beyond endurance, decided this was indeed war, and possibly general hostilities had already begun between the two superpowers. He ordered the nuclear torpedo readied for firing. Torpedo tubes on the Soviet submarine opened. The US Pentagon had assured civilian superiors that Moscow was informed these explosive devices were purely for signaling. The Soviet government, however, never acknowledged receipt of this message and never relayed the contents of the message to commanders on the scene.⁴³

Arkhipov successfully dissuaded Savitsky with American help. He demonstrated impressive interpersonal skills and the advantage of equal rank. Savitsky calmed down, and the psychology of intense crisis gave way to a willingness to at least reconsider. Vadim Orlov, the head of the signals intelligence team on the submarine, revealed Arkhipov's heroism in detail many years later.⁴⁴

Commander William Morgan, captain of the destroyer *Cory*, remained calm throughout the ordeal. He ordered Ensign Gary Slaughter to transmit by searchlight signals an apology to the Soviet military men on deck for the dangerous, aggressive behavior of the American pilots. Slaughter's message quickly compensated for the reckless airmen, provided a reassuring tonic to the Soviets on the submarine, and effectively defused the situation. Arkhipov saw the dramatic signal and alerted his comrades. Savitsky, reluctant throughout to commence hostilities, grasped the importance of Morgan's gesture. He ordered the torpedo tubes, which had been open and pointing at the *Cory*, to close. One of the tubes contained the atomic torpedo. Slaughter remembered later that Arkhipov had quickly gestured to him in reply to acknowledge with appreciation the American signal. Slaughter also reported the follow-up order he received from Morgan: "Keep that Russian bastard happy."⁴⁵

The early sentiments of a majority of ExComm members, under tremendous emotional pressure, had been to respond to the Soviet missile deployments in Cuba with a conventional military attack. Stresses resulting from the US naval blockade and the ongoing direct yet uncertain Soviet-American military confrontation were

43. Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 299–300; and Plokhly, *Nuclear Folly*, 267–68. US President Kennedy and Defense Secretary McNamara clearly believed Soviet Navy personnel were aware the explosions were from purely signaling devices. They were not.

44. Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 303, 317, 399.

45. Plokhly, *Nuclear Folly*, 271.

comparable. Not surprisingly, Soviets on the islands—and at sea—had similar desires to strike back militarily. The Cubans shared this sentiment as well.⁴⁶

Resolution

Meanwhile, on October 26, ExComm officials received a long, rambling, and conciliatory message from Khrushchev. The following day Radio Moscow broadcast a harsh, inflexible message, insisting on the Cuba-Turkey missile trade, which the White House publicly stated was unacceptable. That same day an American U-2 inadvertently penetrated Soviet airspace, leading the Kennedy administration to observe wryly that there “is always some so-and-so who doesn’t get the word.”⁴⁷ Even more ominous, a Soviet missile shot down a U-2 over Cuba and killed the pilot, Major Rudolf Anderson. The Soviets on the ground, isolated without communications and under pressure, fired. Wisely, Washington maintained self-control and did not attack SAM sites or other targets in Cuba.⁴⁸

Kennedy and the ExComm decided to ignore the second tougher message and accept the first conciliatory one. Known only to a select few, Robert Kennedy assured Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin that if the Soviet missiles were removed from Cuba, the United States would remove its missiles from Turkey. The US withdrawal would occur after a sufficient interval to avoid the appearance of direct trade. On October 28, Moscow publicly accepted the American offer to pledge not to invade Cuba after the missiles were removed.⁴⁹

Kennedy, suffering criticism since the Bay of Pigs invasion, realized the extent of the victory.⁵⁰ According to Schlesinger, Kennedy was relieved and fatalistic, observing: “Now is the night to go to the theatre, like Abraham Lincoln.”⁵¹

What were the Soviet motivations for placing missiles in Cuba? Opinions varied widely within the ExComm. They were an inexpensive way to secure nuclear weapons equivalence with the United States. Additionally, they could deter the invasion of Cuba, the claim consistently emphasized later by Soviet officials.⁵²

Regarding the balance of nuclear forces, the ExComm members, by fall 1962, were aware the alleged “missile gap” with the Soviet Union was nonexistent. Yet, there seemed little realistic appreciation of how inferior the Soviet forces were. Khrushchev was under enormous pressure to maintain substantial nuclear and

46. Gribkov and Smith, *Operation Anadyr*, 66–68.

47. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 173.

48. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 827.

49. Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 428–45; Schlesinger, *Decision-Making*, 830; and Sorensen, *Decision-Making*, 807–9.

50. Sorensen, *Decision-Making*, 798.

51. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 830.

52. See Gribkov and Smith, *Operation Anadyr*, 10–12.

conventional military forces while responding to growing demands to provide resources for the consumer sectors of the Soviet economy.⁵³

The United States' credibility to defend Europe in the event of an attack by the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact states would have been reduced if there were strategic missiles in Cuba. Although Moscow's initial plan for installations appeared to involve 64 missiles, there is no indication the Soviets would have stopped there. While missiles in Cuba most likely would not have resulted in true nuclear parity with the United States, they would have significantly evened the imbalance. The true strategic balance notwithstanding, Soviet missiles in Cuba would have changed perceptions regarding the balance of power, and perceptions matter in international affairs.

Lessons Learned

The passage of 60 years has brought significant new information on the Cuban Missile Crises and altered the understanding of the factors contributing to the events—the actual dangers at the time and the roles of principals on both sides. To a remarkable degree, vital dimensions of the confrontation and resolution of the crisis were kept secret for many years. Some of the most pivotal aspects, such as the B-59 incident and Arkhipov's heroism, became public recently. Others actions, such as the intense US efforts to assassinate Castro, became public in the mid-1970s through hearings of the special US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.⁵⁴

The Eisenhower administration managed a successful secret program to topple dangerous regimes, including those in Guatemala, Iran, and probably the Congo. The now well-known CIA effort to assassinate Castro, which included cooperation with organized crime, began under Eisenhower. The operation was accelerated following the Bay of Pigs invasion and was directly supervised by Robert Kennedy. Castro knew of this effort and alluded to it on at least one public occasion.⁵⁵

A review of the lessons learned strongly reconfirms the twin difficulties of accurate perception of developments and effective crisis management. Wohlstetter produced seminal work on the difficulty of separating accurate "signals" of an opponent's intentions from the sea of confusing information "noise" surrounding them. She applied pathbreaking analysis of the Pearl Harbor attack to the missile crisis. Technology can complicate and clarify in this regard. Kennedy administration officials appear to have been misled by a combination of false

53. Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 23.

54. Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 7, 12–14, 129–31, 138, 338.

55. Powers, *Man Who Kept Secrets*, 106–7, 119–22, 132–58.

assumptions about Soviet intentions and false confidence related to advancing photoreconnaissance capabilities rapidly. The U-2 flights over Cuba revealed the Soviet missile ploy only just in time and thanks to the persistence of one official—John McCone, who illustrates the vital human dimension.⁵⁶

Kennedy's performance is highly commendable. In the prelude to the Bay of Pigs invasion, he did what Eisenhower would never do—signed off on an operation without a thorough, detailed review. Kennedy questioned and expressed concern but delegated the details.⁵⁷

In the missile crisis, Kennedy demonstrated the reverse behavior, including constant skepticism, probing questions, and innovative approaches. He absented himself from discussions to facilitate freedom of debate and interchange by subordinates likely to be intimidated by his presence. The president surreptitiously taped conversations of ExComm, a practice begun after the Bay of Pigs invasion. The transcripts confirm a striking sentiment early in the crisis favoring a military attack. Kennedy skillfully deflected this view. The quarantine of Cuba bought time. Finally, he moved decisively to resolve the crisis by privately accepting the Cuba-Turkey missile trade. Kennedy guided people and the crisis to an acceptable resolution through attentiveness, inquisitiveness, skepticism, and initiative.

The Cuban Missile Crisis reconfirmed the importance of the human factor in human affairs, including military competition. A related conclusion is that abstract analysis of matters, often conducted under the label of game theory, is of limited value. Working hard to understand the perspectives, incentives, and limitations of opponents is vital. McNamara, in particular, publicly emphasized this theme.⁵⁸

In the last 60 years, a tendency has emerged to minimize the danger of nuclear war. This perspective reflects wishful thinking and the relative security of the post-Cold War international system. For example, Harvard University Professor Steven Pinker in 2018 wrote, "The records show that Khrushchev and Kennedy remained in firm control of their governments."⁵⁹ This viewpoint, with

56. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 7–8, 12–16; and Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962).

57. Peter Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 321–27.

58. James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, *The Fog of War: Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005). See Errol Morris, dir., *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (New York: Sony Pictures Classic, 2003), <https://www.errolmorris.com/film/fow.html>.

59. Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment NOW: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking/Penguin RandomHouse, 2018), 312.

no further comment, provides powerful evidence for review and reanalysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis and other high-stakes crises.

