



President Barack Obama meets with Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the commander of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, aboard Air Force One 2 October 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark. McChrystal was relieved of command in June 2010, ostensibly due to press reports that indicated members of his forward deployed headquarters staff were being openly disdainful of the president without reprimand or repercussions. Decision conflict, as described in this article, is manifest at even the highest levels of command. (Photo by Pete Souza, White House)

# Decision Conflict in Army Leaders

Adrian Wolfberg, PhD

*Editor's note: There is data/information in this article that the author used without obtaining the proper permissions; he did not follow the conditions set in the human subjects research determination. Further, the Decision Dominance Study was not yet completed at the time of this publication, and any findings*

*or conclusions are premature. However, since it is already in the public domain, the U.S. Army War College asks that others refrain from referencing this study directly and instead contact Dr. David Dworak at [david.d.dworak.civ@mail.mil](mailto:david.d.dworak.civ@mail.mil) to ensure the user complies with the intended use of data associated with the study.*

Conflict is an enduring feature of decision-making. Yet, leaders are compelled to make decisions, which means they cannot escape dealing with various planes of decision conflict. Moreover, the more senior a leader, the more difficult decisions he or she must make. However, because difficult decisions are not limited to only the most senior leaders of a given organization, leaders who have ascended to higher levels of decision-making must constantly assess the quality of decision-making among less-senior leaders over whom they have responsibility.

Consequently, studying and improving leadership is an extremely complex and important topic for the Army. Leaders naturally want to improve decision-making as it plays a significant role in professional development, successful mission accomplishment, and promotion. For example, Gen. Robert B. Brown, U.S. Army Pacific commanding general, emphasizes the importance of decision-making in order to trust and empower subordinates to be agile and adaptive leaders.<sup>1</sup> Agility and adaptability can be negatively impacted when one does not effectively deal with the stress of decision conflict. Gen. Stephen Townsend, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command commanding general, states that, as a result of these impacts, young leaders are losing their confidence when faced with making hard decisions.<sup>2</sup>

This article provides a deeper understanding of the types of conflict within a leader's decision-making landscape. By identifying the types and contexts in which they appear, leaders may be able to recognize their

strengths and weaknesses and make improvements. The article also recommends a framework between three types of decision conflicts and three types of decision contexts, which leaders can use to assess themselves.



Col. Kenneth Mintz, then battalion commander of 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division, discusses the disposition of forces with a leader of an Afghan Security Forces unit following a successful combined route security operation July 2011 in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. Decision-making can be more complex and stressful to a leader in a combat environment. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Aaron Baeza, U.S. Army)

## Motivation for Research

Decision-making conflict has been extensively studied in the national security domain. Conflict is defined as a process where one person believes their interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another person.<sup>3</sup> Among civilian national security policy makers, knowledge-based conflict (i.e., cognitive) between what an individual believes and what new information reveals can often cause an individual to reject or distort new information.<sup>4</sup> This is a potential danger to decision-making.

However, a recent study of twenty-one Army three- and four-star combat arms general officers, who commanded major formations during the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, indicated the opposite.<sup>5</sup> When



presented with conflicting information, they did not reject or distort new information. Instead, their decision-making process improved because the conflicts triggered self-learning and critical-thinking abilities needed to resolve the problems. Since the study produced such unexpected results, it suggested the need for a follow-on study on how decision conflict is exhibited in less-senior Army officers. Data for this follow-on study was collected in late 2016 and early 2017, while the author was the Defense Intelligence Agency representative to the U.S. Army War College, and is provided in this article.

## Methodology

The follow-on study collected 193 decisions from eighty Army officers, consisting of sixty-three colonels and seventeen lieutenant colonels, of which sixty-nine were active duty, six were National Guard, and five were Army Reserve officers. The study focused on how officers experienced decisions and did not systematically focus on decision-making processes, the outcomes of decisions, or mitigation strategies in efforts to overcome conflict.

