

A System Under Strain: **Coherence and Incoherence in the American Way of Limited War**

by Ryan J. Orsini

Only months apart, popular opinions regarding the U.S. action to withdraw from Afghanistan and reinforce Ukraine stand in stark contrast. They exemplify how the American way of war is seemingly criticized and praised within a given news cycle. This disparity between outcomes and perceptions is warranted. Notwithstanding its unprecedented military and non-military endowments, America has an inconsistent record in limited war in the post-1945 era. While all war is inherently uncertain, conflict that seeks limited ends short of an opponent's complete political capitulation is often the hardest to properly assess. America's track record in this kind of conflict is indicative of a way of war that lacks the coherence to translate force into a lasting desired outcome.¹ Perception of the U.S. military's track record in limited war and the roots of its successes and failures matters. Historically, American campaigns were both subject to, and contributors of, the emergent domestic and international political consensus of their time, which engendered the use of military or non-military force.² In short, how the U.S. military as an institution and the wider national security community perceive the relative utility of force shapes present policy options and future policy advantage.

Today, as the U.S. and its partners guardedly await the outcome of Ukraine's 2023 counter offensive, a critique of the American limited way of war, to include its sustained advantages, and the challenges and mechanisms of success and failure, is overdue.³ There is a duality to the American way of limited war, one of military and non-military battle, that both breeds success and sows the seeds of failure. Like two interlocking gears, the complimentary ways of battle are designed to shape, fight, and exploit an adversary during conflict. However, these gears do not always turn as designed, and often fail to translate force, both military and non-military, into desired influence. America's mixed record in limited conflict post-1945 exemplifies this duality. America benefits from military access, non-military conflict expansion, and tactical adaptability, while suffering from the erosion

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of civilian control and operational agility. As the U.S. embarks on another generation of limited conflict, the post-1945 era provides a powerful lesson for today's military professional on the use of force when the very system of war is under strain due to the strategic environment and adversary.

Military and Non-military Ways of Battle: Sources of Failures to Translate

The central tension in the gears of America's way of limited war rests in the ability to translate military and non-military force into influence over time. One source of tension is structural incoherence of force application arising from the independence of U.S. agencies. On one hand, the military way of battle focuses on an enemy's defeat rather than broader political aims.⁴ During military campaigns, the U.S. military typically applies strategies of attrition and annihilation independent of larger political considerations.⁵ U.S. military doctrine refers to campaign completion as military end state, when its instrument of power is no longer the primary means to achieve desired national objectives.⁶ On the other hand, non-military battle utilizes diplomatic, informational, and economic means to shape the conflict horizontally and convert political ends.⁷ These non-military ways and means generate predominantly non-lethal influence and effects varying widely from economic sanction or political pressure campaigns against specified targets or regions. While the military gear often acts absent political purpose, the non-military gear acts without unity of effort. America's non-military means are dispersed throughout its interagency departments, decentralizing its unified projection.⁸ The economic instrument exemplifies this disunity.

U.S. economic statecraft lacks vertical integration with jurisdiction spread across multiple agencies such as Treasury and

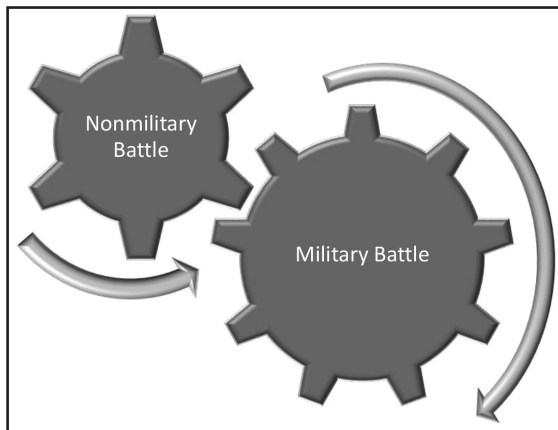


Figure 1. The duality in the American way of limited war.

Commerce Departments. Due to limits of government control over free market enterprise, it also suffers from consistent horizontal integration of purpose to surge resources toward specific geopolitical challenges. Akin to gear teeth that fail to interlock, this structural lack of cohesion among military and non-military battle decreases overall effectiveness of force in application.

Two sources of tension systematically inhibit the translation of America's military and non-military ways and means into desired ends. Structural incoherence, like gears that fail to interlock, prevents the various interagency departments from synchronizing military and non-military force. Dynamic incoherence, represented by gears that spin at disproportionate rates, limits the ability to properly assess the utility of force against a given objective.

