An Alliance Divided?

Five Factors That Could Fracture NATO

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In states with many factions vying for power, the center of gravity lies mainly in the capital; in small states supported by a more powerful one, it lies in the army of the stronger state; ***in alliances, it lies in the unity formed by common interests****; in popular uprisings, it lies in the persons of the principal leaders and in public opinion.*

— Carl von Clausewitz

They [the parties to this treaty] are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage, and civilization of their peoples, ***founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.***

— The North Atlantic Treaty, 1949

For almost seventy years, NATO has positively influenced the world. The Alliance's many credits include acting as a major factor in deterrence of nuclear war, contributing to the erosion of the communist ideology of the Soviet Union, and projecting stability in difficult places such as Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. Although these measures of past performance indicate that NATO could continue to succeed in the future, there are no guarantees. In fact, if the complex and adaptive security environment continues to evolve on its present course, it will become increasingly difficult to maintain cohesion of the Alliance. Arguably, it is one

of the most successful alliances in human history, but without cohesion, NATO can and will fail.

Whether one agrees with Carl von Clausewitz's supposition that the center of gravity of any alliance is "unity formed by common interests" or not, no one can deny that if the members are of one mind, an alliance exists.[1] Conversely, if the members do not have a common understanding, an alliance does not exist. Between these two extremes lie varying degrees of cohesion, and, as such, directly proportional degrees of effectiveness, efficiency, and synergy. If one makes the assertion that cohesion is a center of gravity of NATO, then it becomes essential to identify the types of variables that affect the strength of this center of gravity.

In the spring through the summer of 2017, the authors of this article conducted in-depth research into the factors that contribute to or detract from Alliance cohesion pursuant to the development of the document *The Framework for Future Alliance Operations*.[2] This article summarizes the project's analysis of factors that could affect Alliance cohesion in the future. It provides a model grounded in data to help readers understand and visualize the aspects of cohesion. It is an exploration of the realm of the possible and acts as a solemn warning to leaders of the many possible ways the Atlantic alliance could fracture in the future.

Underlying Conceptual Definitions

As with many research projects, this study began with an exploration of conceptual definitions. The *NATO Glossary* defines a *center of gravity* as the "characteristics, capabilities, or localities from which a nation, an alliance, a military force, or other grouping derives its freedom of action, physical strength or will to fight."[3] This Clausewitzian metaphor refers to a "focal point" as "the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act" for the group.[4] Rather than "characteristics, capabilities, or locations," centers of gravity can be "dynamic and powerful physical and moral agents of action or influence."[5] Even though some question the idea of a center of gravity, the concept retains its relevance for many contemporary planners as it helps them understand the complexities of the security environment and the relationships between systems, as well as prioritize efforts.[6]

The next key term, *alliance cohesion,* reflects the degree to which the members are able to agree on goals, strategies, and tactics, and coordinate activity for attaining those goals.[7] In addition to this behavioral component, cohesion represents the particular quality that makes its members operate as a whole during times of crisis. Literature from the psychology field defines cohesion as "bonds, either social or task based, that contribute to the synergistic functioning as a whole."[8] Other accounts claim "alliance cohesion is based upon the distance between individual member interests and the collective alliance interest."[9] In defining this term, it is key to note that cohesion is a very fluid idea, contextually based and highly subjective. Therefore, this research proceeded under the assumption that cohesion is largely qualitative in nature.

Some assert that the best moment to understand cohesion is in time of crisis, such as when the Alliance faces a significant conflict. In case of wartime alliances, cohesion refers to the states' ability to coordinate military strategy, agree on war aims, and avoid making a separate peace, together with "the degree of convergence among member states' commitments to the alliance."[10] This is important, since conventional wisdom asserts the source of cohesion is usually the element (be it political, economic, military, or nonmaterial) that is targeted by adversary activities and likely results in the defeat of the attacked party. It then follows that by adhering to these definitions, one could consider Alliance cohesion to be at the level of a center of gravity, since it "exerts a certain centripetal force that tends to hold an entire … structure together."[11]

Literature Review

Many scholars in the fields of political science and international relations have conducted research into the topic of cohesion. Especially, the post-Cold War period led some to assert that cohesion between North America and Europe is "no longer guaranteed by a commonly acknowledged existential threat."[12] With their national interests "less predetermined by *a priori* ideological considerations," the "situational nature of threats and challenges, capabilities, and commitments, and interests and

Previous page: U.S. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis (*third from right*) and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (*fourth from right*) walk to a meeting 27 September 2017 with deployed forces in Afghanistan. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Jette Carr, U.S. Air Force)

alignments" has directly affected Alliance cohesion.[13] One can therefore assume that if a direct existential threat exists, the bond is stronger than when it does not.