## Decision Contexts and Decision Conflicts

The results indicate that conflict was widespread in leader decision-making, not only on a knowledge-based (cognitive) level but also emotionally. Just as cognitive conflict within a leader can negatively affect one's decision-making, so too can emotionally based conflict.<sup>6</sup> The greater the intensity in emotional conflict, the greater the likelihood that deliberative decision-making will be negatively impacted.<sup>7</sup> However, the presence of emotionally laden factors within organizational decisions has not been extensively researched.<sup>8</sup>

**Decision contexts.** In the follow-on study, conflict occurred within three contexts: (1) oneself, (2) the subordinate, and (3) the mission. The first,

**Table. Decision Contexts**

| <u>Decision contexts</u><br>of the 193 decisions | <u>Subcategory of decision contexts</u> | <u>Number of decisions</u> |
|--|---|----------------------------|
| <b>Mission</b><br>103 decisions                  | Resource allocation                     | 40                         |
|  | Process improvement                     | 27                         |
|  | Reorganization                          | 18                         |
|  | Partnering                              | 14                         |
|  | Systems                                 | 4                          |
| <b>Subordinate</b><br>39 decisions               | Poor judgment                           | 13                         |
|  | Toxic leadership                        | 10                         |
|  | Sexual misconduct                       | 7                          |
|  | Contractual                             | 5                          |
|  | Illegal                                 | 4                          |
| <b>Oneself</b><br>51 decisions                   | Relation with superior                  | 23                         |
|  | Relation with subordinate               | 15                         |
|  | Relation with foreign leader            | 8                          |
|  | Relation with self                      | 3                          |
|  | Relation with peer                      | 2                          |

(Table by author)

*oneself*, reflects decisions where leaders are the core source and focus. This typically is noticeable in one-to-one or one-to-few relationships between superiors and subordinates. The second, *subordinate*, is personnel-related where decisions regarding individuals are made based on a leader's formal authority over subordinates and the duty to respond to inappropriate behavior. The third, *mission*, consists of leadership decisions about organizations. The table provides details about the types of contexts and subcategories collected in the study.

Decisions regarding resource allocation involved moving or repositioning organizational elements to accomplish an objective. Process improvement involved decisions that the leader sought to correct insufficiency or ineffectiveness within the organization. Reorganization decisions involved the restructuring of specific units or elements but not necessarily for improvement. Partnering decisions involved working with other U.S. military forces or U.S. executive departments. Systems decisions involved the application of technology and its support to the mission; however, because there were so few decisions, it is only included in the overall analysis.

Within the *subordinate* row, decisions were made because of a subordinate's poor judgment, toxic leadership, sexual misconduct (e.g., sexual abuse and sexual harassment), contractor misbehavior, which typically involved contractor power projection issues against the leader, and illegal activity.

The decisions within the *oneself* row occurred during a leader's interaction with someone of higher rank—typically a general officer or equivalently ranked civilian—with a subordinate or with a foreign leader. Mentions of peer and self-aware decisions were so small that details from them were not included in the article, but they were included in the overall analysis of the table (on page 77).

The three decision contexts are nested—fully contained within another—and these types of relationships are typical in hierarchical systems such as the Army.<sup>9</sup> For example, the *mission* is the function that an organization serves. The people in the organization, the leader's *subordinates*, are the means by which

the mission is executed, and the leader has a personal stake in leveraging personnel in order to accomplish the mission. The object of a leader's *oneself* decision is not knowledge (i.e., concepts, tactics, or strategy of an organization) or influencing other's behavior. Rather, it is about the leaders themselves, because,

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whether by design or circumstance, they place themselves reflexively in a very personal interaction with the people around them. This suggests that the leader is the critical player because he or she is at the center of all three decision contexts.