In the end, Kennedy possessed important partners on the other side. Khrushchev resisted enormous military pressures within his government, agreed to remove the missiles, and stepped back from Armageddon, which was paramount. Arkhipov and Morgan, his American counterpart, also played essential roles. Understanding the perspectives, incentives, and limitations of opponents is important in every conflict and vital regarding nuclear war—the ultimate holocaust.

Arthur I. Cyr

Dr. Arthur I. Cyr has served as the vice president of the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and president of the Chicago World Trade Center. He has taught at the University of Chicago, University of Illinois, Northwestern University, and Carthage College (Clausen Distinguished Professor) and is the author of *After the Cold War: American Foreign Policy, Europe and Asia* (New York University Press, 2000) and other books and articles. Cyr graduated from UCLA, received a PhD in political science from Harvard University, and served in the US Army.

Select Bibliography

- Abel, Elie. *The Missile Crisis*. New York: Bantam Books, 1966.
- Bhattacharya, Ananyo. *The Man from the Future: The Visionary Life of John von Neumann*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022.
- Bundy, McGeorge. *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years*. New York: Random House, 1988.
- Dobbs, Michael. *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War*. New York: Vintage, 2009.
- Gribkov, Anatoli I., and William Y. Smith. *Operation Anadyr: U.S. and Soviet Generals Recount the Cuban Missile Crisis*. ed. Alfred Friendly Jr. Chicago: Edition q, Verlags GMBH, 1994.
- Plokhy, Serhii. *Nuclear Folly: A History of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021.
- Sorensen, Theodore. *Kennedy*. New York: Harper & Row, Bantam Books, 1966.
- Wohlstetter, Roberta. *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962.

Understanding North Korea and the Key to Security in East Asia

George Shatzer

Review of

Becoming Kim Jong Un: A Former CIA Officer's Insights into North Korea's Enigmatic Young Dictator

By Jung H. Pak

Rationality in the North Korean Regime: Understanding the Kims' Strategy of Provocation

By David W. Shin

Keywords: North Korea, Kim Jong-Un, nuclear, China, South Korea

Outgoing US President Barack Obama warned President-elect Donald Trump that North Korea's nuclear weapons program would be the greatest danger he would face as president. By late 2017, the Korean peninsula seemed to be the closest to war as it had ever been since July 1953, when the armistice ending the hostilities of the Korean War was signed. On September 3, 2017, North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear weapons test (the last to date). The device, claimed by North Korea to be a hydrogen bomb, triggered a 6.3 magnitude earthquake and had an explosive yield of about 250 kilotons. Throughout 2017, North Korea also conducted 17 missile tests. The final test on November 28 was of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) with a range capable of striking anywhere in the United States and doing so within as little as 30 minutes after its launch.

The Trump administration's policy of "maximum pressure" against the Kim family regime in North Korea sought to compel dictator Kim Jong-Un to end his pursuit of nuclear weapons. The comprehensive set of sanctions was precedent setting in scope and even had public support from the People's Republic of China (PRC)—North Korea's closest, and nearly only, ally. While the North Korean

people were feeling the bite of these sanctions, the tough measures had yet to change Kim's aggressive actions.

As a result, the United States conducted a massive buildup of military power on and near the Korean peninsula to ensure readiness for potential combat operations against North Korea. United States Forces Korea (USFK) and its service components, especially the US Eighth Army, executed this buildup over several months in 2017. Vast quantities of supplies, especially ammunition and medical stocks, were rushed to the region. Extensive preparations were made to train and receive additional US units to fight as part of USFK alongside South Korean forces. As the director of plans (G5) for Eighth Army during this time, it was apparent to me, from our discussions with senior civilian and military leaders, that the United States was seriously considering military options to end the North Korean nuclear program. It is safe to assume Kim could see these same preparations (perhaps through the PRC sharing intelligence with him) and arrived at the same conclusion about US intent.

Whether the increase in USFK military readiness was the decisive factor in pushing Kim to pursue diplomacy with the United States is impossible to say. Perhaps he realized his nuclear program had only pushed the United States and South Korea closer together, especially within the military alliance, and that it was time to adopt a new track with better near-term prospects. He recognized Trump's expressed dissatisfaction with the US share of the financial burden in defending South Korea. Kim also knew South Korean president Moon Jae-In was a progressive and much more open to dialogue and improving relations with North Korea. Plus, the Winter Olympics scheduled to take place in South Korea in February 2018 presented a fantastic opportunity to off-ramp tensions and burnish Kim's standing on arguably one of the largest stages in the world. Regardless of his exact calculus, throughout 2018 and up to his final meeting with Trump at the Korean demilitarized zone on June 30, 2019, Kim demonstrated the wiles and skills to preserve his regime and drive his nuclear program further forward.

Understanding Kim Jong-Un's thinking and how he develops strategy is the central issue in *Becoming Kim Jong Un: A Former CIA Officer's Insights into North Korea's Enigmatic Young Dictator* by Dr. Jung H. Pak. While Pak's book is not an academic work and is intended for a popular audience, it is a serious examination of Kim and his regime and deserves a careful read. Pak is currently a deputy assistant secretary for multilateral affairs and for global China issues with the US State Department and a deputy special representative for North Korea. Previously with the Central Intelligence Agency and as the deputy national intelligence officer for Korea at the National Intelligence Council, Pak leverages

her vast expertise on North Korea to deliver a work that is as analytical as it is engrossing.

What makes her focus on Kim and the regime especially relevant is the peculiar nature of the Kim family's dynasty. The regime is a paradoxical blend of communism with a heredity cult-of-personality grounded in a largely mythologized self-view as anti-Japanese guerillas. North Korea's extreme isolation from the rest of the world, and a relatively small population (approximately 26 million people) locked inside a tight police state, means Kim's decision making is comparatively insulated from the typical range of factors contended by other heads of state. This isolation greatly complicates outsiders' efforts to understand Kim's motivations or to attack his strategies. Hence, works that illuminate the person are of special significance.

Early after the start of Kim's rule in North Korea, following the death of his father (Kim Jong-Il) in December 2011, some dared wonder if Kim would take a different path as the national leader. As a teen, he had been educated briefly in Switzerland and seemed to have an affinity for certain aspects of Western culture, such as professional basketball. If anyone still clings to those hopes, Pak's analysis of Kim's evolution as dictator over the past decade should dispel them.

Rather than reform himself or the family regime, Kim has effectively doubled down on the legacies both of his grandfather (Kim Il-Sung) and his father by tightening even further the surveillance and control over the populace while charging ahead with nuclear weapons development. Kim recognizes, though, that outside influences will only become harder to block. Shrewdly, he has sought to consolidate his control over the elite class by building a self-contained internet and creating a pocket of wealth around the capital city of P'yŏngyang. Kim has done this while ordering the murder of his rival half-brother (Kim Jong-Nam); the execution of his uncle (Jang Song-Thaek); and purging several top military, government, and business officials. On top of all that, Kim has become something of a television and social media star—a twisted development that, as Pak notes, undermines the sanctions regime that took so much effort to build (221).

Pak's analysis really shines in her assessment of Kim's goals and perspectives. Her judgment that Kim sees possession of nuclear weapons as vital to elevating North Korea's status and preserving his regime is nothing new. However, she makes additional points that are novel or at least overlooked by many. First, a viable nuclear deterrent sets North Korea apart from South Korea after decades of South Korea surpassing it in every other way. Where South Korea remains dependent on the United States' extended deterrence, North Korea is on the cusp of having its own. Not only does this give North Korea a domestic military advantage over South Korea, but it also reinforces North Korea's claim the

government of South Korea is an illegitimate puppet of the United States. Second, Kim has made possession of nuclear arms an essential component of North Korean national identity and placed it at the core of his regime's legitimacy. Where, in the past, his father had been at least temporarily willing to negotiate on aspects of the nuclear program for economic gain, Pak assesses Kim's stance hardened as the program matured and his leverage increased. As a result, she believes Kim may no longer be willing to compromise on any part of the nuclear program (228).

Perhaps most worrisome are Pak's assertions that Kim's hubris is increasing and that he believes he has greater freedom of action than ever before. She notes Kim has been very good at reading the United States and calibrating his actions. But she also argues that Kim has "witnessed how Washington has no desire for a military conflict and that South Korea and the United States would restrain each other from taking actions that could potentially spark a war" (237). Combined with a strong sense that the PRC would not abandon North Korea in a crisis, and that the United States would prevent South Korea or Japan from developing nuclear arms, Kim might well be emboldened to take increasingly aggressive actions to undermine the US-South Korean alliance or pursue reunification of the peninsula, seemingly secure in the knowledge no serious combined force is willing to confront him. So, the Kim family regime remains rational but increasingly dangerous, as it feels more secure than perhaps at any moment in recent decades.

