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An official publication of the Center for
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A Note from the Editors

This latest edition of the Georgetown Security Studies Review continues the wonderful tradition of giving graduate students, young professionals, and other contributors a platform to publish critical, insightful analysis of the world's most pressing security challenges. Beyond security, the GSSR also proudly maintains an openness to diverse topics, voices, and methodologies. This issue is once more an example of this tradition. The editorial team proudly presents the articles in this iteration, as they cover a broad array of topics, demonstrate exceptional academic rigor, and showcase impactful analysis. The authors exemplify the mission of GSSR: to contribute meaningfully to pertinent debates, in a constructive, objective, and analytic manner. In times when constructive debate appears less and less feasible, and in a discursive climate which is increasingly poisoned by deliberate misinformation, flooded with superficial content, and increasingly unconducive to genuine debate, this mission is more important than ever. The editorial staff would like to sincerely thank the authors for dedicating themselves to the academic pursuit and reasonable discourse, thereby tipping the scales, even if ever so slightly, in the right direction. The editorial team would also like to invite the readers of this issue and GSSR writ large to join this endeavor: read the articles critically, engage with them, reach out with questions or feedback, or better yet, take up the pen yourself and continue the discussion. The editorial team would also finally like to thank every individual who has contributed to making this issue happen: the authors, the peer reviewers, the associate editors, advisors, friends, and family. Without your unyielding support and selfless dedication, this enterprise would be doomed to fail. So thank you to all who are GSSR and may it produce many more journals out in the future. This edition of the journal spans an array of topics. Each piece was selected not only for its analytical rigor, caliber of writing, and contributions to the field of international relations but also for its unique relevance to the current global climate. The pieces include pertinent discussions of United States strategic force posture, a new framework for understanding proxy warfare, a thoughtful examination of European Union border policy and messaging, as well as analyses of a protracted conflict in the Middle East and simmering tensions in the Pacific. As nations examine their place in a shifting world order and policies are reevaluated, the GSSR Editorial Team hopes that the articles presented herein offer insights that can inform students and practitioners of international relations alike.

Sincerely,

Sarah Cope, *Editor-in-Chief*,

Jakob Grein, *Deputy Editor-in-Chief*

The *Georgetown Security Studies Review* is the official academic journal of Georgetown University's Security Studies Program. Founded in 2012, the GSSR has also served as the official publication of the Center for Security Studies and publishes regular columns in its online Forum and occasional special edition reports.

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Navigating Strategic Uncertainty: The Effect of Force Posture on Strategic Stability

Matthew Revels

In 2017, the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) acknowledged the return of what it labeled great power competition from a period of dormancy after the end of the Cold War. As a result of the NSS and subsequent national security documents, the U.S. Army began aligning itself with overall U.S. strategic priorities by focusing on its new operating concept of Multi-Domain Operations (MDO). Critically, the Army's concept of MDO appears to maintain the service's bias toward offensive operations, despite the United States prioritizing deterrence by denial, an inherently defensive strategy, and the risks for escalation. Accordingly, this paper investigates how the U.S. Army's force posture impacts strategic stability vis-à-vis the U.S.'s near-peer competitors. It finds that a force posture paradox exists as it relates to strategic stability—a posture that bolsters the ability to project power and defend a given territory generally enhances deterrence, but it also exacerbates the security dilemma and raises the likelihood of arms races and conflict escalation. The paper tests this notion of a force posture paradox in two case studies: first, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and second, the Army's doctrinal transition from Active Defense to AirLand Battle. By applying these case studies and the force posture framework to the contemporary strategic environment, this paper shows that the Army's current light-forward force posture decreases stability because its reliance on offensive expeditionary operations to punish an adversary is likely to generate the worst possible outcome: a weak deterrent with the potential to encourage arms races. Alternatively, establishing a defense-in-depth force posture aligned with a denial strategy would promote strategic stability by signaling defensive intentions, obstructing adversary strategic objectives, and building redundancy into theater defenses.

Introduction: The Strategic Stability Puzzle

In 2017, the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) acknowledged the return of what it labeled great-power competition from a period of dormancy after the end of the Cold War. The NSS identified the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia as the main aggressors seeking to "reassert their influence regionally and globally."[1] The 2022 NSS confirmed this renewed strategic orientation.[2] As U.S. national security priorities shifted from the Middle East to the PRC and Russia, so has the focus of the U.S. military. The Pentagon has been highly focused on strengthening deterrence against strategic competitors, with the U.S. Army's contribution to deterrence centered around the new operating concept of Multi-Domain Operations (MDO).[3,4] It is important to note here that the transition to MDO is occurring against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and its implementation is accordingly not linear or fixed. Military planners continuously adjust MDO and the procurement process that underpins it. Hence, MDO may see substantial changes in the future. Nonetheless, at its core, MDO maintains the Army's bias toward offensive operations, despite the United States pursuing a strategic approach of deterrence by denial, an inherently defensive posture.[5] Denial, as opposed to deterrence by punishment, seeks to erode an adversary's confidence in their ability to achieve an objective by retaining the capability to defend.[6] The capabilities of this force structure appear to place a premium on offensive capabilities to penetrate an enemy anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) bubble. This suggests that the Army envisions implementing a strategy that relies on deterrence through punishment instead of

denial. The U.S. Army's transformation has significant implications for deterrence and escalation risks. A reliance on offensive capabilities and doctrines can diminish strategic stability because it increases the likelihood of arms races and the adversary's perception of vulnerability. These decisions have the potential to contribute to deteriorating relations with peer competitors. Furthermore, this paper argues that an offensive orientation increases the U.S. Army's vulnerability. Accordingly, the paper seeks to investigate two central questions. First, how does the U.S. Army's force posture impact strategic stability against near-peer competitors? Second, how can the Army adapt its force posture to provide a credible deterrent without raising the risks of escalation in the process?

Centrally, the paper argues that a force posture paradox exists regarding strategic stability. On the one hand, bolstering one's ability to project power and defend a given territory generally strengthens deterrence. On the other hand, it tends to increase the likelihood of conflict escalation. An examination of historical case studies from the Yom Kippur War and the United States Army's deployment of forces to Central Europe during the Cold War demonstrates that when states adopt a force posture that relies on a small contingent of forward-deployed conventional forces to act as a tripwire, it minimizes the risk of escalation and presents the lowest form of capability. Stability will deteriorate in this situation because the force posture lacks the credibility necessary to deter adversary action. Paradoxically, force postures that rely on a minimal forward footprint, i.e., forces that lack any credible means of defending a given territory, typically depend on offensive doctrines to deter an adversary through the threat of punishment instead of denial. However, offensive doctrines raise the potential for escalation, undermining deterrence, and increasing escalation risk. In contrast to a light-forward deployment, when a state deploys the bulk of its combat-capable forces forward, it bolsters deterrence, but also heightens the threat perceptions about those forward-deployed forces, thereby escalating tensions with the adversary. The case studies again show that offensive doctrines associated with this force posture maximize the potential for escalation. A force posture that balances the costs and benefits of both, referred to in this paper as defense-in-depth, moderates the effect of the force posture paradox and enables armies to balance deterrent credibility with escalation risk.

Recognizing the existence of this paradox, the U.S. Army should reconsider some of its strategic choices. The Army plans to implement a light-forward force posture that relies on offensive expeditionary operations to punish an adversary. Such a strategic orientation is likely to decrease strategic stability because it enhances the potential for arms races and increases the incentive of an adversarial first strike on forward-deployed forces, even as it fails to provide the capability for a credible military deterrent. Alternatively, a defense-in-depth force posture aligned with a denial strategy will promote strategic stability by signaling defensive intentions, obstructing adversary strategic objectives, and building redundancy into theater defenses. Since stability and deterrence rely on adversary perception, altering the U.S. Army's force posture can only lessen the destabilizing potential of the force posture paradox, but it will not provide a panacea. Policymakers and leaders must continue communicating intentions with adversaries and pursuing diplomacy to ensure lasting stability.

The study of force posture and strategic stability will proceed in five sections. First,

this paper defines key terms and explores the Army's global force posture. Second, it assesses the conventional strategic stability literature's current academic schools of thought. Third, this paper explains the methodology for evaluating force posture. Fourth, the current light-forward U.S. Army force posture is tested against two case studies. Finally, this paper offers policy implications and recommendations for the future force posture of the U.S. Army.

Background: Strategic Stability and Force Posture

In this paper, strategic stability refers to the security consequences of competition, the risk of a conflict beginning, and the possibility of escalation.[7] Given the paper's focus on conventional force posture, it is necessary to broadly apply strategic stability, including the escalating use of conventional and nuclear forces. As such, strategic stability is "a situation in which no power has any significant incentive to try to adjust its relative standing vis-à-vis any other power by unilateral means involving the direct application of force against it."[8] A situation where general strategic stability persists should enable the United States to maintain the status quo without armed conflict. This paper's core contention is that force posture matters significantly for strategic stability. Despite its importance, government and scholarly literature lack an established definition of the term. Joshua Rovner and Caitlin Talmadge broadly define force posture as "the size and shape" of a country's "military deployments."[9] To tailor that definition to Army force posture, this paper draws on the U.S. Army's annual force posture statement to Congress, which emphasizes the sustainability of the force, alignment with strategic objectives, modernization efforts, deployment exercises and locations, recruiting, and retention.[10] Accordingly, this paper defines Army force posture as the overall strength, capability, readiness, and disposition of forces in the U.S. Army.[11]

The Army's 2022 Posture Statement clarifies that its focus is on supporting the overall national security objective of integrated deterrence.[12] According to the 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS), integrated deterrence refers to a concept in which the Department of Defense (DOD) "uses every tool at the Department's disposal, in close collaboration with our counterparts across the U.S. Government and with Allies and partners, to ensure that potential foes understand the folly of aggression."[13] To achieve integrated deterrence successfully, the DOD aims to prioritize deterrence by denial "to deter aggression, especially where potential adversaries could act to rapidly seize territory."[14] Denial requires the investment in asymmetric capabilities to erode the adversary's ability to achieve its strategic objectives. The DOD aims to hedge against an overinvestment in denial capabilities by also preparing to deter "by direct and collective cost imposition."[15] Deterrence through cost imposition relates to a concept commonly called deterrence by punishment.

Due to their presence in the NDS, this paper will focus on the competing concepts of deterrence by denial and punishment. Deterrence by denial aims to erode an adversary's confidence in achieving its strategic objectives without exceeding an acceptable cost level, discouraging the adversary from any attempts to change the status quo by force. Meanwhile, deterrence by punishment threatens penalties and severe costs if the adversary pursues a particular course of action. In the case of punishment, the deterring state focuses its efforts on the

threat of conflict escalation and not on the defense of a contested environment.[16]

Influencing Strategic Stability: No Shortage of Theories

Scholarly literature on strategic stability provides an abundance of generalizable theories that discuss how conventional military forces can influence deterrence and shape escalation risks. Though there are many theoretical investigations of strategic stability, this paper will primarily draw on two bodies of literature: the contributions addressing the impact of the offense-defense balance and scholarly work thematizing the impact of evolving military strategies.[17] The robust literature provides unique insight into deterrence and escalation risks in an anarchic system. Still, scholarly works have thus far insufficiently connected these insights to two primary puzzles: the impact of the Army's force posture on strategic stability and how the Army can adjust its forces across geographic regions that present vastly different challenges. Addressing this gap will require analyzing various Army force postures that can deter near-peer competitors and maintain strategic stability by threatening access to multiple domains.

The first group of literature examines how the offense-defense balance affects strategic stability. Robert Jervis's seminal contributions laid much of the groundwork for this discussion. His analysis demonstrated how, within the offense-defense dichotomy, a security dilemma is exacerbated when offensive military capabilities are dominant. Conversely, the proliferation of defensive military means tends to stabilize security dilemmas, as the cost of aggressive actions is increased.[18] Stephen Van Evera expands on Jervis's theory by explaining the war-causing effects that arise when the offense is dominant.[19] Van Evera states that militaries frequently imagine or overestimate offensive capabilities, decreasing the utility of theories regarding the offense-defense balance.[20] Critics of Jervis's original theory repeatedly point to the difficulty associated with determining which form of warfare has the advantage, if any, at any given time. Though speaking about the impact of nuclear weapons on deterrence, Lieber and Press offer a critique on why a stalemate or advantage in the offense-defense balance does not persist.[21] According to their work, competition persists even after a state achieves a stalemate because it is reversible. States can develop new technologies or methods to overcome a stalemate, thus erasing the benefit of achieving a balance in offensive and defensive capabilities.[22]

Despite the criticisms of measuring the offense-defense balance, Glaser and Kaufman proposed a technique that relies on measuring cost ratios between the attacker and defender.[23] Their work goes a long way toward identifying a general measure, but the persisting ambiguity contained in Glaser and Kaufman's work surrounding the critical factors that influence the balance, such as nationalism, makes it difficult to rely upon as a helpful tool.[24] Current literature seems to be moving away from focusing on the broad application of the offense-defense balance in determining stability in the international system and towards states' abilities to scale resources for offensive or defensive efforts, a tendency which may at least in part result from the advent of artificial intelligence and its role in the reproduction and strengthening of offensive capabilities.[25]

The second group of scholars focuses on the influence of evolving military strategies on stability. Most writing in this group centers around what John Mearsheimer called 'conventional deterrence.'[26] Mearsheimer's work was one of the original pieces that focused on using conventional forces and

military strategy to deter aggression. In the equally named book *Conventional Deterrence,* he offers three strategies: attrition, the blitzkrieg (deep armored penetration), and a limited aims campaign.[27] High costs associated with attrition strategies typically lead to deterrence success, while the quick victory promised by the blitzkrieg will lead to deterrence failure. He argues that limited aims campaigns are hard to assess because of variability depending on the situation.[28]

Other scholars expanded on these ideas and introduced concepts such as tripwire forces for reassurance and deterrence, the necessity of defense pacts, the concepts of deterrence by punishment or denial, and the strategy of offshore balancing.[29] For this paper, it is necessary to narrow the discussion on denial to one author, Elbridge Colby.[30] In his book, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, he states that the United States should seek to maintain strategic stability through a "denial defense."[31] Colby focuses on the need for the United States, as an external balancer, to form a coalition to oppose the PRC because it seeks "to seize and hold the target state's key territory," effectively removing them from the anti-hegemonic coalition.[32] According to Colby, external balancers (the United States) cannot rely on cost imposition strategies for two reasons: first, they are likely to alienate the target states that it seeks to protect (Taiwan and the Philippines); second, it is likely to strengthen the resolve of the rising hegemon (PRC).[33] To deny an aspiring hegemon the ability to accomplish a *fait accompli*, the external balancer, in coordination with its coalition, has two options: deny the attacker the ability to seize key territory or deny them the ability to hold it.[34] In a similar line of thinking, Mike Gallagher suggests that a denial strategy requires changes to the current U.S. military force structure because adversary A2/AD capabilities increase the costs associated with imposing a punishment strategy.[35] Colby and Gallagher advise shifts in U.S. military force posture, adapted to the specific purpose of denial, but fail to provide an in-depth analysis of required Army force posture changes.

Each body of literature describes factors influencing strategic stability, tangible or perceived. Of the arguments, none fully explain the effect of service-specific force postures on strategic stability because they focus on the general balance of forces or the chosen military strategy of a state. Setting aside nuclear posture, offense-defense balance, and military strategy offers insight into the impact of the U.S. Army's force posture on strategic stability. However, the theoretical contributions stop short of providing a comprehensive examination of variations in force posture.[36] Of the theorists examined, Mearsheimer's argument most closely aligns with explanations for how Army force posture and doctrine impact strategic stability. Regrettably, as *Conventional Deterrence* is a product of its time, the 1980s, it places a disproportionate emphasis on armored warfare in the context of military strategies and deterrence, which reflects the importance of armor in a hypothetical military contest between the U.S. and the USSR in Europe. While armored warfare still maintains a prominent role in the future of conflict, it faces implementation challenges in the Indo-Pacific theater, a primarily maritime environment, where the ability to achieve strategic objectives via rapid armored penetration is highly unlikely. Additionally, the proliferation of cheap loitering munitions and versatile unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) makes it difficult to concentrate large, armored formations to rapidly disintegrate enemy defenses without undue risk, eroding the viability of states achieving rapid battlefield success with

Mearsheimer's blitzkrieg strategy. Due to these shortcomings, this paper will draw upon these theories to analyze the impact of Army force postures on the strategic stability between peer competitors.

Force Posture Paradox: The Impact of Force Posture on Strategic Stability

Current literature tends to consolidate the military into one group or overly focus on one domain instead of concentrating on the specific contributions of each service. This paper will attempt to remedy this deficiency by considering service-specific force postures as explanatory variables for strategic stability—or in the case of the U.S. Army, strategic instability. A hypothesis focusing on the Army's force posture will draw heavily from the theories and findings within these groups to develop a comprehensive understanding of how variations in force posture can alter the course of strategic stability.

Types of Force Posture

This paper identifies three variations of the independent variable, force posture, to help expand the explanatory power of the offense-defense balance and military strategy theories. To do this, the paper will again rely on the work of Rovner and Talmadge because they discuss three useful variations of force posture. First, they describe a "light presence" as a symbolic gesture that only includes a skeleton base structure and is insufficient to defeat any meaningful aggression.[37] Such force postures are commonly referred to as "tripwires," such as NATO's forward-deployed units in the Baltics. Second, they define a heavy presence as the positioning of overwhelming military power to ensure the cost of action is unacceptably high. Last, they describe the option of "absence" or no military presence.[38] This paper will refrain from examining the absence of a force posture presence because this does not present a viable option given current strategic priorities. Instead, this paper will focus on the force postures of a light-forward deployment, defense-in-depth, and a heavy-forward deployment.[39]

A light-forward deployment consists primarily of what Rovner and Talmadge call symbolic forces, resembling the U.S. Army's current rotational deployments to the Indo-Pacific. The light posture will mostly rely on offensive operations after the engagement of the tripwire force. A historical example of this force posture, though not its original intention, is Task Force Smith during the initial invasion of South Korea.[40]Task Force Smith was a hastily compiled force that was meant to boost the morale of South Korean forces and halt the advance of a much larger North Korean force, demonstrating the resolve of American forces.[41] North Korean forces quickly surrounded and overwhelmed the task force, inflicting approximately 150 casualties.[42] Failure in the opening days of the conflict shocked many American leaders and forced them to prioritize the training and deployment of additional forces. In many ways, the task force served as a tripwire for the entire Cold War, guiding the United States to maintain unprecedented levels of readiness for its armed forces.[43]

Defense-in-depth refers to a force posture where the Army layers its capabilities and strength to delay the adversary by employing a reserve element in the geographic theater. This variation of force posture does not solely rely upon the deployment of expeditionary forces, but instead allocates ample reserve components to respond quickly to potential breaches in forward defensive lines. Thus, unlike the heavy-forward presence, it does not foresee the full forward-deployment of the entire force and emphasizes layered

defenses. A historical example of a defense-in-depth is that of the German military during World War I, where Germany layered its defenses to respond quickly to ruptures in its defensive line.[44]

A heavy-forward presence will place most of the land force's combat power along the probable line of contact to impose a high cost on the adversary's initial advance. Heavy-forward force postures place vital assets close to the probable line of contact to inflict maximum punishment upon the adversary if it chooses to advance. An example of this force posture is the U.S.-led coalition deployment in Saudi Arabia after the invasion of Kuwait, which advanced with armored assets along the line of contact, inflicting severe punishments on the Iraqi military.

Effects of Force Posture on Strategic Stability

Variations in each force posture will uniquely impact strategic stability through the interaction of deterrence and escalation potential. This interaction presents a force posture paradox by which increases in perceived deterrence can escalate the potential for conflict. Similarly, decreases in a force's deterrence capability can lower the probability of escalation but present vulnerabilities for the adversary to exploit. Managing the effects of the force posture paradox requires balancing the level of deterrence needed with an acceptable level of escalation. Considering this concept, this paper hypothesizes that force postures that rely on offensive doctrines decrease strategic stability. Conversely, force postures that rely on defensive doctrines maintain strategic stability when a state minimizes the vulnerability of its forward-deployed forces. The paper will use the case studies presented and the corresponding analysis to examine the hypotheses outlined below.

Hypotheses: U.S. Army Force Posture

A) If an Army adopts a light-forward force posture that relies on expeditionary entry operations to punish an adversary, then its lack of military capability to immediately threaten adversary actions and the perceived offensive intentions of the doctrine will decrease strategic stability and escalate tensions by exacerbating the security dilemma. Similarly, if an Army relies on a defensive light-forward force posture, then its corresponding lack of capability will decrease stability because it increases the perceived advantages of a debilitating first strike or the ability to achieve a fait accompli.

B) If an Army adopts a defense-in-depth force posture capable of repelling an adversary's offensive, then its strategic depth and defensive nature promote strategic stability by reducing force exposure and the perceived advantages of a first-strike operation. This hypothesis assumes that states adopting a defense-in-depth doctrine have inherently defensive strategic objectives. If an Army seeks to switch to offensive operations or doctrine, it will require said Army to shift its posture to one that aligns with a heavy-forward presence out of military necessity. Maintaining the pace of combat operations and achieving offensive objectives requires armies to mass forces at the likely decisive point or along the probable line of contact to penetrate enemy defenses and hold key terrain.

C) If an Army adopts a heavy-forward force posture, then strategic stability will decrease because the adversary's increased threat perception heightens its ambition to compete in an arms race to overcome its disadvantages (when the Army adopts an offensive

doctrine) or the adversary is incentivized to identify strategic vulnerabilities to exploit with a debilitating first-strike operation (when the Army adopts a defensive doctrine).

Case Studies

The case studies in the following section will demonstrate the existence of a force posture paradox. As a military enhances its posture in response to a threat, it destabilizes the relationship by escalating threat perceptions and exposing its forces. Meanwhile, maintaining a low-level capability lowers the escalation threshold but decreases the likelihood of deterrence. Thus, to maintain strategic stability, force postures must aim to moderate capability, intentions, and the likelihood of escalatory reception. For this reason, defense-in-depth provides a balance between deterrence and escalation.

1973 Yom Kippur War

The relatively short conflict permits the testing of a light-forward force posture. Israel's decision to deploy a minimal force forward, particularly at the Bar-Lev Line along the Suez Canal, incentivized the Arabs to pursue a first strike from which they could seek to achieve their strategic aim.[45]The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) relied on a light-forward force posture, which decreased strategic stability because the deterrent force posture could not repulse an initial advance. At the same time, its doctrine emphasized offensive operations and the necessity of a first strike. The findings support and bolster the credibility of the force posture hypothesis.

Background

Before the initiation of hostilities, the Israelis sought to defend using an offensive doctrine centered around rapid armored advances and air power. Meanwhile, the Arabs sought to exploit Israeli weaknesses by making a rapid, limited advance into Israeli-held territory before transitioning to defense in preparation for counterattacks.[46] IDF planners created a military plan known as Shovach Yonim (Dovecote) to repel an initial Arab assault and enable the IDF to assume offensive operations on Arab territory. At the heart of the Dovecote plan was an assumption that Israeli intelligence could provide at least 48 hours' notice before an Arab assault.[47] The IDF operated on the assumption that standing Army forces could block an enemy attack by defending from prepared fighting positions and heavily relying on strikes from the Israeli Air Force. Initial defensive efforts would enable time for the massing of reserve elements to conduct a counteroffensive into Arab territory.[48]

Israel's Force Posture

The Yom Kippur War was separated into two fronts. For the purposes of this study, the focus will remain on the southern front, the Sinai Peninsula, though the general Israeli plan for both frontlines remained the same. Initially, the Dovecote plan required approximately 800 infantry soldiers spread across dozens of checkpoints along the Bar-Lev Line to act as strongpoints and observation posts. Behind the strongpoints of the Bar-Lev Line, the Israelis positioned one tank brigade with approximately 110 tanks to deploy upon notification to fighting positions along the edge of the Suez Canal. Further to the rear, one tank brigade remained postured to reinforce the probable line of contact while the other prepared for a potential counterattack.[49] In contrast to the planned 800 soldiers on the Bar-Lev Line, on October 5, 1973, the Israelis only had 456 soldiers occupying fortifications along the Suez, with the direct support of 7 tanks and an additional 276 tanks in the three armored brigades to the rear.

Meanwhile, the Egyptians on the other side of the canal massed a force of approximately 1,400 tanks with over 1,000 artillery pieces and 62 surface-to-air missile batteries to defend against the Israeli Air Force. In total, across both fronts, the Israelis faced an enormous quantitative disadvantage in regular standing forces, which is why a successful defense relied on the mobilization of the reserves.[50] Recognizing the inferiority of the Israeli forces and their lack of preparedness, the Egyptians and Syrians launched their limited offensive, aimed at securing local key terrain in the Sinai and Golan Heights on October 6th.

In October 1973, the Arab nations ultimately decided to escalate from a state of crisis stability because they recognized that Israel's light-forward defense posture could not pose a credible deterrent to the Arab limited aims strategy, where Egypt sought to gain control of the Bar Lev Line and a 10 to 15-kilometer buffer in the Sinai.[51] At first glance, it seems that Israel possessed a substantial capability at the forward edge of the battle area (FEBA), but its relative strength was inferior compared to what the Arabs brought to the fight. In the Sinai, Israel attempted to defend a 110-mile fixed fortification with approximately 450 soldiers and a reinforced armor division, which seems problematic at best.[52] Original estimates stated that the Israelis could defeat an invading force of 1,500 tanks or fewer.[53] The Bar-Lev line presented a formidable obstacle, but this planning factor expected IDF tanks to destroy Arab military assets at a five-to-one ratio, assuming they would retain air superiority.[54] In contrast to a defense-in-depth, where reserve forces are immediately available for employment, Israel relied on a light-forward posture of active units. Israel's inability to layer its defenses with units readily available within hours, instead of days, incentivized a first strike by Arab forces. The limited geographic aims of Egypt and Syria's strategy also enhanced the perceived benefit of a surprise first strike.

Egypt undermined Israel's force posture in three ways: by draining the available forces with a two-front war, neutralizing the Israeli Air Force, and frustrating the employment of the armored corps. First, Egyptian and Syrian leaders doubted the capability of Israeli forces to respond to surprise assaults on two fronts.[55] Second, Egypt developed "one of the strongest anti-aircraft systems in the world."[56] In the months before the conflict, the Egyptian military extended the air defense umbrella over the Suez Canal. It possessed over 150 surface-to-air missile (SAM) battalions with 2,500 anti-aircraft weapons. The presence of these forces completely negated the superiority of the Israeli Air Force (IAF) in the initial stages of the conflict.[57] Israel's ground forces overly relied on the IAF to conduct deep strikes inside Arab territory to diminish its numerical superiority. By aiming to neutralize this capability, the Arabs understood that Israel could only employ limited indirect fire assets because of Israel's lack of investment in those capabilities. Third, Israeli doctrine and force structure relied too much on unsupported armor operations, which the Egyptians and Syrians sought to counter with portable anti-tank weapons and the use of artillery.[58] The Yom Kippur War demonstrates the direct link between force posture decisions and strategic interactions between adversaries, and further the essential role of force postures in spurring feedback loops, which in many cases lead to attempts to alter the status quo.

Israel's force posture choices before the Yom Kippur War and the Arab states' counter-efforts reinforce the strength of the force posture hypothesis because of the capability gap associated with a light-forward force

posture. Israel's lack of strategic depth seems to have promoted the idea among its strategic thinkers that it necessitates offensive operations to shift the fighting to the adversary's territory.[59] The offensive nature of the IDF's doctrine supports the assertion of the force posture hypothesis by exacerbating the security dilemma between Israel and the Arab states. Egypt invested heavily in Soviet air defense and anti-tank capabilities to limit their effectiveness, signaling the presence of an arms race between the competitors. Understanding that they now possessed the capacity to overwhelm the light-forward defense, the Arabs chose to take advantage of what they now viewed as a first-strike advantage. From this, it is reasonable to deduce that a light-forward force posture fails to maintain strategic stability because it provides an enormous incentive for the adversary to utilize a potential first-strike advantage, since only limited assets are in place to deny access.

From Active Defense to AirLand Battle

The second case study will examine how a significant shift in the U.S. Army's force posture, driven mainly by its doctrinal change from Active Defense to AirLand Battle between 1976 and 1984, impacted the strategic stability of the U.S.- Soviet relationship. Studying these drastically different doctrines permits the assessment of two variations of force posture. The Army's doctrinal focus during the adoption of Active Defense most closely aligns with the force posture of defense-in-depth because of the overwhelming focus on the elasticity and mobility of defensive operations to respond to offensive incursions. Meanwhile, AirLand Battle aligns with a heavy-forward force posture and focuses on regaining the initiative with offensive operations after the adversary's initial strike or counterattack. Due to minimal changes in overall strength and disposition, variations in force posture mainly occurred at the doctrinal level. Active Defense sought to rapidly return the state of affairs to the status quo, while AirLand Battle sought to use the assets at the Army's disposal to achieve strategic objectives and "win."

Ultimately, this case study will show that the Army's adoption of AirLand Battle in 1982 represented a radical departure from its force posture of the previous decade and contributed to a deterioration of the relative strategic stability and detente which had characterized the relations between the U.S. and USSR in the 1970s.[60] Shifting focus from defensive to offensive operations and fielding the Army's "Big Five" weapons systems (the M1 Abrams main battle tank, the M2 Bradley fighting vehicle, the AH-64 Apache attack helicopter, the UH-60 Black Hawk utility helicopter, and the MIM-104 Patriot air defense missile system) destabilized relations by increasing the Soviet Union's self-perceived vulnerability, accelerating the debilitating effects of the security dilemma, and increasing the probability of inadvertent escalation.[61]

Force Posture Changes From Active Defense to AirLand Battle

Army leaders aligned the driving principles of Active Defense with the lessons learned from the Yom Kippur War by asserting that "[t]he US Army must prepare its units to fight outnumbered and win."[62] Accomplishing this required a departure from the Army's typical inclination to favor the offense. Active Defense prioritized the defense because of its ability to maximize the effective use of cover and concealment, firepower, and obstacles. On the other hand, offensive operations may unnecessarily expose a force. Military planners concluded that "the weapons of the attacker are not as effective as the weapons of

the defender."[63] Indeed, the 1976 U.S. field manual FM 100-5 suggested a force ratio of six to one when conducting offensive operations.[64] NATO combat power assessments indicate that military leaders only anticipated achieving this force ratio after the severe degradation of Warsaw Pact forces. A 1984 NATO Force comparison document shows the glaring disparity between the forces of the U.S.-led treaty alliance and the Eastern Bloc. Estimates gave the Warsaw Pact a quantitative advantage of 1.5 million personnel and almost 30,000 main battle tanks.[65] A Department of Defense (DOD) net assessment from 1974 came to the same conclusion regarding the quantitative disadvantage of the United States and NATO's forces, suggesting that Active Defense truly envisioned only a very limited role for offensive operations.[66] At the heart of Active Defense was the premise that the Army should pursue limited and short-duration counterattacks to avoid the exposure of offensive operations. In contrast to an offensive doctrine, Active Defense relied on "the utilization of successive battle positions in depth, to wear down and weaken the enemy."[67]

Active Defense's focus on the centrality of defensive operations garnered significant backlash within the Army because it ran counter to the established culture and ceded the initiative to the adversary. Internal assessments by U.S. Army officers at the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) found that commanders in the field never accepted the attrition doctrine because of its insistence on an elastic defense that traded space for time.[68] Army officers never embraced Active Defense because it violated what many perceived as the principles of war. Critics asserted that it reduced warfare to science and failed to apply the intangible aspects, such as the will to fight and the way of waging war. Essentially, the Army profoundly rejected the doctrine in favor of one that would return the initiative to ground commanders.[69] Institutional rejection of Active Defense led to the creation and adoption of AirLand Battle, which many considered a return to the widely accepted centrality of offensive operations.