Therefore, the first and the most parsimonious factor that emerges is *threat*—a cognitive, or perceptual, concept, whose degree is mostly a function of capabilities.[14] Particularly, the level and source of threat tell about the raison d'être of alliances and inform us about their internal dynamics and durability.[15] The alliance cohesion theory's dominant explanation concerns the *external threat* to alliance. Especially, the realist school of thought writes, "Alliances have no meaning apart from the adversary threat to which they are a response," while being "maintained by stronger states to serve their interests."[16]

The next key observation is that the evolving security context and disappearance of traditional alliance politics have led to the default mode of uses of "coalitions of the willing" and "alignments of convenience."[17] Especially in terms of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, cohesion has become "challenged politically as well as militarily."[18] Moreover, threat assessment differentials in terms of dissimilar prioritization based on the perceived level of threat negatively affect alliance cohesion to a significant extent. In the past few years, cohesion waned as the multiplication of crises—including international terrorism, mass migration, and Russian foreign policy—deepened strategically the east-south division among NATO allies, and as the Alliance's internal disputes intensified due to rising populism and Euroscepticism.[19] While these various "domestic pressures and diverging threat perceptions are threatening to pull Allies apart," cohesion "remains critically dependent on its collective defense commitment."[20]

In outlining realist, economic, institutionalist, and social-constructivist theoretical perspectives, other categories of variables emerged: internal dimension of threats, bureaucracy and alliance institutionalization, and shared values and identity. What happens inside the Alliance could matter as much as what happens outside the Alliance.

Given that NATO's endurance had not conformed to the predictions of traditional alliance theory, Ohio University professor Patricia Weitsman suggested examining internal and external threat dyads in order to understand alliance cohesion.[21] She found that NATO survived the end of the Cold War due to low *internal threat*, which concerns the politics of alliances. Consequently, this alliance cohesion theory says the lower the internal threat, the more cohesive the alliance; and the greater the external threat, the higher level of alliance cohesion.[22]

Another important factor in alliance cohesion is the way in which intra-alliance cooperation institutionalizes bureaucratic structures.[23] For instance, some assert that consultative norms and structures can mitigate internal threats to cohesion.[24] Furthermore, the Alliance's institutional structures allow for information exchange among allies that can raise the level of alliance cohesion independently from external factors.[25] Additionally, the transatlantic bond has depended on credible signaling (i.e., an ally's trust in another's assurances). Especially in the context of nuclear sharing, "weak signals" of U.S. commitment to Europe could damage NATO's cohesion.[26]

The next factor that emerges is that technology and its rapid development remains omnipresent, affecting both the relative operational effectiveness and interoperability of the Alliance.[27] Lastly, some assert that Alliance cohesion flows from the degree of security community formation and the socialization of political and military elites within and among democratic allies that possess a shared set of values and collective identities.[28]

Having laid the conceptual foundation inspired by the existing scholarly literature, this study explored, examined, and refined these ideas

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A paratrooper with 1st Squadron, 91st Cavalry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade and a Slovenian soldier assemble and launch an RQ-11B Raven unmanned aerial vehicle 1 December 2016 during Exercise Mountain Shock in Cerklje, Slovenia. The drill was part of a situational training exercise designed to train and test their reaction to contact and tactical battle drills. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Philip Steiner, U.S. Army)

in an attempt to ascertain the factors that affect the cohesion of NATO in a practical sense.