In his book, *Rationality in the North Korean Regime: Understanding the Kims' Strategy of Provocation*, Dr. David W. Shin squarely tackles the question of Kim's rationality. Shin, a former US Army colonel and current faculty member at the National Intelligence University, settles this question firmly. The book opens with an excellent discussion of rationality and strategy making. He correctly points out that many observers are quick to render a judgment of the Kims' rationality but fail to define rationality. Shin uses a seven-component framework to analyze the actions of the Kim family regime through each of its ruling leaders. The framework components are achieving the desired outcome (success), the role of emotion, assessments based in fact (truth), a logical design (strategy), the use of appropriate resources, the probability of success, and accounting for supporting and opposing actors. In assessing nearly every instance of major aggressive action by North Korea since 1950, Shin convincingly finds the three Kim leaders have been quite rational. Overall, the book was a welcome find and should be essential reading for anyone wanting to understand North Korea.

Shin buttresses this assessment with a strong accounting of Kim Jong-Un's rationality. Shin correctly notes that Kim understands he cannot survive by relying solely on his lineage. Accordingly, Kim has taken several steps to consolidate his control of the regime through killings, purges, and tightened

surveillance, as noted previously. But, Kim also recognizes an iron grip alone can prove self-defeating, so he has returned to his grandfather's policy (*byungjin*) of prioritizing economic and military development simultaneously. In addition to creating an island of wealth around P'yongyang, Kim has permitted once-banned local markets (*jangmadang*) to operate under heavy regulations. Where some might see such action as limited reform that could one day seriously threaten regime control, Kim recognizes the markets are an opportunity to reinforce his control since many people are wholly dependent on the markets for survival.

Shin also points out, like Pak, that Kim has proven to be quite savvy in his dealings with the United States and the PRC. Not only has he prevented any new significant US action from undermining his regime or his nuclear program, but he has also managed to retain the strong support of the PRC to the same end (evidenced recently by the PRC's veto of proposed new United Nations sanctions). Finally, Kim had done all this while pushing forward with further development of the nuclear weapons program, conducting 31 missile tests in 2022 alone (through June). As Shin summarizes, "Kim could use high-level nuclear negotiations to weaken the U.S.-South Korea alliance as a part of his demands for a U.S. security guarantee, and take advantage of opportunities to gain support from the North's traditional allies to resist the U.S.'s maximum pressure" (289).

Shin's analysis of Kim's rationality is also impressive because it accounts for the possibility that emotion can play a positive role in supporting rationality and successful outcomes (9–10). This uncommon view is important to consider, given the peculiar history and nature of the Kim family regime. As Shin points out, the Kims have imbued North Korean national history with a deep sense of being a guerilla state, first defeating the Japanese occupation and now defending itself from the constant threat of attack from the United States and its South Korean lackeys. The Kim doctrine of national self-reliance (*juche*) has been criticized by some observers as a sham, given its turgid, propaganda-style language and the reality of North Korea's heavy dependence on support from the PRC over the decades. Yet, this siege mentality and self-view of underdog self-reliance is clearly a strong motivating factor in Kim's strategic thinking. So far, he has seemed adept at balancing emotional motivation with the practical calculation of ends, ways, and means. This balance is evident in Kim's emotional characterization of nuclear weapons as a "treasured sword" that will protect North Korea—which is also a calculated recognition that states who have given up on nuclear weapons programs (for example, Iraq, Libya, and Ukraine) have been attacked by larger powers. Shin also notes the reunification of the Korean peninsula, on North Korean terms, remains Kim's ultimate deeply emotional aim (286).

In the end, Shin (like Pak) expresses concern that the chance of miscalculation on Kim's part is increasing as he feels emboldened by the progress of his nuclear

weapons program. Shin cites Kim's 2017 threats of preemptive use of nuclear ICBMs against the United States as an indication of this. However, Shin concludes Kim's strong desire to possess a nuclear deterrent and his willingness to talk with Trump in 2018 means Kim can be deterred from using nuclear weapons (290).

What readers take away from both books is a clear sense that the North Korean problem has potentially entered a dangerous new phase. Kim Jong-Un is young and charismatic. He has proven himself to be ruthless and highly intelligent. For over 10 years, he has skillfully manipulated two global powers to his advantage. He is adapting his regime and his nation's economy to preserve his rule. Kim likely possesses the ability to strike the United States with nuclear weapons, and he is presumably building a so-called "second strike" capability to prevent preemptive strikes against his nuclear weapons program. He also continues to enjoy the PRC's backing, which is a strong counterbalance to almost any threat the United States can pose to him.

Additionally, Kim possesses a massive and capable conventional deterrent capability primarily in his long-range artillery and stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons. As both authors point out, war with North Korea is simply an unacceptable option. Conventional strikes against Seoul, South Korea's capital city, would quickly kill tens of thousands of people, wound hundreds of thousands more, and devastate one of the world's top economic centers. A nuclear strike against any major Japanese or US city would do the same.

Both authors make sensible, necessary US policy and strategy recommendations for dealing with North Korea. These include maintaining strong alliances with South Korea and other regional allies like Japan, continuing to use economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure to constrain Kim's resources and options, and working toward regional dialogue that places more burden on the PRC and Russia to deal with North Korea. None of these measures alone or combined are sufficient to end the North Korean threat, as the past many years have shown.

As Pak and Shin point out, Kim may be willing to risk increasingly aggressive actions to achieve his aims. Future conditions such as economic crises or natural disasters in North Korea, perceptions of instability in the South Korean government, fissures in the US-South Korea alliance, perceived slights from the United States or South Korea, or even just a desire to claim a victory, might well encourage Kim to lash out. A sudden attack against US forces (such as on the USS *Pueblo* in 1968 or the shoot down of the EC-121 in 1969) or on South Korean forces (such as the sinking of the navy corvette *Cheonan* in 2010) is quite possible. Such an incident is a no-win situation for the United States. It would force

US leaders to balance a desire to punish North Korea with the risk of escalation a response in kind would entail.

Planners today must prepare detailed contingency plans to deal with such provocations from North Korea. These issues, while serious, are near-term problems that require containment. Planners must remember North Korea's so-called provocations are just as likely intended to deter more significant US and South Korean actions. The larger, unpalatable choice facing the United States is a question of very long-term strategy—attempt to change the regime in North Korea or accept it as a nuclear power.

Seeking regime change would require the United States to play the long game against North Korea. Both Pak and Shin point toward the possibility of undermining the Kim family regime or that it might destabilize on its own due to outside influences. Despite predictions of collapse or overthrow of the Kim family regime for many years, it has not happened, nor do any requisite conditions seem to exist. The United States has no practical, sustained access to the North Korean people, nor does any of the broader populace seem to possess the means or drive to organize a coup. Kim appears to control the elite firmly, who are probably too few in number to overcome the vast security apparatuses monitoring them and defending the regime, or he has co-opted them. It is possible some portion of the security services might choose to seize power, but they would be checked by other sectors of the security services, which all watch one another. There is also no assurance a usurper would be friendly to the United States and South Korea. Also, the PRC is likely to intervene to stabilize North Korea in the event of a leadership crisis there. Finally, the challenge of reunifying the Korean peninsula would be enormous and complex. Its success would almost certainly depend on the United States organizing a vast international financing and support effort to assist a South Korean-led campaign to reintegrate with and rebuild the North.

Shin more squarely advocates for considering the alternative—accepting North Korea as a nuclear state and learning to coexist with it. He argues that good-faith US negotiations with North Korea, and military confidence-building measures between the two Koreas, could normalize relations between all parties. These actions would permit peace treaties that could assuage North Korean fears of US aggression and perhaps even persuade it from fully developing a nuclear ICBM capability. Others, such as Victor Cha, have argued the United States provided North Korea a nonaggression guarantee in the 2005 Six-Party Talks Joint Statement, but North Korea quickly dismissed it as disingenuous. Shin does not explain what it would take to alter Kim's siege mentality or to have him accept the South Korean government as legitimate. Also, Shin's suggested approach seems to be grounded in a view that Kim is pursuing only regime survival and not

reunification of the peninsula under his control. Finally, Shin correctly states the PRC will play an important role in trying to influence North Korean behavior.

Indeed, the United States must recognize North Korea and the People's Republic of China are a package deal. Beijing may well be playing the long game concerning North Korea. The two nations have a shared cultural history stretching back many centuries. While the two do not share the warmest relations today, China views North Korea as vital to its security, as evidenced by its direct intervention in the Korean War to fight against US forces. Beijing has also spent vast sums on keeping the Kim regime afloat and retaining North Korea as a territorial buffer zone. Should North Korea become a fully nuclear state, it would still be almost solely dependent on PRC support, giving China an unmatched degree of leverage over the Kim family regime. It would also provide the People's Republic of China with something the United States does not have in the region—a nuclear-capable ally. This possibility gives Beijing a potentially significant counterweight for any effort it wants to undertake, including the forceable seizure of Taiwan. As such, Korea may well be the future key to regional security in East Asia.

