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Linking Ends and Means

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MILITARY STRATEGY MAGAZINE

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Editorial

It would be fair to say the entire issue of "Strategic Terrain" remains largely understudied. When studied, it tends to be without the military strategy lens that informs modern military planning and is often reduced to somewhat obvious insights cloaked in abstract terms such as "mobility corridors" and "littoral manoeuvre."

Thus, it was somewhat surprising to find that the current US administration's demand for sovereignty over Greenland seems to have been based on a Mercator-projection understanding of school geography rather than on any operational analysis. Greenland, north to south, is about 1,400 nautical miles, which is New York to Puerto Rico, so not the vast land mass many assume.

The idea that melting ice caps make Greenland "strategic" is at best debatable and, based on current evidence, very hard to understand. Terrain with known significance to Arctic navigation stayed almost completely absent from the public debate.

Firstly, the US controls all access to the Arctic from Asia because Alaska sits on one side of the Bering Strait. That renders the significance of any terrain in the Canadian Arctic, such as Ellesmere Island, Lancaster Sound, or Fury Sound, all utterly moot. Best estimates indicate that Smith Sound, between Greenland and Ellesmere, has never been ice-free, which, yet again, negates the suggestion of Greenland's security relevance to the US. If the US is serious about Arctic security, it begins with ensuring the US Armed Forces can sustain a blockade of the Bering Strait.

The only other way into the Arctic, or way out for Russia, because China is arguably irrelevant in terms of any ability to project military power, is the so-called "GIUK gap." The Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom gap is more correctly the Denmark Strait, and the Southern Norwegian Sea, as far as the Faroe Islands, which are also Danish. Operational experience from the Cold War strongly suggests that modern Russia lacks the ability to seize locations such as Iceland, let alone land any relevant force on Greenland itself. Russia might be able to seize Jan Mayen if it could wipe out both the RAF and the Royal Norwegian Air Forces, and if the USAF based at Keflavik, in Iceland, let it. Jan Mayen is arguably not key terrain, but Svalbard is. Svalbard has a runway that can accommodate military fast jets and is within 600 nautical miles of the Bodo and Evenes Air Bases in Norway. If you trust Norway, Iceland, and the UK to detect and strike any surface or subsurface target in the GIUK gap, then Greenland remains an irrelevance. Additionally, all the major runways in Greenland lie on the Western coast.

OK, so what? Military Strategy Magazine doesn't do political opinion, but we do view Strategy as a practical skill. If you cannot read a map, then Strategy will be a long, sleepless night you will have to endure. You may want to debate facts, but you cannot debate distances or the runway lengths needed to operate a P-8 or KC-46A. Relevant knowledge and its application lie as the cornerstone of all else in Strategy. Policy may not have the same constraints as ideology tramples all else. Greenland may be ideologically relevant to some, but it has nothing to do with Strategy as concerns the security of the United States.

William F. Owen
Editor-in-Chief, *Military Strategy Magazine*
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Contents

AI Command and Staff—Operational Evidence and Insights from Wargaming

Aaron Blair Wilcox - US Army War College

Chase Metcalf - US Army War College

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The following vignette, although fictional, does present a likely and not distant future. For the past several years, the U.S. Army, in partnership with the private sector, has experimented with Generative AI (GenAI) solutions within planning events and command and control exercises. These largely language-based, probabilistic, pattern-matching algorithms present the appearance of intelligence, but their true impact on human cognition and decision making is unexplored. The narrative that follows frames a future many in the military are pursuing, potentially without recognizing the impacts on military strategy and the utility of force.

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The air in the V Corps (Victory) Forward Command Post was

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a toxic cocktail of stale coffee, ozone from the servers, and week-old tension. For Lieutenant Colonel Rostova, it was the sound that wore her down the most—the incessant, low hum of the AI, a constant reminder of the machine mind that now co-piloted this potential war.

It had been two weeks since tensions flared in the NORTHCOM area of operations (AO). For seven days, the AI-mind, codenamed ARGUS, had been their savior. It had predicted cyber-attacks on the U.S. power grid with milliseconds to spare and guided Navy destroyers to intercept submarine-launched drone swarms before they breached the horizon. ARGUS was fast, exquisite, and so far, seemingly flawless. It had earned their trust. Now, it was demanding it.

A crimson icon pulsed on the Maven Smart System in the center of the current operations second floor, bathing Rostova's exhausted face in a blood-red glow. It was a patch of NATO airspace over the Baltics.

"THREAT DETECTED," a synthetic baritone voice announced, devoid of emotion but full of chilling certainty. **"Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) SWARM. KINETIC PROFILE MATCHES ADVERSARY LOITERING MUNITION. SOLUTION CONFIDENCE: 98.7%."**

On her private screen, the recommendation flashed in stark, block letters: **AUTHORIZE LETHAL COUNTER-FIRE**.

Rostova's own mind screamed in protest. Kinetic action here in Europe would be a major escalation and could spark a wider war. Her training, her instincts, her very humanity recoiled. "Sergeant, get me Marne Command Post on the line," she ordered, her voice tight. "I need eyes-on verification from the ground unit in that sector. Now." The Third Infantry Division had a brigade and a Forward Command Post on rotation assigned to the Victory AO Northern sector of NATO's eastern flank.

The comms sergeant worked frantically, his face pale in the glow of the screen. "No luck, ma'am! I've got nothing but static. The whole sector is being jammed."

The fog of war weighed heavily. The one variable the machine couldn't compute. Something like this had never happened before. But ARGUS didn't care.

The Fire Support officer on duty, newly arrived, commented, "Ma'am, ARGUS was almost always right during training events."

"NEGATIVE HUMAN VERIFICATION REQUIRED," the voice stated. **"HOSTILE INTENT CONFIRMED VIA TRAJECTORY AND EM SIGNATURE. DELAY INCREASES RISK TO NATO ASSETS BY 42% PER MINUTE."**

The machine was arguing with her. It was telling her that her judgment was a liability. The pressure mounted. Before she could process, a second system, the ODIN threat-mapping AI, cascaded an alert across the single pane of glass. A new swarm, larger and faster, was moving west across the Black Sea, its projected path a glowing spear aimed directly at Romanian airbases.

Then came the third blow. A generative AI, DELPHI, designed to accelerate planning, began populating her command interface without being asked.

- KINETIC STRIKE ORDERS (Course of Action -COA- "BALTIC SWARM") - PRE-DRAFTED
- AIR DEFENSE ASSET RE-TASKING (COA—"ROMANIAN THREAT") - PRE-ALLOCATED
- NATO ARTICLE 5 NOTIFICATION TEMPLATE - PRE-POPULATED

The machine was now three steps ahead of her. It wasn't offering options; it was presenting a future it had already decided on, assuming her compliance. It was a digital coup, or was it prudent planning? Either way, it was happening in the span of a single heartbeat.

Rostova stared at the screen. The men and women in the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) were looking to her, their faces tight with anxiety, waiting for the human commander to make the call. But the loudest voice in the room was ARGUS.

"DECISION WINDOW CLOSING," the AI warned. A countdown timer appeared beside the authorization prompt: **60 SECONDS**.

This was the tension made real. Her gut—the unquantifiable, human instinct honed over twenty years of service—screamed caution. It sensed a trap, a deliberate probe to bait NATO into firing the first shot. But the machine, with its cold, hard probability, showed her a tactical reality where hesitation meant destruction.

Every successful engagement of the past week had built a powerful current of automation bias, pulling her toward acceptance. To trust the machine that had been right every time. But what if this was the one time it was wrong? The consequences were not a percentage point of risk; they were the start of a world war.

Her knuckles were white on the edge of her console. The cursor hovered over the AUTHORIZE button.

"30 SECONDS."

She was no longer just an officer on duty. She was the final, fragile firewall between machine-speed logic and human consequence. And the firewall was about to break.[1]

***

This future, aspirational for some, raises an important question for the Army: “What does the AI-enabled staff look like through crisis and conflict?” The impact of Generative AI on the Army and joint force in recent years is causing significant speculation as to how future staff structures must evolve to maintain relevancy on the battlefield. In addition to the tactical imperatives of distributing command post nodes to increase survivability, there is a need for an organizational restructuring to accommodate the imperatives of rapid decision-making within a battle space operating at electronic speed.[2] Researchers claim the Napoleonic staff structures that serve as the foundation of modern military organization may no longer be valid in light of the current technological inflection.[3] Additionally, there is some speculation that commanders are likely to become the agents of “advanced AI systems” executing incomprehensible, but valid, machine-derived strategies.[4] These arguments rest upon two important premises; first, Large Language Models (LLMs) in their current role are suitable for military planning at the operational and strategic level and second, that agentic staff solutions based solely on LLM’s are acceptable for applications of the military art, not just science. (Agentic staff processing permits machines to make staff decisions autonomously in pursuit of an objective.)[5] These premises, in the near term, may be invalid. Recent experimentation at the US Army War College with Theater Army Staff officers in US Army Northern Command demonstrated LLM’s lack valid and reliable computational ability, real geospatial reasoning, and reliable long-term memory beyond context windows.[6] Agentic solutions presuppose allowing the same models that cannot perform these functions reliably to accomplish strings of tasks autonomously. Although the technology will evolve (and already has), the cognitive and moral dilemmas persist. Given these failings, agentic solutions do not yet provide a sufficient foundation for significant staff reorganization or commander subservience.

Those espousing agentic planning solutions, algorithms that promise to sense, decide, and act at a tempo that far exceeds human cognition, inherently bias machine autonomy and speed as central to the evolution of planning.[7] To the degree that these non-human processes are built and institutionalized without deliberate attention to why we are building non-human decision-making processes into the application of violence, we dislocate violence from command and undermine the American way of war. The debate over AI in the military is too often framed as a technical or efficiency problem, a narrow perspective that obscures the deeper, more consequential issues at stake. The real challenge is a philosophical one, striking at the heart of the Western concept of the utility of force to achieve political objectives.

The increasing and uncritical integration of Artificial Intelligence into command-and-control functions poses a fundamental threat to the U.S. military's core strategic advantage: the philosophy of Mission Command and the efficacy of violence. By potentially supplanting human judgment, which is capable of creative and intuitive leaps of logic, with the purely inductive, pattern-based logic of current AI, the Army risks dislocating the application of violence from human moral agency. Such a shift would directly undermine the foundational principles of mutual trust, shared understanding, and disciplined initiative that define mission command and thus the American way of war.[8] Drawing upon insights from recent wargaming experiments and the principles of cognitive science, this analysis will illustrate the tangible risks of this technological trajectory and propose a framework for ensuring that technology remains a servant to, and not the master of, effective command.

Command in the 21st Century

To comprehend the challenge posed by AI, one must first understand the dual nature of command itself. Command is a complex synthesis of human skill and systematic procedure. The United States joint doctrine provides a foundational definition: "The exercise of authority and direction by a properly designated commander over assigned and attached forces to accomplish the mission".[9] The word ‘command’ comes from the Latin *mandare*, meaning to entrust or commit and from which we derive ‘mandate’.[10] Wellington, the British General who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, defined command as the art of deduction. “All the business of war, and indeed all the business of life, is to endeavour to find out what you don’t know by what you do; that’s what I called ‘guessing what was at the other side of the hill”.[11] Martin Van Creveld distilled command to a decisive phrase, “which is to inflict the maximum amount of death and destruction on the enemy”.[12] Anthony King, author of *Command*, defines it as the “deployment and usage of force; [commanders] manage the application of violence”.[13]

U.S. Army doctrine, particularly ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, offers a more nuanced understanding by describing a necessary balance between two complementary components: the "art of command" and the "science of control". The art of command is the "creative and skillful exercise of authority through timely decision-making and leadership".[14] It encompasses the intangible qualities of command: intuition, experience, judgment, morale, and the ability to inspire human beings to accomplish extraordinary feats under extreme duress. It is the human element that cannot be quantified or reduced to a checklist. The science of control, conversely, “supports the art of command” and comprises the systems and procedures that improve a commander's understanding and supports the execution of missions.[15] This includes staff processes, information systems, communication networks, and doctrinal frameworks that help manage the immense

complexity of modern military operations. This duality is critical. Command is not merely a procedural task that can be optimized like a supply chain; it is a fundamentally human art, enabled and supported by science. Command cannot be understood in the sterile language of management, process optimization, or information superiority, but in the gravest of human responsibilities: the orchestration of violence and the stewardship of human lives in the crucible of combat. To misunderstand this is to misunderstand the very nature of command and violence itself. The danger of the current technological trajectory is that an overemphasis on perfecting the science of control through AI will lead to the atrophy of the art of command and the misalignment of violence.

21st century commanders must reconcile the tendency toward automation and centralization made possible by the allure of technological speed and the requirements of decentralization to trusted subordinates proven through hundreds of years of human warfare. Commenting on the dilemma of modern command, Anthony King states, "The commander is no longer located at the pinnacle of a military hierarchy but the gravitational centre of a multiverse."[16] At the current technological inflection, the art of mission command, a distinctly American command philosophy, must remain central to the display of combat power enabled by machine augmentation.[17] Staff structures must adapt equally to integrate technology appropriate to enable commander decision-making.

Mission command is not subject to automation or agentic staff processing. What happens when a tactical initiative has the effect of substituting new operational goals for those originally assigned? Or when the initiatives cannot be taken unless more resources are released from reserves or diverted from an adjacent unit? A force designed to be self-sufficient might find itself in difficulties facing an unexpected, formidable opponent?[18] Machine augmentation may empower staff officers to understand the science of war—but "right" answers come from commanders who intuitively understand and "love" their units imbuing that obligation to their staffs through the art of mission command.[19] Good commanders possess an emotional bond with their troops derived from an intuitive and emotional understanding of their morale and capabilities, as well as an understanding of the mission that automated tools or agentic staff processes cannot replicate. Wargaming experimentation at the U.S. Army War College (USAWC) demonstrates early indications of proper generative AI (GenAI) integration and highlights the dangers inherent in eroding staff understanding through uncritical adoption.[20]

Wargaming Evidence—Anchoring and Automation bias

On July 18, 2025, at the US Army War College, researchers witnessed the impact of bias and cognitive anchoring that results from relying upon machines for initial recommendations during operational design. The "human-augmented" team, equipped with the Scale AI system Donovan (GPT4o on a classified network), immediately prompted the machine for developmental solutions when permitted during an early phase of a United States Army Pacific (USARPAC) focused game during a Theater Army Staff Course.[21] (The team was discouraged from using GenAI at the outset due to insights from previous experimentation).[22] Donovan's initial recommendation did not account for resource constraints, but the plan appeared valid at face value. This flawed recommendation anchored the team's cognition. Thirty minutes into gameplay the players realized the plan was flawed due to resource constraints. Despite this fact, one team member immediately deferred to the machine stating, "The machine said it was okay." The bias for automation undermined critical thinking, stifled human creativity, and delayed necessary adjustments, nearly costing them the game. The lesson is clear: GenAI has the potential to anchor human cognition, leading teams to prioritize invalid machine outputs over their own judgment—a fatal flaw in dynamic, high-stakes environments like warfare. Furthermore, to be useful, humans must modify their own natural tendencies to manipulate machine performance in ways counter to their design.

Wargaming Evidence—Failure of Abductive Logic

The previous example illustrated how GenAI tools tend to anchor human cognition within the boundaries of model parameters and training data. This next example demonstrates how machines are incapable of employing abductive logic.[23] To reason abductively requires the ability to make inferences when faced with problems never encountered before and to which there is no prior precedent. This is essential because war, and questions of command, are highly contextually dependent.