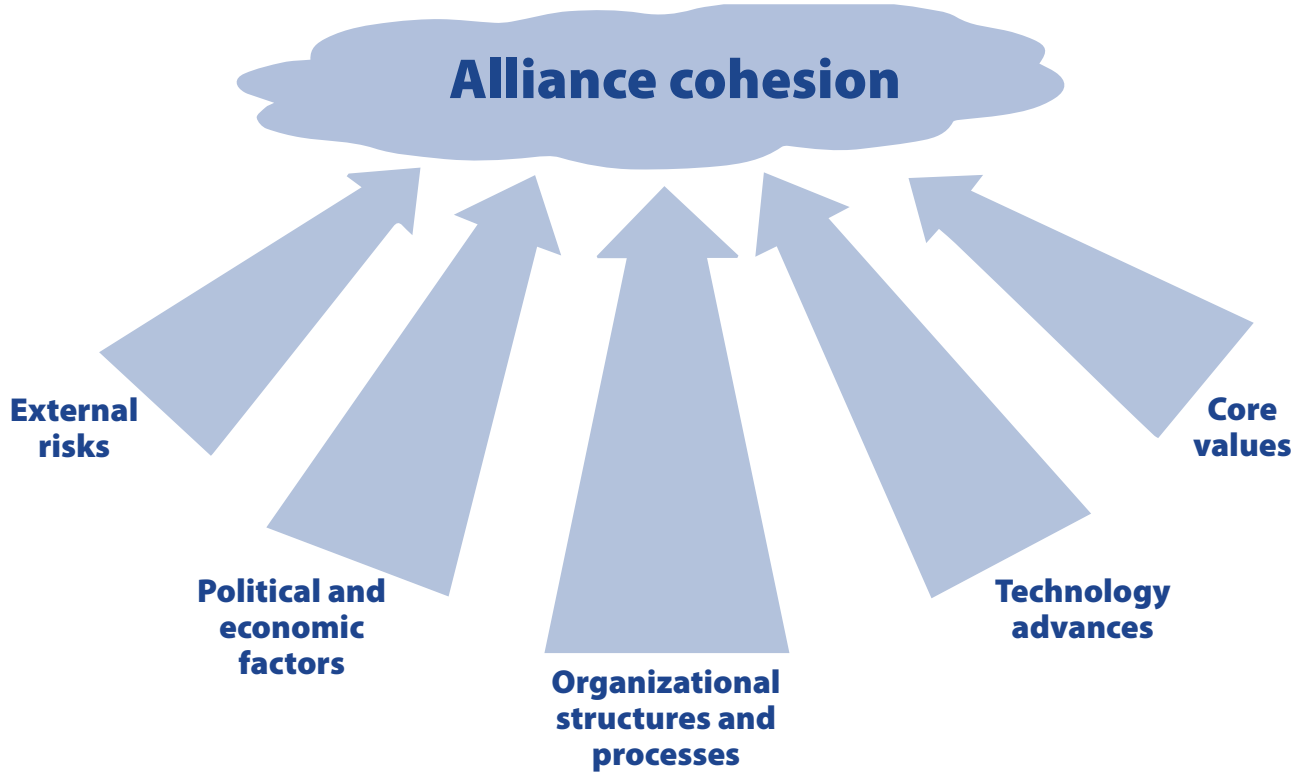
Methodology

The primary research objective of this study was to identify and explore which factors were likely to affect NATO's cohesion through 2035 and beyond in terms of both risks and opportunities. This project targeted students and professionals as the next generation of leaders from different backgrounds (e.g., academia, military, industry, etc.) to understand their perspectives on NATO's cohesion. The primary question that guided this research was, "Which factors are likely to affect NATO's cohesion through 2035 and beyond?"

The study followed a grounded theory methodology and employed both quantitative and qualitative methods, triangulated with the scholarly literature on alliance cohesion theory. Between March and June 2017, researchers gathered data through a series of focus groups, an online survey, and a workshop prepared in cooperation with the Innovation Hub sponsored by NATO Allied Command Transformation. In total, almost one hundred persons participated from across NATO and Partnership for Peace nations.[29] The researchers then analyzed the data with the objective of identifying the thematic categories of variables and the organization of these themes into a theoretical model grounded in the data.[30]

Findings: Five Cohesion Factors

In making sense of Alliance cohesion in the future, this study first refined the understanding of cohesion itself. The findings indicate that NATO's cohesion means synergy and the ability of NATO nations to think and act together. That is, to develop shared interests, values, and common standards and rules, and to respond to problems as a united group. Relying on mutual trust, cohesion is "doing what is best for the community" and looking beyond self-interests. Building on the analogy of ties between family members, the participants stated that cohesion is an expression of



(Graphic by authors)

Figure 1. Five Factors Affecting Alliance Cohesion

staying together despite differences, of "something bigger than ourselves." One participant believed that "without cohesion, the Alliance would implode."

Consequently, based on the scholarly literature and corroborated through the focus groups, this study established that alliance cohesion fluctuates in accordance with a variety of factors. The data collected in this study indicated that variables that affect alliance cohesion fell into five thematic areas: (1) external risks, (2) political and economic factors, (3) organizational structures and processes, (4) technology advances, and (5) core values (see figure 1).

External risks. The participants found it questionable whether allies will be able to find a common conventional threat that would be perceived as strong enough to "transcend the domestic pressures and the concept of sovereignty." Although an absence of external threat to the Alliance is very unlikely, the future risk will lie in multiplication of external threats and a lack of common perception of those threats.

