The Contemporary Presidency

Civil-Military Friction and Presidential Decision Making: Explaining the Broken Dialogue

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This article examines the perennial mutual frustration between presidents and their military advisors over decisions to use force. What often appears to be a personality-driven or political debate between the commander in chief and his strong-minded military advisors actually has deeper institutional and cultural roots. The "professional" military officer has certain expectations about how to craft "best military advice" for the president that are deeply embedded into the organizational culture and in fact hard-wired into the institutionalized and incredibly detailed military planning processes. This planning process is designed with expectations about the roles civilian leadership will play in providing guidance, which are in many ways out of synch with the expectations of the president and his civilian advisors. Ultimately, the output of the military's planning process fails to deliver the type of nuanced advice in the form of creative options that the president needs.

In the 2010 bestselling book, *Obama's Wars*, Bob Woodward recounts President Barack Obama's friction with his military chain of command as he sought options for ending the war in Afghanistan.[1] Woodward paints a compelling picture of a frustrated president who felt "boxed in" by his military commanders who were presenting him with only one real option—deploy 40,000 more troops for a comprehensive counterinsurgency

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1. The motivation for this article is the mismatch I observed between what I was taught as a military officer and also learned in my own academic study of civil military relations and presidential decision making versus what I experienced in my three years as a political appointee in the Obama administration, where I was the deputy assistant secretary of defense for plans, working intimately at the intersection of the civil-military dialogue described here. Thus, this article is based on participant observation, supplemented by a number of follow-up interviews and a critical review of the theoretical frameworks that inform our understanding of how presidents take advice from their military commanders and ultimately make decisions on when and how to use military force.

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strategy and an uncertain timeline. The president and his civilian advisors could not understand why the military seemed incapable of providing scalable options for various goals and outcomes to inform his decision-making. Meanwhile the military was frustrated that their expert advice regarding levels of force required for victory were not being respected (Woodward 2010).

Such mutual frustration between civilian leadership and the military is not unique to the Obama administration. In the run-up to the Iraq War in 2002, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously chastised the military for its resistance to altering the invasion plan for Iraq. The military criticized him for tampering with the logistical details and concepts of operations, which they claimed led to the myriad operational failures on the ground (Gordon and Trainor 2006; Ricks 2007; Woodward 2004). Later, faced with spiraling ethnic violence and rising U.S. casualties across Iraq, George W. Bush took the advice of retired four-star General Jack Keane and his think tank colleagues over the formal advice of the Pentagon in his decision to launch the so-called surge in 2007 (Davidson 2010; Feaver 2011; Woodward 2010).

A similar dynamic is reflected in previous eras, from John F. Kennedy's famous debates during the Cuban Missile Crisis (Allison and Zelikow 1999) to Lyndon Johnson's quest for options to turn the tide in Vietnam (Berman 1983; Burke and Greenstein 1991), and Bill Clinton's lesser-known frustration with the military over its unwillingness to develop options to counter the growing global influence of al-Qaeda.[2] In each case, exasperated presidents either sought alternatives to their formal military advisors or simply gave up and chose other political battles. Even Abraham Lincoln resorted to simply firing generals until he got one who would fight his way (Cohen 2002).

What accounts for this perennial friction between presidents and the military in planning and executing military operations? Theories about civilian control of the military along with theories about presidential decision making provide a useful starting point for this question. While civilian control literature sheds light on the *propensity* for friction between presidents and the military and how presidents should cope, it does not adequately address the *institutional drivers* of this friction. Decision-making theories, such as those focused on bureaucratic politics and institutional design (Allison 1969; Halperin 1974; Zegart 2000) motivate us to look inside the relevant black boxes more closely. What unfolds are two very different sets of drivers informing the expectations and perspectives that civilian and military actors each bring to the advising and decision-making table.

This article suggests that the mutual frustration between civilian leaders and the military begins with cultural factors, which are actually embedded into the uniformed military's planning system. The military's doctrine and education reinforce a culture of "military professionalism," that outlines a set of expectations about the civil-military decision-making process and that defines "best military advice" in very specific ways. Moreover, the institutionalized military planning system is designed to produce detailed

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2. Telephone interview with former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State James Steinberg, September 6, 2012. Dr. James Steinberg served in the Clinton administration as the Deputy National Security Advisor and in the Obama administration as the Deputy Secretary of State.

and realistic military plans for execution—and that will ensure "victory"—and is thus ill suited to the rapid production of multiple options desired by presidents. The output of this system, framed on specific concepts and definitions about "ends," "ways," "means," and expectations about who provides what type of planning "guidance," is out of synch with the expectations of presidents and their civilian advisors, which in turn have been formed from another set of cultural and institutional drivers.