George Shatzer

Colonel George Shatzer is the director of the Strategic Research and Analysis Department in the Strategic Studies Institute at the US Army War College.

To Consider – Recent Books on Similar Topics

The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future

by Victor Cha

On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War

by Van Jackson

The Armed Forces of North Korea: On the Path of Songun

by Stijn Mitzer and Joost Oliemans

Kim Jong Un and the Bomb: Survival and Deterrence in North Korea

by Ankit Panda

Kim Jong-un's Strategy for Survival: A Method to Madness

by David W. Shin

Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader: North Korea and the Third World

by Benjamin R. Young

Book Reviews

DEFENSE STUDIES

A Violent Peace: Race, U.S. Militarism, and Cultures of Democratization in Cold War Asia and the Pacific

By Christine Hong

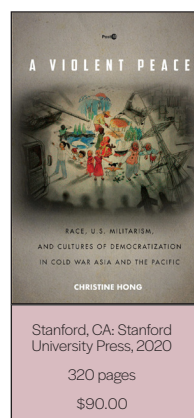
Reviewed by Eric Setzekorn, historian, US Army Center of Military History

Christine Hong, in *A Violent Peace: Race, U.S. Militarism, and Cultures of Democratization in Cold War Asia and the Pacific*, uses critical theory to redefine America's post-1945 Asia-Pacific experience around militarism and domination. While the central role of the US military in the Asia-Pacific since 1945 deserves more study, *A Violent Peace* confuses rather than clarifies the interrelationship of militarism, race, the impact on local communities, and the connections between US foreign policy and domestic programs.

Hong primarily argues US military supremacy in the Asia-Pacific in the aftermath of World War II enabled the construction of new hegemonic racial and political structures shaped by “catastrophic violence and world-altering terror” (3). A key element of this post-1945 environment was the development of new ideas about race and military power. The US military served as a major player, assimilating the peoples of the region and drafting African Americans—who experienced the opportunities and dangers of Cold War militarism—into military service.

An associate professor of literature and critical race and ethnic studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Hong often relies on the works of Cold War-era authors James Baldwin, Carlos Bulosan, Ralph Ellison, and Kenzaburō Ōe to illustrate intercultural conceptual linkages across the Pacific. By mining their ideas on race and power, Hong shows “an untold tale of midcentury U.S. fascism” and her analysis “dilates junctures of political solidarity and alliances during the Cold War among [B]lack Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders and Asians” amid American military power (12). Recent domestic political debates contextualize the work, which has tenuous connections to the Cold War-era Asia-Pacific.

The book's complex, often murky structure poses a significant challenge for readers. Its numerous narrative threads and digressions complicate the core argument. For instance, chapter 7, “Militarized Queerness,” begins



with a discussion of Dan Choi, an advocate against the military “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy in 2009–11. Hong, however, never clarifies the connection between this segment and the book’s themes. The chapter then fails to advance the main argument with a five-page discussion on the US military’s use of dogs in Vietnam. “Militarized Queerness” concludes with a discussion of Korean children living near US military camps in the early 1950s. Readers must labor to connect such subjects to the work’s themes.

The book’s citations also create confusion. Hong alternates her use of in-text references and footnotes and does not supply a bibliography. Readers will find it challenging to refer to sources supporting key themes. For example, chapter six references Noam Chomsky, with in-text citations with his name and a page number in every other paragraph. Without a clear system of footnotes or a bibliography, I could not determine which of Chomsky’s many books was referenced.

Hong also misdates several events, which, while a minor issue, cultivates a rushed feel to the book. I understand the commercial pressures to release a book while a topic is hot, like critical theory, but these errors hinder the work’s impact.

A Violent Peace offers some original theoretical perspectives but largely resembles other critical assessments of US foreign policy. Many of Hong’s references come from the 1970s when academics jaded by the US experience in Vietnam castigated Cold War policies as discriminatory and militarized. Hong provides little new historical information or theory to improve the understanding of the Cold War–era Asia-Pacific. Readers seeking a more historical approach to issues of race and the American military’s encounter with the Asia-Pacific should read Marc Gallicchio’s *The African American Encounter with Japan and China* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000) or Michael Cullen Green’s *Black Yanks in the Pacific* (Cornell University Press, 2010). Readers seeking insights into America’s Cold War–era domestic perspective should read Christina Klein’s *Cold War Orientalism* (University of California Press, 2003), which explores cultural viewpoints, or Kori A. Graves’s *A War Born Family* (New York University Press, 2020), which examines the adoption of Korean War orphans by African American families.

Overall, *A Violent Peace* makes bold theoretical assertions about an interesting topic but the book’s uneven source material and tangled organization impede its effectiveness.

Nuclear Reactions: How Nuclear-Armed States Behave

By Mark S. Bell

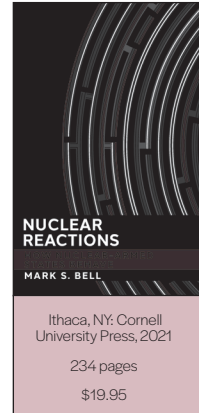
Reviewed by Amy F. Woolf, specialist in nuclear weapons policy,
Congressional Research Service

Mark S. Bell, in his book, *Nuclear Reactions: How Nuclear-Armed States Behave*, develops the “theory of nuclear opportunism” to explain how states alter their foreign policy after acquiring nuclear weapons (6, 22). While much of the research into nuclear proliferation examines why states seek to acquire these capabilities, Bell focuses on what they might do after acquiring them. The important answer to this latter question would not only help the international community respond to the effects of nuclear proliferation, but it would also afford that community the opportunity to outline the military, political, and economic costs it might face in preventing a state from succeeding in that effort.

Bell notes the difficulty of establishing a single theory to explain how all nuclear-armed states will behave. The theory of nuclear revolution, which posits nuclear-armed states become less aggressive due to the resolution of central security dilemmas, helps account for the lack of a great-power war but says little about broader foreign policy goals nuclear states might pursue. Theories asserting states become more aggressive after acquiring nuclear weapons only explain reasons for aggression and not the full scope of changes in a state’s foreign policy.

With the theory of nuclear opportunism, Bell suggests opportunistic states will use nuclear weapons to improve their position in international politics and achieve political goals. He contends nuclear weapons do not necessitate states change their goals; they reduce neither security worries nor competitiveness. Nuclear weapons facilitate a range of foreign policy behaviors extending beyond the reduction or expansion of aggression, depending on unique policy goals.

Bell begins his explanation of the theory of nuclear opportunism by describing a number of possible behaviors a state might engage in after acquiring nuclear weapons, including: aggression, compromise, goal expansion, the pursuit of independence from an ally, the bolstering of an alliance, and steadfastness in the face of threats. Moreover, the goals a state might pursue, along with the military and political tools it might employ to achieve them, depend on the state’s unique



strategic situation. For example, a state faced with a serious territorial threat or ongoing war might use nuclear weapons to improve its security. If it has a senior ally, then nuclear weapons might allow it to gain independence to pursue its security interests. If a declining power, then it might seek to affect its political trajectory, and if a hopeful rising power, then it might seek to bolster its political image.

Bell tests his theory with detailed reviews of the foreign policy behaviors of South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States after each state acquired nuclear weapons. He reviews the historical record to determine why each state acquired nuclear weapons and to describe how its foreign policy changed after it had a deliverable capability. In each case, he finds the model offers insights into how the state pursued its goals and confirms each state exhibited expected behaviors. For example, prior to acquiring nuclear weapons, the United Kingdom had been wary of responding to challenges with military force. After it had a deliverable capability, however, it became more willing to use unilateral force, less attentive to US preferences, and less compromising. Bell concludes nuclear weapons helped the United Kingdom preserve its global position and avoid dependence on the United States.

In Bell's review of other proliferation cases—including those in China, France, India, Israel, and Pakistan—he determines the model, though imperfect, offers insights into how nuclear weapons facilitated the pursuit of these states' foreign policy goals. He notes the seeming exception of China. The theory predicts China would use nuclear weapons to expand its international influence, defend the status quo, and bolster junior allies. China, however, has asserted its nuclear weapons exist only to resist coercion. The study seems to accept this assertion without addressing the recent steps China has taken to expand its influence in international politics and to bolster its regional position. The model may explain China's current behavior as it expands nuclear capabilities but does not predict what China's behavior will be after it has acquired deliverable nuclear weapons.

Bell's research reveals opportunistic states have used nuclear weapons to improve their positions in international politics and to achieve political goals. The theory postulates, and research confirms, nuclear weapons do not change states' political goals but facilitate goal-oriented behaviors. Nuclear weapons affect different states' behaviors in different ways because states have their own aims and means to achieve them. This statement may seem obvious, but it is at odds with current research, which attempts to identify a few overriding goals nations will seek once they have acquired nuclear weapons and to define and design policy responses to block those goals. If nuclear-armed states exhibit different behaviors and pursue different goals reflective of their unique security circumstances, then policymakers will have to deepen their understanding of these states' goals and broaden the range of policy tools to mitigate the risks of nuclear proliferation.