AirLand Battle shifted the Army's focus from the attrition of enemy forces while in the defense to maneuver operations and disorganizing the enemy in-depth, introducing the concept of deep attack. Assessments from the 1990s widely credit AirLand Battle "with restoring the Army's aggressive, warrior spirit."[70] Revisions to FM 100-5 in 1982 departed from the 1976 version through its emphasis on seizing the initiative and exploiting it. AirLand Battle envisioned that the ultimate purpose behind all operations was to keep the enemy off-balance, thereby preventing the adversary's recovery.[71] The doctrine's emphasis on deep battle and moving the fight to enemy territory encapsulates its aggressive and inherently offensive nature.

Given the large force contingent of U.S. Army personnel in Europe throughout the Cold War, it is reasonable to identify an adjustment in the force posture from a defense-in-depth (Active Defense) to heavy-forward (AirLand Battle) by placing a particular emphasis on offensive doctrine.[72] AirLand Battle's focus on deep-strike operations sought to exploit the predictability and tactical rigidity of Soviet forces, but it had unintended consequences.[73] The aggressive nature of the AirLand Battle doctrine diminished the strategic stability of the U.S.-Soviet Union relationship. America's doctrinal shift, by deliberately exposing Soviet weaknesses, heightened the anxiety in Moscow that such a force posture may deliver a first-strike advantage.

From 1976 until the adoption of AirLand Battle in 1982, the U.S. Army's insistence on defensive operations and deployment of a defense-in-depth posture promoted general stability in U.S.-Soviet relations. Reactions of Soviet leaders to the adoption of Active Defense seemed far less alarmist than their reactions to AirLand Battle. One Sovietologist stated that Soviet military writings indicated that Active Defense presented an "effective answer to Warsaw Pact [o]perational strategy."[74] Admittedly, it is difficult to thoroughly assess the impact of Active Defense on Soviet perceptions because of the lack of publicly available information on the topic. Still, a connection becomes evident when examining the absence of destabilizing incidents from 1976 to 1979. It is also difficult to measure the balancing effect of this posture after 1979 because the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, leading to the collapse of détente.[75] Despite the lack of available information, the absence of extreme Soviet reactions and destabilizing incidents suggests that Active Defense helped the U.S. Army project the necessary capability to deter a peer adversary without signaling first-strike intentions or causing otherwise destabilizing effects.

In contrast to Active Defense, AirLand Battle garnered an immediate adverse reaction from Soviet military leaders. The doctrine exacerbated the deterioration of relations by increasing the Soviet Union's perception of vulnerability and its need to initiate an arms race. A 1985 study by RAND summarizes the prevailing views of Soviet military leaders following the adoption of AirLand Battle. In 1983, the Soviet Union's Commander-in-Chief of ground forces, Vasiliy Petrov, described AirLand Battle as "aggressive" and that it left little doubt among the Soviet Union and its allies that the United States and NATO sought "to create and make use of the potential for a 'disarming' first [conventional] strike and concluding the war under conditions favorable to the U.S."[76] Additional articles from the time highlight the concern of Soviet leaders by describing NATO's ability to transfer combat operations to the enemy's territory rapidly.[77] Soviet leaders also took notice of the military equipment that enabled AirLand Battle to achieve its concept of deep attack. Chief of the General Staff, N.V. Ogarkov, stated that the development of these weapons in the United States and NATO countries represented a fundamental change in the nature of warfare and that the Soviet Union needed to begin its expansion of similar weapons.[78] Soviet concern focused heavily on the "reconnaissance-strike complex" (RSC) to enable the deep attack. Soviet writing overwhelmingly hints at the destructive potential of RSC weapons and AirLand Battle. As a result, the Soviet military sought to counter and emulate NATO's new weapons.[79] Though the estimates were imperfect, the Central Intelligence Agency estimated that Soviet spending on research and development increased from 17 billion rubles in 1981 to over 21 billion rubles by 1985.[80] Soviet writings and actions display the inherent vulnerability they felt after the United States fundamentally changed its force posture from defensive to offensive with the adoption of AirLand Battle.

The force posture changes wrought by AirLand Battle further destabilized relations by eroding the credibility of NATO's promise to focus on defensive operations. After the publication of AirLand Battle, NATO's doctrine revolved around Follow-on-Forces Attack (FOFA). NATO repeatedly stressed that FOFA's focus remained purely on the defense, refusing to cross borders to pursue a counteroffensive. FOFA envisioned counterattack as a means of reestablishing the

status quo. AirLand Battle's concept of deep attack fundamentally opposed some of the ideas advanced by FOFA. U.S. leaders sought to assuage fears by promising that FOFA superseded AirLand Battle during a war between NATO and the Soviet Union.[81] Translations of Soviet writings indicate that Soviet military leaders saw no distinction between AirLand Battle and FOFA, diminishing the credibility of NATO's defensive claims.

Soviet leaders' observations from NATO exercises reinforced their concern because of what they saw as successful deep-strike planning. In 1983, Soviet military analysts began to stress the increasingly offensive nature of NATO planning and its ability to defeat a Soviet attack and then use a counteroffensive to overcome its defensive capabilities. [82] Altering the U.S. Army's force posture from a focus on defense-in-depth to a heavy-forward presence facilitated a collapse in Soviet trust that NATO served only defensive purposes.

Soviet military concerns over the shift in U.S. Army force posture manifested in more than academic writing. The increasing frequency of crises in 1983 demonstrates that strategic stability suffered, where the available evidence points to the adoption of an offensive posture as a key explanatory variable. Episodes such as the destruction of Korean Air Lines (KAL) 007 and the response to Able Archer in 1983 demonstrate the increasing suspicion of Soviet leaders.[83] In September 1983, after months of increasing offensive action and rhetoric by the United States, the Soviet military shot down KAL 007 after it refueled in Alaska and then drifted into Soviet airspace, prompting a wave of cynicism about the direction of U.S.-Soviet relations.[84] Stability further deteriorated during the annual NATO Able Archer exercise following this incident. As NATO forces began the annual exercise, intelligence warnings prompted Yuri Andropov to mobilize Soviet divisions, transport nuclear weapons to their launch sites, and to scramble nuclear-capable bombers.[85] A report by the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board discusses the heightening of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union throughout 1983, leading to the belief of many in the Soviet Union that nuclear war was imminent.[86]

Additionally, evidence indicates that Soviet leaders anticipated that the United States sought a first-strike capability against the Soviet Union. One of the advisory board's findings concluded that Soviet uncertainties and distrust increased because the United States bolstered its strategic and conventional posture. After the Able Archer exercise commenced, the Soviet Union heightened the readiness of its air forces in preparation for the possibility that NATO attempted to launch a first strike. U.S. analysts doubted the Soviet Union's genuine concern but still insisted that the behavior was unusual, especially since Warsaw Pact intelligence sought indicators that NATO was about to launch a first strike. Still, it is striking that in 1984, reports indicated that the Soviet Union was shifting its economy to a wartime footing, conducting additional military activities, and improving its military logistics system.[87] Shifts in U.S. Army force posture are not the sole explanatory factor behind the Soviets' increased paranoia and aggressive action. Still, statements from military leaders cast little doubt that changes in force posture assisted in the corrosion of strategic stability.[88]

As mentioned, force posture and military factors fail to explain fluctuations in strategic stability by themselves, but they provide insight into a significant reason for those

changes. One alternate argument about the primary driver of instability during the 1980s would point to the role of an individual, President Ronald Reagan.[89] President Reagan undoubtedly had an enormous effect on relations between the two nations, as did Soviet leaders. Still, there are certain factors that his presence fails to explain. First, changes in U.S. Army doctrine occurred at the organizational level and lacked the president's involvement. The Army's shift to AirLand Battle radically changed the analysis of Soviet military leaders as they began to fear potential vulnerabilities. Second, Ronald Reagan's presence failed to explain the Soviet response to Able Archer in 1983. By then, President Reagan was well into his first term and had overseen two prior Able Archer exercises, so why the extreme reaction in 1983? Once again, a holistic view best describes changes to strategic stability. Stability decreased from 1982 to 1984 because aggressive rhetoric from the commander-in-chief coincided with the development of an offensive force posture that aimed to take advantage of Soviet weaknesses. In response, Soviet leaders sought to undermine the capabilities of the U.S. military by developing a similar response that threatened the credibility of the American deterrent. An analysis of force posture is not all-encompassing, but it does expose the presence of a feedback loop in the complex interaction between posture changes and stability.

Implications: Overcoming the Force Posture Paradox

The presence of a force posture paradox as it pertains to maintaining or degrading strategic stability necessitates a review of the strategic decisions of the U.S. Army. This section will discuss the implications of the Army's recent decision to focus its force posture in the Indo-Pacific on a light-forward force posture, while its posture in Europe alternates between that of a light-forward presence and defense-in-depth.[90] At the strategic level, the Army needs to reexamine the alignment of its military strategy from one focused on deterrence through punishment to one focused on denial. A denial strategy will align closely with a force posture of defense-in-depth, promoting the most significant degree of stability. The Army's strategic reassessment should also focus on alliance and partner management, specifically as it applies to the Indo-Pacific, because of its ability to impact a force posture's deterrence credibility. Though not discussed in-depth in this paper, the Army should consider operational and tactical changes, particularly with its doctrine, to align with its strategic priorities. Recognizing the realities of two vastly different theaters (Europe and the Indo-Pacific), the Army may need separate doctrines to address Russia and the PRC.

Strategic Level Considerations

Maintaining strategic stability in the current international order requires a carefully orchestrated strategic balancing act, particularly as new powers rise and may seek to challenge the U.S.'s hegemonic position within the international system. The two previous National Security and National Defense Strategies direct the military's attention to two primary near-peer competitors, Russia and the PRC. The goal is to maintain the established status quo and retain the global influence of the United States by deterring offensive actions against partners and allies. Army force posture currently aligns with a punishment strategy, relying on the deployment of offensive expeditionary forces to punish an adversary after it pursues an incursion into allied territory or an otherwise offensive action. Unfortunately, this may unintentionally escalate tensions and decrease stability at a time when the strategic environment is rife

with conflict and the U.S Army lacks the required military capabilities to sustain a prolonged conflict, particularly with its commitments in multiple geographic theaters.

Two decades of counterinsurgency operations in the Middle East may hinder the Army's ability to conduct offensive expeditionary operations. Due to its shortcomings, Army leaders should consider adopting a defensive strategy that maximizes the utility of its current equipment. The U.S. Army's experience post-Vietnam is not a perfect analogy to current circumstances, but the similarities are strikingly useful. Evidence shows that General DePuy sought to implement Active Defense as a way of helping rehabilitate the Army and conform to the new reality of an all-volunteer force. As the Army transitioned and began integrating its new weapons systems, Active Defense helped fulfill the Army's role of deterring land conflicts in Europe.[91] Army leaders face similar circumstances today. After 50 years of maintaining the all-volunteer force, the Army faces severe issues meeting recruiting goals. In fiscal year 2022, the Army missed its recruiting goal by about 15,000 soldiers, forcing it to cut its end strength from 476,000 to 466,000. Sustained recruiting issues could force these numbers even lower.[92] Though the Army met its recruiting goals for 2025 four months early, it is difficult to determine if this renewed interest will continue.[93] In addition to personnel similarities, the Army is also attempting to undergo a modernization reminiscent of the Big Five.[94] The Army's Modernization Strategy seeks to develop new platforms and capabilities to accomplish Multi-Domain Operations.

Despite not possessing the necessary technological and personnel capabilities, the Army continues to surge ahead with integrating the offensively minded MDO. Alternatively, Army leaders should reassess their current focus and align their thinking with a denial strategy since the military may lack the credibility and capability to maintain deterrence through punishment.

The strategic complexity of the terrain in the Indo-Pacific may necessitate a forward presence because of the difficulty associated with amphibious operations and the ability to regenerate combat power. Changes should emphasize island defense and prioritize long-range precision fires to provide a credible deterrent. Military planners generally consider amphibious assaults one of the most challenging operations, and the costs of failure can be enormous. One example to contemplate is the Japanese assault on Wake Island. During the assault, 449 U.S. Marines repulsed the initial attacks of a larger Japanese foe. Japan's eventual seizure of the island resulted in the loss of two destroyers, two converted destroyers, a submarine, and approximately 1,000 soldiers, compared to 100 American lives lost.[95] Iwo Jima provides another example of the costly nature of amphibious assaults. Roughly 70,000 Marines assaulted an island defended by 18,000 Japanese. The United States suffered 27,000 casualties in six days of fighting on the island.[96] In 2020, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Berger, assessed that the current nature of the U.S.'s security threats eliminated the need for "large-scale forcible entry operations followed by sustained operations ashore."[97] General Berger's statement makes it abundantly clear that the Army and Marine Corps are developing vastly different concepts for the future of warfare, likely because their respective postures focus on separate theaters. Diverging assessments should necessitate a strategic review by the U.S. Army to determine the force posture and doctrine required to provide a credible

deterrent that suits the geographic challenges of the region.

Deterrence by denial and defense-in-depth requires a dispersed force presence throughout Europe and the Indo-Pacific because of its ability to erode adversary confidence in achieving strategic objectives, such as quickly seizing control of Taiwan, without sustaining unacceptable costs. By aligning force deployments with the concept of denial, the United States can ensure that it has the requisite capability present in theater to impose costs and diminish the PRC or Russia's perception that they can interrupt the movement of reinforcements. The United States already possesses a substantial presence on the European landmass, but stationing additional forces in the Pacific may be difficult. Despite the enduring strength of the U.S.-Japanese alliance, many within Japan resist the idea of additional U.S. forces.[98] Similarly, tensions persist in the U.S.-Republic of Korea alliance because of cost-sharing disputes and the negative actions of some U.S. service members.[99]

New basing arrangements with countries such as the Philippines offer promise, but increasing troop levels may have negative repercussions.[100] An expanded force presence could begin to drive wedges between the United States and its partners and allies as it has in the past. The U.S. military closed its base at Subic Bay and Clark Air Base in 1992 after many in the Philippines began to view the U.S. bases as signs of colonialism and violations of its sovereignty.[101]Increasingly negative public sentiments toward U.S. force presence could undermine the ability to deter PRC actions in the region because it could limit the United States' operational reach and ability to forward deploy forces in the Philippines. Minimizing domestic backlash in the Philippines is crucial for U.S. efforts to deter PRC aggression against Taiwan and further expansion into the South China Sea.[102] The force posture paradox presents another layer of complexity concerning alliance relations. The greater the force presence within the region or country one is trying to defend, the higher the likelihood that such a posture will lead to domestic grievances within the host country.

Successfully deterring the PRC in the Indo-Pacific entails cooperation from other critical states, such as India, which often takes a skeptical view of foreign interference in regional affairs. Preventing this degradation of relations may require the United States to emphasize the combat strength of host-nation forces in its planning by directly integrating them into defensive plans or placing greater emphasis on host-nation responsibility. Since no version of NATO in the Indo-Pacific exists, U.S. military planners must begin to grapple with coordinating efforts across allies and partners that are part of the "hub-and-spoke" system.[103] Disaggregated responses to PRC aggression may attempt to address the problem piecemeal instead of in a coordinated solution. The PRC's ability to operate so close to its shore places the United States at a critical strategic disadvantage as it attempts to coordinate responses from across the Pacific and with a group of allies that have different prerogatives and agendas.

One last strategic consideration is essential: the impact of an offensive military doctrine on the willingness of allies and partners to cooperate. Relying on MDO and other penetration doctrines may garner negative responses from partners and allies who wish to refrain from attacks that may lead to inadvertent escalation or seem disproportionate, given that Taiwan is seen mainly as a Chinese territory.[104] One prime example is Australia, which many consider to be the most reliable ally the United States

has, yet even Canberra's support and participation in a potential war with the PRC remains in doubt. Numerous assessments and articles draw different conclusions about their willingness to participate.[105] Australia's possible decision to stay neutral is a cause for concern, but less so than if Japan claimed neutrality. Japan's abstention from a conflict could hamper the United States' ability to respond to acts of aggression effectively.[106] Many believe this is increasingly unlikely, but the prospect remains, and an offensive military strategy may drive states toward neutrality as they seek to limit the fallout.

Applying the force posture paradox and the historical case studies to contemporary issues presents several alternative implications that could have an equally negative impact on strategic stability. First, adversaries may feel they have a limited window of opportunity to take advantage of perceived weaknesses in the Army's strategy if it adjusts to a denial and defense-in-depth approach. Fully adjusting the Army's capabilities, deployments, and training to a doctrine oriented toward a new force posture may take years to fully implement, especially given the current disposition of forces across the geographic areas of interest. Additionally, negotiating the required basing agreements may take years, as they have with agreements over Pituffik Space Base, or suffer from host-nation instability as they have in the Philippines.[107] As the adversary recognizes that the window is closing, it may act assertively to achieve its strategic objectives before the Army fully implements its new strategy. Aligning the Army's force posture with a new strategy will require significant time, making it potentially vulnerable during the shift. Still, its current reliance on offensive operations already leaves it vulnerable. To address this weakness, the Army must adapt its doctrine and repurpose its assets in theater to conduct a defense-in-depth, giving it the necessary time to procure and deploy the correct platforms and capabilities. The Army can limit, but not eliminate, the risk of escalation by focusing first on doctrinal changes and then on force procurement and deployment decisions. Unfortunately, no definitive solution to the window of opportunity problem exists because all strategic decisions require the management of risk to force and mission. Focusing on doctrinal changes first can help address the potential erosion of deterrence credibility and capability as peer competitors develop systems to contest the Army's ability to project force and adversaries question the country's willingness to escalate conflicts in accordance with MDO.

Second, simply orienting the Army's force posture to defensive operations does not equate with the U.S.'s adversaries perceiving its intent as defensive.[108] Adversaries may fail to deduce that a change in the Army's force posture represents a shift from an offensive to a defensive focus. An example occurred in NATO's relationship with the Soviet Union after the Army adopted AirLand Battle. Despite NATO's insistence that FOFA was defensive, the Soviet Union perceived it as offensive and refused to view it separately from AirLand Battle. The PRC's reaction to the Army's deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea provides a contemporary example of the perception-misperception challenge. Despite being a defensive weapon system, THAAD provoked anger amongst the PRC leadership. They argued that THAAD upset the strategic balance and posed a threat to the PRC's national security.[109] As the United States bolsters its regional defensive capabilities, decision-makers in Beijing are likely to react similarly.

Conclusion: The Future of Strategic Stability Depends on Force Posture

This paper discussed the effect of the primary land force's service-specific force posture on strategic stability. Drawing heavily and in many ways supplementing the findings of offense-defense balance and military strategy theorists, this paper focused on three variations of a ground element's force posture to see how they shaped the stability of relationships. After a study of two relevant case studies during the Cold War, this paper showed that light and heavy forward force postures seem to destabilize relations. In contrast, a defense-in-depth posture maintains or bolsters stability. Case studies reveal the presence of a force posture paradox that enhances the difficulty of managing a ground force's capability and its escalatory potential.

Military organizations seem predisposed toward offensive postures, especially those of the United States, because their culture and education promote retaining the initiative as a fundamental part of their identity.[110] For this reason, the Army maintains a light-forward posture that relies heavily on the offensive doctrine of MDO to deter an adversary through the threat of punishment. The case studies chosen for this paper demonstrate that this will likely lead to the failure of deterrence and the deterioration of strategic stability because it increases the perception of vulnerability and exacerbates the security dilemma. In the future, the Army should consider revising its force posture to a defense-in-depth, which aligns with a denial strategy. The Army's shift to MDO necessitates further research in a few areas, including the impact of doctrine changes on alliance cohesion, the Army's capability to implement a doctrine while awaiting the development of critical technologies, and how the centralization of command can intensify the capability/vulnerability paradox. Other studies should examine the impact of other services and their force postures on strategic stability, particularly since the Air Force and Navy are the preferred tools of power projection. Additional clarification on the impact of the Army's force posture will require further research into Soviet perceptions of Active Defense, and a study of the operational and tactical changes required to implement a defense-in-depth posture in the current strategic environment. The findings of this paper do not provide a perfect explanation of state actions. Still, it presents another vital lens through which one can comprehensively view factors influencing strategic stability.

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[1] Donald J. Trump, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America" (The White House, December 2017): 27, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf.

[2] Joseph R. Biden, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America" (The White House, October 2022): 1, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf.

[3] For an analysis of the 2018 NSS, see James Mattis, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America" (Department of Defense, n.d.): 1, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf. For an explanation of the Army's MDO, see Todd South, "The Army's Transformation Begins with These New Units," Army Times, April 17, 2022, https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2022/04/11/the-armys-transformation-begins-with-these-new-units/.

[4] While the Army initiated its transition to MDO and the modernization of its armored force, Russia attempted to overwhelm Ukrainian defenses with overwhelming armored superiority. As the war continues, Russia's military achievements and blunders in Ukraine forced America's defense community to question its force posture and equipment procurement decisions. The failure of Russia's attempted armored assault into Ukraine prompted some observers to challenge the relevance of armored warfare in favor of "less bulky" anti-armor equipment. One observer went so far as to question whether the tank is obsolete, pointing to Russian employment and doctrine failures as the driver behind its staggering losses. Similarly, questions about the sustainability and applicability of the Army's armored force arise in the Indo-Pacific theater. A 2022 RAND report discusses the sustainment and employment issues associated with significant amounts of armor in the Indo-Pacific. America's last conventional conflict in the region featured small, sometimes critical, quantities of armor. Still, Army leaders assert the significance of armored vehicles for a future fight in the Indo-Pacific. For additional information on these topics, see Rob Lee, "The Tank Is Not Obsolete, and Other Observations About the Future of Combat," War on the Rocks, September 6, 2022, https://warontherocks.com/2022/09/the-tank-is-not-obsolete-and-other-observations-about-the-future-of-combat/; Jonathan P. Wong et al., New Directions for Projecting Land Power in the Indo-Pacific: Contexts, Constraints, and Concepts (RAND Corporation, 2022): 102-04, https://doi.org/10.7249/RRA1672-1; Robert Young, "EARMOR 'It Just Took a Few': The Tank in New Guinea Campaign," accessed March 28, 2023, https://www.benning.army.mil/armor/earmor/Content/Historical/Young.html; Sean Kimmons, "Armored Vehicles Could See Larger Role in Indo-Pacific to Compete with China," www.army.mil, accessed March 28, 2023, https://www.army.mil/article/244203/armored_vehicles_could_see_larger_role_in_indo_pacific_to_compete_with_china; South, "The Army's Transformation Begins with These New Units."

[5] For a discussion on the offensive nature of the Army's Multi-Domain Operations, see Jaron S. Wharton, "The Army Plans Its Warfighting Future," October 7, 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/army-plans-its-warfighting-future. For a discussion on the offensive ideology, see David Johnson, "Ending the Ideology of the Offense, Part II," War on the Rocks, August 25, 2022, https://warontherocks.com/2022/08/ending-the-ideology-of-the-offense-part-ii/.

[6] Michael J. Mazaar, "Understanding Deterrence," *RAND,* April 19, 2018, https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE295.html.

[7] Though there is no agreed-upon definition for strategic stability, this paper will refrain from using definitions that overly focus on nuclear weapons and will use the term to broadly refer to three components: peacetime stability, crisis stability, and wartime stability The presence of multiple definitions for strategic stability dictate that this paper attempt to identify the term broadly and avoid a narrow application that strictly focuses on the role of nuclear weapons. At the same time, when considering a potential conflict between nuclear armed states, the risk of nuclear escalation must be a factor. Given these considerations, this paper will use the three categories of strategic stability defined by Sechser, Narang, and Talmadge. Boehlefeld and Grieco define peacetime stability as a long-range build-up in tensions and intensifying competition between states. They also define crisis stability as the likelihood of immediate crises and conflicts. Meanwhile, wartime stability will refer to the risk of inadvertent escalation in a conflict. Sechser, Narang, and Talmadge include arms races, proliferation, and arms control as factors influencing peace time stability. Crisis stability includes deterrence, coercion, and conflict initiation. Wartime stability includes the conduct, escalation, and the termination of wars. To measure peacetime stability, this paper will once again draw upon Boehlefeld and Grieco by using three key indicators: "1) adversary statements (leaders/government documents) about the exercises, assessing whether they express fears of strategic realignment and issue coercive

threats; 2) increase capabilities and trainings and/or pursue new security partners or build up existing security partnerships; and 3) attempt to divide the exercising states. To measure crisis stability, we examine three key indicators: 1) adversary statements (leaders/government documents) about the exercises, assessing whether they express fears of surprise attack or issue coercive threats; 2) engage in force demonstrations (e.g., reciprocal exercises, weapons tests); or 3) attempt to disrupt the exercise (e.g., shadow exercising aircraft or vessels)." To measure wartime stability, this paper will examine two key indicators 1) adversary actions (e.g. force deployments, resource mobilization, offensive military operations) that change the nature or scope of the conflict and 2) nuclear force posture changes (e.g. nuclear alert status changes, deployment of strategic forces). See Todd S. Sechser, Neil Narang, and Caitlin Talmadge, "Emerging Technologies and Strategic Stability in Peacetime, Crisis, and War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 6 (September 19, 2019): 727–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1626725; James M. Acton, 'Reclaiming Strategic Stability,' in Elbridge A. Colby and Michael S. Gerson (ed.), *Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretations* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2013): 117-146, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA572928.pdf ; Kathryn M.G. Boehlefeld and Kelly A. Grieco, "Exercising Escalation: Do Multinational Military Exercises Provoke Interstate Security Crises?" in Ryan D. Grauer and Rosella Cappella Zielenski eds., *Understanding Battlefield Coalitions* (New York: Routledge, September 11, 2023), https://www.routledge.com/Understanding-Battlefield-Coalitions/Cappella-Zielinski-Grauer/p/book/9781032508375.

[8] Christopher Ford, "Anything But Simple: Arms Control and Strategic Stability," in *Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretations* (Carlisle, PA: Army War College Press, 2013), 202, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA572928.

[9] Joshua Rovner and Caitlin Talmadge, "Hegemony, Force Posture, and the Provision of Public Goods: The Once and Future Role of Outside Powers in Securing Persian Gulf Oil," *Security Studies* 23, no. 3 (July 3, 2014): 549, https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2014.935224.

[10] Christine E. Wormuth and James C. McConville, "On the Posture of the United States Army" (Department of the Army, May 5, 2022): 2-18, https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/aps/aps_2022.pdf.

[11] The definition of force posture draws from an article by Abbas Khan in which he cites the Department of Defense (DOD) as the source for the force posture definition, but the linked citation source is from a non-DOD affiliated website. After an extensive search, no definition of force posture, military posture, or defense posture exists in the DOD's glossary of terms. Despite these shortcomings, Khan's cited definition helps tailor the definition to help maintain focus on the land power dynamic. For Khan's definition, see Nasim Abbas Khan, "Force Posturing and the Contemporary Security Environment: Options for Industrially Dependent Countries," *Wild Blue Yonder*, June 22, 2020, 1-2, https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jun/25/2002321711/-1/-1/1/ABBAS%20KHAN.PDF. For the Department of Defense's Glossary of Terms, see "DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms" (Department of Defense, March 2017), https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1029823.pdf.

[12] According to the Army's Posture statement, it seeks to align with the concept of integrated deterrence through its investments and force disposition. Currently, the Army has approximately 45,000 soldiers deployed in support of reassurance to America's North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies. Recent deployments to Europe seek to provide a combat-credible ground force deterrent in the theater. The Army sought to demonstrate this by rapidly deploying an armored brigade from Ft. Stewart, Georgia, and having them complete a live-fire exercise in less than a week. If deterrence fails, rapid force deployments aim to display America's ability to project combat power into any theater. Unlike the description of forces in Europe, the posture statement lacks a detailed overview of the forces deployed to the Indo-Pacific. U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC) boasts an end strength of 107,000 soldiers. Unfortunately, most soldiers are not within the theater or close to the probable line of contact. USARPAC's forces primarily lie within the U.S. and its territories, with a large contingent focused on a secondary threat in the Republic of Korea. In support of the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI), the Army allocated $1.4 billion to improve its posture inside the first and second island chains and enable the transition to an MDO-capable force. Transitioning to the doctrine of MDO is a priority because the Army maintains its strategic emphasis on the Indo-Pacific. For additional information on the Army's force posture, see Wormuth and McConville, "On the Posture of the United States Army."

[13] Lloyd Austin, "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America," (Department of Defense, October 27, 2022): IV, https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF.

[14] Ibid., 8.

[15] Ibid., 9.

[16] In a perspective piece for the RAND Corporation, Michael Mazar provides an overview for the different versions of deterrence and their definitions. See Michael J. Mazarr, "Understanding Deterrence," *RAND Corporation,* 2018, 2, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE295/RAND_PE295.pdf.

[17] On evolving military strategies, see John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Cornell University Press, 1983), https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1rv61v2. Brian Blankenship and Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Trivial Tripwires?: Military Capabilities and Alliance Reassurance," *Security Studies* 31, no. 1 (January 1, 2022): 92–117, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2022.2038662. Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Reassurance and Deterrence in Asia," *Security Studies* 31, no. 4 (August 8, 2022): 743–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2022.2140598. Do Young Lee, "Strategies of Extended Deterrence: How States Provide the Security Umbrella," *Security Studies* 30, no. 5 (October 20, 2021): 761–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2021.2010887. Jörg Noll, Osman Bojang, and Sebastiaan Rietjens, "Deterrence by Punishment or Denial? The EFP Case," in *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020: Deterrence in the 21st Century—Insights from Theory and Practice*, ed. Frans Osinga and Tim Sweijs, NL ARMS (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2021), 109–28, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-419-8_7. Mike Gallagher, "State of (Deterrence by) Denial," *Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (June 2019): 31–45, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1626687. Glenn Herald Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense* (Princeton, UNITED STATES: Princeton University Press, 1961), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/georgetown/detail.action?docID=4071297. Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing," in *The Use of Force: Military Power and International Politics*, 5th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999). On the impact of the offense-defense balance, see Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars*, ed. Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984). Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214, https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958. Charles L. Glaser and Chaim Kaufmann, "What Is the Offense-Defense Balance and Can We Measure It?," *International Security* 22, no. 4 (Spring 1998): 44, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539240. Ben Garfinkel and Allan Dafoe, "How Does the Offense-Defense Balance Scale?," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 6 (September 19, 2019): 736–63, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1631810. Stephen Van Evera, "Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War," in *The Use of Force: Military Power and International Politics*, 5th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 44–69.

[18] Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," 186-189.

[19] Van Evera, 5.

[20] Ibid., 42.

[21] Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press. *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in The Atomic Age*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020): 121.

[22] Ibid., 121-122.

[23] Glaser and Kaufmann, "What Is the Offense-Defense Balance and Can We Measure It?," 45-46.

[24] Ibid., 60.

[25] Garfinkel and Dafoe, "How Does the Offense-Defense Balance Scale?," 736-737.

[26] Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 29.

[27] Ibid., 29.

[28] Ibid., 59.

[29] For literature on tripwires, see Blankenship and Lin-Greenberg, "Trivial Tripwires?" Mastro, "Reassurance and Deterrence in Asia." For literature on defense pacts, see Lee, "Strategies of Extended Deterrence." For literature on deterrence through punishment and denial, see Noll, Bojang, and Rietjens, "Deterrence by Punishment or Denial?"

Gallagher, "State of (Deterrence by) Denial." Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense*. For literature on offshore balancing, see Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing."

[30] For the works of other authors discussing the concept of denial, see Eugene Gholz, Benjamin Friedman, and Enea Gjoza, "Defensive Defense: A Better Way to Protect US Allies in Asia," *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2019): 171–89, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1693103. "Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia," Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, June 22, 2022, https://quincyinst.org/report/active-denial-a-roadmap-to-a-more-effective-stabilizing-and-sustainable-u-s-defense-strategy-in-asia/.

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[32] Ibid., 151.

[33] Ibid., 149-150.

[34] Ibid., 153.

[35] Gallagher, "State of (Deterrence by) Denial," 32.

[36] Due to the limitations on the scope of this paper, nuclear posture and its influence on specific services will not be examined. The literature on this topic is plentiful, but will not be covered in this paper. This paper will briefly discuss the potential for inadvertent escalation because its primary focus is maintaining strategic stability between nuclear-armed states.