**Decision conflict.** The aforementioned decision contexts were affected by three distinct types of conflicts in the study: (1) psychological, (2) social, and (3) cognitive. Psychological conflict, for the purposes of this study, emanates from within and is defined as internal, emotional tension during a situation in which the leader has a personal stake while interacting with others, regardless of the decision-making context. Social conflict is defined as emotional pressure, behavioral resistance, or verbal threats toward the leader. Cognitive conflict, or cognitive factors—which most studies of individual decision-making within organizational contexts focus on—is conceptual and is defined as the differences in intent, interpretation, meaning, and understanding between the leader and others during decision-making.<sup>10</sup>

A distinguishing feature of the psychological and social conflicts are their emotional nature: the former emerges from within; the latter from outside, from others. Because of the interpersonal and group dynamic nature of work, understanding of emotions is an important factor for leaders to achieve successful outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

What follows next are quotations, each one from different officers participating in the study, illustrative of each type of conflict within the aforementioned contexts. Name, gender, specific organization, location, and rank have been anonymized.

**Psychological conflict.** Examples of psychological conflict are listed below for many of the types of decision contexts. Note the internal emotional tensions experienced by the leader in these examples.

*Oneself: Interaction with a subordinate*

Despite my specifically stated objection to hiring the applicant, they hired the individual behind my back and then lied about it. Firing or terminating them meant losing their significant amount of technical/institutional knowledge and potentially risking mission degradation or failure.

**Keeping them, doing nothing would set a dangerous precedent and diminish my authority as the commander.** (Active duty O-5)



*Subordinate: Subordinate's toxic leadership*

I made the decision to relieve a battalion senior warrant officer ... **he had become verbally and physically aggressive** with other battalion leaders, both officer and noncommissioned officers. I had personally known and served with this warrant officer for over a decade, including in combat. I had also personally hired him for the job **because of my trust in him and his professional competence.** (Active duty O-6)

*Mission: Reorganization*

I went to my leadership with organizational structure issues in my directorate in April. I staffed it with my boss and **began making changes** as briefed. I was informed in July that I was being investigated for toxic leadership. **This churn since April has affected my self-esteem and caused me to, at times, second guess my leadership skills on dozens of issues.** I also have isolated my views more than in previous years because of fear of being misrepresented. Have had to

Col. Ross Coffman (seated, left center), 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division brigade commander, and his brigade staff and battalion commanders listen to an intelligence brief 22 January 2015 during the Leader Training Program at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California. Commanders are faced with decisions every day that impact their subordinates, their superiors, and themselves. (Photo by Capt. Sean Williams, U.S. Army)