IRREGULAR WARFARE

Full Spectrum Dominance: Irregular Warfare and the War on Terror

By Maria Ryan

Reviewed by Dr. José de Arimatéia da Cruz, professor of international relations and comparative politics, Georgia Southern University, and visiting professor, Center for Strategic Leadership, US Army War College

Maria Ryan, a professor of American history at the University of Nottingham, has written an insightful history of the conception of irregular warfare across the US government and on the periphery in the war on terror. *Full Spectrum Dominance: Irregular Warfare and the War on Terror* proposes the pursuit of an irregular warfare capability was part of a broader project with roots predating the application of counterinsurgency in Iraq and transcending the war on terror (4). Ryan argues “9/11 was the initial catalyst for the turn toward irregular warfare because it exposed U.S. security vulnerabilities in spite of unassailable conventional military power” (9).



Irregular warfare developed into a national strategy and doctrine due to several factors: the “globalization” of international security (12); the function of “peripheral theaters of the war on terror” as the “testing grounds for the utilization of irregular tactics” (12); and the development of the Iraqi insurgency (12).

The conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have widely defined America’s war on terror. Ryan explains secondary fronts in Georgia, the Caspian Sea Basin, the Philippines, and sub-Saharan Africa have become key testing sites for developing what the Department of Defense calls “full spectrum dominance” (4). Ryan defines this concept as “dominance across the entire spectrum of warfare from conventional through to irregular conflict, in order to ensure the continuation of US military preeminence in an era of globalization, in which networked nonstate actors now also challenged US hegemony alongside traditional state-based threats” (4). Since the Army’s potential enemies include regular conventional armed forces and nonstate actors, accomplishing globalized full spectrum dominance requires conventional warfare and asymmetric capabilities. To execute this strategy, the Army aims to combine “an offensive approach to both irregular challenges and conventional military affairs” (17).

Ryan makes another important contribution by asserting full spectrum dominance provides an optimistic outlook on the future of military warfare and a “rejection of the narrative of American decline by the Bush administration” (213). Ryan writes the strategy “is grounded in the belief that the United States should and could dominate international relations not just in the realm of conventional state-based affairs but also at the transnational level” (213). This overextension of confidence regarding America’s military dominance has roots in a decentralized and chaotic post–Cold War international system with wars characterized as networked insurgency–style warfare. Conventional military power has limited value in the face of asymmetric challenges exploitative of US vulnerabilities. To counter such threats requires unconventional activity (31).

Regarding the fourth-generation warfare theater, Ryan writes “nation-states” are “no longer the only actors on the international stage” (7) and “[t]ransnational and subnational groups and networks” are “emerging as powerful forces” (7). Ungoverned areas in which a state cannot furnish basic provisions for its citizens have become fertile ground for terrorist organizations and criminal enterprise networks. As Ryan explains, “[t]he strategy also reiterated the problem of ‘ungoverned states and under-governed territories,’ stressing the need to ‘deny terrorists safe haven in failed states and ungoverned regions’” (44).

The African continent served as a trial location for a whole government approach utilizing full spectrum dominance, which began with the establishment of a regional task force based in the East African country Djibouti (85). Other initiatives in Africa included the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), developed in response to the US government’s identification of the Sahel as its number two focus in Africa (the Horn remains number one) in the war on terrorism (89). The State Department established a second interagency program, the East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative, in June 2003 as a “counterpart” to the PSI (93). The important establishment of the African Command (AFRICOM) in 2007 allowed for a “‘holistic’ approach to security that would include good governance, the rule of law, and economic opportunity, as well as more traditional security missions such as train-and-equip programs, with the ‘emphasis on prevention’” (110).

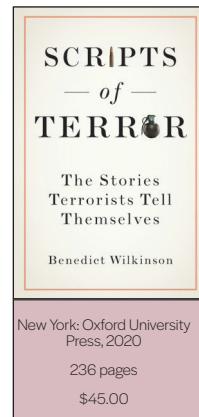
Based on Ryan’s insightful observations, I recommend *Full Spectrum Dominance* to readers interested in security studies, especially US Army War College students.

Scripts of Terror: The Stories Terrorists Tell Themselves

By Benedict Wilkinson

Reviewed by Dr. Whitney Grespin, lecturer and regional program lead,
Institute for Governance, Defense Security Cooperation University,
and non-resident fellow, Joint Special Operations University

Benedict Wilkinson, in *Scripts of Terror*, a book adaptation of the author's PhD findings, provides a theoretical framework for readers to apply to motivations of violent Islamist groups and the strategy of terrorism. Well-researched and lucid, *Scripts of Terror* identifies eight narrative "scripts" fundamental to the motivation and evolution of Islamist extremist organizations in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. The scripts, drawn from three case studies, consist of: "survival, power play, mobilisation, provocation and polarisation, de-legitimisation, attrition, co-operation, and de-mobilisation" (7).



Wilkinson analyzes irregular warfare through valuable vignettes illustrating the potential for different responses from violent extremist organizations (VEOs) faced with similar problem sets. Bringing these episodes' outcomes to attention provides opportunities for informative or insightful thought exercises for strategists conceiving responses to or predicting second- and third-order effects of terrorism.

Wilkinson highlights the phenomenon of VEO subsets formulating scripts independently of leadership. For instance, he writes, "whilst the organisations were acting towards al-Qa'ida's ambitions, they were not acting according to a grand master strategy developed by bin Laden, but to all intents and purposes formulating their scripts autonomously" (67). The decentralization of script creation should remind readers some VEO subsets pursue a "commander's intent" through their own methods; no script is prescriptive.

The work reads primarily as academic. Wilkinson's (admirable) observation of the central problem lacks a "step further" approach. He never articulates policy relevance or draws on his expertise to recommend responses to, interruptions of, or mitigations of scripts. Wilkinson neglects to address the roles of states as incubators for VEOs and misses an opportunity to better characterize the relationship between scripts and their settings (92).

Geopolitical realities and time constraints limit the book's case studies to a Central Command-focus and field research conducted in one country. The work might have benefited from broader consideration of similar groups in different areas of responsibility to determine whether differing trends could emerge elsewhere. The (albeit inevitable) omission of such data weakens the authority of Wilkinson's claims.

The book's biggest contribution lies in its opportunities to interpret each script as a potential course of action with benefits and detriments dependent upon leadership and context (73). With this approach, Wilkinson's scripts could facilitate an intellectual wargaming experience in which readers could analyze incentives and disincentives for each script used by an adversary. Wilkinson acknowledges the importance of observation and anticipation, writing: "Without stories and their cause-effect structures, the outcomes of actions cannot be envisaged and decisions can only be made blindly in the vague hope that something advantageous might arise" (143).

Even with areas in need of improvement, *Scripts of Terror* could serve as a useful primer for VEO case studies. It could prepare practitioners as pre-deployment reading for a better understanding of the foundations and evolutions of potential adversaries. Readers of this publication should be cautioned through this work against the perils of "believing their own press." Wilkinson writes violent Islamists "were deluded by the compelling narratives of scripts as stories [as] [t]hese stories were so alluring . . . that their inherent flaws were glossed over, ignored or dismissed." The *Parameters* community of practice also risks convincing itself of narratives contradicting ground truth.

The Unknown Enemy: Counterinsurgency and the Illusion of Control

By Christian Tripodi

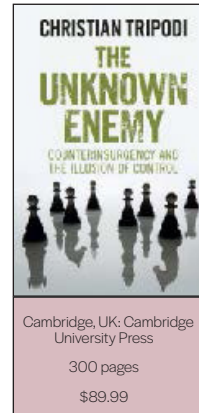
Reviewed by Dr. Kalev Sepp, senior lecturer, Naval Postgraduate School

Was there a misplaced focus on populations and cultures in the prosecution of the military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan? Dr. Christian Tripodi presents a historical analysis and indictment of a century of attempts by Western commanders to wage counterinsurgency warfare in support of national policies. His review covers five cases of failed and failing British, French, and US interventions, with selected quotations from over 330 books and articles by scholars, journalists, and memoirists and four archival sources.

A senior lecturer in the Defence Studies Department of King's College London, the author's previous book examined British political officers on the North-West Frontier of colonial India, 1877–1947. Tripodi displays a sense of the perennial intricacies of control and conflict in destabilized regions and sees a critical emphasis placed by Western armies deployed in these zones on understanding their operational environment; that is, “the peoples and cultures they operate amongst” (xi). Noting this, he asks, “[W]hat is the relationship between such forms of understanding to the success of these endeavors” (xi)?

Tripodi begins his answer by arguing that then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, in his 2002 listing of “knowns” and “unknowns,” left out “unknown knowns”—which the reader eventually comprehends as biases and reflexes deeply embedded in a nation's strategic character (178). These are collectively “The Unknown Enemy” of the book's title (chosen as it happens, by the book's editor), and chiefly explain recurring shortcomings of the Western way of counterinsurgency.