Most civilian leaders recognize that there is a principal-agent issue at work, requiring them to rely on military expertise to provide them realistic options during the decision-making process. But, their definition of "options" is framed by a broader set of political objectives and a desire to winnow decisions based, in part, on advice about what various objectives are militarily feasible and at what cost. In short, civilians' diverse political responsibilities combined with various assumptions about military capabilities and processes, create a set of expectations about how advice should be presented (and how quickly), how options might be defined, and how military force might or might not be employed. These expectations are often considered inappropriate, unrealistic, or irrelevant by the military. Moreover, as discussed below, when civilians do not subscribe to the same "hands off" philosophy regarding civilian control of the military favored by the vast majority of military professionals, the table is set for what the military considers "meddling" and even more friction in the broken dialogue that is the president's decision-making process.

This article identifies three drivers of friction in the civil-military decision-making dialogue and unpacks them from top to bottom as follows: The first, civil-military, is not so much informed by theories of civilian control of the military as it is driven by disagreement among policy makers and military professionals over which model works best. The second set of drivers is institutional, and reflects Graham Allison's organizational process lens ("model II"). In this case, the "outputs" of the military's detailed and slow planning process fail to produce the type of options and advice civilians are hoping for. Finally, the third source of friction is cultural, and is in various ways embedded into the first two. Powerful cultural factors lead to certain predispositions by military planners regarding the appropriate use of military force, the best way to employ force to ensure "victory," and even what constitutes "victory" in the American way of war. These cultural factors have been designed into the planning process in ways that drive certain types of outcomes. That civilians have another set of cultural predispositions about what is appropriate and what "success" means, only adds more fuel to the flame.

First Order (Civil-Military) Friction: Differing Expectations for Civilian Control

In the classic *The Soldier and the State* (required reading by all military officers), Sam Huntington (1981) argued for what he labeled "objective" control of the military. In this model, which Eliot Cohen (2002) labeled the "normal" theory of civil-military relations because of its widespread acceptance across the military profession, civilian leadership should provide the military with broad objectives and then stand aside while the military

professionals plan and execute the mission in the way they see fit. Just as one would not dictate to one's doctor how to perform surgery, presidents or civilian secretaries are considered unqualified to scrutinize details of military operations.

In the minds of many professional military officers, the Huntington (1981) model was validated by the negative example of President Johnson's hyperscrutiny of bombing targets during the Vietnam War, and by the positive example of George H. W. Bush's deference to the military in the execution of the first Gulf War in 1990 (Kitfield 1997). This narrative permeated the education system and the culture of the U.S. military for decades. Indeed, as an Air Force officer in the 1990s, I was taught that our failures in Vietnam were due to the fact that the military was forced to fight "with one hand tied behind its back." When President Bush claimed after Desert Storm, "By God—we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all," military professionals understood that they had a commander in chief who would, as Ronald Reagan (1980) had promised, "never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win."

In contrast, Eliot Cohen (2002) demonstrates in his book, *Supreme Command*, that a more "hands on" approach to civilian control is likely to yield better outcomes. In his model, civilians respect the military's operational expertise, but the commander in chief is understood to have broader responsibilities and insight in his role as president, thus requiring him—indeed legally authorizing him—to determine whether or not various military options are sound. What the military considers the appropriate plan to achieve an operational "victory," a president might view as more strategically or politically risky given other macro objectives. President Kennedy colorfully described this mismatch when he remarked that the Joint Chiefs "advise you the way a man advises another one about whether he should marry a girl. He doesn't have to live with her" (Zegart 2000, 45).

The president's responsibility to see broader strategic issues and goals often leads him to disregard or override military advice. In Cohen's study (2002), for example, Winston Churchill insisted the military continue advancing beyond the point where the generals had declared the enemy defeated because he understood that where forces physically stood and held ground when the bullets stopped flying would dictate the terms of peace, especially in critical places like Berlin. Of course, the right to disregard operational expertise also grants presidents the right to make bold strategic errors as well. Consider that George W. Bush's decision to divert operational resources from an ongoing fight in Afghanistan in order to invade Iraq led to failure in the battle of Tora Bora, missed opportunity to kill or capture Osama bin Laden, and tragic and unnecessary U.S. casualties in the mountains of Afghanistan (Berntsen and Pezzullo 2006; Fury 2008).

For best results, Cohen (2002) proposes the need for a respectful, but "unequal" dialogue between the military and the president. In this model, the military provides its best advice, and the president can and should question it until there is ideally a mutual understanding. Regardless of reaching consensus, the president has the final say in how or if to execute. In this unequal dialogue, the roles are clear as each side has distinct responsibilities based on position and expertise. Because the military are considered the experts in the art of war, their advice should inform presidential decision making by

offering operational military options as well as details about resources required and timelines. A president must know how a potential conflict will unfold, how many forces it might require, and how long it might take to achieve various objectives (or alternative "end states" in military language). The military is not necessarily expected (nor invited) to offer strategic and political advice, such as whether or not the mission is in the "national interest" or if the American people will or will not support it. Presidents would consider those issues theirs to determine after weighing the myriad factors and options.