[37] Rovner and Talmadge, "Hegemony, Force Posture, and the Provision of Public Goods," 554-555.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Khan, "Force Posturing and the Contemporary Security Environment: Options for Industrially Dependent Countries," 4.

[40] T. S. Allen and Perry Jackson, "Task Force Smith and the Problem with 'Readiness,'" Modern War Institute, July 17, 2020, https://mwi.usma.edu/task-force-smith-and-the-problem-with-readiness/.

[41] https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA381834.pdf

[42] TS Allen, MWI.

[43] https://www.aei.org/articles/the-lesson-of-task-force-smith/

[44] For more information on defense-in-depth, see Timothy T. Lupfer, "The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War," *Leavenworth Papers*, no. 4 (July 1981): 1–71.

[45] Uri Bar-Joseph, "Surprise," In *The Watchman Fell Asleep: The Surprise of Yom Kippur and Its Sources* (State University of New York Press, 2005): 205, http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.18255067.22.

[46] Nadav Safran, "Trial by Ordeal: The Yom Kippur War, October 1973," *International Security* 2, no. 2 (1977): 137, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538730.

[47] Van Creveld, *The Sword And The Olive,* 225.

[48] Safran, "Trial by Ordeal," 137.

[49] George W. Gawrych, "The 1973 Arab-Israeli War: The Albatross of Decisive Victory," *Leavenworth Papers*, no. 21 (1996): 18, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/combat-studies-institute/csi-books/the-1973-arab-israeli-war.pdf.

[50] Safran, "Trial by Ordeal," 137.

[51] Steven R. Meek, "*The Illusion of Defeat: Egyptian Strategic Thinking and the 1973 Yom Kippur War*," (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff College, 2016): 38, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/AD1022141.pdf.

[52] Keith F. Koepts, "Breaching the Bar-Lev Line," U.S. Naval Institute, October 1, 2003, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2003/october/breaching-bar-lev-line.

[53] Safran, "Trial by Ordeal,"142.

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[55] For more information on Israeli and Syrian force strength and disposition, see Safran, "Trial by Ordeal," 143.

[56] Avraham Adan, *On the Banks of the Suez: An Israeli General's Personal Account of the Yom Kippur War* (San Rafael, Calif: Presidio Press, 1980): 63.

[57] Ahron Bregman, *Israel's Wars: A History since 1947*, Fourth edition, Warfare and History (London ; New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2016): 129.

[58] Robert S. Bolia, "Overreliance on Technology in Warfare: The Yom Kippur War as a Case Study," The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters 34, no. 2 (May 1, 2004): 52, https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.2197.

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[60] Peter Wallensteen, "American-Soviet Detente: What Went Wrong?" *Journal of Peace Research* 22, no. 1 (1985): 1, http://www.jstor.org/stable/423582.

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[62] Bernard W. Rogers, *FM 100-5: Operations*, (Department of the Army, April 29, 1977): 1-2, https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4013coll9/id/972/.

[63] Rogers, "FM 100-5: Operations," 3-4.

[64] Ibid.

[65] "NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Force Comparisons - NATO Archives Online" (NATO Archives Online, 1984): 8, https://archives.nato.int/nato-and-warsaw-pact-force-comparisons.

[66] A.W. Marshall, "Memorandum From the Director of Net Assessment, Office of the Secretary of Defense (Marshall) to Secretary of Defense Schlesinger" (Office of the Historian, July 30, 1974), https://georgetown.instructure.com/courses/158542/files/folder/SEST%20515%20Lesson%204?preview=9244397.

[67] Rogers, "FM 100-5: Operations," 5-7.

[68] For a detailed review of the reasons behind the transition from Active Defense to AirLand battle, see Jeffrey W. Long, "The Evolution of U.S. Army Doctrine: From Active Defense to AirLand Battle and Beyond" (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1991), https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA241774.pdf.

[69] John Nisser conducted an in-depth study on the doctrinal rejection of Active Defense in favor of AirLand Battle. His study found that the concepts within formal doctrine are not the crucial element for whether it is adopted or rejected. Cultural coherence and the inclusivity of its creation are the crucial ingredients for the acceptance of doctrine. For his study, see John Nisser, "Conceptualizing Doctrinal Rejection: A Comparison between Active

Defense and Airland Battle," *Defence Studies*, 2022, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14702436.2022.2132232?needAccess=true&role=button.

[70] Long, "The Evolution of U.S. Army Doctrine: From Active Defense to AirLand Battle and Beyond," 3.

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[83] Jerald J. Jordan, "The Soviet Response to Korean Air Lines Flight 007" (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Command and General Staff College, 1985): 1-2, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA164784.pdf.

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[87] President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, "President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, 'The Soviet "War Scare,"' February 15, 1990 | National Security Archive" (George H.W. Bush Library): 8-14, accessed March 21, 2023, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21038-4-pfiab-report-2012-0238-mr.

[88] An abundance of declassified documents describe Soviet reactions to the Able Archer exercise in 1983. Documents highlight the response by the Soviet Union and the increasing concern over the realism of U.S. military exercises. Though a large portion of this concern may have been propaganda, it still provides support for the argument that force postures that stress offensive military capabilities diminish strategic stability. For additional information on Soviet reactions to Able Archer in 1982, see Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); Leonard H. Perroots, "U.S. Air Force, Lt. Gen. Leonard H. Perroots, Letter, 'End of Tour Report Addendum,'" (National Security Archive, January 1, 1989), https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21035-us-air-force-lt-gen-leonard-h-perroots-letter-end-tour-report-addendum-january-1989; Nate Jones, "The Soviet Side of the 1983 War Scare | National Security Archive," accessed March 23, 2023, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/aa83/2018-11-05/soviet-side-1983-war-scare; "Soviet Thinking on the Possibility of Armed Confrontation with the United States" (Central Intelligence Agency, December 30, 1983), https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB428/docs/5.a.Soviet%20Thinking%20on%20the%20Possibility%20of%20Armed%20Confrontation%20with%20US.pdf; L.V. Levadov, "Results of the Operational Training of the NATO Combined Forces in 1983 Voennaya Mysl," *Military Thought* 67, no. 2 (February 1984), https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/17320-document-18-colonel-l-v-levadov-results; "Macro Trends in Soviet Strategy 1965-1985" (BDM Federal, Inc., n.d.), https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb285/doc02_I_ch1.pdf; "Implications of Recent Soviet-Military-Political Activities" (Central Intelligence Agency, May 18, 1984), https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB428/docs/6.Implications%20of%20Recent%20Soviet%20Military-Political%20Activities.pdf; Central Intelligence Agency, "Central Intelligence Agency, National Intelligence Daily, 'USSR-East Germany: Air Units Alerted,'" (National Security Archive, November 10, 1983), https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21037-1-nid-ussr-east-germany-alert-11-10-83; Central Intelligence Agency, "Central Intelligence Agency, Chief, Office of Soviet Analysis, and Director, National Warning Staff, [Names Redacted], Memorandum, Distributed by Fritz Ermarth to DCI and DDCI" (National Security Archive, 1989), https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21036-central-intelligence-agency-chief-office-soviet-analysis-and-director-national; Anatoly Chernyaev, "Anatoly Chernyaev Diary," accessed March 23, 2023, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/anatoly-chernyaev-diary.

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[90] Categorizing the Army's current force posture in Europe is difficult because of the changes brought about after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Army's current deployments supplement those of NATO, but present a modest capability in the Baltics, with a more robust force presence in Romania and Poland. Meanwhile, the Army has additional permanent units located in Germany and Italy. The layering and constant movement of these forces hints at the possibility of establishing a defense-in-depth, but the Army's doctrine and overall force presence lacks the capability to actually accomplish a defense-in-depth. Obtaining accurate numbers of only U.S. Army personnel in Europe during the 1970s and 1980s is difficult, but between the adoption of Active Defense and the publishing of AirLand Battle, the U.S. military presence in Europe grew from about 270,000 to close to 320,000. Currently, the U.S. military possess only about one-third of this former capability in Europe. For more information on current and former deployments, see "FACT SHEET - U.S. Defense Contributions to Europe"; "U.S. Troops in Europe 2021," Statista, accessed April 2, 2023, https://www-statista-com.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/statistics/1294309/us-troops-europe/?locale=en; Becky Sullivan, "Explaining the U.S. Military Presence in Europe as 2,000 More Troops Deploy," *NPR*, February 4, 2022, sec. National Security, https://www.npr.org/2022/02/04/1078241901/us-troops-europe-ukraine-russia-crisis.

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Toward Improved Counterintelligence for Critical Energy Infrastructure Protection

Thomas Fitzgerald

The FBI, DHS, and the broader U.S. Counterintelligence (CI) community can and should be allocating substantive resources to support the protection of U.S. critical energy infrastructure from state and non-state adversaries. Critical energy infrastructure has been the sleeping giant that remains underfunded and overlooked by the CI community. Areas for improvement include: (i) Enhanced physical and digital security to critical energy infrastructure: There are no designated agencies with sole responsibility for providing 24/7 physical protection to any electric transmission assets. Excluding nuclear power plants, most of the nation's bulk power infrastructure relies on a series of locked gates, doors, and fencing surrounding inconspicuous high-voltage substation equipment. Smart assets and smart infrastructure further create a digital ecosystem of unsecured and open-source equipment with a history of security breaches. The National Counterintelligence Strategy has discussed both physical and cyber threats; however, substantive action has been slow and limited. (ii) Safeguarding Critical Energy Infrastructure Information (CEII): Utility CEII analysts lack formal standards and are pressured to minimize redactions in public utility regulatory filings due to fear of repercussions from elected state regulators and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). This politically driven creation of OSINT should be a substantial concern within the CI community, given that utility commissions inadvertently publish data explicitly outlining why dollars were spent on a given piece of critical energy infrastructure. The use of Artificial Intelligence to scrape utility commissioner websites looking for CEII could become an easy method of OSINT collection for state and non-state adversaries. (iii) Near-shoring and proactive supply chain management: Prior to the pandemic, most transmission-level equipment, especially power transformers, required roughly two years of lead time from initial purchase order to commissioning. After COVID disrupted much of the global supply chains, these specialty, large, and complex pieces of heavy equipment have seen lead times swell to upwards of four years. To mitigate the risk of running out of critical spares, utilities have begun procuring expensive mobile transformers and mobile substations. When not in use, these assets sit idle in utility yards. They are not guarded, managed, or overseen by anyone within the CI community. The CI community further does not safeguard nor fund the procurement of these critical assets. (iv) Proactive Human Capital and Workforce Risk Mitigation: A small number of highly trained engineers are responsible for understanding, studying, and operating the nation's regional electric transmission power grid. This workforce, about 6,000 highly skilled technical professionals, is increasingly composed of foreign-born nationals due to a lack of U.S. engineers and the boomer retirement wave. These professionals and their families are not adequately protected by the CI community, nor are they provided a smooth or expedited process to become U.S. citizens while having tremendous scope and responsibility. This creates a large CI-driven HUMINT vulnerability in the nation's critical energy infrastructure systems. The CI community has a vested role as part of its defensive mandate to safeguard the nation's critical energy infrastructure.

Introduction

The United States' energy infrastructure has become antiquated, fragile, and brittle while undergoing massive transformations with minimal counterintelligence (CI) support. Starting with the Pearl Street power plant built in New York City in 1882, the United States' power grid is among the oldest grids in the world.[1] The transformation of U.S.

critical energy infrastructure—coupled with a cascading set of poor policy choices, sluggish investment, reactive spending, and macroeconomic drivers—has resulted in the lack of strategic consideration for the security of the nation's bulk power system. Issues plaguing U.S. critical energy infrastructure today include: an aging workforce with inexperienced young replacements; long lead times for ordering complex specialized heavy equipment; globalization of specialty equipment manufacturing (i.e., engineering manufacturing knowledge loss); broken supply chains from raw materials to finished product delivery; the transition from "firm" power generation technologies (e.g., coal, oil, gas) to "intermittent" resources (e.g., solar, onshore/offshore wind, energy storage); privatization of power generation and formation of electric power markets (i.e., uncoordinated power generation project development); a fragmented and underfunded national transmission network; explosion of hyperscale data center development for supporting Artificial Intelligence and big tech; and deferred maintenance through regulatory cost controls. In addition to all of the technical, economic, and logistical issues, climate change-induced extreme weather events are causing exponentially greater damage as incidents continue to become more frequent and severe.[2,3,4] All of these challenges collectively overburden the assets and staff at utility companies and make the U.S. power grid vulnerable.

These challenges have created significant opportunities for adversaries to collect intelligence and exploit U.S. critical energy infrastructure to disrupt the U.S. economy, military, and government. Utilities have had to grapple with these near-daily adversarial encounters with minimal support from the U.S. intelligence community.[5] Paul Redmond defines counterintelligence as: "information gathered and activities conducted to identify, deceive, exploit, disrupt or protect against espionage, other intelligence activities, sabotage or assassination conducted for or on behalf of foreign powers, organizations or persons or their agents, or international terrorist organizations."[6] Counterintelligence thus includes the management of threats from state and non-state actors seeking to sabotage the U.S. power grid.[7] As Robert Jervis argues, CI is not merely a defensive function but one that operates in an environment where deception and perception are central; the adversary's intelligence service may be exploited or misled as part of a broader strategy—what Jervis describes as a "wilderness of mirrors."[8] CI is not only about catching spies or protecting secrets—it is an active process of influencing adversary perceptions, often requiring strategic deception and psychological insight.[9] Hank Prunckun, a leading scholar in CI, states effective CI relies on "four principles— to deter, detect, deceive, and neutralize the opposition's efforts to collect information, regardless of why these data are collected…"[10]

To alleviate the unfit multi-faceted security burden on utilities, CI agencies should develop a robust vulnerability and disruption prevention framework oriented around multiple key considerations. Existing agencies that should be but are not actively involved in utility emergency operations include the FBI, Office of Intelligence and Counterintelligence (OICI), Office of Intelligence and Analysis in the DHS, and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). The critical power system's greatest areas of exposure where the CI community should assist can be broken down into four major matters: 1) enhanced physical and digital security of critical energy infrastructure, 2) stronger national-level guidelines for redacting, handling, and safeguarding Critical Energy Infrastructure Information (CEII) via the reduction of Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) leakage, 3) establishing near-shoring programs for specialty equipment manufacturing, and

lastly, 4) establishing a national human capital workforce strategy for safeguarding critical energy infrastructure and the professionals who manage the real-time operations of the U.S. power grid.

This paper highlights successful adversarial attacks on the U.S. power grid, the lapse of U.S. CI community presence before, during, and after these events, and the need for an intelligent and enhanced power infrastructure-oriented CI program to continue safeguarding American prosperity.

Background

As the grid undergoes its massive sustainability transformation with the integration of clean energy sources, resiliency is a key concern regarding the new power generation paradigm. The National Renewable Energy Labs (NREL) and the U.S. Department of Energy define resiliency as "…the power system's ability to withstand and reduce the impact of disruptive events […] a unique aspect is related to system recovery, or how quickly power can be restored after an outage."[11] Within a given utility or ISO, Critical Energy Infrastructure Information (CEII) management is at the crux of where the CI community should play a role. According to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC):

CEII is defined as information related to or proposed to critical electric infrastructure,

- generated by or provided to the Commission or other Federal agency other than classified national security information,
- that is designated as critical electric infrastructure information by the Commission or the Secretary of the Department of Energy pursuant to section 215A(d) of the Federal Power Act.

Furthermore, CEII is specific engineering, vulnerability, or detailed design information about proposed or existing critical infrastructure (physical or virtual) that:

- Relates details about the production, generation, transmission, or distribution of energy;
- Could be useful to a person planning an attack on critical infrastructure;
- Is exempt from mandatory disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act; and
- Gives strategic information beyond the location of the critical infrastructure.[12]

Utilities, as part of their public service mandate, are required to submit routine filings throughout the calendar year regarding varied topics or issues such as rate cases, cost of service, revenue requirement, energy efficiency program remuneration, renewable portfolio standards, or storm damage cost recovery. To balance the right to public information with the protection of critical infrastructure information, the redaction and concealment of CEII is managed by specialty-trained employees within utilities.[13] Individual citizens and advocacy groups who wish to view unredacted versions of utility filings can submit access request forms to their designated state public utility commission. However, CEII management does not include establishing guidelines for the concealment of minimum resiliency standards nor system recovery speed.[14,15]

Resiliency is inextricably linked to reliability, which is prescriptively measured and, sometimes, scrutinized by state regulators. The most common reliability metrics are the System Average Interruption Duration Index (SAIDI), System Average Interruption Frequency Index (SAIFI), and Customer Average Interruption Duration Index (CAIDI). Reliability metrics are often recorded for performance-based rate allotments where utilities are effectively

compensated with a higher return on investment as outages are kept to a minimum, and reliability key performance indicators (KPIs) are met or exceeded. As the grid undergoes massive reconstruction and transformation, the protection and concealment of where the grid is most exposed—its reliability and resiliency must be safeguarded.

The Patriot Act requires that the Department of Defense and FERC establish minimum guidelines for utilities to protect and conceal information that could be exploited by adversaries.[16] Beyond FERC establishing these guidelines, the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC) enforces compliance, ensuring utilities train designated employees to identify and redact CEII. Oftentimes, this redaction scope falls onto a designated analyst or group of analysts in the utility's transmission planning department.[17] However, to date, much of the redaction work has translated into administrative duties with limited structure on what is and is not CEII. Further, substantial amounts of OSINT are generated that inadvertently expose weaknesses in the nation's physical infrastructure when these gray-area materials are disclosed in public utility filings and on utility regulatory commission websites. Ultimately, the management of CEII and oversight of real-time operations of the U.S. power grid is limited to a very small number of utility professionals. An even smaller number of highly trained engineers are responsible for understanding, studying, and operating the nation's electric transmission power grid.

Enhanced physical and digital security of critical energy infrastructure

As security protocols currently stand, the United States' critical energy infrastructure faces the risk of multi-domain attacks, including physical and digital assaults. Excluding nuclear power plants, most of the nation's critical energy infrastructure relies on a series of locked gates, doors, and fencing surrounding inconspicuous high-voltage substation equipment.[18] Should this information be leaked, or malicious individuals gain access to said infrastructure, a coordinated attack on a handful of regional transmission substations can disrupt the nation's bulk power system. Regional disruptions are also known as 'cascading blackouts.' There are no designated security forces or law enforcement agencies with sole responsibility for providing 24/7 protection to critical electric transmission assets. CISA is not involved in day-to-day operations at transmission control centers or critical substations. In certain cases, even local law enforcement agencies are unaware of or trained on how to identify and protect critical energy infrastructure beyond recognizing the point of an acute attack. The FBI is even further removed from understanding this highly localized infrastructure. This issue is aligned with one of James Olson's warnings in his Ten Commandments of Counterintelligence. Specifically, he highlights the importance with his seventh commandment, Train Your People:

"CI is a conglomerate of several disciplines and skills. A typical operation, for example, might include analysts, surveillance specialists, case officers, technical experts, and DA specialists. Each area requires its own specialized training curriculum. It takes a long time to develop CI specialists, and that means a sustained investment in CI training. We are getting better, but we are not there yet."[19]

If the FBI is not adequately trained in identifying or understanding critical energy infrastructure (such as by engineers from said utilities) or protecting it, this poses a question: How long will it be until a direct physical attack occurs? The answer is that these attacks happen *frequently*, sometimes daily, by an array of actors, including

domestic and foreign, as well as state and nonstate. Recent successful physical assaults by domestic extremist groups provide examples of how this is an ongoing lapse in national security and counterintelligence. Acute events include attacks on two Duke Energy substations in Moore County, North Carolina; the Pacific Gas & Electric Metcalf substation outside of San Francisco; and the Portland Gas and Electric Clackamas substation near Portland, Oregon.[20,21,22] Under these circumstances, utilities restored power after some extended period (between several days to multiple weeks), resulting in the installation of additional security gates or locking mechanisms on doors. However, no proactive measures were taken by the DHS or FBI to anticipate or thwart these future attacks.[23,24,25]

Smart assets and smart infrastructure create a digital ecosystem of unsecured and open-source equipment.[26] Utilities are converting their legacy switchgear, electronic controls, and other 20th-century equipment from analog-based into digital, web, or cloud-based systems. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has penetrated energy, transportation, and water facilities across the continental United States, primarily through these technologies.[27,28,29] The FBI has warned of the presence of PRC-backed hackers "lurking in some infrastructure systems for at least five years."[30] Russian GRU-backed hackers have penetrated multiple countries' energy infrastructure systems. In some circumstances, they even penetrated the power grid and then operated electrical assets, performing actions like opening breakers and usurping control centers.[31,32] A recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that:

"The U.S. electricity grid's distribution systems are becoming more vulnerable to cyberattacks, in part because of the introduction of and reliance on monitoring and control technologies. However, the scale of potential impacts from such attacks is not well understood […] Older legacy systems were not designed with cybersecurity protections because they were not intended to connect to networks such as the internet. For example, many legacy devices are not able to authenticate commands to ensure that they have been sent from a valid user and may not be capable of running modern encryption protocols."[33]

As part of the digital transformation, Wi-Fi-based and other internet-of-things (IOT) technologies create permeable holes in the control network. Setting a minimum SCADA-based (Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition) communications protection standard is prudent for national security purposes as part of this digital transformation. Per Frances Cleveland, head of the International Electrotechnical Commission's (IEC) committee on cybersecurity standards:

"Cybersecurity is needed everywhere in the electricity grid, including distribution systems, transmission systems, and the renewable energy resources connected to them. We need to convince all the different stakeholders involved, and there are many of them, from the manufacturers, the vendors, the installers, right down to the aggregators and the utility regulators, of that necessity…"[34]

To date, utilities have not been required to comply with IEC standards, and the CI community has not publicly advocated for utilities to meet these standards. The National Counterintelligence Strategy does highlight some threats; however, substantive action has been slow or limited.[35] The U.S. Department of Energy released a Cybersecurity Strategy report in January 2024, starting the process to outline what a robust national cybersecurity strategy should involve. However, the department still needs to develop a Cybersecurity Strategy Implementation

Plan.[36] The 2024 Homeland Threat Assessment failed to discuss the grid's lagging cybersecurity standards or enhanced physical protection needs.[37] There is a clear policy pathway to enforce these minimum cybersecurity standards through a FERC order issuance with enforcement by NERC. This order would fall in line with a national cybersecurity counterintelligence strategy.[38] When utilities are underfunded or investment is constrained, critical assets will continue to fail to meet enhanced cybersecurity standards. The responsibility falls on the shoulders of the CI community to either provide funding or develop funding mechanisms to enable the implementation of appropriate countermeasures on interregional critical energy infrastructure security standards.

Safeguarding Critical Energy Infrastructure Information (CEII)

CEII has become a political hot-button in state proceedings with state utility regulatory commissions demanding fewer redactions and more project investments be disclosed in open filings.[39] In an effort to provide more transparency around utility investments, CEII is filed with full disclosure by the utilities. Good policy requires a public, redacted copy and a second commissioner or special request-only version with the CEII-flagged un-redacted copy kept out of the public website search domain. However, in hearings, utility regulators have complained about the amount of redacted material submitted—particularly in electric transmission cost recovery filings. In response to these complaints, the FERC issued additional rules instructing utilities that if information is found to be maliciously concealed (or overly redacted), utilities will be subject to fines.[40] Further, utilities are required to submit both redacted and un-redacted copies of a filing, the engineering justification for why the materials are redacted, as well as the legal reasoning behind said redaction. The general negative tone toward CEII redactions reflected in the FERC ruling is the result of pressure from publicly elected utility regulatory commissioners. Elected officials, in turn, are compelled to cater to the prevailing public opinion of sharing more, not less information.[41,42] Demands for disclosure have arisen due to customer bills becoming increasingly more expensive.[43,44] These skyrocketing costs are the result of multiple issues colliding together including climate change, the explosion of AI and hyperscale data centers disproportionately burdening the grid, and unregulated electricity markets resulting in poor infrastructure planning fostering reliability crises and widespread capital investments with costs mostly burdened by residential utility customers.[45,46] The inherent risk of accidental over-redaction or supposedly malicious concealment places greater pressure on the CEII analyst responsible for redacting less for fear of ramifications from regulators.

Nonetheless, in certain cases, the U.S. critical energy infrastructure system is fragile enough that simply disabling one or two substations can cause catastrophic blackouts across multiple states or regions.[47] This politically driven creation of OSINT should be a substantial concern within the CI community, given that it is publicly available data explicitly outlining why dollars were spent on a given piece of critical energy infrastructure. Much of these investments could fall in a "grey area" whereby because the definition of CEII is vague, much of this information ends up not being redacted. The use of Artificial Intelligence to scrape utility commissioner websites looking for CEII could become an easy, but so far untested, method of OSINT collection for adversaries. After the data is scraped, it can then be aggregated and sold as possible grouped targets for causing cascading blackouts with potentially devastating ramifications for the security of the United States—not to mention the

disruptions to essential services such as hospitals and transportation systems, damages to commerce and industry, and interruptions in critical communications.[48] Cascading blackouts can be prohibitive and broad in size ranging from a few substations losing power for a period of hours to entire regions of the United States or North American continent being dark for weeks:

"Examples of a small initial outage cascading into a complicated sequence of dependent outages are the August 10, 1996, blackout of the Northwest United States that disconnected power to about 7.5 million customers and the August 14, 2003, blackout of about 50 million customers in Northeastern United States and Canada. Although such extreme events are rare, the direct costs run to billions of dollars and the disruption to society is substantial. Large blackouts also have a strong effect on shaping the way power systems are regulated and the reputation of the power industry. Moreover, some blackouts involve social disruptions that can multiply the economic damage. The hardship to people and possible deaths underscore the utility engineer's responsibility to work to avoid blackouts."[49]

Cascading blackouts not only can take extra time for transmission system recovery, but given the regional multi-faceted effects, economic damage and potential loss of life makes these threats all encompassing, costly, and a danger to American life. When these outages occur, the biggest concern is damage or complete destruction to high voltage transformers. Should a given bulk-power transformer be totaled and a critical spare not be insertable (which is the case for most transformers greater than 115,000 volts), the outage will be prolonged.[50] The growing accessibility of AI-powered OSINT tools presents a serious and evolving threat to the resilience of U.S. critical energy infrastructure, where even limited disruptions can trigger widespread and devastating consequences. To safeguard national security and public welfare while still providing transparency, it is imperative that utility regulators at the FERC and state levels reevaluate CEII definition clarity and strengthen protections around sensitive infrastructure data access. Particularly, setting clear guidelines on what is critical energy infrastructure (such as a minimum transmission voltage threshold) and then applying CEII redaction and document control protocols.[51,52]

Near-shoring and proactive supply chain management

Prior to the pandemic, most transmission-level equipment, especially transformers, required roughly two years of lead time from initial purchase order to commissioning. There are only a handful of Western manufacturers (i.e., outside of the PRC or India) capable of producing transmission-level substation equipment, especially transformers >115,000 volts. The three prominent leaders are Siemens, ABB (now owned by Hitachi Power Grids), and General Electric.[53] However, after COVID disrupted much of the global supply chains, these highly engineered, large, complex pieces of heavy equipment have seen lead times swell to as long as four years. Transformers are critical to operating a regional power grid. Transformers are custom-made with teams of specialty engineers and skilled laborers responsible for designing and assembling these large steel boxes with a mix of finely machined hardware and software. Transformers, which can weigh hundreds to tens of thousands of tons, are comprised of tightly wound coils and vats used to smooth sinusoidal electrical waves for stepping voltage up or down so large amounts of power can be shipped over long distances. Further delivery and installation of bulk power transformers requires months of outage planning and approvals at each regional ISO, as well as specialized

construction teams drawing on years of installation experience.[54,55] Less complex power infrastructure, such as low voltage switchgear required for connecting a back-up generator to a building (also sometimes referred to as automatic transfer switches), has suffered drastic lead time extensions as well. According to a recent report by Mordor Intelligence:

"Switchgear manufacturers are facing various challenges in the supply chain, including shortages of critical components, increased lead times, and price volatility. These challenges have resulted in longer delivery times and higher costs, creating various challenges for the industry. Some manufacturers are looking for ways to optimize and streamline their value chains by improving their processes to overcome these challenges."[56]

To mitigate the risk of running out of critical spare transformers, utilities have begun procuring expensive mobile transformers and mobile substations.[57,58] Mobile assets are containerized on the back of tractor-trailers and carted around the country from outage to outage during system recovery after major storms. When not in use, these assets sit idle in utility yards. They are not guarded, managed, or overseen by anyone within the CI community.[59] The CI community further does not fund the procurement of or safeguard these critical assets. These critical spares are vulnerable to physical attacks.

Proactive Human Capital and Workforce Risk Mitigation

The DHS and U.S. Customs and Immigration Service have not focused on enabling and accelerating immigration pathways for professionals or families of "critical energy infrastructure" managers. The 2024 Homeland Threat Assessment does not address this topic.[60] According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the median age of the utility workforce is 44.8 years old, and almost 70% of the utility workforce is >40 years old.[61] The United States is struggling to produce a domestic engineering workforce large enough to serve the "boomer generation" retirement wave that is already in motion.[62] The United States produces approximately 70,000 undergraduate engineers per year. In comparison, one study in 2012 found that China produces an estimated 600,000 engineers per year, and India produces 350,000.[63] China's nationalized utility, the State Grid Corporation of China, enjoys a 1.3 million-person workforce serving the entire country.[64] It is alarming that such a small U.S. engineering workforce will be responsible for overseeing all future utility scope among all of the other opportunities across other, more attractive and higher-paying industries. In other words, where are all the engineers? The workforce challenge is exacerbated by the complicated engineering feat of transforming a network derived from traditional large-scale fossil fuel-based combustion to dynamic intermittent clean power resources, while also ensuring extant operations and security standards continue to be upheld. The 2024 DHS Homeland Threat Assessment report failed to mention this workforce challenge. There are not enough engineers to do the work in some cases.[65]

The unsung heroes within the utility industry are transmission planners and control room operators. Planners are typically PhD electrical engineers who work hand in hand with highly skilled blue-collar operators, together responsible for managing the nation's bulk power system that sometimes ventures within near seconds of cascading darkness.[66] The planners run complex statistical "what-if" level analyses, assuring that a given transmission network can continue to hum in harmony under many adverse scenarios, and the operators push these "what-if" scenarios to the limit.[67,68] A *New York Times* article reported, "There are about 6,000 such professionals, although

some are management employees and do not work regular shifts."[69] Many of these planners and operators are foreign-born nationals who work long hours sitting in control rooms monitoring the grid while the rest of American society sleeps. These planners and operators are completely unprotected by the CI community.

The United States produces so few engineers trained to the appropriate level of technical work and who also want to work in such a challenging role that there is a separate skilled workforce continuity problem within this subgroup of the utility industry.[70,71] To boot, these foreign-born nationals who manage the U.S. critical electric infrastructure are served a complicated and expensive immigration pathway to citizenship with minimal support outside of retaining attorneys to manage the paperwork process. These attorneys can oftentimes be expensive, with the cost burden falling on either the utility employer or the individual. The existing pathways for obtaining a green card as a utility electrical engineer are either through the EB-2 NIW permit or winning the green card lottery.[72] Neither of these scenarios is ideal, and this complicated pathway poses substantial national security risks. Further, given the lack of available immediate domestic talent, relying on new immigration is paramount for national security. Instead, the United States is enacting policies that drive a brain-drain effect.[73]

DHS has a vested role in developing a more efficient and robust human capital strategy coupled with a clear pathway to citizenship for these highly specialty trained foreign-born utility engineering professionals. The existing skilled American workforce is retiring in the utility industry. Further, the backfill is composed of either inexperienced young workers or a highly technically trained group of foreign-born professionals that do not get ample support or incentive to stay in the United States. However, an effective program needs to account for both the immediate technical professional's citizenship, as well as anyone in that professional's family who could be compromised by foreign adversaries. The DHS should be taking a proactive, human-based approach to protect these guardians of U.S. critical infrastructure by both making their immigration process smooth as well as ensuring these professionals and their families are safe from adversarial threats. According to the National Science Board, 46.2% of U.S. Science and Engineering graduate students and almost 60% of computer and mathematical scientists in the United States are foreign-born.[74] These nationals can and have been exploited by their home countries in exchange for "protection against family back home" or, in some cases, family members who did not defect from their authoritarian home countries were executed for retribution.[75] Other times, these defectors have been attacked by paramilitary groups from their defected countries.[76] Providing a smoother immigration process could drastically reduce this HUMINT risk.