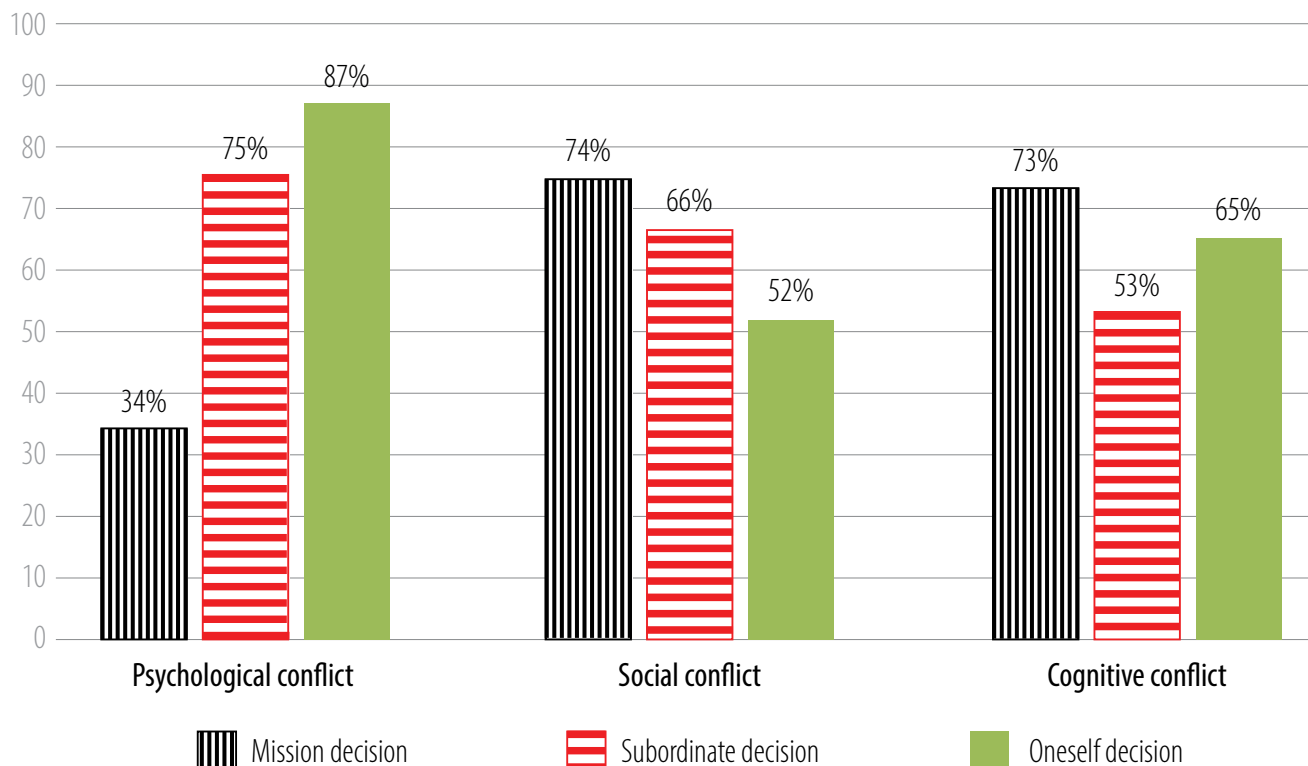
fight my gut instinct to shut down my input.  
(Active duty O-6)

**Social conflict.** While reading the examples of social conflicts, note the emotional pressure, resistance, and threats from others experienced by the leader.

*Oneself: Interaction with a foreign leader*

I traveled with a host nation general officer to a remote location secured by U.S. forces. He wanted to walk downhill to engage with local leaders. I decided to walk down with him, **without higher approval or security planning, to show him trust and not to**





(Figure by author)

**Figure 1. Percent of Conflicts in Decisions**

**hide behind the rules.** Walking down the hill proved to be risky but absolutely cemented trust early and well beyond what my predecessor achieved in a year. (Active duty O-5)

*Subordinate: Subordinate's poor judgment*

I received several **complaints of conflict of interest, misappropriation**, and other charges against one of my battalion commanders. My boss wanted me to relieve him. Because my deputy and command sergeant major briefed me on the prior relationship (about the situation), **I went against my boss** and, instead of firing the battalion commander, I suspended him for thirty days. (Active duty O-6)

*Mission: Process improvement*

I inherited an organization that had been task-organized to achieve operational efficiencies. I directed the brigade and battalions to (make) changes. **There was a lot of pushback.**