Another source of tension is the dynamic incoherence of the perceived utility of force. American consensus over the relationship between the use of force and policy is marked by periods of skepticism and optimism, often apart from the reality of the operating environment.⁹ The last conflict often becomes an analogy to constrain future use of force and objectives in limited war.¹⁰ This trend is magnified by domestic electoral, budget, and news cycles that combine to incentivize short-term outcomes

from military and non-military ways of battle.¹¹ The trend is also enabled by strategic narcissism, or the propensity to view outcomes based on one's own actions, toward the adversary and geopolitical context. This inhibits critical assessment on power instrument application over time.¹²

Given this friction, it is difficult to appropriately sequence and vary military and non-military force combinations, particularly during the conduct of a given campaign. The Joint Phasing Model represents a standard assumption about the political utility of force for a given adversary and geopolitical context. It presents a generally linear progression between non-military and military force with known transition points between instruments of power to reach a desired set of objectives.¹³ Similar to gears that spin at disproportionate rates, this dynamic lack of coherence among military and non-military battle inhibits the proper allocation and exploitation of American war instruments.

Favorable American Capacities in Limited War

The American way of war provides several advantages that range from military access to non-military conflict expansion and an overall tactical adaptability that has allowed the U.S. to effectively use force since 1945. Throughout this period, the American ability to generate and sustain theater access, preserve executive decision space, and tactically adjust to the politico-military context of the operating environment provides key benefits during limited war.

First, America retains an excellent ability for military access and operational reach. The U.S. combines an extensive body of allies and partners with logistical, sensor, shooter, and communication nodes to employ force largely on its own terms.¹⁴ This provides the U.S. with a platform to project force across a range of military operations and purposes, including its

preferred method of maneuver war for decisive military objectives.¹⁵ This combination of superior technology and modern employment and maneuver systems creates a sustained advantage on contemporary battlefields.¹⁶ Further, while typically thought of in terms of a large-scale military force, the advantage of consistent force projection during crisis and competition also bears fruit. While projection enables smaller footprints in the pursuit of objectives, it also enables the deterrent effect of dynamic deployment of military force, one of the most flexible coercive tools in the U.S. policy tool kit.¹⁷ Finally, projection also facilitates the multinational interoperability of the U.S. as a preeminent global security cooperation partner, incentivizing other nations to integrate American military techniques and equipment.¹⁸ The American strategic advantage in access and projection has grown so vast that it has translated directly into adversary security dilemmas and inspired deliberate countermeasures such as air and maritime domain denial techniques and capabilities.¹⁹

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Second, America's ability to use non-military means to shape and expand conflict horizontally also enables it to fight limited war. While vertical escalation increases the intensity of weapons and targets, horizontal escalation expands conflict previously regarded as neutral, be it new geographical regions or domains.²⁰ The American way of limited war bears a rich tradition of diplomatic, information, and economic tools to shape bilateral outcomes from strategic to tactical levels in the post-1945 era.²¹ For example, at the macro level, America's creation and stewardship of governance institutions, such as Bretton Woods

and NATO, fundamentally shaped the political context within which any potential adversary could attempt to achieve its goals.²² At the micro level, the targeted financial sanction emerged over the 21st century to become one of the most effective and used policy instruments of the U.S..²³ America's advantage spurred adaptation, as potential adversaries modeled the American ability to augment military force through non-military action. This response is perhaps best captured in the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine's tenet of 4:1 ratio of non-military to military means in successful future warfare.²⁴

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A final advantage in the conduct of the American limited war is adaptability. While typically unprepared at the outset of crisis, the American way of limited war combines political endurance with high human capital to innovate solutions.²⁵ At the strategic and policy level, this adaptability preserves the executive decision space.²⁶ A professional military funded largely through deficit spending lowers the perceived financial and social costs of the wider electorate, which bolsters the endurance of American force.²⁷ This allows the U.S. to wage conflicts with less popular and governmental scrutiny.²⁸ It also provides resources, such as time, materiel, and talent, to overcome problems on the ground, varying the application of military and non-military means into new tactics, techniques, and procedures.²⁹

Despite these advantages, America best applied force since 1945 against modest goals.³⁰ The sources of tension in America's way of limited war, both structural and dynamic incoherence, favored a generally linear and circumscribed use of force. Militarily,

