



## CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS AND THE U.S. STRATEGY DEFICIT

By Mackubin T. Owens

The primary focus of those who have examined civil-military relations since the 1990s has been on the issue of civilian control of the military. Of course, civilian control is important, especially in the case of a liberal society such as the United States. But civilian control is only one part of the civil-military equation. The effectiveness of the military is equally important because failure on the battlefield threatens the very existence of the polity the military is sworn to defend. The issue of civilian control means very little if the military instrument is unable to ensure the survival of the state.

Unfortunately very little has been written on the relationship between civil-military relations and success in war. But difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan have brought the issue to the fore. Writing in the spring 2009 issue of *World Affairs*, Richard Kohn observed that:

Nearly twenty years after the end of the Cold War, the American military, financed by more money than the entire rest of the world spends on its armed forces, failed to defeat insurgencies or fully suppress sectarian civil wars in two crucial countries, each with less than a tenth of the U.S. population, after overthrowing those nations' governments in a matter of weeks.

He attributes this lack of effectiveness to a decline in the U.S. military's professional competence with regard to strategic planning.

In effect, in the most important area of professional expertise—the connecting of war to policy, of operations to achieving the objectives of the nation—the American military has been found wanting. The excellence of the American military in operations, logistics, tactics, weaponry, and battle has been manifest for a generation or more. Not so with strategy.

He echoes the claim of Colin Gray: “All too often, there is a black hole where American strategy ought to reside.” Is there something inherent in current US civil-military affairs that accounts for this failure of strategy?

The failure of American civil-military relations to generate strategy can be attributed to the confluence of three factors. The first of these is the continued dominance within the American system of what Eliot Cohen has called the “normal” theory of civil-military relations, the belief that there is a clear line of demarcation between civilians who determine the goals of the war and the uniformed military who then conduct the actual fighting. Until President George W. Bush abandoned it when he overruled his commanders and embraced the “surge” in Iraq, the normal theory has been the default position of most presidents since the Vietnam War. Its longevity is based on the idea that the failure of President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to defer to an autonomous military realm was the cause of U.S. defeat in Vietnam.

The normal theory can be traced to Samuel Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*, in which he sought a solution to the dilemma that lies at the heart of civil-military relations: how to guarantee civilian control of the military while still ensuring the ability of the uniformed military to provide security. His solution was a mechanism for creating and maintaining a professional, apolitical military establishment, which he called “objective control.” Such a professional military would focus on defending the United States but avoid threatening civilian control.

But as Cohen has pointed out, the normal theory of civil-military relations has rarely held. Indeed, storied democratic war leaders such as Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln “trespassed” upon the military's turf as a matter of course, influencing not only strategy and operations but also tactics. The reason that civilian leaders cannot simply leave the military to its own devices during war is that war is an iterative process involving the interplay of active wills. What appears to be the case at the outset of the war may change as the war continues, modifying the relationship between political goals and military means. The fact remains that wars are not fought for their own purposes but to achieve policy goals set by the political

leadership of the state.

The Iraq case reinforces Cohen's argument. Former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld may have been wrong on a number of issues but the uniformed military was no more prescient than he. For instance, while Rumsfeld did not foresee the insurgency and the shift from conventional to guerrilla war, neither did his critics in the uniformed services, who remained wedded to operational doctrines focused on conventional war rather than counterinsurgency.

Critics also charged that Rumsfeld's Pentagon shortchanged the troops in Iraq, in part by failing to provide them with armored "humvees." Yet a review of Army budget submissions makes it clear that the service did not immediately ask for the vehicles; the Army's priority, as is usually the case with the uniformed services, was to acquire "big ticket" items. It was only after the insurgency began and the threat posed by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) became apparent that the army began to push for supplemental spending to "up-armor" the utility vehicles.

And while it is true that Rumsfeld downplayed the need to prepare for post-conflict stability operations, it is also the case that in doing so he was merely ratifying the preferences of the uniformed military. Only recently has the uniformed military begun to shed the "Weinberger Doctrine," a set of principles long internalized by the U.S. military that emphasize the requirement for an "exit strategy." But if generals are thinking about an exit strategy they are not thinking about "war termination"—how to convert military success into political success, which is the purpose of post-conflict planning and stability operations. This cultural aversion to conducting stability operations is reflected in the fact that operational planning for Operation Iraqi Freedom took eighteen months, while planning for postwar stabilization began half-heartedly only a couple of months before the invasion.

The second factor, strongly reinforced by the normal theory of civil-military relations, is the influence of the uniformed services' organizational cultures. Each military service is built around a "strategic concept," which according to Samuel Huntington constitutes "the fundamental element of a military service," the basic "statement of [its] role . . . or purpose in implementing national policy." A clear strategic concept is critical to the ability of a service to organize and employ the resources that Congress allocates to it.