Conclusion

The CI community has a responsibility as part of its defensive mandate to safeguard the nation's critical energy infrastructure. Further, as part of the nation's necessary decarbonization transformation, aligning national security goals with an enhanced energy infrastructure strategy is paramount. There are four major areas into which the CI community must be integrated to combat threats to the nation's critical power system: (i) enhanced physical and digital security of critical energy infrastructure, (ii) a clear, FERC-issued definition outlining critical energy infrastructure coupled with stronger national level guidelines for redacting, handling, and safeguarding Critical Energy Infrastructure Information (CEII), (iii) establishing near-shoring programs for specialty equipment manufacturing, and

lastly, (iv) establishing a human capital workforce strategy for safeguarding our critical infrastructure and the foreign-born nationals who manage the real-time operations of our grid.[77]

As time goes on and these problems remain unaddressed, the negative effects of neglecting critical energy infrastructure will become more prominent. Some negative effects that will result include: larger, more crippling cascading blackouts; continued and more frequent acute physical and cyber attacks on bulk power substations; the manipulation of AI platforms for collecting CEII correspondence in the form of OSINT that can then be monetized and sold to malicious actors; delays to new equipment delivery (especially high-voltage transformers) prolonging utility outages and increasing the lethality of cascading blackouts; workforce and control room operator staffing shortages creating more contingencies in regional power network operations; and potential risk of control room operators becoming compromised by state and non-state adversarial actors abroad. Integrating the CI community into safeguarding our critical energy infrastructure is paramount for the United States to achieve both a resilient and sustainable future.

Areas of further research should include: (i) benefits of an enhanced, updated, and concrete legal definition of critical energy infrastructure and CEII based on a certain minimum threshold of voltage that would be all encompassing for the nation's existing bulk-power system. This definition would be issued by FERC, enforced by NERC under the current regulatory framework for critical energy infrastructure and CEII management, (ii) policy mechanisms for maintaining U.S.-based domestic critical energy infrastructure equipment manufacturing and a drafted list of businesses, facilities, and types of equipment, (iii) minimum cybersecurity and state PUC website security standards and protocols to prevent adversarial bot trollers for AI-OSINT collection, (iv) proposed legislation to better support the foreign-born nationals seeking U.S. citizenship who are currently unsupported but also responsible for operating critical energy infrastructure systems, (v) counterintelligence reforms that replace racially biased profiling with inclusive policies—such as family reunification and expedited citizenship pathways—to better support foreign-born critical energy infrastructure professionals and mitigate ancillary HUMINT-based risks, and (vi) expanding effective incentives for American colleges and universities to scale technical and engineering degree programs particularly for physics, electrical, and nuclear engineering majors.

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The Motivation Behind the People's Republic of China Joint Sword Exercises: An Analysis of Multiple Explanations

Jill Gentry

This article explores what motivates the People's Republic of China (PRC) to conduct its most aggressive actions against Taiwan to date: Joint Sword exercises, a series of large-scale military exercises surrounding the island. The first exercise of this kind, dubbed "The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis," followed former U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. At a time when the PRC People's Liberation Army (PLA) normally operated between 10 and 35 aircraft around the island, the PLA reportedly launched at least 100 aircraft. The PLA then executed the inaugural Joint Sword 2023 in April 2023, which preceded Joint Sword 2024-A in May 2024 and Joint Sword 2024-B in October 2024, respectively. Today, foreign policy experts agree that these large-scale military exercises are the most provocative tactics and prominent measures that the PRC has used to pressure Taiwan. They also agree that the Joint Sword series challenges the status quo of the U.S. "strategic ambiguity" policy that has protected the mutual security interests of Taiwan and the United States for decades. However, these same foreign policy experts provide multiple explanations for what triggers the PRC to conduct this aggression against Taiwan. Using a social science approach, this article examines four explanations among foreign policy experts. It applies those explanations to a set of criteria and evidence, which the article uses to identify the strongest of the four explanations. Referencing the evidence, it refutes the three weaker explanations: (1) The PRC conducts these large-scale military exercises as part of an incremental strategy to coerce Taiwan; (2) The PRC uses large-scale military exercises as demonstrations of strength in the face of its weakening domestic economy; and (3) The PRC implements Joint Sword exercises when U.S. actions enable Taiwan's security posture. Then, this article argues the strongest of the four explanations: The PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises whenever it perceives Taiwan's actions promote its independence. This analysis reveals the root of the PRC's motivations: The PRC's most strategic concern over Taiwan is and has always been sovereignty. The importance of this assessment holds time-sensitive value as the current U.S. policy on Taiwan appears uncertain. This article concludes with policy recommendations that help the second Trump Administration save the U.S. "strategic ambiguity" policy, all while embracing the "America First" concept and keeping open the invitation of cooperation with the PRC.

Introduction

Throughout August 2022, the People's Republic of China (PRC) conducted unprecedented large-scale military activities surrounding Taiwan. The activities started with an aggressive unnamed exercise between August 4 and August 7, during which the People's Liberation Army (PLA) reportedly launched at least 100 aircraft and more than 10 vessels around Taiwan.[1] On a typical day in 2022, the PLA usually operated between 10 and 35 aircraft and between five and 10 vessels around Taiwan as part of its routine patrol patterns.[2]

The PRC's behavior was so significant that foreign policy experts dubbed this escalation "The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis."[3] This crisis, however, still stands out among the preceding three crises, none of which demonstrated an ability to coerce Taiwan's main island. During the First Taiwan Strait Crisis between 1954 and 1955 and the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958, the PLA avoided approaching the nominal median line, known as the Davis Line, splitting the

Taiwan Strait. The PLA kept operations closer to the mainland, shelling Taiwan's outlying islands about 10 miles off the mainland China coastline.[4] During the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis between 1995 and 1996, the PLA expanded operations toward the western side of Taiwan but still stopped short of crossing the median line.[5] During this unnamed exercise in August 2022, at least half of all assets crossed the median line and erased any boundary that the median line asserted.[6]

As the PLA retreated, foreign policy experts hoped this exercise was an exceptional event. However, the PRC showed the world that what occurred between August 4 and August 7 would set the stage for similar aggression. The PRC would conduct three more exercises, in which tens of aircraft and vessels crossed the median line, encroached on Taiwan's territorial claims, and demonstrated their ability to overwhelm the island with military force. The PLA executed one of the exercises in April 2023 and the other two in 2024, in May and October, respectively. The PRC codenamed all three iterations under a "Joint Sword" series with the exercise in April 2023, "Joint Sword 2023," the exercise in May 2024, "Joint Sword 2024-A," and the exercise in October 2024, "Joint Sword 2024-B."

As the exercises have not (as was hoped) remained isolated incidents, this article seeks to investigate why the PRC has chosen to continue holding Joint Sword exercises. The article sets out four competing explanations, and by way of a reductive approach, argues that the most likely motivation, given the available evidence, is that the PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises whenever Taiwanese policymakers promote the independence of the island. The article first sketches the historical background and surveys existing literature on the issue. The paper then posits a hypothesis and sets evaluative criteria, against which the hypothesis is evaluated. Subsequently, the article refutes three explanations as insufficiently compatible with existing evidence. The article concludes with implications for U.S. foreign policy informed by this article's findings.

Historical Background

Japan ruled the island of Taiwan throughout the twentieth century until its defeat at the end of World War II in 1945. Japan's surrender included the cession of Taiwan back to China, formally the Republic of China (ROC).[7] The end of the war inflamed the Chinese Civil War, which began in 1927 but largely subsided with the start of World War II in 1937.[8] The belligerents of the Chinese Civil War were China's two rivaling political factions. One of the parties was the Kuomintang (KMT), the governing party of the ROC, and the other was the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a rising party that challenged the KMT.[9] After four years of fighting, by 1949, the CCP defeated the KMT.[10] The CCP created and established the PRC as the new government of China, while the KMT, and by extension the ROC, retreated from mainland China to Taiwan.[11] The KMT, however, continued to exercise jurisdiction over Taiwan as well as the smaller outlying islands of Kinmen, Matsu, and Dachen off the mainland China coastline.[12] This situation has left Taiwan, still officially the ROC today, under two governments that claim sovereignty over it.

Several military clashes between the PRC and Taiwan have occurred since the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War. The First Taiwan Strait Crisis occurred between 1954 and 1955. In September 1954, the PRC initiated a heavy bombardment against the outlying islands off the mainland China coastline.[13] The United States had still recognized the ROC as China's government and therefore agreed to a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan that committed aid should the PRC attack the island.[14] But the treaty did not discourage the

PRC. In January 1955, the PRC seized two smaller islands within the Dachen group.[15] That aggression convinced the United States to complement the mutual defense treaty with the Formosa Resolution, which gave a U.S. president authority to counter an invasion of Taiwan with U.S. military force.[16] The First Taiwan Strait Crisis de-escalated amidst threats of U.S. escalation by April 1955.[17]

The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis occurred in 1958. The PRC shelled the outlying islands of Kinmen and Matsu.[18] This time, the PRC conducted the attacks as an opportunity to test U.S. commitment to Taiwan when U.S. military forces left the island for Lebanon to assist government officials in countering civil opposition.[19] After several deliberations, the United States settled on providing military escort assistance for Taiwan ships protecting supply lines to Kinmen and Matsu. While the crisis stabilized, discontent between the PRC and Taiwan over the outlying islands persisted. Additionally, U.S. support for Taiwan remained the principal reason why the U.S.-PRC relationship stagnated through the 1960s.[20]

The United States significantly altered its relationship with Taiwan come the 1970s. As the United States normalized relations over the decade with the PRC, the United States shifted its official recognition from the ROC to the PRC in 1979.[21] The United States opted, however, to maintain unofficial relations with Taiwan with the implementation of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), which outlined the U.S. "strategic ambiguity" policy that remains today.[22] The TRA introduced a less aggressive stance than the Formosa Resolution, which the U.S. Congress repealed in 1974.[23] Instead of committing military force, the TRA deliberately refused to clarify whether the United States would do so.

The passage of the TRA coincided with the rise in 1978 of Deng Xiaoping, known as the "Architect of Modern China."[24] As Deng assumed leadership of the PRC, he viewed the TRA as a document that allowed the United States the choice to abandon new agreements with the PRC in favor of engagement with Taiwan. Deng also viewed the United States as a significant military power that could undermine the PRC in a confrontation. Deng answered those concerns by creating strategies that blunted the possibility of U.S. leverage over the PRC.[25] He observed the United States closely through cooperative engagement and developed the PLA's defense posture, which included local submarine deployments and maritime mine laying missions along China's periphery.[26]

The increased confidence and capability of the PLA showed itself during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, which began in 1995. This crisis erupted following then-President of Taiwan Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States, the first time Taiwan made such an external decision without coordination from the PRC.[27] Moreover, then-President Lee's comments during the visit angered the PRC. At Cornell University, he expressed discontent with Taiwan's international status.[28] In response, the PRC directed the PLA to demonstrate its new defense capabilities.[29] The PLA showed that it could invade Taiwan beyond the outlying islands, something the PLA could not achieve during the past two crises.

The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis tells a similar story of increased military development and capabilities. Through the twenty-first century, the CCP has further expanded the PLA. The PRC under Xi Jinping, who took power in 2012, has transformed the PLA from Deng's homeland defense force to a world-class offensive military. During the unprecedented exercise in 2022 and the Joint Sword exercises that followed, the PLA showed that today's force can not only overwhelm Taiwan if it chooses but also

compete with the U.S. military in the event of a larger war in the Indo-Pacific region.

Literature Review

What happens in Taiwan matters to U.S. national security. Taiwan is a critical trade partner across the science and technology industries, which set the foundations of the U.S. private and public sectors. If the PRC coerced Taiwan, the United States would lose access to a significant portion of the technologies it needs to sustain services from healthcare to advanced telecommunications.[30] Additionally, Taiwan's geographic position is critically strategic. Taiwan not only sits in the middle of sea lines that facilitate global commerce, it is also the largest land mass between China and two major U.S. allies in the region, Japan and the Philippines. A PRC coercion of Taiwan would likely serve the PRC as a springboard that allows it unfettered access through the Pacific Ocean and that breaks down confidence in the United States' ability to bolster defenses against Chinese influence in the region.[31]

Prior to the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis, foreign policy experts around the world were used to performing most of their China analysis on growing economic and political developments. The unprecedented exercise inspired a segment of those foreign policy experts to focus more on military and security matters, particularly the PRC's ability and willingness to wield the PLA to accomplish its strategic goals. As the Joint Sword series unfolded, they prioritized analytic production on the PLA's military developments. Foreign policy experts have agreed that these large-scale military exercises are the most provocative tactics and prominent measures that the PRC has used to pressure Taiwan. They also agree that the exercises are rehearsals that have challenged the status quo of the U.S. "strategic ambiguity" policy that has protected the mutual security interests of Taiwan and the United States for decades. The methodologies across these foreign policy experts, however, have differed, resulting in similarly divergent conclusions on what motivates the PRC to conduct these large-scale military exercises.

Several assessments on the PRC's behavior spanning the Joint Sword series come from organizations in the United States. Since its inception in 2016, the Global Taiwan Institute has shared several publications and seminars, which provide insights into Taiwan policy subjects. Across issues of the Global Taiwan Brief, one of its publications, staff members like John Dotson have contended that the PRC planned the Joint Sword exercises well in advance and asserted that the large-scale military exercises are part of a larger, incremental strategy that eventually leads to the PRC's coercion of Taiwan.[32] This perspective offers one explanation for what motivates the PRC to conduct Joint Sword exercises.

Other think tanks share this perspective. Contributors for China Brief at the Washington, DC-based Jamestown Foundation have suggested that these large-scale military exercises are not just demonstrations of PLA capabilities but appear as routine events that the PRC uses to increasingly pace and prepare for future aggression surrounding Taiwan.[33] Additionally, a London-based think tank, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, echoed this perspective after Joint Sword 2024-B. Erik Green, a China Programme researcher, stated the exercise appeared pre-planned and was likely a showcase of PLA capabilities as the PRC continues to escalate tensions.[34]

But not all foreign policy experts share this perspective. The American Enterprise Institute features scholars Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, who focus on the implications of the PRC's unstable economy.

They assert that the PRC has conducted this military aggression as a demonstration of strength in the face of the PRC's declining economy over the last several years.[35] This perspective offers a second explanation for what motivates the PRC to conduct Joint Sword exercises.

Academics at Chinese universities such as Xin Qiang and Wang Jialin provide a perspective closer aligned to the standard CCP perspective. In late 2023, they underscored U.S. actions as the enablers of Taiwan's initiatives and therefore the PLA's provocations surrounding Taiwan.[36] This perspective offers a third explanation for what motivates the PRC to conduct Joint Sword exercises.

A fourth perspective appears among foreign policy experts. The Belgium-based International Crisis Group has published reports on the Joint Sword series since early 2023. The organization's authors have suggested that the PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises whenever it perceives Taiwan's actions as asserting its independence.[37] Other foreign policy experts agree with this explanation. The Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, has produced a series of reports called The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis, hosted under the ChinaPower Project led by Bonny Lin and Brian Hart, which describe the PLA's demonstrations as signals of displeasure toward Taiwan's actions that undermine the PRC's sovereignty claims over the island.[38] In sum, these foreign policy experts offer four explanations that attempt to explain why the PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises surrounding Taiwan:

(1) The PRC conducts these large-scale military exercises as part of an incremental strategy to coerce Taiwan.
(2) The PRC uses large-scale military exercises as demonstrations of strength in the face of its weakening domestic economy.
(3) The PRC implements Joint Sword exercises when U.S. actions enable Taiwan's security posture.
(4) The PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises whenever it perceives Taiwan's actions promote its independence.

The Puzzle

Which perspective best explains why the PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises? The question is a critical one because an answer would help U.S. policymakers understand what motivates the PRC to execute these large-scale military exercises surrounding Taiwan. If the policymakers can understand the PRC's behavior, they can use that information to leverage U.S. government options that discourage and deter future Joint Sword exercises, and by extension, save the U.S. "strategic ambiguity" policy.

Hypothesis

Of all four explanations, the strongest is the fourth one: The PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises whenever it perceives Taiwan's actions promote its independence.

Criteria and Evidence

The highest standard of criteria for publicly available studies focused on this puzzle prioritizes qualitative and quantitative datasets provided first-hand by either the PRC or Taiwan. Statements representing the PRC, while not always true, are always authoritative because they have been vetted by the governing CCP.[39] These statements provide insight into how the CCP chooses to explain its behavior and are tailored for both China's domestic audience as well as foreign audiences. Therefore, they provide the best sources in answering this puzzle.

Along the same logic, statements by Taiwan representatives are equally authoritative. Given their goal to preserve the island, they have an incentive to call out the PRC's behavior. Reporting and statements from other foreign sources, including U.S. sources, have not been vetted by the CCP or Taiwan for publication and are therefore less authoritative in explaining the PRC's behavior, although they still provide insight. In the absence of statements from the PRC or Taiwan, this research cites U.S. and other Western sources to provide a more complete picture.

UNPRECEDENTED EXERCISE (AUGUST 4-7, 2022)					
Event	**PRC Statements**		**PLA Assets Participating**		**Non-PLA Participation and Integration**
What event coincided with the exercise?	**Did the PLA confirm dates for the exercise?**	**What did the statement express?**	**PLA Air Force** **Did assets cross the median line into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ)?**	**PLA Navy** **Did assets cross the median line into Taiwan's contiguous zone?**	**Did non-PLA law enforcement assets participate?**
U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in early August.	Yes, the PLA announced joint military exercises would take place between August 4 and August 7 on August 2.	The PLA stated on August 2, "these military operations are the stern deterrence against the major escalation of the US' negative moves on the Taiwan question, and also the grave warning on the separatist actions of the 'Taiwan independence' forces."	The PLA committed to "at least 100 aircraft" on August 4. No reports identify the number of PLA aircraft that participated. Though 22 aircraft crossed the median line into Taiwan's ADIZ. 68 aircraft participated on August 5. Yes, 49 aircraft crossed the median line into Taiwan's ADIZ. 20 aircraft participated on August 6. Up to all the aircraft may have crossed the median line into Taiwan's ADIZ. 66 aircraft participated on August 7. Yes, 22 aircraft crossed the median line into Taiwan's ADIZ.	The PLA committed to "at least 10 destroyers" on August 4. No reports indicate they crossed the median line into Taiwan's contiguous zone. The Liaoning aircraft carrier also participated. 13 vessels participated on August 5. No reports indicate they crossed the median line into Taiwan's contiguous zone. 14 vessels participated on August 6. Yes, "some" crossed the median line into Taiwan's contiguous zone. At least 14 vessels participated on August 7. No reports indicate they crossed the median line into Taiwan's contiguous zone.	No. *Separate PLA note: The PRC launched at least 9 ballistic missiles over Taiwan.

Figure 1: Description of 'Unprecedented Exercise (August 4-7, 2022),' compiled by the author based on the following sources: [4041424344546474849]

JOINT SWORD 2023 (APRIL 8-10, 2023)					
Event	**PRC Statements**		**PLA Assets Participating**		**Non-PLA Participation and Integration**
What event coincided with the exercise?	**Did the PLA confirm dates for the exercise?**	**What did the statement express?**	**PLA Air Force** **Did assets cross the median line into Taiwan's ADIZ?**	**PLA Navy** **Did assets cross the median line into Taiwan's contiguous zone?**	**Did non-PLA law enforcement assets participate?**
President Tsai's visit to California to meet U.S. Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy and other U.S. Congressional leaders on April 5.	Yes, the PLA announced the start of "combat readiness patrols" and conducted "Joint Sword" exercises on April 8.	The Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated on April 6, "The US acts with Taiwan to connive at 'Taiwan independence' separatists' political activities in the United States, conduct official contact with Taiwan and upgrade the substantive relations with Taiwan, and frame it as a "transit…[The meeting] sends an egregiously wrong signal to the 'Taiwan independence' separatist forces."	71 aircraft participated on April 8. Yes, 45 aircraft crossed the median line into Taiwan's ADIZ. 70 aircraft participated on April 9. Yes, 35 aircraft crossed the median line into Taiwan's ADIZ. 91 aircraft participated on April 10. Yes, 54 aircraft crossed the median line into Taiwan's ADIZ.	9 vessels participated on April 8. No reports indicate they crossed the median line into Taiwan's contiguous zone. The Shandong aircraft carrier also participated. 11 vessels participated on April 9. No reports indicate they crossed the median line into Taiwan's contiguous zone. 12 vessels participated on April 10. No reports indicate they crossed the median line into Taiwan's contiguous zone.	No.

Figure 2: Description of 'Joint Sword 2023 (April 8-10, 2023),' compiled by the author based on the following sources: [50515253545556]

JOINT SWORD 2024-A (MAY 23-24, 2024)					
Event	**PRC Statements**		**PLA Assets Participating**		**Non-PLA Participation and Integration**
What event coincided with the exercise?	**Did the PLA confirm dates for the exercise?**	**What did the statement express?**	**PLA Air Force** **Did assets cross the median line into Taiwan's ADIZ?**	**PLA Navy** **Did assets cross the median into Taiwan's contiguous zone?**	**Did non-PLA law enforcement assets participate?**
President Lai's inauguration speech on May 20. President Lai referenced Taiwan as a "sovereign, independent nation."	Yes, the PLA announced the exercise on May 23. The PLA stated it will begin the morning of May 23 and conclude May 24.	The PLA stated on May 23 the drills "serve as a strong punishment for the separatist acts of 'Taiwan independence' forces" and a stern warning against the interference and provocation by external forces."	At least 49 aircraft participated on May 23. Yes, 35 aircraft crossed the median line into Taiwan's ADIZ. 62 aircraft participated on May 24. Yes, 47 aircraft crossed the median line into Taiwan's ADIZ.	19 reported vessels, including Liaoning aircraft carrier, participated on May 23. (Some reported vessels may have been CCG vessels.) No reports indicate they crossed the median line into Taiwan's contiguous zone. 27 vessels participated on May 24. No reports indicate they crossed the median line into Taiwan's contiguous zone.	Yes. CCG vessels participated for the first time. At least 7 CCG vessels participated on May 23, operating on the eastern side of the island. No, not on May 24.

Figure 3: Description of 'Joint Sword 2024-A (May 23-24, 2024),' compiled by the author based on the following sources: [57585960]

JOINT SWORD 2024-B (OCTOBER 14, 2024)					
Event	**PRC Statements**		**PLA Assets Participating**		**Non-PLA Participation and Integration**
			PLA Air Force	**PLA Navy**	
What event coincided with the exercise?	**Did the PLA confirm dates for the exercise?**	**What did the statement express?**	**Did assets cross the median line into Taiwan's ADIZ?**	**Did assets cross the median line into Taiwan's contiguous zone?**	**Did non-PLA law enforcement assets participate?**
President Lai's National Day Speech on October 10. President Lai stated, "our determination to defend our national sovereignty remains unchanged."	Yes, the PLA announced the exercise on October 14. The exercise lasted 13 hours.	The Ministry of National Defense stated on October 14 the drills "serve as a stern warning to the separatist acts of 'Taiwan independence' forces."	125 aircraft participated on October 14. Yes, 111 aircraft crossed the median line into Taiwan's ADIZ.	14 vessels participated on October 14. No reports indicate they crossed the median line into Taiwan's contiguous zone. The Liaoning aircraft carrier also participated.	Yes. 12 CCG vessels participated, operating around all sides of the island.

Figure 4: Description of 'Joint Sword 2024-B (October 14, 2024),' compiled by the author based on the following sources: [616263]

The Three Alternative Explanations

(1) Military Exercises as an Incremental Coercion Strategy

The first alternative explanation suggests the PRC conducts large-scale military exercises as part of an incremental strategy to coerce Taiwan. John Dotson from the Global Taiwan Institute argued this explanation following the conclusion of Joint Sword 2024-B. Dotson stated this exercise is another installment of the emerging Joint Sword series that the PRC uses to gradually intensify pressure against Taiwan.[64] While the PRC attempts to frame the Joint Sword exercises around actions by Taiwan's political leaders, they are best understood as outbursts that the PRC uses as excuses to increasingly coerce Taiwan.[65] For Dotson, the Joint Sword exercises are political warfare tactics within a larger strategy that the PRC uses to intimidate Taiwan and prepare the PLA for an eventual invasion scenario. The large-scale exercises will continue to increase in intensity as the PRC amplifies its coercive efforts. [66]

But the PRC's level of intensity across Joint Sword exercises is not gradual. An intensity comparison summarizing the aforementioned evidence shows that the aggression of each exercise falls in this order, from most to least:

- Joint Sword 2024-B,
- Joint Sword 2023,
- Unprecedented exercise in 2022,
- Joint Sword 2024-A

Based on the most intense day of each exercise, Joint Sword 2024-B is the most intense exercise. Joint Sword 2024-B had the highest number of participating assets, including China Coast Guard (CCG) vessels. Joint Sword 2024-B also had the highest number of assets that crossed the median line of the four exercises. Joint Sword 2023, based on activities from April 10, comes in second place. The unprecedented exercise in 2022, based on activities from August 5, earns third place. Joint Sword 2024-A, based on activities from May 24, is the least intense exercise and is in fourth place.

Additionally, the PRC has not intensified military activities surrounding Taiwan every day since August 2022. Rather, these

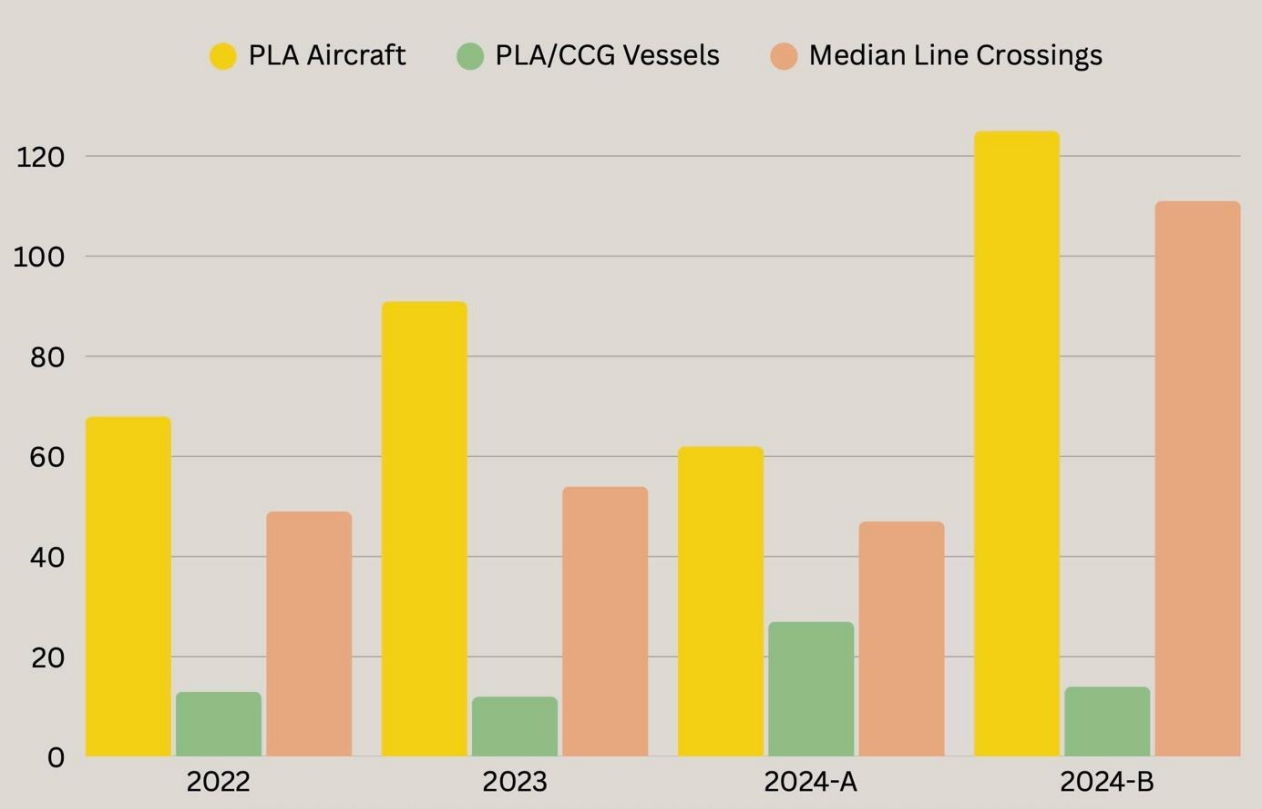


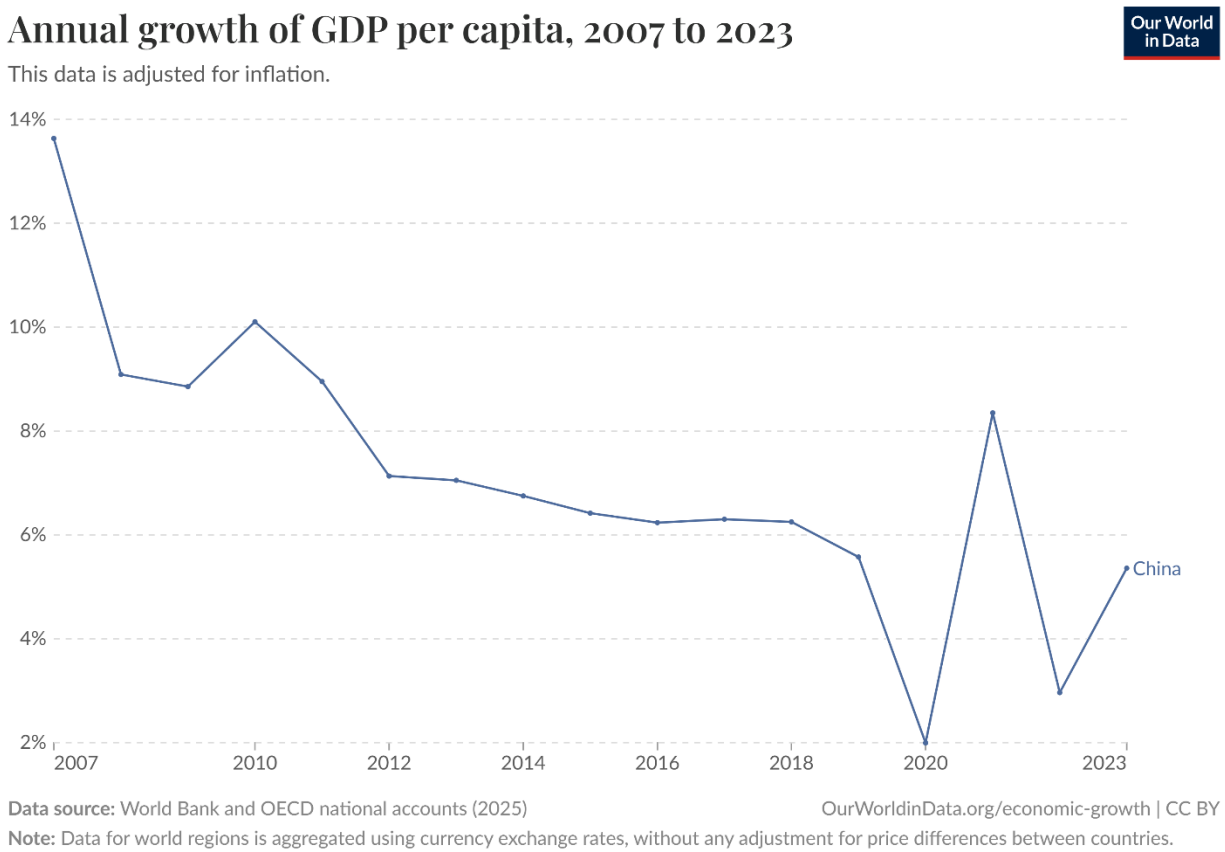
Figure 5: Number of PLA Aircraft, PLA/CCG Vessels, and Median Line Crossings; numbers compiled by the author.

exercises are episodes of significant behavior with the increased activities subsiding just days later. As PLA assets retreated following the unprecedented exercise in 2022, on August 8, the PRC crossed the median line 14 times.[67] That number tapered into the single digits later in the month.[68] The day following Joint Sword 2023, on April 11, the PLA crossed the median line again 14 times, but this number decreased to just one 72 hours later on April 14.[69] No data indicates the PLA crossed the median line the day following Joint Sword 2024-A on May 25, though a data point suggests the PLA crossed the median line once on May 27.[70] The day following Joint Sword 2024-B, on October 15, the PLA crossed the median line eight times, and this number mainly stayed in the lower single digits the rest of the month.[71] Therefore, this view does not explain why the PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises.