Cohen's model is useful in that it outlines the perspective and responsibilities of the commander in -chief, helps one understands his constraints and expectations, and draws clear lines around the roles each side should play in an "unequal" civil-military dialogue. Cohen's book, which was published in 2002, is a clear challenge to the "normal" Huntington model, which has been the prevailing model for military professionals for decades. Based on the historical record of frustrated presidents, it appears that Cohen's model comes closer to how civilians assume the process should work. It easily follows that where presidents and their civilian advisors subscribe to Cohen and military officers to Huntington (1981), friction is bound to ensue. This mismatch in expectations creates not an "unequal" dialogue, but a *broken* one.

Graham Allison's account of the decision to execute a naval blockade during the Cuban missile crisis is a classic example of the dilemma that emerges given the mismatch in philosophy over civilian control, coupled with the principal-agent problem of military expertise. In this account, after a great deal of wrangling and maneuvering among advisors and between civilians and the military, the president decided that a blockade was a better option than airstrikes. No sooner had the Navy gotten to work executing its mission, than President Kennedy and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara began to wonder just what—exactly—they had ordered the Navy to do. They sought answers:

> McNamara put his questions harshly: Who would make the first interception? Were Russian-speaking officers on board? How would submarines be dealt with? . . . Picking up the Manual of Navy Regulations [Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Anderson] waved it in McNamara's face and shouted, "It's all in there." To which McNamara replied, "I don't give a damn what John Paul Jones would have done, I want to know what you are going to do now!" The encounter ended on Anderson's remark, "Now Mr. Secretary, if you and your Deputy will go back to your office the Navy will run the blockade." (Allison 1969, 707).

This exchange demonstrates how a president, subscribing to the Cohen (2002) model, can fall into a trap by not asking the "right" questions up front of his Huntingtonian-minded military advisors. During the decision-making deliberations, President Kennedy chose a naval blockade over what he perceived was the more aggressive and operationally and politically risky option of airstrikes. Details about rules of engagement would have been important for the president to know in order for him to understand how various options might unfold and to determine the level and nature of risk he may be undertaking in each option. Thus, the questions McNamara was asking were critical to this understanding—and arguably should have been asked before the decision was made. Still, civilian decision makers might also have assumed that such an assessment of risks would have been offered by the Navy as part of its presentation of options and in its role

as advisor. In short, civilians may not know what they do not know. But, from the classic Huntingtonian perspective, which clearly the Chief of Naval Operations subscribed to, such details would have been considered too "in the weeds" for civilians to concern themselves with and such questions perceived as "meddling" in military affairs.

During the Clinton administration, Jim Steinberg, who was the deputy national security advisor, was told by the military leadership that he was not "qualified" to see a particular set of detailed, highly classified, war plans. Steinberg concluded, "the military thinks that this military stuff is so complex and complicated that civilians don't have the expertise to understand what they are seeing. So they need to 'protect' them from making poor decisions." He says that for high-level civilians who need to advise the president, it is important to "understand the game." But, he says, he refuses to play it.[3]

When Steinberg insisted on being briefed, he was alarmed to note that there were large movements of forces written into the early, precombat, phases of the plan. He commented that this might be perceived as provocative to the enemy and thus risk unnecessary escalation, something civilian leadership desperately wanted to avoid. But from the military's perspective, not having those capabilities in the region when the time came introduced a level of operational risk that made the military very uncomfortable. Steinberg's instincts to query the military and to delve deeper into the details—against the preferences of the military—paid off in creating the opportunity for each side to better understand the tradeoffs between the political and operational objectives. Thus, the president could be presented with a more holistic understanding of the risks when and if the time came.

In some ways, both sets of expectations revealed in these examples are understandable. Military professionals expect to be given clear objectives for their military planning and then be free to execute toward those objectives based on their military expertise and their judgment regarding what constitutes operational success (a.k.a. "victory"). Presidents and secretaries should know what they want done and issue explicit orders accordingly. But in order to decide what they want done—in fact in order to provide the type of up-front guidance the military desires—they need to weigh risks associated with how various options might unfold. And for that they need a level of military expertise they likely do not possess, and a degree of familiarity with plans and rules of engagement that the military considers beyond their need to know. Presidents do not normally study military doctrine and operational manuals in preparation for their role as commander in chief. They expect their military advisors to present such advice and expertise to them.

A more recent example, recounted by former Pentagon official Rosa Brooks, further illuminates this "chicken and egg" dilemma (Brooks 2012).[4] As early as 2009, White

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3. Telephone interview with former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State James Steinberg, September 6, 2012.

4. The author also participated in this planning debate, as a colleague of Dr. Brooks in the Pentagon, 2010-11. Dr. Brooks was a senior advisor to the undersecretary of defense for policy at the time, working on rule of law and humanitarian issues; the author was the deputy assistant secretary of defense for plans. In this broken dialogue, our role as Pentagon civilians was to translate what the White House wanted into concrete planning "guidance."

