

THE DUAL-SYSTEM PROBLEM IN COMPLEX CONFLICTS

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Conflicts are increasingly complex and unpredictable. The United States and its partners have not been unambiguously successful at the strategic level in most of the conflicts they have been engaged in since September 11, 2001. This is, in part, because conflicts are becoming more complex and, therefore, more unpredictable and volatile; the parties to conflicts are more fragmented yet more interconnected (domestically, regionally, and internationally); and alliances among combatants are increasingly formed out of expediency or necessity rather than ideological alignment, trust, or a desire for power sharing. In complex wars, it can be unclear what winning might even look like from the U.S. perspective.

The U.S. policy system is also more complex than most leaders appreciate. The difficulty of operating in fragile and conflict environments is exacerbated by the fact that the U.S. policy system is also too complex to manage predictably. However, it is still thought of as a bureaucracy rather than what it actually is: a “complex system” (as scholars define the term). Complex systems by their nature do not always turn inputs (such as policy decisions) into predictable outcomes (such as U.S. influence). Something usually gets lost in translation.

The United States will not be effective in foreign conflicts until it understands this “dual-system problem.” The ability of U.S. leaders to influence outcomes in crisis situations is restricted by the fact that not one but two complex systems—the domestic policy system and the foreign conflict—stand between their decisions and the real-world outcomes they want to influence. This is not due to maliciousness or incompetence in the federal workforce or military forces, but rather to the nature of the system that has been set up by the U.S. Congress and Presidents from both political parties over the course of many decades.

The United States is better at providing humanitarian assistance to mitigate the effects of war than it is at preventing, winning, or ending wars or at helping societies recover from them sustainably.

Complexity benefits spoilers more than established powers. State and nonstate actors looking to undermine the global system and harm U.S. interests have an advantage over large, successful countries such as the United States: they are simply better positioned to respond to rapid changes in the complex conflict environments in which they operate. This is partly because it is easier for small, flat organizations to innovate than it is for large and multifaceted organizations attempting to operate as hierarchies, and partly because it takes significantly more energy, foresight, and cooperation to maintain order than it does to disrupt order.

Complexity weakens the effectiveness of international legal instruments. When decision-makers associated with supranational legal institutions fail to account for the complexity of policy and conflict systems, international criminal law becomes a weak tool for helping decision-makers achieve their objectives, whether those objectives are strategic or humanitarian. International law has real normative power, but in complex settings, that normative power is not always strong enough to deter or prosecute perpetrators of atrocities. Conflict actors generate and follow their own rogue norms of behavior, which can effectively counterbalance established legal norms. The inclusion of both sets of rules and actors—established and rogue—can therefore exacerbate rather than reduce the complexity of conflict settings and thus the ability to influence conflict outcomes.

Experts already know what reforms are needed. A great deal of research on approaches that are and are not effective in complex environments points to the

importance of, among other insights, simplifying or harmonizing the way support to in-country partners is delivered, engaging affected communities and marginalized groups in solutions, taking seriously the advice of experts and the opinions of citizens, investing in preventive work in fragile environments before they turn violent, clearly articulating the objectives of an intervention, giving field offices the authority to respond with agility in fast-changing situations, allowing staff to experiment and learn from failure without being punished for taking calculated risks, and empowering and rewarding entrepreneurial staff as they discover and implement effective innovations.

Figuring out how to implement those reforms remains the key challenge. Experts spend more time **recommending** the aforementioned practices than studying the sources of resistance to their effective implementation. There are established methods in the social sciences for studying “policy resistance” (e.g., political economy analysis and system dynamics modeling), but conflict scholars, policy advisers, research centers, and doctrine writers rarely employ them to discover the barriers to success within the U.S. policy system. While it remains critically important to produce doctrine, discover lessons, and identify best practices for effective action in complex environments, such documents far too often recommend that troops, civilians, contractors, and agencies take actions and produce results that their own policy system will never allow them to actually deliver (e.g., “whole-of-government”) in the absence of significant reforms – a topic about which the authors of such documents rarely express curiosity. The domestic barriers to becoming more entrepreneurial, more experimental, and more systemic in complex environments have yet to be studied systematically. Unless we develop a more sophisticated understanding of the complexity of our own systems – and more effective practices for operating through them – political leaders of the future, frustrated by the impotency of existing systems, might be tempted to bypass democratic processes and impose in their place more linear processes (e.g., command and control). That might help decision-makers get more immediate results, but linear processes are even worse at predicting second-order effects than current approaches, and they are more likely, therefore, to produce results that run counter to the long-term interests and values of the American people.

The military services have the motivation and resources to lead a shift in emphasis from a command-and-control mindset in policymaking to a systemic mindset. There will always be a place in military

institutions for commanders to expect subordinates to obey orders, and there will always be an expectation by elected and appointed civilian leaders that their decisions will be implemented with their intent intact. However, “whole-of-government” implementation is a failed dream; there are too many sources of resistance to full interagency coordination within the policy system. Shifting from “whole-of-government” to “systemic governance” is therefore a necessity, and the Army has the motivation and resources to lead that shift. Officers from lieutenant colonel through brigadier general need to be trained and educated in a way that inculcates a systemic mindset in themselves and, at the very least, encourages them to recognize and reward experimental and entrepreneurial tendencies in their subordinates. Education, training, and doctrine institutions are designed to adapt as global conditions change, and the key adaptation today is to become more systemic, more entrepreneurial, and more experimental, particularly on planning, joint concepts, doctrine, wargaming, and force development. That is as true for political leaders and civilian agencies as it is for military organizations. All will need to solve the dual-system problem before they can expect to protect U.S. interests and contribute to a stable international order in the future.

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