This underdeveloped common understanding of external threats, accompanied by differential threat assessments, could weaken NATO's cohesion. To illustrate this point, although the survey participants listed the failure to activate Article 5 in case of attack as a potential risk, further discussions showed that non-Article 5 missions could constitute the real test for NATO's cohesion. In words of the one of participants, "if there is an operation and only two nations show up, this is not cohesion."

For some nations, this threat multiplication and dissimilar threat perceptions can lead to an operational overstretch or to an eventual "mission creep." In contrast, other nations might develop an excessive sense of security that would lead them to reduce their attention and willingness to participate in NATO activities. For this reason, terrorism, for instance, cannot constitute NATO's defining threat. Additionally, the changing nature of threats to allies' security will require domestic, nonmilitary means to address them, rather than alliance-wide military measures. In other words, "nations will be looking inside to maintain order."

Political and economic factors. The group of political and economic factors points to the risks of severe

disagreements among the allies, which could lead to the weakening of the transatlantic bond, disintegration tendencies within the European Union, or even withdrawal of a NATO nation from the Alliance.

At the level of political elites, the participants identified the crisis of political leadership in NATO nations among the most probable causes of weakening alliance cohesion in the future. Particularly, populist leaders who prefer narrow, short-term political gains at home and who are prepared to "undermine an international institution to gain consensus internally" represent a serious threat to multilateralism, on which the Alliance has depended. Oftentimes, national leaders "use NATO as a scapegoat for their domestic political games," while "NATO does not [and cannot] fight its own nations."

At the level of domestic population, the support for the Alliance in member states can decline due to NATO's unclear purpose. This could become an acute problem, especially if national leaders continue to frame security problems exclusively in domestic terms instead of treating them as NATO-wide. Particularly, concerns over sovereignty could override the relative value of the Alliance's collective good and make governments pull limited funds away from NATO.

In a similar vein, demographic shifts changing the socioeconomic and cultural fabric of nations, such as an aging population and migration, will drive differences in fiscal priorities, which could result in decreasing national defense spending. Furthermore, if the free-riding behavior reaches critical proportions within NATO burden sharing, it can create, out of those who bear their fair share, a group of allies disinterested in defending free-riding nations, as they could cease to see "return on their investment."

Organizational structures and processes. This project's focus groups concluded that NATO's rigid organizational processes that hold onto the past could result in an Alliance "unable to evolve with member states' national interests." Bureaucratic politics within the Alliance structures could cause NATO's slow adaptation to contemporary needs and values. For instance, the participants listed the top-down defense planning process of determining capability requirements as a case where the Alliance and evolving national interests do not align.

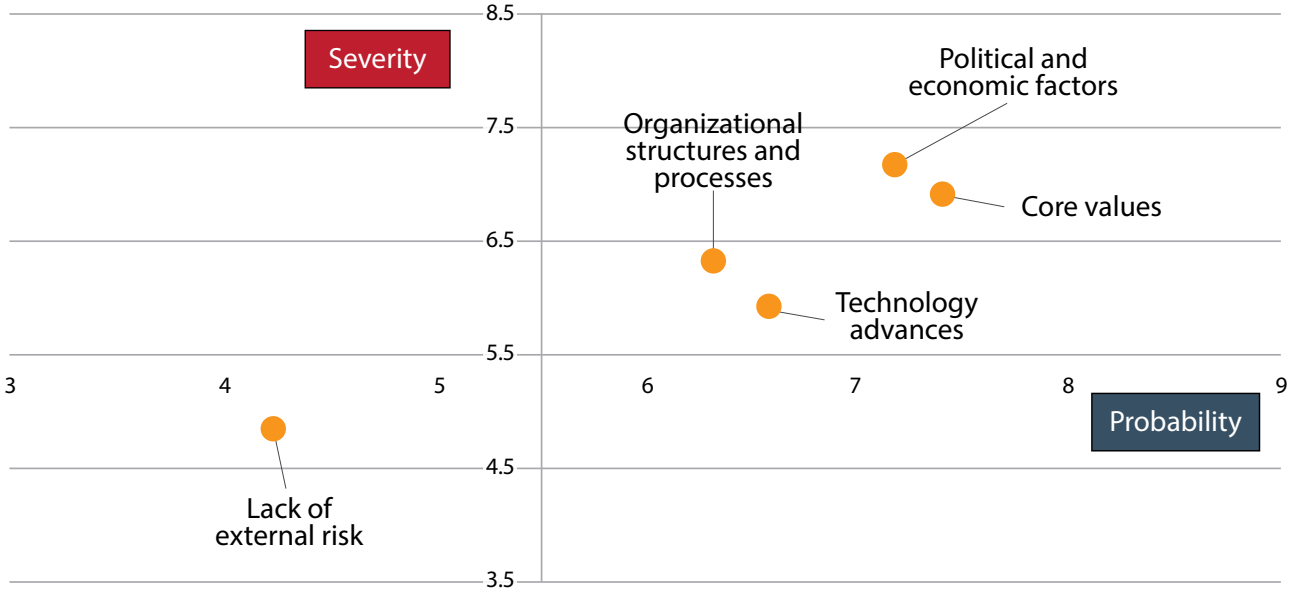
Furthermore, civil-military frictions on both NATO and national levels could negatively affect readiness of the forces. Long decision-making processes and underdeveloped institutional procedures in national headquarters could prevent the Alliance from developing a legal framework for a common course of action under the NATO flag; for instance, in addressing new adversaries that use unconventional means such as cyber. Put simply, NATO cannot be faster than the individual countries that make it up.