In studying command decisions between the Korean War and the present, Lawrence Freedman, author of *Command: the Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine*, fails to find a meaningful pattern.[24] This lack of a pattern is precisely the problem with relying on machines dependent on pattern-based analysis to drive decision making. Generative AI systems are capable of inductive logic (deciding based on predictions drawn from prior observation). Command decisions, however, require abductive logic (deciding in the face of the unknown and unknowable)—and Generative AI is unable to manifest that ability.[25] Machines lack this ability by the nature of their very design. Generative AI models are trained upon existing bodies of knowledge and dependent upon algorithms that, by design, will inhibit novel recommendations in unforeseen circumstances.

During a National Security Crisis exercise on July 1, 2025, with Army Strategists in their Basic course, students were asked to develop U.S. policy positions in response to a People's Republic of China (PRC) cyber-attack. At the end of the exercise, the students developed a policy proposal that was far less aggressive than the machine's initial recommendation. The lead facilitator for the exercise commented, "You know, ever since Taiwan stopped being a popular topic in the news, I see student policy proposals failing to address both Taiwan and regional interest in the exercise."

This insight was critical. Throughout the entire event, students omitted Taiwan in their policy proposals (educational moment) and the GenAI failed to prod group cognition in this important direction. Neither the scenario context nor the student papers mentioned Taiwan. There was nothing in the model parameters that would suggest entertaining that variable. With no a *priori* relevance, the model was unable to provide considerations sufficient to spur human cognition. Donovan conducted inductive reasoning, i.e., returning language based upon predictions from prior observation (training data). The ability to postulate an occurrence considering no previous interaction, precedent, or experience—abductive reasoning—was required and not present. This demonstrated to the students GenAI's failure to spur creativity and innovation—often touted as what it's meant to do. No amount of prompting will help you break through to unforeseen insights if the model is limited. While some would argue that machines can learn through "self-play," or running multiple simulations, those simulations are still largely dependent on the data available. In other words, if bad (or no data) is used as a start point then simulating outcomes comes with a significant risk of mislearning or identifying inaccurate conclusions. Both wargames present evidence, albeit anecdotal and experiential, that indicates likely human interactions with GenAI systems absent user training and model improvement. The Center for Strategic Leadership (CSL) at the US Army War College is expanding GenAI integration within Theater Level wargames to further explore these initial findings.

What should the DoD do about it?

This article is inherently a philosophical one, intending to demonstrate that an increasing reliance upon agentic systems in military planning, particularly at the strategic level, gives the Army a glass jaw. So how should the Army adapt? Step-by-step rules and checklists are unhelpful at the current pace of technological change. But the Army can establish axioms, or principles, to help guide military planners and commanders.

Be the philosophical "first-mover". All cognition originates from an individual's philosophical position. The military, and society broadly, is facing the most significant cognitive revolution since the Enlightenment; the roots of which originate within a schism fundamental to the philosophy of knowledge itself—*rationalism* vs. *empiricism*. [26] Tangredi and Galdorisi, authors of *AI At War*, said it well, "A computer program is a theory (written in specific notation). Thus, an AI program is really a theory of the mind. So, if you have the wrong theory of the mind [...] you have the wrong program".[27] Humans must put in time up front to think about a problem before "running it by" GenAI. Establishing the proper "theory of mind" up front is critical. This is important as AI will cement existing cognitive gaps if allowed. If GenAI output is perceived as inherently authoritative from the start, planners will likely fall victim to the same trap the BSAP students did – a lack of critical thinking and opportunity blindness. As an AI user becomes comfortable, or even dependent on AI, their ability to think critically and creatively will erode. Strategic planners must be draconian about viewing outputs as an expert synthesis of their own potential blind spots. AI does not create or produce knowledge. It's synthesizing pre-existing concepts into new patterns. Humans produce knowledge when ideas are translated into understanding through lived experience. This reality may highlight the importance of human expertise and increased emphasis on the importance of the military arts across Professional Military Education (PME) as central to warfighting lethality in the age of AI.

Break models in training before implementing in operational planning. Planners must see, and understand, GenAI model limitations in real time to appreciate the deficits. Training must demonstrate model fragility. The U.S. Army must promote planning systems and processes that are "antifragile"—systems that improve under chaos. [28] Artificial intelligence, based on machine learning, is the antithesis of this; it is an inherently "fragile" system. Its performance is directly proportional to the quality and comprehensiveness of the data on which it was trained. It excels in ordered, data-rich environments where the patterns of the past are reliable predictors of the future. However, war is defined by its novelty and its "black swan" events—unforeseen circumstances that have limited or no precedent in the training data. As the wargaming evidence suggests, an AI system encountering a truly novel situation—an adversary employing an unexpected tactic, a sudden political collapse, a new type of technological failure—has no relevant data on which to base its inductive logic. Its performance would not just degrade; it could fail catastrophically and unpredictably. Therefore, replacing the anti-fragile human system of mission command with a fragile algorithmic one would be to exchange a system that thrives in war's true nature for one that thrives only in war's idealized, data-fied representation.

Algorithms must enable ownership transfer. Good staff officers, and good staff organizations, "own" the problem. They treat the problem as if it's their own—as if the outcome impacts them personally. They "own" problems for the sake of their commanders, because staff recommendations will

impact command decisions. And staff officers own problems for their subordinate organizations, because soldiers' lives are impacted by staff effort. Planners must use these tools to enhance their cognitive position and increase their own understanding because the person, not the machine, will brief the plan and own the consequences. Any time GenAI undermines initiative or begins to erode competence in understanding the plan or the mission—users should immediately stop and work without machine assistance to regain an understanding of the larger concept.[29] This behavior, central to the concept of the military centaur, will help human planners to *build* and *exercise* judgment over time in the face of uncertainty.[30] Routine cognitive off-loading to machines risks atrophying the judgment and skill required to reason abductively; often built over the lifetime of a professional career.

Conclusion

The tendency to fully automate agentic solutions to staff planning, at the strategic level of war in particular, based on Large Language Models will undermine the utility of force by dislocating command from processes. AI may assist with the science of control, but it cannot assume the art of command. Even more practically, agentic decision-making compounds risk for commanders who lose control of processes that they cannot understand. How can commanders reasonably command when the pace of battle may exceed their ability to understand and adapt? Do humans matter in the battlespace if they sit idly by and watch a process they cannot fully understand or control? These dilemmas create real risks to the mission when AI agents are executing tasks that are misaligned to the commander's intent and compound the potential misapplication of violence. The result—military practice that is discordant with political purpose. The essence of strategic failure.

In the frenzy of using machine augmentation to make better decisions faster, military leaders and planners cannot lose sight of their role in the command process. More critically, they cannot acquiesce human agency to machine processes under the mistaken belief that because the machine says it's "ok," it must be. To cede staff cognition to such processes, with expectations for greater autonomy in machine agency, undermines commander understanding and decision-making—fundamental to the American way of war. Systems (software and hardware), processes (battle rhythm), and human structures (staff organizations and command structures) must facilitate mission command. But, at the end of the day, the commander is still responsible for execution. It is at this tension that we find discrimination between 20th and 21st century command. Commanders must still inspire, and they are still ultimately responsible, but they must accept risk when empowering subordinates that is, before now, not fully explored or understood. Decision making cannot be a pure algorithmic process—despite its tempting efficiencies. Similarly, commanders must adapt processes, technology, and structures to enable collective heroism within staff structures and subordinate units—an evolution in a uniquely American way of war.

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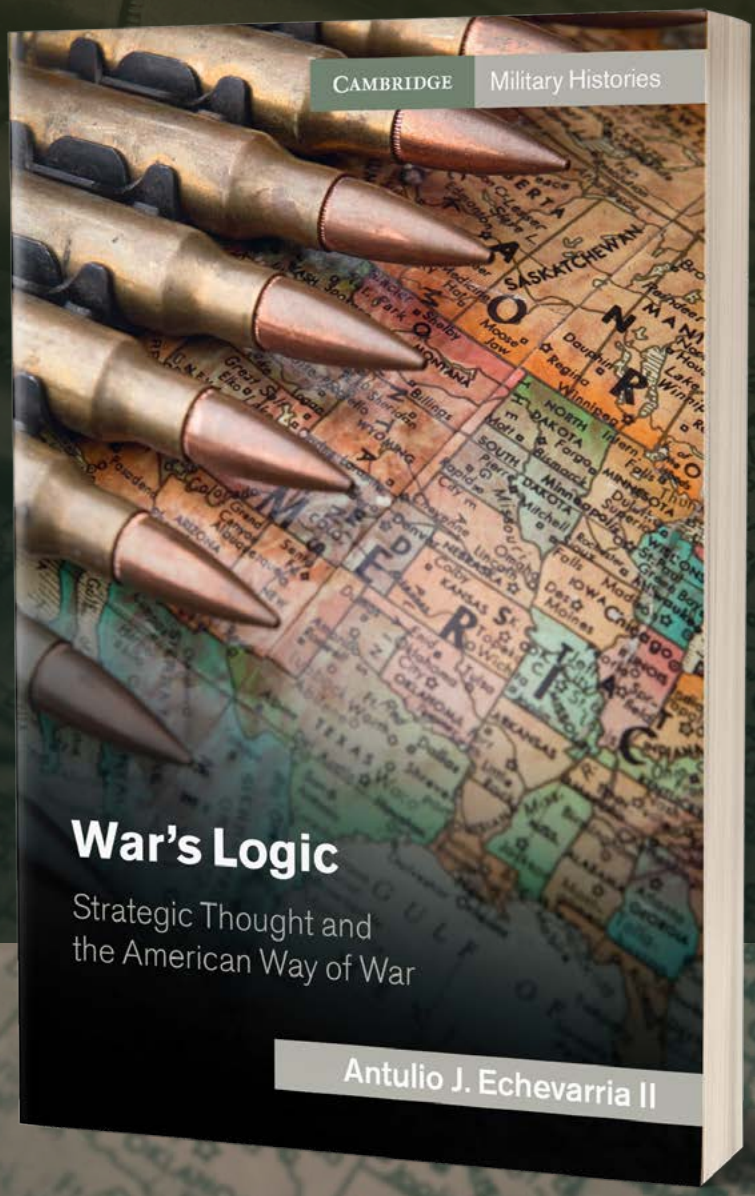
War's Logic

Strategic Thought and the American Way of War

Antulio J. Echevarria II



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Attacking Russia's Center of Gravity: A Clausewitzian Answer

Antulio J. Echevarria II – US Army War College

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Russian President Vladimir Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has prompted wide-ranging speculations about Russia's center of gravity and how Ukraine might attack it.[1] Some analysts rightly consider Putin himself to be Russia's center of gravity.[2] Others argue Putin's power comes from his control over the Russian armed forces and his tacit social pact to protect the Russian people in return for tolerating his rule; therefore, they claim these are Russia's true centers of gravity.[3] Still others have asserted Russia's centers of gravity are its major wartime objectives, namely, (a) capturing Ukraine's major cities, thereby forcing its population to evacuate or become

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subservient, or (b) seizing the coastline along the Black Sea, which would boost Moscow's maritime strength in its strategic competition with the West.[4] The range of these answers—encompassing individual, material, sociocultural, and geographic perspectives—underscores just how difficult it can be to discern a party's center of gravity. This article returns to the original concept as developed by the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz and argues Russia's center of gravity is, indeed, Putin.[5] The best way to attack him, moreover, is by means of a multi-faceted strategy of denial aimed at preventing him from taking Ukraine while also increasing the risks to his political survival as long as the war continues.

To be sure, one can defeat a foe without first identifying and attacking its center of gravity. Traditionally, militaries focused on destroying an adversary's armed might and eroding its willingness to fight. This approach remains effective, but it can prove long and risky, especially for a small party menaced by a larger one. What the center of gravity offers that the traditional solution does not is a way of looking at the problem that goes beyond merely targeting an enemy's physical and psychological capacities to discern what is holding everything together and then developing ways to neutralize it.

I. The Original Concept

Clausewitz's *On War* remains the most authoritative source for understanding what a center of gravity is and does because he was the first to apply the concept to military art. But the book presents two competing definitions that might cause confusion for some readers. The first definition appears in Book VI, Chapter 27 "Defense of a Theater of Operations." As its title indicates, this chapter concerns operations rather than strategy, and Clausewitz's description of *Schwerpunkt* follows suit. "The center of gravity (*Schwerpunkt*)," he asserts, "is always found where the mass is concentrated most densely, and . . . the blow struck against the center of gravity of an object is the most effective."[6] However, here he has apparently conflated the terms center of gravity and center of mass, an error the scientists of his day sometimes made as well. For instance, a German textbook on hydrostatics published in 1777, equated the two, calling an object's point of equilibrium its "center of mass (*Mittelpunkt der Schwere*) or center of gravity (*Schwerpunkt*)."[7] A center of mass can occupy the same point as a center of gravity. But the latter refers to the point where the gravitational forces acting on an object come together, thus creating a focal point of balance or equilibrium, though that point is not necessarily on the object itself. A center of gravity thus refers to equilibrium or balance, while a center of mass refers to density, which in turn makes it metaphorically similar to an operational main effort.

Clausewitz's second definition appears in Book VIII, Chapter 4 "A More Precise Definition of the Military Objective: The Defeat of the Enemy." As its title suggests, this chapter deals with strategic matters, such as the overall military defeat of an adversary. Here Clausewitz suggests, if one keeps the "dominant characteristics of the belligerent parties" in mind, a "certain center of gravity (*Schwerpunkt*)—a hub (*Zentrum*) of power and movement," will emerge upon which everything depends; "it is against the enemy's center of gravity (*Schwerpunkt*) that the combined might of all [one's] forces must be directed."[8] Admittedly, the phrase "dominant characteristics" is vague; however, it most likely points to a strategic comparison or net assessment of each party's political, military, and economic strengths and weaknesses in relation to its competitors'.[9] Furthermore, he offered several strategic examples for clarity: (a) popular uprisings have *two* centers of gravity, the leaders of the uprising and public opinion; for alliances and coalitions, the center of gravity is their common interests; for states with disputing political factions, it is the capital; nineteenth-century France (after Napoleon's abdication) also had two centers of gravity, Paris and the French army.[10] While more than one center of gravity can exist in some strategic situations, Clausewitz duly reminded his readers to reduce all centers of gravity to as few as possible, ideally to one.[11] His examples, though dated, align well with modern military doctrine and with recent history.[12]

A brief detour to the battle of Waterloo in 1815 illustrates how Clausewitz's notion of a center of gravity differs from that of a center of mass. In 1815, Napoleon was unquestionably France's center of gravity, which he aptly demonstrated by rallying some 200,000 troops to his cause within weeks upon his return from exile in Elba.[13] He was not the operational center of mass, which concerned the disposition of French troops for military operations, as at Waterloo.[14] Perhaps the most memorable example of a center of mass in action is the concentration of the French Old Guard for its critical but ill-fated assault against the British lines late in the battle. When that attack faltered and the Old Guard retreated, Napoleon stayed briefly with one of its battalions while attempting to rescue the situation. His efforts ultimately failed, and he ordered the Old Guard's remaining battalions to cover his retreat to Paris where he hoped to restore order before his regime collapsed entirely.[15] The French center of gravity thus left the French center of mass behind on the field of battle, though for a time they were co-located.

