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Blind Spots: Preventing Will-To-Fight Intelligence Failures

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Recent US failures to accurately evaluate “will to fight” in Afghanistan and Ukraine are said to derive from IC analytic deficiencies and a US military culture that prioritizes weapons and technology. However, they are rooted more in how the United States projects influence globally and structures its government. Intelligence customers and producers focus on military capabilities of friends and foes and on the intentions of foreign leaders, while focusing less on the will of the military forces and local populace. Ongoing efforts to improve analytic methods will not prevent recurring failures. Only institutional reforms within the national security and foreign policy communities to prioritize human influence and greater IC assertiveness in initiating long-term, in-depth collection and analysis on the human aspect will resolve this institutional blind spot.

Recurring Failures To Address “Human Will”...

Failures by many in the US Government to accurately evaluate the will of Afghanistan’s security forces, government officials, and populace to resist the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 and the Ukrainians’ will to resist Russia’s invasion in 2022 are the latest iterations of a recurring struggle to move beyond traditional military capability analysis to evaluate human will. For decades, the United States has struggled to account for the will—the decisionmaking and associated behavior, further described as the wish, choice, desire, intent, or general disposition to act toward a desired end—of actors who have the potential to influence outcomes that impact US national security and foreign policy interests. Routinely underevaluated is the will of military forces—especially those of partner forces the United States helps train, arm, and supply—and foreign populations in areas deemed strategically important.

This institutional blind spot wreaks havoc on US planning and execution of national security strategy and foreign policy.¹ Commonly traced back to the US counterinsurgency campaign in Vietnam between 1965 and 1973, here policymakers and military leaders prioritized intelligence on adversary military capabilities and focused less on the perspectives of the local people, friendly and enemy military forces, and the enemy’s politico-military approach.² Concentrating on Soviet military and technological capabilities during the Cold War, while overlooking less substantial reporting on societal indicators of decline, led the United States to be caught offguard by the collapse of the Soviet Union.³ Focusing on military capability has also led to overestimations of a willingness to fight, including assessments of the Iraqi Army’s desire to fight to the death in the Gulf War in 1991.⁴

Post-9/11, the United States failed to adequately consider the perspectives of key actors among the indigenous populations in Iraq and Afghanistan, enabling misguided approaches that created fertile ground for insurgencies.⁵ While maintaining relatively accurate assessments of indigenous military capabilities and creating a revolutionary terrorist targeting machine that exploited intelligence to “find, fix, and finish” adversary forces with unprecedented efficiency, the United States struggled to consider the perspectives of other relevant actors in both countries to inform effective counterinsurgency campaigns.⁶ This challenge persisted into the Arab Spring when a Tunisian street vendor self-immolated in December 2010—an event nobody could have predicted. The United States possessed a detailed understanding of the military capabilities and leaders across the Middle

The RAND Corporation defines *military will to fight* as “the disposition and decision to fight, to act, or to persevere when needed,” and *national will to fight* as “the determination of a national government to conduct sustained military and other operations for some objective even when the expectation of success decreases or the need for significant political, economic, and military sacrifices increases—of friendly and adversary actors.” *Fighting at the national level includes “not only military force but also the use of all aspects of national power to achieve particular political objectives.”*

– Ben Connable et al., *Will To Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will To Fight of Military Units*; Michael J. McNerney et al., *National Will To Fight: Why Some States Keep Fighting and Others Don’t*

East, but mostly missed the growing popular revolutionary energy that was ignited by images of the vendor's horrific plight.⁷ And, although the United States subsequently detected the growing size and strength in Syria of al-Qa'ida in Iraq and what became the Islamic State's military capabilities in 2013, it mostly missed the societal factors that led to the disenfranchisement of Iraq's Sunni population and degraded the Iraqi Army's will to fight—paving the way for ISIS forces to take over almost a third of the country in 2014, mostly unopposed.⁸

