



Executive Summary



Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College

TALKING PAST EACH OTHER? HOW VIEWS OF U.S. POWER VARY BETWEEN U.S. AND INTERNATIONAL MILITARY PERSONNEL

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INTRODUCTION

Research Background.

For more than a decade, intense multinational operations and overseas engagement have demonstrated to the current generation of U.S. military officers the differences between how U.S. military officers and their international peers view and discuss the exercise of U.S. power and influence overseas. Frequently, it seems as if American officers and their foreign partners are talking past each other—not only coming to different conclusions, but using entirely different premises and reasoning to explain the exercise of U.S. power abroad. Despite resembling one another in terms of professional background, experience, and age, we and our international peers often proceed from entirely different narratives and analytical frames.¹ This often results in difficulties of understanding, communication, and coordination. There is a safety net of sorts; since many military exchanges occur in the context of established protocols and cooperative agreements, the operational impact of such misunderstanding has often been mitigated. The costs are real, though, in terms of lost efficiency, lost opportunities, and strained relationships; the safety net is imperfect.

It may be that limited mutual understanding is a luxury that a dominant military can afford when dealing with allies in an environment of abundant resources. In the wake of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as a devastating

global economic downturn with dire budgetary consequences for the U.S. military, we should question whether our level of dominance can sustain that luxury.² In Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and elsewhere, our cooperation with both host nation security forces and with coalition partners has in the past decade suffered from friction, confusion, and occasionally lethal confrontation.³ Our margins for tolerating such negative outcomes will decrease with reduced funding, force structure, and presence overseas. Simply put, we must take care to better understand and more seamlessly cooperate with our allied and coalition militaries.

Crucial to improvement in this area is understanding how our conception of our role and power overseas diverges from that of our international partners and how we can deal with that divergence to improve coalition and partner effectiveness. This monograph attempts to support improved understanding by addressing the following questions: How much do the views of U.S. and international military officers diverge? What are the underlying reasons for that divergence? Do the differences follow predictable patterns? If so, what recommendations can we draw for U.S. officers to minimize the negative impact of cultural differences and to learn constructively from the differing frames?

From a practical point of view, this research might help inform an important investment question: Do we understand coalition and partner friction well enough to recommend strategies of mitigation or improvement? As an

example, criticism from international partners may be based on close and realistic observation of how we operate, with negative outcomes tied to specific actions or mistakes. Such criticism might suggest a careful and incremental approach to managing cooperation, with appropriate give-and-take based on reasonable partner concerns. If, on the other hand, criticism is ideological or only loosely tied to specific acts, criticism and opposition might stem from underlying negative views that cannot be easily mitigated or de-conflicted. Such a pattern might suggest a more contractual or transactional approach, one with clear limits to what is being asked and the degree of cooperation envisioned.

From a theoretical point of view, this research seeks to contribute to the growing field of scholarly inquiry regarding the roots of global opposition to the leading role of the United States in world affairs. The field divides into two main camps: Those who believe that opposition to the United States stems from transitory factors and specific missteps; and those who believe that such opposition stems instead from underlying pathological hatred or bias. We can expect that the views of international military officers, systematically examined, might shed light on which force underlies the very specific friction we encounter in bilateral or multilateral military contexts. Recognizing the error of conflating criticism, opposition, and bilateral friction altogether, this research does rest on the assumption that critical popular and media views of the United States will be at least a partial driver of opposition and friction in military-to-military relations. Much of the literature on opposition to U.S. power overseas or “anti-Americanism” deals with aggregate public opinions, or anecdotal observations and messaging. The research presented contributes to this field of inquiry by expanding it to include the specific demographic of senior military officers.

Description of Methods and Organization.

This monograph begins with a review of notable studies on the nature of critical and oppositional views of U.S. power and influence.

It then presents and analyzes data gathered via survey of two sample groups of senior military officers, one comprised of U.S. students at the National Defense University (NDU), the other of NDU’s international students. The survey was constructed based on themes recurring in academic literature and media coverage of U.S. power overseas. The survey questions were designed to both gauge divergence between U.S. and international views on U.S. power overseas, and provide insight as to the nature of critical views of the United States: Can they be characterized as contingent and conditions-driven, broadly speaking, or as ideological and systematic? The subsequent analysis focuses on where the response patterns of international officers differ from those of U.S. peers, and where significant deviations are present, whether the cause is question-specific, or based on underlying bias. The final section addresses implications for U.S. military decisionmakers.

Summary of Key Findings.

