

War and Military Operations in the 21st Century: Civil-Military Implications

Conference Summary

Ionut C. Popescu, Duke University

Key Findings

- The character of modern warfare requires a closer integration between civilian and military operations to achieve strategic success in counterinsurgency, stability operations and irregular forms of conflict. Such integration needs to take place both at the strategic level in Washington or London, as well as on the ground between the troops and their counterparts in other departments of government.
- The use of military force to achieve strategic and political objectives will be constrained inasmuch as wars in the 21st century are now “wars among the people”. Winning the “war of perception” may be as important as success on the battlefield.
- There are inherent tensions between military leaders and their civilian superiors which stem from their different responsibilities, but such tensions could be productive and conducive to good strategic performance. Mutual trust and respect, as well as good personal relationships, are key to effective collaboration between civilian and military leaders.
- The recent political and partisan activities of retired officers have led to a perceived politicization of the military, and thus created unnecessary frictions in civil-military relations in both the United States and the United Kingdom.
- The use of contractors is controversial but they play a vital role as logistical suppliers. They will likely remain a feature of future military operations. We need to improve existing control mechanisms and make sure that they are more accountable.
- Both civilian and military leaders need to take steps to make sure that they engage in a more productive strategic dialogue. Civilian leaders need to improve their understanding of military matters so that they can better evaluate the merits of competing military recommendations. Military leaders need to shift their attention from operational thinking to strategic thinking.

Lead off Session: “War and Military Operations in the 21st Century”

The opening session of the event provided a broad strategic perspective. It provided an analytical framework with which to understand how military operations are changing in the current strategic environment and how this impacts the conduct of civil-military relations. The three panelists, Professors James Gow of King’s College London, Hew Strachan of the Oxford University, and General James Mattis, Commander of U.S. Joint Forces Command, offered their insights on the strategic, operational and tactical challenges facing American and British forces operating on a 21st century battlefield.

James Gow addressed three main topics in his presentation: the broad changes taking place in the international system, the changes in the character of modern warfare, and the need to expand the classical Clausewitzian trinities (passion/reason/chance, loosely corresponding to people/government/armed forces) to accommodate the changes in the character of 21st century warfare. The current strategic environment is powerfully shaped by four trends: increased globalization, the pervasiveness of global communications networks, the restraining impact of global trade on the use of force, and a shift in global ethics towards a very low acceptance for casualties. These changes in the international system have had an impact on the character, if not the nature, of modern warfare. Gow, following General Sir Rupert Smith, described current conflicts as “wars among the people.” In such conflicts, war, understood in the Clausewitzian sense as a “battle of wills,” is more important than the physical/material force emphasized in more conventional conflicts. Because one now needs to tailor one’s message for multiple global audiences (one’s own domestic audience, the publics of partner and allied states, the enemy’s public, bystanders), succeeding in the battle of ideas is more challenging than ever. Given the complexity of the current security environment, one of the greatest dilemmas regarding the use of force in the 21st century will be how to achieve one’s strategic objectives through the application of military power.

Hew Strachan argued that many contemporary scholars of security studies overemphasize how much the international environment has changed in recent times. He highlighted four major areas of strategic continuity: the WE and NATO continue to be hegemonic military powers; the “state” is still an important tool for understanding the causes of wars (witness, for example, state-building missions, failed states, and rogue states); and inter-state wars have broken out at a steady pace since 1945. Non-state actors are often seen as new but, in fact, they have historically been an important element of warfare. That said, Strachan noted recent conflicts (notably those in Iraq and Afghanistan) have changed in important ways. In particular, it is evident that their character has been shaped more profoundly by political and social than by technological factors. In his conclusion, Strachan stressed the importance of separating operational thinking from strategic thinking. Both the US and the British military do the former better than the latter. Strategic theory today lacks context, Strachan argues. He criticized current concepts such as

“Long War” and “Full-Spectrum of Conflict” as unhelpful in understanding our current strategic challenges because they are too broad and conflate a great number of very different things. Lastly, when it comes to civil-military relations, Professor Strachan called for a closer dialogue between policy and strategy, and in particular for more sophisticated thinking of the relationship between military means and political ends in today’s conflicts.

