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Joint Professional Military Sedition:

Operational Planning and the Link between Strategy and Civilian Leadership

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Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) is a requirement for advancement to senior ranks in the U.S. military, but is it weakening our officers' strategic acumen and undermining civilian leadership? Recent events in the South China Sea and the Middle East have brought the political implications of operational planning into the forefront of public debates about American strategic direction. While the passing of America's unipolar moment in global affairs makes the new emphasis on "look before you leap" a salutary development, the way political leadership increasingly depends on military planners to do the looking runs the risk of further weakening America's position in the world by calcifying Cold War-era security commitments and hardening the global perception of the United States as an aspiring military hegemon. In order for the United States to manage the transition to a multi-polar world where it remains stable, prosperous, and first among equals, we must reinvigorate public discussion and understanding of civilian strategic direction and the operational insight necessary for campaign planning.

No international relationship will likely be more important for the United States to manage for its national security over the next fifty years than the one with China. Therefore, the public understanding of our national interests with regards to China are of paramount concern, especially since the Pacific region has the potential to become our most complex multi-polar operating environment. The current shape of this public debate was put in sharp relief when the USS Lassen transited in October 2015 within twelve nautical miles of Subi Reef, the site of an artificial island and naval base created by the PRC, in order to assert international freedom of navigation within waters of the South China Sea that Beijing has claimed. News reporting claimed that U.S. Navy planners had long asserted the strategic importance of freedom-of-navigation operations (FONOPS) in the vicinity of the contested Spratly Islands, and that military officials had been frustrated for months by delays in the Obama administration's execution of the proposed operation. "Delaying the patrols actually made it into a bigger deal," said an anonymous source in the Department of Defense. "This may have diminished the initial

strategy that these patrols should be a regular, ordinary matter."[1]

Framing the story of the USS Lassen's FONOPS with a criticism of the administration's deliberative planning process likely owes more to the surrounding context of partisan presidential campaigning than to a serious attempt to explore the relationship between civilian and military planners in defining and pursuing national strategy. Nonetheless, the story highlights a consequence of several trends within U.S. political and military cultures that have made the stewardship of America's long-term strategic interests into a point of contention and undermines the constitutionally mandated subordination of the U.S. military to civilian control. These trends include a growing civilian and military divide in American society that affects military attitudes towards civilian strategic capabilities and civilian deference to military capabilities, ongoing tactical employment of the U.S. military in trophy campaigns that satisfy domestic political demands more than they further national security, the accelerating migration of interagency instruments of national power from civilian administration and control into the combatant commander level of military bureaucracy, and an expanding joint professional military educational establishment, mandated by the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, that advocates usurping more and more civilian functions into the military establishment under the guise of joint operational doctrine.

The civil-military cultural divide, partly accelerated by the advent of the All-Volunteer-Force, results more from the relative demographic isolation of military personnel and veterans within the U.S. population than from ideological differences between the groups. Even so, perceptions of a cultural gap between warriors and citizens have complicated discussions of national strategic direction. The anonymous DOD source cited in the FONOPS reporting criticized civilian decision-makers on the basis of their failure to grasp the larger strategic point of the military's advance planning. Looked at from the level of general principles, the criticism depends on a perception of the U.S. military establishment as the preeminent institutional home

of thinking about America's long-term strategic interests. As such, military criticism of the FONOPS delay parallels criticisms by historians and political scientists that America's civilian policymakers pushed the military into large-scale military actions like the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan without anticipating the long-term strategic losses that would result. In both cases, civilian leaders are criticized for their failures to articulate a coherent or achievable desired end state for American actions abroad.

In a 2007 article that is a mainstay in the JPME programs offered by the services' war colleges, Colonel Phillip Meilinger (USAFA ret.) argues that "civilian control of the military, the bedrock of American military culture, must be offered loyal opposition from military professionals to avoid political decisions to employ military power in ways that are antithetical to sound grand strategy." Meilinger's essay asserts that military leaders have a double advantage over civilian leaders in the art of strategic assessment. First, "senior commanders will generally be on the scene where crises develop." Second, those commanders will be skilled in *operational art*, defined by U.S. Navy War College professor Milan Vego as "a component of military art concerned with the theory and practice of planning, preparing, conducting, and sustaining campaigns and major operations aimed at accomplishing strategic or operational objectives in a given theater."[2] Skill in operational art thus qualifies military commanders to differ with civilian leaders over the feasibility of strategic objectives. Meilinger castigates senior officers during the Vietnam War for failing to tender their resignations when their assessments of civilian-directed objectives for the war differed with those of civilian leaders. In reference to current operational planning, Meilinger concludes, "If senior commanders sincerely believe that the military strategies directed by our civilian leaders are fatally flawed . . . then they have a responsibility to the country and to those under their command to express those reservations forcefully and unambiguously."[3]