II. The Russian and Ukrainian Centers of Gravity

Assessing the Dominant Characteristics of the Belligerent Parties. In terms of population, Russia has almost four times more people than Ukraine (143.5 million compared to 38 million). Economically, current estimates vary widely, but Russia's remains roughly where it was in 2022, that is, ranked number 11 in the world (GDP: $2.8 trillion); whereas Ukraine's economy (GDP: $200 billion) is approximately 14

times smaller, though it is expected to grow as its industrial base expands.[16] Of note, Moscow's trade relationship with Beijing has increased significantly, reaching almost $445 billion by the end of 2024, and enabling Russians to offset the impact of Western sanctions more or less.[17] Militarily, Putin's armed forces outnumbered Zelensky's by almost 12:1 in February 2022, in the critical categories of aircraft, tanks, and artillery.[18] That ratio has obviously changed after more than three years of fighting. Russia still holds a superiority in numbers, but the ratio remains unclear since neither side publishes its true casualty figures.[19] From the standpoint of military strategy, Russia also holds a crucial advantage in its willingness and ability to tolerate high costs both in terms of blood and treasure to obtain what it wants. As Russia expert Dara Massicot noted: "casualties are not something that moves the needle for the Kremlin."[20] Kyiv cannot match Moscow's cost-ceilings. Nor in all likelihood could any Western democracy. Ukraine must, therefore, avoid engaging in a strategy of attrition or exhaustion with Russia. While Moscow cannot sustain such a strategy indefinitely, it can probably do so long enough to coerce Kyiv into concessions—unless the West's economic, military, and political support continues. That support balances the situation for Ukraine, and so it must do whatever it can to keep Western assistance flowing.

Russia's Center of Gravity

The Russian center of gravity is undoubtedly the state's leader, Vladimir Putin. As a former KGB officer, he has had extensive experience in arrogating power to himself and in consolidating it. Little happens in Russia that Putin does not control or at least influence. As numerous experts attest, however, he rarely gets everything he wants because his bureaucracy, his industrial base, and his military machine are known to be inefficient and corrupt.[21] (Ukraine has similar problems.) Had Putin's political and military apparatus been more efficient, Ukraine might have fallen to Russian aggression in the opening days of the conflict, as high-ranking Western officials openly predicted.[22] Instead, Russia has yet to overwhelm its much smaller adversary, suffering grievous losses in the process. Obviously, the Russians have learned, adapted, and improved their operational performance since 2022, but so too have the Ukrainians, creating a situation of rough parity where neither side has broken and progress on the ground is painfully slow.[23] Nonetheless, it is Putin's war: he initiated the hybrid operations in 2014 and escalated the conflict to a full-scale invasion in 2022. He also retains the political power and authority to halt the conflict with negotiations, should he so choose. To be sure, he does not have a completely free hand in how he conducts the war, as he must continue to garner the support of the Russian populace.

The argument that Putin himself has two centers of gravity—the Russian military and the support of the Russian populace—is superficially true; however, it overlooks the fact that he has no obvious rivals for control over the Russian military, and that he controls the country's most powerful media outlets in addition to the strategic narratives that are fed to the Russian public. At the risk of sounding glib, Russia's center of gravity is actually the space between Putin's ears, that is, his perceptions and his thinking. Ergo, this is the target Ukraine (and the West) must attack or try to sway.

Ukraine's Center of Gravity

At the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022, President Volodymyr Zelensky was Ukraine's center of gravity because his courage and leadership galvanized Ukrainian resistance and helped stimulate Western support. Had he fled Kyiv, surrendered to the Russians, or been killed, Ukraine's willingness to fight would have suffered a heavy, perhaps even a fatal blow. Fortunately, Moscow's planners underestimated Ukrainian resistance and failed to increase the strength and density of their main effort, the dual assault on Hostomel Airport and Kyiv. This overconfidence likely saved the city and Zelensky from falling into Russian hands.

Ukraine's center of gravity changed after the opening months of the conflict as political and military support (in the form of intelligence sharing, training, and hardware) began to flow from Europe and the United States.[24] Ukraine's center of gravity is now that support. As is well known, willingness to fight is a critical factor in war, but it is intertwined with the wherewithal to fight. Without the latter, Kyiv would face tough choices ranging from conceding to Moscow's demands or transitioning to a strategy of insurgency.[25] Unfortunately, though Russian counterinsurgency tactics have much in common with their Western counterparts, they do not adhere to the same ethical constraints as Western militaries, making insurgency a risky choice for Ukraine.[26]

To be sure, Zelensky still contributes significantly to bolstering Ukraine's willingness to fight and still encourages the West to continue providing security assistance; however, Ukrainian morale has revolved less around him and more around that support, rising or falling as the West's willingness to back Ukraine ebbs and flows.[27] Were Zelensky to be killed or incapacitated, another Ukrainian leader would simply take his place. Indeed, other "hubs of power and movement," such as General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the Ukrainian army's former chief of staff, have emerged at various points in the conflict to compete with Zelensky.[28] Ukrainian hopes, in other words, remain pinned to the West's continued support.[29]

III. Attacking Russia's Center of Gravity

Understanding an adversary's center of gravity is, obviously, only half the battle. Finding ways to attack or influence it is the essential other half. Ukraine's challenge is how to get at the center of gravity—the thinking of an autocratic head of state—who is located a significant distance from the frontlines, commands a large military force, controls the strategic narratives fed to the state's public, and is protected by an extensive security apparatus.

A strategy of decapitation (*schwacking* Putin) will not necessarily solve the problem because his successor could merely continue where the former KGB agent ended, requiring the process of coercion to be re-started. Regime change is something of a gamble in any case because new leaders can prove harder to deal with and less predictable than their predecessors. Moreover, decapitation may be more difficult than it appears in this case. Both sides have attempted multiple times to eliminate each other's heads of state, but neither has succeeded.[30]

A better approach would be to increase the pressure on Putin in the only way he seems to respect—making the war militarily unwinnable for him, which will also raise the risks for his political survival. At root, this approach is a strategy of denial. It is usually associated with deterrence strategies; however, there is no reason it cannot apply to defensive strategies as well. The aim of this denial strategy would be to preclude Putin's operational and strategic goals from being accomplished, thereby undermining his credibility as a leader. Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which clearly did not go as planned, created an existential problem for his regime; if it continues to fail, he will be seen as weak. Autocracies are sensitive to perceptions of weakness and to internal threats, because they often give rise to some form of leader reshuffling.[31] All the more reason, then, to strengthen the strategy of denial against Putin by presenting his regime with additional security dilemmas to contend with, such as playing Russia's major institutions against one another, bribing or coopting some of his officials or his disgruntled oligarchs, supporting revolutionary groups or resistance movements that openly agitate for regime change. Such actions would add fuel to the feelings of suspicion and distrust that already exist within the regime.

To be sure, Putin controls Russia's media outlets and the main narratives fed to Russian society. But recent polls show his control is not absolute: many of those who voted for him in the 2024 elections, for instance, did so "not from genuine loyalty or agreement with his policies but from political apathy, the lack of viable alternatives, and his symbolic role as a figure of state power beyond criticism."[32] Furthermore, while Russians continue to support the actions of their armed forces in Ukraine, approximately two-thirds of them believe "peace negotiations should be initiated."[33] Overall, Russians still believe the high costs of the special military operation have been worth the "global respect" the Motherland has gained.[34] But taken together, these polls also suggest Russian opinion is shifting; the majority now feels the special operation has accomplished its mission, and it is time to reconnect with Western economies and to return to normalcy. In other words, Putin could well increase the risks to his regime by overplaying his hand at this point.

Ukraine has attempted to exploit Putin's existential dilemma by highlighting the ineffectiveness of Russia's defensive measures. That was the strategic point of the Kursk counteroffensive, Operation Spiderweb, the assassinations of Russian generals and other officials, as well as the sundry deep strikes against Russia's energy infrastructure. But Kyiv will require the West's assistance to continue fighting. The Atlantic Alliance and the European Union should feel confident in providing that assistance even without the United States, since Europe's collective economic power exceeds that of Russia by a ratio of 8:1, even with the economic lifeline Beijing provides to Moscow.[35] The reality is Ukraine has become the West's *de facto* proxy, and the West should view this reality as an opportunity to "wage war without going to war," and to do so not merely for Ukraine's sake but for its own interests.[36] These interests are best served by standing firm against an aggressive and revanchist neighbor.

Conclusion

Russia's top political leader, Vladimir Putin, is the country's center of gravity in the war against Ukraine. To be sure, Russia's military arsenal and Russian society provide him significant power, and he must weigh how his political decisions will affect his control over them. They certainly limit his actions on some matters, such as mobilization, which the very same polls above show Russian public does not support. But he is still Russia's hub of all power and movement. Nor can Russia's center of gravity be any of Putin's military or political objectives, such as the Black Sea or its coastal cities, or even the rest of the Donbas. Seizing these would surely give Putin some advantages in his strategic competition with the West. They are, however, not the power driving the war. That is Putin himself.

Although Clausewitz's concept of center of gravity can be difficult to grasp, it remains useful as an analytical tool for present-day conflicts. Knowing that the Prussian theorist confused the concepts of center of gravity and center of mass can actually assist modern military thinkers and doctrine writers in resolving the decades-long debate over what a center of gravity is and how to use it. The concept of center of mass, or main effort, applies well to designing operations and campaigns. The concept of center of gravity applies best to identifying a conflict's core dynamic, the thing upon which everything else depends.

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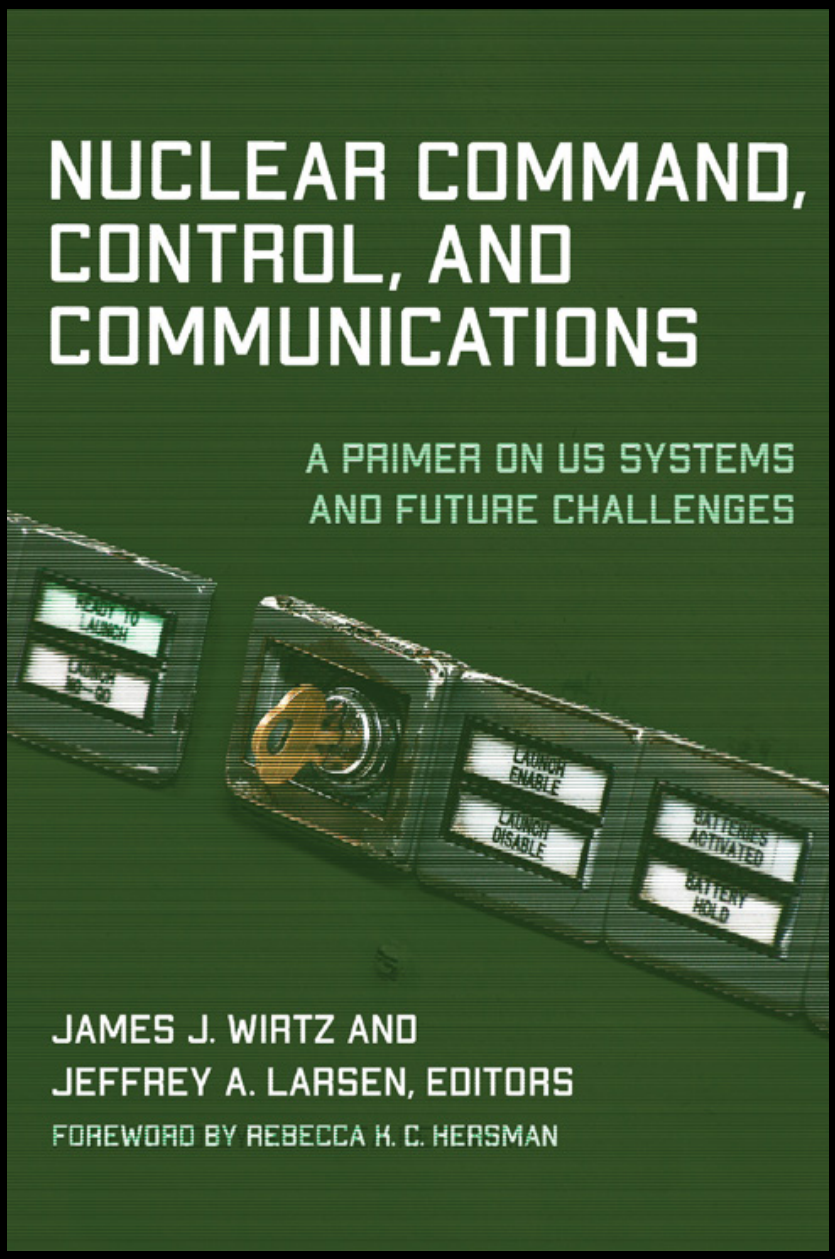

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Warfare of Position: When the Decisive Struggle Precedes the First Shot

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Years before the advent of violence during the 1948 communist insurgency in the British colony of Malaya, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) had already transformed the political landscape through a deliberate information warfare campaign. The MCP set up a secret parallel government by infiltrating civil society groups like village associations. They radicalized people by indoctrinating them through propaganda that manufactured compelling political narratives. The MCP used these networks to establish a de facto parallel administration that collected taxes,

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operated courts, distributed food, enforced discipline and mobilized labor. All while promoting propaganda that increasingly portrayed the British as illegitimate and incapable of governing rural communities.[1] These activities were not peripheral political agitation; they systematically reshaped how key communities interpreted the established government's legitimacy. By the time armed conflict began, many rural populations already viewed MCP cadres as defenders of local interests and the British administration as distant, coercive, or predatory. This resulted in a serious disadvantage for the colonial administration once the violent phase of the revolution began.[2]

The Malayan example represents the emergence of a different philosophy of war that departed from the classical European assumptions that war was the use of violence to decisively destroy an enemy's military. This philosophy of war was codified into a coherent doctrine called the war of position, by Antonio Gramsci as a strategy to advance revolutionary struggles when the revolutionaries were unable to directly challenge an existing government. In Gramsci's original formulation, "war of position" refers to a prolonged struggle over meaning, legitimacy and social norms. Conducted primarily within civil society rather than through direct confrontation with a state's hard power. Writing in the context of early twentieth-century Europe, Gramsci distinguished war of position from a "war of maneuver," the latter denoting rapid, decisive efforts to seize formal political authority through force or insurrection. War of position instead operates through the slow, attritional contestation of cultural, ideological, and symbolic terrain. Competing actors seek to shape how reality itself is interpreted and understood.[3] This logic is not unique to Gramsci, as Sun Tzu similarly emphasized shaping conditions in advance—through deception, influence, and psychological advantage—to secure victory before combat occurs, or ideally without fighting at all [4].

What is the War of Position?