House officials in the Obama administration began to worry about potential genocide-level violence in the wake of the pending referendum on South Sudan. They wanted to know what the military could *do* about it—what military options could they recommend to the president in the event such mass killing commenced or appeared imminent? But before offering options, the military said they needed more guidance. Their queries led to exasperation on both sides in a classic frustrated dialogue that went something like this:

> Civilians: What are our military options to prevent or stop mass atrocities?
> Military: That depends. How much money is the president willing to spend?
> Civ: What? How much does this kind of thing normally cost?
> Mil: What kind of thing? What do you want to do, exactly?
> Civ: We don't want genocide. We want to protect innocent people from getting killed.
> Mil: Ok, then we need some proper planning guidance. How many troops is the president willing to commit? For how long? What are his end states? Is it purely humanitarian or do you want plans to fight the Sudanese in north Sudan? Are we talking about targeting the bad guys or just evacuating civilians? Oh, and it will take us about six months to gin up a plan.
> Civ: Six months? The referendum is in 4 months! This could happen any day! And what do you mean by "end state"?

Rosa Brooks characterized the broken dialogue as follows:

> The ensuing back and forth was tense and occasionally broke out into open expressions of anger and mistrust. At best White House staff members considered their military counterparts rigid, reductionist, and unimaginative. At worst, they were convinced that the Pentagon was just being difficult—that the military "didn't care" about Sudan or about atrocity prevention and was determined to flout the president's wishes by stonewalling and foot-dragging at every turn instead of getting down to work.
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> The military representatives involved in the discussions were equally exasperated. What was wrong with these civilians? Didn't they know what they wanted? Were they too naïve—or uncaring—to understand that the potential mobilization of thousands of people and millions of dollars of equipment required greater specificity in terms of assumptions, constraints, and desired end-states? (Brooks 2012)

Clearly, a mismatch in perspective over how civilians can and should oversee the military and provide guidance and how the military should present plans and advice contributed to this very frustrated dialogue. But a simple Cohen-Huntington debate does not fully illuminate why, once the military has come to the table, it seemed so difficult for them to understand what civilians wanted to accomplish or to generate options in what civilians might consider a reasonable amount of time. Civil-military scholar and former white house official, Peter Feaver might explain this behavior as classic military "shirking," which according to his principal-agent model is likely to occur when "the gap between what the military would prefer to do and what civilians have asked it to do is great . . . and/or when the expectation of punishment is small" (Feaver 1998, 415).

The Sudan episode may seem to fit Feaver's model; but military professionals who concede the importance and legitimacy of civilian control adamantly reject the shirking thesis. As a former chief of the planning office on the Joint Staff, Brigadier General Hix, put it, "don't ascribe malice of intent to either side of the equation; there are simple laws

of physics at play in military planning"[5]. Hix's "laws of physics" include realities of time and space associated with logistics as well as the sheer work load faced by the limited numbers of trained planners using insufficient computer modeling technology to produce viable military plans. A detailed examination of the military's planning process and the doctrine that informs that process shows how these elements affect the military advice offered to the president. Decision-making theories, such as the bureaucratic politics (Allison 1969; Halperin 1974) or the organizational process models (Allison 1969), further illuminate the dynamics at play.

Second Order (Institutional) Friction: Military Planning Systems Meet Presidential Decision Making

The classic bureaucratic politics model applied to presidential decision making presents a vision of men and women in a room, each with a different desired course of action, bargaining and debating for the final outcome. Their positions are determined by the interests and culture of their organizations, demands placed on the individuals within the organization, and personal goals of decision makers and advisors that may not be directly related to the issue at hand. That is, "where you stand is where you sit" (Allison 1969, 711).

In this model, the president and his military advisors each come to the table with a very different set of factors influencing "where they sit." As General Michael Hayden, former Director of the CIA, described the environment, "each person has a seat at the table; but each has come to that seat through a very different door" (Hayden 2012). The president is charged as commander in chief to be a responsible steward of military resources; while also ensuring he is safeguarding the national security of the country. He may also have any number of domestic agenda items for which he will need to husband his political capital. As Hayden also points out, the president of the United States, who is elected based on his vision for the country, is therefore "vision-based" and inherently optimistic about the United States' ability to solve problems. This is in contrast to his intelligence advisors, who are "facts based," and more pessimistic about outcomes (Hayden 2012).

Extrapolating from the Hayden lens, the professional Huntingtonian military officer would see himself in the role of "expert advisor," armed with nearly 30 years of experience and study in the art of war, and charged with supplying "best military advice" to the president. Indeed, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is legally obligated to provide "independent" military advice to the president. It is very important to his credibility and that of his organization to provide accurate advice—that is, he needs to present an *executable* plan.[6] As explained below, to ensure that a given option is indeed

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5. Telephone Interview with Brigadier General William Hix, former director for plans, Joint Staff, J7, September 12, 2012.

6. Interview with Joint Staff Advisor #1, Chairman Mullen's staff member, March 2, 2011.; telephone interview with Brigadier General William Hix, former director for plans, Joint Staff, J7, September 12, 2012.

viable, he must rely on a complex military planning process, involving hundreds of planners running numerous tests, exercises, and models to ensure the advice he is delivering to the president is indeed sound. This is where the gears in the military's machine do not always synch with those of the White House.