Meilinger's arguments provide a backdrop for the long-simmering debate over U.S.

intervention in the Syrian civil war and the related question of how the U.S. should respond to the growth of ISIL and the establishment of a caliphate in contested portions of Syria and Iraq. Sound operational planning requires a desired strategic end state articulated by civilian leadership and appropriately resourced by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) after direction by the National Security Council (NSC). On August 28, 2014, after months of speculation and pressure, President Obama resisted calls for American military action against ISIL in Syria by declaring in a press conference, "We don't have a strategy yet," and "the idea that the United States or any outside power would perpetually defeat ISIS ... is unrealistic." According to President Obama, the crucial components of a strategy--a desired end state and the means to achieve it--were not present. Until they were, action could not be taken against ISIL despite its unsavory character.[4]

President Obama's reticence with regards to intervention in Syria demonstrated a difference in approach to the public discussion of American strategy since the chastening experiences of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the unexpected outcome of intervention in Libya. The president continually referred to the deliberations and assessments of military leaders in manner that foregrounded the military responsibility for the operational level of war planning. In November 2015 briefing on U.S. strategy in Syria, for instance, President Obama declared "we have the finest military in the world and we have the finest military minds in the world, and I've been meeting with them intensively for years now, discussing these various options."[5] Policy particulars aside, what is notable about the President's remarks on many occasions is that he so frequently invokes military assessments of strategic objectives.

The presumed operational expertise of military leaders, however, is a knife that cuts both ways. At its heart, the presumption rests on the flawed premise that military planners are capable of discerning the scope of American commitment to a specific desired end state, the relative degree of usefulness inhering in other instruments of national power (diplomatic, informational, and economic), and the relationship between the dynamic policy environment of electoral

politics in a democracy and the calmer waters of policy development in non-electoral bureaucracies.

Alexander Mattelaer attributes the development of the flawed presumption of military supremacy in operational planning to a doctrinal assertion in U.S. Joint Warfare publications that expansively defines the operational level of war: "[T]he operational level of war . . . has driven a wedge between politics and warfare. By defining 'operational art' so broadly as to encompass the design of campaigns, the political leadership has been reduced to the role of strategic sponsor. Being part of the professional jurisdiction of the armed forces, the operational level usurped the role of civilian leadership in campaign planning. Political strategy, devoid of tactical views, thus became prone to miscalculation and wishful thinking."[6]

Mattelaer's critique highlights the dangers of decoupling civilian strategic leadership and operational planning because "wishful thinking" could describe any number of proclaimed political objectives for recent American actions abroad, from establishing stable, democratic governments in Afghanistan and Iraq, to guaranteeing the safety of civilian populations in Libya and Syria by contributing to the collapse of oppressive governments. In many cases, American military actions have been more symbolic than effective as gestures towards our strategic goals of a peaceful and stable Middle East. In this, military leaders have enabled the wishful thinking of political leaders by passing off tactics like political assassination, air strikes, and counterinsurgency operations as strategies. In reality, these operations have increased instability in the region.

Despite overt deference by the two most recent U.S. presidents to the advice of military leaders, the disastrous and self-defeating adoption of tactics (things the military can do) as long-term strategies demonstrates that recent American military leaders have had very little strategic acumen. For instance, political assassination through manned and unmanned bombing campaigns has not contributed to the defeat of irregular warfare extremist groups. In many cases, successful

assassination of an effective military or political leader brings a more brutal successor into power. At its heart, this tactic misapprehends terror networks and extremist groups as only personality-driven rather than ideologically driven and hierarchical rather than loosely coordinated.

The failure of this tactic to achieve its stated ends appears even more tragic if we consider that its employment strengthens the ideological attractiveness of the United States' enemies because aerial bombing campaigns are perceived as inhumane and proof that ISIL, for instance, can successfully resist us. Arguably, every missile launched brings more militants into the field than are taken out of it. A viable strategy to counter such extremist groups would need to focus on their center of gravity—their ability to regenerate combat power through recruitment. Such a strategy would depend more on exertions of America's diplomatic, economic, and informational national resources than on military ones, which is part of the reason why depending on military leaders to come up with a strategy to defeat ISIL is misguided.