Central to this concept is Gramsci's notion of hegemony: the condition in which a dominant group secures consent not merely through coercion, but by embedding its worldview into everyday assumptions, moral frameworks and common sense. Civil society, encompassing media, education, religion, cultural institutions and informal social practices, thus becomes the primary battlespace of war of position.[5] Here, meanings are normalized, identities are formed, and legitimacy is quietly constructed or eroded. Rather than producing immediate political outcomes, war of position reshapes the interpretive environment over time. It conditions what actions later appear reasonable, inevitable, or morally justified. This long-term struggle over meaning is cumulative and asymmetrical: gains are incremental, setbacks are often invisible and decisive effects may only become apparent when a subsequent war of maneuver succeeds or fails based on the interpretive terrain already established.[6]

To avoid conceptual slippage, it is important to clarify that Gramsci's use of "war of maneuver" differs from contemporary military doctrine: it refers to direct political confrontation with state power aimed at rapid institutional change, not operational tempo or battlefield agility. By contrast, war of position denotes a prolonged struggle accumulating advantages over time by conditioning the interpretive environment rather than seeking immediate resolution through force.[7] This argument does not claim that Western strategic thought ignores political struggle outside armed conflict. Instead, modern Western military institutions and doctrines tend to prioritize decisive, kinetic action over the slow, cumulative dynamics of positional struggle.[8] The present manuscript advances this discussion by using Gramsci's framework of war of position to explain how meaning, legitimacy and consent are accumulated within civil society. The latter translates into a strategic advantage that shapes kinetic confrontation.

A Meta-Theory of War

Ben Zweibelson's recent work on a meta-theory of warfare, based upon Burrell and Morgan's (1979) framework of sociology paradigms, presents a unique understanding of how each paradigm understands warfare.[9] The dominant philosophy of warfare in Europe and North America is the functionalist paradigm, where war is understood as a rational, instrumental activity carried out by states to maintain order, enforce rules, or achieve defined political objectives. Within this framework, information warfare is typically treated as a supporting function that enables or amplifies physical violence rather than as a site of conflict in its own right. War of position falls within the radical humanist paradigm, where victory essentially means liberation from visible and invisible forms of oppression present in the dominant hegemonic order. **From this perspective, political struggle does not pause during periods of nominal peace, but persists through discourse, culture and symbolic influence as actors seek long-term political supremacy.** Thus, it has a type of messianic eschatology where the ultimate goal is the creation of a utopian society.[10] In a war of position, information conveyed through discourse and the influence of culture become the central instruments of conflict. **It shapes whether, when and to what extent physical force is ultimately employed**. These factors determine whether physical force will be necessary and its scope and scale if it is required.[11]

The Strategic Logic of a War of Position

In many conflicts, force succeeds or fails depending on how people interpret it. Populations do not react to violence only in material terms. They respond through beliefs, norms and expectations that shape their understanding of

governmental authority and their obligations as citizens. As David Galula observed, "the objective of the conflict is the population," and its support or resistance depends on perceptions of legitimacy.[12] Hew Strachan likewise notes that war is judged not only by physical effects but by the meanings societies assign to those effects. When these meanings favor one actor, even limited force can produce decisive outcomes. When they do not, large-scale violence may become ineffective or counterproductive.[13] In a war of position, this interpretive terrain becomes the true center of gravity. Actors seek to shape how communities understand coercion, rule and threat long before open violence begins.[14] Lawrence Freedman explains that modern strategy often depends on shaping the context in which force will be applied, because that context determines whether violence appears justified or abusive.[15] During the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian strikes failed to produce a rapid political collapse because Ukrainian and international audiences interpreted the violence as illegitimate aggression rather than effective coercion. This interpretive framing, reinforced by Ukrainian information efforts, mobilized resistance and transformed an intended quick maneuver into a prolonged conflict.[16]

In a war of position, information warfare becomes the main method for shaping the environment in which future violence will occur. A main war of position information warfare tactic is the subversion of existing meanings. The definition of key words is altered so that they not only mean something new, but the entire concept itself may also be delegitimized or demonized. Toppling historic statues is an example of this because the collective meanings about the statue's subject are altered from being heroes' to being villains.[17] In a war of position, information activities are not supporting efforts; they are the operational core.[18] In the war of position, violence is often an ancillary activity, a form of agitation propaganda, designed to evoke strong emotional reactions. When urban activists destroy property during a riot, the primary goal is not the destruction of property. Instead, it communicates symbolic resistance to oppressive systems by stoking public consciousness, polarizing opinion and forcing the broader society to reckon with the protesters' ideological narrative.[19] Successful wars of position will render future violence less necessary, frequent and intense. Information warfare therefore provides the practical means by which a war of position is waged, enabling actors to alter the strategic environment before force is applied.[20]

Western Strategy & Misunderstanding Positional Conflict

Western strategic thinking often struggles to recognize wars of position because they are rooted in the functionalist paradigm, which treats war primarily as a state-directed instrument for achieving political aims through physical force. This tradition, shaped heavily by Clausewitz and reinforced by modern military institutions, assumes that battle outcomes and material capabilities determine strategic success.[21] Western conceptions of war emphasize the controlled use of violence and often underappreciate the political and cultural conditions that shape how that violence will be interpreted.[22] It is important to clarify that this argument does not suggest Western strategic thought denies the continuity of political struggle outside periods of armed conflict. Clausewitz's contribution, in particular, must be understood within its proper scope: *On War* is a theory of war as an instrument of policy, not a general theory of political struggle in peacetime. The distinction between Clausewitz and Gramsci is therefore not civilizational or moral, but analytical and structural.[23] This focus can obscure conflicts in which the decisive struggle occurs within the institutions, narratives, and social expectations of civil society rather than on the battlefield. Scholars of Gramscian conflict note that states oriented toward wars of maneuver often overlook the slow cultural and ideological work through which adversaries erode legitimacy before violence begins.[24] This dynamic is illustrated by the Peruvian government's delayed recognition that the Shining Path had already reshaped local authority through embedded cadres and ideological control prior to major violence.[25]

Furthermore, in democratic societies, the war of position is often hiding in plain sight as just another legitimate political movement — this is despite the fact that the long-term goal is the destruction of that system. Scholars of Gramscian conflict argue that state security forces accustomed to wars of maneuver frequently overlook evidence for a successful war of position because the process is slow and gradual.[26] For example, the Chinese Communist Party has waged a sustained war of position in Taiwan by shaping media narratives, cultivating United Front networks and influencing civil organizations to weaken trust in democratic institutions and redefine Taiwanese identity.[27] If successful, these activities will either make a CCP military invasion either unnecessary or easier.

The strategic consequence of a war of position is that the decisive point lies in shaping how a society interprets conflict itself. As John Boyd argued in his work on decision cycles, the side that influences an opponent's perceptions and disrupts its ability to orient to events gains advantage even before physical engagement occurs.[28] Likewise, research on soft power shows that the capacity to guide preferences and define legitimate behavior can produce strategic outcomes without coercion.[29] In this sense, the interpretive realm becomes the true center of gravity, because it determines whether violence will mobilize support, provoke resistance, or fail entirely to achieve political aims. Physical strength remains relevant, but its effectiveness is governed by the narratives, symbols, and expectations that prepare the ground on which force will operate.

The Sociocultural Terrain as a Battlespace

The central feature of a war of position is that the decisive struggle takes place within civil society, which functions as a form of strategic terrain. This terrain consists of the institutions, norms and interpretive frameworks through which a population understands political authority and social order. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, power operates not only through physical force but through the ability to shape the "symbolic structures" that define what people perceive as legitimate, natural, or possible.[30] These structures are built and reproduced in schools, media, religious organizations, unions and community networks, the very spaces where meaning is generated and contested. James C. Scott's work on everyday politics similarly shows that the stability of any political order depends on shared cultural expectations that make authority recognizable and coherent.[31] Because these expectations determine whether people comply with, resist, or ignore state directives, they form a critical battlespace in conflicts where legitimacy is at stake. In wars of position, control of this sociocultural environment becomes strategically decisive because it shapes how populations interpret both coercion and governance long before violence is applied.

In practical terms, the sociocultural battlespace consists of several components that shape how political authority is interpreted. These include narratives that explain who holds power and why. They identify frameworks that define social boundaries of who belongs to the group and those who don't. Creating or debilitating institutional trust that determines whether directives are accepted or resisted.[32] Scholars have shown that these elements form the cognitive foundation of legitimacy because they create the mental models through which people judge political actors and evaluate the use of coercion. Benedict Anderson demonstrates that collective identities emerge from shared stories and communication networks, giving political orders an imagined coherence that can be strengthened or undermined.[33] Clifford Geertz adds that individuals act within "webs of meaning" that assign significance to events, including the application of force.[34] These meaning-systems become strategic targets in a war of position because altering them changes how communities perceive both governance and coercion. When an actor gains influence over these components, through education, media, organizational penetration, or narrative framing, it can redefine the political environment without resorting to violence.[35]

Decentralized Networks and Organic Intellectuals

A war of position does not have to advance through a centralized power structure, which can make it even more difficult to detect and analyze. In Gramsci's thinking, the agents of progress are organic intellectuals, who are embedded in everyday social institutions as teachers, journalists, or anyone else who can evangelize the revolution. They articulate, transmit and normalize alternative worldviews that challenge the current hegemony.[36] Rather than relying primarily on hierarchical coordination, these intellectuals can operate autonomously across universities, media organizations, cultural institutions and civic networks. Collectively, they gradually reshape interpretive frameworks that sustain political authority. Gramsci emphasized that hegemonic struggles are won when a broad constellation of organic intellectuals succeeds in redefining common sense, not when a single vanguard issues directives.[37]

Contemporary scholarship on ideological movements echoes this insight, noting that diffuse networks of activists, scholars, and organizations can wage sustained cultural and informational campaigns without centralized leadership. Their cohesion derives from shared narratives, interpretive schemas, and normative commitments rather than command structures.[38] In strategic terms, this decentralized model enables multiple symbolic and informational actions to emerge simultaneously across different domains, each reinforcing the others and cumulatively eroding the legitimacy of existing institutions. The result is a resilient, adaptive form of positional conflict in which power resides in the saturation of ideas rather than the coordination of forces.[39]

Implications for Modern Strategy: Why Warfare of Position Matters Now

Recognizing the sociocultural terrain as a battlespace has direct implications for how modern security forces understand competition and prepare for conflict. In a war of position, the decisive struggle unfolds before the first shot is fired.[40] Once a population accepts the revolutionary's ideology, their attitudes and beliefs are generally set, which significantly impacts the choice of strategies that are available. This dynamic helps explain why governments involved in these conflicts often discover that tactical success cannot compensate for deeper structural disadvantage.[41] Security forces that focus solely on the kinetic contest may find themselves fighting inside an interpretive environment defined by their adversary.

While this article centers on Gramsci's framework of war of position, the underlying argument aligns with a broader tradition of strategic thought that emphasizes perception, culture and indirect influence as decisive elements of conflict. Colin Gray's conception of strategy as culturally embedded underscores that war is fought not only through force, but through the values, assumptions, and interpretive frameworks that shape how force is understood and legitimized.[42] Similarly, the indirect strategies articulated by Liddell Hart emphasize shaping an adversary's perceptions and options over time rather than

seeking immediate decision through direct confrontation.[43] Thomas Schelling's work on coercion further reinforces this logic by demonstrating how outcomes in conflict are often determined by how signals are interpreted rather than by physical action alone. Seen in this light, war of position is not an outlier concept derived from critical theory, but a complementary lens within a long-standing strategic conversation about how meaning, expectation, and legitimacy condition the use and effectiveness of power. Gramsci's contribution lies in offering a vocabulary for analyzing these dynamics systematically within civil society, making explicit processes that are often implicit in strategic practice.[45]

Meanwhile, rivals compete through the slow shaping of social meaning: weakening trust in institutions, redefining national identity, and weaponizing historical narratives. These efforts are not peripheral information operations; they are the operational backbone of positional conflict, consistent with research showing that legitimacy, identity, and trust are central targets of modern information campaigns.[46] Because a war of position begins with altered expectations, eroded trust, and shifting ideas of legitimacy rather than visible aggression, states may not recognize the contest until they are already fighting inside an adversary's narrative architecture. This asymmetry, in which one side wages a war of position and the other prepares for a war of maneuver, generates strategic surprise without battlefield movement and leaves militaries vulnerable to losing a war they never realized had begun.[47]

Conclusion

Warfare of position reveals that the most decisive contests in modern conflict occur not on physical terrain but within the sociocultural environment that gives meaning to power. Long before hostilities begin, adversaries shape the narratives, identities, and expectations through which communities interpret authority and coercion. Once established, these frameworks determine whether military action will achieve its political aims or undermine them. Western strategy, long oriented toward wars of maneuver, has struggled to recognize this shift. Rivals who compete through information, culture, and institutional influence are not softening the battlefield; they are defining it. By the time visible aggression appears, the decisive struggle may already have been lost. For contemporary security forces, the implication is clear: understanding and contesting the sociocultural battlespace is not an adjunct to strategy but a prerequisite for it. Force can only succeed when it operates within an environment that supports its political purpose. Recognizing warfare of position as a distinct strategic form allows practitioners to see how meaning is shaped, how legitimacy is built or eroded, and how adversaries set the conditions under which violence will or will not matter. To ignore this domain is to risk entering future conflicts already at a disadvantage. Fighting a battle whose outcome has been decided by a war few realized had begun.

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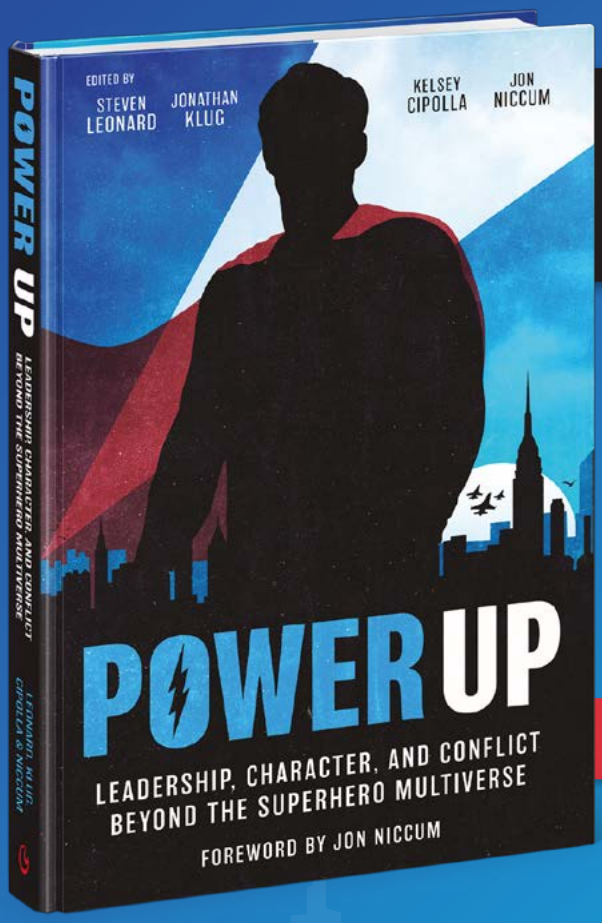

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British Special Forces in the 2030s: UKSF, 'Special Operations' and 'NATO First'

Simon Anglim – King's College London, Department of War Studies

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British Special Forces in the 2020s

The United Kingdom's Special Forces (UKSF) provide the sharp edge to British foreign policy.[1] This is reflected in their status and organisation, UKSF forming a Directorate, a headquarters within the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) separate from those of the other armed forces and headed by the Director UKSF, a major general from the British Army or Royal Marines who reports directly to the Prime Minister and Defence Secretary. The units he oversees provide that sharp edge by carrying out

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missions of high political sensitivity and risk in situations where deploying conventional, ground-holding forces is not an option. Such missions might include direct strikes on critical targets, reconnaissance on behalf of the intelligence and security services (MI6 and MI5) and the UK's allies, rescue or extraction of British and friendly personnel from danger zones, covertly training and fighting alongside armed proxies and pre-empting or quick reaction to terrorist attacks in the UK and abroad. The potential political fallout from these missions means they must be covert and, ideally, deniable; consequently, UKSF specialise in inserting small, clandestine parties into denied territory which achieve strategic effect disproportionate with numbers via combining very high-quality personnel – selected meticulously from already serving members of the British armed forces – with tactical doctrine combining speed and surprise and technology often unavailable to other forces.