It is Allison's "model II" organizational process that perhaps comes closest to explaining how the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff comes to develop the advice he brings to the president's decision-making table. In Allison's model II, options are seen as "outputs" of organizational processes and standard operating procedures. In this case, the organizational process is the military's planning process, the procedures for which are outlined in military doctrine and reinforced in the military's professional education system. An examination of this doctrine, combined with three years of personal participant observation of the system, reveals an exceedingly time-consuming iterative activity that fails to produce multiple detailed options to the president.

Embedded elements of the military's planning system help explain why its outputs fail to meet presidential expectations. First, to ensure an option is logistically and operationally viable, it must be analyzed in great detail. War games may be run to "red team" the option, which allows the commander to make assumptions about how enemy ("red") forces might respond to his proposed course of action. The force requirements are identified and time-phased force deployment data (TPFDD) are developed, detailing the precise choreography of the movement into theater of everything from aircraft to Army troops. Developing a TPFDD requires dozens, if not hundreds, of planners from all parts of the Department of Defense, running models at a number of in-person conferences over a period of months.

If the red-teaming or other analyses determine that changes to the proposed option are required, this may necessitate changes to the TPFDD, which can add weeks or months to the planning process. The TPFDD is then input into the Force Management System, which matches forces required against forces available. The output of these combined processes allows the commander to make an assessment about how soon he will be able to flow forces into a region to conduct the operation as designed, how confident he is of mission success, and what factors enhance or reduce risk to operational success.

The important thing to note about this process is that the steps outlined above are required for *each specific option* in order to have high confidence that an option is viable. So, while it is true that military doctrine identifies various points in the "operational design" phase of the planning process, during which actual options or alternative courses of action are supposed to be designed and presented to leadership, the resource-intensive and time-consuming analytical steps required to validate each option drives incentives for operational commanders to "down-select" the most promising course of action for submission for TPFDD development and further analysis.

Other provisions in the planning doctrine allow for option development in less detail and without the analytical verification associated with TPFDD development and modeling. In these so-called level 1, 2, or 3–types of plans, options and concepts of operations (conops) are designed and presented for discussion among military leadership.

But only "level 4" plans are subjected to the entire analytical process and TPFDD development, so only these plans have the high-level confidence of the military advisors. As one experienced senior planner explained, "without a TPFDD, these things are no better than grad-school research papers."[7].

If presidents or civilian leaders become frustrated by the lack of options, they can explicitly ask for a lesser level plan or perhaps a "commander's estimate," in lieu of the detailed level 4 plan for use in the decision-making process. Military leaders, however, will be loath to bring such "back of the envelope" thinking to the president—assuming presidents or their civilian advisors are even aware that military doctrine allows for the development of less detailed plans. Military officers have a legitimate fear that the president or his advisors might latch onto an "half-baked" idea and order the military to execute—only to discover too late that the resources required were unavailable or that the conop was ill-conceived.[8]

The normal military planning process was designed to avoid such misadventure. However, the process assumes there is ample time to think through a problem, develop various options, test, analyze, and iterate among civilian and military leadership. This so-called adaptive planning process was put in place in the wake of Secretary Rumsfeld's frustration with being presented only one fully developed option for Iraq. In the adaptive planning process, options are developed and presented to leadership (usually the secretary of defense or his/her "designated representative") at various points along the way as outlined in Figure 1. This process is designed to facilitate a robust civil-military dialogue *during* the planning process, so that civilian leaders can better understand the way the scenario might unfold (the conop) and the resources that might be required. Importantly, the process allows civilian leaders to clarify political objectives and redirect planning efforts along the way if required (Bucknam 2011).

From a civilian oversight perspective, the adaptive planning process is an ideal model for facilitating a robust civil-military dialogue *while* the plans are still being developed. It is the primary means by which the secretary of defense exercises his authority and carries out his legal responsibility to issue guidance and review and approve all military plans.[9] By law, every two years the secretary reviews and updates a list of planning priorities for the department and submits it to the president for approval. This classified list includes various "most likely" and "most dangerous" crises scenarios identified through intelligence analysis and strategic prioritization. The four-star combatant commanders are then tasked, through the secretary's classified document, Guidance for Employment of the Force (GEF) and the chairman's companion document, Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (JSCP), to develop these plans and submit them for review by the secretary of defense via the iterative process depicted in Figure 1.

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7. Interview with Military Planner #1, 2009.