Missing the human aspect similarly fueled the more recent failures to evaluate will to fight in Afghanistan and Ukraine. The United States generally understood Afghan Government and Taliban military capabilities and their leadership intentions. But, as GEN Mark Milley noted, “The timeframe of a rapid collapse was widely estimated and ranged from weeks to months, and even years following our departure.”⁹ Many in the US Government failed to fully recognize how changing security, political, and societal factors, and withdrawal of American air and intelligence support, would lead much of the Afghan populace and military to pragmatically conclude it made sense to submit to the Taliban's will as Afghan leaders ran for their lives. On Ukraine, the United States accurately anticipated Vladimir Putin's aggressive intentions and assessed, with stunning precision, Russia's military movements in the leadup to its invasion.¹⁰ But many in the US Government failed to understand or anticipate the decision calculus of the Ukrainian population, military, and government officials and their will to stand up to this Russian aggression.¹¹

... Amid Repeated Efforts To Improve the Intelligence Process

In the wake of these will-to-fight judgment shortfalls, observers commonly blamed the IC for failing to predict outcomes or, alternatively, the decisionmakers who consume intelligence for failing to accept the IC's analysis. In truth, these repeat failures to address the human aspect arise out of the US intelligence *process*, and they are best thought of as institutional failures of that process in which both producers and consumers of intelligence have a part. The cases above reveal a track record of misjudgments where sometimes parts of the IC got it wrong, and in other cases customers were more to blame. The IC collects and analyzes information, disseminating reports to customers—policymakers at the national level, and civilian and military leaders, planners, and operators at home and in the field—but these customers' requirements largely drive intelligence collection and production.¹²

In the aftermath of 9/11, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, combatant commands, and the military services pursued various initiatives to improve knowledge about foreign populations and integrate more holistic assessments of the people's will to inform the application of US hard and soft power.¹³ As it became increasingly clear the United States was facing insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, these efforts gained momentum to inform population-centric counterinsurgency campaigns that considered drivers of stabilizing and destabilizing behavior among the local people in both countries.¹⁴ They sponsored conferences and tabletop exercises with subject matter experts, funded research studies, and facilitated exploratory working groups.¹⁵ They sought to integrate social science expertise into planning

and intelligence analysis, while introducing concepts such as sociocultural intelligence, population-centric intelligence, human terrain analysis, human geography, and the human aspects of military operations.²⁰ Some theorized a so-called “human domain” represented an additional warfighting domain.²¹ These efforts yielded new analytical frameworks, offices, and programs, as well as new doctrine and concepts that addressed requirements for knowledge about relevant actor will.²²

When the United States was surprised by many Iraqi actors’ acquiescence to the ISIS invasion in 2014, the US Government introduced “will to fight” as operative terminology. The Army was particularly forward-leaning, funding a series of RAND studies that sought to identify how to improve US capabilities for evaluating the will to fight.²³ RAND’s comprehensive methodologies sought to drive analysts to consider a broader range of actors and associated factors that would generate more holistic assessments of military and national will to fight—and ultimately more thoughtful policies.²⁴ Still, the United States made critical misjudgments about the will to fight in Afghanistan and Ukraine.²⁵

Institutional Blind Spots Impede Study of Will To Fight

Despite efforts to develop tools and methodologies, the United States’ persistent focus on military capabilities and leadership analysis, while giving less consideration to the human factors that also influence national and military will to fight, most likely is symptomatic of deeply ingrained institutional factors that create a blind spot. Key among these factors is the way the United States projects its influence globally and how the government is organized to formulate and execute foreign policy and national security strategies.