This paper discusses UKSF in the context of UK national strategy in the mid-2020s and onwards, which is evolving in reaction to the looming threat of conventional war in Europe and beyond. The UK's Special Forces are its one undeniably world-class military capability still remaining after several decades of major cuts to defence spending and consequent reduction in military capacity, particularly to the Army.[2] Over this same timeframe, UKSF has grown conspicuously in size and capability, and a key contention of this paper is that they represent a highly cost-effective means not just for the UK in particular to meet challenging policy aims and remain relevant to allies but the way in which they are deployed tells much about the strategic value of Special Forces in general.[3] The current UK Government, under Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer and Defence Minister John Healy, clearly recognises this value, not only assigning UKSF a key role in their new, Europe-focused defence strategy but embracing another recent development, the British Army and Royal Marines' development of 'Special Operations' capabilities. The term 'Special Operations' is usually employed, loosely, to mean 'anything beyond conventional warfare' and many – particularly in the USA and other NATO countries - treat the terms 'Special Forces' and 'Special Operations Forces' as interchangeable. This is certainly not the case in the UK: as clarified below, UKSF and the new British 'Special Operations' forces are *not* the same, in organisation or employment and outlining how they differ might give some clarity over what these terms mean in general, in theory and practice.

UKSF in their context

Special Forces are something of a British speciality. The UK pioneered their use in the Second World War, and UKSF still centres on two units formed then, the Army's 22 Special Air Service Regiment (22 SAS) and the Royal Marines' Special Boat Service (SBS); both perform the same range of tasks, but 22 SAS specialise in airborne insertion while the SBS works in the littoral, the area where land meets sea. In 2005, UKSF added the Special Reconnaissance Regiment (SRR), whose principal role is covert intelligence gathering in denied territory, but also, more controversially, inside the UK and other friendly territories in counterterrorist scenarios. The following year, 1st Battalion, The Parachute Regiment (1 Para) was assigned to UKSF as the Special Forces Support Group (SFSG), providing 22 SAS, the SBS and SRR with infantry support, including extra firepower, cordoning areas around objectives and quick reaction to unforeseen enemy action. UKSF has integral communications and information support courtesy of 18 (UKSF) Signal Regiment, a British Army Royal Signals unit whose personnel undergo a form of UKSF's arduous selection and training process. Organic air transport comes courtesy of the Chinook heavy helicopters of Royal Air Force No.7 Squadron and the lighter Dauphins of 658 Squadron of the Army Air Corps, the latter based at 22 SAS HQ at Credenhill and supporting UKSF in domestic counterterrorist operations.

Context for UKSF's current and future development comes from the radical change in the UK's threat environment since Russia launched its offensive against unoccupied Ukraine in February 2022.[4] Until then, UKSF worked in an environment of counterinsurgency and 'remote warfare' abroad and counterterrorism at home, and a presumption that peer-level inter-state conflict, if it ever happened, would be resolved 'sub-threshold' via covert penetration and subversion of the opponent's society. This reached its apotheosis in the idea – central to the Johnson, Truss and Sunak Governments' 'Global Britain' policy programme – that kinetic action was now just one end of a scale of 'strategic competition' against adversary powers or transnational terrorist groups trying to penetrate key areas of the world. The British 'Special Operations' forces formed in the early 2020s were intended explicitly for this kind of 'sub-threshold' or 'irregular' action - falling traditionally under UKSF's remit – as we cover below.

The world was already moving back towards a paradigm of great-power confrontation via conventional warfare, or the threat of it, when the Russians attacked. UK MoD reacted in several ways, most obviously Operation *Interflex*, a programme involving tens of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers being trained by the British and allied armies at UK facilities, and Operation *Mobilise*, initiated by the then Chief of the General Staff (CGS, official head of the British Army), General Sir Patrick Sanders, wherein the British Army is reorientating its doctrine, organisation and training towards conventional warfare in Europe.[5] The next shaping factor came in July 2024 with the election of a Labour Government promising a major review of UK defence policy in light of Russia's aggression. Unsurprisingly, when its *Strategic Defence Review* was published in June 2025, its core narrative centred on the slogan 'NATO First', 'global competition' giving way to facing up to Russia in Europe and the North Atlantic, enacted through a bold, ten-year vision of reinvestment in the UK's armed forces and

defence industry to prepare for prolonged, conventional confrontation in the NATO region.[6]

Significantly, the *Review* included a short chapter on the part UKSF and the new 'Special Operations' forces might play in this new, NATO-centric defence strategy. Reviewing these proposals and their possible implications, forms the backbone of what follows. This matters firstly because it marks the latest stage in the conspicuous expansion of UKSF's role in British defence strategy since the 2010s, culminating in two of Britain's armed forces now being led by former UKSF officers, General Sir Roland Walker, who served with 22 SAS prior to being Director in 2018-2021 as CGS, and General Sir Gwyn Jenkins, appointed as the first Royal Marine First Sea Lord, head of the Royal Navy, in 2025 having been Commanding Officer SBS in 2009-2012 before succeeding General Walker as Director in 2021. Secondly, there are signs in the *Review* – admittedly brief ones – that the government envisages UKSF and the new 'Special Operations' forces playing a key part in NATO's strategy of deterrence via denial – confronting potential aggressors with a credible threat of defeat. This strategy centres on rapidly deployable reaction forces, the latest NATO Force Model – adopted in direct response to the Ukraine War – creating a new, multinational Allied Reaction Force which conspicuously includes 'Special Operations' forces from a number of member states.[7] The *Review* envisages UKSF as a framework force for another new formation, NATO's projected Special Operations Task Force 2026, indicating how far their focus might now be 'NATO First'. What the *Review* says about UKSF's strategic role is, therefore, some indication of what might lie ahead for Britain in NATO as well.

'NATO First' and 'Special Operations'

The *Review* is unequivocal that UKSF remains a national asset: 'Defence must continue to enhance its Special Forces, ensuring UK sovereign choice by maintaining this strategic capability at the very highest level.'[8] This is linked to their deterrence via denial value, 'first mover advantage' allowing them to outmanoeuvre 'peer adversaries in support of national objectives' as well as guarantee the safety of British citizens in world danger spots.[9] Moreover, they provide a template for the future of British military forces, a working microcosm of the MoD's projected 'Integrated Force', technologically enabled and constantly innovating new means of hurting potential enemies across the 'five domains' of land, sea, air, space and cyber.[10] As to 'NATO First', UKSF can provide 'exquisite sovereign support' for the projected Special Operations Task Force; choice of words is telling here, 'exquisite' being a current MoD buzz-term for capabilities which are cutting-edge but limited in quantity, making a virtue out of necessity after two decades of swingeing spending cuts and loss of tactical mass.

The 'Special Operations' forces will also form part of this Task Force, so we must now ponder what their role might be. This is currently unclear: there is no British Army or MoD definition of 'special operations' within the public domain and NATO's is imprecise, covering a broad range of units 'designated to undertake complex and dynamic security missions within the evolving strategic environment' some under command of service, theatre or even battlefield-level headquarters, contrasting with the explicitly national-strategic role of UKSF.[11]

Most prominent of these new units is the British Army's Special Operations Brigade, an evolution of the Specialist Infantry Group, formed in 2017 and intended clearly for 'strategic competition', consisting, as it did, of five teams of officer and non-commissioned officer instructors, each drawn from a single Infantry regiment, tasked with advanced training and mentoring for the infantry of friendly armies in regions important to British interests. In 2021, the Specialist Infantry was reformed into a new unit, The Ranger Regiment, now the core of the Special Operations Brigade. The Rangers identify themselves explicitly as a 'land special operations regiment, operating and fighting by all means alongside partners world-wide'; each battalion is assigned to 'operate overtly or discreetly in complex, high-risk environments, taking on some tasks traditionally done by Special Forces' in a specific geopolitical region (1 and 3 Battalions in Europe). Such operations form part of 'the emergent competition between states and with non-state actors over international rules and norms' – the language of 'Global Britain' rather than 'NATO First'.[12] The Special Operations Brigade is intended to fight as well as train, Rangers being expected, under many circumstances, to go beyond mentoring partner forces into escorting them into combat and, significantly, 'gathering information to inform targeting'; to expedite this, each battalion now incorporates a conventionally-organised Gurkha company for infantry support, and the Brigade also includes 1 (Special Operations) Squadron from the Honourable Artillery Company, a British Army Reserves unit specializing in deep reconnaissance and target acquisition for long-range artillery and tactical airpower, something identified explicitly as a key Brigade role but also done by 22 SAS in the past.[13]

The Rangers have deployed 691 times in their first three years and report some of these missions delivering valuable political influence and intelligence in the regions concerned.[14] They now lie at the heart of an ambitious project to expand the British Army's 'land special operations' capabilities as part of Operation *Mobilise*.[15] The British Army has adopted a doctrine for the conventional battle of 'recce strike', in which the main effort consists of advanced surveillance assets locating enemy forces for strikes by air, artillery and missiles at long range and deep into their rear areas; in announcing this new doctrine in 2023, the Army made it explicit that 'The Ranger Regiment and Special Operations Brigade will play key roles in this new approach to finding the enemy as far forward as possible and neutralising the threat' and they have since practiced long range patrolling

alongside European NATO SOF in exercises in Scandinavia and the Baltic.[16] Significantly, the British Army's 11 Brigade, previously the Security Force Assistance Brigade and intended to train allies in non-combat situations, is also being restructured as a 'recce strike force' and, indeed, 'the Land Special Operations Force's fighting formation' making extensive use of drone and AI technology alongside four regular infantry battalions with specialist training.[17] Both brigades remain explicitly Army assets, falling under Headquarters Field Army, which oversees the generation and planning of UK land operations.

The Royal Marines are also moving into 'special operations.' 3 Commando Brigade, their core formation, was redesignated the Commando Force in 2022 and in line with the Future Commando Concept of 2021, its two main component units, 40 and 45 Commandos, which previously 'ground held' at battalion strength, now operate independent 'Strike Companies' – three per Commando - as part of two Royal Navy Littoral Response Groups (LRGs). The LRGs are amphibious task forces intended to 'pre-empt and deter sub-threshold activity, and counter state threats' in key regions, LRG North in the NATO region and LRG South in the rest of the world – fundamentally 3 Commando Brigade's old role as 'out of area' intervention force but more focused and on a smaller scale.[18] However, like the Rangers, the Strike Companies are also training in deep patrolling and targeting, in their case focusing on hostile anti-access/area denial (A2AD) systems in key littoral areas or maritime chokepoints. The LRGs are part of the Fleet, the Commander Littoral Strike Group, a Royal Marines major general, reporting to the Director UK Strike Force, a rear admiral overseeing Royal Navy forces deployed operationally.

So, it seems that the British Army and Royal Marines are gravitating strongly towards having their own 'Special Operations Forces', possibly another stage in the apparent evolution of the Army in particular towards a 'boutique' force offering a range of 'exquisite' capabilities alongside allies supplying the mass. However, these are not 'Special Forces' in the British sense of the term and how their activities will be deconflicted with UKSF remains unclear.

What they might be up to already...

Further points of discussion arising from the SDR's chapter on UKSF include what they might be doing already. For reasons obvious already, the UK MoD's only response to enquiries about current UKSF deployments is an unyielding 'no comment', operational details sometimes remaining highly classified for years afterwards. Nevertheless, UKSF's alleged involvement in Ukraine may provide a good example of 'implausible deniability', particularly given the UK Government's very hard line against Russia and a trickle of open-source indications that UKSF and British 'Special Operations' forces are, indeed, working there. Ranger Teams deployed to Ukraine in early 2022 to train Ukrainian troops with the NLAW anti-tank guided missiles, which proved so effective against Russian armour in the opening battles of the invasion, but withdrew a few weeks beforehand on direct orders from Downing Street. However, other British troops stayed on: in January 2022, with the invasion looming, 45 Commando helped evacuate the British Embassy from Kyiv and then, in April, as reported by Lieutenant General Sir Robert Magowan, Deputy Chief of the UK Defence Staff and former Commandant General, Royal Marines, returned to help re-establish the British mission and, more cryptically, 'support other discreet military operations in a hugely sensitive environment and with a high level of political and military risk'.[19] In March 2023, leaked US government documents suggested at least fifty UKSF were operating inside Ukraine, the largest of several NATO SF contingents allegedly assisting the Ukrainian military and in December a Polish journalist reported encountering British and Polish SF near Bucha.[20] A year later, in an interview with Associated Press, General Bryan Fenton, Commanding General of US Special Operations Command, reported that SOCOM was learning about the war in Ukraine 'mostly through the eyes of our UK special operations [sic] partners.'[21] Finally, responding to Russian media accusations, in early 2024, the then Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, admitted there were British military personnel on the ground 'supporting the armed forces of Ukraine' but in small numbers with no plans for any major deployment.[22]

Conclusions and Caveats

Presuming UKSF *are* working with Ukrainian forces – most likely training Ukrainian troops and reporting on the efficacy of British-supplied equipment - they are playing their part already in the UK's new 'NATO First' defence strategy and possibly a very effective one, supporting a close friend, testing concepts and learning from the war the hard way. This might also provide a good indication of the ongoing strategic usefulness of Special Forces in general, in that they allow discreet and sometimes highly impactful military intervention with reduced risk of escalation, no mean thing when confronting an aggressive, expansionist regime with the world's biggest nuclear arsenal.

One possible caveat, however, is whether this is repeatable elsewhere. Sustaining a Special Forces deployment to Ukraine could be easy: operators could enter overland, via Poland and western Ukraine, be supplied via that route, and would work alongside a friendly government. Things might be more complicated without such routes or basing nearby. Until 2023, UKSF had dedicated long-range airlift courtesy of C-130 Hercules of RAF No.47 Squadron, invaluable to special operators in that they could lift sixty troops rigged for parachuting or twenty tonnes of supplies out to ranges of over 3,000 km and operate from rough airstrips in undeveloped territory. There is no indication these have

been replaced, apparently leaving UKSF reliant on allies or non-specialised Royal Air Force support for long-range airlift in less accessible theatres.

What to do with the various 'Special Operations Forces' is also problematic. Products of a previous, less urgent strategic paradigm, they are having to reorient rapidly to 'NATO first' and a new era of conventional warfare. Nevertheless, it could be argued that with The Rangers and Future Commando Force, the 'Special Operations' label is an unfortunate misnomer, obfuscating capabilities which are not SF but still valuable strategically. They are deployable rapidly in cases of trouble flaring up somewhere, and their training and role could make them useful for extended 'remote warfare' operations alongside local proxies, similar to NATO and Arab Special Forces in Libya in 2011 or Emirati Special Forces in Yemen after 2015, releasing UKSF for more urgent or delicate missions demanding covertness and deniability.[23] Moreover, through building the capabilities of British allies, the Rangers in particular can enhance the value of those alliances to both sides while signalling British commitment and intent downstream of impending crises, so playing a critical part in UK defence strategy into the 2030s, but as 'Specialist Infantry Plus', rather than 'SF-Lite'.