The need to match military means to political ends was likewise one of the core themes of General **James Mattis’** presentation. The General called for a vastly improved decision-making process. This should serve to link policy and strategy with the military capabilities required to support them. He also argued that the American officer corps needs to undergo a “strategic awakening.” Even though the US military has become very proficient at dealing with the tactical and operational levels of war, its current ability to provide its civilian masters with valuable strategic advice is limited. Military efficiency alone does not bring victory, he noted. Good strategy is also required. Mattis went on to argue that the state of civil-military relations in the United States is fairly sound, but that retired officers should be more careful to take a non-political stance. The general concluded his remarks by noting that in today’s hybrid conflicts, where there is a blurring of distinctions between conventional and irregular challenges, and between political and military issues, the inherent tensions between civilians and military must be resolved in a constructive way. Adaptation to the new circumstances will be key for successful civil-military relations.

During the Q and A, a member of the audience noted that retired General Jack Keane had advocated a strategy in Iraq – the surge – at a time when the commander on the ground, Gen. George Casey, opposed it. Mattis responded that the President has the right to choose whatever advice he wants, even the one of retired military officers. James Gow acknowledged the difficulty of tailoring one’s message to different audiences. He emphasized, however, the importance of perception in today’s wars. Who will win a war is often dictated by who tells the winning story.

“Limitations on War in the 21st Century”

Christopher Gelpi, a Professor of Political Science at Duke University, was the main presenter on the evening panel. He saw four factors as likely to limit the utility of war and military force in the coming decades. First, our goals are shifting: our aims are no longer conventional war aims. Rather we are introducing new goals like nation-building. This will create important limitations because Western military organizations do not know how to use force to accomplish this kind of goal as well as they know how to use force to accomplish more traditional objectives. Second, the international community no longer agrees as to when the use of force is legitimate. The US and its Western allies appear much more willing to use force to protect liberal human rights than some other great powers like Russia and China.

Third, the spread of democracy around the world may somewhat paradoxically limit the ability of the United States to persuade potential allies to join in multinational military operations. For example, Turkey, for domestic political reasons, refused to allow the passage of US forces through its territory in the run-up to the War in Iraq. This episode highlighted the increasing importance played by soft power and public diplomacy in the achievement of military goals. Lastly, the increasing partisan polarization inside the United States makes it ever more difficult to maintain large-scale popular support for military interventions. In the past most foreign policy disputes took place within the political parties. Now they are mostly between them. The rise of partisan media outlets further contributes to the polarization of voter's preferences. In conclusion, Gelpi advised future Washington leaders to pursue a more humble foreign policy which does not require the US forces to get involved in difficult state-building operations. In addition he suggested that they invest time and energy in rebuilding an international normative consensus on the use of force, and promote cross-partisan cooperation on foreign policy.

The first commentator, historian **Wayne Lee** from UNC-Chapel Hill, highlighted the importance of the changes in the cultural understanding of war and the limits these have placed on the conduct of modern conflicts. Over time, the targeting of non-combatants has tended to increase. In the most recent conflicts, however, the United States has attempted to reverse this trend. It has drawn a distinction between civilians and the political regime under which they live and have portrayed them as innocent victims of the latter. The rhetorical and operational focus on regime change missions means that we must avoid as much collateral damage as possible and separate civilians and non-state actors from their regimes. This is a demanding task that will continue to limit the effectiveness of military interventions in the future.

The next commentator, **Cori Dauber**, a Professor of Communication Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill and research fellow of the U.S. Army War College, discussed the role of contemporary media as a constraint on military operations. The main goal of terrorists, she noted, is to shape public perceptions. The western media often plays into their hands by publicizing terrorist acts. The media also limits the operations of democratic states. Problems arise in particular when Western media reports news without providing context. Reporters sometimes pass along enemy propaganda to the audience without providing them with the means for them to judge its truthfulness. The absence of professional media from most of today's battlefields, along with the proliferation of social media and user-generated content, will only reinforce this trend and make it ever more necessary for Western militaries to improve their ability to counter enemy propaganda by quickly disseminating data and video in support of their version of events.