(2) Joint Sword Exercises as Distractions in the Face of a Weakening Economy

The second explanation suggests the PRC conducts large-scale military exercises in the face of its weakening domestic economy. Michael Beckley and Hal Brands from the American Enterprise Institute introduced this explanation in a report that informed their book, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China*, and subsequent articles. Beckley and Brands used World Bank data to show that the PRC's economy has slowed since 2007.

To compensate for this ongoing slowdown, Beckley and Brands explained that the PRC is in a hurry to draw attention to national military power as a distraction.[72] In other words, the PRC wants the world to focus on its evolving capabilities within the PLA and not its weakness in the economy. The PRC,



Annual GDP growth of the People's Republic China in percent per annum; retrieved from OurWorldinData via: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/gdp-per-capita-growth?tab=line&time=2007..latest&country=~CHN

therefore, brandishes the PLA to intimidate Taiwan and highlight its power at moments when the economy is faltering.

However, the PRC's economic statistics do not align with this explanation. Using the World Bank data that Beckley and Brands reference, the PRC earned the lowest GDP growth rates in 2020 and 2022. Moreover, the PRC earned the highest GDP growth rate in 2021. The GDP growth rate rose slightly again in 2023 and remained around the same level by the end of 2024.[73] If this explanation were true, the PRC would, consequently, have conducted the most aggressive exercises in 2020 and 2022, likely holding no exercises in 2021, and more modest exercises in 2023 and 2024. The intensity comparison from most intense to least intense would have been:

- A hypothetical "Unprecedented exercise in 2020 / "Joint Sword 2020,"
- "Joint Sword 2022"
- Joint Sword 2023
- Joint Sword 2024-A / Joint Sword 2024-B

But as observed, this pattern was not the case. Instead, the PRC demonstrated no exercise in 2020. While the PRC conducted no exercise in 2021 and executed the unprecedented exercise in 2022, which would support this explanation, the case for Beckley and Brands further weakens, referencing the data from 2023 and 2024. As mentioned, according to the World Bank data, the exercises over 2023 and 2024 should have been more modest compared to 2022. But they included the most

intense exercises, Joint Sword 2024-B, followed by Joint Sword 2023.

The Federal Reserve Economic Data (FRED) provides additional evidence for this response to Beckley and Brands. The FRED offers a closer look at the World Bank data by calendar year that Beckley and Brands use by breaking down the PRC's GDP growth rate numbers by quarter. Over the 2022 calendar year, the GDP growth rate was steady until a dip at the start of the fourth quarter in October, several weeks after the unprecedented exercise.[74] Therefore, no decrease in GDP growth rate motivated the unprecedented exercise in 2022. Additionally, the PRC's GDP growth rate recovered from the dip by the beginning of the second quarter of the 2023 calendar year and remained stable the rest of 2023.[75] Therefore, the PRC did not have an economic incentive to conduct Joint Sword 2023. Lastly, the GDP growth rate maintained a steady increase over the 2024 calendar Year. In the PRC's own words, according to a report by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the GDP growth rate remained around its goal of 5% the entire year.[76] By quarter, the GDP growth rate was 5.3% after the first quarter, 4.7% after the second quarter, 4.6% after the third quarter, and 5.4% after the fourth quarter.[77] This stability does not match the occurrences of Joint Sword 2024-A in early May and Joint Sword 2024-B in late October. Therefore, this view does not explain why the PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises.

(3) Military Exercises As Responses To U.S. Interference

The third alternative explanation suggests the PRC implements Joint Sword exercises when U.S. actions enable Taiwan's security posture. Xin Qiang and Wang Jialin from Fudan University elaborated on this theory. They suggested that the United States views Taiwan through a lens of ideological dichotomy and drives Taiwan to challenge the PRC's territorial claims over the island.[78] Xin and Wang also claimed that U.S. arms sales, given their kinetic features, are the most audacious steps of several interferences that leave the PRC no other choice but to respond to U.S. collusion with confrontation.[79] In other words, the United States empowers and allows Taiwan the ability to resist the PRC, which the PRC must discourage in the form of large-scale military exercises.

But the PRC does not respond to U.S. actions supporting Taiwan with Joint Sword exercises. The PRC publicly responds to the United States with diplomacy. For example, when the United States announced a two-billion-dollar arms sale to Taiwan on October 25, 2024, the PRC released a statement the next day, declaring that the PRC "will take resolute countermeasures to firmly defend national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity."[80] No Joint Sword exercise followed this sale, nor similar U.S. foreign military sales to Taiwan in the past.

Moreover, no PRC statement associated with the Joint Sword exercises implicated the United States as the primary reason for their executions. As provided in the evidence, the PRC called out the United States in the statements tied to the unprecedented exercise in 2022 and to Joint Sword 2023. In 2022, the PRC stated the exercise was an answer to "US' negative moves on the Taiwan question, and also the grave warning on the separatist actions of the 'Taiwan independence' forces." In 2023, the PRC stated that "the United States [acts] with Taiwan to connive at 'Taiwan independence' separatists' political activities, conduct official contact with Taiwan…(which) sends an egregiously wrong signal to the 'Taiwan independence' separatist forces." A closer look at these statements shows the PRC views the United States as a dependent variable against Taiwan as the independent variable. In 2022, the PRC addressed U.S. involvement but mostly

denounced Taiwan's actions. During Joint Sword 2023, the PRC characterized U.S. actions as complementary ones, which inclined then-President Tsai Ing-wen's choice to visit the United States. Overall, for both exercises, the PRC described the United States as a sidekick, not the master, of Taiwan's actions.

The strength of this alternative explanation further weakens when observing the PRC statements in 2024. Regarding Joint Sword 2024-A and Joint Sword 2024-B, the PRC made no mention of the United States. For Joint Sword 2024-A, the PRC made what was likely an indirect reference to the United States. The PRC stated the exercise would "serve as a strong punishment for the separatist acts of 'Taiwan independence' forces and a stern warning against the interference and provocation by external forces." The statement separates the exercise's intent as a punishment against 'Taiwan independence' forces, an indirect reference to the current Taiwan President, Lai Ching-te. The statement's intent then was a warning, a less severe choice of words, against "external forces," likely an indirect reference to the United States, despite it not being involved in President Lai's inauguration speech. For Joint Sword 2024-B, the PRC made no direct or indirect reference to the United States in any statement tied to the exercise. The statement had only referenced "a stern warning to the separatist acts of 'Taiwan independence' forces," likely another reference to President Lai. Therefore, this view does not explain why the PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises.

Evidence for the Remaining Hypothesis

Joint Sword Exercises As Responses To Chinese Perceptions of Pro-Indeoendence Actions by Taiwan

The hypothesis suggests the PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises whenever it perceives Taiwan's actions promote its independence. The International Crisis Group provided arguments supporting this explanation. According to its publication, starting around 2021, as President Tsai was rounding out the first half of her second term, the PRC began to increase rhetoric reminding Taiwan that it was part of China. In response, President Tsai selectively released public statements that clarified that Taiwan is not subordinate to the PRC—that Taiwan is its own political entity.[81]

The PRC viewed President Tsai's statements as a departure from her usual cautious approach she had exhibited since her first term, starting in 2016.[82] In 2022, when President Tsai unilaterally welcomed then-Speaker Pelosi to Taipei, the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit the island since the 1990s, the PRC feared it was losing grip on control over Taiwan. In response, the PRC conjured what it considered a necessary action with the unprecedented exercise.[83] Moreover, when President Tsai chose to reciprocate the opportunity to host then-Speaker Pelosi to be a guest of her successor, then-U.S. Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy, just eight months later in April 2023, the PRC responded similarly with Joint Sword 2023 to punish President Tsai's actions that assumed Taiwan's sovereignty and independence.

The PRC's concern did not cease when President Tsai left office in 2024. The PRC viewed President Lai as not only a continuation of President Tsai but as an even more aggressive driver of this drift from the PRC.[84] The PRC had already designated President Lai a "troublemaker" before succeeding President Tsai, given his career advocating for Taiwan's independence.[85] The PRC therefore responded to President Lai's promotion of Taiwan's independence with additional large-scale military exercises in 2024.[86]

This explanation answers why the PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises. The PRC stated so itself each time. Starting with the unprecedented exercise in 2022, the PRC sought to warn Taiwan of the CCP's ability to control the island's fate and called out President Tsai for receiving then-Speaker Pelosi with the blame against "separatist actions of the 'Taiwan independence' forces." Then, the PRC used Joint Sword 2023 to clarify again to Taiwan, specifically President Tsai, that the island should expect such aggression whenever its leaders forgo coordination over actions that the CCP believes belong to it. The PRC called out President Tsai with the blame against "the 'Taiwan independence' separatist forces." In May 2024, the PRC used Joint Sword 2024-A to punish Taiwan for President Lai's "independence" mention during his inauguration speech. Lastly, even though President Lai downplayed "independence" initiatives by removing its mention in the National Day speech in October 2024, and replacing it with language indicating that his determination remained "unchanged," the PRC decided it had no more patience for President Lai and executed its most intense demonstration to date, Joint Sword 2024-B. The PRC statements across these two exercises were identical in nature, focusing blame on President Lai in the same way previous statements targeted President Tsai for "the separatist acts of 'Taiwan independence' forces." This view best explains why the PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises.

Assessment

The PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises whenever it perceives Taiwan's actions promote its independence. The evidence shows this explanation as the strongest of the four explanations among foreign policy experts. Each exercise coincided with a PRC statement snubbing alleged Taiwan independence initiatives and served as retaliation for those initiatives.

While the three alternative explanations do not answer why the PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises, they still contain elements that enhance our understanding of what drives PRC behavior. While the intensity of large-scale military exercises surrounding Taiwan appeared episodic rather than gradual, the CCP will eventually want to coerce Taiwan. While the rise and fall of the PRC's GDP growth rates do not parallel the intensity across the Joint Sword exercises, the PRC looks to distract the world from domestic issues with demonstrations of power. Lastly, while the PRC appears to publicly respond to U.S. actions through diplomacy rather than Joint Sword exercises, the PRC will continue to reject U.S. influence in Taiwan.

Not only does the answer to this question show why the PRC conducts Joint Sword exercises, it also reveals why the PRC cares so much about a perception of Taiwan inching toward independence: The PRC's most strategic concern over Taiwan is and always has been sovereignty. The PRC's reactions to Taiwan's perceived independence initiatives that manifested the "Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis," and the following Joint Sword exercises, derive from similar motivations that drove the PRC to escalate military activities against Taiwan during the former three crises. As the PRC under Xi seeks to establish itself as a leader on the global stage, the last impression the CCP seeks to cast is the inability to control an island it claims as PRC territory. The CCP, therefore, to maintain credibility, translates any action that Taiwan takes as its own political entity as a violation that it must swiftly counter before a new status quo of separation between the PRC and Taiwan can emerge.

Limitations

More recent large-scale military activity surrounding Taiwan puts into question the longevity of the hypothesis and provides support for the first alternative explanation. Not even two months following Joint Sword 2024-B, the PRC forewent code-naming a fifth exercise of similar scale under the Joint Sword series. On December 5, 2024, the PRC stated its lack of support for "Taiwan independence" following President Lai's decision to take a tour across the Pacific, which included travel to Hawaii and Guam over the first week of December.[8788] The statement preceded an unnamed large-scale military exercise between December 9 and December 11, 2024. Over December 9 and December 10, Taiwan reported that 47 aircraft, 12 vessels, and nine CCG vessels participated, with 16 aircraft crossing the median line.[89] On the last day of the exercise, December 11, Taiwan reported that 53 aircraft, 11 vessels, and eight CCG vessels participated, with 23 aircraft crossing the median line.[90]

Foreign policy experts should therefore ask whether the PRC will value the Joint Sword series in the future. Not only was the Joint Sword code-name absent from this exercise, but so was a PRC statement identifying the exercise as a response to President Lai's tour. These omissions weaken this article's argument that the PRC uses Joint Sword exercises as its response to perceived Taiwan independence initiatives. Moreover, these omissions from the PRC might suggest that such large-scale military exercises surrounding Taiwan are becoming routine enough that the PRC requires neither a series indicator like Joint Sword nor a justification for the execution of such large-scale military exercises. This case for normalization, if true, favors the first alternative explanation.

Additionally, the most recent large-scale military exercise brings more attention to these considerations. In early April 2025, the PRC pursued another rehearsal of a similar scale to the Joint Sword exercises but categorized it under an inaugural code-name. Over April 1 and April 2, 2025, the PRC conducted Strait Thunder 2025-A. On April 1, the PRC stated the exercise served as "strong containment of the separatist forces of Taiwan independence."[91] By the end of April 1, Taiwan reported that 76 aircraft, 15 vessels, and four CCG vessels participated, with 37 aircraft crossing the median line.[92] On April 2, Taiwan reported that 59 aircraft, 23 vessels, and 8 CCG vessels participated, with 31 aircraft crossing the median line.[93]

This occurrence further weakens support for the hypothesis and further supports the first alternative explanation. The Global Taiwan Institute, which provided an argument for the first alternative explanation, provided a similar analysis for Strait Thunder 2025-A. Dotson, alongside Jonathan Harman, described this exercise as not a response option but a more aggressive continuation of the Joint Sword series.[94] They supported this approach by referencing the separate timeframes of Taiwan's most pro-independence actions that could have inspired Strait Thunder 2025-A. Dotson and Harman noted the timing of two events: a speech by President Lai calling out CCP espionage operations on May 13, 2025, and the visit to Washington, DC, by Taiwan's Deputy National Security Adviser Joseph Wu starting April 4, 2025.[95] Neither event coincided with Strait Thunder 2025-A, a pattern that is apparent across each of the past large-scale military exercises.

The Jamestown Foundation provided additional analysis that complements Dotson's argument. Researchers Tai-yuan Yang and K. Tristan Tang argued that Strait Thunder 2025-A marks the normalization of PRC aggression encroaching Taiwan.[96] They explain that the PRC used the introduction of Strait Thunder 2025-A to set a new pace for future exercises.[97]

This argument by Yang and Tang is valid. While Joint Sword 2024-B remains the most intense exercise, after comparing it to the unnamed exercise in early December 2024 and Strait Thunder 2025-A, the trend of intensity across all of the large-scale military exercises appears overall increasingly gradual. Moreover, the increasing frequency of these large-scale military exercises deserves mention. Strait Thunder 2025-A marked the fourth occurrence of a large-scale military exercise surrounding Taiwan in almost a year. Joint Sword 2024-A occurred in late May 2024, and Joint Sword 2024-B occurred in October 2024. The unnamed exercise took place in early December 2024, and Strait Thunder 2025-A occurred in early April 2025. Should these patterns of intensity and frequency continue, the first alternative explanation will become the strongest explanation of the four referenced in this article.

Challenges

Regardless, the limitations of this research do not diminish the time-sensitive value of the answer to this puzzle and its connection to the PRC's strategic concern over Taiwan's sovereignty. Under the second Trump Administration, the U.S. policy on Taiwan appears uncertain. President of the United States Donald Trump has appointed several long-standing "China hawks" who back the continuation of the U.S. "strategic ambiguity" policy. One of them is U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, whose agency on February 13, 2025, removed a long-standing line on the agency's Taiwan fact sheet, "The United States does not support Taiwan's independence."[98] The PRC rebuked this adjustment and urged the United States to "correct the mistakes in Taiwan wording" within the update.[99] Yet, President Trump has been silent on Taiwan and has indicated his favor for appeasing the PRC as he negotiates bilateral trade deals. When asked whether he was against the PRC integrating Taiwan by force, President Trump stated, "I never comment on that" and deflected to his close relationship with Xi before criticizing U.S. narratives against Chinese investment in the United States.[100] The PRC praised President Trump's response as a lack of commitment to Taiwan.[101]

This inconsistency regarding Taiwan poses a risk to the island's security and U.S. interests in it. It creates confusion around U.S. intentions and imposes increasing doubt on the willingness of the United States to defend Taiwan in a large-scale attack. This situation, therefore, is ripe for miscalculation. The PRC may decide the time is right to amplify a future large-scale military exercise from another rehearsal to a guise for an invasion that finally achieves its strategic goal of integrating Taiwan with mainland China.

Taiwan acknowledges this possibility, especially as President Trump's "America First" policy calls on partners to do more to provide for their own security. In response, politicians serving President Lai have pushed special budget allocations that increase the island's defense budget.[102] They also intend for the proposals to strengthen the island's resilience against U.S. tariff impacts.[103] These efforts appear to reflect a growing concern in Taiwan. President Lai's legislators seem to fear that President Trump could use Taiwan as a bargaining chip to prioritize U.S. relations with the PRC. As a result, the United States may be more likely to abandon, rather than uphold, its long-standing commitment to strategic ambiguity if the PRC invaded Taiwan.

Conclusion

This article analyzes multiple perspectives that explain the PRC's motivation to conduct Joint Sword exercises. Using a social science approach, this article identifies the strongest of four explanations among foreign policy experts: The PRC conducts Joint Sword

exercises whenever it perceives Taiwan's actions promote its independence. This perspective explains the PRC's motivation to conduct Joint Sword exercises because it proves a correlation that the other three explanations could not. A PRC statement that blamed Taiwan for a perceived independence initiative coincided with the execution of each Joint Sword exercise. No such correlation exists among the three other explanations: The PRC conducts these large-scale military exercises as part of an incremental strategy to coerce Taiwan; The PRC uses large-scale military exercises as demonstrations of strength in the face of its weakening domestic economy; and the PRC implements Joint Sword exercises when U.S. actions enable Taiwan's security posture. These perspectives do not explain the PRC's motivation to conduct Joint Sword exercises because the PRC's level of intensity across Joint Sword exercises is not gradual; The rise and fall of the PRC's GDP growth rates do not parallel the intensity across the Joint Sword exercises; and the PRC does not publicly respond to U.S. actions supporting Taiwan with Joint Sword exercises.

This answer reveals the PRC's most strategic concern: its ability to maintain its claim of sovereignty over Taiwan. The nature of this assessment is time-sensitive, as the current U.S. stance on Taiwan is inconsistent. Moreover, while the PRC appears to use Joint Sword exercises as a response to perceived independence initiatives, an emerging trend indicates that the PRC intends to increase the intensity and frequency of these large-scale military exercises regardless. In response, President Lai has pushed for defense budget increases, which appear to reflect a concern that the United States may be more likely to abandon, rather than uphold, its long-standing commitment to strategic ambiguity.

Foreign policy experts should apply this article to future analysis that continues to evaluate the credibility of these explanations. Such analysis can either corroborate the hypothesis or lend credibility to one of the other three explanations, which the observation of future large-scale military exercises surrounding Taiwan can drive. Additionally, foreign policy experts should use any future analysis to inform U.S. government options that discourage and deter future large-scale military exercises, and by extension, support the U.S. "strategic ambiguity" policy.

President Trump can use the analysis within this article to his advantage today. Taiwan's legislative initiatives not only bring attention to Taiwan's willingness to do more for its own security but to the realization that Taiwan shares the same national security priority of the second Administration: defense of the homeland. Taiwan has not floundered but rather displayed a resilience that complements President Trump's foreign policy goals. Now, therefore, is the perfect time for President Trump to champion Taiwan as the exemplar of an "America First" associate that other countries should follow. Should the PRC interpret this rhetoric as a variation of U.S. support for Taiwan's independence, President Trump can emphasize that his America First concept addresses all countries and that the CCP should allow all levels of the PRC to join the United States in promoting the outcome of international peace that the America First policy suggests. This approach is a trifecta for President Trump. It allows him to (1) boost America First, (2) keep open the invitation of cooperation with the PRC, yet (3) provide the umbrella that Secretary Rubio and other appointees need to continue their support for the U.S. "strategic ambiguity" policy and continue in the decades-long partnership that both Taiwan and the United States need.

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Disclaimer: *The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Department of the Navy, the United States Department of Defense, or the United States Government*.

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Strengthening the Enemy: An Assessment of Saudi Arabia's Counterterrorism Operations Against the Houthis

Hailey Hoffman

Throughout the last three decades, Ansar Allah, commonly known as the Houthis, has transitioned from a marginalized insurgent group to the de facto governing authority in Yemen, solidifying its legitimacy and gaining substantial foreign backing, particularly from Iran. Since 2009, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has engaged militarily with the Houthi movement, seeking to neutralize the insurgent group through a series of counterterrorism tactics. Following a conflict overview and threat assessment, this article analyzes the Houthi movement's origins and priorities as a domestic force outside the Iranian-proxy narrative. It then examines the Houthis' growth in relation to Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism efforts in three distinct phases: initial military support for the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) from 2009 to 2011, an intensive coalition-led military intervention beginning in 2015, and a 2022 ceasefire and shift toward conciliation. This paper, applying a framework of counterterrorism strategies developed by Daniel Byman, finds that despite Saudi Arabia's attempts to mitigate the Houthi threat, the tactics it employed strengthened the movement, increased its global visibility, and enhanced its recruitment efforts. This study argues that Saudi Arabia's interventions have provided the group with a powerful narrative of resilience, reinforcing its domestic influence while securing greater political and material support from Iran. The paper identifies a conciliatory approach as most suitable for Saudi counterterrorism efforts going forward, as this strategy reverses some of the previous shortcomings and is most likely to enable the achievement of Saudi Arabia's strategic objectives in Yemen.

Introduction

Prior to October 2023, international attention was far removed from Yemen, despite decades of conflict and violence. What changed this were relatively sophisticated attacks on cargo vessels in the Red Sea, perpetrated by the Houthi militia. These attacks drew Yemen and the Houthis into the global spotlight and galvanized renewed interest in both the country and the armed group. Saudi Arabia borders Yemen to the north and has maintained a decades-long interest in the Houthis due to the direct security threat they pose. Saudi Arabia has sought to manage these threats through a panacea of counterterrorism approaches. The central research question of this article is how well these counterterrorism approaches have fared, and how shortcomings of past efforts may inform current and future Saudi counterterrorism strategy in Yemen. After providing an overview of the conflict in Yemen as well as Saudi Arabia's threat perception, which informed its counterterrorism activities, the article then traces these three distinct phases of Saudi counterterrorism efforts. These three phases are evaluated through a framework of counterterrorism strategies developed by Daniel Byman. Based on this assessment and maintaining the aforementioned framework, the article provides recommendations for Saudi counterterrorism strategy in Yemen going forward. It argues centrally that while Saudi Arabia continues attempts to mitigate the Houthi threat, their strategic and operational implementation of counterterrorism measures have not sufficiently aligned with its political ambitions toward Yemen. The article suggests a conciliatory approach going forward, as such an approach would enable this alignment and is also otherwise favorable given the current strategic balance in the

region. Finally, the article closes with general remarks.

Conflict Overview

Saudi Arabia's largest border is with the Republic of Yemen. Thus, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has long prioritized maintaining a Yemeni leadership friendly to Saudi interests, primarily via the General People's Congress (GPC).[1] However, Yemen's domestic makeup is heavily decentralized and factionalized based on various loyalties, the primary being tribal affiliation. Authority in the country has been described more as a "constellation of powers than a coherent state."[2] This absence of a center of political power has long meant that provincial disputes and (sometimes violent) inter-tribal disagreements have been a staple of Yemeni political life—there is simply no authority powerful enough to monopolize violence. However, in the early 2000s, violence in Yemen escalated and the country sank into an all-out armed conflict, which, by 2015, had engulfed the entire nation.[3] While local security concerns focused on secessionist activity in the south of Yemen, the spread of Al-Qaeda and its branch Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) complicated the situation and contributed to the overall deterioration of the security situation, also because it gave the conflict an international dimension and dragged it into the U.S.-led Global War on Terror.[4] This turned an already fragile situation into a melting pot of local political grievances, sectarian violence, tribal disagreements, and terrorist activity. A detailed analysis of the development of violence in Yemen and its exact causes goes beyond the scope of this paper; however, what must be noted is that, first, the situation in Yemen rapidly deteriorated into armed conflict, and, in the context of this escalating violence, the Houthi movement rapidly militarized.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has directly engaged militarily with the Houthis since 2009; however, their countermeasures have failed to curb the long-term threat that the terrorist movement poses. Saudi Arabia is one of the leading powers in the Arab world.[5] It maintains strong political ties both internationally and across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). It is also a member of the G20, boasting the highest per capita GDP and the largest military budget in the greater Middle East.[6] Yet political and military instability in Yemen, the region's most impoverished country, persists, which in turn poses a direct foreign threat to the Kingdom's national security. This instability has also enabled the rapid rise of the Houthis, a Yemeni militant organization, over the last three decades. Today, the Houthis are the de facto political authority in Yemen, and the central government's power has largely disappeared.

Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism efforts against the Houthis occurred in three distinct phases. During each of the distinct phases, Saudi Arabia's ambitions vis-à-vis the Houthis shifted. First, between 2009 and 2011, Saudi efforts sought to strengthen its ally, the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG), thereby indirectly suppressing the rise of the Houthis. The second, and perhaps most notable, phase of Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism efforts in Yemen began in March 2015. This phase was marked by a fundamental shift in Saudi Arabia's approach—Riyadh pursued an aggressive campaign of airstrikes intended to eliminate the Houthi threat kinetically. The most recent phase of Saudi counterterrorism shifted away from military bombardment and instead sought a more conciliatory approach by prioritizing ceasefire negotiations. Each of these three phases included different counterterrorism measures that created varying levels of short-term success—yet proved counterproductive in the long term. Overall, Saudi Arabia's military and

diplomatic measures intended to counter Houthi power have only emboldened their resolve and provided the Houthis both a global audience and a powerful ally, namely the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Conflicting narratives regarding the origins of Yemen's political unrest abound in politics and academia. The violence in Yemen is commonly framed as a proxy war reflecting the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran; however, this is an oversimplified perspective. Nonetheless, the ROYG and Saudi Arabia have long boasted the Iranian proxy narrative, which in turn has served as a self-fulfilling prophecy by incentivizing increased Iranian involvement. While regional politics certainly play a role in Yemen, the Houthis' origins are more directly rooted in domestic factors and socio-cultural grievances. These grievances, expressed by different factions, tribes, and classes within Yemeni society, include Western overreach, sectarian tensions between Salafi and Zaydi educational institutions, Saudi border securitization, economic disparity, and authoritarian leadership. Dr. Marieke Brandt, an expert in Yemeni affairs, notes that "many other narratives of the Houthi conflict sometimes complement each other, sometimes compete." [7] Both academic scholars and politically invested voices make conflicting arguments about the primary causes of war in Yemen. Boundary and proxy-war narratives—as described by Brandt—underlie the counterterrorism efforts pursued by Saudi Arabia and the primarily Sunni-state coalition in Yemen.[8]

A competing narrative about the conflict is that it is a domestic sectarian struggle between Shia and Sunni Muslims. This too is a reductionist explanatory approach that fails to do justice to the complex and evolving social structures present in Yemen, such as that of the Zaydi-Shia northern tribes' relationship to the growing Salafist-Sunni influence.[9] As previously mentioned, the branch of Shia Islam that Ansar Allah bases itself on does not fit neatly into the Shia-Sunni divide. Its character contains some proximity to Sunni Islam and marked differences from the other branches of Shi'ism. Due to its embrace of rationalism and non-sectarian elements in its agenda, it would be a mistake to characterize Ansar Allah as just a religiously motivated movement. The frame of the religious conflict simply does not capture the many layers, motivations, and agendas innate to the conflict and the warring parties.

Furthermore, there is an argument focused on Western imperialism and the subjugation of Yemen in colonial dynamics. The Houthis employ this lens and have described themselves as a marginalized group fighting for the rights of Yemeni citizens and against exploitation by great powers.[10,11] Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi, the group's founder, stated in an interview that "the Houthi movement was a defence of Islam itself against the onslaught of U.S. imperialism and its allies and puppets within the Yemeni government, the Islah party and the Salafis." [12] Echoing this in his analysis, Michael Knights asserts: "Explicit criticism of U.S.-Yemeni counterterrorism cooperation by the Houthis was a proximate cause for the commencement of hostilities by the Yemeni government in June 2004." [13] However, Brandt contends that none of these influences occur in a vacuum, and any narrative that excludes another is incorrect. Indeed, the conflict in Yemen cannot be definitively explained through a single lens. The Houthis are a proxy of Iran. However, they also have distinct interests, agency, and identity. Domestic strife has also undoubtedly contributed to the conflict, which has been amplified by historical divisions that, at least in part, originate from colonial influences.

The History of Ansar Allah And Its Rise To Power

The Houthis emerged from the Zaydi population in the Sa'dah province, a mountainous region in the northeast of Yemen and along Saudi Arabia's southeastern border. Zaydism is a religious, social, and political Shia Muslim ideology that a third of Yemen's population follows, but comprises only 8% of the global Shia population.[14]

Zaydism (الزَّيْدِيَّة), also referred to as 'Fiver Shi'ism,' is one of the three main branches of Shi'ism alongside 'Twelver Shi'ism' and Ismailism.[15] It emerged in the eighth century, and scholars consider it to be the closest to Sunni Islam of the three Shia branches. Zaydism generally values rationalism as more important than Qur'anic literalism and has historically tolerated other belief groups in Yemen.[16] It is important to note that the adherence to Zaydism sets Ansar Allah apart from their Iranian sponsors, where particularly the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) contains many adherents of the, in some ways, much more rigorous Twelver Shi'ism.[17]

Although sectarian tensions exist in Yemen, understanding the political environment as religiously bifurcated is insufficient to explain the aims and identity of the Houthis.[18] Rather, the Houthis' primarily claim to represent an economically marginalized group of Yemeni society: those victimized by the GPC President Saleh and the international interests he claims to represent.[19] This victimization narrative appeals to many in Yemeni society beyond sectarian lines and carries momentum that expanded Houthi membership. In the early 2000s, the Houthis transitioned from a political movement to a more militarized quasi-revolutionary force. Bruce Hoffman asserts that this shift occurred due to the absence of a centralized power and a subsequent shift in Houthi tactics to seek a monopoly of violence in what was a power vacuum.[20] Since taking up arms, the Houthis have pursued political change in Yemen with increasingly escalating violence and a strategy based around instilling fear and creating chaos. More recently, the Houthis drew worldwide attention and their attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea gave their struggle a global dimension. The motivations behind the Houthi attacks on shipping are complex, ranging from an intention to counter Western meddling in the Middle East, pursuing the objectives of their Iranian backers, to potentially genuinely fulfilling their ideological goals stated in the *Sarkha* (الصرخة), the political slogan of the Houthis, which includes "Death to Israel."[21] The Houthis' use of violence to instill fear in a global audience and achieve political change aligns with Hoffman's definition of terrorism "as the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change."[22] This is crucial because, independent of what the Houthis' aims may be, the tactics they employ have allowed outside powers such as Saudi Arabia or the United States to frame Houthi activities as terrorist and hence legitimize interventions as counterterrorism campaigns.