It also largely determines a service's organizational culture. Some years ago, the late Carl Builder of the RAND Corporation wrote a book called *The Masks of War*, in which he demonstrated the importance of the organizational cultures of the various military services in creating differing "personalities," identities, and behaviors. His point was that each service possesses a preferred way of fighting and that "the unique service identities . . . are likely to persist for a very long time."

The organizational culture of a service, in turn, exerts a strong influence on civil-military relations, frequently constraining what civilian leaders can do and often constituting an obstacle to change and innovation. The critical question here is this: who decides whether the military instrument is effective, the civilian policymakers or the military itself?

An illuminating illustration of this phenomenon at work has been the recent attempt to institutionalize counterinsurgency doctrine within the U.S. Army, a difficult task, given the service's focus on the "operational level of war," which manifests itself as a preference for fighting large-scale conventional war—despite the fact that throughout most of its existence, the conflicts in which the U.S. Army engaged were actually irregular wars.

Beginning in the late 1970s, the Army embraced the idea of the operational level of war as its central organizing concept. As Hew Strachan has observed, "the operational level of war appeals to armies: it functions in a politics-free zone and it puts primacy on professional skills." And herein lies the problem for civil-military relations: the disjunction between operational excellence in combat and policy, which determines the reasons for which a particular war is to be fought. The combination of the dominant position of the normal theory of civil-military relations in the United States and the U.S. military's focus on the non-political operational level of war means that all too often the conduct of a war disconnected from the goals of the war.

As an essay published by the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute puts it, the operational level of war has become an "alien" that has devoured strategy.

Rather than meeting its original purpose of contributing to the attainment of campaign objectives laid down by strategy, operational art—practiced as a "level of war"—assumed responsibility for campaign planning. This reduced political leadership to the role of "strategic sponsors," quite specifically widening the gap between politics and warfare. The result has been a well-demonstrated ability to win battles that have not always contributed to strategic success, producing "a way of battle rather than a way of war."

The political leadership of a country cannot simply set objectives for a war, provide the requisite materiel, then stand back and await victory. Nor should the nation or its military be seduced by this prospect. Politicians should be involved in the minute-to-minute conduct of war; as Clausewitz reminds us, political considerations are "influential in the planning of war, of the campaign, and often even of the battle."

The task of strategy is to bring doctrine—concerned with fighting battles in support of campaigns—into line with national policy. But instead of strategy, we have Gray’s “black hole.”

The third factor contributing to the perseverance of the American strategic black hole is one that was, ironically, intended to improve U.S. strategic planning: the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. In passing Goldwater-Nichols, Congress sought to address two central concerns: 1) the excessive power and influence of the separate services; and 2) the mismatch between the authority of the combatant commanders and their responsibilities. The act increased the authority of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff while reducing that of the Joint Chiefs themselves and increased the authority of the theater commanders. Congress expected that such reorganization would, among other things, improve the quality of military advice to policymakers.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff are responsible for integrating theater strategy and national policy. But if they are marginalized, as they were during much of the time during the Bush administration, such integration does not occur. This is an institutional problem illustrated by the case of Gen. Tommy Franks, the commander of US Central Command, who in directing the war in Afghanistan after 9/11 and the first phase of the war in Iraq, was able to bypass the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His justification is found in his memoirs, *An American Soldier*: “Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan had been nitpicked by the Service Chiefs and the Joint Staff, and I did not intend to see a recurrence of such divisiveness in Iraq.” He sent a message: “Keep Washington focused on policy and strategy. Leave me the hell alone to run the war.”

Of course, such an attitude is a dysfunctional consequence of the well-intentioned institutional arrangement created by Goldwater-Nichols reinforcing the idea that there is an autonomous realm of military action within which civilians have no role. The result of such a disjunction between the military and political realms is that war plans may not be integrated with national policy and that strategy, despite lip service to its importance, in practice becomes an orphan. And in the absence of strategy, other factors rush to fill the void, resulting in strategic drift.

Unfortunately, the failure of the current civil-military framework to provide strategic guidance for integrating the operational level of war and national policy is obscured by the myopic focus of students of civil-military relations on the issue of civilian control. Rectifying this situation requires that both parties to the civil-military bargain adjust the way they do business. On the one hand, the military must recover its voice in strategy-making while realizing that politics permeates the conduct of war and that civilians have a say, not only concerning the goals of the war but also how it is conducted. On the other, civilians must understand that to implement effective policy and strategy requires the proper military instrument. They must also insist that soldiers present their views frankly and forcefully throughout the strategy-making process.

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