8. Interview with Joint Staff Advisor #1, Chairman Mullen's staff member, March 2, 2011.

9. 10 U.S.C. § 113(g)(2): "The Secretary of Defense, with the approval of the President and after consultation with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, shall provide to the Chairman written policy guidance for the preparation and review of contingency plans, including plans for providing support to civil authorities in an incident of national significance or a catastrophic incident, for homeland defense, and for military support to civil authorities."
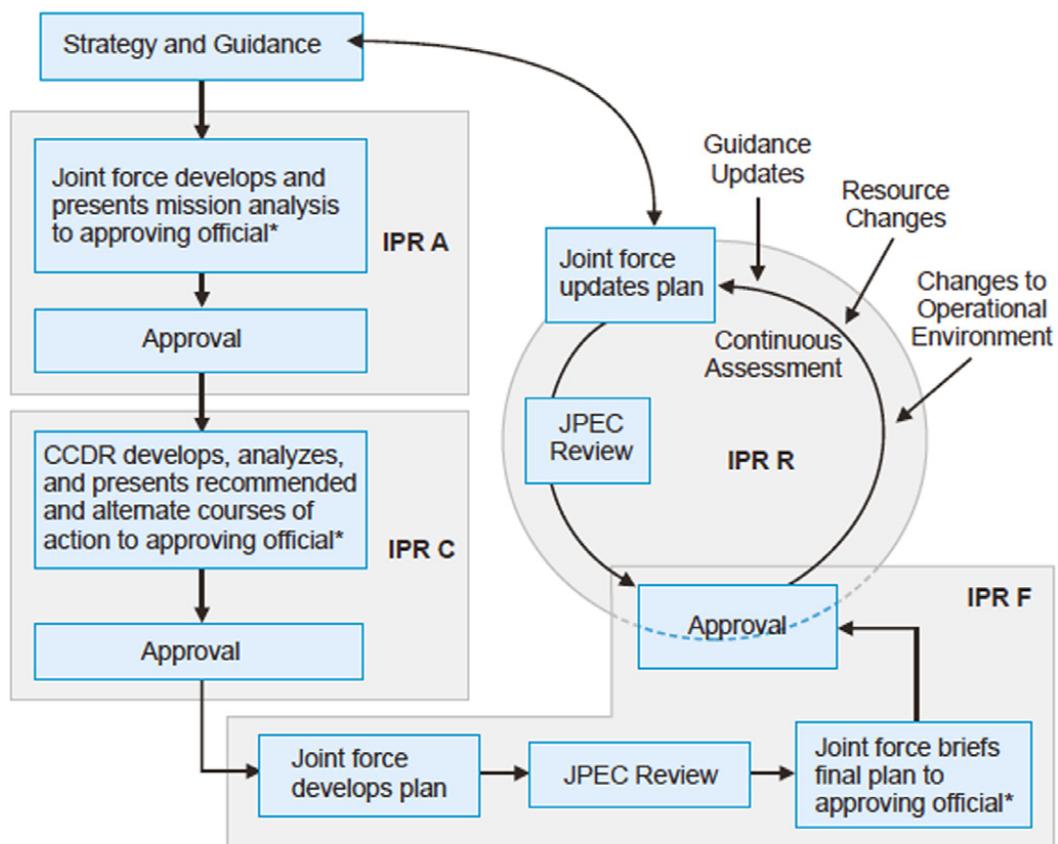
*Approving official is typically the Secretary of Defense or designated representative

Legend

CCDR	combatant commander	IPR F	plan approval
IPR	in-progress review	IPR R	plan assessment
IPR A	strategic guidance	JPEC	joint planning and execution community
IPR C	concept development		

FIGURE 1. Adaptive Planning Review and Approval Process.
Source: Department of Defense (2011).

As the deputy assistant secretary of defense for plans from 2009 to 2012, I was charged with developing the prioritized list and coordinating this civilian-military dialogue with the four-star combatant commanders and the secretary of defense. As such, I was often the first civilian in the secretary's chain to be presented with the plans and options at various stages in the review process. In the beginning, despite the guidance and doctrine emphasizing the importance of option development, rarely was there more than one option presented during my briefings, as the military commander had often already directed his planning staff to "down-select" to only one. Over time, working through the adaptive planning process, with its many waypoints allowing for

civilian-military dialogue, we were able to request, and the planners had the time to develop, additional options for various "deliberate" plans.

Throughout this process, a continual source of frustration for both sides is the differences in expectations regarding planning "guidance." Military planners want detailed guidance from civilians regarding end states and objectives that civilians often cannot provide up front. While civilians might find this unrealistic, the military considers it absolutely vital and promotes this expectation through its doctrine and education. The language is clear in the military's keystone doctrinal manual for military planning, *Joint Publication 5.0: Joint Operation Planning* (Department of Defense 2011). This publication outlines precise instructions for the production of detailed military plans by a large staff of military planners under the direction of a Joint Force Commander. The starting point for this process is strategic guidance, which is defined as follows:

> In general, [strategic] guidance provides long-term as well as intermediate or ancillary objectives. It should define what constitutes "victory" or success (ends) and allocate adequate forces and resources (means) to achieve strategic objectives . . . For specific situations that require the employment of military capabilities (particularly for anticipated large-scale combat), the President and SecDef typically will establish a set of strategic objectives (Department of Defense 2011).

This doctrine sheds light on the frustrated, chicken and egg-style dialogue that occurred during the Sudan planning. Planning staffs are taught that they will receive very detailed guidance regarding the strategic objectives, including a predetermined end state and boundaries about resources allowed or available. But civilian presidents and defense secretaries might be surprised to learn that it is considered their responsibility to determine ends and means without being first offered a menu of feasible options, or without detailed data about how much things cost to do in general and which forces are at appropriate levels of readiness or are otherwise available and capable of getting to the fight. Only the military has access to such data or expertise in such rough order of magnitude concepts. Still, much of this friction can be mitigated through robust iterative civil-military dialogue facilitated in the adaptive planning process—assuming there is enough time.