America's advantage of access was arguably best demonstrated in use of force against limited objectives and peripheral interests in Grenada and Kosovo.³¹ Similarly, America's non-military use of force might be best defined by the cyber and economic tools used to temporarily compel Iran's nuclear program with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.³² However, when needed, the American ability to adapt provided the capacity to reassess and redefine goals. For example, the development of limited objective attack and counterinsurgency concepts during the Korean War and the Iraq War, respectively, exemplify the ability to preserve the executive decision space and tactically adapt based on the strategic context of the theater of operations and in the domestic political landscape.³³

Unfavorable American Capacities in Limited War

The duality of the American way of limited war also reveals trends of weakness. The post-1945 era has uncovered two unfavorable capacities in the American conduct of limited war: eroding civilian control and operational agility. America's adversaries, past and present, successfully exploited these weaknesses against U.S. short run objectives and long run interests.

First, limited war requires increased civilian control to mitigate strategic incoherence between the desired ends and chosen ways and means.³⁴ However, in practice, American leaders increasingly defer policymaking control to the military to boost approval, avoid responsibility, and mitigate interagency tension.³⁵ Since 9/11, in particular, eroding civilian control has magnified the military's embrace of the Huntington objective control to isolate military and non-military instruments of power.³⁶ Without consistent interagency coordination, the American unity of effort, and by extension holistic policy perspective, increasingly falls to the National Security Council. However, National Security Council effectiveness,

both in terms of personnel and procedure, historically varies and is largely a function of the executive personality. It also trends toward a consensus-driven decision-making process.³⁷ Taken together, these frictions make the design, assessment, and execution of limited coercive campaigns difficult. Perhaps this incoherence is best exemplified in the planning and implementation of military surge policy options to meet the broader U.S. national security goals in Afghanistan.³⁸ Ultimately, U.S. policy is often unable to communicate effective coercion during conflict, both in understanding the will and ends of an adversary and adapting to them over time.³⁹

Another unfavorable capacity of American way of limited war is the military's constrained operational agility. This stems in part from a bias toward large-scale combat and the tactical level of war. An institutional idealism about the true nature of war and the military's role in limited conflict is both embraced and forced upon the military institution in the post-1945 era. On one hand, the U.S. military culture selectively incorporates lessons of past conflicts, orienting its technological and conceptual forms of improvement on tactics against a prioritized list of typically conventional and state-based threats.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the post-nuclear era focus on deterrence and compellence at the policy level largely relegates military thinking to the operational realm and below, which enables the military to grow concepts such as modern maneuver-based operational thought inside a policy vacuum.⁴¹ This focus accentuates the incoherence within America's way of limited war as competing schools of military thought on service identity, capacity, and mission remain isolated from broader policymaker and academic debate without challenging the services' core assumptions.⁴² As a result, the U.S. military often lacks the ability to measure and reassess durable success that meets policy aims at acceptable cost rather than through legacy views of decisive military victory, a type of war termination often

absent in limited war.⁴³

Since 1945, U.S. action has positioned many of these problems, as well as their antecedents, in the structural and dynamic incoherence of the American way of war to translate force into policy outcomes. In Vietnam, U.S. domestic political considerations repeatedly usurped the complexity of the operating environment, from initial coercive air campaigns that launched the war to the process of Vietnamization that ended American participation in the conflict.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the U.S. military organizational culture struggled to integrate counterinsurgency lessons into its attritional strategy and exploit changes in the operating environment following the 1965-1967 counteroffensives, which blunted North Vietnamese conventional attacks and threatened the survival of South Vietnam's weak regime.⁴⁵ Military biases inhibited what would have already been a dramatic shift to rebalance resources between conventional force, pacification, and border security.⁴⁶ It also exaggerated host dependencies as American popular and elite support declined.⁴⁷

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Similarly, the U.S. was slow to adapt the state and non-state actor counterstrategies with the U.S. paradigms that won the Cold War and Desert Storm.⁴⁸ In Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. struggled to identify war termination criteria without upsetting its bargaining position with adversaries.⁴⁹ For example, the internal power dynamics of the Karzai regime—who in the years following American intervention increasingly focused on weakening political rivals rather than defeating Taliban threat—diffused American opportunities to sense and exploit a post-invasion or post-surge settlement.⁵⁰ More recently, the

U.S. has been slow to understand how traditional measures of U.S. military and non-military overmatch eroded in competition with Russia and China, as these actors continually seek to accrue advantage in the space between detection, attribution, and response and widen the conflict space based on intensity and activity.⁵¹ Today, it is clear that core tensions in the American way of limited war were purposefully targeted by the nation's adversaries. If human conflict is defined by a battle of complex and adaptive systems, then subsequent strategy in pursuit of policy must become equally willing to embrace and exploit change.⁵²

Military and non-military objectives should align not only with the adversary's losing conditions, but also with the true political purpose, which is often unrealized at the outset of limited war.