The Houthis' growth came as a surprise to many. In 2002, they were considered an isolated and minor paramilitary group in northeast Yemen. Already in 2004, their growing strength had made them a direct military threat to both the ROYG's hold on power and Saudi Arabia's southern border—a threat which grew over the following years. By 2011, the Houthis firmly controlled Sa'dah Province, and in September 2014, they seized Sana'a, Yemen's capital. Seizing the capital, the political and economic center of Yemen, granted the Houthis widespread recognition as a quasi-state actor with great potential to destabilize the region.[23] Brandt notes that in 2014, the Houthis "seemed to appear out of nowhere on Yemen's national

stage," as their presence and prior fighting with ROYG forces was limited to the northeast.[24] 2014 thus ushered the Houthis into the domestic political sphere and introduced them to the regional and international stages as well.

In response to the fall of Sana'a, Saudi Arabia organized a coalition of GCC military forces and launched Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015.[25] Primarily an air campaign, the coalition swiftly "began shelling military installations, arms stockpiles, airports, streets, bridges, and infrastructure throughout the country."[26] This phase of Saudi-led counterterrorism had major ramifications, most glaringly a country-wide humanitarian crisis and the excessive killing of civilians.[27]

Saudi Arabia's Threat Perception

Saudi Arabia maintains a broad definition for what constitutes terrorism. It includes acts intended to "disturb public order," "endanger national unity," "undermine state reputation," and "cause damage to state facilities," among numerous other expansively defined activities.[28] Under this definition, the Houthis inherently qualify as a terrorist organization. Saudi Arabia perceived the Houthis' rising influence as a threat to two major interests: its border and regional power. The Houthis threatened to destabilize Saudi Arabia's largest shared (and minimally fortified) border. Saudi Arabia and the northern Yemeni tribes share a long history across the borderlands that dates to the Treaty of Ta'if, which concluded the Saudi-Yemeni War of 1934.[29,30] The borderland has relied on decentralized security cooperation between tribes, Saudi, Yemeni, and foreign governments. However, in recent years, this concept of borderland, rather than an identifiable demarcated border, has been described as "controversial and vulnerable," especially specific to the border between Saudi Arabia and Yemen.[31] The borderland's permeability is home to a "vibrant shadow economy" and grants both terrorists and migrants relative freedom of movement.[32] The 2000 Treaty of Jeddah further solidified the Saudi-Yemen border, and Saudi Arabia initiated plans for physical fortifications. This marked a major shift from Saudi Arabia's "borderland policy based on patronage and tribal ties to a border policy centered on securitization and the incremental militarization of the frontier."[33] This strategic change upset many borderland tribes as it threatened their autonomy and freedom of movement. The resulting tribal animosity and shift in loyalties away from Saudi Arabia-allied actors made border violence an even greater security threat.[34] The Houthi proximity to—and the malleability of—the Yemen-Saudi border made it a high priority target that drew Saudi Arabia into direct military engagement with the Houthis, notably marking the first Saudi military deployment abroad without an ally.[35]

The Saudis also perceived the Houthis as a threat to the Kingdom's geopolitical power in the region during a time of heightened tensions with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Regardless of this threat's initial validity, Saudi Arabia's countermeasures and subsequent Houthi responses increased the threat of Iranian involvement. The ROYG, specifically President Saleh, frequently made unsubstantiated claims that the Houthis were operating as Iranian proxies.[36] A 2009 U.S. diplomatic cable estimated that "Iranian influence in Yemen had thus far been limited to informal religious ties between Yemeni and Iranian scholars and negligible Iranian investment in the energy and development sectors."[37] Further, Brandt notes, the Houthis did not provide a potential strategic advantage for Iranian foreign policy as they had "little prospect of actually overthrowing the Salih regime, and would probably not be subservient to Tehran even if [they] did."[38] Nonetheless, the government of Yemen perpetuated this narrative, framing the Houthi conflict in Yemen primarily through the lens

of the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide—a move that buttressed the emergence of political and scholarly explanations of the conflict as largely a reification of the cold war between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The combination of these two elements, the sectarian divide and the geopolitical competition mapped thereupon, provided short-term benefits to the ROYG by ensuring vested Saudi interest and support.[39]

As the Houthi threat expanded, Saudi Arabia adopted and perpetuated this narrative, spreading it to regional Sunni allies in the GCC and international allies, including the United States. Iran officially addressed the violence in Sa'dah province in 2009 on the coattails of Saudi Arabia's direct military involvement. They urged Saudi restraint and respect for Yemen's sovereignty.[40] This Iranian response and subsequent support from Tehran turned a narrative into a self-fulfilling prophecy. When the Saudi-led coalition began airstrikes in 2015, the actions were embedded into and legitimized by the narrative that the campaign was intended to counter Iranian terror proxies and curtail Iran's influence in the region.[41] Entering into a vicious cycle, the capabilities of the Houthis and their aspirations to challenge the ROYG, Saudi Arabia, and hold other assets in the region at risk, eventually incentivized a strategic decision to invest in the Houthis and challenge Saudi Arabia—confirming their threat perception.

An Assessment of Saudi Arabia's Counterterrorism Measures

Saudi Arabia's prior counterterrorism experience focused on countering terrorist financing, denying safe haven to terrorists, and aiding the United States' "Global War on Terror" against Al-Qaeda and ISIS. The emergence of the Houthis in Yemen caused a shift. Saudi Arabia saw the Houthis as a threat to their regional power, domestic stability, border, and Sunni-Salafi ideology.[42] For the first time, Saudi Arabia found itself spearheading military action against a foreign enemy. Although not explicitly defined by Saudi publications, there were three phases of countermeasures initiated by Saudi Arabia and its coalition against the Houthis. The first phase sought to strengthen the Yemeni government and equip it with sufficient capabilities to eliminate the Houthi militant capacity. When this failed and the Houthis took the capital of Yemen, Saudi Arabia transitioned into a new phase of their counterterrorism campaign. Saudi Arabia and its coalition of Gulf states pursued an aggressive airstrike campaign complemented by naval blockades and limited ground operations, intending to reinstall ROYG leadership in Sana'a. However, operational failures bred a massive humanitarian crisis throughout Yemen and forced Saudi Arabia into its third and most recent phase of countering the Houthis, conciliation through ceasefire negotiations and power-sharing agreements. Success in this phase would mean a secure Saudi-Yemen border and curbed Iranian involvement with the Houthi movement.

An assessment of success is facilitated by Daniel Byman's framework of eight counterterrorism strategies, as laid out in the Oxford Handbook of Terrorism.[43] The first phase, "crushing terrorists" engages terrorist actors directly with overwhelming force; the second, "killing terrorist leaders," is targeted assassinations of key personnel; the third, "strengthening allies to crush terrorists," refers to providing material support rather than direct military engagement; the fourth, "containing terrorists," seeks to keep threats localized and sow internal divisions within terrorist groups; the fifth, "defenses," intends to curb the terrorist threat by strengthening a home country's defenses, thereby neutralizing the terrorist's ability to cause destruction; the sixth, "delegitimation," relies on narrative efforts to delegitimize a terrorist group's cause; the seventh, "conciliation,"

attempts to achieve rapprochement by granting concessions to some demands or negotiating peace; and lastly, "going after root causes," focuses on addressing the grievances underlying the terrorism.[44] These eight approaches are not mutually exclusive and are often pursued simultaneously. However, this framework is suitable for the assessment of Saudi counterterrorism strategy because it allows a structured analysis of each phase and a contrast between phases.

Saudi Arabia's First Phase: Strengthening Allies to Crush Terrorists

"Strengthening allies" is both a common and relatively effective counterterrorism tactic and one Saudi Arabia initially employed to counter the Houthis. Rather than engaging the adversary directly, Saudi Arabia funneled resources to ROYG to enhance its capacity to suppress the Houthis independently. The Yemeni government received substantial weapons, funding, and military support from Saudi Arabia throughout the Sa'dah wars.[45] The logic behind this strategy is clear: most terrorist groups, especially ones in their infancy and with limited means such as the Houthis in the early 2000s, tend to target local forces, and treat foreign targets as secondary objectives.[46] Saudi Arabia thus sought to treat the Houthis as akin to a local insurgency rather than a terrorist group, tailoring its strategy accordingly. The strategy of localization and refraining from an intervention has a second key advantage: it can capitalize on local grievances against terrorist organizations. This allows a counterinsurgent to source combatants from the population who are motivated to fight against the target insurgent or terrorist organization. This policy was successful in the short term by enabling the government to ward off Houthi forces from Sana'a during the six Sad'ah wars from 2004 to 2010. This period of prolonged violence resulted in increased sympathy toward ROYG and Saudi security interests from the GCC and international powers like the United States, the United Kingdom, and France.

However, these short-term successes led to counterproductive long-term effects. The ROYG's counterterrorism measures were repressive, extremely harmful to the civilian population, and tainted by overt corruption.[47] These factors contributed to increased recruitment and local sympathy for the Houthi movement throughout the Sa'dah province.[48] The Houthis matched the ROYG's brutality, leading to an overall deterioration of the security situation in northeast Yemen. Historically feuding tribes joined opposite sides, adding cultural complexities to each side's ever-increasing "ideological, political, sectarian, tribal, and personal interests."[49] Instead of suppressing a security threat in its immediate geographic vicinity, Saudi Arabia contributed to the delegitimization of ROYG among large swaths of the Yemeni population. As a direct consequence of Saudi Arabia's support for ROYG, Houthi membership proliferated.

Evaluating this initial period through Byman's framework of counterterrorism strategies suggests that two alternative strategies, namely leadership "killing terrorist leaders," also known as terrorist decapitation, and "conciliation," could have been more productive. Saudi Arabia may have opted to pursue the core leadership of Ansar Allah; however, this counterterrorism strategy comes with risks. Terrorist decapitation risks strengthening an organization by creating martyrs, which terrorist organizations then leverage to recruit new members, inspire current followers, and produce propaganda material.[50] The 2004 killing of Houthi founder Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi emboldened the organization with a prophetic martyr figure.

However, research has shown that targeted killings, when used in conjunction with other

means, can reduce militant violence.[51] The removal of a charismatic or influential leader can disrupt the underlying momentum or internal order within a terrorist organization. In addition, the psychological effects of leadership loss, especially that of a figure with whom members of an organization identify themselves, should not be underestimated. Bryan Price notes that negative and positive outcomes of leadership decapitation are not mutually exclusive. He summarizes the outcomes of his research succinctly: "tactics aimed at removing terrorist leaders may have negative consequences in the short term, but they increase the mortality rates of the groups they lead."[52] There is potential for long-term disruptions if key figures are taken out of the picture early.

Abdalmalik al-Huthi, brother of Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi and second leader of Ansar Allah, exemplifies the potential of decapitation. Abdalmalik al-Huthi was instrumental in a radical transformation of the Houthis, away from a political movement and towards a militarized revolutionary group. Between 2005 and 2010, Abdalmalik al-Huthi professionalized, militarized, and grew the organization.[53] His pivotal role would have made him a logical target for leadership decapitation from a Saudi perspective. Given the precarious situation in Yemen, combined with fluid allegiances of local actors and scarce resources, it is conceivable that preventing Abdalmalik al-Huthi from professionalizing and consolidating the organization under his control could have stopped it dead in its tracks. While this scenario is a counterfactual, it is proposed to demonstrate the potential utility of alternative counterterrorist strategies. Moreover, leadership decapitation contains inherent and unpredictable risks: a government pursuing such a strategy vis-à-vis a terrorist organization can never exclude the possibility that more competent leaders emerge, or that a targeted organization finds other ways of reconstituting itself. A more aggressive leadership decapitation strategy by Saudi Arabia may have accelerated the dynamics and incurred political costs for the Kingdom, both at home and abroad. In short, leadership decapitation is a gamble with effects that cannot always be mitigated.

The Byman's seventh strategy, conciliation, may have been suitable for the Saudi counterterrorism efforts. In Brandt's assessment, she asserts, "It can certainly be said that in the first phase of the conflict—during the first three bouts of war from 2004 to 2006—it could well have been possible to resolve or at least contain the conflict through mediation."[54] Saudi Arabia could have opted to address the security threat in its borderlands by negotiating with the Houthis. Such a conciliatory approach could have offered greater Houthi autonomy in the Sa'dah province or other negotiated concessions to the then-political movement, before it transitioned into a militarized threat. While it is uncertain whether the Houthis would have been receptive, how ROYG may have reacted or responded, or whether other factors may have influenced the conciliatory approach, a scenario is conceivable wherein a codified agreement between Ansar Allah and Saudi Arabia could have exchanged political concessions for demilitarization. Given how rapidly the Houthis rose to power and how repressively ROYG responded, it is understandable that conciliation would seem an exceptionally lenient concession by ROYG at the time. However, it is important to note that it could have been a more strategic counterterrorism tool for Saudi Arabia to explore at the time. What is, however, clear is that the strategy of 'outsourcing' the challenge of dealing with Ansar Allah to ROYG was insufficient. The central government's limited means, repressive response in the northern regions, and often corrupt officials made it a subpar implementer of an effective counterterrorism effort.

A 2009 Houthi attack on the borderland marked the shift in Saudi counterterrorism strategy away from supporting the ROYG to direct Saudi military engagement. Houthi attacks against Saudi Arabia mainly targeted the borderland of Asir, Jazan, and Najran provinces.[55] Saudi Arabia sought to send clear signals to the Houthis that it would not tolerate attacks on its territory, and thus "[...] launched a large-scale military incursion into northern Yemen in November."[56] This confrontation was "the game-changing factor" in Saudi border securitization policy.[57] Although Saudi Arabia intended to deter escalation and suppress the Houthi threat, the military incursion instead piqued Iranian interest and initiated Tehran's public condemnation of Saudi involvement in Yemen.[58] This marked one of the first identifiable moments of Iranian interest in countering Saudi Arabian influence in Yemen's political turmoil. The 2011 Arab Spring uprising also escalated Iranian involvement as the Middle East cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran expanded to Bahrain, Syria, and increasingly, Yemen.[59] Saudi Arabia's initial policy emphasizing direct Iranian involvement in the Houthi cause finally rang true.

The Second Phase: Overwhelming Kinetic Force

Following substantial Houthi territorial gains and the seizure of Sana'a in 2014, Saudi Arabia shifted from an indirect approach to a direct, kinetic strategy. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia led a military coalition against the Houthis in what was called "Operation Decisive Storm." The operation had two key goals: to restore the authority to ROYG and to deter Iran from further intervention in the region.[60] More than just addressing a security concern, Saudi Arabia saw this as an opportunity to demonstrate their military and political strength to the Arab world and cement Riyadh's leadership ambition. However, the military campaign did not go as smoothly as Saudi Arabia had intended. The Houthis used the mountainous region of Sa'dah province to their advantage, and its general inaccessibility to foreign threats encouraged the coalition to pursue an air campaign that they were not operationally equipped to carry out.[61] The airstrikes were meant to target strategic Houthi assets and infrastructure like the air force and weapons sites. Initially, the air campaign saw success over its strategic targets, and they succeeded in reclaiming the strategic southern city of Aden.[62] However, broad civilian areas under the control of Houthi-sympathizing factions were substantially bombarded as well.[63]

Public opinion, both domestically and internationally, has ever-increasing effects on the efficacy of counterterrorism strategies.[64] The disproportional air campaign's collateral damage both shifted moral opinion against the coalition and added stature to the Houthi movement. The thousands of civilian deaths incurred led to negative perceptions of the coalition, which varied from poor military execution to outright disregard for human life. The damage inflicted by the Saudi-led coalition's air campaign saw domestic and international support plummet. The failure to maintain the humanitarian high ground was ruinous for the Saudi-led coalition. Not only did the air campaign result in mass civilian casualties and global condemnation, but the coalition continued despite these outcomes, further entrenching perceptions of Saudi repression. This was a massive strategic failure. Repression induces long-term resentment, which leads to an increased security threat once that repression ends.[65]

Beyond being counterproductive to counterterrorism efforts, this resentment also complicates other counterterrorism approaches, particularly conciliation. After a prolonged bombing campaign, peace negotiations and coming to an agreement are all the more difficult. Despite intensifying bombardment, significant expenditure of

resources, and mounting casualties, Saudi Arabia was unable to achieve any of the objectives of its military campaign, and the Houthis grew in power. Saudi Arabia's escalating counterterrorism measures against the Houthis proved counterproductive due to the organization's ever-increasing platform and legitimization. The campaign publicized Houthi effectiveness and resilience, which in turn reinforced Iranian perceptions of the Houthis as a viable and useful ally. Gregory Jognsen summarizes this dynamic, highlighting: "Saudi Arabia went to war in Yemen in early 2015 because it was worried that the Houthis were an Iranian proxy. They weren't, but after nearly six years of war, the Houthis and Iran are closer than ever, exchanging ambassadors and battlefield lessons."[66] The coalition air campaign and the naval blockade, intended to prevent Iranian arms shipments, increased the Houthi and Iranian international threat perception. Maria-Louise Clausen asserts that linking the Houthis to the so-called 'Axis of Resistance,' an informal coalition of Iranian-backed militant groups across the Middle East, "elevated the Houthis from a movement perceived as a Yemeni domestic movement to one with a regional and international audience."[67]

The Houthis have been the primary benefactors of this elevation. They have capitalized on this narrative by increasing Iranian arms shipments, training, and funding, thereby transforming from an armed group focused on domestic objectives in Yemen into a global political actor whose actions have worldwide consequences. This aligns with a fundamental aim of terrorist organizations to seek increased leverage and influence through publicity.[68] The Houthis have now undeniably gained this publicity on the international stage, setting them apart from other actors, which lack the same kind of political capital "to effect political change on either a local or an international scale."[69]

Overall, there is a clear academic consensus regarding the second phase of Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism activities in Yemen: the kinetic approach was executed with insufficient operational competence and without a clear strategic perspective.[70] Coalition strategic shortcomings were largely due to a failure to adapt to the changing situation in Yemen, while the Houthis continuously reassessed strategy and acquired new tactical offensive technology. More importantly, the continuous application of largely indiscriminate force not only triggered increased outside support for the Houthis, but also allowed them to make "indirect gains due to coalition-caused citizen fatalities," shifting the strategic balance further in Ansar Allah's favor.[71] On the operational level, the coalition continued to rely on aerial bombardments, even as they yielded minimal target success. Saudi Arabia's prospects for success continued to deteriorate, and it found itself unable to even prevent offensive Houthi attacks, particularly against vulnerable oil infrastructure.[72] Overall, Saudi Arabia faced a "reputational cost caused by the war," and their failure highlighted a major "gap between the political aspirations and their 'operationalization.'"[73] Without a shift in strategy, the coalition's technological superiority largely went to waste. The campaign to "crush terrorists" fell victim to the counterterrorism strategy's assumed risk that "the more force is used the less effective it is."[74]

The Third Phase: Conciliation

As coalition members like Qatar and the UAE ceased military participation, conversations shifted in favor of ceasefire negotiations. Hardliners in Saudi Arabia are likely to view this as counterproductive to Saudi Arabia's long-term security as it permits a long, shared border with the Houthis—an Iranian ally.[75] Saudi Arabia has historically worked to preserve a Sunni buffer zone, including by

supporting Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war.[76] This view argues that "the biggest impediment to a political solution remains Saudi Arabia's fear of the Houthis' subordination to Tehran."[77] However, Saudi Arabia has few viable alternative counterterrorism approaches apart from rapprochement. Not only has the history of Saudi Arabia's engagement in Yemen shown the futility of overwhelming kinetic efforts, but the strategic situation has also evolved. Massive international and domestic pressure has emerged in response to Saudi Arabian operations in Yemen, urging the Kingdom to cease military action.[78] Oil prices had dropped, the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged populations, and allies distanced themselves due to the Saudi killing of Jamal Khashoggi.[79] These factors, in conjunction with the Houthis' growing power and resolve, made conciliation the most recent and potentially productive countermeasure to the Houthis. It remains to be seen whether conciliation is feasible after decades of violence and how the changing strategic position of Iran in the region may impact the dynamics between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis.

Redefining Success and Countermeasure Recommendations

Terrorist organizations end for multiple reasons, as Audry Cronin highlights in the context of Al-Qaeda.[80] This is no less true for Ansar Allah, and the possibilities for Saudi Arabia to achieve the objective of neutralizing Houthi operations are numerous. The Houthis may collapse if they fail to build a stable political and bureaucratic structure in Yemen, or at least in the parts they control. The diverse allegiances within the Houthi movement pose a threat to its internal cohesion. Outside the organizations, the Houthis are confronted with a country that remains deeply divided and decentralized, undermining any faction seeking political power.

Alternatively, on a perhaps more optimistic note, the Houthi insurgency may transition into a more orderly and legitimate political process, reversing the militarization of the organization itself. However, due to the overall unstable situation, salient tribal, ethnic, religious, and social divisions, this appears unlikely. What is more likely is that the Ansar Allah may shift from terrorism to other forms of violence, institutionalizing their violent methods in government institutions, much like the Taliban have in Afghanistan.[81] This appears to be the most likely outcome, and is arguably already occurring.

However, despite their military capabilities and some headline-grabbing successes, the Houthis' political capacity is weak.[82] Due to the internal divisions and their primary modus operandi being warfare, Ansar Allah has, and will likely continue to have, trouble acting as a legitimate, and more importantly, peaceful political force. The Houthis thrive when they are at war. Their primary means of creating power is through violence—the organization seems to have internalized the Weberian maxim of the monopoly of violence.

Saudi Arabia must recognize the Houthis' political weakness and base its counterterrorism strategy around this insight. Saudi Arabia should stop providing the Houthis with a war to win by minimizing opportunities for them to be violent.[83] It has pursued such a policy since the 2022 UN-brokered ceasefire, even urging the United States to act with restraint against the Houthis in the Red Sea in January 2024.[84] Continued negotiations and power-sharing agreements offer the right path forward. Although sharing a border with a militarily strong Iranian ally is less than ideal for Saudi Arabia, domestic considerations like a focus on Saudi Vision 2030 (a program aimed at achieving economic diversification), strengthening the Yemeni border, and an inability to militarily

defeat the Houthis all make continued conciliation an important tool. Conciliation is not without drawbacks. The biggest argument against this countermeasure is that it allows terrorists to make gains, regroup, remilitarize, and then renege on the prior agreement through renewed violence.[85] However, as Byman notes, the timing of conciliation plays a large role in its effectiveness as a countermeasure against terrorist organizations.[86] Houthi and U.S. engagement along the Red Sea works in favor of Saudi Arabia's bargaining power. The Houthis may be more incentivized to consolidate their gains and commit to a settlement due to both the increased U.S. military threat and potential pressure from Iran to limit escalation. In short, the timing for conciliation is ripe.

In addition to conciliation, Saudi Arabia should pursue countermeasures that Byman labels "containing terrorism" and "defenses."[87] These measures entail directing attention toward protecting domestic territory and suppressing the Houthis rather than attempting to completely destroy them. This would include increased border fortifications and defensive technology like the U.S. Patriot MIM-104E air defense systems that the U.S. approved to sell to Saudi Arabia in 2022.[88] Restraint from offensive engagement is key to this countermeasure's success. As established, military engagement with the Houthis serves their purposes well. Byman asserts that successful containment can transform terrorists "from a grave strategic threat to a dangerous nuisance."[89] Further, a defensive posture allows Saudi Arabia to use the "delegitimation" countermeasure, which entails "highlighting the horrific violence and extreme goals" of the organization.[90] This method was previously unsuccessful because the Saudi Arabia-led coalition's airstrikes killed innocent civilians. Saudi Arabia was hard-pressed to claim the moral high ground while this was occurring. Now that the counterterrorism strategy appears to have shifted toward conciliation, such narrative delegitimization is feasible, and a more defensive Saudi Arabian posture may create an environment wherein Houthi attacks appear as thoroughly aggressive and not in response to some military action (such as airstrikes). Hardliners may argue that the strategies of containment and defense have the negative implication of creating a dovish appearance, which may be problematic for Saudi Arabia's international standing as well as domestic support. However, Saudi Arabia's failure to defeat the Houthis has already precipitated negative perceptions of its military and political power, all the while costing the Saudi government resources and perpetuating risks to critical infrastructure and global maritime commerce.

A conciliation strategy combined with a strong defensive posture and tailored containment efforts presents a powerful answer to Saudi Arabia's prolonged problem. The timing and overall strategic context are favorable, and Riyadh may have a golden opportunity to secure a negotiated settlement with the Houthis, stabilizing Yemen and mitigating a security threat in Saudi Arabia's immediate vicinity.

Conclusion

Saudi countermeasures against the Houthis in Yemen failed; they instead bolstered Houthi legitimacy and incentivized Iranian investment in the terrorist organization. The Houthi movement began as a disenfranchised insurgency opposed to a corrupt and repressive government and is now an actor on the global stage. Countermeasures taken against the Houthis, first by the ROYG and then by the Saudi-led coalition, dramatically elevated the perceived Houthi threat, legitimized their grievances, and increased their recruitment. Currently, Saudi Arabia is struggling to navigate what security and counterterrorism measures would be successful given the Houthis' de facto

political leadership in Yemen. Saudi Arabia was unable to overwhelm and crush the Houthis through aggressive military force, so they now must seek alternative solutions to the security crisis that they, in large part, created. The most promising way forward is by reconciling with the group they previously sought to destroy. Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism strategy and its future direction offer many interesting avenues for further research. First and foremost, future inquiries may broach the issue of Iran's changing influence across the region and how this impacts the dynamics between Ansar Allah and Saudi Arabia. Other studies may examine more closely the role of domestic politics in Saudi Arabia and its impact on counterterrorism strategy. Lastly, future research may observe if the recommendations this article makes are implemented, and if so, what the consequences for Yemen, Saudi Arabia, the Houthis, and the wider region are.

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Externalizing Migration Management or Helping Local Authorities? Analyzing the Communicative Dissonance in the EU Council's Framing of EUCAP Sahel Niger

Jonatan von Moltke

This paper examines EUCAP Sahel Niger as a form of externalization of migration policy, focusing on the EU's communication regarding the EUCAP mission. It seeks to uncover the extent to which the EU Council's motivations and interests in expanding EUCAP's mandate to counter irregular migration differ when compared to its public communication and decisions. It finds that while the addition of a mandate to curb irregular migration is not brushed over in public communications, these do employ a different framing. A "communicative dissonance" becomes apparent as press decisions emphasize the overarching goals of peace and stability in the region rather than the putative domestic migration policy interests behind countering migration through this CSDP mission.

Introduction

The European Union Capacity-Building Mission in Niger (EUCAP) was initially deployed in 2012, with its counterpart EUCAP Mali, at the request of the two governments to strengthen the capacities of internal security forces.[1] The mission centered around capacity-building measures, and was complemented by a military partnership mission (EUMPM) in Niger a decade later. The EU established EUCAP to enhance Niger's ability to combat the primary security threats of terrorism and transnational organized crime (TOC). Initially, the mission focused inward, with a particular emphasis on improving coordination, training, and logistics.

However, EUCAP's scope expanded in response to the 2015 migration crisis, as irregular migration became a primary concern for EU member states. Since 2015, the mission has added a pillar to strengthen border security, tackle irregular migration, and human trafficking networks.[2] EUCAP's operations shifted to support establishing mobile border units and specialized police teams to intercept smugglers and migrants. After the coup d'état in Niger in July 2023, both missions were expelled and their respective mandates under the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) were terminated as part of a parallel Nigerien shift to partnering with Russia.[3,4]

Notwithstanding EUCAP's termination, it is worth examining the EU's track record regarding this mission, particularly after the addition of a migration pillar to its mandate. The mandate of the mission had originally focused on capacity building in Niger's security sector: training and equipping police and military units and developing standard operating procedures.[5] EUCAP also provided infrastructure support and assisted in strengthening the security forces' integration into the criminal justice system, with the hope of improving rule of law, accountability, and human rights. The mandate limited the European involvement and did not include military deployments or active, European-led counterterrorism operations.

The integration of the migration pillar did not change the character of the mission as a capacity-building enterprise, but expanded its activities to train Nigerien personnel to surveil, interdict, and ultimately curb

irregular migration flowing through Niger.[6] With this, EUCAP became a more integral part of the EU's overall engagement with Niger in the domain of migration. Between 2012 and 2019, EUCAP trained 19,000 security officials, many of whom would then support efforts against irregular migration.[7] Indeed, a majority of the EU's engagement in Niger was directed at migration-related projects, with 58% of total funding (or 396 million Euros) disbursed to Niger between 2015 and 2022 spent on border control, training, and other law enforcement capacity-building projects.[8] EUCAP thus became a key implementation avenue for the EU's engagement on migration in Niger.

In light of the strong politicization of migration policies, this seemingly technical addition to EUCAP's mandate raises compelling questions about both its political intentions and effects on the Nigerien people and migrants' perspectives. This paper specifically examines the EU Council Communications concerning EUCAP and argues that the mission's migration mandate is not as pronounced in public communications compared to its internal decisions. From a legitimacy and transparency perspective, such a "communicative dissonance" raises significant questions amidst turbulent geopolitical upheaval: How can the EU's CSDP missions enhance real and perceived security? What are the underlying political motivations of investing in a particular context? To whom and to what extent are—and should—these be communicated when mandates are established?

The essay proceeds as follows. Firstly, drawing from extensive policy debates and academic literature, the migration pillar of EUCAP is contextualized in terms of the EU's overall engagement over the last decade in Niger and the broader Sahel, and in terms of the EU's wider attempts at "border externalization." Secondly, it lays out a qualitative content analysis contrasting official EU Council decisions with EU Council press releases, which brings out potential dissonances by identifying differences in tone, narrative, and objectives in the language of official policy documents and public media statements. In doing so, it employs an inward-looking, constructivist approach by analyzing written text as a data source. It assumes that analytical value lies in the meaning of words themselves in EU communications, which can propel or hide certain narratives in the creation of CSDP. When the tone and substantive emphasis points differ between public (external) communication and internal decisions, a communicative dissonance arises. This need not necessarily be positive or negative for pursuing certain policy goals, but it is noteworthy and revealing of both internal priorities and external perceptions. In turn, communicative dissonance may affect the legitimacy of CSDP missions when it occurs in extreme forms, for instance, by concealing misaligned interests or underlying goals.

In the case study of Niger, a communicative dissonance regarding the relevance placed on curbing migration could also be associated with public pressure and politicization of migration policies more broadly. Indeed, a more public and explicit attempt to thwart migration flows can be expected to draw backlash. Overall, the EU Council did not attempt to 'hide' its support of the Nigerien forces to curb irregular migration in the north of Niger. However, it did not prominently communicate its intent in doing so either, framing this mandate as secondary to that of capacity-building for stabilization in the region more broadly and embedding it in overarching security and development policy frameworks on EU-Nigerien relations. A slight communicative dissonance thus appears between the press statements and Council decisions regarding the true priorities given to migration-curbing interests as part of

an effort to strengthen the capacities of Nigerien security forces.

Contested Efforts Around Border Externalization

The European Union significantly increased its security presence and both widened and deepened its engagement in the Sahel region over the past decade.[9] This shift towards a more prominent security role in the region can be viewed as part of a broader trend of the EU's externalization of its migration policies to third states, which involves the outsourcing of border control activities to countries and regions outside of the EU's immediate borders.[10] The EU's High Representative at the time, Josep Borrell, famously illustrated this understanding of migration policies when he claimed that "Europe's border is not in the Mediterranean, but south to the Sahel."[11]

Understanding Externalization Through A Constructivist Lens

This paper situates itself in the constructivist tradition of international relations and bases its approach on discursive analysis of EU communications. Prior to such an assessment, it is essential to define what is meant by 'externalization' and its relationship to other constructivist literature on the EU as a whole.