The author critiques American and British efforts in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars to “know the human terrain” as paradoxically replacing “strategy with stereotypes” (4). He assesses that their planning drew on “bad history” and the “questionable” works of T. E. Lawrence, Mao Zedong, and David Galula (11). Counterinsurgency, Tripodi proposes, must be understood by practitioners as “political warfare . . . when warfare is used not simply to create the terms for political victory, but instead as a force of politics *in and of itself*” (22, author's emphasis). Socio-cultural intelligence and “big data,” he contends, do not enable



military officers to deal adequately with “phenomena they rarely comprehend” in this kind of fight (23).

The four themes Tripodi employs to examine each of the counterinsurgencies are: (1) Imperialism, defined as expeditionary democratization; (2) the Nature of War, which he believes is “largely hidden” to military leaders; (3) the Power of Doctrine, epitomized by *US Field Manual 3-24*, which holds a “host of assumptions” and “facile and unworkable principles”; and (4) Policy, Tactics, and the Military Operational Code, a term Tripodi borrows from an unpublished doctoral dissertation, meaning a “set of beliefs about certain rules of action,” which can simply be called organizational culture (28–43, 182).

In each of the five cases Tripodi analyzes with his four themes, he discovers succinct reasons for governmental and military failure. On the British-ruled Indian North-West Frontier, 1919–39, the Indian Political Service was manipulated by the local Pashtuns and burdened by a “directionless and confusing” British policy (88). Similarly, an insupportable French national policy during the Algerian War, 1954–62, drove the Sections Administratives Spécialisé (SAS) to militarize counterinsurgency, winning tactical actions but losing the war. The US Military Advisory Command in Vietnam, 1964–72, did not recognize the “fundamental uselessness of pacification.”

Three decades later, the British Army in Basra and the US forces in Al Anbar, Iraq, 2006–9, were at “the mercy of powerful local actors,” which the Americans “didn’t understand.” The UK-US actions to counter the insurgencies produced consequences contrary to their strategic objectives; pacifying Anbar empowered the Sunni majority, causing “immense frictions” with the Shia-led national government. As for Afghanistan, NATO’s fight in Helmand, 2006–14, could not be won because of Afghan corruption, the Pakistani sanctuary, and Western governments tiring of the war—announcing in 2010 that their military forces would withdraw by 2014. In 2021, they belatedly implemented that decree.

Tripodi agrees with many strategists and analysts who preceded him. His note of debilitating “bureaucratic interests” was well disposed by Ambassador Robert Komer in his 1973 Vietnam retrospective *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam*, where Komer identified the “inherent reluctance of organizations to change operational methods” (118). During the Iraq and Afghanistan interventions, Professor Eliot Cohen, Jan Horvath, and John Nagl, offered offered “Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency” (*Military Review*, March-April 2006). Among their paradoxical dictums: “If a tactic works this week, it will not work next week; if it works in this province, it will not work in the next.” They warn, and Tripodi echoes, “Tactical success guarantees nothing.” Tripodi’s bibliography does not include such references and is not a counterinsurgency reading list.

None of Tripodi's assessments is particularly new, although they are usually not presented with such academic condescension. For military commanders, "a true understanding of (the war in Helmand) was even more problematic than a misunderstanding, or even no understanding at all . . ." (195). Senior commanders were " . . . without benefit of a historian's eye for the inherent problems" of the role of military power as an agent of change (66). One might allow that General David Petraeus' doctoral dissertation, subtitled "A Study of Military Influence and the Use of Force in the Post-Vietnam Era" (1987), and Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster's PhD in military history qualify them as historians. Their advisers, like Pashto-speaking analyst Carter Malkasian (mentioned in the preface) were similarly credentialed. Yet, Tripodi gives them little credit.

A viable assessment of the value of socio-cultural intelligence in counterinsurgency requires investigation of winning campaigns as well as losses—but none are studied. The government successes in Malaya versus the Malayan National Liberation Army (MLRA), France versus the Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS), Philippines versus Hukbalahap, El Salvador versus the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), Peru versus Sendero Luminoso, or Turkey versus Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), among others, could have been researched. And if application of cultural knowledge does not work, then what does? Tripodi offers no solutions besides calling for military professionals "to better understand their role" as "political actors" in such conflicts (208). Military professionals may find his lengthy, if eloquent, sentences and paragraphs often obscure rather than clarify his arguments.

Engaging Russian, Chinese, and Iranian expansion below the level of conventional and nuclear combat—that is, in the realm of political warfare—is now recognized as a strategic imperative. There are foundational tutorials: the 1942 British Political Warfare Executive white paper, George F. Kennan's 1948 State Department memorandum, *The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare*, and the 1950 National Security Council policy paper NSC-68, *United States Objectives and Programs for National Security*, all consider political warfare in the context of what is now termed great-power competition. Counterinsurgency is just one of its operational components. For military commanders and staffs, wide study of this "like-war-but-not-war," and previous successes and failures in its conduct, may be useful preparation for the demands they may have to meet in the very near future.

MILITARY HISTORY

Tower of Skulls: A History of the Asia-Pacific War, July 1937–May 1942

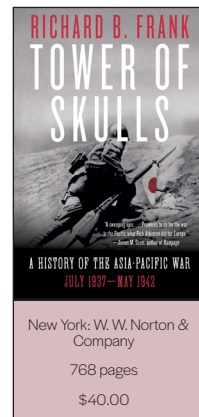
By Richard B. Frank

Reviewed by Colonel Jonathan Klug, US Army, assistant professor,
Department of Military Strategy, Planning, and Operations,
US Army War College

Richard Frank's *Tower of Skulls* shares many similarities with Rick Atkinson's *An Army at Dawn*. Both superb, "bingeable" first volumes of World War II trilogies contextualize the American Army in different theaters of war. Frank's *Tower of Skulls* resembles *An Army at Dawn* in the quality of its research and readability but has a broader scope. Frank focuses on the Asia-Pacific War as a whole rather than one theater and one army. Frank delivers on the sweeping and ambitious nature of *Tower of Skulls*. Given contemporary concerns in the Western Pacific, Frank's efforts are especially relevant to military historians and senior members of the defense community.

As the subtitle suggests, the book spans the period from July 1937, the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War (July 7, 1937–September 9, 1945), to May 1942, the day before the Japanese–American carrier battle of the Coral Sea. Frank spends the first five chapters of the book detailing and contextualizing the fight between the Japanese and Chinese and addresses the roles of other nations, especially the United States. His expert discussion interweaves action in China with the series of events leading to the Pearl Harbor attack. He dedicates just over half the book to the period before the merging of the Sino-Japanese War with the Asia-Pacific War, which one could argue began the global conflagration of World War II.

In the second half of *Tower of Skulls*, Frank covers events from December 7, 1941, to May 1942. He examines Pearl Harbor and its aftermath and investigations with an evenhanded discussion of the latter. Pearl Harbor marks the beginning of Japan's grand offensive, and Frank examines each significant Japanese effort following it, with an excellent treatment of Australian, British, Dutch, and American aspects. Part of this treatment includes the forging of the Anglo–American Alliance and the early conferences of the Combined Chiefs of Staff. *Tower of Skulls* features a thoughtful consideration of the Allied failures in Southeast Asia and the Philippines. Frank concludes the book with a discussion



of the Japanese Empire's zenith and the Bataan Death March, setting the stage for the trilogy's second volume, which will begin with the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Frank's exhaustive and impeccable research synthesizes a wide variety of sources. In his acknowledgments, he recognizes a circle of supporting Asia-Pacific War experts and World War II generalists and details many archives where he conducted research using primary sources. Frank devised his own form of endnotes (also seen in his books *Guadalcanal* and *Downfall*) to support his writing, which often includes detailed, expert explanations—a mark of sound scholarship. While formal standardized endnotes would facilitate the retracing of Frank's efforts, his approach improves readability and condenses the book. The inclusion of excellent maps also supports comprehension.

Underpinned by superb research, *Tower of Skulls* balances artful historical coverage with readability—no small feat given its scope. Frank tells a magnificent story of the Asia-Pacific War with seamless shifts from a bird's-eye view to a worm's-eye view. Although he focuses mainly on the strategic environment and battles, Frank incorporates a human element through his descriptions of critical leaders and individual stories.

Frank's work does what no other trilogy or single-volume history of the Pacific War has done: provide balanced coverage of the principal belligerents of the British Commonwealth, the United States, Imperial Japan, and China. While balancing the treatment of the first three major powers is an achievement, Frank contributes to World War II historiography with his unique elevation of the Sino-Japanese War and its significance to the field of strategic studies. Rana Mitter and others' books attest to the tremendous recent literature on the war in China. Still, no other author has seamlessly incorporated China's contribution into the greater context of the Asia-Pacific War in the way Frank has now. If the next two installments follow the trajectory of *Tower of Skulls*, Frank's authoritative trilogy will provide immeasurable contributions to the field.