Lastly, size matters; cohesion is more difficult to forge and maintain in an ever-enlarging alliance, especially when increasingly divergent national interests tend to change the modus operandi of the Alliance. More rather than less often, NATO's international staff will need to find compromise during its decision-making processes between a political and formal equality hoped to enhance Alliance cohesion on the one hand and the desirable Alliance effectiveness on the other hand.

Technology advances. The participants agreed that technology advances are important for NATO's continued cohesion. Technology will constitute a significant intervening factor in how NATO nations maintain their cohesion in the future for three reasons. First, ever-evolving communication technology can facilitate the spread of risks coming from outside of the Alliance and exacerbate their negative effect. The examples that resonated the most during focus group sessions are information warfare and targeted propaganda against NATO nations. Internet communications technology creates infinite room for alternative media that distort reality, contribute to the emergence of populist and radical movements, and increase the danger of miscommunication among nations.

Second, NATO risks losing the innovation game to the commercial defense industrial sector. In the future, private companies will continue to stay ahead of NATO in designing specifications and setting standards for platforms. This can have a major impact on readiness and interoperability among NATO nations if their innovation efforts (e.g., the U.S. Third Offset Strategy) do not materialize.[31]

Third, some nations may become reluctant to share their latest technology acquisitions, especially if they put private gains above the collective endeavor. This would pose a challenge "for anyone to share information they own without gaining any profit for themselves." The political unwillingness may feed distrust, which can result in a deepening interoperability gap between allies on the battlefield, and ultimately, a less cohesive Alliance.



(Graphic by authors)

Figure 2. Probability versus Severity of Risks to NATO Cohesion

Core values. The participants acknowledged that shared values and identity mean that allies do not represent a threat to each other. NATO's core liberal-democratic values, defined in the Preamble and Article 2 of the North Atlantic Treaty, further frame the nonadversarial culture of the Alliance's internal relational dynamics.[32] Yet, although core values scored high in the survey, the discussions revealed the disagreement about whether they are more crucial for cohesion than national interests are.

The findings indicated that the general problem with core values relates to the intangibility of the common good that NATO produces. If the Alliance is successful, "nothing happens," which leads nations to take peace, security, and stability for granted. This can affect the overall understanding of NATO's purpose among domestic populations. Due to an unknown or unclear purpose of NATO, this "we-feeling" can disappear.

Moreover, the rise of populism and radical nationalism with authoritarian inclinations, further fueled by hybrid, cyber, or information warfare coming from Russia, appears threatening to NATO's core values and will create frictions within NATO. Arguably, the Islamic State also uses a "strategy of chaos" intended to divide the NATO nations and to destroy the cohesion within and among their societies. Further regarding authoritarian regimes, the participants mentioned that the Alliance should think twice before establishing a partnership with yet another country.

Additionally, some participants believed that the continuing migration to Europe from the Middle East and North Africa region would change the fabric of the European societies. European societies might drift apart due to the different paces of change in their identities and values.

To conclude, although there was no consensus among the participants on the degree to which common values play a role in NATO and its cohesion, sufficiently aligned interests of NATO nations, together with a shared purpose of NATO, constitute a definite precondition for a cohesive Alliance.

Probability and Severity

The online survey participants were asked to evaluate possible negative effects of these five factors on NATO's cohesion in terms of probability and severity on a scale from one to ten, ten being the most probable/severe (see figure 2). The overall quantitative data indicate that in terms of probability, NATO will most likely face weakening of its core values, accompanied by internal political and economic risks to its cohesion.

