Civil-Military Relations:
The Role of Military Leaders in Strategy Making

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ABSTRACT: This article addresses the current inadequacies of the civil-military relations model advanced by Samuel Huntington and embraced by the US military, the tensions and realities of security policy development, and the professional responsibilities military leaders have for providing the best military advice possible to political leaders.

National security strategy making is difficult business. Some contend the entire enterprise, at its very best, is just focused improvisation.[1] Post-9/11 decisions to use military force, as part of national security policy implementation, and the execution of those polices, have been plagued in the past by a host of factors that have reduced public confidence in both government decision making and the efficacy of military force in the 21st century. With some clear exceptions, the senior leadership of the military, and those who advise it, have contributed to the confusion because of their largely self-imposed mindset of civil-military relations stemming from our almost 50-year acceptance of the orderly and appealing concepts of Samuel Huntington.[2]

Huntington's 1957 *The Soldier and the State*, has defined civil-military relations for generations of military professionals. Soldiers have been raised on Huntingtonian logic and the separation of spheres of influence since their time as junior lieutenants. His construct assigns to both military and civilian leaders clear jurisdictions over the employment of military force. This clarity appeals to military minds and forms the philosophical basis for military doctrine and planning systems. The logic of Huntington's "objective control" of the military focuses on the role of civilian leaders to determine objectives and broad policy guidance up front. The military offers options to achieve these goals and provides its assessment of risk for each of these options. The president makes the key decisions and then the military executes this guidance with minimal political oversight or "meddling" and is held accountable for the results.

However appealing to the military, Huntington's conceptualization of proper civil-military relations does not reflect the reality of security strategy making and implementation today. Such an orderly, logical world simply does not exist at the top of the national-security hierarchy.

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1 Eliot Cohen, Robert E. Osgood Professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, conversation with author, October 20, 2015. See also Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 243.

2 Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1957).

The result is that many senior military leaders find themselves, when thrust into this stratosphere, ill-served by the tradition the military's embrace of Huntington has taught them. They worry that diving into the murky waters of national security decision-making causes them to become "political," which is seen as antithetical to military culture and ethics.

Since America puts so much faith in its military leaders and these national security decisions put American lives at risk, military officers are morally obligated to help craft the best possible policies and strategies.[3] As opinion polls show and commentators assert, the American public holds the US military in extremely high regard and gives significant deference to military leaders on matters of security. This deference creates a responsibility, even an obligation, for generals to participate fully in the dialogue that leads to civilian decisions on the use of force.[4] Our senior general officers, pressed into this dialogue by the demands of their current positions, know this obligation well. Although their warfighting skills are unquestioned, most military leaders do not naturally wade, by inclination or assignment, into these political waters on their way up in rank. To be effective and to assist the president in crafting and implementing national-security policy involving military force, senior military leaders must embrace a more involved role in the back-and-forth dialogue necessary to build effective policies and workable strategies. Thus, educating and developing strategic-mindedness in our rising senior military officers is an imperative that trumps nearly all other aspects of their professional competence.

Building and implementing successful national security policy and strategy is hard. It is even harder when senior military leaders communicate ineffectively. It is not as simple as Huntingtonian tradition suggests. Effective support to civilian decision-makers requires that military officers not only provide informed arguments about military strategies and capabilities, but also that they engage in a messy give-and-take on the full range of issues to craft living, whole-of-government strategies.

Difficulties in Making and Implementing National Security Strategy

Even in the simplest of cases, crafting and implementing a workable strategy to achieve national-security policy goals is a very difficult undertaking.[5] Four main reasons account for this difficulty. First, the demanding workload, limits of experience, and tyranny of the present denies top decision makers and their staffs the luxury of having sufficient time to think through all the problems they face. Enumerating goals is relatively easy to do, but all too often strategic discourse ends there. Having the capacity, time, energy, and knowledge to craft a sufficiently detailed set of workable strategies to achieve policy goals is a much more elusive and difficult endeavor. These need to be strategies

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3   James M. Dubik, "Civilian, Military Both Morally Obligated to Make War Work," *Army Magazine* 65, no. 11 (November 2015): 17-18. LTG (Ret) Dubik's upcoming book is focused on this moral obligation to get war-making decisions right.

4   Rachel Maddow makes this point effectively in Rachel Maddow, *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power* (New York: Random House, 2012).