Externalization, following David S. Fitzgerald's definition, is understood as the efforts by developed, powerful countries of the Global North, in this case the European Union and its members, to prevent migrants from reaching the European borders by cooperating with third parties, which then stop migration flows well before they have any chance of touching sovereign European territory.[12] With this practice, the EU seemingly detaches itself from responsibility for handling refugees and migrants at its borders and aims to prevent migrants from accessing the legal protections they would (or should) have at European borders. Externalization thereby frames third parties as responsible agents for migration control. To borrow Wallersteinian terminology, the responsibility for migration is thereby shifted from the core to the periphery. Postcolonial scholarship, for instance, has criticized the externalization of border management in the form of "migrant offshoring" as a neo-colonial 'transfer' of penal responsibility towards African countries.[13]

Constructivism is well-suited to analyze externalization due to its focus on how identity, norms, and language shape state behavior. Discursive analysis further enables a nuanced study of the EU's framing of its actions. Together, these frameworks can highlight ulterior motives, connecting ideational and domestic-political considerations to the conduct of international relations in ways other analytic approaches may not. Furthermore, analyzing language put forward in explanation of foreign policies can highlight power imbalances, which is particularly valuable when studying migration, as the power imbalances here are particularly steep.[14]

The approach and research subject, namely the EU Council, is not without problems. As some scholars have highlighted, studies of migration and externalization often de-center recipient countries and perpetuate a Eurocentric perspective.[15] Other studies have attempted to rectify this and show the colonial legacies which overdetermine EU activities on the African continent, particularly with respect to externalization.[16] With this consciously in mind, the article nonetheless focuses on the more powerful actor in the externalization relationship. The focus on the EU also serves to challenge the parity which the European institutions seek to establish, framing African counterpart governments as reliable partners in the externalization of borders.[17]

Niger's Role in Externalization

Unsurprisingly, Niger was a crucial political ally for the EU in the Sahel until the coup that ousted Niger's president, Mohamed Bazoum, in July 2023.[18] The international community had regarded Niger as an anchor of stability with a solid democratic record that offered a stable base for counterterrorism measures and migration management efforts in an otherwise volatile region. Further, Niger had a strategic dimension when it came to migration routes; it is estimated that 90% of migrants from Western Africa in transit to Libya travel through Niger.[19]

Initially, the EUCAP missions in Mali and Niger were established to support respective authorities in countering regional instability in the Sahel, marked by heightened insecurity and sequential coup d'états in Mali and Burkina Faso. Threats from violent extremist organizations (VEOs), high conflict displacement numbers, widespread human rights violations, discrimination against transhumance and ethnic groups such as the Fulani, an underdeveloped economy with the fourth-lowest Human Development Index (HDI) value worldwide, and a disproportionate vulnerability to the effects of climate change were the overall factors that marked the situation.[20] With a total staffing of 120 officials headquartered in Niamey, and with a post-mandate-expansion outpost in the "migrant smuggling hub" and northern transit city of Agadez, EUCAP was placed strategically and with sufficient resources for its capacity-building mandate.[21]

With regards to EU civilian missions, critics have argued that the political incentives behind security interventions, particularly in the EUCAP mission, have led it to prioritize migration management and border control objectives at the expense of broader development and governance goals in the region. Migration Partnership Frameworks with Tunisia and Mali (together with Niger) emerge as cases where the EU has externalized its migration policy and drawn criticisms.[22,23] Non-governmental organizations like Amnesty International have also attempted to raise attention on these matters and hold the EU to account in these efforts, claiming that partnerships like the one in Tunisia make the EU complicit in the widespread human rights violations.[24] Human rights organizations have also raised the issue of the likely irreconcilability of EU practices with international law, particularly in the case of the Libyan coast guard.[25]

In Niger, the EU has invested heavily in the integration of a wide array of measures in the fields of security sector reform, development cooperation, and migration policy. Between 2014 and 2020, Niger was among the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states receiving the highest development cooperation resources per capita.[26] However, critics have highlighted that these efforts lacked coordination and coherence.[27] In an analysis of the EU's overall migration policy engagement in the Sahel, it was noted that the mandates of many actors were overlapping, and security and migration interests were conflated.[28] As a result, the EU's focus on curbing irregular migration "has set a precedent for governments in the Sahel to prioritize border protection over the protection of people on the move."[29]

Others have gone further and claimed that the EU's overall engagement in the Sahel was not only uncoordinated but also counterproductive, producing a "transit migration state."[30] It has also been described as a system that is "manufacturing smugglers," or even a "migration laboratory."[31,32] Indeed, policies aimed at controlling migration and smuggling have increased the smuggling industry and reinforced corrupt practices, with estimates of aid diversion as high as 75%.[33] In particular, in the north of Niger surrounding Agadez, the EU's reinforcement of Nigerien migration

policies such as the contested law 2015-36, which criminalized both smugglers and migrants, has been criticized as being harmful to the overall economic situation and trust in local and traditional authorities.[34,35] These deteriorations in turn also led to a shift in the coping strategies of the local population.[36]

Human mobility and migration in Western Africa are marked by high levels of informal mobility and often unclear protection statuses throughout the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).[37] Within this context, the EU's containment efforts have also been said to hinder regional integration.[38]

EU Council Communication on EUCAP Sahel Niger

These criticisms raise questions about whether the EU Council deliberately framed its public communication on EUCAP Sahel Niger to de-emphasize its role in migration enforcement, particularly in response to accusations of externalization. Such a maneuver would be reflected in a change in the language with which it frames EUCAP in its public statements as compared to its formal decisions. Following this hypothesis, one would expect less emphasis on measures that enable Nigerien authorities to curb migration than on counterterrorism and security-sector reform (SSR) measures in the EU's official press releases.

The EU Council communications do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, these documents, their drafters, and spokespersons consider various factors in their statements, such as public accountability to citizens of the EU, interests of constituencies, and the global image that the EU projects. Consequently, any such communication is in intertextual relation to other stakeholders, including the 450 million EU citizens and international partners, and should thus be expected to take these into account.

To operationalize the research question, two types of qualitative sources will be contrasted. On one hand, the EU's Political and Security Committee decisions to *substantively* amend EUCAP's mandate will be analyzed. There are 78 documents on the Council website with the search query "EUCAP" from January 2015 onwards. Of these, 43 are inaccessible to the public, 18 regard the mandate of the Head of Mission of EUCAP, and the remaining 17 regard the mandate of the mission itself. Discarding again the decisions amending only the time frame or allocation of funds, only seven decisions and one advisory review document by the Committee for Civilian Aspects of Crisis Management (CIVCOM), the advisory body responsible for civilian aspects of crisis management in the EU, remain. These eight documents deal substantively with the mandate of EUCAP, beginning with the 2015 change in decision 9675/15 of the Council, and will be analyzed by coding the relevant parts as EUCAP's (1) objectives and (2) functions into a qualitative analysis software. In a second step, a segment matrix is extracted that retains only the relevant text parts. With this data, a software-based qualitative content analysis is conducted regarding (1) their tone and audience, (2) their overall narrative, and (3) their language specifically regarding irregular migration.

The same procedure is then applied to all EU Council press releases available on EUCAP since 2015. While the PSC decisions are only partly available to the public, too, these official statements can be expected to have a more performative character and subsequent weight in influencing the public political debate, as they are issued with the very aim of being picked up by media reporting and intended to influence public discourse. Their language can thus better indicate the Council's intentions regarding public perception. In the EU Council's "News and Media" Repository, the same search query is used and filtered for "Press release", yielding

18 results ranging from 2015-2024. No further data is available when looking in the categories of "Speeches," "Statements and remarks," or "Media accreditation". The same procedure of software-based coding and segment matrix analysis is then applied.

Differing Tone and Narratives, Yet No 'Brushing Over' Migration

Tone and Audience

Several differences emerge at first glance when contrasting the EU Council's language of decisions with that of press releases on EUCAP's objectives and the overall mission. Firstly, and perhaps most unsurprisingly, there is a difference in terms of tone and audience. Decisions seem to assume an internal focus meant for an audience of policymakers, bureaucrats, and EU lawyers, while press releases adopt a more public-friendly tone. Indeed, council decisions focus on technical aspects, strategic objectives, and mandates, often addressing long-term institutional goals. For instance, terms like "interoperability," "sustainability," and "coordination" are used frequently. They reflect a formality and an emphasis on long-term capacity-building and integration across security actors. Press releases, on the other hand, use language that seems more conducive to public support. They emphasize immediate actions and outcomes and embed the "news" in the broader context, highlighting specific regions like Agadez, coordination with the EUCAP mission in Mali, or partnerships like the G5 Sahel. Overall, press releases aim to communicate the EU's role in addressing pressing security and migration challenges to broader audiences, including the media and public.

Narrative

Beyond the tone and audience, the narrative about EUCAP's mission differs between the two publication types. Decisions frame EUCAP as part of a systemic effort to integrate security and development strategies, emphasizing coherence and integration. The focus is on policymaking and capacity-building. They refer to other strategic frameworks, such as sustainability or human rights approaches, positioning EUCAP as part of long-term governance improvement efforts in Niger. Press releases instead refer to the "macro-level" challenges, often presenting the mission in the context of pressing geopolitical challenges such as terrorism or migration crises. They also make political appeals to emergencies and a need for coordination with the African Union and United Nations for the EU to assume political leadership, which the decisions do not. For instance, quoting High Representative/Vice President Federica Mogherini, the Council Press Release accompanying the initial mandate expansion states that: "Only by working jointly with countries of origin and transit, with the African Union and the UN, we will succeed to tackle the root causes of the emergency while disrupting criminal organizations and helping migrants to escape from them."[39]

What About Migration?

Interestingly, in outlining the overarching mission of EUCAP, both decisions and press releases mention the fight against irregular migration as a key objective. In total, seven out of the 16 coded press release parts mention irregular migration to give context to the function or objective of EUCAP. Yet, they do not detail further how the Nigerien authorities are meant to achieve this objective and how the capacity-building mission is supposed to be operationalized to that end. Thus, the hypothesis that press releases downplay migration is not supported. Repeatedly, press releases address the aim that the Nigerien authorities should combat irregular migration, but usually mention this objective only after the other goals, namely the fight against terrorism and curbing

organized crime. This could be due either to the later addition of migration policy to EUCAP's mandate or to an implicit hierarchy of goals, in which migration outcomes are not the primary ones in the Council's public communication. One notable exception to this is the press release that primarily announces the expanded mandate of EUCAP in 2015, entitled "EUCAP Sahel Niger to help prevent irregular migration," which goes into slightly more detail about the consequences of the expanded mandate:

"The Council has agreed to reinforce the civilian mission EUCAP Sahel Niger as part of the actions of the European Union to prevent irregular migration." "The EU will offer the Nigerien authorities support in preventing irregular immigration and combating associated crimes. This would include advice on a related strategy and training to the Nigerien security services. EUCAP Sahel Niger would also have an outpost in Agadez, a major trafficking hub on the road to Libya."[40]

In line with the hypothesis of a hierarchy of goals, the overall thematic focus of the documents is different. Decisions provide the framework and constraints of EUCAP's role, whereas press releases focus on outcomes and broader relevance within EU initiatives. The decisions often reiterate the initial mandate, like in the 2016 decision (10395/16), where the boundary that EUCAP "shall not carry out any executive function" is highlighted again. The intent to enable the authorities to manage migration is clear in the decisions, too, yet restricted to the core legal framework necessary to enact such a mission. Language found in press releases, on the other hand, reflects an intent to generate support and demonstrate impact, but does not do so with regard to migration outcomes. For instance, the sentences "EUCAP Sahel Niger, which supports the fight against organised crime and terrorism in Niger" and "EUCAP provides advice and training to strengthen security capabilities" appear repeatedly in the press releases, but there is no mention of desired migration outcomes. The focus here lies on showcasing the missions and thereby the EU's nature as a regional partner rather than delving into its own putative interests tied to it. It would be speculative to infer intentionality. However, press releases do place more weight on the overarching security sector reform and counterterrorism frameworks and goals, whereas countering irregular migration is usually listed as the last, subsidiary goal.

Conclusion and Limitations

The mandate of EUCAP Sahel Niger has evolved, evident in its reception in the literature as a measure that externalized EU migration policy and the associated framing by the EU Council. Initially established to strengthen Niger's internal security forces, EUCAP's scope shifted in 2015 to address irregular migration. This shift reflects a broader transformation of EU priorities as a response to the so-called "refugee crisis." The qualitative content analysis method highlights nuances in the tone and narrative of two distinct kinds of EU Council documents. While EU Council decisions emphasized technical objectives in legal language, its press releases used a more public-friendly tone and highlighted geopolitical challenges and broader EU leadership. The aim of countering migration management, though present, was often secondary, suggesting a hierarchy of priorities rather than outright omission. Indeed, migration management was framed as a subsidiary goal, with press releases often citing the core mandate objectives first.

While this qualitative approach offers insights specific to the EU perspective, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, a look at the qualitative data that is publicly available and published by the EU Council is necessarily biased towards a

positive framing of EUCAP. Interviews with policymakers, also beyond the Council, and former EUCAP staff could reveal additional dissonance in communication. Further elements to consider include how the communication on EUCAP evolved over time, which could shed light on the reactiveness to the aforementioned criticisms.

Secondly, the constructivist and inward-looking approach adopted here, focusing solely on EU communication, is unfit to measure the most important and immediate policy elements: the repercussions of EUCAP for the Nigerien authorities, for Nigerien civil society, and for migrants in transit. Such an analysis of policy outcomes - for instance regarding whether security forces were successfully trained, how many migrants decided to adapt by taking other routes, how many were deterred by the high numbers of returnees, individual returnee perspectives, and more - is crucial but faces challenges in establishing a direct causality in the absence of a counterfactual without EUCAP.

Still, policy analyses of the EU's broader Sahel engagement bear value to inform future missions. Indeed, now that the mission has ended, a difference-in-difference analysis examining whether the migration flows have surged since would be valuable. The mission may have reached its goal, although it is far from clear whether this can be attributed to its externalization policies. Initial data suggests that no uptake in Europe-bound migration has taken place since Niger's coup in July 2023.[41]

The outlined recurrent distinctions between the EU Council's public statements and decisions highlight the EU's balancing act between addressing domestic political pressures and retaining legitimacy in the partnership with the Nigerien government. As EUCAP's mission has now concluded amidst regional instability, future research should examine the long-term implications of its operations on migration dynamics, local governance, and EU-Niger relations. This should inform future decisions on establishing and communicating about CSDP missions operating in volatile regions. Especially when implementing partnerships in former colonial contexts marked by stability, donors and partners such as the EU should communicate cautiously but transparently about underlying policy interests. The Sahel bears even more relevance in this regard, as other strategic rivals have long recognized the developmental and economic potential of the region, with, for instance, Russia and the People's Republic of China investing heavily in closer economic and military partnerships.

Precisely because these competitors have their own agenda in the Sahel, from the perspective of the EU, it should be paramount to intensify efforts to strengthen the EU's position as an honest, reliable, and up-front partner. After all, as is the case not only in politics, partnerships based on honesty in intent and mutual trust tend to create better and more durable synergies.

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    i. 21 February 2019: EUCAP Sahel Mali: mission extended until 14 January 2021, €67 million budget adopted
    j. 18 February 2019: Sahel: EU takes further steps to better support the security of the region
    k. 18 September 2018: EUCAP: Council extends the mission for two years
    l. 14 May 2018: EU training mission in Mali: Council extends mission for two years with broadened mandate to include support for G5 Sahel Joint Force
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Pressure Proxies: A Model for State Support of Non-Traditional Proxy Groups Abroad and Their Use as Deterrence

David M. Sip Ph.D.

The world knows many proxy groups and wars. These proxies help their sponsor countries pursue strategic objectives and combat adversaries. Yet there are other proxies who are recruited from ethnic or religious minorities in a hostile state and are embraced by the sponsor without being developed into a military force. There is no real plausible deniability, and the sponsor country pays a high political price for little military gain. Therefore, these proxies defy traditional logic. Why and how countries make use of these proxies will be explained in this article by a model of pressure proxies. The model will be applied to case studies from Ukraine, India, and Iran, showcasing why countries are willing to pay the political price for so little military gain. In addition, this article gives insights into lesser-known proxies such as the Indo-Tibetan Special-Frontier-Force (SFF), the Chechen Units of Ukraine, and the Iranian-Azeri proxy of the Husayniyun and the Islamic Movement in Nigeria.

Introduction

Contemporary research on proxies usually focuses squarely on large, sophisticated groups that can field large numbers of fighters and resemble more a supplement to conventional forces, one that is capable of independently influencing the outcome of major battles. These traditional proxy groups abound, from the Donbas to the Middle East to the African continent. Groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah with its vast missile arsenal, or the Russian Wagner Group, a private military company (PMC), are prime examples.[1] Departing from the main research focus, this paper will instead focus on smaller groups, such as India's use of the Tibetan Special Frontier Force or Iran's leveraging of the Azerbaijani Husayniyun. These groups often have limited military value and come with considerable political cost, creating hostility from the targeted state and often exposing the proxy group's sponsor state to accusations of supporting terrorism or separatism. These pressure proxies are formed from minorities or opposition groups in the state targeted by a pressure proxy sponsor. In most cases, however, the formation of such groups is not done with an intent to use these groups in the context of military action, but rather to create a latent threat and with that, political bargaining power. Such pressure proxies defy traditional proxy logic; there is often no plausible deniability, and their current limited military value comes at a high political cost of creating hostility in the state wherein the group is recruited. Thus, the central question this article seeks to investigate is: Why do states sponsor militarily ineffective and politically costly proxy groups? To capture this dynamic, this article proposes a novel framework called pressure proxies to analyze these non-traditional proxy groups.

Structure and Case Studies

This article aims to answer the research question in a structured manner. First, the article presents the model of pressure proxies, followed by the theory in which this model is rooted. The model is then applied to four case studies. First, the Ukrainian-sponsored Chechen Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion. Second, the Indian Tibetan Special Frontier Force (SFF). For the third and fourth case studies, the article focuses on Iran as the sponsor country. The model is applied to the Iranian Islamic Resistance Movement of Azerbaijan, often also called the Husayniyun,

or Hüseynçilər, and lastly, to the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN).[2] In each of the discussed case studies, at the time of writing in July 2025, the actual military power of the group in question is limited, indeed sometimes non-existent, yet they come with a high political cost to their sponsors. Each of these cases will feature an analysis of the relationship between the respective country dyads—Ukraine and Russia, India and the People's Republic of China (PRC), Iran and Azerbaijan, and Iran and Nigeria. Using secondary literature, media reports, and, where possible, social media, the article will analyze potential and present sources of conflict, deterrence dynamics in each dyad, and will proceed to identify relevant state interests that may be pursued through the support for pressure proxies. The article will also analyze how proxy warfare fits into the broader topic of deterrence theory and why countries maintain these kinds of proxies. The article will conclude with a discussion of the model's limits and merits, an examination of other potential cases that could be explained through this framework, and an analysis of why proxy warfare fits in the broader topic of deterrence theory.

The Model of Pressure Proxies

This article will present a model of a pressure proxy to explain the existence of non-traditional proxy groups. The core of the model revolves around pressure proxies that work either to pressure the targeted state into more compliant policies or to deter the hostile state from attacking or otherwise changing the status quo. To do so, pressure proxies work by threatening the hostile state with insurgency and terrorism. The sponsor state has the group in its back pocket and can threaten their deployment, thereby exerting pressure on the targeted hostile state. Because their non-deployment does not immediately escalate tensions, they leave the door open for diplomacy and should be interpreted also as signaling devices that countries do not want to engage in violent conflict, but are ready to also use unconventional means when forced to. Sponsor states leverage pressure proxies instead of engaging in active operations against adversary states. This difference sets pressure proxies apart from regular proxy forces, which are used in active combat and to achieve geopolitical goals on the battlefield.[3] In many instances, proxies are sent to fight directly in the enemy state, an example would be the Donbas armies Russia created to wage war on Ukraine from 2014 onwards.[4] Alternatively, proxies operate in another state against a hostile state, such as Hezbollah attacking Israel from Lebanon, training pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and Syria, and operating in the latter in support of the Assad regime.[5] Pressure proxies are not deployed in their intended role; instead, the threat of their deployment as regular proxies is used for political ends. The intention is either to deter the hostile state from changing a beneficial status quo or to influence domestic politics in a target country, thereby changing the status quo to the benefit of the sponsor country. The model also makes a connection between pressure proxies and deterrence, and argues that such groups can be understood as a form of deterrence, which rests on the threat of a latent insurgency. Because these proxies are not yet operating in their intended role—in their homeland as insurgents—they create ambiguity, keeping the door for diplomacy open. By maintaining the possibility of a full-blown insurgency, turning a proxy group from a political nuisance into a military or terrorist threat, the sponsor countries can exert pressure without fully committing to violence. This places pressure proxies in between violent and diplomatic means of interstate action as part of the escalation ladder.[6] States employing pressure proxies want to signify the earnestness of their intention while also highlighting that they would favor diplomacy over violent confrontation.

As there is a fluidity between the use of proxies for deterrence and pressure, proxies might at times be used for one or the other; they do not represent two different subgroups despite being used for different goals. What is important to note, and what sets this model apart, is that both of these groups defy traditional proxy logic; they do not fight wars on behalf of their sponsor, nor do they have any plausible deniability.[7] Because their sponsor's open embrace of them is central, pressure proxies increase the political cost for a sponsor, rather than lowering it by creating ambiguity and outsourcing responsibility for violent conflict. When a sponsor forms and maintains a unit consisting of citizens of another country, it is aware of the political implications. The implicit threat of violence and insurgency, and, in the worst case, of a full-blown civil war, distinguishes pressure proxies from civil opposition groups; the threat is not purely ideological or political. These proxies are also not a mere manpower source or auxiliaries.[8] If the sponsor country only wanted to use them as a recruitment pool, it would most likely integrate them into the regular armed forces or deploy them as auxiliaries, as the Russian Armed Forces have done in Donbas and Luhansk. Instead, in the case of pressure proxies, the sponsor country maintains distinct and separate identities; in fact, they are publicized, and identity-based differences form a key part of the strategy. By fully embracing these groups and their ethnic or religious background, the sponsor country communicates with the target country. The sponsor country signals its readiness to support the proxies and turn them into an insurgency, as a means of leverage in diplomatic negotiations. Sponsor countries may decide not to use the pressure proxies at all; however, the threat of their existence is the key idea underpinning this model. The fact that these groups are not built up as a standalone military threat makes it clear that it is not purely about short-term effects and military objectives. If it were the case that proxy groups primarily serve military objectives, pressure proxy groups, such as the ones analyzed in this article, would need to receive much greater material support, maintain combat readiness, and pose a real and immediate military threat. None of the groups that are classed in this article as pressure proxies fit this mold; they are all rather small, and while some have been deployed in wars, so far none have been sent to their home countries to undergo the transformation into an actual military threat.

The Theoretical Background

This article argues that proxy activity is an extension of foreign policy.[9] The analysis focuses on the sponsor countries' foreign policy interests, be they deterrence, power expansion, economic, or ideological goals. It is important to note that pressure proxies used for general deterrence distinguish themselves from proxies built up for immediate deterrence. Immediate deterrence comes into play when one state is actively planning an attack on another, and the other state is trying to deter said attack.[10] General deterrence, meanwhile, happens in a situation where one state considers an attack if the opportunity arises in the future, and planning is in an early stage. The targeted state uses general deterrence to showcase the impossibility of the success of any military action against it, even in the long term. This way, the aggressor will be dissuaded from military action.[11] Pressure proxies do not pose an acute military threat. Rather, the threat is implicit in the potential that they can one day become a threat if policies are not adjusted. Formerly, Hezbollah deterred Israel from directly attacking Iran because Hezbollah maintained substantial military potential.[12] This potential was not something that would materialize in a future conflict, but was already in existence and served immediate deterrence. The proxy groups under analysis in this article serve a more long-term deterrence and are thus part of general deterrence.

This paper is limited in its scope and does not offer insight into the actual effectiveness of pressure proxies. The theoretical model assumes that countries willing to pay the political price of supporting a proxy group also believe that the proxy will be useful as a political bargaining chip, similar to other instruments of statecraft and hard and soft-power tools. Pressure proxies also present unique challenges. Adversaries may be further antagonized and pushed into pursuing hostile policies towards the sponsor country due to its support for pressure proxies, or deem the threat not serious enough to be dissuaded from their current policy course.

Pressure Proxies and the Proxy Literature

The model of pressure proxies has to be analyzed in the context of the proxy literature. Theories of proxies have developed in three phases according to Vladimir Rauta.[13] Initially, there was the "founder" phase, which happened during the last years of the Cold War and immediately afterwards, when wars such as the U.S. engagement in South-East Asia or the Soviet-Afghan War were interpreted according to the new framework of proxy wars. The "framers" worked in the aftermath of 9/11 and the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring, followed by the "reformers" who analyzed civil wars in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere through the prism of proxy wars. The model of pressure proxies situates itself as part of the latest phase of proxy literature. The concept of proxy wars has seen many contributions that attempt to classify proxies according to the relationship with their sponsor, such as Amos C. Fox with "coercive", "contractual", "exploitative", "cultural", and "transactional" models of proxy relationships.[14] This article connects to this body of literature by presenting its own special form of proxy relationship. In addition, proxies have also been analyzed in terms of their political role, as Assaf Moghadam and Michel Wyss highlight.[15] More recently, Amos C. Fox defined "a proxy as any actor (Actor B) used by another actor (Actor A) to help accomplish Actor A's politically motivated military objectives."[16] While this definition is a useful starting point and contains many of the central elements of proxy warfare, this article chooses to narrow its definition of proxies to non-state actors that are dependent on their sponsor for political, and usually material, support, which excludes states. This shift of focus does, however, facilitate other useful theoretical investigations. Deterrence and pressure via proxies have mostly been analyzed in the context of Iran, with Hezbollah and the Houthis being prime examples of Iranian deterrence via proxies.[17] This article will help shine more light on the aspect of deterrence and proxies that so far have been under-analyzed.

Pressure

A key pillar of the framework presented in this article is the concept of pressure. The article proposes the following description: for pressure, a sponsor does not use the proxy in warfare against the target state, since that would constitute an act of aggression and would risk precipitating open hostilities—something that this strategy tries to avoid. Instead, the proxy often operates in the sponsor country or even a third country. The pressure proxy might exist underground, or under special circumstances, in the open, in the target country, but not as an armed force. Under these circumstances, proxies exert pressure through their potential to become a military or security threat to the target country. The article deduces the theoretical framework in part from the observation that some proxies exist which have marginal military value, or at least a military potential which stands in no relation to the political cost a sponsor country pays by openly supporting this particular group. It is important to note that the pressure proxies framework centers the long-term political

strategy of countries rather than short-term military or deterrent effects, this is different from classical Cold War era proxies where one or both sides used the proxy to engage in active hostilities and change the status quo or maintain it through violent means, such as the Mujaheddin in Afghanistan where the U.S. pursued the goal of weakening the Soviet Union.[18] Both the sponsor country and target state know that even if the threat of turning a pressure proxy into a live military force should be followed up with action, it will take time to build up the proxy into a sizable force, have weapons and trained personnel smuggled across the border, and then for the pressure proxy to become operational—all while interdiction efforts by the target state occur. Hence, this article argues, sponsor countries will employ these pressure proxies to achieve longer-term strategic foreign policy goals rather than short-term tactical gains. The goal of pressure is to change the status quo, to compel a policy change in a target country. What Thomas Shelling called compellence, the "forcing action through fear of consequences."[19] By threatening violence and insurgency, the sponsor country hopes to make the policies of the target country more amenable to its wishes. This changing of the status quo is important because it distinguishes pressure from deterrence, which serves to maintain the status quo.

Pressure Proxies and Deterrence

Deterrence Theory was developed during the Cold War, with a primary focus on nuclear deterrence.[20] Concepts such as mutually-assured-destruction (MAD) were meant to ensure that an open war, and subsequent use of nuclear weapons, between the two blocs would not happen, because mutual deterrence would prevent either side from changing the status quo via warfare.[21] While nuclear deterrence constitutes the core of deterrence theory, conventional military as well as unconventional deterrence were also extensively analyzed. All forms of deterrence share a goal: to stop an adversary from changing the status quo and compelling a deterring country to either incur suffering or be forced to accept concessions.[22] By drastically increasing the price any aggressor would pay for changing the status quo, deterrence makes such a change unlikely or outright impossible—in the case of nuclear deterrence, the threat is annihilation. This article focuses on conventional deterrence, and more specifically, deterrence in the context of unconventional warfare. The aspect of unconventional warfare, however, complicates the analysis because the scope of the threat rests primarily on potential, political willingness, and fears in target countries, all factors that are hard to quantify. Conversely, the capabilities that underlie conventional and nuclear deterrence can be assessed, and probable outcomes calculated. With unconventional means of deterrence, the threat is far more ambiguous. Will it just be small-scale terrorist attacks, skirmishes, and a bit of guerrilla warfare, or will it be a large-scale uprising that might even topple a government? The pressure proxies framework emphasizes this ambiguity and centers its analysis around the fears inherent to most governments.

Pressure proxies leveraged for deterrence can have similar deterrent effects to maneuvers or military exercises. Danylo Kubai described this deterrent effect of military exercises "as an element of a deterrence strategy [...] an instrument of messaging and a tool that provides political leadership of a country with an opportunity to send respective signals on their readiness to give a proper answer to a potential aggressor."[23] This definition highlights the similarities between military exercises and pressure proxies. Both are messaging tools sending signals of readiness to use certain types of force against another country, to deter or to pressure.

Pressure proxies should thus be conceptualized as part of general deterrence,

which prioritizes long-term deterrence over short-term effects.[24] Since it will take time to deploy pressure proxies and for them to reach their full potential, they do not serve the purpose of deterring an immediate threat, but rather influencing the long-term calculations of adversarial states and shaping the dyadic relationship over decades. This is also the reason why pressure proxies deserve special analysis. While 'regular' proxies are part of the conventional deterrence toolkit, the same as any other armed force, pressure proxies distinguish themselves by not being an active force.[25] Proxy-based deterrence works through a credible threat of the sponsor country's ability to turn the proxy into a viable force. As this enables the sponsor state to adjust its escalation in case of war, this means that these proxies fit well with the bargaining model of warfare.[26] In this model, states choose not only to engage in fighting but also the scale of fighting.[27] This enables them to control the level of escalation they want during war. By increasing escalation, they can increase the pressure; likewise, by not deploying their full force, they open up options for diplomacy. This aligns well with how pressure proxies function. Deploying proxies rather than the regular forces during an escalation might deter the enemy in a crisis without forcing the sponsor to engage the target state's forces directly, thereby preventing further escalation. By showcasing the ability to engage in said bargaining during war, the sponsor not only shows willingness to the other side to engage in conflict if necessary, but also that it actively develops toolkits for such an eventuality.

For pressure proxies, sponsor credibility, the sponsor's perceived or actual ability to carry out a threat, is essential. The primary capacity under question is the capability to wage a proxy war. A state that has no credible ability to build proxies cannot use pressure proxies. This article roots itself in perfect deterrence theory, which connects credibility and rationality. Perfect deterrence shares many underlying assumptions with classical deterrence. But unlike classical deterrence, perfect deterrence theory is grounded in the assumption that threats are believable if it is rational to carry them out.[28] In essence, the theory argues, deterrence only works if it is believed to be credible, and said credibility is only given if both the capacity to use force is present and it is rational for the deterring state to use it.[29] To preempt the case studies, in the case of Iran, it is believable that Iran could smuggle weapons into Azerbaijan and thereby allow its proxy groups to become operational, and hence a security threat. Iran has mastered the buildup of proxies across the Middle East. Hence, there is a clear capability. This is an important aspect of the pressure proxies framework, borrowed from perfect deterrence theory: a country must be militarily and intelligence-wise perceived as capable of turning the pressure proxy into an actual military force. If this capability is lacking, the threat is not credible, and a sponsor country cannot exert pressure. It is important to note that actors with little or no successful experience in building reliable and strong proxies will struggle pursuing such a strategy, because the adversary will not believe them capable of creating a real threat.

