

Best Military Advice

Since the beginning of the Republic, the guiding premise for the US military is the concept of civilian control. From a civil-military relations perspective, the military is a professional corps, trained and equipped to provide for the defense of the nation's interests. While the US military is sworn to protect and defend the Constitution, its personnel serve at the pleasure of elected and appointed American civilian officials. As such, senior military leaders are charged with providing professional military advice to the civilian leadership. Throughout the American experience, military officers have provided civilian leaders with their best professional judgments on raising, sustaining, equipping, and employing military forces. The provision of what is known as *best military advice* is part process, part professional knowledge and skill, and a healthy dose of art—surrounded by the entire national security policy-making process. What follows is a glimpse into the recent workings and challenges associated with best military advice provided by senior military officers. It is not meant to be a definitive work on how to provide such advice but more as my observations of how that advice was or was not implemented and how it did or did not serve national security objectives.

The Workings of National Security

US national security is a complex and dynamic necessity, organized to protect the nation's interests. Its power and authority are principally focused in the executive branch and the Congress. These institutions provide the legitimacy for setting policies and objectives. While the Constitution creates the framework for checks, balances, accountability, and authority, the people elect and empower officials. The principal actors in national security are the president, the Congress, the Department of State, and the Department of Defense—each having distinct and important authorities, roles, and functions. These actors, along with various other departments of the government, translate national security objectives into departmental objectives in support of the national security strategy.

The continuum of activities associated with the national security strategy has many diverse narratives. There are political narratives, reflecting the differing views on a particular issue; narratives on priority of

issues to be addressed; and narratives on how issues should be addressed. The competition of differing issues, objective solutions, and resourcing constantly vie for the attention and resources of government. By its very nature this competition creates a highly dynamic environment for any senior military leader.

Of course the military services attempt to cope with this dynamism by doing what they know best: planning. In the military that means a complex, detailed, and time-consuming activity with high regret factors for not being thorough. While the military planning process is methodical, its focus is successful military victory in support of the military objectives. However, history is rich with examples of failed military adventures when the military is used for nonmilitary objectives, is subjected to incremental employment strategies, or suffers mission creep. More often than not, when objectives are not military in nature, the military is not defeated in battle but fails to deliver the desired national objectives. In these cases, some part of the blame must rest with senior military officers in their provision of best military advice. It is the responsibility of senior officers to ensure military planning, capabilities, and resources support the end states of the national security policies and objectives by bridging the gap between these competing narratives and processes. This responsibility carries through to policy development, sequencing and integration of objectives and priorities, and the potential authorization and execution of a military intervention. Senior officers must also focus on the transitions between these processes, because it is in the integration, time phasing, and sequencing that the highest likelihood for consequential error may occur. In formulating best military advice for national security policy makers, four challenges emerge.

Challenges to Best Military Advice

The first challenge, which is one that causes significant disruption within the military, is premature closure on a course of action in support of the military objective without sufficient study of the national security objectives. This inevitably leads to reducing the senior civilian leadership's options or "boxes them in" to a course of action prematurely. Our planning process is good in addressing detail, capturing a broad range of military views and perspectives, and thoroughly translating the ends, ways, and means associated with the objective. However, what we often

fail to consider is our role as a supporting activity in the larger government and national security strategy. In our planning we discard many potential courses of action based on assumptions of resourcing and capabilities that may remain flexible to our civilian leaders. We come to a course of action and attempt to make all other alternatives appear to fall short of the mark. We forget the other elements of national power will be integrated into the objective at the highest levels of government. We fail to recall the use of force is a political decision—part of a larger strategy—and that the end state will not be the political introduction of force; it will be a political settlement. That is, the principal reason for military intervention is to facilitate the political objectives. Expending military resources and winning battles that do not, or will not, lead to a political settlement waste a precious resource.

The second challenge, which is another that causes significant disruption, is to recommend a detailed military plan that does not account for the roles of other agencies. The US military does a great job covering all possible adversary actions. Nevertheless, we again fail to consider the alternatives based on a differing and dynamic set of national assumptions and integration into the larger national security strategy. We introduce a course of action that does not tolerate alternative means, alternative resource implications, and/or adjustments for political dynamics. It is of greater importance for our best military advice to craft a more tolerant set of alternatives that offer the president a range of options to build his integrated strategy across all elements of national power. Good military risk analysis is always wise, but good integration of national objectives with a military plan that both tolerates and complements the national risk analysis is the only path to successfully integrate all elements of national power. Military options that span the national objectives and provide maximum flexibility to civilian leadership are essential. Forcing the president to integrate the elements of power with no flexibility in the form of alternatives is not a recipe for success.

The third challenge is setting boundary conditions, such as roles, responsibilities, capabilities, and resources. This challenge is most evident in the internal planning processes but also manifests itself in the execution of the military intervention. There is a healthy tension within the military organizational structure among those who train, organize, and equip; those charged with regional oversight; and commanders charged to conduct military interventions. Healthy advocacy among these ac-

tors can often layer unnecessary resources or become unresponsive to the assigned mission and to missions directed but of lower organizational priority. Some recent examples of this include the shortfall in capabilities to address reconnaissance, missile defense, and improvised explosive devices. At the same time, agility has its limits across the broad span of military actions, particularly for the uninformed advocate or decision maker. Best military advice should articulate the risks of any investment. Once understood, advocacy and agility must support the national security strategy and objectives of the present conflict—not the one we desire. The frustration many civilian leaders experience is how to get the military to fight the war it is in, rather than the one in which it wants to be.

The final challenge to address is the challenge of the dissenting opinion. Military officers of all ranks learn there is a time to offer alternative approaches and question ends, ways, and means and a time to salute smartly and execute the mission. Dissent can be provided in writing, through conversation, or by requesting reassignment or discharge. Of course the latter is usually reserved for moral or legal disagreements. At the most senior levels, where moral and legal issues can be far less certain, it is the responsibility of those providing best military advice to clearly articulate their concerns early. Concerns over the risks being assumed, the likelihood of achieving the desired result, and/or the level of allocated resources are areas where dissension should be clear and offered at the earliest possible time to allow the system to respond to the concerns. However, simply not getting your way in a choice of ends, ways, and means is not an acceptable reason for dissent. Dissension for moral or legal concerns is much more difficult. The diversity and changing nature of conflict, such as uninhabited vehicles or weapons, have many grey areas associated with moral and legal issues, especially in areas where no declaration of hostilities exist. Interpretations that serve a specific action or context may contradict the assessment of the senior officers and/or expose the force to inappropriate risk. In these cases, thorough analysis, advice of counsel, and legal review will be valuable tools in crafting any dissent. The use of these tools should be in the context of presenting your concerns to civilian leadership. This seems logical but remains challenging, as interpretations of standards—cultural in particular—are in constant flux. Interpretations that serve an action that has a seeming

urgency but when taken in a larger context expose the force to unnecessary risk are particularly vexing.

Human suffering, collateral damage, weapons of mass destruction, and battlefield intelligence gathering are all difficult issues senior officers will have to grapple with in providing best military advice. Addressing these challenges will not guarantee successful execution of assigned tasks, but they are offered as insights and observations on the type of civil-military relations issues senior military leaders face in providing their best military advice. **SSQ**

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