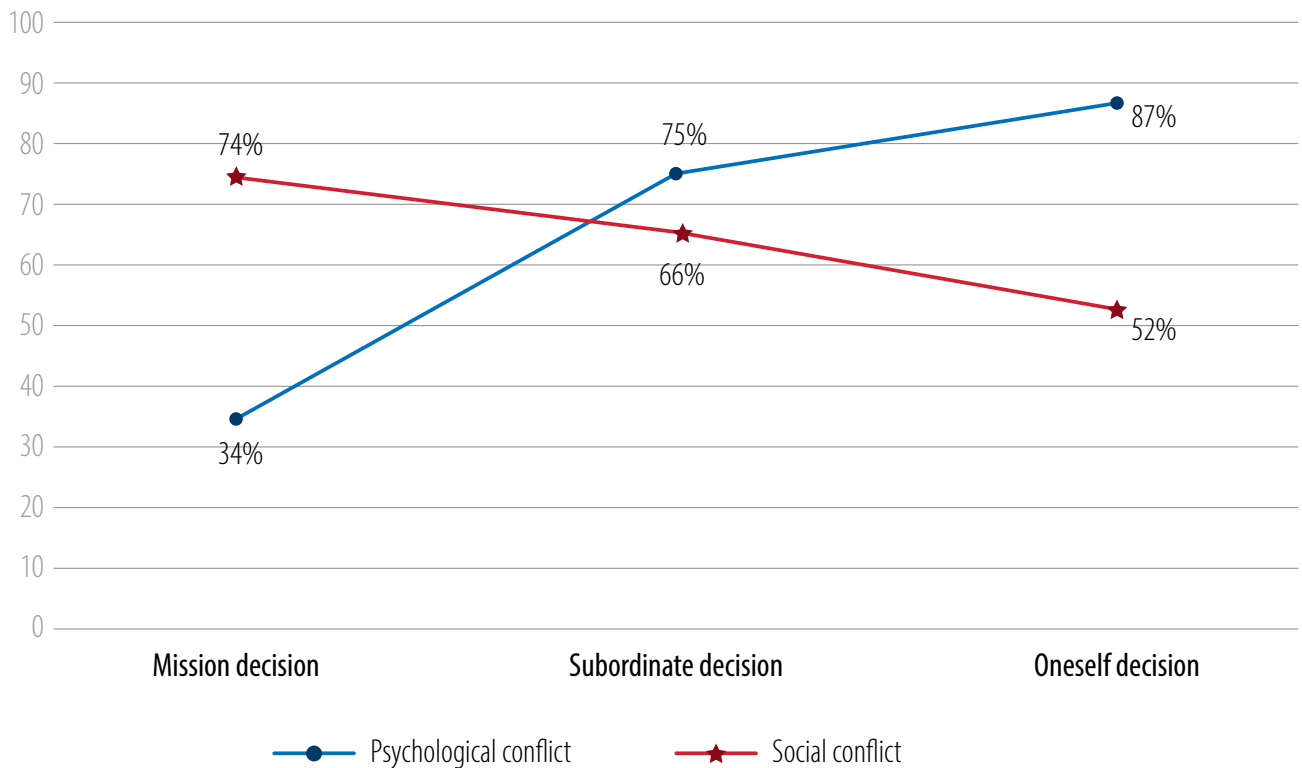
We worked through hurt feelings from changes in command and supervisory relationships, through tense discussions on operational versus support value and priority in the formation, through resistance to the physical and administrative work required to reorganize iterative staff and command discussions....

**It required overcoming the emotional and organizational resistance.** (Active duty O-6)

**Cognitive conflict.** Examples of cognitive conflict are listed below for many of the types of decision contexts. Note the problems with intent, interpretation, and meaning.

*Oneself: Interaction with a superior*

A general officer was using Reserve component personnel in, what I thought, was a violation of federal law. That general officer was my rater. **I confronted him several times about the issue.** He said he could remedy this issue but never did. After some months, I went over his head. (National Guard O-6)



(Figure by author)

**Figure 2. Patterns of Psychological and Social Decision Conflicts**

*Subordinate: Subordinate's sexual misconduct*

During combat operations, there was something happening to the females during our initial visit of their battle space. I discovered some of the female soldiers were being sexually harassed and abused. **I was surprised that a female soldier was still dedicated to the platoon leader** who was having sex with her. (Active duty O-5)

*Mission: Resource allocation*

I was tasked to develop options on a DOD program, but it did not have congressional support and only limited DOD support. My recommended option was approved by senior leadership. **I endeavored to explain the decision and offer feasible mitigation measures to the combatant commands; however, they continued to misinterpret the decision,** and I underestimated the amount and level of communications necessary to achieve shared understanding. (Active duty O-6)

**Conflict is widespread in decisions.** The three types of conflicts (psychological, social, and cognitive) were present in most of the 193 decisions, to varying degrees, and included multiple types of conflicts. Figure 1 (on page 80) summarizes these results. Note that because the multiple types of conflicts occurred within decision contexts, the percentage totals in figure 1 exceed 100 percent.