5   Richard Betts provides a thorough dialectic on the difficulty of strategy making and implementation in Richard Betts, *American Force* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 232-271.

that not only contain initial ends, ways, and means, but also things like development of supporting objectives and thorough risk analyses. All of that takes time and each day brings unforeseen challenges that strip away the time and energy leaders and their staffs have, especially in Washington.

This limitation leads to the second challenge—the need to craft the fundamental underpinnings underlying any successful strategy. Assumptions, necessary for any planning to proceed, must be valid. Understanding the other actors is especially problematic; assumptions about how our adversaries and potential partners will act or react to our actions are often wrong. The ends sought must be attainable by the means available and given the ways with which those resources, including time, will be employed. Finally, and most importantly, the causal logic must be right. While causal relations—the "theory of victory" that logically ties actions to successful attainment of goals—are somewhat predictable in the short run, the omnipresence of chance and the existence of thinking adversaries confounds predictions of causality over the longer term.[6]

If the theory of victory tends to dissolve over time due to the nonlinear nature of warfare, then the ability and willingness to change strategies becomes the third challenge to achieving effective security policy outcomes.[7] Thus, one must view policy and strategy formulation as iterative. Policymakers and senior military leaders must adapt their strategies throughout implementation.[8] They must change resources allotted, the methods of resource employment, or modify the ends themselves. But costs get sunk, administrations become tied to certain courses of action, and the "can-do" attitude ingrained in military leaders often leads to requests for more time and more resources rather than a thoughtful re-evaluation or modification of ongoing policy and strategy. Similarly, accurate assessments of changing situations are much harder to build than outside observers might expect.

National level analysts often claim those on the ground are not able to see the forest for the trees. Those on the ground decry the rosiness or direness of external assessments as being out of touch with reality and missing the "fingertip sense" of actual conditions. Thus, due to the difficulty in both assessing the need for change and the very human reluctance to change our minds, policies and their implementing strategies often outlive their usefulness.

Even if leaders have the capacity to develop a workable strategy, get the logic right, and possess the courage and wisdom to shift direction as required by changing situations, implementation of those strategies may confound even the most wise and diligent of senior leaders. Fog and friction abound in the field, making the execution of even the simplest strategic effort difficult, per Clausewitz's famous dictum.[9] In the 21st

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6   For a fuller discussion, see J. Boone Bartholomees, "Theory of Victory," *Parameters* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 25-36.

7   For a superb discussion of the nonlinearity of warfare, see Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Unpredictability of War," *International Security* 17, no. 3 (Winter 1992): 59-90.

8   Strachan, *The Direction of War*, 55, notes: "War has its own nature, and can have consequences very different from the policies that are meant to be guiding it."

9   Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), Book I, Chapter 7.

century, it is more important than ever for coordination to take place with US government interagency and international partners about the direction and energy for any strategy. Most significantly, domestic political will must back the effort, not only at the beginning, but especially when setbacks and missteps occur. This coordinated implementation in the face of an adaptive adversary is simply a difficult and unsure business—made harder still by the realities of representative democracy.

In his speech to the Corps of Cadets at West Point on April 21, 2008, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates noted the difficulty of successfully using military force to achieve national goals when he referenced the relatively unknown but hugely influential mentor of George Marshall and Dwight Eisenhower, Fox Conner, and his three axioms for waging war by a democracy: never fight unless it has to, never fight alone, and never fight for long.[10] Examples like troop presence on the Korean Peninsula for more than 60 years show America can support long-term military commitments and uses of military force as integral parts of coercive foreign policies. Still, strategy is hard business, made even harder by the domestic political considerations inherent in a participatory democracy. In effect, civilian and military leaders must always work together and overcome significant challenges to have a legitimate hope of getting any strategy right.