Retired U.S. Air Force General **Charles Dunlap**, the third commentator on the panel, argued that we should draw a clear distinction between limits on existential wars and limits on non-existential ones like the current interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the latter case, the American people are indeed likely to place more limits on both the financial costs of the wars and also on the level of tolerance for

casualties. Governors are also likely to put more limits on the deployment of National Guard units for extended periods of time. Dunlap noted that there is a trend within the Army towards becoming a force focused on the conduct of “stability operations.” In his view, this is ill-advised. Using military forces to perform civilian tasks in an effort to nation-build is uncertain and difficult, whether it is for building government capacity, legislatures, or schools.

The last commentator, **Rachel Kerr** from King’s College London, noted the increasing extent to which laws of war are enforced in current conflicts. She stressed the heightened sensitivity to allegations of war crimes, and the expectations that have been created for forceful prosecution of their perpetrators. The recent shift in the nature of public discourse on war towards issues of legality and legitimacy could thus pose new limits on the conduct of military operations.

In the Q&A session, Dauber and Dunlap debated whether equipping soldiers with helmet-mounted video cameras could help the US in the war of perception: Dunlap was pessimistic about the utility of such a measure, while Dauber thought it might be quite useful. Dunlap also disagreed with Gelpi’s contention on how best to treat captured terrorists. Gelpi had argued that there could be a real public diplomacy gain from treating people that we capture in accordance with higher standards than the ones used at Guantanamo Bay during the previous administration. Dunlap argued that captured terrorists need to be treated according to a law of war, not civilian law, and that we are unlikely to improve our image in the eyes of our enemies simply by modifying our detention policies.

Civil-Military Relations in the Field during Operations

The first full day of the conference began with a presentation by Army General **H.R. McMaster**, a top official with the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command. The General focused on how important it was to integrate civil-military efforts on the ground in theaters like Iraq and Afghanistan. The overall strategic success of this and future wars depends on it, he said. So far, unfortunately, the U.S. and allied militaries have not managed to “institutionalize” this aspect of war planning. There are no venues in which civilian and military planning can be properly integrated to allow for truly *strategic* planning of military operations. This can be blamed in part on adherents of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) school of thought during the post-Cold War era who thought of war more in terms of technology and as an engineering problem rather than as a phenomena dominated by its political and human elements. A focus on operational level thinking and an indomitable quest for efficiency dominated the defense debates, rather than an effort to understand the nature and character of present wars in strategic terms. The question of how civilian and military operations could best be integrated was largely ignored during the debates of the 1990s. McMaster concluded by suggesting three pillars on which effective war planning in the future must be based: integration of civil-military teams at higher levels in the inter-agency process;

inclusion of indigenous leaders in planning; and a constant examination and re-examination of the “big questions,” such as what is the character of the conflict that we are engaged in. Lastly, echoing the remarks of Hew Strachan, the general concluded by cautioning future statesmen to develop realistic political objectives that can be carried out by their military forces.

The first commentator on this panel was journalist and author **Thomas Ricks**. He argued that there was a bifurcated command structure in Iraq between 2003 and 2004. Civilian leaders wanted to transform Iraq into a flourishing free-market democracy. The military mistrusted this effort, and instead focused more on providing stability. This was, in the jargon of academic civil-military relations theory, a “shirking” of their mission. He offered the example of General Petraeus who largely declined to implement the de-baathification policy decided upon by the U.S. civilian leadership in Baghdad. If we are to avoid this parallel structure of command in the future, Ricks argued, we must put a civilian in charge of the overall civil-military effort.

Andrew Rathmell, a UK-government consultant and the second commentator on the panel, argued that one of the greatest challenges in improving the conduct of whole-of-government, state-building-type missions is how to deal with the local politics. Many of the solutions and recommendations debated in Western governments are technical in nature and involve bureaucratic fixes. Not enough attention is paid to the question of how to select our “legitimate” local partners or allies. We also need to offer more support to UN peacekeeping and peacemaking missions, particularly in Africa. These civil-military operations show how the international community at-large could complement the efforts of U.S. and UK forces in assisting at-risk states and in “policing” un-governed territories. Rathmell concluded by recommending a more indirect approach for military forces, one focused on providing enabling capabilities to local partners and on advisory efforts.