The American military's long romance with counterinsurgency doctrine further illustrates the danger of hailing a military tactic as a viable national strategy and venerating military leaders who begin their operational planning within an outdated or unrealistic strategic frame. As is now painfully apparent to most analysts, counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan were pursued without abiding by their first principle: an external power can never fight an insurgency on behalf of an internally illegitimate local government. Counterinsurgency tactics are only transformed into a long-term strategy when they are employed by a legitimate local government or one that can realistically pursue legitimacy. Applying counterinsurgency tactics to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq required historical amnesia with regards to the imposed nature of the new partner governments in both countries. Without a legitimate local partner, the only place the United States military could fight an effective counterinsurgency campaign would be somewhere we planned to stay for the long haul, e.g. the continental United States or, in the early 20th

century, a place like the Philippines. Engaging in counterinsurgency operations as a means of leaving the theater of war is like sleeping with a neighbor's wife with the hope that adultery will strengthen her marriage.

The strategic blindness of U.S. military planners is not surprising given how military training, experience, and operational planning processes condition them to think within existing strategic constructs of the nation's long-term interests. Consider, for instance, the military's stewardship of several large operational plans that facilitate quick response to specific potential crises in strategically important parts of the world. These operational plans provide prepackaged campaign options in response to ossified foreign policy commitments of previous administrations. The dynamic changes in geopolitics over the last twenty years have outdated the value of these plans and made implementing them strategically dangerous, yet they drive both joint exercises and military acquisitions, such as those focused on countering China's Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) curtain. The existence and constant updating of these operational plans create within the military establishment a bias for Cold War and unipolar strategic commitments to overseas allies and partners that no American president would follow through today on if push came to shove.

In the Pacific, for instance, U.S. force projection still depends on Carrier Strike Groups. Any concerted military action against China in the region could entail the loss of a Nimitz-class carrier at a cost of over $10 billion and a loss of more than 5,000 lives, a casualty rate from one event that would far exceed the total sustained over ten years in either of our wars in Afghanistan or Iraq. What U.S. president would authorize an action with such enormous consequences unless the United States was facing an existential threat to its existence? Yet the military focuses an inordinate amount of its resources on countering a host of less significant threats to our national interests at costs far beyond their merit because military planners are not predisposed to consider the strategic environment within which a civilian decision-maker operates. Their planning and

advice is inherently limited by the nation's past strategic commitments and the echo chamber created by ongoing joint exercises defending those commitments. Moreover, as the unusually public controversy over the way exercise controllers reversed red team successes in Millennium Challenge 2002 suggests, the U.S. military's commitment to joint exercise planning in support of these operational plans seriously compromises the ability of military leaders to think realistically about the strategic and operational costs of America's overseas commitments.[7]

If institutional factors contribute to a limited strategic acumen among military leaders, then cultivating strategic vision in civilian leaders becomes paramount. However, Mattelaer's proposed solution for the dangers of wishful civilian strategic thinking is worse than the problem. He proposes that civilian policymakers whose jobs are to advise the president on national security matters attend military war colleges so as to learn more about the construction of military campaigns. While this solution might more deeply impress civilian leadership with the need to properly resource objectives derived from "wishful thinking," it will only accelerate the movement of the United States away from a balanced pursuit of all facets of national power into a militarily sponsored hegemony in which the diplomatic, economic, and informational might of the country are employed within larger constructs that assume military leadership and control.

Much could be said about the way the allocation of the U.S. budget starves the diplomatic, informational, and economic leaders of American power in the executive branch in favor of buttressing a professional military establishment that, thanks to its recent emphasis on counterinsurgency doctrine, has created space within its operational commands for those traditionally civilian pursuits. At present, the Combatant Command (COCOM) structure is the best funded and most comprehensive bureaucratic site for long-term stewardship of American foreign policy, especially in troubled parts of the world. When the President and the Congress want quick and effective action abroad, they understandably turn towards PACOM, AFRICOM,

SOUTHCOM and the like. While COCOMs are operationally effective, they are strategically unsound as the face of U.S. interests abroad. Although the migration of assets to the COCOMs stems from their ability to provide security for the other instruments of national power, this migration creates the perception and reality that the United States is increasingly an imperial hegemon abroad rather than a democratic exemplar of a free society, a perception that harms our long-term strategic interests.

The American way of war, historically understood, sees armed conflict as an aberration to be quickly resolved. Our large peacetime military establishment is a consequence of the long Cold War in which the United States saw itself as facing an existential threat. Joint military doctrine, and especially those components of it that expand the operational level of war as a bridge between tactics and strategy, have created the conditions for a presumptuous and military-centric strategic establishment within the senior ranks of the United States military. As the arguments of both Meilinger and Mattelaer suggest, excessive emphasis in Joint Professional Military Education on operational art, a military specialty, as a crucial component of assessing the viability of national strategy sidelines the American public and its elected representatives from the dominant position they have under the Constitution.