Getting Past Huntington

Much academic and practitioner work has described the many tensions inherent in American civil-military relations.[11] Among these are the Constitutional construct of Articles I and II that create a dual-principal, single-agent construct for military leaders. Culturally, military preference for robust, decisive wins, even in the absence of existential and immediate threats, runs afoul of the democratic tendency to compromise and leap only halfway across the proverbial Clausewitzian ditch.[12] As a society, Americans are intrigued by the lure of precise, discriminate military weaponry and dismayed when such expensive tools fail to achieve lasting results. Many more such bureaucratic, perceptual, political, and organizational tensions exist and, coupled with the lack of military experience of most policymakers, have created a situation in which political and military leaders are often not on the same page. National security policymaking and strategizing requires both military personnel and civilians to learn how to be more effective, both separately and with each other - an imperative likely to be uncomfortable for all involved. But the onus is on military leaders to cross the divide to meet civilian policymakers on their turf, rather than expecting civilian leaders to provide the military clear autonomy in the development and execution of strategy. Clausewitz noted:

> War is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse carried on with other means…To bring a war,

10   Robert Gates, speech to Corps of Cadets, West Point, NY, April 21, 2008, http://www.stripes.com/news/text-of-secretary-of-defense-robert-gates-speech-at-west-point-1.77986.

11   Janine Davidson, "Civil-Military Friction and Presidential Decision Making: Explaining the Broken Dialogue," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (March 2013): 129-145; and Matthew Moten, "A Broken Dialogue: Rumsfeld, Shinseki, and Civil-Military Tension," in Suzanne Nielsen and Don Snider, eds., *American Civil-Military Relations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 42-71

12   "A short jump is certainly easier than a long one, but no one wanting to get across a wide ditch would begin by jumping half-way." Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 598.

or one of its campaigns, to a successful close requires a thorough grasp of national policy. On that level strategy and policy coalesce: the [general]-in-chief is simultaneously a statesman.[13]

Nearly 170 years later, historian Hew Strachan stated:

> The effort to remain apolitical may lead military members to avoid the necessary political education and awareness they require to operate in today's complex environments. The unintended consequence of this ignorance is incompetence when the mission requires awareness of political sensitivities and the political repercussions of military actions.[14]

While Strachan's comment is clearly hyperbole, both he and Clausewitz correctly note that senior military leaders must understand the strategic political space into which they will offer their military advice.

The challenge for senior military leaders and those who advise them is to recognize that the comfortable notion of separate spheres of professional responsibility does not always correspond to reality. Effective military support to the nation's senior civilian leaders requires senior military leaders who are politically astute without engaging in domestic politics, and who have learned the non-military complexities of policy implementation. The wars of the past decade show that military force is insufficient in and of itself to achieve all policy goals. Military leaders must help broaden the dialogue to all means of national power. Effective military support also requires that military leaders learn how to participate effectively in the dialogue necessary to better align ways and means with desired ends. They must be prepared to offer alternative ends if the ways and means are limited. They must take the time to build relationships and trust in a chaotic and transitory decision-making process, learn how to socialize ideas, and most importantly, must reconsider how to provide "best military advice" as part of a holistic strategy to achieve national objectives.

For their part, civilian leaders should endeavor to gain a better understanding of the capabilities, limitations, and bluntness of military force and to be open to the recommendations of military leaders. They must have the fortitude to withstand the lure of fast, cheap, light, and easy solutions to complex problems. They do not exist. Civilian leaders must grasp that clean, discriminate, and error or risk-free warfare is a dangerous myth. They must understand there is rarely a one-agency solution to achieving policy objectives, and must work through the difficulty of coordinating multi-agency actions. This is a challenge for policymakers who cut their teeth on domestic politics and military leaders should not assume this understanding is mutual. Finally, civilian leaders at all levels must be willing to listen and modify their positions when presented with compelling arguments. Senior military leaders can help by gently and respectfully educating civilian decision makers on the various aspects of military force and warfighting as part of a whole of government strategic approach.

Civilian policymakers must also strive to do the right thing. While Lieutenant General James M. Dubik (US Army, Ret.) makes the ethical

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13   Clausewitz, *On War*, 112-113.
14   Hew Strachen, "Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War," *Survival* 52, no. 5 (September 29, 2010): 164-165.

argument that civilian leaders do not have the right to be wrong when so many lives are on the line, our Constitution clearly does give them the authority to make what they believe is the best possible policy decision.[15] Finally, as policymakers, civilian leaders must help ensure American foreign policy remains solvent: that national commitments are roughly aligned with interests, available resources, and political will.[16]

There are two broad schools of thought on American civil-military relations when it comes to the creation of effective policies: one that was originally set forth by the academic godfather of the topic, Samuel Huntington, and another that critiques his conception of objective control. Huntington's conceptualization provides the roots for much of the United States military. The military raises its officers throughout their careers to believe that, by assumption, guidance from above starts with a mission or goals to be achieved. In line with our planning systems, senior leaders and their staffs expect to take that clear mission and create courses of action from which the president ultimately decides. Military officers then expect relative freedom in executing the chosen option and then to be held accountable for the results. The clarity of objective control, however, does not reflect reality.