REGIONAL STUDIES

Kim Jong-un's Strategy for Survival: A Method to Madness

By David W. Shin

Reviewed by Dr. Patrick M. Cronin, Asia-Pacific security chair, Hudson Institute

Who could have guessed Kim Jong-Un would turn out to be such a clever strategist? He was dispatched to a Swiss boarding school during North Korea's famine years in the 1990s, graduated from Kim Il-Sung Military University in P'yŏngyang shortly after North Korea's first successful nuclear test in 2006, and was hastily groomed for leadership after his father suffered a stroke in 2008. When Kim Jong-Il died in December 2011, his third son, 27 years of age, inherited a troubled regime guided by a clique of octogenarians and locked in enmity with the United States and its democratic allies. Many observers considered the "young general" out of his depth. His likelihood to survive was questionable, his strategic acumen dubious. What a difference a decade makes.

In his latest book, *Kim Jong-un's Strategy for Survival*, retired Colonel David W. Shin explains the secret to Kim Jong-Un's success. As the subtitle suggests, Shin asserts there is indeed a "method" to Kim's so-called "madness." Shin demystifies the Kim regime and shows the young Kim had a clear "strategy for survival" replete with: control of political elites and information flow; circumvention of sanctions; summons of economic efficiency; assembly of a credible nuclear deterrent; and deeper cooperation with China and Russia to fend off Japan, South Korea, and the United States.

Shin spent years at the intersection of arms and Asia as a product of the Army's Foreign Area Officer Program. His experience includes negotiating with North Koreans at P'anmunjŏm as a United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission staff member and as a Joint Staff security representative on the US delegation to the Six Party Talks. Now an associate professor at the National Intelligence University, Shin testifies to the value of cultivating deep regional expertise among military professionals.

Shin's professional background and systematic sourcing provide an authoritative basis for his judgments on Kim's strategy. He captures how Kim orchestrated



a hierarchy of power using the Korean Workers' Party's Organization and Guidance Department to sort out critical political and military leadership posts. Shin notes how Kim also strengthened state security by cracking down on illegal cell phone signals, thus turning an information threat into an advantage. The totalitarian system may have regressed under his father, but, according to Shin, the young Kim understood how to secure the power needed for survival.

Shin illustrates Kim's survival strategy through four case studies. The first is Kim's choreographed nuclear crisis in March 2013, accomplished through dispersing KN-08 mobile missiles. Washington found the threat credible because Kim had paraded a KN-08 ICBM mockup the previous April in a power play that happened to telegraph Kim's strategic intent accurately.

The second case study comes from 2015, in which a tampered landmine wounded two South Korean soldiers patrolling the demilitarized zone. Kim engineered this crisis to demonstrate authority. He was willing to use limited force against conservative South Korean President Park Geun-Hye but seemed content to use less escalatory means when dealing with progressive President Moon Jae-In, suggesting finesse—rather than randomness—to his decision making.

The nuclear showdown in 2017 is the third case study. Days after de-escalating tensions over the 2015 landmine incident, a media leak disclosed a new alliance contingency plan (OPLAN 5015) that would seek a prompt end to the war through a decapitation strike on North Korea's leadership. According to Shin, this revelation hastened Kim's ICBM program. Shin suggests Kim consciously engaged in a war of words with President Donald Trump to justify a nuclear ICBM and to buy time to complete it.

Shin faults Trump for resurrecting Nixon's madman theory, the coercion of an adversary by means of establishing one's own volatility. He adds he wrote the book to refute the idea that Kim is "crazy." At the outset, Shin assails the analysis of the late Jerrold Post for overdiagnosing Kim's apparent malignant narcissism. Shin attests "certainty in psychoanalysis remains elusive." But perhaps Shin would agree it is unclear whether foreign affairs specialists using other (non-psychoanalytic) tools could identify the underpinnings of Kim's actions, either.

Compulsion to relinquish nuclear weapons may never take effect on Kim, but surely few national security professionals assume the North Korean dictator is *non compos mentis*. For this reason, "madman" seems a straw man. For instance, Shin implies then-National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster believed Kim was insane because McMaster opined classical deterrence theory would not apply to Kim. McMaster, however, was counting on Kim's rationality and hoped

to muster “maximum pressure” to convince Kim to reconsider the risks of nuclear weapons and initiate serious diplomatic talks.

In the final case, Shin highlights statecraft that led to a diplomatic stalemate with the United States. Kim sought to reveal the futility of America’s goal of “Final and Fully Verifiable Denuclearization.” (Not without a touch of hypocrisy: the short-term possibility of accomplishing a goal does not determine the ultimate outcome, as Kim surely believes of reunification.)

Despite the policy implications of these case studies, Shin skirts a consideration of arms control talks based on the concept of “denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula.” The sound reasoning of taking modest step-by-step measures is embedded in the Biden-Harris administration policy. South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol also hopes to induce North Korean nuclear concessions with new economic development promises. But this challenge remains: would sanctions relief, in exchange for dismantling the Yŏngbyŏn nuclear complex, help or hinder North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs?

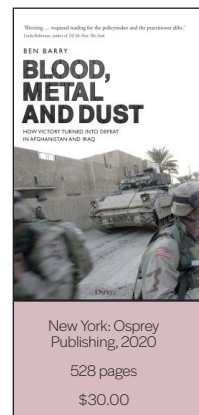
In the end, to know Kim Jong-Un’s strategy is not to be able to forecast his every move, but to avoid underestimating him. A close read of Shin’s book will make it easier to understand Kim and almost impossible to underestimate him.

Blood, Metal, and Dust: How Victory Turned into Defeat in Afghanistan and Iraq

By Ben Barry

Reviewed by Dr. John A. Nagl, associate professor of warfighting studies, US Army War College

Blood, Metal, and Dust is a military history of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq focused on the roles of the United States and her closest ally, the United Kingdom. The author, Ben Barry, served as an infantry officer in Bosnia and as Director of the British Army Staff before joining the International Institute of Strategic Studies over a decade ago. Since then, he has studied and written about contemporary history and served as the primary author of a classified study of the British Army’s role in Iraq’s stabilization. That work informed Barry’s new book, in which the ex-infantry officer pulls few punches.



In this stunning compendium of lessons learned, Barry analyzes why the overwhelming early successes of the US-led coalitions in toppling the Taliban

in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq turned to “dust” in the face of persistent insurgencies. Throughout the book, Barry notes how many Western tactical victories resulted in strategic failure.

Barry telegraphs his sentiments through the book’s subtitle, *How Victory Turned into Defeat in Afghanistan and Iraq*. He argues with conviction that “for all the blood and money expended since 9/11, the US and its allies did not win the war in Iraq and have failed in the longer term to achieve almost all of their objectives in Afghanistan” (14). The book, published before the end of the Western military campaign in Afghanistan, contains the prescient prediction “an emboldened Taliban could well overwhelm the current Afghan government and its forces, imposing a victors’ peace that would give it the ability to reverse much of the last two decades of socio-political development” (14).

If the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan proved unpopular in the United States, then they were hated in the United Kingdom—particularly Operation Telic (the British code name for the Iraq War). Barry notes the British military’s trepidation concerning a shift in public opinion. He highlights the tension between spheres: “the army’s key leadership was worried that the effect of fighting two unpopular wars at the same time might so greatly damage the army to the extent that after the wars ended, it might not be able to recover its capability and its reputation” (325). This became a particular concern after British troops in Afghanistan engaged in heavy fighting in the Helmand province in 2006, during part of a larger shift of emphasis from Iraq to Afghanistan mirrored by the United States. The public mind indeed quickly soured towards the largest deployment of British troops since the Persian Gulf War, and both campaigns disaffected the British.

Writing with unsparing prose and conveying inarguable lessons, Barry could republish his outstanding final chapter, “Bloody Lessons,” as a profitable stand-alone article to raise hackles on this side of the Atlantic. Barry notes, with a decidedly un-British willingness to point out mistakes made by its larger ally, “the late 2001 failure to encircle and isolate the Al Qaida fighters in the Tora Bora mountains allowed the movement a better opportunity to reconstitute itself than if the US attack had been better planned and led” (462). In the wake of US troops’ withdrawal from Afghanistan, reflection on the early missed opportunity for success at Tora Bora should caution strategists to take full advantage of opportunities when they present themselves in conflict, if only to prevent future vulnerabilities.

Barry brutally denounces the 2003 American invasion of Iraq as “the worst military decision of the 21st century” and even calls it “military strategic folly on a level equal to that of Napoleon’s 1812 attack on Russia and Hitler’s 1941 attack on the Soviet Union” (464-65). Unlike those two gross strategic errors

in Mackinder's heartland, "Iraq administered no such massive attrition of the military capabilities of the US and its allies. But it had an effect of similar strategic magnitude—the significant loss of [US] legitimacy" (465). Mistakes made in Iraq and Afghanistan have shaken America's global leadership role and will reverberate for generations.