In the Q&A session, General McMaster talked about the evolving character of the conflict in Iraq over the years, and of the difficulty of adapting strategy to the emerging realities on the ground. He also highlighted the role played by personality (in developing good relations between civil and military leaders. The question arose as to whether US forces who focused on counter-insurgency missions might risk losing their expertise in conventional combat. The panelists agreed that a proper balance need to be found between the two. They also agreed that the US military needed to be able to do both.

What Role, What Problems, for Reserves and Contractors?

The second panel of the day began with a presentation by Lindsay Cohn, a political scientist at the University of Northern Iowa. In order for the United States to preserve a world order beneficial to its interests, US forces need to be ready to accomplish several important sets of missions, including the stabilization of crucial regions, the protection of allies, and the accommodation of rising powers. In turn, the future operational environment demands three sets of requirements. First we

need to cultivate deployability (both air- and sea-lift). Second we must aim for flexibility (we must focus less on conventional operations, adopt more flexible means of procurement, and develop a wider range of individual and unit-specific skills). Third we need to achieve sustainability (allow rotation predictability, reduce dependence on contractors, modify the promotion system to reward career paths in stabilization and reconstruction missions). The Reserve component, Cohn said, should play a larger role in rear-area security and logistics, as a “ready reserve” equipped to deal with “civilian” tasks, in homeland defense, and in disaster relief. Cohn criticized the lack of personnel in several key high-demand specialties needed for reconstruction missions, and the inflexible compensation system which makes it difficult to recruit individuals with special skill sets. She ended by making several recommendations. The United States should increase the reliance on reservists rather than on contractors for rear-area logistics and support. It should reduce the number of “strategic reserves” and increase that of specialized units. Finally, it should adjust training requirements to recognize individuals with special skills.

The second presenter, **Deborah Avant** from University of California–Irvine, addressed the role of contractors. According to some estimates, she said, there are currently more contractors in Afghanistan than U.S. troops. Contractors are involved in the war effort in three primary ways: they provide logistical support, security, and engage in reconstruction efforts. The use of contractors does affect civil-military relations. First, it has an effect on *political* control. The public (according to Avant’s most recent research) is as sensitive to casualties incurred by American contractors as by American troops. However, the use of contractors probably does reduce transparency and the influence of Congress. Second, it has an effect on *functional* control. Contractors provide specific skills that would be otherwise unavailable and so play a crucial role in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Third, it has an effect on *social* control. Contractors are widely used because of the limited manpower resources available for large-scale operations. But using them is often inconsistent with current normative and legal global frameworks. Avant argued that tensions in civil-military relations generated by these factors would probably continue but not prevent their continued use in the future. She concluded by suggesting that the tensions could be constructive and help U.S. political and military leaders better integrate contractors into their overall force planning efforts.

Following these presentations, **Christopher Kinsey** of King’s College London, by way of comments, provided a historical perspective on the role of contractors. Their presence on the battlefield is nothing new, he said; they have been used, for better or worse, in many wars throughout history. Contractors are an essential component in today’s wars because of the role they play in logistical supply, which in its turn is vital to a successful strategy. Reservists and contractors complement one another - with contractors largely supplying rather than fighting wars. Contractors, he concluded, make our forces more effective, although it is worth debating whether or not we should set some limits to the functions they perform. However, contractors will continue to play a big part in modern military operations.

In the brief Q&A session that followed, the panelists clarified two points. First, Congress cannot impose the same level of control on private security firms as on the military, and second, policymakers consider contractors to be politically cheaper to mobilize than regular troops.

Politicians and the Military: Tensions, How Resolved?

The third panel of the day addressed the complex issue of the inherent tensions between political and military leaders, in both Britain and the United States. **Brian Holden Reid** of King's College discussed the British experience, while U.S. Army Col. Mathew Moten discussed the American.