There are many critiques of Huntington's model that better reflect the realities of security strategy making today. In general, they note the effectiveness championed by Huntingtonian logic either does not work in the real world of national-security policymaking or is best achieved through direct intervention in military affairs by civilian leaders.[17] Given the complexities of 21st century warfare, control by issuing top-level objectives and then allowing the military to build and execute operational plans is simply not practicable; nor is this system used in American security policy-making today. Having said this, the famous admonition "war is too important to be left to the generals" must also be modified for the 21st century.[18] What is largely missing in this debate is a middle ground between arguing effective policy is best achieved by relatively autonomous military leaders on the one hand, or by directive civilian leaders on the other.

Importantly, this is not just an academic argument. Building competence in this middle ground by both military and civilian leaders will lead to better national-security policy outcomes. Richard Betts offers a useful model for today's complex world as one of equal dialogue with unequal authority.[19] Civilian leaders rarely articulate clear objectives for an endstate up front in this dialogue and thus confound standard military planning processes. Moreover, goals frequently change over the course of a conflict. While civilian leaders must strive to be right in their decisions to use force, the ability to achieve that wisdom depends heavily

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15   Dubik, "Civilian, Military Both Morally Obligated to Make War Work," 18.

16   Walter Lippman, *US Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1943).

17   Scholars criticizing the "objective control" model favored by Huntington are many. Since Huntington focused on effectiveness as his dependent variable, the best comparison is Elliott Cohen, *Supreme Command* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002). However, also useful for the debate are Suzanne Nielsen and Don Snider, eds., *American Civil-Military Relations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); and Peter Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2003).

18   George Clemenceau, "La guerre! C'est une chose trop grave pour la confier a des militaires," quoted in Georges Suarez, *Soixante Annees d'Histoire Francaise, Clemenceau, Vol 1: Dans la melee*, 1932.

19   Betts, *American Force*, 225-231.

on a bruising back-and-forth dialogue with military leaders. In practice, the spheres of responsibility and execution significantly overlap—by design.

Equal dialogue means both military and civilian leaders have the responsibility to listen to each other and probe the answers they hear. This dialogue is required to achieve rough consensus on the definition of the problem faced, and it must precede policy and option articulation. The logic of the strategy must be right. Department and agency leads must generate real strategic options to give the president actual choices; however, the ends to which each option can aspire and the inherent risks involved in them are often dissimilar and the nation's senior civilian leadership needs to understand those dynamics as well. Ultimately, civilians will ask senior military leaders to give their "best military advice," and military leaders must do so in a holistic and contextual manner that frames the use of military force in a larger national and international framework of action.

Six Realities in National-Security Policymaking

Those who develop and provide this "best military advice" must be cognizant of the impact of six realities of national-security policymaking in the United States today. First, clear policy guidance rarely appears at the beginning of the strategic dialogue. Since military leaders have been conditioned to expect to receive a mission complete with goals or "end-states," the lack of clear guidance raises the angst of leaders and their planners.[20] They must accept this condition when necessary, and not be paralyzed by this lack of clarity. Second, the policy formulation process is iterative and often "out of order" with the military's more linear models for planning. Policymakers often request options before policy goals are decided to reduce the political risk of laying down markers that will come back to haunt them in the future. External shocks may change the framing of the problem well into the discussions of policy and options. When necessary, military leaders must get used to a lack of linearity and finality in the national security policy decision-making process.

Third, military leaders must also face the reality that political decisions on policy and uses of military force are rarely as timely as necessary for prudent planning and minimization of risk. The retention of political and strategic flexibility is a prime consideration for the senior civilian leadership and thus military planners should expect delays in decisions, which often come in the guise of requests for more options or operational details. In the end, military leaders and planners must be prepared for the frustrations of constant planning and modification of guidance.