**Psychological and social conflicts.** On the one hand, as figure 1 shows, the extent of psychological conflict increased when it transitioned from *mission* to *subordinates* to *oneself*. On the other hand, social conflict decreased as decision contexts shifted in the same direction. This pattern can be seen by focusing only on the left-hand and center groupings of bar graphs in figure 1, titled “Psychological Conflict” and “Social Conflict.”

Thirty-four percent of psychological decision conflicts are *mission* related. This increases to 75 percent for subordinate decisions and 87 percent for *oneself* decisions. Social conflict decisions were 74 percent for *mission* decisions, 66 percent for *subordinate* decisions, and

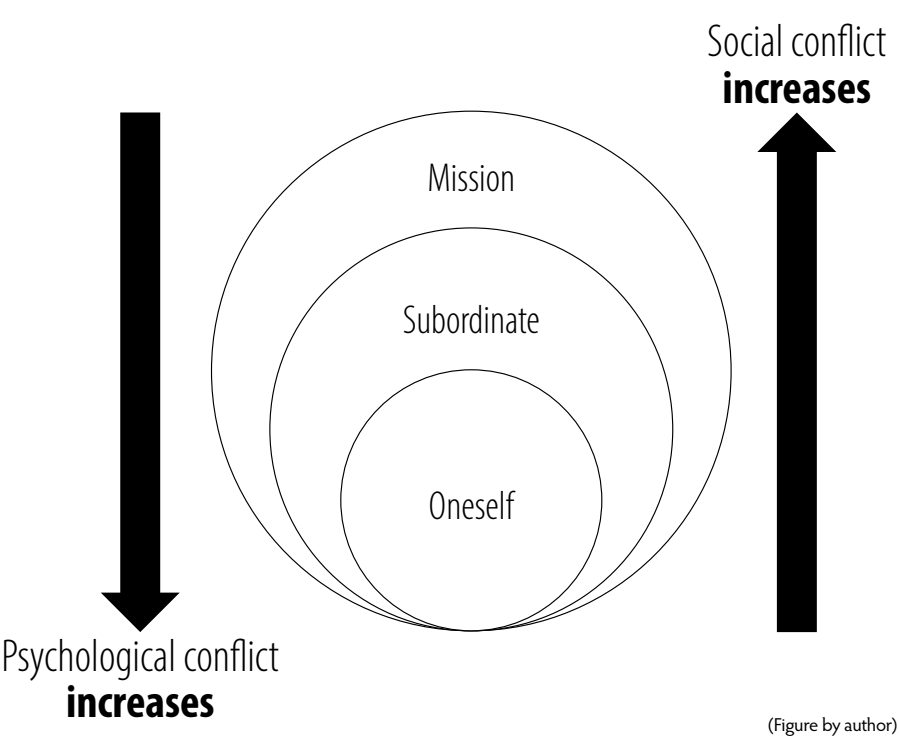
52 percent for *oneself* decisions. Figure 2 (on page 81) shows the same increasing and decreasing dynamic for only psychological and social conflicts.

By framing the data from figure 2 differently, psychological and social conflict both increase depending on which decision context one starts at. Psychological conflict increases as the leader shifts from *mission* to *subordinate* to *oneself*, while social conflict increases as the leader shifts from *oneself* to *subordinate* to *mission*. The leader cannot easily escape these emotional conflicts in decision-making, and figure 3 portrays this increasing presence of emotional-laden psychological and social conflict within the decision contexts.

### Recommendation

Because this systematic study is exploratory, it provides an initial glimpse into emotional conflict within military decision-making. Consequently, prescriptive advice is not yet feasible. What the results can do, however, is suggest a learning framework to guide leaders toward a deeper understanding of conflict in their decision-making.