Additionally, the findings indicate that political and economic factors will likely have the most severe impact on NATO's cohesion. On average, in the survey

technology advances and organizational structures and processes scored relatively high as well. As outlined above, the focus groups discussions further refined and detailed the understanding of the possible negative evolution of NATO's cohesion in the future.

Recommendations for the Future

During this project, it became apparent that each factor that contributed to cohesion could also detract from it if the conditions changed. If NATO nations acknowledge these factors and can implement proactive and dynamic policies to manage them, they can affect cohesion for the better. If they fail to do so, by either ignorance or inaction, cohesion could very well wane, leading ultimately to a fracturing or disintegration of the Alliance. Therefore, the Alliance could take concrete steps to manage each of these five cohesion factors by taking the following measures:

- **Remain grounded in the values that brought NATO together in 1949.** Nations founded the Alliance on the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law. In the future, these values will provide a unique and distinct advantage over potential adversaries that lack the ability to provide a morally based alternative narrative.
- **Identify political frictions and agree to move toward common solutions.** NATO stakeholders will continue to have their own unique interests. In the dynamic security environment of the future, when these interests differ, it will be critical to acknowledge the differences and agree to move toward integrative solutions to minimize friction.
- **Maintain the technological edge, but do not let technology outpace interoperability.** The members of the Alliance should invest to maintain the technological advantage over potential adversaries, but realize that if technological development is uneven or uncoordinated, it could lead to major interoperability issues in the future.
- **Keep pace with the future security environment.** In the future, leaders should ensure organizational structures and processes function at a pace that allows timely decision-making to address instability in the security environment before, during, and after it occurs.
- **Develop and maintain a common understanding of future threats.** NATO leadership should seek to develop and maintain a common understanding of external threats and a holistic common threat picture (internally and externally, across all domains including cyber and space, and across all levels of war, strategic to tactical).

Of course, the Alliance can maintain its cohesion in the future in many ways. This list of ideas is a start point for discussion on what NATO could do to maintain its cohesion. What the Alliance will do in the future is a question for future leaders as they address the challenges of their time. This study indicated that if they can keep an eye on maintaining cohesion and the factors that add or subtract from it, they might increase the chances of future Alliance successes.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to identify the possible future risks to cohesion and to provide NATO with a perspective on how to prevent the Alliance's cohesion from eroding. Although an absence of external threats to the Alliance is very unlikely, the future risks to cohesion may lie in a lack of common understanding of external threats and in disagreements about priorities among NATO nations. Even though there was no consensus on the degree to which common values play a role in cohesion, sufficiently aligned interests of NATO nations, together with a shared purpose, constitute a definite precondition for a cohesive Alliance.

Overall, NATO as a whole is more than just a sum of its parts. Despite many challenges and criticisms levied against it over its history, today the nations that comprise it see its value as an insurance policy for the unexpected, unforeseeable, and unknowable. Simply put, in the future, cohesion will be the glue that will hold the Alliance together and give it its strength. If the future leaders of NATO understand the nature of cohesion, the factors that contribute to it, and how to maintain it, the Alliance can remain intact to contribute positively to stability and security in an increasingly unstable and Hobbesian world. ■

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are the authors and do not represent the views of the U.S. Army, NATO, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

Notes

Epigraph. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War,* eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 595–6 (emphasis added by authors).

Epigraph. The North Atlantic Treaty, preamble, 4 April 1949, 63 Stat. 2241, 34 U.N.T.S. 243, accessed 31 October 2017, https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%2034/v34.pdf (emphasis added by authors).

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22. Alex Weisiger, "Exiting the Coalition: When Do States Abandon Coalition Partners during War?," *International Studies Quarterly* 60 (2016): 753–65. Wartime alliances constitute an important exception. Cohesion does not depend on a higher external threat but on what is happening on the battlefield. The balance of power/threat is valid only in case the allies "are able to provide security."

23. Weitsman, *Waging War*, 15, 45. Again, to identify the institutional effect on alliance cohesion, it is important to distinguish peacetime from wartime alliances. Peacetime alliances serve to manage relationships among states within the alliance (manage internal threat), while wartime alliances promote fighting effectiveness.