Fourth, mutual trust between military leaders and senior civilians is not automatically conferred. Rather, such trust is built over time through iterative interaction, and is largely based on personal relationships. Rank does not confer trust in either direction. However, this trust is absolutely necessary for the constructive dialogue so essential for the development of sound policy and strategy. It is for this reason

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20   However ubiquitous in national security parlance, the term "endstate" in reality has little meaning, since changing circumstances and policy often modify the policy ends sought. Even if policy implementation was perfect, an "endstate" simply becomes an intermediate objective upon which statesmen build new policy goals.

that military leaders must not shun service in Washington, but rather take the time and energy to build relationships and trust that can help shape good national-security decisions in the future.

As Peter Feaver notes, the fifth reality is that civilian and military leaders need each other to develop sound policy options.[21] Neither always has the right answer and each is laden with a set of experiences that served them well to that point, but may be insufficient going forward. Use of military power has complexities and limitations of which most civilians are unaware or downplay. On the other hand, strategic aims have political dimensions that military leaders might underappreciate. Strategy and policy options require long-term political and popular support and thus must be feasible, nuanced, and ultimately provide hope of success.

Finally, as Richard Betts notes, the reality is strategy is often neglected in the current civil-military divide.[22] Civilians frequently talk policy goals and assume military actions will naturally bring about their attainment, while military leaders often assume battlefield successes alone will somehow achieve the overall political goals. It is strategy that ties policy to military and whole-of-government operations and the cognitive space that must be addressed. In sum, the reality of national-security policymaking is very different from the military's conception of how that process should run. Civilian and military leaders must change their behavior in order to construct strategies that can realistically achieve policy goals, or to modify desired political goals to those that can be achieved with the resources available.

However frustrating these realities may be, senior military officers and their staffs must learn to act in this environment and to commit fully to the often frustrating and iterative dialogue necessary to craft effective policies and strategies; they must provide civilian leadership with decision options worthy of the expenditure of the nation's blood and treasure.

Providing Best Military Advice

Colloquially, the final recommendations provided by the most senior military leaders to their civilian overseers are known as "best military advice."[23] Senior military leaders give this considered military advice, a set of recommendations based on experience and planning, every day at many levels regarding issues of policy, force structure, and the like. The discussion below concerns the provision of best military advice on the critical subset of interactions focusing on use-of-force decisions and implementing strategies, but the interactive dynamics apply to the range of policy decisions. Those recommendations are essentially a strategic narrative of various options and associated risks that have the

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21   Peter Feaver, in Feaver and Richard Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 418.

22   Betts, *American Force*, 234.

23   The term "best military advice" has a decidedly political connotation in Washington. Committee Chairmen ask for such final recommendations when trying to make a point for or against administration policy. Senior leaders may use that specific term when attempting to draw attention to a critical redline over which they will not acquiesce or modify. In this paper, I use the term in a more neutral manner, akin to what James Golby describes as "considered military advice." Author's conversation with Major James Golby, Assistant Professor, United States Military Academy, October 27, 2015.

potential to help achieve specific security policy objectives. It is critically important to note military objectives rarely if ever achieve overall policy objectives.[24] If properly aligned and executed, they set conditions for the achievement of policy objectives. Military leaders, thus, must always be cognizant of the larger strategic goals to which military actions are subordinated.

But first, some clarifications and conventions on terms are in order. An *option* is a set of actions including resource commitments designed to lead to a specific political objective or goal or a fundamentally different combination of ways and means to achieve the same political objective or goal. *Courses of action* are minor variations on a single option and provide differing levels of resources and ways to achieve the same policy objectives or goals. Thus, if the president asks the military for multiple options, there is an inherent requirement to provide clarity on the political objectives that each option is designed to help achieve. Said differently, there is a clear imperative to offer alternative ends when presenting multiple options. Finally, *risk* is the discrepancy between ends sought and means available or, otherwise stated, as the probability of failure in achieving strategic goals at politically acceptable costs.[25]

Four important steps outline military responsibilities in the provision of best military advice for the strategy making process. First, civilian leadership provides initial guidance and military leaders use their best judgment to come up with narrative options for consideration. Second, the iterative dialogue at multiple levels leading up to the president then takes center stage and helps both military and civilians sharpen their thinking and understanding of objectives sought and strategies to be employed. Third, senior military leaders offer their best military advice and recommendations and the president makes an initial decision. Fourth, both military and civilian leadership periodically reassess the policy and strategy and offer adjustments as required.