The framework establishes a relationship between decision conflict and decision context. Figure 4 shows the framework in a three-by-three matrix format. On the side of the matrix, the three types of decision contexts are shown: *oneself*, *subordinate*, and *mission*. On the top of the matrix, the three types of



**Figure 3. Increasing Tendency of Psychological and Social Conflict in Decision-Making**

|                          |             | Type of decision conflict |        |           |
|--------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|--------|-----------|
|                          |             | Psychological             | Social | Cognitive |
| Type of decision context | Oneself     |                           |        |           |
|                          | Subordinate |                           |        |           |
|                          | Mission     |                           |        |           |

(Figure by author)

**Figure 4. Framework for Retrospective Analysis of Decisions**



decision conflicts are shown: psychological, social, and cognitive. The matrix produces nine possible insights.

The framework can be used retrospectively to analyze a leader's decision. This can be done as an informal or formal case study. A decision can be described verbally or in writing to the fullest extent. The analysis of the decision can be accomplished individually or in a group setting. For each of the nine relationships in the three-by-three matrix, a qualitative or quantitative value can be assigned. For example, high, medium, or low could be used to characterize the extent of a conflict in one of the context types.

A retrospective analysis could produce a pattern from the nine squares, which could then be compared with other patterns. Comparisons of the same leader's decisions could then lead to a deeper understanding of how conflict manifests itself in a leader's decision-making. In professional military education programs like the mid-career Command and General Staff College or senior-level Army War College courses, the framework could be used as a practice technique for analyzing conflict so leaders can gain proficiency analyzing their personal and subordinates' decisions.

## Summary and Future Research

The purpose of this study was to explore whether, and to what degree, conflict exists in leader

decision-making. Army colonels experienced three types of conflict (psychological, social, and cognitive) within three decision contexts (oneself, subordinate, and mission). The emotionally laden psychological and social conflicts revealed that as decisions became more personal, psychological conflict increased; and as decisions became less personal, social conflict increased. Cognitive conflict was evident in most decisions.

A learning framework is proposed for the leader to retrospectively analyze their own or other's decisions in order to better understand the character of their decision-making. Once such a characterization is understood, mitigation techniques for improving resiliency in decision-making could then be developed and, with practice, initiated.

Future research with a larger sample of colonels would help to validate this exploratory, systematic study or gain different insights. Future qualitative studies could expand the collection of decisions by Army captains and majors, which would be informative for officer development and senior leader selection. Similarly, in-depth studies to identify the consequences of relationships between conflict and decision, as well as mitigation efforts used against conflict, could add valuable insight to the complexity of Army decision-making. ■

## Notes

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2. Kyle Rempfer, "The Past Decade of War Has Eroded the Decision-Making Confidence of Young Leaders, Army General Says," *Army Times* (website), 9 January 2019, accessed 24 January 2019, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/01/09/the-past-decade-of-war-has-eroded-the-decision-making-confidence-of-young-leaders-army-general-says/>.

3. James A. Wall Jr. and Ronda Roberts Callister, "Conflict and Its Management," *Journal of Management* 21, no. 3 (1995): 515–58, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4bd8/4a12bc63c016cc8dc-178cd16a4520b6809a8.pdf>.

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5. Adrian Wolfberg, "When Generals Consume Intelligence: The Problems that Arise and How They Solve Them," *Intelligence and National Security* 32, no. 4 (2017): 460–78.

6. George Loewenstein and Jennifer S. Lerner, "The Role of Affect in Decision Making," chap. 31 in *Handbook of Affective Sciences*, ed. Richard J. Davidson, Klaus R. Scherer, and H. Hill Goldsmith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

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11. Edgar H. Schein and Peter A. Schein, *Humble Leadership: The Power of Relationships, Openness, and Trust* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2018), 117–18.