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Capt. David Minghella (left), a communications officer assigned to Green 1 Security Force Advisory Team, 1st Squadron, 89th Cavalry Regiment, and 1st Lt. Ziaullha (right), a platoon leader in the Afghan National Army, analyze captured Taliban identification cards found 24 May 2013 during a clearing operation in the Kushamond District of Paktika Province, Afghanistan. Recent rewrites of U.S. Army doctrine, heavily influenced by more than fifteen years of combat experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, may generate erroneous, misleading, and counterproductive assumptions about future conflicts. (Photo by Sgt. Mark A. Moore II, U.S. Army)

The Myopic Muddle of the Army's Operations Doctrine

Maj. Daniel J. Kull, U.S. Army

Last Veterans Day, the Army published its updated edition of its operations doctrine, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Operations*, as well as its companion reference guide, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, *Operations*.[1] Along with ADP 1, *The Army*, these manuals are the Army's capstone doctrine and represent the insights of fifteen years of hard-earned experience in the crucibles of Iraq and Afghanistan. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see our mistakes of the past, and these manuals attempt to correct them.

But, this is the only good that comes out of an otherwise disappointing effort to revise and update doctrine. The new doctrine is unimaginative, inconsistent,

"The Myopic Muddle of the Army's Operation Doctrine," a critique of recently published Army Doctrine Publication 3-0, *Operations*, and Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0, *Operations*, intended to spur discussion prior to important doctrine updates released at the end of 2017.

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Russian Actions and Methods against the United States and NATO

Maj. Collins Devon Cockrell, U.S. Army

Russia has worked to upend the post-Cold War European order through an aggressive campaign of information warfare in recent years—so much so that the 2017 European Command Posture Statement identifies Russia as the primary threat, stating that "Russia seeks to undermine this international system and discredit those in the West who have created it."[1] In January 2017, retired Gen. James Mattis, then the nominee for U.S. secretary of defense, stated that Russia was the number one threat to the United States and was engaging in a continuing effort to "break the North Atlantic alliance."[2] President Vladimir Putin's speech at Munich in 2007 declared that Russia would execute a foreign policy that no longer recognized a U.S.-led, unipolar system.[3] Putin stated publically that the West, specifically the United States, was attempting to make Russia a weak "vassal" state and was preventing Russia from reclaiming its role as the inheritor of the Soviet Union's counterbalance role in the world.[4] The hyperbolic and confrontational worldview of the Russian ruling elite can be summarized in reported comments by Andrey Krutskikh, a senior advisor to President Putin, at a February 2017 Moscow conference:

> You think we are living in 2016. No, we are living in 1948. And do you know why? Because in 1949, the Soviet Union had its first atomic bomb test. And if until that moment, the Soviet Union was trying to reach agreement with [President Harry] Truman to ban nuclear weapons, and the Americans were not taking us seriously, in 1949 everything changed and they started talking to us on an equal footing.[5]

As a direct reflection of this, Russia is intervening in political systems across Europe in order to destabilize established and newer democratic states. Putin's stated goal is the restoration of "Great Russia."[6] This paper briefly overviews United States and NATO information operations (IO) doctrine and contrasts those with current analysis of Russian concepts of information warfare.[7] This overview is intended to orient readers to important distinctions in doctrine, capacity, and purpose so that Western actors have a firm understanding from which to make decisions.

U.S. doctrine defines information operations as "the integrated employment, during military operations, of IRCs [information-related capabilities] in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own."[8] These IRCs include military information support operations (MISO),

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"Russian Actions and Methods against the United States and NATO," an analysis of Russian information operations, as well as NATO understanding of, and response to, Russian actions, intended to enable understanding of the complexity of response to aggression in the twenty-first century.

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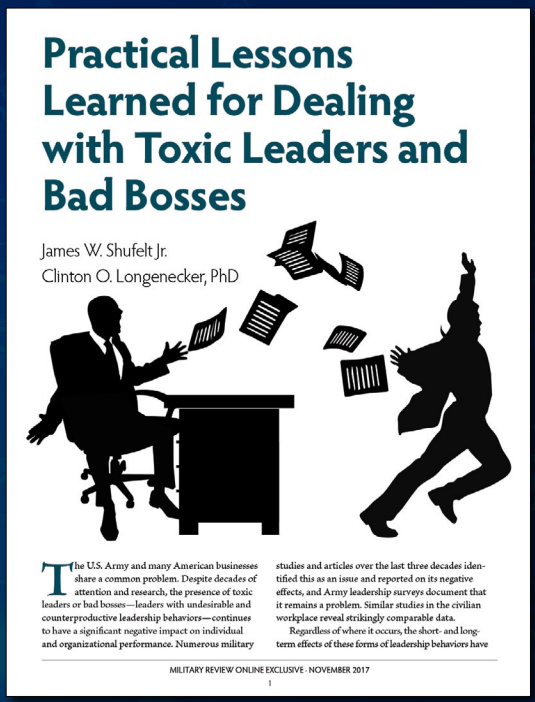