Bridging the middle ground between policy and operations begins with strategic options. Senior civilian leaders do not like to be painted into a box by the limiting of options, but since each option may achieve different objectives or goals, proper civil-military relations calls for a more expansive view of the military's responsibility in providing best military advice.[26] In this conception, discussion by military leaders of policy objectives is part of the needed dialogue. Importantly, this dialogue starts with gaining rough, collective agreement on the nature of the problem faced. Military action, however tactically brilliant, is insufficient to achieve policy goals if the actual problem defies coercive force. Every option must have a separate, logical, strategic narrative that addresses the problem, states the specific policy ends that can be achieved, discusses the resources (means) and how those resources will

24   Trey Braun, Professor, US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, November 2015, conversation with author.

25   James F. Holcomb, "Managing Strategic Risk," in J.B. Batholomees, ed., *US Army War College Guide to National Security Policy and Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2004), 119.

26   Franklin D. Roosevelt, one of our nation's most astute politicians, viewed service contingency planning as "an institutional gambit to box him in. He refused to issue the kind of clear policy guidance that military planners craved . . . if his subordinates were in conflict with one another, they would always have to appeal to him for decisions, bringing a range of alternatives from which he would be free to choose, or not." See Matthew Moten, *Presidents and their Generals* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2014), 192-193.

be applied (ways), key assumptions that underpin the logic, and the resulting risk. Thus, the provision of multiple options requires a comprehensive dialogue between the military and civilian leaders addressing the policy objectives that the option's ways and means can reasonably attain. In this part of the discussion, the civilian leadership must provide as much detail as possible in response to the key questions asked by the military leadership. The answers to these questions will form the conditions that the military must work with to derive strategy options. In turn, the military leadership must be able to respond with the number and variety of strategy options desired by their civilian counterparts.

Taking the conditions for the strategy making process into account, to include the factor of time available for option analysis, every strategy option that the military presents for consideration must be assessed in detail. Risk cannot be simply high, medium, or low, but rather clearly and specifically outlined in terms of the alignment of military objectives to the political objectives sought, potential 2nd and 3rd order effects, the time requirements, the potential for casualties and collateral damage, the risk of escalation, and, importantly, the risk of inaction.[27] Because these options and associated risks involve human lives, there is a strong ethical component to this dialogue. The back-and-forth nature of the discussion allows military leaders to articulate clearly the limits of what military force can achieve and how the uncertainties and vagaries of combat can foul even the best laid plans. This dialogue and accommodation to different ideas and contextual understanding works in both directions. The military should not think it is civilians alone who must modify their thoughts and positions after receiving military advice.[28] The dialogue sharpens and refines the beliefs and recommendations of all participants in this effort.[29]

Military leaders sometimes offer advice and recommendations in a way that limits the choices of civilian leaders. Broadly, military professionals should avoid three situations in the provision of their considered military advice. The first is for the military to present to the civilian leadership a single option that focuses on one set of policy objectives. Doing so resembles a briefing rather than a dialogue and will rarely result in acceptance of that option. Alternatively, a military leader may offer an artificially limited set of strategic options, with all but one option presented as clear throw-aways. Using present day Syria as an example, this list of faux options might be capitulation to ISIS (throw-away), create a Kurdish enclave, and invade Syria with a Desert Storm-sized joint force (throw-away). Another variation on the single option error is when a single option is disguised as two more courses of action. Again, the president is limited in his choices because he or she is given only one real option. Using Syria again, an example would be the creation of a Kurdish enclave with a) 20,000 troops, b) 25,000 troops, or c) 30,000

27   This typology of risk comes from course materials used by the Basic Strategic Arts Program at the US Army War College.

28   The dialog between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Joint Chiefs of Staff regarding the invasion of North Africa is instructive in this regard. Had the president simply accepted the chiefs' "best military advice" in the summer of 1942, he would have forgone the invasion of North Africa in favor of sending more resources to fight the Japanese in the Pacific. This shift in strategy might have had harmful effects on the course of the war.

29   Golby, conversation with author, September 2015.

troops.[30] In each of these examples, the military provides only one real option, which then gives the decision-maker little flexibility or potential for an informed choice.