US Global Influence

America’s approach to projecting influence abroad by pursuing military and technological superiority and encouraging foreign leaders to reform their countries to align more with American democratic values causes its focus on military capability and leadership intent to the

PERSISTENT FOCUS ON FORCE CAPABILITIES AND NEW METHODOLOGIES

The limited consideration of the will to fight in Afghanistan and Ukraine shined a light on the United States’ continued focus on military force capabilities as a key measure of anticipated outcomes and belief that new tools and methodologies could fix the problem. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff GEN Mark Milley, the President’s senior military advisor at the time, stated after the Taliban takeover: “They [the Afghan military] had the training, the size, the capability to defend their country. This comes down to an issue of will and leadership. And, no, I did not—nor did anyone else—see a collapse of an army that size in 11 days.”¹⁶ He subsequently acknowledged the need for “a really effective technique to read people’s hearts, their will, their mind, their leadership skills.”¹⁷

However, Dr. Ben Connable, the leading US researcher on will-to-fight analysis, noted in 2023 that—although the US military was interested in improving its *general* understanding of will to fight as early as 2016, mainly through funding studies that led to the development of new methodologies—it resisted pursuing focused will-to-fight analysis of Afghanistan.¹⁸ In a 2022 Congressional hearing on Ukraine, discussions among Senator Angus King, Defense Intelligence Agency Director LTG Scott Berrier, and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines similarly demonstrated the limited consideration of Ukrainian will to fight in contrast to robust assessments of Russia’s and Ukraine’s relative military capabilities, while also implying that improved analytic approaches could prevent future failures.¹⁹

detriment of developing and applying an understanding of societal factors that shape human will.²⁶ Since World War II, the United States has exerted influence by seeking to defeat or deter adversaries through superior military capabilities and technology, or by improving the military capabilities and technologies of allies and partners through security cooperation arrangements involving security force assistance, foreign internal defense, and security sector assistance.²⁷ The United States also projects its influence by working to advance notionally Western democratic systems, structures, and values, usually through convincing foreign leaders to make related reforms in their countries. Toward this end, the United States endeavors to develop more democratic systems of governance; promote interaction with and support for free, fair, and open economies; foster improved human rights; advance gender and racial equality; expand access to food, water, and health care; expand opportunities for education; and foster access to fair rule of law.

Military and civilian agencies thus perceive that their core missions are to support progress toward these predetermined goals. Such aims align with larger national assumptions that developing and deploying superior military and technological capabilities to prevent adversaries from physically threatening US interests at home and abroad—while advancing US democratic values globally—makes the world a place where the United States can better coexist, compete, and thrive. Although many aspects of how the United States projects its influence globally are morally supportable, the approach rarely drives intelligence customers to want to better understand granular details about the will of the full range of actors whose choices and actions ultimately determine outcomes. Because the intelligence process is customer-driven, intelligence producers have little incentive to move beyond the traditional analytic focus on military and technological capabilities and leadership analysis to evaluate the will of all potentially relevant actors in places where the United States seeks to project influence.

Interagency Structure and Processes

This institutional disinterest in evaluating relevant actor will is exacerbated by how the US Government is organized to formulate and execute strategy. US Government structures and processes actively resist interagency coordination toward shared goals. The National Security Council (NSC) and its staff should ensure that a whole-of-government strategy is formulated and implemented; however, as former NSC Director for Afghanistan and Pakistan Paul D. Miller explains, “The United States’ national security establishment lacks an integrated strategic planning capability. Disparate organizations carry out strategic planning for their respective organizations with minimal coordination between them.”²⁸ Although various administrations have sought to empower special envoys or NSC senior directors to facilitate coordination, a Congressionally mandated study of the national security system concluded, “Parochial, departmental, and agency interests, reinforced by Congress, paralyze cooperation even as the variety, speed, and complexity of emerging security issues prevent the White House from effectively controlling the system.”²⁹ Rarely found are coordinated interagency approaches at the strategic, operational, or tactical levels that resemble what National Defense University Research Fellows Christopher Lamb and Douglas Orton call “cross-functional

teams,” capable of rapidly adjusting functional expertise in coordination with others toward resolving complex problems.³⁰