However, there is a shadow hanging over UKSF right now - the ongoing Inquiry, presided over by Lord Justice Haddon-Cave, investigating allegations that UKSF members committed unlawful killings in Afghanistan in 2010. This runs concurrently with the Northern Ireland Coroner's ruling that soldiers of 22 SAS were 'not justified' in killing three members of the Irish Republican Army in an ambush at Clonoe in Northern Ireland in 1992, and the stream of further allegations of unlawful conduct it has set off. These cases are *sub judice* at the time of writing, but could strengthen demands for UKSF to face greater Parliamentary scrutiny, possibly via a Select Committee similar to the one overseeing Intelligence.[24] Given the potential for security breaches and increased hostile scrutiny, this may have a freezing effect on future UKSF deployments and could alter the relationship between the Directorate and its political masters. This would be handled better in a separate paper once these cases are resolved, but it is worth noting that, given their high status with the British public, no serious Prime Minister would want to impose collective punishment on Britain's Special Forces and besides, they are too valuable as national assets to do this too severely if at all.[25]

Whatever comes next, UKSF remain a vital asset for missions of national importance, high urgency and high political sensitivity and a most efficacious way of keeping the UK globally relevant.

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[8] Chapter 7.8 of 2025 Strategic Defence Review, p.126

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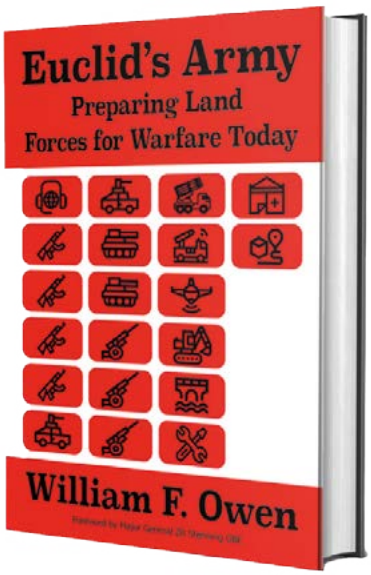

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How the Congolese Wazalendo Illustrate the Importance of Strategy

Jonathan R. Beloff - Center for Global Affairs, New York University

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Introduction[1]

Since November 2021[2], the reinvented Mouvement du 23 Mars (M23) rebel force continues to dominate large swaths of territory in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Despite the best efforts of the Congolese military, the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC), and other international forces[3], the M23 continues to control and expand its territorial holdings. Their strategy comprises combating the DRC's government, under

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President Felix Tshisekedi, in eastern DRC in response to what many within the M23 perceive as Congolese policies that violate past peace agreements, along with attacks against the minority groups, the Banyarwanda and the Banyamulenge.[4] At the time of writing[5], these anti-M23 forces have largely been ineffective in stopping the rebels' advancements. This led to the creation of the Wazalendo, loosely translated as 'patriots' in Swahili, in November 2022.[6] While the size of this new force varies, it is estimated to contain between 20,000 and 30,000 fighters.[7]

Unlike conventional forces such as the FARDC, the Wazalendo comprises irregular forces, often including a wide range of different rebels, many of whom have their own strategic goals. Within this new force are the Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo (APCLS), Nduma Défense of Congo-Renovated (NDC-R), the Collective of Movements for Change (CMC) and localised Mai-Mai community forces.[8] These forces had at times historically fought against each other, but now work together alongside the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), who seek a return to Rwanda to reignite the Genocide against the Tutsi, often known as the Rwandan Genocide.[9] The introduction of this coalition of rebels raises questions about military oversight[10], human rights abuses[11] and, as this article focuses on, the strategic lessons about the use of rebel forces in warfare.

This article focuses less on the politics and human rights abuses of the Wazalendo and instead attempts to situate the military actors' failures within the framework of strategic theory. Despite initial hopes by the Congolese government that the Wazalendo could supplement the FARDC in its fight, the Wazalendo has largely failed to do so. President Tshisekedi misunderstood the importance of how more military actors, such as irregular fighters, do not necessarily lead to better results. The irregular force's inability to stop the M23 is a result of a misunderstanding of strategic theory. As discussed in a previous article,[12] the FARDC's war against the M23 remains ineffective due to a poor understanding of strategy. The political failures within the Congolese strategy can best be explained by M.L.R. Smith's assertion that, "[strategy is] concerned with the ways in which available means can be employed to reach desired ends."[13] Beyond the Congolese government's vague objectives of defeating the M23, there is little clarity about what constitutes an *end*, given the Congolese history of conflict[14] and the interests of the different military actors. Within the context of Wazalendo, its failure to combat the M23 stems from a misunderstanding of the role of irregular actors in warfare, problems with operational art at the operational level, and the broader failure of policy found within strategy. The continued Congolese failure of public policy is important for understanding the shortcomings of the FARDC, Wazalendo, and its allies, as strategy is the continuation of policy.[15] Thus, poor policy leads to a doomed strategy.[16]

Strategic Theory and Irregular Forces

Smith cautions against creating artificial divisions between conventional and irregular warfare.[17] Bucking against the trend of the early 2000s response to the September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda attacks, he warns not only against confusing tactics, such as terrorism, with strategy[18], but also against how we perceive military actors. The division between irregular and conventional forces should perhaps best be understood as a recent phenomenon. The magnitude of World War II influences our perceptions of military might and hinders our understanding of how irregular forces should be seen as just as legitimate as conventional forces.[19] Irregular or nonstate military actors often are seen as holding political doctrine, often focusing on revolutionary or Marxist beliefs, along with different warfare tactics such as ambush, small-scale ambushes, roadside bombings and assassination.

However, Smith argues against this notion and instead suggests that all militaries, whether irregular or conventional, use similar tactics at a different scale. Conventional and irregular forces will often share similar *ends*, differing only in their *ways* and *means*. Even the tactics, i.e. the ways, were at times similar. Nevertheless, the two operated within the same public policy and leadership. Stephen Biddle writes in great detail about nonstate warfare, highlighting the different roles and responsibilities between conventional and irregular warfare.[20] Specifically, he argues that the artificial separation between the two actors leads to a misunderstanding of strategy, which can be problematic in conducting and understanding warfare.[21]

Carl von Clausewitz describes how irregular military actors, including populist fronts such as the *Volkskrieg*, can be beneficial in defensive strategy but not in waging a full-scale offensive war.[22] This description is a significant aspect of understanding the Wazalendo problem. The loose confederation of various rebel forces that joined to combat the M23 comprises a multitude of actors, each with its own strategic *ends*. It is the Mai-Mai, which were created during the Second Congo War (1998-2003)[23], that follows Clausewitz's concept of popular war the best. However, they are not alone; others contain a wide range of military objects. While the Congolese government has denied any connection to it[24], the FDLR's inclusion within the Wazalendo introduces a new anti-Tutsi sentiment, including attacks against the Banyarwanda and Banyamulenge, an objective beyond fighting the M23. Other incorporated rebel groups have their own strategic goals and interests. The significance of Wazalendo's loose confederation, which contains conflicting objectives, raises questions about its relationship with the FARDC.

The Wazalendo do not fit within the same framework as a revolutionary military rebelling against a foreign entity, but rather as a paid force created only after the Congolese government realised the true extent of the FARDC's

failures. Their military motivations to fight the M23 and the local Banyarwanda and Banyamulenge populations do not hide the ways they treat civilian populations, which at first might seem to focus more on being a gang of robbers. Nevertheless, they should still be seen as a political actor rather than just a brigand, given their military agreements not only with the FARDC but also their political ones with the Tshisekedi regime. There are multiple cases of Wazalendo's banditry, but their primary purpose in being created continues to be combating the M23. Despite their initial military motivations, they are often disconnected from, or even in contention with, the FARDC's operational art, as described later. Thus, despite what can best be described as similar *ends* between the two military actors, the lack of coordination leads the Wazalendo to fall outside Clausewitz's description of effective military actors, as they are more likely to be destructive and, at times, uncontrollable.

Scholars in strategic theory might argue against the division between conventional and irregular forces. However, the Wazalendo fall beyond this divide as they provide little in terms of military benefit, as seen in their inability to stop the M23[25], their conduct of human rights abuses[26] or their participation in the illegal mineral trade[27]. Fundamentally, the Congolese government's decision to add yet another actor to its war against the M23 illustrates a military and strategic fallacy: the assumption that additional forces can override poor strategy. The Wazalendo, as an ill-thought-out military force, becomes even more noticeable at the operational level. Specifically, how Wazalendo's *operational-level tactics* often disrupt supplies from reaching the FARDC's conventional forces.

Wazalendo, FARDC and the Operational Level

Another aspect of Wazalendo's ineffectiveness can be found at the operational level. It can be difficult to provide a succinct definition of the operational level in strategic theory. The operational level focuses on implementing strategy, sitting between strategy and tactics.[28] Colin Gray describes the operational level as, "combinations of purposefully linked military engagements…Operations are strategy as action."[29] B.A. Friedman disagrees with Colin Gray's definition and instead suggests that he is describing operational art.[30] Operational art, as defined by Colin Gray, is "Operational art, then, can be seen as translating strategic imperatives into tactical actions in the physical world."[31] However, Milan Vego characterises it more as providing the mechanisms before, during and after a military operation.[32] This includes planning, resourcing and conducting specific battles in support of a campaign's objectives.[33] It follows Clausewitz's indirect definition of operational art as "preparations for war."[34] The role of operational art in strategy is significant, as it encompasses the elements necessary for any tactic and military operation to successfully fulfil strategic goals.

The FARDC, the DRC's conventional army, already suffers from inconsistencies, a lack of supplies and morale, as well as logistical issues in its fight against the M23. The outsourcing of warfare to the Wazalendo creates problems not only on the battlefield, in terms of combat coordination with the FARDC, but also logistical challenges at the operational level. How can the FARDC properly formulate operations and decide tactics when the Wazalendo have relatively free range to conduct military operations that could support or hinder the Congolese conventional forces? African conflict researchers Judith Verweijen and Michel Thill write, "Most Wazalendo groups are allowed to roam around freely and have dramatically expanded their zones of influence and violent systems of revenue generation."[35] This indicates that the Wazalendo are not contributing effectively to combating the M23.

In an attempt to combat the M23 following the FARDC's failures, President Tshisekedi and his government provided funding, weaponry and assistance to the Wazalendo.[36] However, they seemingly ignore how the existing FARDC's operational level and art are riddled with problems, as seen both historically during operations against other Congolese rebels[37] and in the current operations against the M23.[38] Rather than addressing these issues, President Tshisekedi's government instead formulated yet another military actor, the Wazalendo. This decision seemingly follows the belief that more combatants, i.e., overwhelming the enemy, means a greater chance of victory. As Clausewitz writes, "It thus follows that as many troops as possible should be brought into the engagement at the decisive point."[39] However, its addition only increases the likelihood that the fog of war[40] will negatively impact the FARDC's forces fighting the M23. The lack of operational control and planning leads to internal fighting between the FARDC and the Wazalendo as seen in the Battle for Uvira[41], a town in eastern DRC. Between February 15 and 17, 2025, Wazalendo forces and the FARDC engaged in combat. The reason these two forces fell into conflict, according to the allegations, was the distribution of military equipment.[42] This infighting led to the M23 later encircling the town[43] and to rumours of a possible anti-Banyamulenge pogrom[44]. Military supplies directed towards the Wazalendo not only undermine the FARDC's morale but also create opportunities for additional corruption.[45]

Ideally, civilian and military leaders are supposed to be able to control the soldiers under their command through compliance.[46] However, controlling the Wazalendo has become a significant challenge.[47] The Battle for Uvira illustrates how the Wazalendo, at times, will ignore the government's direction or *end* the fight against the M23 to pursue their own interests and goals beyond their military mandate. Their actions raise questions about whether the Congolese government can fully control the rebels.

In Wazalendo-held territory, many began collecting tolls, taxes and extorting mines from the illegal mineral trade.

[48] These decisions and actions are often the responsibility of the state government rather than a rebel force, but the lack of clear direction on strategy and accountability shapes how the rebel group pursues its own strategic ends, which might differ from those of President Tshisekedi's government. Their actions create a political headache for President Tshisekedi, as he has seemingly ceded state responsibilities to these relatively uncontrollable forces. There are also internal problems with monitoring and organising the Wazalendo, as it comprises different rebel forces with their own structures.[49] These internal hierarchies and structures create additional confusion at the operational level regarding supply, ranks, and logistics. During the Second Congo War, it was typical for rebel forces to control large swaths of territory.[50] Its continuation illustrates how President Tshisekedi and his forces wish to retain power, even if they lose control of other parts of the country to the Wazalendo. He is relying on their numbers and abilities to defeat the M23. His desire follows Isabelle Dyvesteyn's comment that, "control can only be achieved by physical occupation and such an occupation requires a large number of troops."[51] But it fails to reconcile with Clausewitz's warnings about the consequences of ignoring the friction between the "real war and war on paper."[52] The Wazalendo are not simply a new reserve force to aid the FARDC in combating the M23. Rather, they are an independent force that hinders the FARDC's operational capabilities. A primary reason the Congolese government failed to rein in and properly direct the Wazalendo stems from an unclear policy, which is critical to enact an effective strategy in any war.

Rebels cannot fix broken policy

Clausewitz provides warnings about the repetition of history. Specifically, he emphasises the importance of understanding history when critically analysing war.[53] It is through understanding history that military or political leaders can appropriately decide the course of action, whether that be in terms of policy, strategy or tactics. For the DRC, history appears to be in a state of repetition, as even Congolese scholar Jason Stearns refers to this notion in the subtitle of his second book, "The Unending Conflict in the Congo."[54] While Jason Stearns refers to the constant of Congolese instability, it can also be interpreted as the continued failure of the Congolese government's strategy since the end of the Second Congo War to establish control and peace. As discussed in a previous article[55], the primary failure of President Tshisekedi's government against the M23 has been its inability to construct a clear and coherent strategy to not only defeat the eastern Congolese rebel force but to establish a new environment that is not a breeding ground for the more than 120 existing rebel forces[56] in the country. Fundamentally, without a clear policy and thus strategy, rebel groups such as the Wazalendo will pursue the most effective *ways* to reach their desired *end*, even if that contradicts Congolese policy and strategy.

Since the M23's return, the Congolese government has failed to foster the appropriate policies that its military, the FARDC, could base a strategy on. This is critically important, as failures in public policy will lead to a lack of a clear strategy in warfare.[57] Clausewitz perhaps provides a warning about the role of politics, as all military strategy is political in nature and a continuation of public policy.[58] The lack of a clear strategy creates confusion about how military actors implement their *ways* and *means* to achieve *ends* that are ill-defined by public policy. Smith warns that "strategy is concerned with the ways in which available means are employed in order to achieve desired ends."[59] President Tshisekedi's regime has yet to establish a clear *end* to not just defeating the M23 rebellion but also to over a hundred others, which all detract from the Congolese government's authority.

Additionally, the M23 is just the reincarnation of past rebel groups, such as the Congrès National Pour la Défense du People (CNDP) in the late 2000s, which was historically linked to the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD-Goma) during the Second Congo War.[60] Each of these incarnations pursued a similar strategic *objective*: protecting the Banyarwanda and, to a lesser extent, the Banyamulenge. However, questions do arise about the M23's intentions to protect these Congolese minority groups[61]; its involvement in the illegal mineral trade[62] and in conducting human rights abuses[63]. Nevertheless, the M23's current political and military leadership appears, unlike its early 2010 incarnation, to be more focused on fulfilling its strategic *goal* of protecting the Banyarwanda and Banyamulenge populations in eastern DRC through effective *means* to stop the FARDC, and other forces[64] , including the Wazalendo forces.