Reid began by discussing the roots of the current civil-military tensions in Britain. These, he said, date back to Margaret Thatcher's reforms of all "professions" in Britain, the introduction of new managerial techniques and higher levels of bureaucratization and centralization, and in particular the attacks on the traditional "right to be different" that the armed forces used to enjoy in the past. The civil service is now much more involved in defense policymaking and in determining how the armed services go about their business. In recent times, however, the wars in Afghanistan and particularly Iraq contributed to a sustained rise in civil-military tensions. These long-term wars could not be carried out at such limited cost as the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s, and the British military felt overly burdened and underappreciated by its political masters. Military frustration arguably reached a peak with the blunt criticism of Tony Blair's Iraq policy by then Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt. His public outburst, and of the fact that he declared support for the Conservative Party shortly after retirement, made it difficult for the Blair government to deal with the military. In the future, Reid argues, military leaders should avoid such public airing of grievances. He also suggested that the creation of a strategy-making body similar to the US National Security Council could facilitate better cooperation between civilian and military officials.

Col. Matt Moten argued that a certain level of political-military tensions is inherent because it is embedded in our constitutional arrangements, but that these tensions can be constructive. The demands of policy and strategy may pull in different directions at times, but conflict is not inevitable. Good personal relationships, respect, and trust between civilian and military leaders are the key components to successful civil-military relations. The present state of civil-military relations under Secretary Gates is much better than during his predecessors, even though Gates fired many more generals. Military professionals, Moten emphasized, understand the need for accountability. Gates manages to remain well-liked by the services, despite his occasional harsh measures, because he successfully cultivates relationships of mutual trust and respect. Moten noted three areas of concern for the future of American civil-military relations. First, professional expertise among military leaders may decline in part because of the high rate of promotions in recent years and in part because professional education has been somewhat neglected of late thanks to our involvement in warfare. Second, the public activities on the part of

retired generals, such as those calling for Rumsfeld's resignation, have led to a higher politicization of the military. Third, the increasing reliance on private contractors is detrimental. It is leading to a dangerous outsourcing of core functions to the point that we may not in future be able to keep an army in the field without logistical help from outside. Moreover, the presence of retired officers as lobbyists for defense contracting firms is corrupting.

The first commentator, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General **Richard Myers**, underlined the crucial importance of personal relationships and mutual trust to the health of civil-military relations. Relationships cannot and need not be friendly, he stressed, but they need to be respectful. Civilian bosses have the responsibility to confront their military subordinates in private, not rebuke them in public. Conversely, military leaders need to offer their advice in private as well, and avoid leaks or "end-runs." In addition to the executive, the services also need to work with Congress, which sometimes poses challenges of balancing the requirements of each branch of government. General Myers also expressed his concern about some of the partisan political activities of retired officers, including the endorsements of candidates. Retired officers have a right to run for office, but they should not allow themselves to be used as "potted plants" at political conventions.

The second commentator was the Vice-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs during Myers tenure, Admiral **Edmund Giambastiani**. He agreed with his former boss on the importance of personal relationships. When strong disagreements arise, senior officers should retire quietly and avoid causing a potential crisis by offering a formal resignation. Giambastiani was a little more optimistic than some previous speakers on the strategy-making abilities of the U.S. government. He saw the U.S. military as an organization with remarkable capacity to adapt and innovate during wartime. He pointed to the development of the stability operations as a good example of how much the U.S. military learned from its difficulties in Iraq. Along the same lines, he pointed out that President and his Secretary of Defense are required to review and approve war plans. This, he said, is one way in which civilian and military leaders engage in strategic debates on some of the most important national security decisions, both in wartime when plans are implemented and in peacetime when force structure and mission are determined.

During the Q&A session, Myers talked about how the reliance of contractors has its roots in the defense cutbacks during the 1990s. It was then, he said, that the "fat" (non-essential tasks) was first contracted out on a systematic basis. He also said that in Iraq it took too long to develop appropriate policy towards and rules of engagement for contractors in order to have the necessary levels of accountability. Duke professor Peter Feaver made the point that Congress and the Out-Party are much to blame for the politicization of the military – both of encourage retired members of the military to speak in public and political matters if it suits their partisan purposes. Moten underlined once more how challenging it is for military officers to deal with being responsible both to the executive and legislative

branches. Lastly, Myers stated that Rumsfeld's personality and his confrontational management style were at least partly to blame for frictions with his top military officers.