Implications: Improving An Institution's Stance

The Joint Force is due for a reassessment of its readiness for the disordered limited conflict it is likely to continue to face, sharpening its ability to simultaneously fight and negotiate toward a desired political end. As the history of limited force since 1945 shows, the American military toolkit does not inherently guarantee success. Nor does it challenge future requirements because military coercive capability is a necessity when asserting U.S. national interests.⁵³ Rather, each threat will require unique integration and sequencing of military and non-military capabilities that are able to identify and exploit opportunity over time. Reflecting on the first decades of the U.S. military's limited war, theorist J.C. Wylie outlined that advantage comes from the ability to control the pattern of conflict, which is a seizure of initiative that

is not based merely on threat or terrain-based objectives.⁵⁴ This requires a candid dialogue both internal and external to the institution to recognize the desired pattern of conflict and then shape military and non-military objectives and methods accordingly.

One way to improve force readiness for limited conflict is to reexamine the objectives that contribute to the U.S. military end state and war termination during conflict. Military and non-military objectives should align not only with the adversary's losing conditions, but also with the true political purpose, which is often unrealized at the outset of limited war.⁵⁵ Counter to the Powell Doctrine—the accepted logic of well-defined and static objectives—this alternative model necessitates the active exploration or probing of the operational and strategic levels of the friendly and adversary systems and a disciplined tolerance for changing objectives. It also requires the force to understand that particular military strategies, such as decapitation, while often most politically and militarily feasible, are also almost certainly incomplete.⁵⁶ Finally, the alternative also accepts that emerging battlefield conditions, refracted by activities in the information space and diplomatic arena, will likely constrain tactical and strategic options alike.⁵⁷ Through this candid internal dialogue over military objective, the U.S. military may identify the desired pattern of conflict, mitigating the structural incoherence in the American way of limited war that drives it toward default setting of enemy defeat through attrition or annihilation agnostic of true political purpose.

The U.S. military can also improve its stance for limited war well in advance of conflict through candid external dialogue with political leaders to shape the perceived utility of military force for a potential threat over time. This dialogue also comes at a price of military independence. Rather than the commonly accepted Huntingtonian notions of professional

independence, this dialogue requires military leaders to invite civilian policy into the initiation, execution, and termination of war strategy.⁵⁸ This puts forward a more objective view of the utility of military or non-military ways and means and requires the military to accept complimentary roles to the coercive potential of other instruments of power across strategic contexts. As a result, the U.S. military can better inform the perceived utility of force that typically aggravates the American way of limited war.

Conclusion: Fighting with a System Under Strain

Despite an impressive suite of military and non-military tools, America's mixed record in limited conflict uncovers a way of war that lacks the organic coherence to translate force into a lasting, desired outcome. Limited war acutely stresses not only the American participants, but the entire system itself. This problem will only deteriorate as the politicization of force and costs of decisive military operations increase over time.⁵⁹ A central challenge for America's future way of war, therefore, is to evolve with state and non-state actors' ways and means specifically designed to inhibit its effectiveness. The U.S. cannot afford for its national security establishment to gauge the utility of force based on pronounced success or failure of a past conflict. Rather, it must be based on a nuanced understanding of the adversary and operating environment. In this process of change, the U.S. can heed a lesson of the last great competition: military contests are a dynamic process of strength exploitation and cost imposition.⁶⁰ More than ever, the U.S. must be willing to question the fundamental assumptions that govern its perceived asymmetric advantages—and change America's way of war accordingly. **IAJ**

Notes

1 This study uses an expanded view of Julian Corbett's definition of limited war based on desired ends, not applied means. As a result, it excludes from the post-1945 Operation Just Cause, Operation Uphold Democracy, as well as the early stages of Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. It also captures uses of force used to coerce opponents before, during, and after conflict in accordance with the US Joint doctrine for the "Competition Continuum." For more on conception of limited war see Julian Corbett, *Principles of Maritime Strategy* (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), 40-51 or Donald Stoker, "Everything You Think You Know About Limited War is Wrong," *War on the Rocks*, December 22, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/12/everything-you-think-you-know-about-limited-war-is-wrong/>. For more on the US competition continuum, see *US Joint Doctrine Note 1-19 Competition Continuum* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2019), https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_19.pdf.

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