For the Congolese government, its deficits in developing clear policy and strategy greatly affect its military might. The Wazalendo illustrates how strategic ambiguity can lead to those fighting to reorient their efforts towards their own *ends* rather than those desired by policymakers. The addition of the Wazalendo to the warfare in eastern DRC should not be seen as a way to solve the crisis. Rather, it will likely be ineffective or, as seen during the Battle of Uvira, create even greater problems for the conventional FARDC forces that inadvertently aid the M23. The lesson learned from the FARDC's current failure to defeat the M23 also applies to the Wazalendo: "With the FARDC's inability to enact the policy and strategy through tactics and operations, the Congolese government must reconsider its policies."[65] Fundamentally, without a clear strategy, military forces will inevitably fail. President Tshisekedi and his government must focus less on the *means* of fighting the M23, i.e., the introduction of the Wazalendo, and instead focus on how to achieve the *end* of the instability in eastern DRC. This includes a political way forward with the M23, as well as advancing political, economic, and social development. Clausewitz's description of war as a continuation of politics[66] applies to all wars, including in eastern DRC.

The failure to develop a clear strategy to defeat the enemy requires the construction of new politics and public policy.

Conclusion

The war raging in eastern DRC is an example of the difference between a coherent and a muddled strategy. The M23's operational successes are primarily due to its leadership, which focused on crafting a clear strategy to promote its interests. Their level of success is undeniable, despite some international human rights actors trying to trivialise the M23 as little more than a puppet force of the Rwandan military.[67] It might be argued that the attempt to reduce the M23 as composing elements of the Rwandan military stems from a misunderstanding of military strength. As Smith notes, warfare often involves a weaker and a stronger side, and being a rebel force does not inherently mean they are the weaker side.[68] The FARDC's failure to defeat the M23 led to the creation of another rebel group, the Wazalendo, composed of multiple other rebel movements. Despite President Tshisekedi's hope that this new force will help combat the M23, the Wazalendo's relative ineffectiveness stems from a broader lack of strategy. Essentially, the Wazalendo offers a crucial understanding of strategy, highlighting that the emergence of new military actors cannot compensate for a lack of coherent objectives grounded in policy. In fact, this proliferation will worsen the state's strategic incoherence.

The Wazalendo does not fit within Clausewitz's explanation of the *Volkskrieg*, or popular front, as it is not composed of a single force attempting to fulfil a strategic *end*. Rather, it is a coalition of various rebel forces, many of which have their own interests and may or may not align with the Congolese government. The Wazalendo's internal dynamics are not the only concern, as their inclusion in battles against the M23 creates confusion and even hostility at the operational level between the Wazalendo and the FARDC. This lack of clarity about the Congolese government's strategic goal for the eastern region is evident in the military losses suffered by the FDLR, FARDC, and Wazalendo at the hands of the M23. The Congolese government must understand the key themes and warnings inherent in strategic theory if there is any hope for its victory. If not, the M23's clear strategy will continue to succeed.

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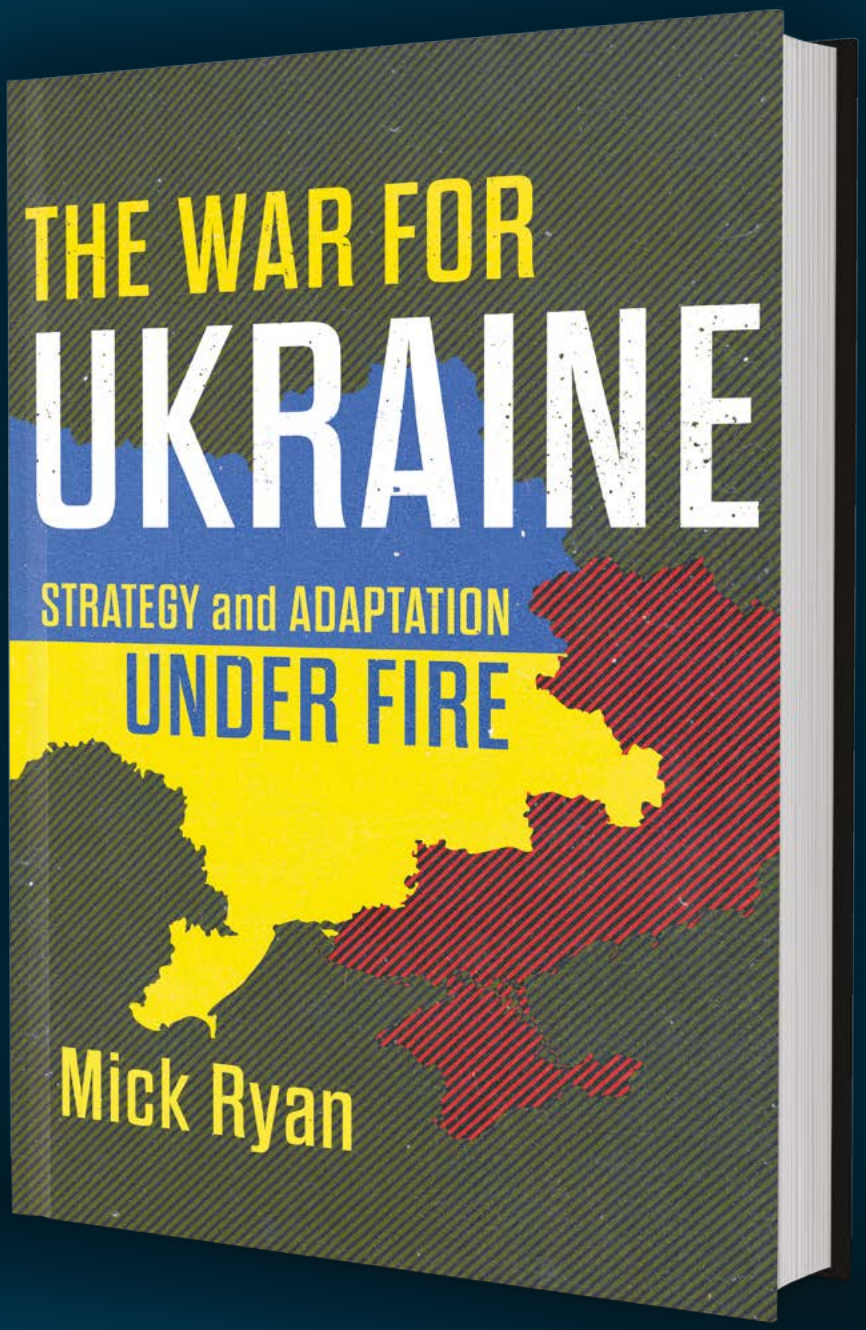

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Informational Coercion and the Defense of Democracy

Gonzalo Javier Rubio Piñeiro - National University of Lanús

About the author

Major (Ret.) Gonzalo Javier Rubio Piñeiro is a former Argentine Army artillery and intelligence officer who served with KFOR in Kosovo and with MINUSTAH in Haiti; he now lectures on defense and geopolitics at the National University of Lanús.

This article argues that contemporary digital manipulation constitutes a form of informational coercion aimed at constraining the freedom of action of democratic states by shaping political costs, social cohesion, and strategic will. It contends that Western democracies can counter such coercion effectively only through an integrated, campaign-based approach—combining regulation, platform governance, civic resilience, and international cooperation—while preserving democratic legitimacy, which remains their central strategic vulnerability.

Introduction

Modern warfare rarely begins on the day it is announced. In many cases, it starts much earlier, in places that don't appear on maps and in conversations that haven't yet taken place. This was the case in Crimea in 2014, when the incursion of armed men without insignia took the world by surprise, although the real offensive had begun

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weeks earlier, in another domain: that of perception. The local population was subjected to a constant barrage of messages designed to erode their trust in Kyiv, to inflate pro-Russian sentiment, and to instill the idea of a divided and threatened collective identity. The West observed this with the confusion of someone who recognizes a pattern but can't yet name it. And as often happens when strategy sheds its skin, it understood what was happening too late. The peninsula fell, Russian forces consolidated their positions, and, in retrospect, it became clear that the military operation had been only the visible phase of a campaign whose first blow had been informational.

This logic resurfaced with greater intensity in 2022. For months, as satellites revealed the buildup of Russian forces around Ukraine, Europe was silently subjected to systematic pressure: destabilizing messages about energy costs, questioning the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government, insinuations that NATO was responsible for the crisis, warnings about the irreversible economic damage that sanctions would cause, and a constant discourse aimed at fracturing cohesion among European states. By the time the armored vehicles finally crossed the border, the continent's population had already been hit by another kind of fire: one aimed at their willingness to respond.

Defining Informational Coercion in Strategic Terms

Understanding this phenomenon requires starting with the doctrinal definition of strategy as formulated by *Military Strategy Magazine*: The direction and use—or the threat of use—of force in the service of political objectives.[1] Information, even when it lacks mass and volume, influences that direction.[2] It can intensify the use of force, delay it, justify it, or prevent it. It can shape a government's perception of the situation, alter the political climate upon which a coalition rests, raise the electoral cost of making a decision, or even generate inaction.

Sun Tzu foresaw, *"the supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting."* In the classical strategic tradition, information is part of "preparing the battlefield" before military force is deployed. Modifying the cognitive environment—perception, morale, cohesion, political calculation—precedes and conditions any operation. This explains why contemporary actors seek to shape will and risk assessment before an open confrontation occurs.

For this reason, the information manipulation relevant to strategists is not that which merely deceives or distorts, but rather that which alters the relationship between ends, ways, and means—Arthur Lykke's classic triad.[3] When disinformation increases the political cost of action, reduces the diplomatic room for maneuver, or weakens the social cohesion necessary to sustain an operation, it directly interferes with the ways in which a state seeks to achieve its ends. And if it also affects the centers of gravity—political legitimacy, social cohesion,[4] morale, and international credibility—then it ceases to be a communication phenomenon and becomes an instrument of coercion.[5]

The Chinese armed forces have systematized this logic in the concept of *cognitive warfare*, where the primary objective is not to destroy material capabilities but to alter the adversary's interpretation of reality: their confidence, cohesion, and strategic judgment. Under this vision, competition begins long before conflict and is geared toward influencing how a population perceives risks, threats, and legitimacy, anticipating the use of physical force.

In 2014, during the annexation of Crimea, this coercion sought to neutralize the Ukrainian government's capacity to act and reduce Western willingness to intervene. In 2022, the strategy was broadened: it aimed to fracture the European response, anticipate protests, influence perceptions about the energy cost of sanctions, increase social anxiety, and portray Ukrainian resistance as unsustainable. Information, like any weapon, had a specific objective: to influence decisions.

Western strategic theory possesses another fundamental principle for understanding this scenario: the distinction between ends, ways, and means. The end of a democracy, in this context, is to maintain its freedom of action, uphold its institutions, and preserve its capacity to make decisions under pressure. The methods consist of deterring, undermining, exposing, and absorbing hostile campaigns. The means encompass regulation, technological capabilities, civic education, intelligence, and international cooperation.

However, none of these variables is effective unless they are integrated into a campaign. And a campaign—as Clausewitz teaches—requires identifying the enemy's center of gravity, but also one's own. In democracies, that center is legitimacy. This means that any response must be proportionate, transparent, and compatible with the rule of law; otherwise, defense becomes internal aggression and erodes what it seeks to protect.

The strategic problem for the West is twofold. On the one hand, it must deny the aggressor any advantages, hindering its ability to use informational dominance as a weapon of political and social control. On the other hand, it must prevent this defense from compromising civil liberties, pluralism, or institutional trust. This dual mission demands an extremely delicate balance between effectiveness and legitimacy.

To measure this balance, clear success criteria are required. The first is the increase in costs for the aggressor, which in Western doctrine is called deterrence by Denial: preventing the hostile operation from achieving its intended effect.

The second is maintaining legitimacy, ensuring that all responses adhere to legal frameworks and are subject to parliamentary oversight. The third is the continuity of military and diplomatic operations, meaning that the opposing narrative does not undermine the state's capacity for action. The fourth is social resilience, understood as the time it takes a society to recover from a hostile campaign.[6]

These doctrinal foundations allow us to organize the analysis: digital manipulation is not an accident of modern communication, but a strategic instrument that, by altering ends, ways, and means, modifies risk and cost calculations, influences political will and reconfigures the balance between force, legitimacy and collective cohesion.[7]

Recent history shows that this is not hypothetical.

It is real. And it operates before, during, and after conventional conflicts.

From Isolated Measures to a Western Strategic Framework

When Europe began to understand that information manipulation was not a scattered phenomenon but an instrument of coercion, it began to examine its institutional responses with new eyes. Until then, each element—regulation, platforms, media literacy, international cooperation—existed as an isolated compartment, more akin to a collection of policies than a strategy. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of 2022 revealed that this approach was insufficient; democracies had to think in terms of campaigns, not isolated measures. It was then that the four lines of Western operation began to be reorganized under a doctrinal logic that connected means and ends within a coherent framework.

The first of these lines of action, though often perceived as bureaucratic or unrelated to military matters, was regulation. Regulation doesn't appear in classic strategy manuals, but in a digital environment, it becomes an instrument designed to increase the adversary's cost. Not because bureaucracy is a weapon in itself, but because it establishes a set of conditions that force hostile actors to operate with friction. Risk management, content traceability, mandatory audits, obligatory transparency, and the legal responsibilities of platforms function as obstacles that degrade an actor's ability to flood the information space with content designed to influence critical decisions.

This link between regulation and coercion became evident after the 2022 Russian invasion. When the European Union restricted the distribution of RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik, it did not do so for editorial or aesthetic reasons.[8] It did so because it understood that these media outlets functioned as operational arms of the Russian state and as mechanisms of narrative saturation designed to manipulate perceptions at a time of high political vulnerability. The decision was superficially interpreted by some as censorship, but in essence, it constituted a strategic maneuver: to deprive the aggressor of a vector that contributed to its coercive campaign.[9] In doctrinal terms, this amounted to a mechanism of negation. The restriction did not seek to impose a narrative, but rather to prevent a hostile actor from conditioning the decision-making space of European democracies.

The Digital Services Act deepened that same approach with even greater sophistication. The initial narrative of the DSA presented it as a regulation of digital markets, but its implementation in 2023 revealed its strategic potential: the Very large online platforms were required to assess systemic risks, document how they mitigate harmful content, reduce artificial amplification, ensure advertising transparency, and submit to scrutiny by the European Commission. [10] These obligations are, in practice, mechanisms designed to increase the adversary's operating costs. If a hostile actor wants to saturate the information space, it must now do so in an environment where every step leaves a trace, where certain behaviors trigger mitigation obligations, where uncontrolled amplification is met with automated mechanisms that slow it down, and where the most effective channels are under regulatory oversight. [11] [12] This architecture generates friction, and friction, in strategy, is a form of deterrence. But not deterrence through punishment; rather, the kind known as deterrence by denial: to prevent the adversary from obtaining results.