The US Government approach to projecting influence globally thus typically manifests itself as the pursuit of linear progress on technocratic metrics through stove-piped, poorly integrated lines of effort that individual agencies are usually assigned to lead, generally within the categories of security, governance, and development.³¹ And, regardless of how positive these metrics—such as numbers of partner troops trained or women educated—may appear, they tend to be measures of performance, rather than measures of effectiveness and, therefore, give little consideration to their impact on the decision calculus of the various actors whose behavior ultimately determines outcomes. Instead, they often amount to what former National Security Advisor LTG H.R. McMaster described as the “confusion of activity with progress.”³²

A Way Forward for the Intelligence and Policy Communities

The cost of forgoing a holistic approach to US national security and foreign policy development and implementation, worsened by repeatedly paying short shrift to the impact of such approaches on the will of actors whose behavior impacts outcomes, signals a need for the US Government to change. By identifying the origins of the United States’ recurring failure to evaluate the human will to fight as being institutional in nature, one shifts problem resolution from developing better tools, technologies, and analytical methodologies to instituting effective organizational change. Prior scholarship on organizational change identifies that transformation occurs when institutional theories of change and success are adapted to accommodate the required change, and when standard operating procedures, force structures, and staffing processes are reformed to support these revised theories.³³

Given the customer-driven nature of the intelligence process, fixing the problem would require the US Government to prioritize human influence over technocratic, linear progress within unintegrated lines of effort and adapt its standard operating procedures, structures, and staffing to support an actor-centric approach. As former Army Chief of Staff GEN Raymond Odierno, former Marine Corps Commandant Gen. James Amos, and former Commander of US Special Operations Command ADM William McRaven observed: “Conflict and competition are about people... [and, therefore,] influencing these people—be they heads of state, tribal elders, and militaries and their leaders, or even an entire population—remains essential to securing US interests. All elements of national power have an important role in these interactions with other nations and peoples.”³⁴

Within this broader context, good strategy execution would synchronize lethal and nonlethal actions over time and space to create conditions that drive the decisionmaking and behavior of

MOVING FORWARD

The US Government should prioritize human influence and adopt institutional reforms that replace technocratic, linear progress with a holistic, actor-centric approach...

... as the IC leans forward to initiate and integrate long-term, in-depth collection and analysis on human will and conditions that drive behavior supporting or countering US objectives.

all relevant actors in accordance with US objectives. Whether applying lethal force to remove adversaries from the battlefield, conducting negotiations with host-nation and regional governments, freezing an actor's finances, training indigenous military forces, supporting host-nation governance, or conducting economic development, these actions would all be subordinate to a coordinated approach designed to shape relevant actor decisionmaking and behavior toward favorable outcomes, also known as measures of effectiveness.³⁵ Only then will the intelligence process be able to leverage new capabilities and lessons learned over the past 20-plus years to generate the types of requirements and intelligence necessary to evaluate relevant actor will.

Additionally, the IC could rethink the relationship between intelligence producers and consumers.³⁶ This approach would mandate that the IC have more leeway to initiate more long-term, in-depth intelligence production about the people in areas where the United States seeks to exert influence, even though such intelligence may seem irrelevant to customers at the time and may only prove useful in the future. Such a step could foster integration of the intelligence personnel who generate such production more thoroughly into US Government processes for policy and strategy development and for operational planning. This approach may be cause for concern among those who fear that closer coordination between producers and consumers of intelligence raises the risk of politicization.³⁷ But it is the only way to ensure all relevant actors' will is aggressively evaluated within the IC and thoroughly considered when national security decisions are being made.

Both approaches are highly invasive to current practice. Although costly in blood and treasure, some may conclude that this institutional blind spot for evaluating will to fight may not be enough of a problem to warrant the time and effort required to fix it because none of the failures discussed led to an existential threat to the United States. The combination of fresh wounds from Afghanistan and Ukraine, coupled with the importance of such analysis to a potential military engagement with a near-peer competitor—China—over Taiwan, however, have spiked interest in such improvements, making now as good a time as ever to attempt such change within America's rigid, bureaucratic organizations.

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If you have comments, questions, or suggestions for a *Research Short* topic or article, please contact the NIU Office of Research at NIPress@niu.odni.gov.

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