Every issue has a decision space that defines, at that time and for that issue, the range of possible strategic options from which the senior civilian leadership can choose. The real "art" of military interaction in the political sphere is the understanding that space. Its size and boundaries are ambiguous and changeable. The space expands or contracts for a variety of reasons, including world events, domestic and international public opinion, and the availability and terms for evaluation of options. Expanding that decision space increases the likelihood of good policy decision, and it is with that goal in mind that military leaders should offer their analysis and advice. This is where a senior military leader must be politically aware, without being perceived as openly partisan or actively political. This is not easy, but without such political astuteness, a leader's "best military advice" can be of limited value to senior civilian leaders.

At the beginning of a national security dialogue, such as the debate over what to do about Syria in 2013, presidential decision space is undefined and dialogue becomes necessary to gain common understanding of the problem and to start identifying policy goals and desired strategy ends. Civilian leaders ask military leaders for options despite the fact that policy objectives have yet to be clearly stated. A parody of such a conversation between a NSC staff member and Pentagon planner might go something like this:

"What are some military options to deal with this situation?"

"Well, what do you want to achieve?"

"I don't know, what can be achieved?"

"Well, we can't give you options until you tell us what you are trying to achieve."

While this example may be cartoonishly problematic, this cart-before-the-horse discussion is both common and unproductive. At this point, both the civilian and is military staffs need each other to create the context and real strategic options demanded by their senior leaders. The military cannot afford to step out of this dialogue and then object when civilian leaders decide on an action that military leaders believe to be decidedly sub-optimal.

Provision of multiple genuine options, expressed in a strategic context that explains how and why the resources requested can act upon the extant problems and help achieved specified ends at defined levels of risk, is the best way to honor the traditions of American civil-military relations and craft the best possible policy and strategy. This dialogue is iterative and the back-and-forth conversation, animated but respectful, helps expand the senior civilian leader's decision space and brings the civilians and military closer to optimal policy choices matched with an appropriate strategy.

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30   Some administration officials complained that the military recommendations for a surge of forces to Afghanistan in 2009 fell into this category.

Military professionals honor the traditions of American civil-military relations when they provide multiple, genuine options, expressed in a strategic context that explains how and why the resources requested will solve or mitigate given problems and help achieve policy goals at acceptable levels of risk. They do this as part of an iterative dialogue, sometimes animated but always respectful. They help expand the senior civilian leader's decision space and brings the civilians and military closer to optimal policy choices that are matched with an appropriate strategy. The policy dialogue may prompt military planners to modify their options or change their preferences in light of a whole of government approach or by the inclusion of allies and partners. The dialogue may expose faulty assumptions and question causal mechanisms. It can also sharpens strategic understanding and leads to better tasking to intelligence agencies for supporting information. At its best, the policy dialogue, however bruising, creates achievable policies, lowers risk, and leads to more ethical decisions regarding when and where to put soldiers' lives on the line. Throughout this iterative process, senior military leaders offer the senior civilian leader highly valued military advice.

When a senior military leader offers his or her military advice and a decision is made, the process of policy-making on this issue is most certainly not over. As described above, the vagaries of use of military force against an adaptable and intelligent enemy demand periodic reassessment of assumptions, policy, and strategy. Military leaders play a vital role in this constant assessment process. They often control the assets with high fidelity on operational and strategic effectiveness. Given the credibility enjoyed by the military, these assessments and recommendations for change, as required, demand brutal honesty and may run counter to the "can-do" ethos of the American military.[31] As Barry Posen points out, proper civil-military relations require senior military leaders not be the enablers of bad policy.[32]

Senior military leaders engaging in this strategic dialogue should be aware of three conditions that increase the risk of bad policy decisions by the senior civilian leadership. The first occurs when the military leaders offer multiple options but their preference, their "best military advice," falls squarely in the middle of the senior civilian leader's decision space. In such a situation, groupthink can occur and the president might make a bad policy decision in the absence of the dialogue that would otherwise probe the beliefs of those agencies involved.[33] If a consensus comes too quickly, wise military leaders will step back and "red team" the issue.[34] The second condition is the slow march of accommodation to the political space in which the gradual but persistent demands for more

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31   As General David Petraeus and his staff were flying across the Atlantic en route to Iraq at the beginning of the surge in 2007, his executive officer, Colonel Peter Mansoor, cautioned him that the hardest thing for him to do, should it come to it, would be to tell the President and the American people the surge had failed. Peter Mansoor, conversation with author, October 2015.