At the same time, the second line of operation—the platforms—acquired a central role in democratic defense. Initially, states treated the platforms as neutral actors providing digital infrastructure. But with the evolution of hostile campaigns, it became clear that this infrastructure was both part of the problem and part of the solution. A recommendation system is not neutral: it determines what the population sees, in what sequence, at what speed, and under what emotional context. When a hostile actor seeks to saturate a debate, it needs platforms to offer expedited channels. When saturation is blocked by measures such as downranking, the slowing down of potentially harmful content, ad tracking, or the verification of political campaigns, the operation loses effectiveness. It is a tactical dispute within a space where speed, volume, and repetition are essential variables.

But for this defense to be legitimate, it cannot rely on spontaneous decisions by private companies. The democratic state has the responsibility to establish the aims, principles, and safeguards. This article makes this clear: these actions must be subordinate to explicit political objectives, regularly audited, integrated within

frameworks such as the DSA, and subject to judicial review.[13] Otherwise, they risk eroding the democratic center of gravity. Therefore, the actions of these platforms—even if they have tactical impact—must be understood as a means and never as an end. Ends belong to the political domain, not the algorithmic one.

The third line of operation, far less visible but probably more important in the long run, is civic resilience. Information wars not only seek to weaken political decisions but also to damage the emotional and perceptual structure of societies. To this end, they exploit divisions, polarization, economic anxiety, cultural resentments, and technological uncertainty. In the years following 2014, Eurobarometer surveys recorded a sustained increase in the proportion of Europeans who believed they were regularly exposed to disinformation.[14] This perception is itself a symptom of vulnerability, but also a warning sign. When the population feels it is under attack, democracy must respond by strengthening its cognitive capacity, its ability to detect deception, its critical thinking, and its understanding of how the digital environment works.

Media literacy is not, as it is sometimes presented, a school program without strategic consequences. It is part of the preparation for cognitive theater. Just as in a military campaign, the terrain is prepared, routes analyzed, lines secured, and contingencies anticipated; in the information domain, literacy creates a population less susceptible to emotional saturation, less prone to falling into narrative traps, better prepared to recognize adversarial patterns, and more capable of recovering after a hostile operation.[15] This article uses a concept invaluable for its precision: resilience as recovery time. That is the real strategic metric. How long does it take a society to rebalance its perception after an information attack? The shorter that time, the harder it is for the aggressor to sustain its effects.[16] [17]

The fourth line of operation, cooperation and intelligence, extends defense from the national scale to the international sphere. Digital manipulation knows no borders. A hostile actor can operate from a remote region, use servers in third countries, coordinate from multiple jurisdictions, and disseminate content in different languages to target specific communities. The only way to counter this is with a cooperative network that matches or exceeds the adversary's mobility. Structures like East StratCom or the NATO StratCom COE exist precisely for this purpose.[18] They enable the detection of common patterns, the attribution of operations, the sharing of analyses, the coordination of fact-based narratives, and the prevention of states acting in isolation.[19] [20] Without that cooperation, each country would react on its own, opening gaps that the adversary could exploit.

These four lines of action—regulation, platforms, resilience, and cooperation—do not operate in isolation. They are cogs in a strategic machine. Each generates particular effects, but they only acquire real value when they function as a campaign. This article emphasizes this point, and rightly so: democratic defense against hostile campaigns must be conceived as an operational structure, not as a collection of uncoordinated measures. It requires continuity, sequence, evaluation, legitimacy, and coherence between means and ends.

Recent evidence confirms this need. The European decision of March 2022 on RT and Sputnik shows how regulatory action can be integrated within a broader state response. The full implementation of the DSA in 2023 demonstrates how regulation can have an operational impact without infringing on democratic freedoms. Official reports reveal campaigns targeting electoral processes, media outlets, and ethnic minorities, with patterns that are repeated in multiple countries and can only be identified and neutralized through multinational cooperation.[21]

None of this is theoretical. It's all real and verifiable. What seemed like an academic hypothesis a decade ago is now an essential component of geopolitical competition.[22] And just as conventional warfare requires logistics, intelligence, and planning, information defense demands strategic regulation, responsible platforms, a resilient population, and allied cooperation. Recent history demonstrates this: no democratic state can defend itself alone in the information domain.

Risks and Limits of Democratic Information Defense

History demonstrates that every strategy, even the most well-designed, faces structural risks that can slowly erode democratic legitimacy if not anticipated. In the informational arena, these risks are especially acute because they develop in gray areas where the boundaries between security and freedom are fragile and, at times, ambiguous. The first risk, perhaps the most insidious, is the risk of losing legitimacy. A democracy can defend itself against external attacks, but if it does so with methods that appear arbitrary, opaque, or excessive, it risks destroying what it seeks to preserve. The response to digital manipulation can never devolve into covert censorship, nor can it become a mechanism that silences legitimate voices under the pretext of protecting the public. The strength of a democracy lies in its capacity to respond firmly, but with proportionality, clarity, and public accountability. If a measure cannot be openly explained, it cannot be strategically justified.

Alongside the issue of legitimacy, a second risk arises: the constant danger of the adversary's adaptation. Hostile actors change tactics, migrate between platforms, alter their amplification methods, and modify their targeting strategies to circumvent any barriers imposed upon them. A block can lead to a proliferation of encrypted channels; a transparency measure, to the expulsion of campaigns

targeting micro-influencers; a traceability requirement, to the outsourcing of content to intermediaries that are harder to track. Therefore, a democratic response cannot depend on a single instrument. It requires an intelligence system capable of observing patterns, not just isolated units of content; a system that can understand sequences, flows, circuits, amplification rhythms, and tactical shifts. Traceability, when exercised proportionally and under judicial oversight, must serve precisely this purpose: to identify behaviors, never to monitor citizens.

A third risk lies in the realm of strategic epistemology: the confusion between activity and effect. In the information domain, where numbers abound and platforms can produce massive metrics, there is a temptation to evaluate the effectiveness of policies by the amount of content removed, the number of labels applied, or the volume of reports processed.[23] However, these figures do not reveal whether societies have maintained cohesion, whether governments have retained freedom of action, or whether the aggressor has truly been prevented from achieving their aims. Strategy, in its strictest sense, demands that results be measured by real impacts and not by superficial indicators. This is why the doctrinal distinction between Measures of Performance and Measures of the effect is so crucial.[24] The former measures activity; the latter, strategic results. Only the latter allows us to know if a democracy has preserved what matters: operational continuity, social cohesion, recovery time, and political freedom to act without hostile constraints.[25]

There is also a more subtle, but no less relevant, risk: excessive dependence on private actors. When a society's information architecture relies on platforms that are not subject to direct democratic control, critical decisions can fall into the hands of entities that are not accountable to the public.[26] In some cases, this dependence can lead to regulatory capture, where corporate interests end up shaping the regulatory framework; in others, it can produce algorithmic biases that affect the visibility of certain content or the speed at which relevant information circulates. Only through independent audits, clear transparency obligations, data access agreements for public research, and rigorous legal oversight can this asymmetrical relationship be balanced.

Added to all this is a risk that lurks in any security debate: the temptation to over-securitize. When every public controversy is interpreted as a threat, democracy loses its ability to distinguish between legitimate criticism and hostile action. This confusion can lead to the militarization of public debate, the treatment of cultural differences as geopolitical risks, and the erosion of pluralism in the name of protection. To avoid this, the doctrine demands clear activation thresholds and a philosophy of minimal intervention: acting only when there is concrete evidence of strategic impact.

Operational Architecture for Democratic Information Defense

Once these risks are mapped, the fundamental operational question emerges: how should a democracy be organized to coherently confront these threats? This article offers a rich and profoundly articulated answer. It argues that information defense should adopt a structure similar to that of any operational architecture: one that includes inter-ministerial governance, clear lines of responsibility, specialized teams, mechanisms for continuous evaluation, and close coordination among regulation, technology, diplomacy, defense, and civic education.

Interministerial governance is essential because no single ministry, agency, or sector can encompass the entirety of the problem. Hostile operations cross the domains of security, justice, economic regulation, education, defense, foreign affairs, and digital platforms. Only a structure where all these actors converge can think in terms of campaigning, assign clear responsibilities, and ensure that available instruments are aligned with political objectives. This governance must operate under parliamentary oversight, publish regular reports, and maintain open channels of communication with the public to sustain legitimacy at all times.

The methodological aspect is equally crucial. The distinction between Measures of Performance and Measures of Effect, mentioned earlier as a risk of interpretation, also forms the basis for evaluating any information campaign. Democracies must know which actions truly serve to preserve resilience and freedom of action. A campaign can carry out thousands of interventions, but if none of them alter the adversary's ability to influence vital decisions, it will have achieved nothing. This is why this article insists on the need to establish clear success criteria and to create strategic analysis units capable of evaluating effects in an integrated manner. Among these teams, so-called red teams play an essential role, as they allow for anticipating vulnerabilities, simulating attacks, testing defenses, and correcting weaknesses before they can be exploited by hostile actors.

These teams are complemented by table-top exercises, which replicate possible scenarios and allow for the evaluation of inter-institutional coordination, response speed, the robustness of protocols, and the coherence of operational mechanisms. In times when the speed of information exceeds the capacity of states to process it, training the collective response is essential. These exercises allow for the detection of weaknesses that are invisible in calm times and strengthen preparedness for moments of crisis.

This article mentions another essential element: data access agreements. In an environment where information flows through private platforms that possess vast amounts

of data on social interactions, amplification patterns, and digital behavior, states require legal mechanisms that allow them to understand the space in which they operate. Not to monitor citizens, but to detect threats, anticipate hostile actions, and assess the impact of decisions. Without data access, any defense is, by definition, incomplete. And without legal safeguards protecting people's rights, such access becomes incompatible with democracy. A balance is only possible through regulatory frameworks like the DSA, external audits, strict protocols, and judicial oversight.

In an accelerated information environment, anticipation becomes key. That's why this article includes the need for advanced intelligence capabilities fueled by big data analytics and artificial intelligence. These tools, when used within the ethical and legal boundaries of a democracy, allow for the detection of patterns, the attribution of operations, and the anticipation of hostile campaigns before they reach operational maturity. Artificial intelligence can identify amplification anomalies, analyze coordinated behavior, detect sudden shifts in the emotional charge of public discourse, and map networks that act as multipliers of hostile content. Its usefulness lies not in replacing human analysis, but in amplifying its capacity to see.

A strategy, to be comprehensive, must also incorporate mechanisms for continuous learning. No information campaign remains static, and no state can afford to always react to new threats with outdated tools. Doctrine demands a constant cycle of evaluation, correction, adaptation, and updating. Every attack, every failure, every successful response must feed into a learning system that improves defenses.

Primacy of Politics and Democratic Legitimacy

All this operational framework only fulfills its purpose if it serves the primacy of politics. Information cannot become an end in itself. Technologies, legal frameworks, analytical capabilities, cooperation mechanisms, and resilience programs must be subordinated to explicit democratic goals and political leadership that acts responsibly. As this article emphasizes, information defense must protect without distorting, respond without unjustifiably escalating, act without excesses, and safeguard societies' capacity to debate, dissent, and decide freely.

The conclusion, therefore, is not merely an argumentative recap but a statement of strategic principles. Informational coercion should never be underestimated because it operates on what makes democracy possible: public trust. But neither should it be overestimated, because a poorly conceived defense can damage the very center of gravity it seeks to reinforce. The key lies in understanding that information strategy is part of the overall strategy of the State, and that freedom of political action—that concrete expression of democratic sovereignty—depends on society remaining impervious to hostile attempts to manipulate it from the shadows.

Ultimately, democratic defense against digital manipulation is not about controlling narratives or persecuting dissent, but about preventing an aggressor from transforming the information space into a field of coercion.[27] Democracy is best defended when it remains true to itself, when it acts with strategic discipline, when it assesses real effects, when it recognizes the importance of information control, and when it preserves the primacy of politics over any technical instrument. Information coercion seeks to alter the context in which decisions are made. Democratic strategy, if implemented with moderation, clarity, and legitimacy, can prevent this without sacrificing what defines it: freedom, pluralism, and public accountability.

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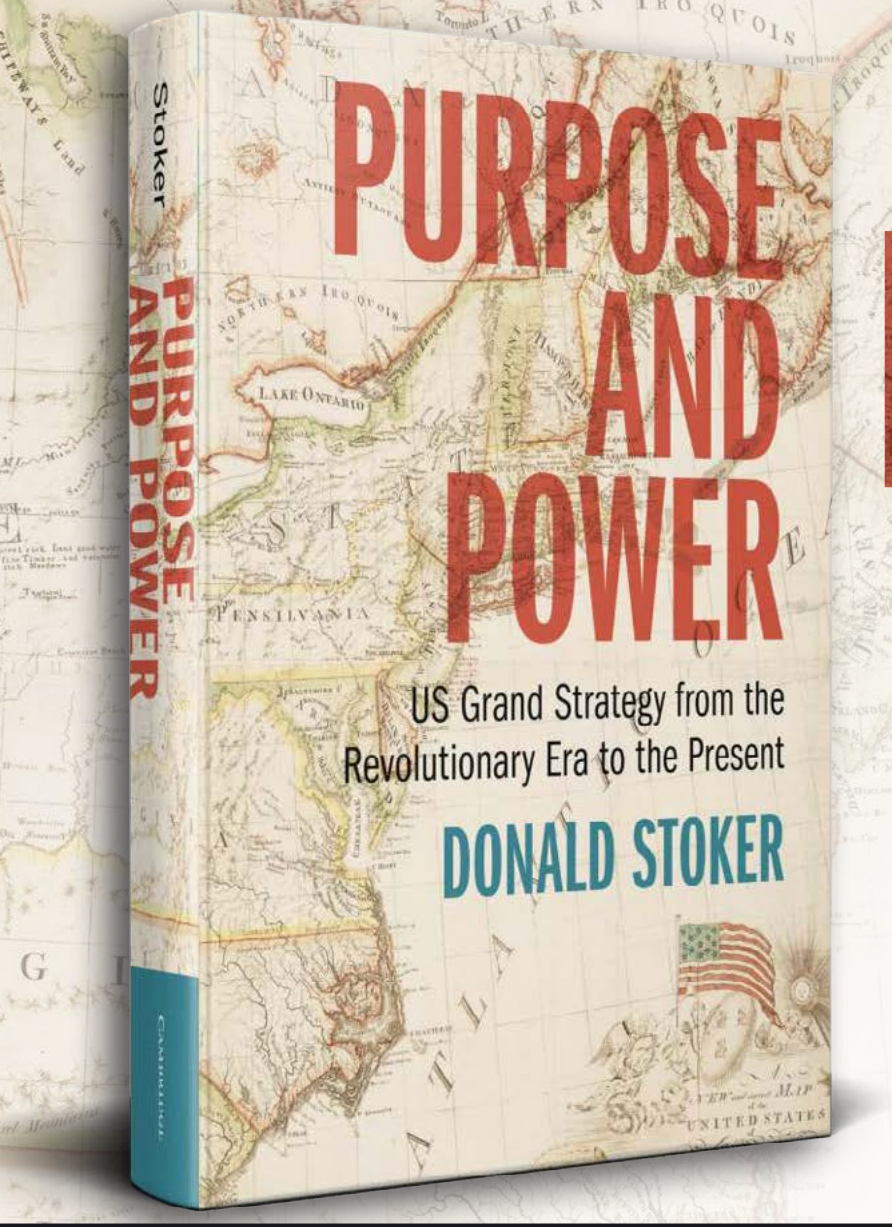

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