Barry argues the "simplest explanation" for the strategic defeat of the United States and her partners in both wars "is that the US government of President Bush displayed insufficient strategic competence between 2002 and 2007" (484) as "[i]t took several years for President Bush to recognize that the ends, ways and means being employed were inadequate" (485). The problem mirrored itself on the other side of the Atlantic: "British contributions to the first parts of the Iraq and Afghan wars were degraded by a lack of strategic competence in London" (486). Of President Bush's American counterpart, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Barry writes his "strategic leadership of Britain's role in both wars should be judged a failure" (487).

Barry doles out scathing criticism of American and British leaders, but some belligerents did earn his praise. Unfortunately, those participants fought on the other side. He calls Qassem Soleimani, then-commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force, "the most successful strategic leader of the wars" (488). He deems the Afghan Taliban and Iran "much more successful" than the United States and her allies (509) and believes "Iran is the only nation that can be judged to have succeeded in achieving its strategic aims in Iraq" (463).

Blood, Metal, and Dust is not a cheery read for Americans who care about the high estimation of their country and hold the armed forces in high regard. Given America's tradition of widespread patriotism and love of its troops, this book deserves a wide audience for a better understanding of—and foresight to curtail—America's weaknesses. Ben Barry has the courage to call out failures of the American national security establishment. The lessons he lays out could save lives and prevent strategic failure when America reencounters the inevitable challenge of irregular warfare.

Contributor's Guidelines

Article Submissions

Content Requirements

Scope

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

Audience

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

Clearance

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

Concurrent Submissions

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

Formatting Requirements

Length

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

Articles: 5,000 words or less.

Commentaries: 2,500 to 3,000 words.

Book reviews: 800 to 1,000 words.

File Type

Text must be provided in a single MS Word document (.doc).

Visual Aids

Charts, graphs, and photographs may be provided to clarify or amplify the text. Tables must be presented in the body of the Word document. Microsoft-generated charts and graphs must be submitted in Excel. And photos must be provided as .jpg images of not more than 9MB (at 300 dpi). If any table, chart, graph, or photograph has been previously published, written permission from the copyright holder to republish the content must be included with the submission.

Citations

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

Submission Requirements

Address

usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.parameters@army.mil

Include

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

Attach all files, including graphics.

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

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

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

Timelines

Receipt

Please allow 1 business day for confirmation of receipt.

Review

Articles: 4 to 6 weeks.

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

Cover Photo Credits

Front and Back Covers

US Army Soldiers Deploy to Afghanistan

Transit Center at Manas, Kyrgyzstan

US Army soldiers get as comfortable as they can as they prepare to fly a C-17 Globemaster III from the Transit Center at Manas to their deployed location in Afghanistan April 16. This onward movement of troops is one of four mission pillars of the Transit Center. The remaining pillars are airlift, aerial refueling, and humanitarian assistance.

Photo by: Staff Sergeant Stacy Jonsgaard, 376th Air Expeditionary Wing
Public Affairs

Date taken: April 15, 2011

VIRIN: 110416-F-JH117-046

Web address: <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/395446/us-army-soldiers-deploy-afghanistan>

Disclaimer: The appearance of US Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

CALL FOR PAPERS

STRATEGIC LANDPOWER SYMPOSIUM

9 – 11 MAY 2023

ARMY HERITAGE AND EDUCATION CENTER, CARLISLE, PA

The USAWC, in partnership with HQDA G-3/5/7 and Army Futures Command, requests research papers on the “**role of strategic Landpower in future Joint and Combined operations.**” We welcome proposals from scholars, students, defense professionals, and others from the national security community on the following themes or related topics:

1. Campaigning, Integrated Deterrence, Competition, Cooperation, and Setting the Theater
2. Defending the Homeland, Defense Support of Civil Authorities, Disaster Relief, the Arctic, Climate Change, Threats to the Homeland, Mobilization, and AC/RC Mix
3. Leadership, Talent Management, Modernization, Readiness, the SECARMY’s Six Objectives
4. Future Challenges, Strategic Gaps, Technology, Large Scale Combat Operations, Urban Operations, Multi-National Operations, and Integrating Joint Domains

Abstract Submission Guidelines: Interested participants should submit an abstract of no more than 500 words and a CV. Abstract and CVs are due **1 October 2022**. Include the thesis, methodology/sources, and how this piece advances the Landpower discussion. Submit abstracts and CVs to the Symposium website below.

Paper Guidelines: Papers should be 4,500 to 5,500 words, following the *Chicago Manual of Style*. **Papers are due 15 January 2023**. The best papers will be selected for presentation at the Symposium in May and considered for publication. Prizes may be awarded for the best papers. Submit papers using the Symposium website below.

Please note: Submitted papers cannot have been previously published, under review with another outlet, nor be forthcoming in any print or electronic publication.

You can find more information about the Symposium and author’s guidelines at the Symposium website: <https://csl.armywarcollege.edu/landpower/>



Contacts:

Dr. Gregory Cantwell, gregory.l.cantwell.civ@army.mil or 717-245-3235
MAJ Justin Magula, justin.m.magula.mil@army.mil or 717-245-4814



THE UNITED STATES ARMY WAR COLLEGE



US Army War College Quarterly

Parameters

47 Ashburn Drive | Carlisle PA 17013-5238
717-245-4943

<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/>

e-mail: usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.parameters@army.mil

The US Army War College Quarterly, *Parameters*, is a refereed forum for contemporary strategy and Landpower issues. It furthers the education and professional development of senior military officers and members of government and academia concerned with national security affairs. *Parameters* is indexed in, inter alia, Air University Library Index to Military Periodicals, US Government Periodicals Index, LexisNexis Government Periodicals Index, Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, Lancaster Index to Defence & International Security Literature (UK), and PAIS Bulletin. Book reviews are indexed in Gale Group's Book Review Index. *Parameters* is also available through ProQuest and UMI.

Periodicals postage is paid at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and additional entry offices. ISSN 0031-1723 | USPS 413530 | Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 70-612062.

Subscriptions: US Army War College graduates who are actively employed by the government, as well as select organizations, may receive a gratis subscription. For eligibility requirements, visit the website listed above.

Nongraduates, retired graduates, and the general public may subscribe through the Government Publishing Office (GPO).

Address Changes: Submit address changes for unpaid subscriptions to the *Parameters* office by e-mail or phone. For paid subscriptions, submit address changes to the GPO (bookstore.gpo.gov).

Reprint Requests: For permission to reprint articles, contact the *Parameters* editorial office by e-mail or phone. Be prepared to provide the article's title, author's name, publication date, intended use, quantity, and means of distribution. Reviews and Replies: We invite reader commentaries on articles appearing in *Parameters*. Not all commentaries can be published. For those that are, the author of the article will be invited to provide a reply. For additional information, visit the website listed above.

US Army War College

The US Army War College educates and develops leaders for service at the strategic level while advancing knowledge in the global application of Landpower.

The purpose of the US Army War College is to produce graduates who are skilled critical thinkers and complex problem solvers in the global application of Landpower. Concurrently, it is our duty to the Army to act as a "think factory" for commanders and civilian leaders at the strategic level worldwide and routinely engage in discourse and debate on the role of ground forces in achieving national security objectives.



The School of Strategic Landpower provides support to the the US Army War College purpose, mission, vision, and the academic teaching departments through the initiation, coordination, and management of academic-related policy, plans, programs, and procedures, with emphasis on curriculum development, execution, and evaluation; planning and execution of independent and/or interdepartmental academic programs; student and faculty development; and performance of academic-related functions as may be directed by the Commandant.



The US Army Heritage and Education Center makes available contemporary and historical materials related to strategic leadership, the global application of Landpower, and US Army Heritage to inform research, educate an international audience, and honor soldiers, past and present.



The Strategic Studies Institute publishes national security and strategic research and analysis to influence policy debate and bridge the gap between military and academia.


The SSI Live Podcast Series provides access to SSI analyses and scholars on issues related to national security and military strategy with an emphasis on geostrategic analysis. <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/ssi-live-archive/>



The Center for Strategic Leadership provides strategic education, ideas, doctrine and capabilities to the Army, the Joint Force, and the nation. The Army, Joint Force, and national partners recognize the Center for Strategic Leadership as a strategic laboratory that generates and cultivates strategic thought, tests strategic theories, sustains strategic doctrine, educates strategic leaders, and supports strategic decision making.



The Army Strategic Education Program executes General Officer professional military education for the entire population of Army General Officers across the total force and provides assessments to keep senior leaders informed and to support programmatic change through evidence-based decision making.



PARAMETERS (USPS 413530)
US Army War College
ATTN: *Parameters*
47 Ashburn Drive
Carlisle, PA 17013-5238

Periodicals Postage Paid



The US Army
War College



The Quarterly

For this and other publications, visit us at
<https://press.armywarcollege.edu>