On questions of U.S. power and influence, the responses of senior international officers differ significantly from their U.S. peers nearly half the time.

- Two groups of military officers similar in rank, age, and experience—one U.S. and one international—showed statistically significant variation between aggregate response patterns on 40 percent of the items on a 40-question opinion survey.

On questions of belief, opinion, and bias related to U.S. power and influence, the international group diverged from U.S. counterparts exactly half the time, and the clustering of responses suggests that U.S. value and belief positions account for 80 percent of the variance.

- A subset of the survey questions was designed to indicate an underlying bias for or against the United States in response patterns. Significant variation between U.S. and international responses within this subset was expected to indicate that strongly held opinions or beliefs,

rather than differences of interpretation or evaluation, were driving variation. Statistically significant variation occurred in response to half the questions (five of 10).

- International officer responses showed a fairly wide distribution, whereas U.S. officer responses clustered over a much narrower range, suggesting that where bias drove the variation, it was U.S. rather than international officer bias.

Response patterns to certain questions were unambiguous enough to clearly suggest areas for policy focus or strategic communication. Examples include:

- Majorities in both groups thought the U.S. people and government do not understand the world well enough to effectively exercise global leadership. Agreement on that point was near total—it had the lowest score for significant deviation in the entire survey.
- Nonetheless, both groups still believe it is in the world’s best interest for the United States to remain globally engaged, and to maintain a robust official and business presence abroad.
- The two groups strongly agree that the U.S. Government acts overseas based on hard interests rather than ideology, and that the United States is unique in how it uses its power.
- More than twice as many U.S. as international officers believe in the necessity and benefits of the missile shield program currently being deployed in Europe.
- U.S. officers are nearly unanimous in the belief that drone strikes against terror targets are necessary and justified; international respondents are deeply divided on this issue
- U.S. officers are far more convinced than their international peers that the United States is genuinely committed to democracy, human rights, the law of war, and counterdrug policies abroad.

Survey and interview data suggest that international officer views of the United States are frequently critical, but seldom cluster in responses that are categorically anti-United States.

- This evidence helps to refute the notion that criticism of the United States is driven by reflexive, predictable bias—sometimes referred to as “pathological” anti-Americanism. It supports interpretation of anti-U.S. sentiment or criticism as varied, rational, and contingent.

International military personnel at U.S. commands and schools constitute a valuable resource for sampling opinion on a systematic basis.

- High-level contacts between attachés and general officers should be complemented through regular surveys and focus groups, which help us understand differing views among our critical partners. Such tools, as well as the information they yield, can best be leveraged in the various professional military education programs.

ENDNOTES

1. Zhongdang Pan and Gerald M. Kosicki, “Framing analysis: An approach to news discourse,” *Political Communication*, Vol. 10, Issue 1, 1993, pp. 1-5. Frames analysis has been used to refer to the differing ways in which news media portray the salient aspects of a given event and to describe how differently news can be portrayed and interpreted based on the frame used. Individuals also use frames, and the interaction between media and individual frames is one of the reasons the survey items for this research project were shaped to reflect international media themes.

2. As of March 2012, presidential and congressional budgetary estimates foresee a roughly \$450 billion cut to military budgets over the next decade, but budgetary sequestration could result in budget cuts twice that large or more.

3. Matthew Rosenberg, “Afghanistan’s Soldiers Step Up Killings of Allied Soldiers,” *The New York Times*, January 20, 2012, available from www.nytimes.com/2012/01/20/world/asia/afghan-soldiers-step-up-killings-of-allied-forces.html?pagewanted=all; Sam Dagher, “Iraqi Soldier Reportedly Kills Two G.I.s,” *The New York Times*, November 12,

2008, available from www.nytimes.com/2008/11/13/world/middleeast/13iraq.html?pagewanted=all. The first article is one of many of its type; it reports widespread tension and frequent clashes between U.S. and Afghan military personnel. According to the *The New York Times* coverage of a classified report covering military-to-military tensions in Afghanistan, by early 2012, relations reached a crisis point. "As one Afghan Colonel described the situation in early 2012, 'The sense of hatred is growing rapidly,' said an Afghan Army colonel. He described his troops as 'thieves, liars and drug addicts,' but also said that the Americans were 'rude, arrogant bullies who use foul language.'" Though less common in Iraq, such incidents also occurred there; the second article provides one example. This author observed numerous nonlethal incidents from 1991-2011 in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Turkey, usually stemming from cultural or behavioral friction.

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