What to teach in Civil-Military Relations?

The last panel of the conference addressed some of the pedagogical issues involved in teaching civil-military relations. Attention was given to teaching three categories of students: undergraduates, graduate students, and military officers.

Risa Brooks, a political scientist at Northwestern University, led off the discussion by talking about her experience teaching college students about civil-military interactions. She outlined the issues on which she focuses in her classes. First, she offers her students a basic lesson in civics. She introduces them to the organization of the U.S. government, the Department of Defense, and the Armed Forces. Unfortunately, she said, many students lack this knowledge. Second, she talks in greater detail about the importance role played by the U.S. military in American society. She discusses the key moments in the evolution of the U.S. military; how and why military leaders currently enjoy high esteem, and the size and importance of the defense budget, and civilian control of the military. Third, she addresses the theoretical and practical aspects of the proper relationship between the American society and its military: to what extent can or should the armed forces reflect the society at large? At the end, she says, she stresses the need to step back and think about broader strategic questions. We need to encourage our students to think about the role our forces do and should play in protecting America's interests and values in today's world.

The second presenter, **Christopher Dandeker** of King's College London, offered his insights on how to teach civil-military relations to graduate students. He made clear to the audience that at King's College this topic has been heavily influenced by Sir Michael Howard's approach. Howard analyzes war in breadth and depth, and then puts it in the larger strategic context – his book, *War in European History* is a scholarly that does just this. Dandeker then listed five classic works of civil-military relations that he discusses in detail with his students: Samuel Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*, Morris Janowitz's *The Professional Soldier*, Samuel Finer's *The Man on Horseback*, Peter Feaver's *Armed Servants*, and General Sir Rupert Smith's *The Utility of Force*. These five books allow for a deep exploration of some of the enduring themes of civil-military relations theory and practice. Dandeker listed the following questions as key to the study of the civil-military relations. What is the proper understanding of civilian control? How much can or should military culture diverge from that of society as a whole? Is it possible for today's military to be as different from or as separate from society as it used to be in the past? Finally, what are the implications of the new contemporary security environment? In other words, how are civil-military interactions on and off the battlefield affected by the fact that we now live in an era dominated by "wars amongst the people?"

The last speaker, Naval War College professor **Mackubin Owens**, addressed the challenges of teaching military officers about civil-military relations. American military leaders generally understand the idea of civilian control, but civil-military relations properly understood are about much more than that one issue. Owens identified five key questions that need to be addressed. First, who controls the military and how, or more precisely what are the roles and responsibilities of the executive branch, but also of Congress, on different aspects of defense policy? Second, what is the appropriate role of today's military? Should it focus mainly on high-end wars, or low-end conflicts and "constabulary" missions? Third, how do various patterns of civil-military relations affect military effectiveness? Fourth, what is the proper role and level of influence of the military in strategic debates? Fifth, who fights and serves and how should that be decided?

Owens argued that the hard line distinction between political and military decisions stipulated in Huntington's famous "normal theory" of civil-military relations is not helpful for understanding today's challenges. Even decisions that we might think of as mainly military, such as those relating to questions of doctrine and force structure, have important political and strategic components to them, affecting what policy options will or will not be available to civilian leaders. Andrew Bacevich in his "Petraeus Doctrine" article in *The Atlantic*, and John Nagl and Gian Gentile in their exchange on counterinsurgency (*Joint Force Quarterly*) both illustrate the impact military can have on grand strategy. The modern practice of civil-military relations needs to take this interconnectedness into account. This alone will ensure good strategic performance at all levels of government.

At the beginning of the Q&A session, UNC-Chapel Hill's Professor Richard Kohn remarked on the difference between the theory and practice of civil-military relations in the American experience. The relationship as it was practiced throughout history often times fell short of the ideal standard visible in the constitution. Another theme of the discussion during Q&A was the worrisome gulf emerging between academic social science and the real world of civil-military relations practitioners. Risa Brooks remarked that there is not much support from the government for bridging this increasing divide. Some members of the academic world, she added, are still very ambivalent towards the military. An increasing lack of civilian understanding of military issues is thus one of the areas of concern for the future of civil-military relations.