In case the sponsor is challenged, it must be ready to engage in proxy conflict. Therefore, the sponsor must have a rational preference for proxy conflict over conceding in case its threats are challenged. Frank C. Zagare and D. Marc Kilgour argue that: "threats can be believed exactly when it is rational to carry them out; thus, only rational threats are credible threats."[30] Other models of deterrence see past actions as a source of credibility.[31] In the case of proxies, the complexity in building up a reliable and strong proxy makes such threats more believable if the country has engaged in proxy warfare in the past. In empirical studies, Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo demonstrate that the past actions model can be a good indicator of whether deterrence will work.[32]

Given the complexity in building up a reliable proxy, the military and intelligence challenges, the record of a sponsor as a 'master of puppets' will be a decisive factor in whether the target country believes the threat or not. For pressure proxies, the 'Past Action Model' yields better results rather than relying solely on the rationality of actions. Iran, for example, has repeatedly used proxies against its enemies to deter them or pursue its goals; any target state can safely assume that Iran, with its record as a sponsor of proxies, will also in the future use proxies for such endeavors. Regardless of which model is used, the sponsor must make the target believe that it has the capability and will to engage in proxy warfare, either by showing a propensity to engage in proxy conflict or by making this decision appear rational. This paper will now apply the framework of pressure proxies to several case studies: the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion, the Special-Frontier Force, the Husayniyun, and the Islamic Movement in Nigeria.

The Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion in Ukraine

In 2014, the Maidan protests ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych from power. As the protests unfolded and while Ukraine was paralyzed by political chaos, Russia implemented its plans to annex Crimea.[33] After the annexation, Russia followed up with a covert invasion of eastern Ukraine. While initially no regular Russian forces were deployed, using special operations forces, the intelligence services, and mercenaries, Russia propped up two proxy forces in eastern Ukraine: the People's Militias of the Luhansk People's Republic and People's Militia of the Donetsk People's Republic also known as 1st Army Corps (DPR) 2nd Lugansk-Severodonetsk Guards Army Corps (LPR).[34] At the beginning of the war in 2014, Russia saw some initial successes with its proxies. However, the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF), with the help of volunteer units, were able to push the Russian proxies back, and the regular Russian armed forces had to intervene. [35] Some of the aforementioned volunteer groups came from outside of Ukraine.

Among the Ukrainian ranks were Chechen exiles formed into different units, including one named after the first President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria—the *Dzhokhar Dudayev* Battalion. The battalion was founded in 2014 by Chechen exiles in Denmark. In the same year, its members entered the war in Donbas alongside the Ukrainian armed forces.[36] It is important to note that Ukraine could have chosen to integrate the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion into other Ukrainian units, but instead accepted it as a separate Chechen unit. The Chechen identity of the battalion provides the transition into the pressure proxies framework, and why the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion may be understood as a case of a pressure proxy.

Russia and Chechnya share a long and troubled history. Russia waged two wars against Chechnya. The first, from 1994 to 1996, ended in a Russian defeat and the expulsion of Russian forces. In the second war, lasting from 1999 to 2009, Russia brought Chechnya back under its control and eventually crushed the Chechen insurgency in 2009.[37] What remains in Chechnya is the memory of the brutality of Russian forces and the resentment towards Moscow in parts of the population. Coupled with a religious dimension (Chechnya is a majority Muslim region), this entails that the threat of a renewed Chechen insurgency against Russia is real. During the Syrian Civil War, numerous Chechen Islamists joined the Islamic State, where they gained extensive combat experience and most underwent ideological entrenchment. Upon returning from Syria, these Chechens constituted an acute security threat to the Russian

Federation.[38] It is this fear of a renewed Chechen insurgency, fueled by radicalized and experienced fighters coming from abroad, that Ukraine sought to capitalize on with its Chechen battalions.

Viewed through the prism of pressure proxies, Ukrainian support for the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion can be seen as part of a deterrence strategy. Between 2014 and 2022, Ukraine was honing pressure proxies that would threaten the Russian periphery. In theory, trained Chechen fighters with strong anti-Russian sentiment could have been sent from Ukraine to Chechnya to then spearhead an insurgency, which would have threatened the Russian periphery, necessitated the diversion of resources, and may have even given Ukraine a bargaining chip in negotiations. Ukraine did not send those units back, and much of what is discussed above is speculative. It cannot be ascertained whether the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion would have had the capability to launch a potent insurgency, how the Russians may have reacted, and whether Russia would not have been galvanized more by Ukrainian support for partisans on its territory, rather than seeing it as something to be bargained over.

Ukraine's decision not to dispatch the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion back to Chechnya has several possible explanations. A likely explanation is that Ukraine may have found it more useful to use the unit in combat, as the unit has demonstrated high morale and willingness to fight. Moreover, even before the full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine was struggling with personnel shortages, and hence sending well-trained and motivated troops abroad on an uncertain endeavor would have been an unpopular decision. A second explanation is that the deployment of the battalion to Chechnya and then subsequently maintaining it would not have been feasible. This explanation is unlikely, as intelligence services, also the Ukrainian services, have demonstrated the capability to operate beyond their own borders and orchestrate complex missions, such as the assassinations and sabotage operations that Ukraine has successfully conducted in Russia.[39] However, this article argues that the most likely explanation for why Ukraine has not taken advantage of the possibility of a pressure proxy is that it may be concerned with the potential reaction of its Western backers if Ukraine were to support a renewed Chechen insurgency. Most likely, such a step would be viewed as an unwarranted escalation on the part of the Ukrainians, complicating their relationship with the West. The religious dimension and the presence of armed Islamists in the North Caucasus make it even more complicated, and Western support or approval of such a strategy is even less likely.

The reason Russia was not deterred by Ukraine's threat of deploying its proxies can, among other factors, be explained by the pressure proxies model itself. Before 2022 and the full-scale invasion, Ukraine had no experience deploying proxies abroad and limited experience in conducting sabotage or infiltration missions in Russia itself. Therefore, the believability of its threat was low since its capability was low. This unconventional strategy would have also most likely failed. This has changed since, and for the last three years, the world has witnessed Ukrainian grit and capability in fighting Russia. Particularly, Ukrainian intelligence operations such as Spider's Web and other asymmetric operations have shown Ukraine's capabilities. Nowadays, the prospect of Ukraine helping foster a Chechen insurgency seems less far-fetched. But beyond the lack of believable capabilities, it was Russian hubris that thought the might of the Russian Army could crush Ukrainian resistance and conquer the country, so the failure of deterrence cannot solely be attributed to a lack of believability of the proxy deterrence, but must be seen in the context of comprehensive Russian

miscalculations about the nature of the war they would start.[40]

The Special Frontier Force in India

The PRC and India are waging a literal cold war in the Himalayas. The Line of Actual Control (LAC) demarcates the disputed border between the two countries.[41] The Sino-Indian border dispute has existed since the PRC occupied Tibet in 1951, which established a direct line of contact between India and PRC-controlled territory. Since then, the LAC has seen numerous deadly skirmishes, with Indian and People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers repeatedly engaging each other in hand-to-hand combat (both parties agreed to remove firearms in the 1996 Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures).[42] India has an interest in resolving the border conflict, which would allow it to refocus resources and deconflict tensions with the PRC. But the PRC wants to maintain the volatile situation. Given the PRC's overall resource superiority, especially in terms of economy and technology, it is in the PRC's interest to prolong the conflict on a small scale.[43] The PRC can spend resources on expanding its power in the Indian Ocean and on maintaining tensions in the Himalayas, while India cannot spend its resources as lavishly. This is especially rooted in the PRC having more economic resources that it can invest and use, and having superior military technology, which puts India at a disadvantage. This forces India to pour resources into the border conflict and diverts resources from the Indian Navy and its ability to challenge PRC encroachment in South and South-East Asia, since beyond the Himalayas, the Chinese-Indian rivalry mostly plays out in a naval arms race over influence in the Indian Ocean.[44]

The PRC is allied with India's main rival, Pakistan. In recent years, Beijing has become Pakistan's main arms supplier, providing fighter jets, ships, missiles, tanks, and other modern armaments.[45] Pakistan and India have been at war several times, most recently from late April to early May 2025. The confrontation was triggered by an Islamist attack on worshippers in Northern India, which India says is indicative of a larger and more structural Pakistani support for terrorists and insurgents that are attacking the Indian state, especially in the disputed area of Kashmir.[46] The PRC's strategy is obvious in this regard: it wants to bog down Indian forces and resources by strengthening Pakistan. This is mirrored in the latest clashes, where Pakistan deployed Chinese-made fighter jets to great success against the Indian Air Force.[47] Contributing to the hostilities between India and Pakistan, thereby ensuring that India does not shift its focus on its northern neighbor, gives the PRC more space to expand its power in the Gulf of Bengal and all over South-East and South Asia, such as in Sri Lanka and Myanmar.[48] Despite Pakistan remaining India's principal adversary, India has a pronounced interest in countering the PRC's expanding influence throughout the Asian continent.

India has a long historical relationship of religious and cultural ties with Tibet. In the early half of the 20th century, Britain had negotiated treaties with Tibet defining the border between the British Raj and Tibet.[49] When the PLA overran Tibet, India was disturbed not only for religious and cultural reasons, but also because India lost its buffer state against the PRC. During that time, the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) started training Tibetan partisans in Nepal, who went on to wage guerrilla war for decades.[50] In 1959, many of them fled Tibet again when the uprising against the PRC occupation forces failed. The 14th Dalai Lama was brought to India and there formed a government in exile.[51] The unclear border situation and the hosting of a hostile government in exile all contributed to rising tensions between India and the PRC. These tensions escalated into the Sino-Indian War in

October 1962, wherein the Indian Army was outmatched by superior PLA forces. This led to the creation of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, a lightly-armed but specialized militia which constitutes the first line of defense in the challenging theater of warfare, which is the Himalayas.[52] The war also led to the creation of the Special Frontier Force (SFF). The unit was initially known as Establishment 22 and numbered around 5000 men. Many recruits were former resistance fighters and bodyguards of the Dalai Lama.[53,54] In 1967, it was renamed to SFF and became an airborne unit with special mountain and jungle training. The CIA continued supporting and training the unit in cooperation with the Indian Central Intelligence Bureau (CIB). In 1969, President Nixon stopped U.S support in preparation for his diplomatic initiative towards the PRC.[55] Since then, the SFF has existed as an Indian special forces unit.

While built and trained to fight the PLA, the SFF had never engaged PRC forces—until 2020. The SFF was deployed against the PLA amidst border clashes.[56] However, the SFF has, as far as is known, not been deployed to Tibet. Nonetheless, its origins suggest that a deployment to Tibet is not out of the question. This intent has been corroborated by official statements. An Indian general interviewed by Iskander Rehman stated that "envisioning what role the Tibetan boys would play does not require much imagination."[57] Professor Karubaki Datta at the University of North Bengal has stated outright that the Indian plan was to have the SFF start a guerrilla war in the PRC-occupied parts of Tibet in case of a full-blown war with the PRC. [58] For most of its history, the SFF was a secret formation. It gained extensive experience in asymmetric warfare during the Bangladesh Liberation War, the Kargil War, as well as during Operation Blue Star, to name just some of its deployments. Furthermore, it has been instrumental in Indian intelligence gathering operations.[59]

Yet in 2020, the SFF was transformed from a secretive unit into a publicly known force. After the clashes that same year, India openly embraced the SFF. This shows a transition from a military asset to a political asset—a pressure proxy. Other dynamics illustrate this shift away from prioritizing the SFF's military utility toward using it as a political bargaining chip. Indian officials attended the funeral of a Tibetan soldier killed in action, an event at which Tibetan flags were shown.[60] The playing of the so-called "Tibet card" was criticized in India, but it also caused a stir in PRC-controlled media.[61] The Chinese *Global Times* harshly criticized India for even entertaining the image of supporting Tibetan separatism. That same article gave voice to threats of the PRC supporting separatists in India's Northeast in retaliation.[62] By publishing this article, the *Global Times*, a newspaper run by the CCP, demonstrated how the Indian leadership hit a nerve with the CCP and exemplifies the SFF's usefulness as a political pressure proxy.

Some experts have questioned the viability of deploying the SFF in the case of war because of the PRC's extensive intelligence capabilities and political and military presence in Tibet.[63] Yet as Clausewitz wrote, "war is not the work of a living force upon a lifeless mass", and no defense in the history of war has yet proven to be impregnable.[64] Despite the potential advantages of an asymmetric force like the SFF, any outcome of a military deployment would come with a great deal of uncertainty for India. However, the PRC faces the same uncertainty; they do not know whether extant surveillance systems and security force capabilities will be enough to stop an infiltration of the SFF, or whether the SFF will be able to fulfill its role in waging a guerrilla war in Tibet, disrupting PLA supply lines and tying up PRC resources.[65] Field Marshal Moltke's assertion that no plan survives first contact with the enemy works both ways.[66] The PRC

cannot be certain how successful this force would be in the case of a broader war. As Carl von Clausewitz wrote, "war is the realm of uncertainty." This uncertainty enables India to use the SFF as a pressure proxy and leverage it against the PRC.[67] Iskander Rehman called the SFF unconventional deterrence, which describes the military *modus operandi* of this kind of proxy well but does not encapsulate all the theoretical and political dimensions.[68] The SFF serves multiple purposes beyond unconventional deterrence, including dissuading the PRC from using existing insurgencies in India as proxies against India.

With the open sponsorship of the SFF since 2020, the force now embodies the model of the pressure proxy. By publicly embracing the group, elevating the contentious Tibetan identity, and openly taunting the possibility of the 'Tibetan boys' operating behind enemy lines, India has turned the SFF into a political instrument and a pressure proxy complementing its deterrence strategy vis-à-vis the PRC. By threatening the PRC with an insurgency in Tibet, India is hoping to maintain the status quo and dissuade further escalation, without threatening open conflict. However, this recent reframing of the SFF has a high political cost for India, which corresponds to the pressure proxies framework. Furthermore, it remains to be seen whether the repurposing of the SFF will yield meaningful results for India. From a theoretical standpoint, its prospects are not good. While India has shown credibly that it is willing to fight the PRC, and has consistently invested in its regular armed forces for that exact reason, it does not have a proven track record of supporting insurgencies abroad.[69] It has never successfully built an insurgency; its proxies are local militias in India, not guerrillas tying down enemy armies.[70] Beyond likely shortcomings on the Indian side and the theoretical doubts about the "Tibet Card", there is the question of possible denial by the PRC.[71] In 70 years of control over Tibet, the PRC has built a tight system of surveillance and control.[72] Furthermore, the PRC, the Ministry for State Security, and other security forces maintain a sizable presence there, which would further complicate SFF activities and support from India. This compounds doubts about the SFF's ability to foster an insurgency and thus whether it carries any value as a pressure proxy. What the SFF does show, however, is that the pressure proxy framework is applicable to a diverse array of actors, and the dynamics contained therein describe foreign policy actions by states in very different situations.

The Husayniyun in Azerbaijan

The Islamic Resistance Movement of Azerbaijan, also known as the *Husayniyun*, is a group of Azerbaijani exiles who formed an insurgent group opposed to the Aliyev government in Azerbaijan. They are ethnically Azeris, but their strict adherence to the Shia faith puts them in sharp opposition to the ruling secular regime. The group, in the context of the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, is a further case study for the pressure proxies framework.

Azerbaijan was long a part of Iran, but was lost to the Russian Empire in the 19th century.[73] Despite Imperial Russian and later Soviet control, Azerbaijan remained deeply connected to its Persian heritage. The country is overwhelmingly Muslim, with a slight majority adhering to the Shia faith. Persian culture and language continue to permeate the border, and millions of Azeris live in Iran to this day.[74] In 1993, a military coup ousted the government in Azerbaijan. This coup laid the groundwork for successive governments led by members of the Aliyev family, which remains at the helm of the Azeri government. Since the 1990s and the military coup, relations between Iran and Azerbaijan have deteriorated. For instance, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which had

helped to train Azeri soldiers, was expelled from the country after it had attempted to ideologically indoctrinate members of the Azerbaijani military.[75]

The most recent war between Azerbaijan and Armenia further complicates the relationship between Azerbaijan and Iran, because the geostrategic situation in the Caucasus has changed, and Iran is confronted with an increasingly powerful Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan is closely allied with Türkiye, to an extent with NATO, and, most problematic for Iran, with Israel.[76] Iran has long alleged that Azerbaijan serves as a base for Israeli intelligence operations in Iran.[77] Moreover, Tehran has to contend with the fact that a significant share of Iranians, around 16% of the total population, are ethnically Azeri.[78] Iran may fear that, should the Azerbaijani government become more assertive towards Iran, this part of the population could destabilize the regime and threaten its power. The most recent Israeli strikes have further upset the regional balance of power and deteriorated Iran's strategic position, showcasing that Iran's conventional deterrence is much weaker than anticipated. Thus, Iran finds itself in a precarious situation, which buttresses the case study presented here.

Iranian foreign policy towards Azerbaijan and its general conduct vis-à-vis Azerbaijan maintains a distinct ideological element. Even before the downfall of the Soviet Union, Khomeinist ideas appeared in Baku, which Iran sought to leverage to strengthen its hand against Azerbaijan.[79] The connection via the Shia faith, and Iran's self-styled role as the protector of Shia Muslims worldwide, has been a powerful lever Tehran seeks to pull on, also concerning Azerbaijan. Iranian media have reinforced this ideological and identity-based tension with Azerbaijan. In publications, Azerbaijan was referred to as the Baku government, thereby questioning Azerbaijani sovereignty; Iranian media even published claims on Azerbaijan, referring to it as a hand cut off from the Iranian arm that ought to be returned.[80] Thus, Iran has openly embraced a confrontational political course against Iran, and in this context, the Husayniyun emerged.

The group was officially founded in 2015 by theology students from Azerbaijan who were studying in Iran and later went to fight ISIS in Syria.[81] The group claims it was founded and named with the blessing of Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Quds Force. Notably, the only evidence of this claim is online media sources.[82] Making it more of a founding myth, one that cannot be independently verified. Yet the alleged ties to the Quds Force and Qassem Soleimani make perfect sense when analysing the group as a pressure proxy. By having the group be associated with the Iranian proxy war in Syria and the Iranian proxy command structure there is a seriousness in the threat. But this threat is mitigated by the group being "social-media only"; this way, the threat level is reduced, and Azerbaijan can engage with Iran diplomatically without losing face. Making the group more of a diplomatic tool. The group has fully embraced Khomeinism, and its Hezbollah-style flag features a Dragunov sniper rifle, a nod to the post-Soviet identity of Azerbaijan, on a red or yellow background.[83]The movement has popped up sporadically, with social media sources and media reports, as well as interviews being the only real evidence of its existence.[84] There is no evidence that the group has participated in any Iranian military operations in Syria or elsewhere. It has no documented military potential, and its most notable action was its alleged involvement in an assassination attempt on the mayor of Ganja, Azerbaijan, in 2018.[85] Azeri authorities arrested some people connected to the Husayniyun and demanded the extradition of others from Iran.[86]

Despite its absent military utility, low profile, and likely also limited membership, Iran has

openly embraced the group and allowed its propaganda to spread via the otherwise tightly-controlled social media.[87] Moreover, the founder of the group, Tawhid Ibrahim Begli, has been present at official gatherings of the IRGC, further reinforcing the close connection between the Iranian government and the group.[88] Since Husayniyoun has neither military capabilities and is openly embraced by the Iranians (creating political cost for Tehran by causing friction with its northern neighbor), the framework of pressure proxies aptly describes this case.

The real threat of the Husayniyun to Azerbaijan is more implicit; should Azerbaijan pursue a more hostile policy towards Iran, the government in Tehran may decide to do more than just tolerate the activities of the Husayniyun and transform it into an active, armed, and dangerous proxy force akin to Hezbollah or other groups supported by Iran. As such, the Husayniyun serve Iran not as a military asset or a tool of short-term conventional deterrence, but rather as a pressure point to shape long-term policy-making in Baku. It is critical to note that the latency and absent military utility, and hence the primary role of the Husayniyun as a signaling device, suggest that Tehran has a preference for diplomacy rather than escalation. Given the changing strategic context and power balance between Azerbaijan and Iran, viewing the group as a political bargaining chip rather than a prospective military force in a conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan appears as a more satisfying explanation for Iran's continued connection to the group. Iran likely views the group as a way to secure more favorable outcomes in negotiations with Baku, given its otherwise disadvantageous position.

IMN in Nigeria

The Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) is a special case. The IMN is not, in a true sense, a proxy of Iran. While the group has been accused of receiving Iranian support by Nigerian and Saudi officials and media outlets, no conclusive evidence of any deep-running connection has been presented so far.[89] Indeed, the geographic distance between Iran and Nigeria complicates possible material support and makes any large-scale support operation by the Iranians unlikely.[90] As of now, the group operates without Iranian support. Beyond that, it is not armed and pursues a strategy of mostly peaceful resistance and protests.[91] Despite this, and the fact that Nigeria is far removed from the primary sphere of Iranian influence, the model of pressure proxies can deliver insights about this specific case study. By positing IMN as a (potential) pressure proxy, one may illuminate the interest Iran does have in the group.

Nigeria itself is not yet as economically or politically important for Tehran as other countries in Iran's more immediate neighborhood. But political proxies are, as mentioned, part of long-term strategies. Iran has been pursuing an African strategy over the last twenty years. This initiative, which was started under President Ahmadinejad, seeks to find new export markets, develop trade links, and thereby potentially also gain political allies on the African continent.[92] In addition, Iran's interest in the African continent is connected to its illicit arms and drugs smuggling, which in turn contributes to financing Hezbollah and other groups in the Iranian proxy network.[93] With this background in mind, Nigeria becomes an obvious target for Iranian activity. It has a growing population and a fast-growing economy. Its movie industry, often dubbed Nollywood, has its substantial soft-power influence in the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa.[94] All this makes Nigeria poised to expand its leadership role on the African continent and become a viable market for Iranian products. By having a local ally in the

form of the IMN, Iran gets a lever to influence the politics of Nigeria.

Nigeria also gives Iran intelligence gathering possibilities in Africa to monitor Islamist groups such as ISIS, which also pose a threat to Iran. In addition, Iranian intelligence operations in Nigeria can support smuggling by Iran or Iran's proxies, such as Hezbollah. Professionalizing operations to smuggle goods into Iran that are sanctioned, but also smuggling drugs abroad, such as Captagon, which Hezbollah smuggled together with the former Assad regime to finance their operations, using third countries to smuggle the pills into Jordan, the UAE, and Saudi-Arabia.[95] Beyond this, there is also a more political and strategic element coloring the relationship between Nigeria and Iran. The regional struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia and Israel respectively also overdetermines the relations with Nigeria, as both Israel and Saudi Arabia maintain good relations with the African country.[96] Furthermore, Israel and Nigeria have a longstanding partnership in the security and defense domain, with Nigeria being the biggest buyer of Israeli weapons on the continent.[97] Saudi-Arabia, meanwhile, cooperates with Nigeria due to shared interest in stable oil prices. Both countries are members of OPEC, and thus coordinate their oil outputs to regulate global supply and thus control prices.[98] In short, despite geographic distance, the relationship between Iran and Nigeria is a multifaceted one.

Applying the pressure proxies framework, IMN can be understood as a lever with which to threaten Saudi and Israeli interests in the country. Iranian proxies often serve more to deny security to the other side than to provide security to Iran. The same may be said about IMN and its potential to become a security threat for Nigeria, a country with an already dire security situation. By supporting a group in the country and having the Damocles sword of it becoming an active and armed Iranian proxy, Iran has substantial bargaining power vis-à-vis Nigeria.[99]

Before the founder of the IMN, Sheik Zakzaky, started his missionary activities, there were almost no Shia in Nigeria.[100] Zakzaky was inspired by the Islamic revolution when he was studying in Iran in the 1980s, and upon his return, he founded his movement. In the 1990s, he first publicly identified as Shia. Now, his movement runs schools and social services and has many followers in Nigeria. It's estimated that there are up to three million Nigerian Shias these days, with the number being almost zero before the Islamic revolution and the increase being almost solely due to the IMN activities.[101] Iran was not directly involved in founding the IMN, and it has not financially supported the group with any substantial amounts.[102] Iran's political embrace of IMN qualifies it as a pressure proxy, even though the group is not materially dependent on Iran. The Iranian Foreign Ministry has been making public statements condemning the Nigerian government's oppression and the imprisonment of Sheik Zakzaky.[103] Further symbolizing the connection between the IMN and Iran, the daughters of the Sheik were invited to Iran.[104] There, they held a meeting with representatives of the Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly and a meeting with the daughter of Qassem Soleimani, the latter had championed the group before his death.[105,106] The fact that the commander of the Quds Force has embraced the IMN elevates the threat's implicit nature.[107] IMN's role as a proxy is evidenced by the ideological commitment of the IMN to Iran. IMN subscribes to Khomeinism and follows the leadership of Khamenei. Through this ideological connection, Iran can leverage IMN and thereby exert pressure on the Nigerian state. In a state where the security situation is already tense, the prospect of another armed insurgency constitutes a powerful lever Iran may pull on.

The security situation in Nigeria, and especially the Muslim North, is dire. Previously, groups such as Boko Haram have spread terror and fear; these days, a local offshoot of the Islamic State commits terror attacks, murders, and abductions.[108] There is a real fear that the IMN will become an armed proxy of Iran, posing a similar threat as Sunni Islamist groups already do.[109] This fear is not unfounded: in 2019, the number of Shias in Nigeria was estimated to be up to 5 million.[110] Beyond this being a substantial population which could provide plenty of recruits to an armed insurgency, the IMN is already well entrenched in Nigeria through social services and especially schools.[111] The group already has guards called Hurras, who are uniformed but unarmed, but of course, through their structure and existence, offer themselves up as an opportunity to quickly build up a military potential.[112] What further supports the threat of the IMN becoming an armed Iranian proxy is state-sponsored violence inflicted upon the group. Members of the IMN have seen repeated clashes with the government, leaving hundreds of Shias dead.[113]

The group affirms its loyalty to Iran through public demonstrations, mourning ceremonies for Qassem Soleimani, and by demonstrating on Quds Day.[114] This organization is maintained and expanded through donations from members and abroad, with Iran promoting the organization and helping it network with Iranian trusts.[115] Given the local circumstances in Nigeria, the nature of the IMN, the strong connection between sponsor and pressure proxy, as well as Iran's proficiency in building proxy groups, the threat of the IMN becoming an armed proxy is real and credible. With this direct threat to Nigerian security, Iran can exert massive pressure on the Nigerian government to be more compliant with Iranian interests while also fulfilling the Iranian mandate to protect its fellow Shia Muslims.

The Iranian engagement with the IMN is not about deterrence. The IMN can be read as a pressure proxy that helps Iran increase its foothold in Africa, thereby supporting long-term political goals. However, what is also likely a factor in this case is the Iranian government's intention to protect Shia Muslims (which is ultimately also a political goal).[116]

Conclusion

When political cost outweighs the military utility of a proxy, and its main use is the threat of its potential, then it is a pressure proxy. The case studies presented in this article shed light on examples of pressure proxies. Their purpose is not to be deployed against hostile governments as rebels or insurgents, but rather to exert pressure and to deter or change policies vis-à-vis the target country. This makes these proxies distinct from other types of proxies; however, they may still share similar characteristics, such as being part of a deterrence strategy. The Houthis in Yemen are a good example: they function more as a traditional proxy, however, for their Iranian sponsor, their activities also contain an element of deterrence against Saudi Arabia. Pressure proxies' deterrence lies in their future potential, not in their current capability. They are a unique category and should be analyzed accordingly. The nature of pressure proxies is also in flux. The Chechen units in Ukraine changed from pressure proxies into auxiliaries of the UAF when the Russian full-scale invasion began. The SFF, meanwhile, operated in secrecy and only became a pressure proxy in recent years.[117] Nonetheless, the case studies have shown the usefulness of the model. Cases such as Ukraine with its Chechen proxy, India with its Tibetan proxy, and Iran with its Azeri proxy show how countries attempt to deter hostile states by threatening them with a potential build-up of insurgencies in the future, while keeping the door for diplomacy open. This last aspect is especially important:

these groups form part of the diplomatic-military toolkit of a country. While pressure proxies rest on the threat of military force and violence, this is not comparable with the establishment of an actual armed proxy that pursues conflict on behalf of a sponsor country. The escalation level is lower, and while pressure proxies signal the interests of states, they also leave more room for diplomatic maneuver. It is essential neither to overreact nor to ignore these groups; instead, target states must understand pressure proxies as a signaling device. Governments should not overreact because pressure proxies are not intended as a concrete military threat and are not necessarily part of any broader military plans. On the other hand, because pressure proxies are such a potent signaling device, their presence and role should also not be ignored. If a sponsor country feels like its threats are unheeded, it may seek to create pressure through other means or intensify its aggression. Policy makers must therefore carefully assess whether groups are regular proxies meant to increase influence through military force or pressure proxies used for concrete political goals which the sponsor hopes to achieve through diplomacy. While Iran has been able to stabilize the relationship with Azerbaijan somewhat, the Husayniyun remain part of Teheran's diplomatic and strategic toolkit towards its northern neighbor.[118] The Iranian engagement with the IMN, meanwhile, mirrors a core tenet of the pressure proxies model, namely that groups with little to no military value should also be assessed as proxies, as they can serve as attempts to compel policy changes. Indeed, the IMN and its latent threat may be understood as an attempt at compellence beyond just the security dimension, and rather an effort to shape Nigeria's long-term policy choices. The two case studies involving Iran highlight another central insight, which the pressure proxy framework shares with many theories of international relations, and especially theories of deterrence: the success of pressure proxies hinges on the credibility of the threat. Iran's success in leveraging proxies can be explained by the credibility and experience Iran has with proxy warfare. Ukraine, on the other hand, has far less experience with proxy warfare, which helps explain why the Chechen presence in Ukraine was far less of a threat to Russia compared to other cases of pressure proxies. It must be noted here that the evaluation of the Ukrainian case is complicated by the presence of a full-scale war and the different dynamics contained therein. In the case of India, the question remains open whether the SFF can help deter large hostilities with the PRC. India and its intelligence services do not have much experience with building insurgencies in target countries; hence, their current capability and threat level in this regard are low.

Other examples might be worth analyzing through the prism of pressure proxies, the Iranian proxies of the *Liwa Fatemiyoun* and *Zainebiyoun* units, made up of Afghan and Pakistani recruits that were active in Syria. They had started as regular proxy units that helped Iran stabilize Bashar al-Assad's regime for a time, but even when the civil war had wound down after 2015 and before Assad's regime fell in late 2024, the units still existed. Observers have noted that these units may be redeployed to Afghanistan or Pakistan to help Iran pursue its interests there.[119] However, as of writing in early 2025, such a repurposing has not occurred.[120] It remains to be seen whether it will, but if it does, the pressure proxies framework can serve as a useful analytic lens.

Another example is the *Sibir* Battalion of Ukraine's Armed Forces.[121] The unit is recruited from Russian volunteers, deserters, and prisoners of war who changed sides, from the various ethnic minorities from Siberia—hence the name of the battalion. These volunteers now fight against the Russian Federation. Their existence and identity, as

well as the possibility of them returning to Russia (or being helped to do so by Ukrainian intelligence) and fomenting insurgency, may influence the Russian strategic calculus. There are many variables that make an assessment of this case difficult, and it would most definitely be an outlier case; however, it may still be an interesting subject of inquiry, and one may apply the framework of pressure proxies. The pressure proxy model presented here shows the nuanced role that proxies can play when engaging in deterrence. Especially when applying the bargaining model of war, proxies can play a role in deterring the enemy from all-out war and from making full use of its personnel power. This approach should be explored in the case of the Ukrainian deployment of proxies.[122]

There are plenty more potential case studies for pressure proxies, including such historical cases as the Danish Brigade and Norwegian Police Troops in Sweden during World War II, and many contemporary ones.[123] Future research may also develop a more solid classification system, which groups should be understood as conventional proxies, and which may be best understood as pressure proxies. With the growing multipolarity of the international system and the potential for new conflicts, there is a distinct possibility that pressure proxies will gain in importance. States may wield pressure proxies to deter potential aggressors and to shape the policy choices of adversaries and competitors in accordance with their strategic objectives.

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