32   Barry R. Posen, Ford International Professor of Political Science at MIT, and Director of the MIT Security Studies Program, conversation with author, October 2015.

33   The term groupthink was first coined by Irving Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Wadsworth, 1972); see also David Patrick Houghton, "Understanding Groupthink: The Case of Operation Market Garden," *Parameters* 45, no. 3 (Autumn 2015).

34   General Motors CEO Alfred Sloan once famously ended a meeting where there was unanimous support for a decision with the statement "I propose we postpone further discussion of this matter until our next meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about." See Alexander George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980).

and more acceptance of risk slowly results in a final policy choice that looks quite different from the original military recommendation.[35] C.S. Lewis wrote, "the safest road to hell is the gradual one."[36] At some point, military redlines are likely crossed, beyond which the military leaders cannot go quietly. The third condition is that of the political general - a military leader who shapes his advice to accommodate the perceived decision space of the senior civilian leader.[37] When any of these three conditions hold, military leaders fail to fulfill their professional responsibilities to the civilian leadership and the nation.

Conclusion

Huntington understood military culture in the context of its unique planning systems. However, the 21st century world of national-security policymaking and the resulting strategies of implementation demands significantly more dialogue and political savy from senior military leaders and their staffs. In October 1950, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Hoyt Vandenberg, told President Truman if the Chinese attacked in Korea, the United States would have to resort to atomic weapons, as that was the current strategic doctrine. Truman, not wanting to be boxed-in by an option clearly outside his decision space, retorted that Vandenberg needed to "go back and get yourself some more strategic doctrine!"[38] Senior military leaders who offer their recommendations in such an absolutist manner abdicate their vital role in the shaping of policy and strategy on use of force. Likewise do those who fail to keep military operations tied to the political objectives toward which force was used in the first place.

Developing military leaders who are competent in the political environment of national-security strategy decisionmaking is vitally important. It requires a broad revision of talent management among the armed services. Developing strategic mindedness goes beyond operational warfighting assignments and simply "broadening" the officers by sending them to fellowships or for civilian graduate degrees, though both are valuable. Assignments that increase the leaders' understanding of the interagency decision-making process and of alliance and coalition relations are critical. This means sending the very best to the Joint Staff, OSD staff, and combatant commands. These developmental roles widen thought-apertures and worldviews. Military leaders must also build their interpersonal and communications skills to engender the trust of other stakeholders, and to be effective and valuable contributors to the policy dialogue. This requires analytical understanding, mental flexibility, skill in rhetoric, comfort with media relations, and presentation techniques that do not rely on innumerable powerpoint briefing charts. Finally, senior military leaders have all had jobs that are

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35   The iterative steps that led to the creation of Cobra II, the plan to invade Iraq in 2003 with insufficient force to control the country in the aftermath of major combat operations, falls into this category.

36   C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Harpers, 2014), 61.

37   The advice provided by General Maxwell Taylor to President Lyndon Johnson, which led to the introduction of ground combat forces to war in Vietnam without a clear path to victory, falls in this category. See H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

38   Quoted in Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: A Life* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 344.

physically and emotionally draining. They must relearn to how take care of their aging selves so they are sharp and ready when civilian leaders need their strategic counsel.

A sign that the military is addressing a shortfall in strategic thinking is the recent surge in introspection among all military services. For example, in 2013 General Raymond Odierno ordered complete reviews of the history of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Other top leaders are directing similar reviews of the past fourteen years of conflict and undertaking changes to professional military education and personnel policies to make competency in national security strategy formulation a core part of leader development over the length of a career.

The experiences of the past two decades show improved dialogue between military and civilian leaders may lead to better policy and the strategies to achieve them. Military leaders play an exceedingly important role in this dialogue, but it is a role and an arena of dialogue foreign to military leaders for most of their careers. The senior leaders of the armed services of the United States must overcome this largely self-imposed handicap in the quest to provide their best military advice in the creation of effective policy and strategy. Civilian leaders must better understand the nature of war and the vagaries of warfare. Military and civilian leaders together must ensure that when Americans put their lives on the line, they do so with a path to victory that relies on more than hope.