Practical Lessons Learned for Dealing with Toxic Leaders and Bad Bosses

James W. Shufelt Jr.
Clinton O. Longenecker, PhD

The U.S. Army and many American businesses share a common problem. Despite decades of attention and research, the presence of toxic leaders or bad bosses—leaders with undesirable and counterproductive leadership behaviors—continues to have a significant negative impact on individual and organizational performance. Numerous military studies and articles over the last three decades identified this as an issue and reported on its negative effects, and Army leadership surveys document that it remains a problem. Similar studies in the civilian workplace reveal strikingly comparable data.

Regardless of where it occurs, the short- and long-term effects of these forms of leadership behaviors have

"Practical Lessons Learned for Dealing with Toxic Leaders and Bad Bosses," research analysis designed to provide practical insights and responses to frustrating and enervating professional roadblocks in the collaborative work environment.

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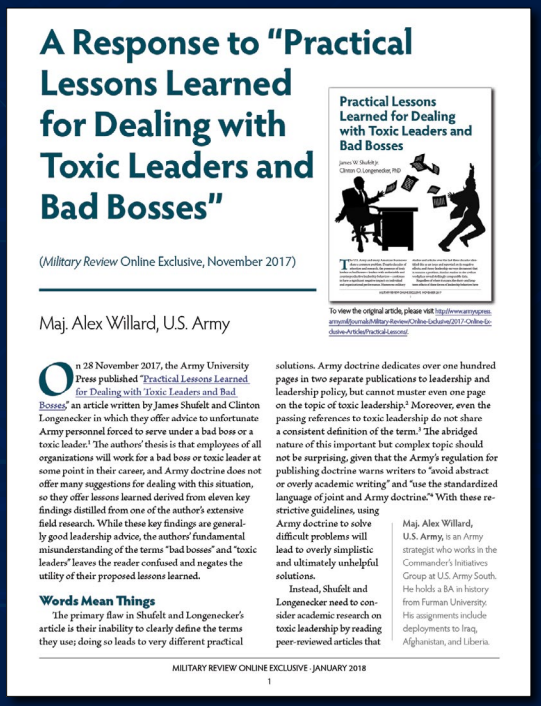

A Response to "Practical Lessons Learned for Dealing with Toxic Leaders and Bad Bosses"

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On 28 November 2017, the Army University Press published "Practical Lessons Learned for Dealing with Toxic Leaders and Bad Bosses," an article written by James Shufelt and Clinton Longenecker in which they offer advice to unfortunate Army personnel forced to serve under a bad boss or a toxic leader.[1] The authors' thesis is that employees of all organizations will work for a bad boss or toxic leader at some point in their career, and Army doctrine does not offer many suggestions for dealing with this situation, so they offer lessons learned derived from eleven key findings distilled from one of the author's extensive field research. While these key findings are generally good leadership advice, the authors' fundamental misunderstanding of the terms "bad bosses" and "toxic leaders" leaves the reader confused and negates the utility of their proposed lessons learned.

Words Mean Things

The primary flaw in Shufelt and Longenecker's article is their inability to clearly define the terms they use; doing so leads to very different practical solutions. Army doctrine dedicates over one hundred pages in two separate publications to leadership and leadership policy, but cannot muster even one page on the topic of toxic leadership.[2] Moreover, even the passing references to toxic leadership do not share a consistent definition of the term.[3] The abridged nature of this important but complex topic should not be surprising, given that the Army's regulation for publishing doctrine warns writers to "avoid abstract or overly academic writing" and "use the standardized language of joint and Army doctrine."[4] With these restrictive guidelines, using Army doctrine to solve difficult problems will lead to overly simplistic and ultimately unhelpful solutions.

Instead, Shufelt and Longenecker need to consider academic research on toxic leadership by reading peer-reviewed articles that

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Online Exclusive articles also serve as a space for discussion and debate on arguments and ideas of importance to the Army. A recently published response to "Practical Lessons Learned for Dealing with Toxic Leaders and Bad Bosses" showcases respectful dialogue on defining and understanding the practicalities of professional behavior in the Army chain of command.

To view this article, please visit http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2017-Online-Exclusive-Articles/Response-to-Toxic-Leaders/.

Army University Press

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