The biggest problems arise when crises that are not reflected on the president's list begin to emerge or ongoing operations start to evolve in unpredictable ways. There is simply not enough time to initiate the rigorous adaptive planning process described above. For scenarios that are not already tasked in the GEF or the JSCP through the Title 10 legal process outlined above, the president can task the department through the secretary of defense who in turn will issue a Strategic Guidance Statement, or the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who will issue a Planning Order to the relevant combatant commander to commence planning.

During both the Libya crisis and the Sudan episode, the National Security Staff anticipated a crisis and requested that options be developed for the president (Brooks 2012).[10] Unfortunately, lower-level staffers do not have the authority to task the military

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10. Interview with Ambassador Vicki Huddleston, former deputy assistant secretary of defense for African affairs, September 20, 2012.

to develop plans. So staffs spend even more time haggling at lower levels over whether or not to elevate the issue to the president and advise him to issue planning guidance. In another case in which people began to worry about genocide in Kyrgyzstan, lower-level White House staffers were frustrated that they could not just task the military to move assets into place or to develop options. When a White House staffer was told by senior defense official, Rosa Brooks, that she could not just order the military to move like that, and that he needed to get the president to discuss the request with the secretary of defense, he complained, "We don't have time to spin up a whole bureaucratic process . . . Whatever happened to civilian control of the military?" To this she responded, "You are the wrong civilian" (Brooks 2012).

This extremely hierarchical tasking process, combined with a slow and deliberate planning system designed to develop extremely detailed and viable operational plans and a hesitancy of military leadership to present "back of the envelope" options to the president, results in too few options on too slow a time line to enable the president to make informed and timely decisions. According to Jim Steinberg, who served in both the Clinton and the Obama administrations, this dilemma leads frustrated civilians in the White House or elsewhere in the executive branch to come up with their own "hairbrained" options,[11] effectively flipping the advisory process. Instead of the military presenting options for decision, lesser-informed civilians are presenting options to the military for viability testing. Of course, this flipped process is risky. In the worst case, the president might order a poorly developed option to be executed, resulting in mission failure. In other cases, options can be judged unviable and even more time can be wasted starting over again.

When Ambassador Huddleston, serving as the senior civilian defense official for African affairs, could not get the Joint Staff or Africa Command to commence planning for an emerging crisis in North Africa, she ginned up a small cell of "action officers" in the office of the secretary of defense over a weekend to develop some "rough order magnitude" options for presentation to the White House. Because these civilians lacked the expertise or data, however, the options were considered ill-conceived and more time was wasted while the proper authority was developed at much higher levels to issue a Planning Order to the proper combatant commanders via the Joint Staff.[12]

Once the planning commenced, however, the civil-military dialogue met other classic friction associated with definitions of end states and disagreements over resources required, including numbers of troops, for mission success. Civilians in the White House and the State Department could simply not understand why the military insisted on a huge, politically risky, military footprint to accomplish the mission. From the military's perspective, as explained below, smaller footprints are a recipe for military disaster.

11. Telephone interview with former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State James Steinberg, September 6, 2012.
12. Interview with Ambassador Vicki Huddleston, former deputy assistant secretary of defense for African affairs, September 20, 2012.

Third Order (Cultural) Friction: Defining "Risk" and Limiting Escalation

A perennial source of tension in the broken planning dialogue is the issue of resource requirements or force size. From Kennedy's search for options in the Cuban Missile Crisis, to Rumsfeld's ideas about a leaner, faster invasion force in Iraq, or President Obama's haggling with the military over numbers of "boots on the ground" in Afghanistan, it seems civilians and the military are often out of synch when it comes to just how much force is required to "win." In these cases, presidents often have more limited objectives in mind and cannot understand why the military cannot provide smaller force packages for smaller, more limited operations.

Presidents have a number of issues weighing on them that drive their predilection for small deployments and limited mission objectives. The first is a desire to limit the bloodshed. The more troops in harm's way, they assume, the more risk for casualties and body bags. As an elected official, presidents are also sensitive to public opinion and the desire to avoid large expensive and bloody wars "on their watch." Presidents also are trying to avoid a nasty political fight over war powers with the Congress, which would clearly be triggered by a large buildup and deployment of forces requiring large appropriations of funds. Thus, in the up-front haggling over force size, presidents prefer a smaller footprint so as not to alarm Congress and the public, be overtly provocative, or be accused of overstretch.