To some degree, the emergence of COCOMs and the Joint Staff as the de facto home of American strategic thought can be seen as the success of the Goldwater-Nichols Act. Consequently, the Senate Armed Services Committee's thirty-year review of the Act in 2016 should prompt public discussion about how its signature bureaucratic structures and the military doctrines that resulted from them have shaped American presuppositions about the components of strategic vision and planning.[8] This review is particularly urgent given that the Goldwater-Nichols Act responded to a Cold War environment which presumed a global military struggle for power rather than our contemporary environment of linked regional theaters in which control is

contested by national and subnational actors with greater dependence on informational, economic, and diplomatic axes of power than military ones.

After World War II, the esteemed strategist G.H. Liddell-Hart stated "the pure theory of strategy best fits the case of a State that is primarily concerned with conquest. It has to be modified if it is to serve the true purpose of a nation that is content with its existing territorial bounds, and primarily concerned to preserve its security and maintain its way of life."[9] The global scope of the Cold War obscured the truth of Liddell-Hart's observation for the United States, but the time is ripe for a reassessment. The global entanglements of the United States incurred during an extended Cold War no longer serve the long-term strategic interests of the country. The multi-polar world with its complex mix of subnational and regional threats and competitors requires new strategic direction, and undoubtedly our military structures will need to evolve to fit.

The relationship between military knowledge and civilian leadership will also have to evolve in a world where American military power allows us to go places that our strategic interests should forbid. The knowledge and experience gap between military and civilian decision-makers is an urgent problem that requires action. However, rather an approach that militarizes civilians, America's interests would be better served by a policy shift that facilitates the movement of military members towards civilian service. In a March 22, 2016, interview, former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel decried the dearth of military veterans in congressional and White House security decision-making bodies. "When you look at the presidential candidates today, not one is a veteran," Hagel said. "Our current president and vice president are not veterans. The entire senior White House security staff, none are veterans."[10] He went on to point out that in the late 1970s, over 70% of the elected officials in Congress were veterans, whereas veterans comprise less than 20% of Congress in 2016. Happily, the United States has a tradition of citizen-soldier service that can be reinvigorated by the judicious actions of the

Department of Defense, service-member and veterans organizations, and public forums like the U.S. Naval Institute.

Some changes and initiatives that could speed the needed growth of insight into military affairs in civilian leadership circles include the following:

- Develop a "Troops to Public Service" track in separation and retirement Transition Assistance Programs.
- Revise current guidelines about political speech issued to service-members so that necessary injunctions against implied military endorsements of candidates or positions do not discourage full participation in appropriate public discourse as a citizen.
- Initiate Public Forums and Candidate Mixers sponsored by veteran service organizations with the intent of creating relational connections between veterans and current and future elected officials.
- Leverage Reserve expertise by establishing speaker bureaus in urban areas with large Reserve populations; provide enhanced PAO support to speakers to ensure presentations are informational and not advocacy-oriented.

Our national strategic learning process is slow, admittedly, but it has never failed to rise to the occasion when a true existential threat exists. The American electoral system is akin to a supercomputer in its ability to incorporate massive amounts of data and, over time, to determine the vital interests of the nation. Unlike military planners on the Joint Staff and in our Combatant Commands, America's civilian leadership must constantly grapple with the strategic constraints, ambitions, and retrenchments that issue from the public through the electoral system. Our Joint Professional Military Industrial Complex needs to stop planning for global hegemony and return strategic thinking to its true American home: the reactive, pugnacious, sometimes myopic, and yet always ultimately wise American electorate. Only to the degree that military leaders are also

citizens can they further this necessary debate and move it from the conference rooms of our Combatant Commands and into the public eye.

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[1] Andrea Shalal, et. al. "As Obama weighed patrol to counter China, Pentagon urged faster action." *Reuters*, 28 October 2015.
[2] Milan Vego. *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice*. Newport: Naval War College, 2009. I-4.
[3] Phillip S. Meilinger. "American Military Culture and Strategy," *Joint Forces Quarterly*. 46.3 (2007): 80-86.
[4] Barack Obama. Statement during Press Conference. 28 August, 2014. Accessed on Whitehouse.gov, 30 October, 2015.
[5] Barack Obama. Press Conference by President Obama-Antalya, Turkey. 16 November 2015. Accessed on Whitehouse.gov, 29 December 2015.
[6] Alexander Mattelaer. "The Crisis in Operational Art." A paper presented at the European Security and Defence Forum. London: Chatham House, 2010. 14.
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[8] John McCain. Opening Statement on Goldwater-Nichols Reform Hearings. 10 November 2015. Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing. Accessed on Senate.gov, 29 December 2015.
[9] B.H. Liddell-Hart. "The Objective in War." *Naval War College Review* 5.4 (December 1952). 25.
[10] Leo Shane III. "Chuck Hagel laments the dearth of veterans in key national security roles." *Military Times*, 23 March 2016.