From the military's perspective, as Brigadier General Hix explains, this is again just a simple matter of physics; or as the cliché goes, "amateurs discuss strategy; professionals talk logistics." From the logistician and planner's points of view, terms like "limited" or "surgical" are fraught with risk. Images of small units of troops on the ground handing rice to starving Somalis or perhaps conducting a targeted raid in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, is not as easy as it looks on CNN. According to Hix, "civilians who want a small footprint mistakenly think this will limit the bloodshed—but as soon as American troops are deployed someplace, they become a target."[13]

As planners can easily see, the force package must not only be big enough for the particular mission, but big enough to protect itself—or even better, so big and so scary that any would-be enemy would be deterred by the shear firepower that might "rain down on them" should they be so foolish to attack. This means things like tanks and airpower will be visible. Then there are the forces required to support that fighting or humanitarian force. For this, logisticians use a 2:1 ratio of support troops to fighting troops. In all, between the requirements to protect the force and prevent unnecessary bloodshed (and thus escalation) and the requirements to feed, house, and care for the troops on the ground, it very quickly starts to look like the American military is going to war—precisely the image the civilians may be trying to avoid.[14]

13. Telephone interview with Brigadier General William Hix, former director for plans, Joint Staff, J7, September 12, 2012.
14. Telephone interview with Brigadier General William Hix, former director for plans, Joint Staff, J7, September 12, 2012.

But there is another, less technical, explanation for the military's predilection for larger force packages: Vietnam. In his detailed examination of the nature of military advice in the post-Vietnam era, David Petraeus claims that one of the critical lessons the U.S. military took from its experience in Vietnam was about the "perishability of public support for military action abroad," making time "the principal limit in so-called limited wars." This fixation on the need to "win" before the public grows tired of the action, informs the way in which the military approaches the planning process from the start. "Once the decision to use force is made," he states, "the military have frequently, and understandably, sought to use as much as they believed was necessary to bring the commitment to a speedy and victorious conclusion" (Petraeus 1989, 492).

This cultural predisposition for large, speedy wars, with concrete objectives over what would most likely (in their professional assessment) be long drawn-out quagmires if ends and means were limited at the start, was famously enshrined in the so-called Powell doctrine. This approach was more of a policy than a doctrine, as it stipulated *when* force was to be used—only as a last resort, only if the rules of engagement and objectives were clearly articulated from the start, and only if there was a so-called exit strategy—as well as *how* it was to be employed—with overwhelming force vis-à-vis the enemy. In short, the Powell doctrine attempted to ensure the military would not again be put in a position where it could not fight how it wanted to fight, win decisively, and come home swiftly with few casualties and to great public approval (Halberstam 2002; Kitfield 1997).

Thus, the civilians' quest to sustain a low political and public profile is out of synch with the military leadership's focus on ensuring "overwhelming" and swift victory. For a great number of potential military operations, clear "victory" over an identifiable military opponent is difficult to envision—for either civilians or military. Consider the use of force to prevent or stop ethnic violence or genocide, civil unrest in a foreign country, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, or any number of operations in which the objective is to restore order or assist a host nation's security forces in an internal conflict.

Where the military cannot see a clear-cut path from deployment of force to decisive victory, they have had trouble planning or presenting options. When, for example, during the Clinton administration, the White House wanted the military to develop options for countering the emerging threat of transnational terrorism, and al-Qaeda in particular, they got nowhere.

> It was stunning how much [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General] Shelton pushed back. He simply did not want to provide options. Said it can't be done militarily, would require tens of thousands of troops, would involve massive casualties, etc.[15]

The broken dialogue on al-Qaeda motivated the White House to engage the CIA, who were considered "much easier to deal with."[16] The options the CIA came up with were based on a different set of legal parameters and thus allowed them more flexibility to craft

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15. Telephone interview with Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State James Steinberg, September 6, 2012.

16. Telephone interview with Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State James Steinberg, September 6, 2012.

what appeared to be more flexible options. Steinberg concedes that the legal authorities under which the military operates are more restrictive and that having the military do the types of things the CIA proposed might be a slippery legal slope. He worries about having the military operating outside theaters of war, where their Geneva Convention protections might be compromised. Still, the military's refusal to even consider options was extremely frustrating for the civilians looking for solutions to what was becoming a grave threat to national security.[17]

Conclusion

This analysis reveals that what often appears to be a personality-driven or political debate between the commander in chief and his strong-minded military advisors has deeper institutional and cultural roots. The military, steeped in Sam Huntington's mindset of the professional military officer, has a certain set of expectations about how to craft "best military advice" for the president. These expectations are deeply embedded into the organizational culture and in many ways hard wired into the institutionalized planning processes. The processes are designed with a set of expectations about the roles the civilian leadership will play in providing guidance, which are in many ways out of synch with the expectations of the president and his civilian advisors. Ultimately, the output of the military's planning process fails to deliver the type of nuanced advice in the form of creative options that the president needs.

Three years after the debate over Afghanistan, President Obama, in discussing the decision process for military operations in Libya, seemed resigned to the fact that the Pentagon is not likely to provide multiple options toward various political outcomes. "What the process is going to do is try to lead you to a binary decision. . . . The process pushes towards black or white answers; it's less good with shades of gray" (Lewis 2012).

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17. Telephone interview with Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State James Steinberg, September 6, 2012.

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